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Adverse Psychological Outcomes of Academic Delays Amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Comprehensive Exploration

Arif Hidajad^{1*}

¹ *Sendratasik, Fakultas Bahasa Dan Seni, Universitas Negeri Surabaya*

* Corresponding author:

Email: arifhidajad@unesa.ac.id

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted education globally, leading to academic delays for students at all levels. This paper explores the adverse psychological outcomes of these delays, focusing on higher education students. The shift to remote learning introduced challenges in self-discipline, isolation, and technology access, impacting students' emotional well-being. Uncertainty about academic timelines intensified stress, anxiety, and eroded confidence. Students navigated this uncertainty through coping mechanisms such as virtual support networks, mindfulness practices, and engaging in hobbies. Educational institutions played a critical role by providing mental health resources, fostering flexibility, and addressing the digital divide. The paper underscores the need for holistic approaches to education, adaptive curriculum design, resilience-building, educator training, and collaborative support systems. The pandemic offers an opportunity to redefine success in terms of adaptability and emotional well-being, preparing students for a changing world.

Keywords: *Academic delays, COVID-19 pandemic, psychological outcomes, remote learning, higher education*

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1. Introduction

The global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in recent years has ushered in an era of unprecedented challenges across various spheres of human life (Wilkins, 2020). Among its far-reaching impacts, the education sector has been profoundly disrupted, leading to academic delays

for students at all levels of education. As institutions rapidly shifted to remote and hybrid learning models, students faced not only changes in their academic routines but also the destabilization of their personal lives (Daniel, 2020). These disruptions have not only manifested as tangible shifts in educational timelines but have also cast a pervasive shadow on the psychological well-being of students.

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged as an unexpected and formidable force, reshaping the way societies functioned on a global scale. Lockdowns, social distancing, and the closure of educational institutions became necessary measures to curb the spread of the virus. As a result, the traditional in-person learning environment, characterized by face-to-face interactions with peers and instructors, transformed virtually overnight. While this transition was a testament to the adaptability of educational systems, it came at a cost (Parker, 2020).

For students, accustomed to structured classrooms and predictable routines, the sudden shift to remote learning proved to be disruptive (Kee, 2021). Not only did they have to grapple with the technical aspects of online platforms, but they also found themselves navigating a new mode of learning that required heightened self-discipline and time management. The lines between home, study, and leisure blurred, leading to a complex interplay of roles within the same physical space. The absence of in-person social interactions further compounded the sense of isolation and detachment.

The disruption of the familiar learning environment was coupled with a digital divide that underscored existing inequalities. While some students seamlessly transitioned to online learning, others faced challenges accessing necessary technology and stable internet connections (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). This discrepancy exacerbated feelings of frustration and inequity among students, deepening the psychological strain of academic delays (Hasan & Bao, 2020). Furthermore, the inability to engage in extracurricular activities, participate in collaborative projects, or seek immediate clarification from instructors contributed to a sense of detachment from the learning process.

Beyond the logistical challenges, academic delays became an unintended consequence of the pandemic (Hossain et al, 2021). Delays arose due to a variety of reasons, including technological barriers, pedagogical adjustments, and personal circumstances such as illness or familial responsibilities. As a result, students found themselves in academic limbo, their educational trajectories unexpectedly extended. These delays, often manifesting as postponed examinations, project submissions, or graduations, brought about a plethora of emotional and psychological responses.

Feelings of uncertainty about the future became a common thread in the student experience. The initial optimism of a brief disruption evolved into a prolonged state of ambiguity, with timelines for resuming normal academic activities remaining uncertain. This uncertainty intertwined with personal aspirations and career goals, intensifying stress and anxiety levels. The abrupt disruption of well-defined timelines challenged students' sense of control, amplifying feelings of powerlessness (Sundarasan et al, 2020).

The subsequent sections of this paper will delve into the intricate web of psychological ramifications stemming from these academic delays. By exploring both empirical research and real-life experiences, this will uncover the multifaceted nature of the challenges students face.

