

# Forging A Path: Adapting Situational Leadership to Prioritize Student Mental Health During Covid-19 Outbreak at Universiti Teknologi Mara, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

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## Abstract

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges for educational institutions worldwide, including Universiti Teknologi MARA, Cawangan Pulau Pinang (UiTM CPP) in Malaysia. During the pandemic, the campus experienced a lockdown with 255 students, leading to potential stress, anxiety, and depression among the student population. To assess the students' mental health, the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS) was employed as a tool to measure their levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Based on the survey conducted, it was found that a significant percentage of students experienced normal levels of stress (70%), anxiety (55%), and depression (60%). However, a small percentage of students reported extremely severe cases of stress (0.8%), anxiety (7.1%), and depression (2.7%). These findings provided insight into the students' mental health condition during the Movement Control Order (MCO) period. In response to these findings, the Student Affair Department at UiTM CPP took appropriate actions based on a situational leadership approach. The leadership team recognized the need to adapt their leadership style to the unique situation presented by the pandemic. They took steps to provide support and assistance to students who were experiencing higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. This may have included offering counselling services, providing resources for mental health support, and creating initiatives to foster a supportive and inclusive campus environment during the challenging times of the pandemic. The situational leadership approach allowed the Student Affair Department to effectively respond to the needs of the students, taking into consideration the specific situation of the lockdown and the mental health challenges faced by the students. By being flexible and adaptable in their leadership approach, the Student

Affair Department was able to provide appropriate support to the students and help them cope with the stress, anxiety, and depression caused by the pandemic.

### **Introduction**

Leadership is a critical aspect of any organization, and effective leadership requires flexibility and adaptability to address unique situations and the needs of individuals or teams being led. One leadership style that emphasizes this approach is situational leadership, developed by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard in the late 1960s. The situational leadership model emphasizes adjusting leadership approaches based on specific circumstances to achieve optimal results. The education sector has been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with a sudden shift from face-to-face learning to online learning, leading to increased stress and anxiety among students.

#### *Therefore, aim of this study*

- To explore the impact of the pandemic on students' mental health and how situational leadership can be applied to address the challenges faced by students during this unprecedented situation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the education sector, resulting in a sudden shift from traditional face-to-face learning to online learning. This transition has had a profound impact on students, leading to increased levels of stress and anxiety. In response to this unprecedented situation, researchers have conducted numerous studies to understand the extent of the mental health challenges faced by students.

Many studies have explored the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of students. For instance, studies conducted by AlAteeq et al (2020) in Saudi Arabia and Maalouf et al (2020) on the mental health impact of COVID-19 revealed that a significant proportion of students reported moderate to high levels of stress. Factors such as sudden changes in learning environments, increased workload, and limitations on physical activities have contributed to the elevated levels of stress and anxiety among students. Moreover, other studies have highlighted the role of specific student groups, such as community college transfer students, postgraduate students, and athletes' students, who may be more vulnerable to stress during this time. For example, Cheung et al (2020) found that community college transfer students and athletes' students experienced higher levels of depression and anxiety, while Bukhsh et al (2011) reported that postgraduate students faced fatigue due to heavy workloads.

In response to the increased stress levels among students, interventions such as the Resilient Student Warrior program proposed by Sylvia et al (2020) have been developed to reduce stress through mind-body stress reduction techniques such as exercises, yoga, Tai Chi, and art-therapy. This highlights the need for adaptive leadership approaches that take into consideration the unique needs and circumstances of students during this challenging time. Therefore, the situational leadership model, which emphasizes adaptability and flexibility, can be a relevant leadership style in addressing the unique challenges faced by students during this unprecedented situation. By adjusting leadership approaches based on the specific needs of students, leaders can provide effective support and guidance to help students cope with the challenges of online learning and promote their mental well-being.

**Literature Review**

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges for leaders across various sectors, ranging from healthcare to business and education. The impact of the pandemic has been far-reaching, affecting not only the health and well-being of individuals but also the economy, social interactions, and many other aspects of life. This situation has required leaders to be agile, adaptable, and innovative in their approach, as they constantly assess and adjust their strategies to respond to the rapidly changing situation. There are several leadership theories that can be used to manage stress and anxiety among students during the COVID-19 pandemic such as transformational, servant, authentic and situational leadership. Hence, several studies assessing the level of stress, anxiety, and depression experienced by students have been studied to understand the importance of adaptive leadership in supporting student well-being during these challenging times.

