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Differential responses to academic stress during the COVID-19 pandemic, transition, and the new normal period

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate decreasing student academic stress in distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, transition period, and new normal era by giving a self-help module to students. This research employed an experimental approach with a group pre-test post-test design with quantitative analytics. The perceived academic stress scale (PASS) and module evaluation scale were utilized to assess students' academic stress levels and their understanding of the module. The subjects consisted of one male student and thirty-seven female students, as the school was dominated by female students. This study indicated that students' academic stress levels during the pandemic and the new normal were in the medium range (18.82 - 19.97). The results showed that there was no significant difference in academic stress between the pandemic and the transition period ($t = 1.322$, $p > 0.05$) and the data between the pandemic and the new normal ($t = -1.426$, $p > 0.05$), while between the transition period and the new normal, it showed a significant difference ($t = -4.189$, $p < 0.05$). The study recommends that schools develop future guidance and counseling programs to help students cope with stress and build resilience. This study's findings can inform policy decisions and academic interventions to support students' mental health and academic success during challenging times.

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1. INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2019, the whole world was shocked by the emergence of an outbreak of the coronavirus disease known as Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). This virus is a new virus that attacks acute respiration with a short incubation period and very fast transmission. The COVID-19 virus is spreading all over the world. Various efforts have been made to prevent and reduce the morbidity and mortality caused by the COVID-19 virus. In Indonesia, in particular, the government has established a policy of large-scale social restrictions and recommends wearing masks, washing hands, and maintaining physical distance to protect against disease and COVID-19 transmission. The implementation of large-scale social restrictions and physical distancing recommendations has caused several impacts such as the closure of various public facilities, and workers implementing work from home. All forms of activity, which previously could be carried out outside the home, were temporarily suspended and the public was advised to remain in their

respective homes. This creates unusual conditions and all groups are forced to adapt to new habits (new normal). One of those affected are teenagers who are used to doing activities outside the home such as playing and going to school.

This sudden change has a profound impact on individual health, especially for workers and students, both physically and mentally. Zhang *et al*. [1] suggested that the health crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic caused psychological changes such as depression, anxiety, discomfort, and fear. This symptom is felt by all citizens, both teenagers, and adults. For the age of students, they must also participate in teaching and learning activities that were originally face-to-face to distance learning with the e-learning learning method.

Several studies have shown that academic stress can reduce students' motivation to learn, delay assignments, and most significantly increase dropout rates [2]. Factors that can influence emotional development have an impact on stress including physical changes, changes in interaction patterns with parents, changes in interaction patterns with peers, changes in external views, and changes in interactions with schools [3]–[5]. Furthermore, Munir *et al*. [2] specifically state that the factors that cause stress in the community include income, limited food, and concerns about being infected with the COVID-19 virus.

A research by Fawaz and Samaha [6] pointed out that online learning has given rise to depression and anxiety disorders among Lebanese university students. Meanwhile in Indonesia, the results of a survey conducted by the Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia (Indonesian child protection commission) related to the perception in face-to-face to distance learning from 1,700 respondents, as many as 77.8 percent of students had difficulty due to the piled-up tasks between teachers [7]. Moreover, the task collection time is relatively short. Meanwhile, 37.1% of respondents complained that the time for working on assignments was narrow, which made students less rested and tired. The next difficulty in face-to-face to distance learning with the online system is related to the problem of internet quotas, as many as 42.2 percent admitted that they did not have an adequate quota. According to the Ministry of Education and Culture, Indonesia, the emergence of stress in students is one of the negative impacts of face-to-face to distance learning where this is identified due to the lack of interaction of students with teachers, friends, and the outside environment plus the difficulty of face-to-face to distance learning both technically and materially [8]. In the other hand, another study also found that students experience a good learning during the distance learning [9].

Given that the stressors in the COVID-19 pandemic situation are very complex, it cannot be denied that the level of academic stress on students is also expected to increase [10], [11]. Research conducted by Basith *et al*. [12] with student subjects found that the level of academic stress on students during the COVID-19 pandemic was in the moderate category. In more detail, Muchsini and Siswandari [13] in his research found that academic stress was mostly triggered by uncertainty about final exams and assignments. Moreover, high school students may have quite heavy pressure, which is also related to preparing for higher education or the world of work. Based on the study by Nuryana *et al*. [14], during the pandemic the policies of all sectors were changed including education where learning activities in schools were closed and required to conduct online learning. It had caused some issues in mental health such as stress, anxiety and depression that had been research widely.

