

From Open Distance Learning (ODL) to On-Campus: Exploring Post-Pandemic Anxiety Among Students at UiTM Seremban

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Abstract

The shift from Open Distance Learning (ODL) to traditional on-campus education poses a significant challenge in the post-pandemic era, emphasising the importance of understanding student anxiety during this transition. This study investigates the factors contributing to post-pandemic anxiety among students transitioning from Open Distance Learning (ODL) to traditional or on-campus classroom settings at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Seremban. A cross-sectional quantitative survey was conducted among undergraduate students transitioning to face-to-face classes on campus starting in October 2022. Data were collected through structured questionnaires covering health concerns, financial stress, behavioural changes, and time management issues. Based on the analysis of 271 responses, it is evident that there is a significant correlation between anxiety and various factors, including health concerns and behavioural changes. The study highlights the increased levels of anxiety associated with health concerns, financial stress, and the challenges of adjusting to new social and academic norms in the aftermath of the pandemic. This indicates the need of holistic interventions such as mental health support, financial literacy, behavioural guidance, and time management training in reducing anxiety and ensuring a smooth transition back to in-person education. The findings offer valuable insights for educational institutions seeking to improve student well-being in the changing educational landscapes following the pandemic. Further studies are necessary to investigate other variables and personal attributes that may impact anxiety to create more focused interventions.

Keywords: Covid-19 Pandemic, Open Distance Learning, Anxiety, Face-To-Face Learning, Post-Pandemic.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic that emerged in 2020 has caused significant disruption to education systems worldwide. In response to this crisis, Malaysia, along with many other countries,

implemented strict measures to contain the spread of the virus. These measures have considerably changed the daily life routine and the education system's teaching and learning approach (World Health Organization, 2022). With the need to shift away from traditional classroom interactions, educational institutions are quickly adopting Open Distance Learning (ODL) as a solution. They employ digital platforms such as Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams and Webex to implement distance education.

Malaysia's strategy to cope with the pandemic, notably the National Immunisation Program (NIP), which began in February 2021, has facilitated the gradual resumption of face-to-face learning (Chan, 2022). Nevertheless, the transition from ODL classrooms to face-to-face classrooms has numerous challenges. Students voiced concerns about their motivation to attend lectures due to the challenges they perceived with online learning. However, many students have become accustomed to online education, viewing it as a practical alternative amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Staying at home while studying can help alleviate the financial burden of returning to university, especially when it comes to expensive housing costs (Sufian, 2022).

Moreover, according to Patterson's study (2022), prolonged social isolation and dependence on digital communication technologies have increased anxiety levels among students who are unprepared to continue traditional educational approaches. These findings highlight the significant impact of prolonged physical isolation on students' mental well-being and their ability to adjust to traditional classroom settings.

According to Tan et al (2023), anxiety levels were higher among undergraduate students. They also highlighted that a rise in anxiety has been reported regarding the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic. The anxiety that university students prevalently experience necessitates an investigation into the underlying factors contributing to their anxiety to go back to in-person classes on campus. This transition exacerbates stress and anxiety among university students. Given the complexity of this shift, it is vital to investigate the factors that influence students' anxiety that occurs post-COVID-19 pandemic. This study focused on students at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Seremban 3 who shifted from ODL to traditional face-to-face classes on campus. The objective of the study is to identify the relationship of factors such as health, financial, behavioural and time management issues with the post-pandemic anxiety among students. The results of the study are crucial for improving students' mental health as educational institutions adapt to the post-pandemic environment.

Literature Review

Anxiety disorders pose significant mental health challenges, as patients experience profound fear and excessive worry, and subsequently result in a significant decrease in their daily functioning. There is a growing focus on the occurrence and severity of anxiety disorders among students in higher education, especially due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated an already challenging mental health condition.