Transformational leaders were found to be effective at inspiring and motivating their students, providing emotional support, and creating a sense of optimism and hope. However, Lawton-Misra and Pretorius (2021) also emphasized that leaders were expected to not only fully understand the meaning of empathy and compassion, but to know how to sincerely demonstrate these qualities to staff and students during times of crisis COVID-19. This study briefly explores the evolution of leadership theory, leadership during crisis, in general, and leadership during COVID-19 from a psychological perspective. Gill et al (2010) investigates the impact of transformational leadership (TL) on student educational satisfaction (SES) and student stress (SS) among Asian students pursuing business management programs in colleges and universities in British Columbia, Canada. The results demonstrate that an increase in perceived TL used by instructors/professors correlates positively with improved SES and reduced SS. Nonetheless, TL does not appear to alleviate the stress levels of graduate students.

Akter and Islam (2023) examined the evolution of transformational leadership and management concepts and contemporary debates surrounding crisis events and leadership styles in higher education during emergencies. These debates involve crisis management strategies, including crisis planning, diagnosis, and response, and resilience, dynamic learning, and strategic renewal. They reviewed the current literature on leadership styles and crisis management strategies in university education during the pandemic and suggests future strategies as guidelines for crisis management in university education and other levels of education in developing countries.

Apart from that, Francisco and Nuqui (2020) aimed to identify the emergence of situational leadership, also known as new normal leadership, among school administrators in the Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative research methods were used to gather data from selected school administrators in the Province of Bulacan during the school year 2020-2021. The data was analysed through transcriptions, codes, and triangulations, leading to the identification of themes. Findings showed that new normal leadership involves the ability to adapt while maintaining commitment, being an effective instructional decision-maker, and possessing qualities such as good planning, vigilance, and initiative.

The existing literature in this area is scant. Previous studies have predominantly focused on the influence of leadership styles on employee motivation and job satisfaction in the context of the pandemic. Considering the robust association between student mental health and the Covid-19 outbreak, it is imperative to enhance the understanding on how the emergence of situational leadership may pave the way for mitigating the mental health challenges encountered by students. Therefore, this paper proposes the situational leadership as a vital

role of leadership in times of crisis and highlighted the need for leaders to possess a range of skills, including strategic thinking, adaptability, communication, empathy, and collaboration.

### Methodology

The present study utilized a survey to collect data from students who were in lockdown on campus between April 15th and 20th, 2020. The survey was administered using Google Form and included the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS), which comprised 21 items. In addition, two qualitative exploratory questions were included to gather information on the students' experiences during the pandemic. The questions asked were, "Did you face difficulty to control your emotion and mind during this pandemic?" and "What is your issue/problem that is currently disturbing you?"

The sample population comprised of 255 students of all genders aged 18 to 24 years who were enrolled in either a diploma or degree program. Participants came from diverse family backgrounds and financial situations. Score Scale, which is presented in Table 1, was used to assess students' stress, anxiety, and depression levels. Each scale was composed of five stages, ranging from normal to extremely severe, and the final score for each scale was used to determine the level of stress, anxiety, or depression experienced by the student at the time of the survey.

Table 1

#### *DASS' Score Scale*

Score Scale			
	Stress	Anxiety	Depression
Normal	0-7	0-4	0-5
Mild	8-9	5-6	6-7
Moderate	10-13	7-8	8-10
Severe	14-17	9-10	11-14
Extremely severe	≥18	≥11	≥15

### Results and Discussions

#### **DASS' Score Scale Results**

##### *Perceived stress level*

Table 2 presents the outcomes of the responses to the Perceived Stress Scale, which is a tool for measuring an individual's perception of stress. The scale comprises seven statements, each rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from "Never" to "Very often." The table illustrates the frequency of responses for each rating option for each statement. The findings indicate that a considerable percentage of respondents perceive stress, as evidenced by the high percentages of responses in the "Almost never," "Fairly often," and "Very often" categories. Specifically, the participants reported struggling with feelings of nervousness, restlessness, and difficulty relaxing. These outcomes suggest that individuals generally experience some degree of stress and might benefit from stress management techniques.

