

An Analysis of Recommendations on Psychological Well-Being During Open and Distance Learning (ODL): Students' Viewpoints

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic that hit Malaysia prompted the administration of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) to switch all its classes to the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode, which commenced in April 2020. The shift in the teaching and learning mode elicited a variety of responses from students as they grappled with their mixed emotions of anguish and uneasiness pertaining to ODL. They displayed signs of mental anguish through several comments and status updates posted on social networking sites. Thus, to help ease the problems with students' psychological well-being while utilising the ODL mode amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the researchers felt inclined to place more emphasis on recommendations from the perspectives of UiTM students in urban, suburban, and rural localities. A total of 1,931 students from all UiTM campuses responded to the DASS-21 online survey, which assessed their levels of depression, anxiety, and stress during ODL. Using Microsoft Excel software, the collected data were analysed, and all comments and recommendations provided by the respondents were then coded, categorised into themes and sub-themes, and reviewed to ensure accuracy. From 569 recommendations provided by the respondents on their perspectives on handling depression, anxiety, and stress, three major themes were identified: social support (value of peer support, expert support, significant person support, family support, and administrative assistance), self-care (need for self-management of emotions, spiritual and recreational activities, and outdoor activities), and learning environment (students' learning preferences and in-person instruction). The results underline how crucial social support, self-care, and a supportive learning environment are for managing DAS. The findings are hoped to assist educational institutions in comprehending the types of resources and assistance they can provide to help students adjust to online education, even after the pandemic period.

Keywords: anxiety, depression and stress (DAS), open and distance learning (ODL), students' recommendations

INTRODUCTION

Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) switched to the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode in April 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions (Abu Karim, 2020). The switch caused students to feel distressed as they faced ODL challenges, which they expressed via social networking sites (Haziq, 2020). Although the closing of educational institutions was proven to be an effective strategy to prevent virus transmission (Dutta & Smita, 2020), it disrupted the learning and evaluation process, as 60% of students globally were reported to be negatively impacted by such a circumstance, with underprivileged students being the most affected (UNESCO, 2020). The study of cognitive impacts due to the pandemic is essential to develop measures for lessening the symptoms of mental distress and to fully understand the variables (Best et al., 2021). Therefore, the researchers conducted a study to identify and analyse recommendations from UiTM students of diverse localities—urban, suburban, and rural—to assist in alleviating concerns about depression, anxiety, or stress (DAS) related to ODL by measuring their DAS scores using the DASS-21 questionnaire. This study addresses the following question: From the perspectives of students in urban, suburban, and rural areas, what are the recommendations to alleviate the issues related to depression, anxiety, or stress (DAS) when utilising Open and Online Distance Learning (ODL) approach amidst the COVID-19 pandemic?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since decades ago, urbanisation has been linked to increasing cases of anxiety, distress, and psychological disorders among adults and adolescents. As a matter of fact, the prevalence of psychological disorders is higher in urban regions than in rural areas (Gruebner et al., 2017; Pykett et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2020; Nikman et al., 2022) where the measurements of biological stress response were correlated with both urbanisation and psychological wellbeing, in addition to validating the correlations between urbanisation and biological stress systems (Evans et al., 2020). Although little is documented about specific correlations involving these variables with urbanism, social alienation, and racism, all may still lead to psychological health strain (Gruebner et al., 2017; Taylor, 2019). Over the past two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has increasingly provoked immense stress and anxiety that is not only restricted to grownups but also young people of all ages; since parents do not have enough time to adequately care for their children, stress management among children and young adults becomes very challenging (Hena et al., 2020). Besides, it was also claimed that one of the major causes of stress in the teaching and learning process among students and teachers during COVID-19 is related to academic demands, which have become increasingly stressful for both groups (Hena et al., 2020).

Additionally, localities contributed to stress and anxiety among the infected individuals during quarantine. Hubbard et al. (2021) found that rurality, area deprivation, and access to outside space were correlated with mental health during the outbreak of COVID-19 and this is concurrent with prior pre-pandemic findings in published research on rural and urban disparities in China during the COVID-19 outbreak, which claimed that those residing in urban regions experienced greater psychological suffering than those in rural regions (Liu et al., 2021). Abd Rahman et al. (2022) also revealed that almost all of them experienced moderately extreme or extreme levels of depression and anxiety while adapting to the ODL mode during the lockdown period due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Interestingly, they found that participants residing in a remote place with limited resources suffered from relatively severe despair and anxiety, which could be attributed to the rural lifestyle that allows them to welcome obstacles, thus resulting in better emotional and stress management (Abd Rahman et al., 2022).