Anxiety is a complex emotional state characterised by feelings of tension, worry, and nervousness, as described by Spielberger (1983). It often manifests through a combination of cognitive, emotional and physiological symptoms, which can hinder a person's ability to navigate social and academic environments effectively. Spielberger (1983), posits that

feelings of anxiety may have a negative effect on students' self-confidence, particularly after going through challenging situations. This aligns with Chorpita's (1998), and Gray's (1982), viewpoints on anxiety, which they regard as a fundamental element of negative emotions. Anxiety is often distinguished from fear by its anticipatory quality.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on student anxiety. Its main effect is that it increases the level of anxiety. University students around the world have experienced a significant spike in anxiety levels due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In a recent study by Patsali et al (2020), it was found that anxiety levels experienced a significant increase during the outbreak. The researchers attributed this increase to the sudden shift to online learning and enforced social distancing measures implemented during the lockdown period. The study by Khoshaim et al (2020), found that university students experienced significant anxiety due to fear of epidemic infection and concern about the health of their loved ones. They also face significant pressure to adapt to new academic norms.

Furthermore, the prolonged isolation caused by the pandemic and the disturbance of daily routine has had a lasting effect on the mental well-being of students. In Lokman's study (2022), it was discovered that many students continued to experience anxiety and social withdrawal even after the lockdown measures were lifted. This indicates that the impact of the outbreak on their ability to continue their normal activities is long-lasting. According to a study conducted by Islam et al (2020), university students experienced high levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms amidst the outbreak. Moreover, lack of physical activity and social interaction also intensify these negative emotions.

There are several factors that can contribute to anxiety disorders among university students, as illustrated in Figure 1.

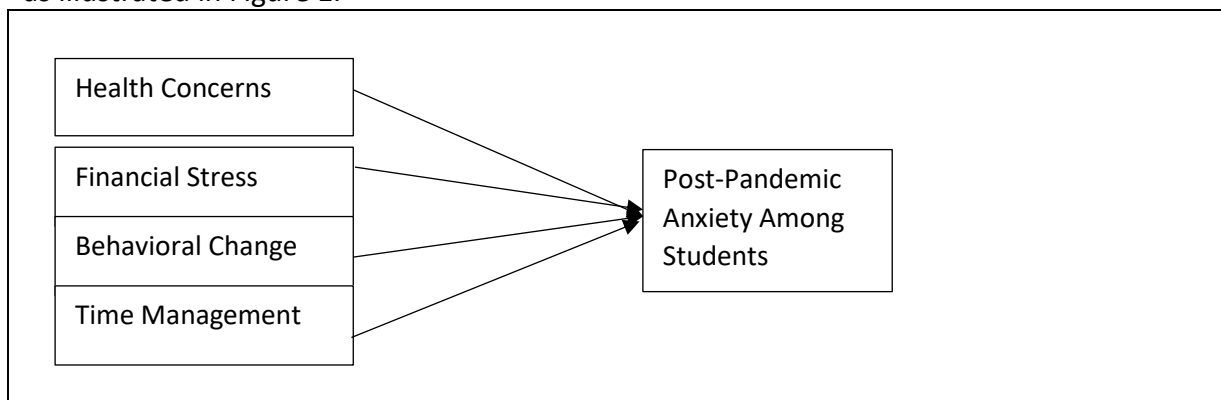


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Initially, the factor that affects anxiety is health concerns. Health concerns often drive student anxiety. In a study conducted by Kessler et al (2007), it was found that mental health problems tend to reach the highest levels among young individuals, including those in university. The study revealed that anxiety disorders often coincided with depression in this group. In the study by Wang et al (2020), they emphasise the importance of addressing anxiety among students, which gives the impression that mental health issues are becoming more prominent and can affect the well-being of people as a whole. They emphasised the need for timely intervention and support to address this issue.

Another factor is financial stress. Hassan et al (2021), suggest in their review that there is a significant connection between financial well-being and mental health. Financial instability can significantly increase anxiety levels among university students, especially those who come from low-income families. As evidence, Appleby et al (2022), revealed that that university students in Canada and the UK expressed their concerns about the impact of the pandemic on their finances. This is due to the obligation to pay for university accomodation, tuition expenses, and income loss during the pandemic. The rising costs of education and basic needs also contribute to this burden, further resulting in a significant deterioration of mental health for these students.