Moreover, the table reveals that a significant proportion of respondents tend to overreact to situations, have difficulty accepting interruptions to their activities, and are easily offended. These results have potential implications for how individuals manage stress and interact with others in stressful situations. For instance, individuals who tend to overreact to situations might benefit from learning coping mechanisms to control their reactions and avoid

unnecessary stress. Similarly, individuals who are easily offended may need to develop resilience and coping strategies to deal with stressful situations more effectively. Thus, the Perceived Stress Scale outcomes suggest that the respondents experience some degree of stress and face challenges in coping with stressful situations. The findings highlight the importance of developing effective stress management strategies and building resilience to deal with stressors effectively. These results also have significant implications for individuals' mental health and overall well-being.

Table 2

*Responses to the perceived stress scale (N=255)*

Perceived stress scale	Never	Almost never	Fairly often	Very often
I find difficult to calm down	73 (29%)	152 (60%)	30 (12%)	0 (0%)
I tend to overreact to a situation	109 (43%)	126 (49%)	15 (6%)	5 (2%)
I think I'm too nervous	85 (33%)	134 (53%)	32 (13%)	4 (2%)
I find myself easily restless	67 (26%)	129 (51%)	52 (20%)	7 (3%)
I find difficult to relax	82 (32%)	148 (58%)	22 (9%)	3 (1%)
I cannot accept anything that prevents me from continuing what I am doing	92 (36%)	140 (55%)	23 (9%)	0 (0%)
I am easily offended	47 (18%)	140 (55%)	43 (17%)	25 (10%)

### ***Perceived Anxiety Level***

Table 3 displays the responses of the anxiety scale, indicating the percentage of responses for each rating option for each question. The most interesting finding is that the highest percentage (58%) and the lowest percentage (0%) came from the same question, which was difficulty in breathing. Moreover, two questions had 0% responses, which were almost panicked, and my heartbeat goes fast, both of which were under the Very Often scale. Interestingly, two questions revealed about the same percentage, which were some parts of my body have trembled and my heartbeat goes fast. The percentage for the question "some parts of my body have trembled" was 46% for the Never scale and 43% for the Almost Never scale. Furthermore, the question "my heartbeat goes fast" showed 44% for the Never scale and 45% for the Almost Never scale. The results also indicate that the percentage of Very Often scale for anxiety level ranged from 0% to 5%, which is a better result compared to the stress level findings. In the Almost Never scale, the difference in percentage between the highest and the lowest was quite good, which was only 9%. The highest percentage was 45%, and the lowest was 36%.

The findings suggest that the participants experienced some level of anxiety, as indicated by the responses to the anxiety scale. The results also show that the participants experienced different symptoms of anxiety, including difficulty in breathing, trembling, and a fast heartbeat. These symptoms may have implications for individuals' mental and physical health. Moreover, the low percentage of responses under the Very Often scale for anxiety level suggests that the participants had a relatively low level of anxiety. However, the findings should be interpreted with caution, as self-reported data may be subject to bias and inaccuracies.

Table 3

*Responses to the perceived anxiety scale (N=255)*

Perceived anxiety scale	Never	Almost never	Fairly often	Very often
I realized my mouth was dry	75 (29%)	116 (45%)	51 (20%)	13 (5%)
I have difficulty in breathing such as breathing too fast, gasping even when not doing physical activity	147 (58%)	93 (36%)	15 (6%)	0 (0%)
Some parts of my body have trembled (example: hands)	118 (46%)	110 (43%)	23 (9%)	4 (2%)
I worry about a situation where I panic and behave stupidly	132 (52%)	93 (36%)	24 (9%)	6 (2%)
I almost panicked	134 (53%)	104 (41%)	17 (7%)	0 (0%)
Although I am not doing any physical activity, my heartbeat goes fast	113 (44%)	116 (45%)	26 (10%)	0 (0%)
I feel scared for no reason	124 (49%)	103 (40%)	23 (9%)	5 (2%)

### ***Perceived depression level***

Table 4 reports the responses of the depression scale, indicating the percentage of responses for each rating option for each question. The highest percentage of responses (73%) came from the Never scale for the question "my life is meaningful anymore." Meanwhile, the lowest percentage of responses (1%) was under the Very Often scale for the four questions, which were "do not have any positive feelings at all," "nothing to expect," "feel worthless," and "my life is meaningful anymore." Furthermore, the percentage of responses for the Never and Almost Never scale for the question "do not have any positive feelings at all" was about the



same. The percentage of responses for the Never and Almost Never scale was 49% and 44%, respectively.