From heightened stress and anxiety to feelings of uncertainty about the future, these psychological responses intertwine with the practical aspects of academic setbacks.

Through this comprehensive analysis, we aim to not only recognize the profound psychological toll of academic delays but also to underscore the importance of a holistic approach to education during times of crisis. By understanding the interconnectedness of academic and psychological well-being, educators, policymakers, and support systems can work collaboratively to develop strategies that mitigate the negative impacts and nurture the resilience of students.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the psychological responses of students to academic delays during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of the emotional experiences and coping strategies adopted by students in response to these delays. Data was collected through open-ended online surveys that allowed participants to freely express their feelings, thoughts, and reflections related to academic delays. The sample consisted of higher education students from diverse disciplines and backgrounds, selected through purposive sampling to ensure a range of perspectives.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data collected through the open-ended survey responses. This involved a systematic process of identifying patterns, themes, and meanings within the data. Initially, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data by reading through the response's multiple times. Then, codes were generated to label segments of the data that represented recurring concepts and ideas. These codes were subsequently organized into broader themes that captured the essence of participants' psychological responses and coping mechanisms. The analysis aimed to provide a rich and nuanced exploration of how academic delays impacted students' emotions and how they navigated these challenges emotionally.

Ethical considerations were rigorously upheld throughout the research process, ensuring participants' anonymity, informed consent, and protection from potential harm arising from sharing their experiences.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Psychological Responses to Academic Delays

The landscape of higher education underwent a seismic transformation with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. As institutions grappled with navigating the uncharted territory of remote and hybrid learning models, the resulting academic delays brought forth a complex tapestry of psychological responses among students (Dhar et al, 2020). The impact of academic delays reverberated across students' emotional experiences, yielding a wide spectrum of reactions. On one end of the spectrum lay feelings of frustration and disappointment (Kee, 2021). These emotions were often fueled by dashed expectations and the sudden disruption of carefully planned academic trajectories. Some students found themselves grappling with an unexpected halt to their momentum, leading to a disheartening pause in their educational journey.

Conversely, heightened stress and anxiety occupied the other end of the emotional continuum. The uncertainty introduced by academic delays stirred a cauldron of worries. Concerns about

falling behind, academic performance, and future prospects escalated to a crescendo, contributing to heightened emotional distress (García & Weiss, 2020). The inability to predict when academic activities would return to normal added an element of unpredictability that exacerbated the emotional toll.

Uncertainty emerged as a powerful undercurrent threading through the emotional responses to academic delays. The absence of concrete timelines for resuming in-person classes, examinations, or completing academic projects deepened the sense of instability. Students, accustomed to a structured educational environment, were now confronted with the unknown. This lack of clarity regarding their academic future acted as a catalyst, magnifying emotional reactions and intensifying psychological strain.

The rapid transition to remote learning, while a necessary response to the pandemic, brought with it a distinct sense of detachment. The shift from bustling classrooms to solitary study spaces altered the traditional academic landscape. The interpersonal connections formed in physical classrooms were replaced by virtual interactions, leading to a sense of isolation (Soleas & Coe-Nesbitt, 2022). Additionally, technological challenges inherent in remote learning introduced a cognitive load that further contributed to this detachment. In turn, this detachment cast a shadow over students' sense of academic achievement. The conventional markers of success, such as engaging classroom discussions and shared experiences, were disrupted. This shift led to a diminishment in the perceived value of their educational endeavors. Consequently, the holistic academic experience became fragmented, accentuating the emotional toll of academic delays.

The pandemic exposed a digital divide that had implications beyond mere access to technology. Students from varying socio-economic backgrounds faced disparate challenges in transitioning to remote learning (Du Preez & Le Grange, 2020). While some students seamlessly integrated into the digital learning landscape, others encountered barriers like limited access to devices, stable internet connections, and conducive study environments. This divide not only deepened emotional responses but also amplified feelings of inequity, potentially intensifying the psychological impact of academic delays.