Other problems also arise during the implementation of distance learning, so the quality of education in Indonesia has decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Seeing the various problems that arise due to distance learning, the government has begun to set a strategy so that learning can be carried out face-to-face, and a new policy regarding the implementation of limited face-to-face learning has emerged starting in July 2021. Limited face-to-face learning has several conditions, namely, all education personnel have been vaccinated and learning is done by limiting meeting hours, as well as implementing strict health protocols. In this case, students are divided into study groups or scheduled based on shifts to limit the number of students in one room. Before the implementation of limited face-to-face learning, the Ministry of Education and Culture socialized and published a learning guidebook during the pandemic. According to Grubic *et al*. [15], the roles of the learning team include: i) dividing study groups and setting lesson schedules for each group; ii) making arrangements for the layout of the room; iii) providing dividing boundaries and markers for the direction of corridors and stairs; iv) implement a bullying prevention mechanism for residents of education units who are stigmatized by COVID; and v) prepare all equipment for implementing health protocols.

The implementation of face-to-face learning applies the precautionary principle because it is related to the health and safety of school residents so the health protocol must be applied strictly by the limited face-to-face implementation rules. Limited face-to-face learning is a limitation on the number of students in one class, so it is necessary to regulate the number with a rotation system and a capacity of 50% of the normal number of students, parental approval, application of strict health protocols, education personnel have carried out vaccinations, as well as facilities and equipment. supporting infrastructure for the implementation of health protocols is available.

Based on the results of interviews with the coordinator of guidance and counseling teachers, limited face-to-face learning is limited to 3 hours of lessons for 1 shift and combined with face-to-face to distance

learning, so that limited face-to-face learning is carried out 2 to 3 times a week. Each student does limit face-to-face learning for 6 to 9 hours with the entry system made alternately with a pause of a few minutes so that there is no buildup between students who will go home and those who will enter the classroom. Conditions like this have a huge impact on both teachers and students. The impact on the teacher is that the teacher has difficulty managing learning, and the learning time is reduced so that the teacher cannot fulfill the burden of teaching hours. While the impacts for students are: i) students experience a reduction in social interaction with their friends; ii) students complain about the severity of assignments from the teacher; iii) increased sense of academic stress and boredom due to activity restrictions while at school; and iv) learning is dominated by teachers because the delivery of material is quite dense.

This is supported by the results of a preliminary study in schools, data shows that this limited face-to-face learning has a big impact on students, including students experiencing academic stress due to the many assignments given by the teacher. In addition, students do not feel free to be in school. The many rules that must be met, cause students to feel pressured and feel uncomfortable at school. Based on the above, research on students' academic stress in distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, the transition period, and in the new normal era is considered important.

2. METHOD

This study used experimental approach with a group pre-test post-test design. The procedures started with diagnosis of the situation of the class, action plan, taking action, evaluation, and following up on the evaluation. Based on the initial diagnosis, the reserchers designed the activity in action plan using self-help module entitled “psychoeducation to reduce student academic stress.” The study measured the different levels of the academic stress and their understanding of the module. The interesting situation found in the study was that the action research crossed the three different times including the COVID-19 pandemic, transition period, and new normal era. The research instruments as the pre-test and post-test were distributed during those times. Therefore, the analysis used included a t-test to find a significant difference between academic stress and their understanding of the module during the treatment or in the three different times. In addition, correlation test was used to investigate relationship between academic stress and the level of understanding the module during the pandemic, transition period and new normal. The regression test aimed to find that academic stress in the new normal was predicted by the level of students' understanding of module. A mediation test to examine the relationship between transitional stress and the new normal was mediated by the variable understanding of module.

The treatment procedures conducted including: i) stage one was collecting the pre-test data during the pandemic period; ii) the second stage, during the transition period, participants had to read the module independently; iii) the third stage was the main workshop leading by facilitators to reduce the academic stress based on the module that was ended by post-test; and iv) the final stage was the following up after a couple of months trearment by giving the post-test instrument in which happened during the new normal era. The subjects consisted of 1 male student and 37 female students as the school was dominated by female students.

The instrument used to see the level of perceived academic stress of students was using the perceived academic stress scale (PASS) measuring instrument which was developed based on the perceived stress scale (PSS) from Cohen [16], the research instrument consists of 10 question items with an answer choice scale of 0-4. and the sample will be faced with five answers to each question item. The five answer choices are 0 = “never”, 1 = “rarely”, 2 = “sometimes”, 3 = “often”, and 4 = “very often”. However, items 4, 5, 7, and 8 were scored in reverse (0 = 4, 1 = 3, 2 = 2, 3 = 1, and 4 = 0). The indication is that the higher the PASS value, the total score of 13 shows the average value or is still said to be within normal limits. A stress score of 20 or more indicates severe stress. As the PASS was developed from PSS by Cohen [16] that was translated by researchers according to field conditions and language. From the results of the reliability test, the reliability coefficient of Cronbach's alpha was 0.7 indicated a good consistency.