Furthermore, behavioural changes significantly affect student anxiety. In a recent study, researchers have found a correlation between neglecting personal hygiene and not following public health guidelines with the increased levels of anxiety among students during the pandemic. These findings highlight the importance of maintaining good hygiene practices and adhering to recommended health protocols or Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to promote mental well-being. Furthermore, signs of anxiety can be seen through behavioural changes, such as refusal to attend class or refusal to engage in social activities. These changes can have a negative impact on academic performance and social integration.

The last factor is time management. Increased anxiety among students is often associated with poor time management. Ping and Xiaochun (2018), stated that anxiety can be reduced with proper time management training. Time management skills are crucial to better performance and reduced anxiety levels in higher education (Kearns & Gardiner, 2007). Akyüz et al. (2020) underlined the relevance of time management skills in academic success since students have control over how they spend their time. A study conducted by Akçöltekin and Çetin (2015), where they revealed that individuals who struggle with managing their time effectively face higher levels of anxiety more often. This is particularly noticeable among students who struggle to balance their academic and personal obligations.

Methodology

This study employs a cross-sectional quantitative research method at UiTM Seremban Campus. This study involved students from three different faculties: the Faculty of Administrative Sciences and Policy Studies (FSPPP), the Faculty of Computer Science and Mathematics (FSKM), and the Faculty of Sports and Recreation Science (FSR). This study uses sampling techniques to ensure the sample is representative and targeted. Respondent criteria for this study are undergraduate students enrolled at UiTM Seremban who are undergoing a transition process to return to campus for face-to-face classes starting in October 2022.

This study's sample size of 357 respondents was determined from the total population of 5804 students at UiTM Seremban Campus 3 based on Krejcie and Morgan's table. The primary instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire designed to assess various factors contributing to anxiety disorders. The questionnaire covers multiple aspects, including health concerns, financial stress, behavioural changes and time management issues. The survey questionnaire was constructed bilingually in Malay and English. Data is collected using an online survey platform (i.e. Google Forms) and distributed through various university channels such as email and social media.

Findings

This study was conducted at the UiTM Seremban campus, involving a total of 271 respondents, with a response rate of 76%. Most respondents were female (74.2%) and aged between 21 and 23 years, with most having a Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) between 3.00 and 3.49. Additionally, 79.3% of the respondents were degree students, with third-year students constituting the largest group at 49.1% of the total.

Table 1

Relationship between Health Concerns, Financial Stress, Behavioural Changes and Time Management with Post-Pandemic COVID-19 Anxiety

Variables	Pearson's Correlation Coefficient (r)	p-value
Health Concerns	0.362	0.000
Financial Stress	0.200	0.001
Behavioural Change	0.252	0.000
Time Management	0.142	0.019

For the analysis of health concerns, it was found that there was a moderate positive correlation with post-pandemic anxiety among students. This correlation is substantiated by a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.362 and a highly significant p-value of 0.000. This implies that there is a correlation between students who prioritise their well-being and those who experience heightened levels of anxiety. The results highlight the significant influence of health concerns, potentially intensified by the consequences of the pandemic, on students' emotional well-being.

This study also revealed that financial stress contributes to post-pandemic anxiety, although its impact is relatively smaller compared to other factors. The correlation coefficient between the two variables is 0.200, with a p-value of 0.001. This slight positive correlation suggests that while financial problems play a role in increased anxiety, the impact is not as significant as health-related anxiety. Students facing financial stress may experience a slight increase in their anxiety levels, although the effect is not substantial.

In addition, the outbreak has led to notable behavioural changes, which have demonstrated a weak to moderate positive correlation with post-pandemic anxiety. The Pearson correlation coefficient was 0.252, indicating a significant relationship, with a p-value of 0.000. These findings imply that changes in behaviour, possibly caused by different daily routines or modified social dynamics, are associated with increased levels of anxiety among students. The relationship underscores the continuous psychological adjustment that students are experiencing as a result of the disturbance caused by the pandemic.