As further supported by Cao et al. (2020), localities were indeed a factor influencing college students' anxiety over the COVID-19 epidemic; based on the participants' experiences, students living in urban areas were more protected against anxiety compared to those in rural areas who were more likely to experience severe anxiety. Besides, the most recent study by Nikman et al. (2022) on the challenges faced by UiTM students staying in three different localities—urban, suburban, and rural—in adapting to the ODL mode at home concurred with this claim; while the majority of the students did not encounter prominent infrastructural issues throughout the online learning sessions, those in suburban and rural locations particularly experienced stress and anxiety when dealing with challenges adhering to the university's online class schedules due to internet connectivity problems (Nikman et al., 2022).

Recommendations on Managing Psychological Wellbeing from Students' Perspective

According to Hena et al. (2020), students were under a lot of stress caused by the lockdown, and the main cause of stress among students is often academic-related; therefore, it is necessary to take particular and tailored solutions to significantly reduce this strain. Furthermore, the needs of students should also be considered when developing teaching methods and campus surroundings. Some recommendations include utilising student welfare services, creating surroundings that are more "student-friendly," and scheduling routine extracurricular that everyone can participate in because these measures are seemingly considered effective stress relievers (Hena et al., 2020).

The abrupt shift from the conventional classroom setting to online learning could result in several obstacles. Evidently, Othman et al. (2022) claimed that the major deterrent during online learning sessions was weak internet connectivity, which will most likely influence the daily learning sessions of students. Therefore, to best assist students in this transition, lecturers should employ a variety of teaching strategies, choose the most appropriate teaching and learning platforms, and take the necessary steps to engage students in the process (Othman et al., 2022).

Other past studies have also discussed a few recommendations on methods that can be applied by individuals experiencing stress and anxiety caused by the pandemic. As observed by some scholars, meditation, quality sleep, and yoga practices can help improve one's daily functioning ability, emotional sensitivity, alertness, and cognitive clarity; thus, enhancing students' academic performance and enabling them to preserve their psychological and physical health during challenging circumstances such as epidemic diseases (Hena et al., 2020; Dalpati et al., 2022) can be essentially helpful. In line with this review, Okano et al. (2019) claimed that a well-balanced sleep routine is crucial for students' academic performance, and Elstad et al. (2020) confirmed that yoga has indeed been proven to significantly and substantially reduce distress and improve sleep quality (as cited in Dalpati et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, not many studies have delved into what would be the most suitable and appropriate alternatives that can be recommended to students, especially in terms of how best to deal with these challenges from the students' point of view. Therefore, it is apparent that the current study is significant in highlighting and understanding students' perceptions of the measures that can help ease the issues of stress, anxiety, and depression experienced by them as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

A total of 1,931 students from UiTM, who enrolled in the ODL mode during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, participated voluntarily in this study by answering an online survey. The survey was divided into five parts: Part A collects information on the respondents' backgrounds, while Part B, Part C, and Part D consist of questions on depression, anxiety, and stress, respectively, each comprising seven items. The questions in Parts B, C, and D were derived from the Depression,

Anxiety, and Stress Scale 21 (DASS-21) and were rated on a four-point scale. A score of 0 indicates "not at all applicable to me," while a score of 3 indicates "applies to me, or most of the time." Meanwhile, Part E focuses on the recommendations provided by the respondents to alleviate the problems related to depression, anxiety, and stress (DAS).

The primary objective of this study is to identify and analyse recommendations from the perspectives of students in urban, suburban, and rural locales to minimise the problems associated with DAS when utilising the ODL mode amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. All participants were particularly required to fill out Part E, which seeks suggestions and recommendations—from their point of view—on how to mitigate DAS concerns. Subsequently, all feedback and recommendations provided by the participants were analysed using Microsoft Excel software before being coded, classified into themes and sub-themes, and further reviewed for accuracy to achieve the research objective.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

For this study, the population consisted of 1,931 students of UiTM who enrolled in the ODL mode during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Primary data was collected using a set of questionnaires which was distributed online via Google Form. Out of 1,931 participants, 82.34% of them are females and 17.66% of them are males, with ages ranging from 18 to 53 years old. Most of the participants were from urban areas (47.85%), followed by rural areas (26.26%) and sub-urban areas (25.89%).