The second instrument was using an evaluation module scale consisting of 10 questions. The second instrument included questions about the meaning and types of academic stress, factors causing academic stress, symptoms and risks of academic stress, and some techniques to release the stress. The reliability for the module evaluation scale was 0.67. This module is a means to assist students in reducing academic stress and is also equipped with student self-help worksheets. This module is an interactive guide that can be used independently by students to understand the meaning and types of academic stress, factors that cause academic stress, symptoms and risks of academic stress, and practice cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) techniques to reduce academic stress. The next data was obtained using descriptive analysis, t-test, correlation, and regression test. The results of the correlation test were used as the basis for whether or not a regression test was carried out to measure whether academic stress in the new normal is predicted by the level of student understanding.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data were collected three times during the pandemic, at the beginning of the transition period with some restrictions, and during the new normal when students were allowed to do normal activities. The total subjects were 38 students due to some missing data during the pandemic (age 16 to 18 years). Some students were sick and had some problems with the internet connection when the data were collected during the pandemic; therefore, the data gathered were different from the plan. The PASS was utilized to collect the data in the study and considereda good instrument consisting of 10 items with 0.662 for the Alpha Cronbach test. Meanwhile, the level of understanding of module was measured by using the instrument in the module on academic stress for students.

Based on the data, it could be seen that during the pandemic when students had to study from home, the level of academic stress was moderate with a score of 18.82 on average. During the relaxation or the transition period, the level of academic stress decreased to 17.74 on average but it was still in the moderate category. During the new normal, students participated in the full scheduled activities such as learning in class, guidance and counseling activities, and classroom competitions before completing the PASS. Interestingly, the level of academic stress tended to increase during the new normal reaching 19.97 on average but it was still in the moderate category. Meanwhile, the understanding level of academic stress measured during the transition period was 15.82 out of 22. This meant that the level of understanding was considered high.

To test the difference between students' level of academic stress during the pandemic and the new normal, the paired samples t-test analysis was conducted. The results showed that there was no significant difference in academic stress between the pandemic and the transition period ($t = 1.322$, $p > 0.05$). Similar results also showed when the data between the pandemic and the new normal were tested. It indicated that there was no significant difference between variables ($t = -1.426$, $p > 0.05$). Conversely, the test between the transition period and the new normal showed a significant difference ($t = -4.189$, $p < 0.05$). The result explained that students' academic stress at the beginning of the transition period was significantly different from their conditions during the new normal. Based on the analysis, all variables showed a significant correlation between paired variables as could be seen in Table 1. Although the two paired variables had no significant difference, they had a significant correlation.

Table 1. The result of the paired samples t-test

Paired variables	t	p	r	p
Pandemic-Transition	1.322	0.194	0.430	0.007
Pandemic-New normal	-1.426	0.162	0.354	0.029
Transition-New normal	-4.189	0.000	0.463	0.003

Note: N = 38

A Pearson's correlation analysis was performed to analyze the relations between the four variables and further used to decide the need for a predictive test (N = 38). The results indicated that there was a significant correlation between students' academic stress during the pandemic, the transition period, and the new normal which could be observed in Table 2. Furthermore, the correlation was positive meaning that the variables tended to move in the same direction. However, there was no significant correlation between the level of understanding of module and students' academic stress during the pandemic and transition period. A significant relation showed between the level of understanding and the new normal data ($r = 0.397$, $p < 0.05$). As the correlation was positive, both variables tended to show the same direction. A high level of understanding of module was associated with the high level of students' academic stress during the new normal. The finding is interesting and further explanation is in the discussion.

Further analysis was carried out to find the predictive correlation between the four variables that showed a significant correlation in the previous test. There were four regression tests based on the correlation analysis. Overall, the results showed that the effect of the independent variable (level of PASS during transition and new normal period) on the dependent variable (level of PASS during pandemic, transition period and level of understanding module) was from 12.5% to 21.5% as shown in Table 3. The academic stress in the transition period accounted for 21.5% of the variance in academic stress during the new normal ($R^2 = 0.215$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.193$). Meanwhile, the level of understanding of module accounted for 15.8% of the variance in academic stress during the new normal ($R^2 = 0.158$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.134$). However, the academic stress during the pandemic showed a significant contribution to the academic stress during the new normal ($R^2 = 0.125$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.101$).