The findings suggest that the participants experienced some level of depression, as indicated by the responses to the depression scale. However, the relatively high percentage of responses under the Never scale for the question "my life is meaningful anymore" indicates that the participants did not feel that their lives were meaningless. The study found that the participants experienced some level of depression, as indicated by the responses to the depression scale. However, the findings suggest that the participants did not experience severe depression. Therefore, the results highlight the importance of managing depression to promote overall well-being. In contrast, the low percentage of responses under the Very Often scale for the four questions "do not have any positive feelings at all," "nothing to expect," "feel worthless," and "my life is meaningful anymore" suggests that the participants did not experience severe depression. However, the findings should be interpreted with caution, as self-reported data may be subject to bias and inaccuracies.

Table 4

*Responses to the perceived depression scale (N=255)*

Perceived depression scale	Never	Almost never	Fairly often	Very often
It's seemed I don't have any positive feelings at all	125 (49%)	111 (44%)	17 (7%)	2 (1%)
I feel reluctant to do anything	50 (20%)	134 (53%)	52 (20%)	19 (7%)
I have nothing to expect (despair)	125 (49%)	101 (40%)	27 (11%)	2 (1%)
I feel gloomy and sad	66 (26%)	151 (59%)	32 (13%)	6 (2%)
I am not enthusiastic at all	70 (27%)	137 (54%)	37 (15%)	11 (4%)
I feel worthless	140 (55%)	87 (34%)	25 (10%)	3 (1%)
I don't think my life is meaningful anymore	186 (73%)	56 (22%)	10 (4%)	3 (1%)

### DASS Results and Intervention Strategies

Table 5 reveals the results of the DASS questionnaire completed by 255 students who were locked down in the campus during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the students reported experiencing normal levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, with the fewest students reporting extremely severe levels. These findings suggest that the programs implemented by the Division of Student's Affairs during the lockdown period were effective in reducing the severity of mental health issues among the students. During the lock down period, several programs were implemented to support the well-being of the students. These initiatives were aimed at addressing the potential stress, anxiety, and depression that may arise due to the

isolation and uncertainty caused by the pandemic. The programs included food provision, online counselling, community service, cultural activities, and online games. Students were able to access these resources and activities to alleviate their concerns and maintain a sense of connection with the community. Additionally, for those students experiencing extreme levels of stress, anxiety, or depression, counsellors were available to provide individualized support and assistance. These programs proved to be beneficial for most students, as evidenced by the results of the DASS assessment.

One of the programs involved in UiTM CPP is providing food at least three times a day, including Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC), pizza, and *Nasi Beriyani* on some days in addition to routine meals. The Counsellor Online service was also available to students who needed private advice, and *Pegawai Hal Ehwat Islam* was available to provide spiritual guidance. Community service activities, such as making face shields and hand sanitizers, were also conducted to engage students and make them feel appreciated. Cultural units hosted online competitions for dancing, poetry, and singing, while student representative councils hosted online games such as PUBG and Mobile Legend.

However, there were still some students who reported extremely severe levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. In these cases, Counsellors attempted to provide online consultations and then met with the students face to face. As a last resort, students were sent back home, and their condition was followed up by Counsellors. Nonetheless, all students who reported extremely severe levels did not experience this severity in all categories at the latest follow-up. Figure 1 shows the programs conducted during the lockdown period. Overall, the programs implemented during the lockdown period were successful in reducing the severity of mental health issues among the students, with a few exceptions requiring further intervention.

Table 5

*DASS' result*

	<b>Stress</b>	<b>Anxiety</b>	<b>Depression</b>
<b>Normal</b>	<b>179</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>154</b>
<b>Mild</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Moderate</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Severe</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Extremely severe</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>7</b>





Figure 1: Programs conducted during Movement Control Order (MCO)

**Results of Qualitative Exploratory Question**

Two qualitative exploratory questions were included in the survey, as shown in Figure 2 and Table 6. The pie-chart result in Figure 2 illustrates the responses to the question, "Did you face difficulty to control your emotion and mind during this pandemic?" Of the respondents, 77% indicated that they were able to control their emotions and minds during the pandemic, while the remaining percentage indicated otherwise. On the other hand, Table 6 presents the results for the question "What is your issue/problem that is disturbing you for the time being?" The highest reported issue was homesickness, as students were not allowed to go home during the lockdown period.