Overall, 569 respondents (29.5%) provided a total of 704 recommendations for alleviating DAS. The remaining respondents (1362, 70.5%) did not offer any recommendations. Figure 1 displays the distribution of respondents with recommendations on how to alleviate DAS by locality. Of those who provided the necessary recommendations, 265 respondents (46.6%) were from urban areas, while the other 304 respondents (55.4%) were from suburban and rural areas combined.

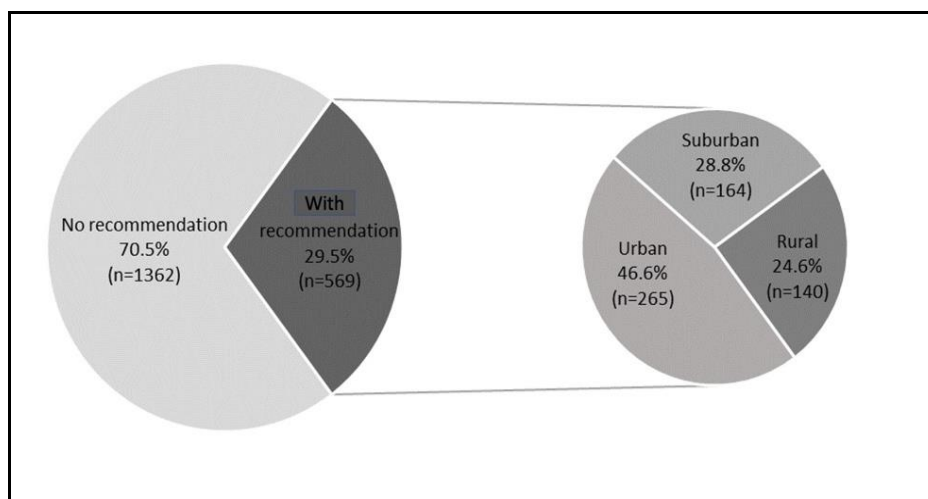


Figure 1: Respondents with Recommendations on How to Ease DAS

An analysis of the recommendations revealed three central themes on how to alleviate DAS from the students' perspectives: 1) social support, 2) self-care, and 3) learning environment. The identified themes and sub-themes in the data are illustrated in Figure 2.