Table 2. Correlation between academic stress in the pandemic, the transition period, the new normal, and the level of understanding of module.

	Academic stress			
	Pandemic	Transition	New normal	Understanding
Pandemic	1	0.430**	0.354*	0.159
Transition	-	1	0.463**	0.030
New normal	-	-	1	0.397*
Understanding	-	-	-	1

Note: N = 38, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05

Table 3. Regression test of the variables

Dependent variable	Independent variables	R^2	Adjusted R^2	F	β	t
Transition	Pandemic	0.185	0.163	8.181	0.430	2.860
New normal	Pandemic	0.125	0.101	5.153	0.354	2.270
New normal	Transition	0.215	0.193	9.837	0.463	3.136
New normal	Understanding	0.158	0.134	6.741	0.397	2.596

Note: N = 38

Based on the regression analysis, the mediation test was possible to be conducted to find whether the level of understanding mediates the effect of the academic stress during the transition period on the new normal. As the academic stress during the pandemic showed a small contribution to the academic stress during the new normal (R^2 = 0.125), the variable was excluded from the mediation analysis. Based on Table 4, the results indicated that when the mediator was added to the equation, the correlation between the academic stress during the transition period and during the new normal became more significant (R^2 Change = 0.362, F = 9.917, p < 0.05). In other words, the level of understanding of module mediated the relation between the academic stress during the transition period and during the new normal. The contribution of the independent variable and mediator was 36.2% of the variance in academic stress during the new normal. The number was higher than the contribution of academic stress during the transition period (21.5%) to academic stress during the new normal.

Table 4. The results of the mediation test

		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients				F Change	
	Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	R^2 Change	F	Sig.
1	(Constant)	10.270	2.315	-	4.436	0.000	0.362	9.917	0.000
	Transition	0.227	0.068	0.452	3.344	0.002			
	Understanding (M)	0.359	0.126	0.384	2.840	0.007			

Dependent Variable: New normal, M: Mediator

The condition of academic stress measured in three different time periods shows some interesting findings. The general prediction that the level of academic stress during the pandemic, where students study from home fully, is much higher than the transition period and the new normal, is not proven in this study [17], [18]. The level of academic stress in the new normal period indicates a higher average than during the pandemic and transition period. In fact, during the transition period, academic stress tends to decrease compared to the pandemic period. This is possible because students have not fully participated in normal learning activities, so their learning load may be lighter than in the new normal period. The transition period in this context is a period where the school has allowed students to enter school in stages with the regulation that only 50% of the student quota enters and is scheduled, meaning not every day. Meanwhile, the new normal period is a period when students are allowed to enter school with a daily shift pattern and normal teaching and learning activities. This is in accordance with the results shown by de la Fuente *et al*. [18] which showed that the learning process during the pandemic did not have a significant effect on academic stress. This explains that there is no difference between academic stress during the pandemic and the new normal period.

Several studies have been conducted to measure students' academic stress levels both at school and university levels during the pandemic and new normal [19]–[22]. In general, the results show that academic stress levels during the pandemic and new normal also tend to be high, however, research is still rare that

investigates differences in stress levels during the pandemic and the new normal period. This research can be a picture of the comparison level of academic stress of vocational high school students in Indonesia during the pandemic and the new normal. It turns out that the level of academic stress during the pandemic and the new normal does not show a significant difference. It is possible because the existence of specific stressors in both situations put pressure on students equally so that the level of academic stress is actually higher than during the transition period.

An interesting finding is shown from the results of the difference test between academic stress conditions during the transition period and the new normal which shows a significant difference. The learning load during the transition period may be lighter than the new normal period because it is still in the adjustment period, while the new normal period learning activities have been running as usual, although health protocols are still maintained. Considering that the data was taken at the beginning of the new normal, it is possible that students are still in the adjustment phase. When the data was collected, students had just participated in a busy school activity with some tasks, such as learning activities in class, guidance and counseling activities, and preparation for competitions between classes. The researchers [23]–[25] showed that academic stress is strongly influenced by existing stressors such as life satisfaction, locus of control, gender, individual differences, and residence. Therefore, it can be assumed that a high level of academic stress is due to some demanding tasks. Unfortunately, the study was not seeing and assessed the types of stressors in detail that might affect students in filling out the PASS.