The abrupt shift to remote learning prompted students to reassess their concept of academic achievement. Traditional markers of success were redefined in the context of digital education, creating a new yardstick for accomplishment. The recalibration of expectations, coupled with the aforementioned emotional responses, reshaped students' self-perception and the perceived value of their academic pursuits.

3.2. Impact of Uncertainty on Mental Well-being

Uncertainty acts as a potent amplifier of stress, propelling it from a manageable level to an overwhelming force. The absence of clear timelines and predictable outcomes generates a pervasive sense of instability. Students, accustomed to well-structured academic schedules, found themselves navigating a labyrinth of unpredictability. The stress response, once a subtle undercurrent, surged to the forefront, resulting in heightened physiological and emotional reactions (Pollard, 2001).

The anticipation of what lies ahead, coupled with the inability to plan with certainty, intensifies stress levels. Students grappled with multifaceted worries, from concerns about academic performance to the broader implications of delays on their personal and professional

trajectories. This heightened stress, left unchecked, can have cascading effects on overall mental well-being, leading to exhaustion, burnout, and a diminished capacity to cope effectively (Rothenberger, 2017). Uncertainty and anxiety share a symbiotic relationship, with one often exacerbating the other. The ambiguity surrounding academic delays was fertile ground for cultivating anxiety. The shifting sands of when regular academic activities would resume left students grappling with unknown variables. This lack of control over their educational trajectory and the lingering doubts about the future acted as triggers for anxiety.

Students embarked on a perpetual cycle of "what ifs," contemplating a range of hypothetical scenarios, each carrying its own emotional weight (Subramanian & Vaughan, 2020). The longer the uncertainty persisted, the deeper these anxieties took root. The potential implications of delays on graduation, job prospects, and personal goals introduced layers of complexity, fueling the anxiety nexus and further heightening emotional turmoil.

The prolonged uncertainty wrought by academic delays eroded students' confidence in their ability to navigate their educational journeys effectively (Settersten Jr et al, 2020). The instability of academic timelines led to a pronounced disconnection between effort and outcome. The relationship between hard work and achievement, once relatively straightforward, became convoluted. This erosion of confidence was driven by the inability to foresee the consequences of one's academic endeavors, leaving students questioning the value of their efforts.

As confidence waned, self-doubt emerged as a persistent companion. Students grappled with questions about their competence, their capacity to adapt to digital learning, and the overall relevance of their education. The erosion of confidence can foster a negative feedback loop, where diminished self-belief impairs academic performance, further exacerbating emotional distress.

Navigating academic uncertainty required a constant negotiation between emotional responses and rational understanding (Chaaban et al, 2021). The challenge lay in balancing the desire for definitive answers with the reality of an ever-evolving situation. This process of navigating ambiguity placed significant cognitive and emotional demands on students, consuming mental energy that could otherwise be directed towards learning and personal growth. In turn, this mental strain added to the overall emotional burden, amplifying the intensity of emotional responses. The cognitive load of processing uncertainty, coupled with the challenges of remote learning, created a fertile breeding ground for emotional exhaustion and burnout.

3.3. Coping Mechanisms and Adaptive Strategies

Recognizing the need for social connections in an era of physical isolation, students turned to virtual support networks. Online study groups, virtual forums, and social media communities emerged as platforms for fostering a sense of belonging. These spaces allowed students to share their challenges, seek advice, and offer mutual support. The shared experiences of navigating remote learning and academic delays created a sense of camaraderie, mitigating feelings of isolation.

Mindfulness practices gained traction as effective tools for managing stress and anxiety. Techniques such as meditation, deep breathing, and yoga provided students with strategies to ground themselves amidst emotional turbulence (Brown & Gerbarg, 2012). The deliberate focus on the present moment offered respite from the uncertainty surrounding academic delays.

Additionally, students engaged in self-care routines, dedicating time to activities that brought them joy and relaxation, reinforcing their emotional resilience.