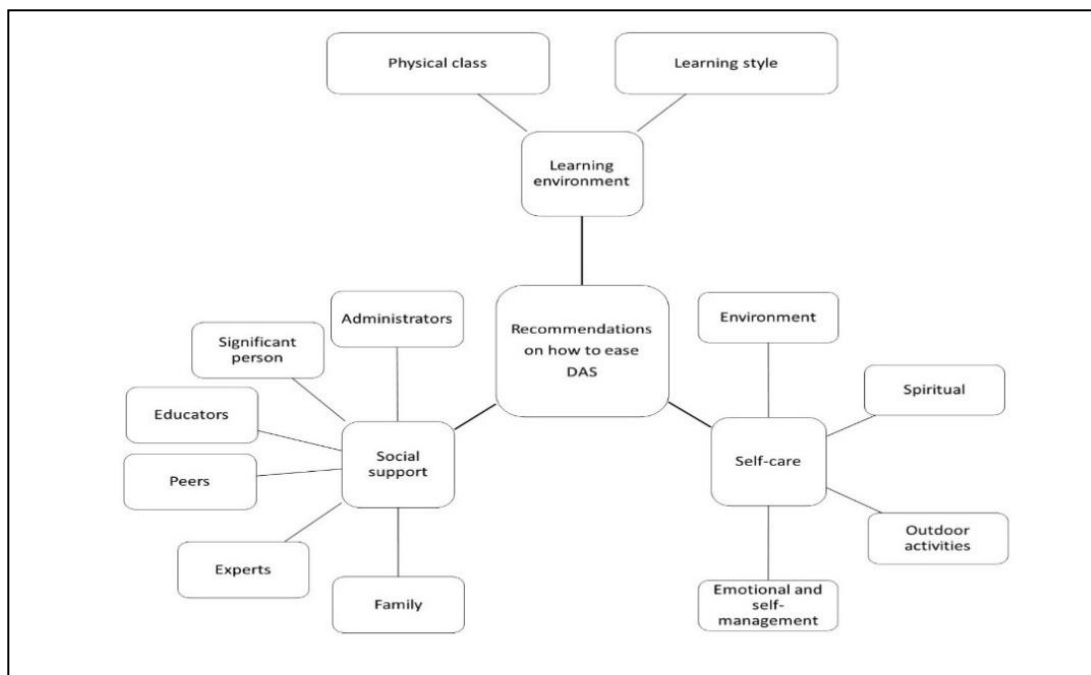


Figure 2: Central themes surrounding the recommendations on how to ease DAS

The findings recorded a total of 704 recommendations on how to ease DAS from the perspectives of 569 respondents. Table 1 provides the distribution of central themes and subthemes by locality, with social support being the most frequently mentioned (46.6%), followed by self-care (38.2%) and learning environment (15%). Urban respondents had the highest number of recommendations for all three central themes (46.6%), followed by suburban and rural respondents with 28.8% and 24.6%, respectively.

Table 1: Distribution of themes and subthemes by locality

THEME	Locality			
	Overall n (%) (N=569)	Urban (n=265)	Suburban (n=164)	Rural (n=140)
Social Support	328 (46.6)	160 (48.8)	96 (29.3)	72 (22.0)
Peers	110 (33.5)	47 (42.7)	29 (26.4)	34 (30.9)
Experts	94 (28.7)	51 (54.3)	23 (24.5)	20 (21.3)
Significant Person	61 (18.6)	30 (49.2)	22 (36.1)	9 (14.8)
Educators	33 (10.1)	18 (54.5)	11 (33.3)	4 (12.1)
Family	27 (8.2)	14 (51.9)	9 (33.3)	4 (14.8)
Administrators	3 (0.9)	0 (0.0)	2 (66.7)	1 (33.3)
Self-Care	269 (38.2)	133 (49.4)	71 (26.4)	65 (24.2)
Emotional and Self-Management	175 (65.1)	91 (52.0)	44 (25.1)	40 (22.9)
Spiritual	42 (15.6)	17 (40.5)	14 (33.3)	11 (26.2)
Entertainment	26 (9.7)	13 (50.0)	8 (30.8)	5 (19.2)
Outdoor Activities	26 (9.7)	12 (46.2)	5 (19.2)	9 (34.6)
Learning Environment	107 (15.2)	44 (41.1)	39 (36.4)	24 (22.4)
Learning Style	89 (83.2)	37 (41.6)	34 (38.2)	18 (20.2)
Physical Class	18 (16.8)	7 (38.9)	5 (27.8)	6 (33.3)

Social support

Based on the findings in Table 1, social support (46.6%) emerged as a crucial factor in addressing DAS-related problems during online learning. The social support theme garnered a significant number of recommendations, with most of them being aimed at peers (33.5%) and experts (28.7%). In addition, the respondents also provided suggestions on how to ease DAS with the help of significant persons, family members, and educators, but most of these recommendations were provided by the respondents from urban areas. Meanwhile, in terms of recommendations for administrators, the responses were only given by the respondents from suburban and rural areas (Figure 2).

The recommendations analysed in the study revealed various sub-themes related to social support, including peers, experts, significant persons, educators, family, and administrators. The respondents identified peers as an essential source of social support while participating in online learning. Accordingly, they suggested that organisations support virtual social networks and discussion boards that allow students to connect and share their experiences. One respondent remarked, *"I personally believe that the best way for someone suffering silently is to ask them whether they are in a good condition, catch up with them, and be a listener and stop giving your opinion. Just listen to them affectionately, at least they will feel better"* (Respondent 1913). Another respondent emphasised the significance of unofficial peer relationships by expressing *"Always communicate and ask about each other's well-being"* (Respondent 1256). Evidently, the absence of physical interaction during online learning has been identified as a factor contributing to respondents' dissatisfaction with the lack of social support provided by their friends. This finding is in tandem with that of Irawan et al. (2020), which stated that social support is essential and can lessen psychological discomfort during epidemics. According to recent research, social support is an essential way of solving psychological conflict and crises, and good social support is of immense significance for maintaining a generally good emotional experience (Fasihi Harandi et al., 2017; Wei, 2022)

The respondents also recognised the significance of experts as the second most important social support resource. They advocated for organisations to provide them with access to mental health experts and counsellors for advice and support, particularly for those experiencing DAS-related problems. One respondent emphasised the importance of having access to professionals by saying *"It has been quite beneficial to be able to speak with a mental health expert. They have given me tips on how to control my tension and worry"* (Respondent 0358). Students often use both negative and positive coping mechanisms, such as drinking or smoking and positive reframing, meditation, physical exercise, writing, playing with pets, and indulging in hobbies, to manage their psychological stress during the epidemic (Son et al., 2020). In this regard, mental health professionals can provide students with 24/7 access to self-guided tutorials on ways to improve mental health and wellness (Soria et al., 2021).