The results of the review of the module on academic stress for students provide an idea of whether students' perceptions of academic stress are also influenced by their knowledge of academic stress itself [26]. Therefore, the study aims to see whether the condition of academic stress has a relationship with the level of students' understanding of academic stress. At the same time, the relationship between levels of academic stress measured at three different times was also tested. The results shown are quite interesting because each variable turns out to have a significant relationship even though the level of the relationship does not correlate strong enough because it is still below 0.70. The exception is that there is no correlation between the level of understanding of module and academic stress during the pandemic and transition period. In fact, the level of understanding of stress is only correlated with the level of academic stress in the new normal.

The direction of the correlation shown is positive where it turns out that students with a good understanding of academic stress show high levels of academic stress. In fact, several studies find that the level of understanding of stress will make people know better how to deal with academic stress, eventually, the level of academic stress tends to be lower [27]–[29]. This is quite different in this study, where knowledge about academic stress actually indicates that students' academic stress levels are also high. This can be explained that students could be in the process of adjustment when entering the new normal period. Students have a good stock of knowledge about stress, but not with the application of coping with stress. It is possible that students do not have a sufficient understanding of how to manage their academic stress [29]. Moreover, the process of psychological assistance in schools through guidance and counseling teachers was still limited at that time, so the outcome of the guidance and counselling program cannot be seen right away. Therefore, the preparation of an appropriate counseling guidance program is critically needed in the new normal period [17].

Further analysis was performed to test whether academic stress conditions in the new normal were predicted by academic stress in the transition period and the level of understanding of module. This test was carried out based on the results of the correlation test which showed the two independent variables had a fairly good correlation with academic stress in the new normal period. Generally, the results show that the level of understanding mediates the relationship between academic stress in the transition period and the new normal. In other words, the level of academic stress in the new normal period was predictable at 36.2% explaining the variance referring to the level of academic stress in the transition period and understanding of academic stress. If these results can be known before the implementation of the new normal policy for students, schools and teachers can support students better in preparing themselves when entering the teaching-learning in the new normal period. However, the results shown can also be the basis for developing programs to equip students with coping strategies and good stress management at school during the new normal [28], [30].

Apart from the limitations described above, this study has not been able to distinguish whether academic stress experienced by students has a negative impact on their learning performance at school. This is because stress is divided into two types, namely eustress (positive) and distress (negative) which will certainly have a different impact on each individual [25]. There is a need for further research on whether the high level of academic stress has a significant effect on the level of student achievement. Several previous studies have shown that stress has a negative effect on student performance [20], [31]–[33]. However, other studies have found that academic stress and academic achievement are positively correlated [34]. Furthermore, stressors that can be specifically identified can also be interesting things to study subsequently. Thus, researchers can provide specific information on stress-triggering factors and the effects of that stress on

students. In addition, the number of research subjects also needs to be enlarged with a more balanced involvement of men and women which may lead to different findings. Research shows that women have a higher tendency to academic stress than men [21], [35]. Finally, the formulation of assistance programs, especially by guidance and counseling teachers to students, needs to be constructed well and comprehensively

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the data, it could be seen that during the pandemic, the level of academic stress was moderate with a score of 18.82 while during the transition period, it decreased to 17.74 and increased during the new normal reaching 19.97 in the moderate category. Meanwhile, the understanding level of module measured during the transition period was 15.82 out of 22. This meant that the level of understanding was considered high. The results showed that there was no significant difference in academic stress between the pandemic and the transition period ($t = 1.322$, $p > 0.05$) and the data between the pandemic and the new normal ($t = -1.426$, $p > 0.05$). Conversely, the test between the transition period and the new normal showed a significant difference ($t = -4.189$, $p < 0.05$. This indicated that students' academic stress levels during the pandemic and new normal had the same level in the medium category. Meanwhile, there was a significant difference between the level of academic stress in the transition period and the new normal even though it is still in the same category. It was explained further in subsequent findings that there was a significant relationship between the two variables. It could be observed that there was a correlation between the academic stress of the transition period and the new normal. Furthermore, the level of understanding of module also showed a significant relationship with academic stress in the new normal. Further analysis was carried out and found that the relationship between academic stress in the transition period and the new normal was mediated by the level of understanding of module. It showed that the level of stress in the new normal could be predicted by 36.2% of the transition period and the level of understanding of module. Based on these results, the study recommends further research that can investigate more specifically the stressors that arise and the effects of stress on students' academic performance. In addition, the study suggests a guidance and counseling program that can be developed by schools for students about coping strategies and stress management as the level of students' understanding of stress is already good.

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