In the context of post-pandemic anxiety, it is worth noting that there is a weak positive correlation ($r=0.142$) between time management skills and post-pandemic anxiety. This correlation is statistically significant, as indicated by the p-value of 0.019. There is a noticeable correlation between poor time management skills and a slight increase in anxiety levels. Although the correlation may not be as robust as with other factors, this implies that better time management can help reduce anxiety, although the effect may be less pronounced.

Discussion

The results of the analysis show a robust pattern in the relationship between different factors and the level of anxiety reported by students at UiTM Seremban in the aftermath of the pandemic. Several factors have been identified as contributing to students' anxiety as they navigate the obstacles of a post-pandemic world, including health concerns, financial stress, behavioural changes and time management.

The findings of this study demonstrate a significant effect of health concerns on students' anxiety levels following the outbreak. The outbreak of COVID-19 seems to have increased the anxiety of students due to various health issues. Concerns may include personal health, the well-being of loved ones, and fears about future outbreaks. These findings are consistent with research showing that health anxiety, especially during an unprecedented global health emergency, can have a significant influence on a person's mental well-being (Wang et al., 2020). Previous experiences and concerns about the prospect of ongoing health risks may have contributed to an increased focus on health concerns, which may have worsened existing stress.

Based on the findings, post-pandemic anxiety was more strongly associated with health-related anxiety than with financial stress. A slight positive link suggests that economic constraints play a role in producing anxiety, although not to a significant degree. Consistent with the findings of Appleby et al (2022), the current economic upheaval resulting from the pandemic has posed challenges for students to manage their educational and personal budgets effectively, adding to their financial stress. Although the strength of the correlation is lower, this study emphasises the continued relevance of addressing financial instability. Students can benefit from institutional support and financial literacy programs, which offer helpful tools and resources to manage their finances properly. According to Mckee-Ryan et al (2005), this can alleviate some of the anxiety associated with financial problems.

The findings suggest that changing behaviour had a moderate effect on post-pandemic anxiety levels. The pandemic requires many behavioural changes, including adaptations to social interactions, study patterns and daily routines. Although it is necessary to adjust to new norms, this shift appears to generate heightened anxiety among students who seek stability and predictability. Based on research by Horesh and Brown (2020), the changes students are required to make due to various reasons have significantly impacted their feelings of stability and predictability. Consequently, the anxiety levels of students have escalated. Interventions aimed at helping students manage and adapt to these behavioural changes are necessary in reducing anxiety.

The findings indicate that post-pandemic anxiety has a weak positive relationship with time management abilities. Despite the decreased correlation value, this finding remained statistically significant, suggesting that even minor issues with time management can contribute to increased anxiety. The pandemic has disrupted previously established routines and patterns, hence posing difficulties for students in managing their time properly. The difficulty of balancing several commitments, such as academic obligations, personal life, and additional tasks related to the pandemic, can exacerbate feelings of stress and anxiety. Therefore, providing students with time management training and support can reduce

anxiety and balance their academic and personal commitments more effectively (Claessens et al., 2007).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study found that health concerns, financial stress, behavioural changes and time management all exert varying levels of influence on the post-epidemic anxiety of UiTM Seremban students. Health concerns and behavioural changes seem to have the most significant impacts, while financial stress and time management, although relevant, have less significant impacts.

Several recommendations are offered to address the problem of post-pandemic anxiety if it happens again in the future. To begin with, it is imperative for the university to prioritise health services and emphasise mental health support and wellness programs. This will help in alleviating the anxiety that is often associated with health concerns. Next, the university needs to improve existing financial assistance initiatives and implement educational programs on financial literacy to help reduce the burden of financial difficulties. Additionally, it is crucial to create a strong support system for students to assist them in adjusting to new norms and social dynamics. Counselling programs and peer support groups can help with this. Universities should also provide training and materials to help students improve their time management skills, enabling them to handle the pressure of academic responsibilities and personal obligations effectively.

Finally, it is important to note that these findings emphasise the complexity of post-pandemic concerns and the need to create comprehensive strategies to effectively support students in areas such as health, financial stability, behavioural adaptability and time management. Future research could explore the students' characteristics and include more variables to gain a better understanding of the complex dynamics underlying anxiety among students in the aftermath of the pandemic.

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