In response to the detachment triggered by remote learning, many students sought refuge in digital engagement and hobbies (Langstedt & Hunt, 2022). Pursuits such as online art classes, virtual book clubs, and gaming communities provided avenues for creative expression and connection. These activities not only served as distractions from academic stressors but also acted as vehicles for forming new social connections and fostering a sense of accomplishment outside of academia.

The digital landscape offered an array of resources that students harnessed to enhance their coping mechanisms. Online counseling services, mental health apps, and webinars on stress management and emotional well-being provided accessible and personalized support (Dantas & Ferreira, 2020). Students recognized the value of professional guidance in navigating their emotional challenges, leveraging digital platforms to seek assistance and develop strategies for resilience. The blurred boundaries between academic and personal spaces prompted students to redefine their approach to work and leisure. Establishing structured routines that allotted time for focused learning as well as leisure pursuits became essential. By integrating leisure activities into their daily schedules, students aimed to strike a balance that contributed to their overall emotional well-being and prevented burnout.

Amidst the uncertainty, students proactively sought academic clarity by engaging with instructors and institutions. Clear communication, timely updates on academic plans, and opportunities for addressing concerns played a pivotal role in alleviating emotional distress. Students demonstrated agency by advocating for their academic needs, contributing to a sense of empowerment in navigating their educational journeys.

3.4. Role of Educational Institutions and Support Systems

Transparent and empathetic communication from educational institutions emerged as a cornerstone of effective support. Regular updates on academic plans, timelines, and modifications provided students with a sense of predictability amidst uncertainty. Clarity about the steps being taken to address academic delays reassured students and minimized the emotional distress associated with the unknown (Farris et al, 2021). In recognition of the emotional challenges students faced, educational institutions expanded mental health resources. Online counseling services, virtual support groups, and workshops on stress management and emotional well-being were made readily accessible. By integrating mental health support into the digital learning environment, institutions aimed to offer practical strategies for coping with academic delays.

Educational institutions adapted to the new learning landscape by fostering flexibility in academic approaches (Altshuler & Schmidt, 2021). Recognizing that students were navigating unique circumstances, institutions adjusted deadlines, assessment methods, and academic expectations. This adaptive approach acknowledged the diverse challenges students faced and aimed to alleviate undue pressure that could contribute to emotional strain. As remote learning became the new norm, institutions prioritized creating inclusive digital learning environments. Efforts were made to ensure that all students, regardless of their socio-economic background, had access to necessary technology and resources. By addressing the digital divide, institutions aimed

to mitigate disparities and prevent additional emotional challenges stemming from unequal access to learning opportunities.

Support systems introduced holistic well-being programs that recognized the interconnectedness of mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Initiatives encompassed not only academic support but also self-care practices, mindfulness sessions, and avenues for social connection (Napoli & Bonifas, 2011). These programs reinforced the idea that student well-being extended beyond academic performance and encompassed emotional resilience. Collaboration with student organizations and communities played a pivotal role in crafting effective support strategies. Student voices were amplified, allowing institutions to understand the unique challenges and needs that arose from academic delays. By involving students in decision-making processes, institutions fostered a sense of ownership over their education and well-being.

The experience of academic delays during the pandemic underscored the need for comprehensive crisis preparedness. Institutions recognized that unexpected disruptions could occur again and implemented strategies to address future challenges effectively. By having robust contingency plans in place, institutions aimed to minimize emotional turmoil and ensure a seamless transition to alternative learning modes.

3.5. Implications for Future Education

The pandemic underscored the need to approach education holistically, acknowledging the interconnectedness of academic and psychological well-being. Institutions must recognize that students are not just learners but individuals navigating a complex emotional landscape. Integrating mental health resources, well-being programs, and strategies to address emotional challenges becomes integral to nurturing students' overall growth and success. The disruption caused by academic delays highlights the importance of an adaptive curriculum design (Pather et al, 2020). Recognizing that unforeseen disruptions can occur, educational institutions must create curricula that can seamlessly transition between in-person, remote, and hybrid learning modes. This approach ensures that students are equipped to navigate shifts in the learning environment without compromising their academic progress or emotional well-being.