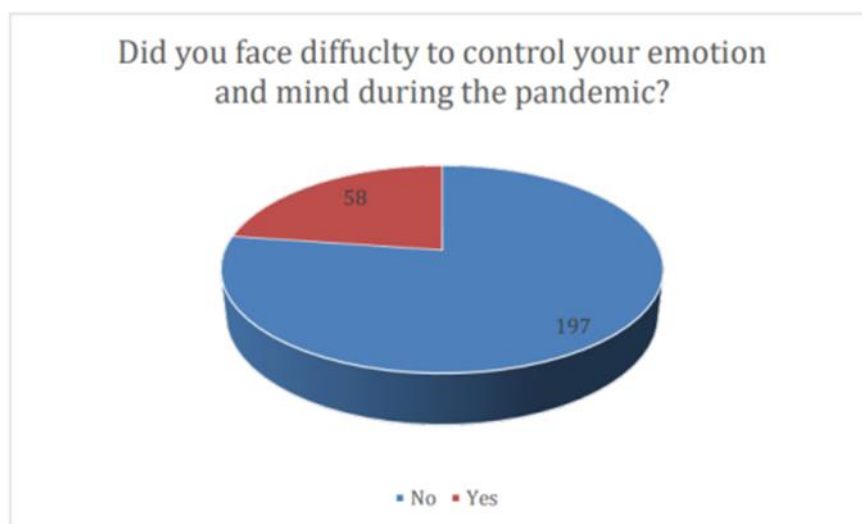


Figure 2. Result for the first exploratory question

Table 6

*Result for the second exploratory question*

<b>Issue/Problem</b>	<b>Total</b>
Homesick	67
Academic	51
Personal	41
Wi-Fi	8
Health	3
Mental/ Psychiatric	5
Recreation	4
Financial	3
Peers	3
Food	4
Sleep	6
None	60
<b>Total</b>	<b>255</b>

### Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic created unprecedented obstacles for educational institutions across the world, including Universiti Teknologi MARA, Cawangan Pulau Pinang (UiTM CPP) in Malaysia, leading to the possibility of students experiencing stress, anxiety, and depression during the lockdown. The Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS) was employed to evaluate the mental health of the students. The findings of the survey revealed that most students experienced average levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, while a few reported severe cases. In response, the Student Affairs Department at UiTM CPP adopted a situational leadership approach to offer support and help to students who experienced higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. This strategy allowed the department to respond efficiently to the students' requirements, considering the lockdown circumstances and the students' mental health challenges.

The Division of Student Affairs conducted programs addressing students' needs from a spiritual, mental, and physical perspective, which could have contributed to these results. While a small number of students reported severe levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, appropriate measures were taken to ensure their well-being. Follow-up consultations with a counsellor showed that all these students were in good condition. This study suggests that providing support programs and services during a challenging situation can be effective in promoting students' mental health. The situation described in the study can be related to the situational leadership style. Situational leadership is a leadership style that adapts to the needs of the situation and the people being led. In this case, the Division of Student's Affairs demonstrated situational leadership by providing various programs to address the needs of the students during the lockdown. These programs included food provision, online counselling, community service, and cultural activities.

The leaders in the Division of Student's Affairs had to assess the situation and the needs of the students, and then adjust their leadership style accordingly. They had to provide different types of support to students depending on their level of stress, anxiety, and depression. For

example, some students needed spiritual support, while others needed mental or physical support. Therefore, the leaders had to use a flexible leadership approach to meet the different needs of the students. By using a flexible leadership approach, they were able to provide the necessary support to students and help them cope with the challenges of the pandemic.

In short, the findings highlight the importance of assessing the mental health of students during challenging times such as the Covid-19 pandemic. It also emphasizes the need for leaders to adapt their leadership style to the unique situation presented by the pandemic. The situational leadership approach allowed the Student Affair Department to provide appropriate support to the students and help them cope with the stress, anxiety, and depression caused by the pandemic. By recognizing the need for flexibility and adaptability in their leadership approach, educational institutions can effectively respond to the needs of their students and create a supportive and inclusive campus environment during challenging times.

This research study has two main contributions. Firstly, it applies a leadership theory called situational leadership to the context of supporting students' mental health during the Covid-19 pandemic. This approach emphasizes adapting leadership style to the specific situation and the needs of the individuals being led.

Secondly, the research is significant because it focuses on a specific educational institution in Malaysia during the pandemic, which sheds light on the challenges faced by students and institutions in a developing country. The study shows that the situational leadership approach was effective in addressing the mental health needs of students in this context and provides practical insights into the support programs and services that can be implemented to promote students' mental health and well-being.

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