Based on the findings, a significant person (18.6%) was identified as the top three crucial sources of social support, apart from educators (10.1%) and family (8.2%), while administrators (0.9%) were seen as the most insignificant source of social support during ODL. The respondents recommended that educational institutions support their efforts to maintain social connections with their family members and offer digital tools to facilitate communication. Such resources would enable students to receive emotional support from their loved ones, which could help alleviate feelings of loneliness and isolation. One respondent remarked, *"It has been incredibly beneficial to be able to express my feelings to my significant other. They are incredibly encouraging and make me feel less isolated"* (Respondent 1426). To alleviate some of the stress associated with academic performance, the respondents recommended establishing open communication channels between students and educators, providing opportunities for one-on-one interaction, and offering academic assistance services. These measures would not only support students in their academic pursuits but also provide them with a sense of support during challenging times, as one of the respondents remarked, *"A*

supportive and understanding lecturer can be a little help. Lecturers can continuously motivate the students if ODL happens" (Respondent 1211).

Although the roles of administrators seemed insignificant during ODL, the respondents recommended that institutions offer resources and support services that are specifically designed to address the challenges of online learning. Consequently, students would feel more secure and confident in their ability to succeed in this new learning environment, such that *"University needs to revise the guidelines of assignment, writing, and submission during ODL. Most of the assignments need to be submitted within irrelevant duration"* (Respondent 1318). These findings highlight the significance of closely monitoring students' workloads and motivation levels as well as providing appropriate educational resources to decrease anxiety and negative perceptions of academic performance (Stevanović, 2021). Hence, equipping students with the required resources and assistance can significantly influence their success in online learning. The respondents also indicated that providing students with appropriate resources and support can have a significant impact on their online learning achievement. In addition, to meet students' social and emotional needs for structure, transparency, trust, connection, validation, and support, the faculty can utilise trauma-informed teaching practices (Schlesselman et al., 2020).

Self-care

During ODL, self-care played a crucial role in addressing DAS issues, as stated by 38.2% of the respondents. The study identified different sub-themes of self-care per the respondents' recommendations, including emotional and self-management, spirituality, entertainment, and outdoor activities. As displayed in Table 1, emotional and self-management sub-themes were deemed crucial (65.1%), while leisure and outdoor activities accounted for less than 10% of the recommendations. Emotional intelligence and spiritual development are essential for achieving life's ultimate goal; thus, low emotional intelligence can lead to negative emotions and increase the risk of several illnesses (Jamalnia et al., 2018). As such, students were advised to practice mindfulness, breathing exercises, and journaling to regulate their emotions and reduce stress and anxiety. As claimed by two respondents, *"Writing down my thoughts and feelings has helped me to process my emotions and reduce my stress levels"* (Respondent 0156) and *"Taking a few deep breaths before starting a Zoom session or taking a walk when I am feeling overwhelmed has helped me manage my emotions better"* (Respondent 0903).

According to the respondents, incorporating spiritual practices such as meditation and prayer into their daily routine as well as spending time outdoors potentially serve as essential self-care techniques for reducing stress and anxiety. Another respondent emphasised the importance of connecting with nature, saying *"Going for a walk in the park or just sitting outside and enjoying the fresh air has been really helpful in reducing my stress levels"* (Respondent 1737). One respondent also said, *"Taking time to meditate and connect with my spiritual beliefs has been really helpful. It helps me to feel more grounded and centred"* (Respondent 0739). The importance of entertainment as a self-care technique during online learning was also highlighted by the respondents. They suggested activities such as watching movies, reading books, and listening to music as ways to relieve stress and pressure: *"Watching a hilarious movie or listening to music has helped me to relax and rejuvenate"* (Respondent 1264.)