The digital divide exposed during the pandemic necessitates a concerted effort to strengthen digital accessibility. Institutions must work to bridge disparities in access to technology and reliable internet connections. Ensuring equitable access is not only critical for academic success but also for mitigating additional emotional challenges arising from unequal learning opportunities. Resilience, both academically and emotionally, must be recognized as a fundamental educational goal. Institutions have the opportunity to equip students with the skills to adapt to unexpected challenges, manage stress, and navigate uncertainty. Incorporating resilience-building components into the curriculum cultivates a proactive approach to coping with academic delays and future disruptions (Bartusevičienė et al, 2021).

Educators play a pivotal role in supporting students' emotional well-being. Therefore, educator training should include strategies for recognizing and addressing psychological challenges. Equipping educators to provide empathetic support, establish open communication channels, and identify signs of distress empowers them to play an active role in fostering student resilience. The emotional toll of academic delays necessitates collaboration across disciplines. Educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers must work together to design

comprehensive support systems (Singh et al, 2020). This collaborative effort acknowledges that student well-being extends beyond the classroom and requires a multi-faceted approach.

The pandemic offers an opportunity to redefine success and achievement in education. Institutions must move beyond rigid notions of achievement based solely on grades and exams. Instead, success can be measured by a student's ability to adapt, problem-solve, and maintain emotional well-being amidst challenges. This shift in perspective aligns with the changing landscape of education in the 21st century. The lessons learned from navigating academic delays have the potential to foster lifelong resilience in students. The strategies they develop for managing uncertainty and emotional distress can serve them well beyond their academic journey. By nurturing these skills, institutions contribute to producing graduates who are equipped to thrive in an unpredictable world.

4. Conclusion

The complexities of psychological responses to academic delays amid the pandemic have illuminated a profound intersection between education and emotional well-being. As institutions of higher learning grappled with unprecedented challenges, students embarked on an emotional journey marked by frustration, anxiety, resilience, and adaptive coping. The impact of academic delays traversed a spectrum from dashed expectations to heightened stress, leaving an indelible mark on students' mental and emotional landscapes. The stark presence of uncertainty acted as a central catalyst, amplifying emotional responses and intensifying stress levels. This uncertainty disrupted the well-established rhythms of academia, leaving students in a state of perpetual anticipation and vulnerability. The resulting emotional turmoil, coupled with the abrupt shift to remote learning, created a new paradigm of academic engagement—a landscape that required innovative coping mechanisms and adaptive strategies.

The emergence of virtual support networks, mindfulness practices, and engagement in hobbies highlighted students' resilience and their ability to foster connections in a socially distanced world. The embrace of digital resources for mental health support and the proactive quest for academic clarity demonstrated a remarkable blend of agency and vulnerability. These coping mechanisms were not mere survival strategies; they were manifestations of students' determination to navigate adversity and emerge stronger. Educational institutions and support systems played a pivotal role in shaping the emotional trajectory of students. Transparent communication, flexible approaches, and holistic well-being initiatives underscored the importance of considering emotional well-being alongside academic success. The collaborative efforts of educators, mental health professionals, and student communities showcased the power of collective empathy in times of crisis.

The implications of this journey extend far beyond the pandemic. They call for an educational paradigm that places students' holistic growth at the center. The lessons learned prompt us to redefine success, foster resilience, and nurture a new generation equipped to navigate uncertainties with grace and determination. As we reflect on the psychological responses to academic delays, we stand at a crossroads—a juncture that challenges us to reimagine education as a tapestry woven with emotional support, adaptability, and a profound understanding of human resilience. This chapter in the educational narrative encourages us to cultivate an ecosystem

where emotional well-being and learning intertwine, creating a landscape where students can thrive academically and emotionally, no matter the challenges that lie ahead.

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