Finally, the respondents further recommended outdoor activities such as cycling, hiking, and walking as essential self-care methods. Accordingly, they suggested taking breaks from online learning to participate in physical activities that would bring them outdoors and allow them to connect with nature: *"Going for a stroll or a walk has been quite beneficial for me in terms of getting some exercise, clearing my head, and recharging my batteries"* (Respondent 0908). In the same vein, Rotas and Cahapay (2020) found that students appreciated coping strategies that align with the self-care practices identified in this study, such as self-compassion, time management, emotional release, and

spiritual practices, despite the difficulties posed by the pandemic and online learning. According to Cousins and DeLuca (2017), encouraging self-care is a crucial component of fostering students' overall wellbeing who have ongoing medical needs, particularly those related to their mental health. Essentially, this supports previous research (Cook-Cottone, & Guyker, 2018; van Vliet et al., 2018; Cleofas, 2021) suggesting that students who engage in effective self-care are more invested in their studies, even in online classes.

Learning environment

The learning environment category is likewise essential in managing DAS challenges during online learning. Based on the recommendations provided by the respondents, sub-themes such as learning style and physical classroom have been identified as important elements in this category. Table 1 shows that 83.2% of the recommendations in this category were related to learning style, as indicated by most of the respondents residing in urban areas. Conversely, recommendations concerning the physical classroom accounted for less than 20% of the learning environment category. The findings of this study also revealed that adapting to individual learning preferences is crucial for managing DAS during online learning. Additionally, taking breaks and using study aids such as flashcards were considered important; as remarked by one respondent, *"I take frequent breaks and use flashcards to help me memorise important information. This helps me stay focused and engaged in my studies"* (Respondent 0583). Another student also remarked, *"I've learned that I'm a visual learner, so I try to find videos and diagrams that help me understand the material better"* (Respondent 0776).

According to the survey, around 16.8% of the respondents considered the conventional classroom setup a crucial factor in effectively dealing with online learning difficulties due to DAS. Evidently, the respondents expressed a preference for face-to-face classes as they felt that online instructions lacked the motivation and social interaction that typically come with in-person learning. One respondent remarked, *"I definitely miss having my peers and teachers in a physical classroom. When everyone is contributing to a single objective, it is simpler to keep motivated and focused"* (Respondent 1723). Furthermore, another student stressed the need to be able to separate one's personal life from one's studies, saying *"When I am surrounded by the distractions in my house, it is hard for me to concentrate on my studies. I can psychologically separate my personal life from my academic life when I am in a physical classroom"* (Respondent 0561). This concurs with Atlam et al. (2022) who highlighted the lack of direct face-to-face interaction between students and teachers during online learning, and the possibility of technical issues such as slow internet and difficulty in using online platforms, which could lead to other psychological issues that may arise such as confusion and dissatisfaction. Plus, the study by Gockel and Deng (2016) also highlighted the value of a supportive learning environment for pupils who require mental health services in order to enhance their general wellbeing and academic achievement.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has highlighted the crucial roles of social support, self-care, and the learning environment in managing the challenges faced by students with DAS during online learning. By providing a supportive environment that fosters social connections and emotional well-being, educational institutions can help students thrive in the virtual classroom. Additionally, incorporating practical learning exercises and tools that promote interaction and engagement among students can also enhance the online learning experience for all learners. In this regard, as the study continues to navigate the uncertainties of the pandemic, it is imperative that the study priorities the well-being of our students, especially those with DAS, and ensure that they have the resources and support necessary to succeed in their academic pursuits. Since the existing study mainly focuses on the DAS experience of respondents during ODL, future research can, therefore, expand the sub-themes found

in this study to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by students with DAS during online learning.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Badruesham, N., Hasan H. and Nikman, K. conceived, planned, and carried out the study and data collection. Badruesham, N., Ismail, M. I. and Mad Arib, N. contributed to the interpretation of the results. Nikman, K. and Hasan, H. took the lead in writing the manuscript. All authors provided critical feedback and helped shape the research, analysis, and manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATION

We certify that the article is the Authors' and Co-Authors' original work. The article has not received prior publication and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. This manuscript has not been submitted for publication nor has it been published in whole or in part elsewhere. We testify to the fact that all Authors have contributed significantly to the work, validity and legitimacy of the data and its interpretation for submission to Jurnal Intelek.

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