

UNDERGRADUATE LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE AND WORKPLACE STRESS MANAGEMENT AMONG ALUMNI OF INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Despite increasing emphasis on graduate employability and mental well-being, limited research has examined how undergraduate leadership experiences influence stress management in the workplace. This study explores the relationship between student leadership involvement and workplace stress management among alumni of the International Islamic University Malaysia, incorporating an Islamic perspective that guides holistic well-being. Using a qualitative research approach, the study identified five major sources of workplace stress, eight mechanisms utilised by alumni to manage stress, and six transferable skills nurtured through leadership involvement that contribute to a positive work environment. Notably, many alumni highlighted the role of Islamic values such as *tawakkul* (reliance on Allah), *sabr* (patience), self-accountability, and ethical conduct in shaping their coping strategies and leadership behaviours. The findings reveal a meaningful association between undergraduate leadership experience and the ability to manage stress effectively in professional settings, supported by Islamic principles that promote emotional resilience and balanced living. These insights can guide the university in evaluating and enhancing the effectiveness of its ecosystem in nurturing graduates who are professionally competent and spiritually grounded.

Keywords: undergraduate leadership, stress management, workplace

INTRODUCTION

The Concept of Leadership

Leadership is no longer studied solely for theoretical purposes; it has become a practical field of inquiry, attracting significant attention from scholars and researchers (Antonakis et al., 2019). Understanding the concept of leadership is essential before delving further into its analysis. Winston and Patterson (2006) define leaders as individuals who influence one or more followers while effectively conveying a vision that followers can comprehend and embrace. Leaders embody a prophetic vision of the organisation, employing critical thinking, intuition, insights, interpersonal communication, active listening, and constructive discourse. They facilitate followers' understanding, resolve ambiguities, and guide them toward accepting the organisation's future state as a desirable outcome.

Leadership authority can manifest in various forms, including bureaucratic, psychological, technical, professional, and moral authority, with psychological aspects being particularly vital for effective leadership (Schwartz & Schwartz, 2016). Leadership has been conceptualized in multiple ways: as a

process of influencing others to recognize and achieve their full potential in alignment with organisational goals (Nanjundeswaraswamy & Swamy, 2014), as a combination of values, abilities, and skills to inspire others (Noor et al., 2015), and as the capacity to motivate followers toward wholehearted commitment to organisational objectives. Strong leadership is further characterised by courage, integrity, a clear vision, emotional intelligence, and strategic planning capabilities (Hilliard, 2010).

Importance of Leadership

In order to further discuss this study, the importance of leadership skills towards the development of the alumni as students must also be critically analyzed. There are many literatures which can suggest the importance of student leadership at campus level such as Noor et al., (2015), J. Hassan & A. Safar (2010) and Hilliard (2010). For instance, the emotional management skills and decision-making skills. Other than that, for those who involved themselves in student leadership, they are also capable of leading of any group to achieve its objectives and able to identify self-leadership patterns though the leadership experiences. The leadership experiences are also important for the students to be employed for their future career life in the future (Noor et al., 2015). Other values such as the building of self-discipline, self-confidence and communication skills can also be improved by involving student leadership at campus level (J. Hassan & A. Safar, 2010). According to Hilliard (2010), student leadership at campus level offers various benefits to the students. For instance, it can create a sense of ownership and responsibility to the students, the students will be able to coordinate meetings, can help their peers in solving problems, will be able to motivate others' educational and personal development, can also be agents of positive change at campus level, they will have better self-understanding and greater understanding trait towards others, show greater commitment, gain improved conflict management skills and gain better clarity for personal values. Other than that, students who involved in student leadership can deal better with uncertainties, able to take more risk willingly and able to lead organisations or agencies to higher engagement and better academic achievement.

Stress and Mental Wellness in Workplace

Workplace stress has emerged as a critical global concern, significantly impacting productivity, well-being, and economic growth. Studies indicate that mental health issues are among the leading causes of work-related loss, with stress being a major contributor. Factors such as high workloads, tight deadlines, job-role mismatches, and personal issues including family problems and chronic illnesses exacerbate stress levels (Can et al., 2019). Globally, countries including the United States, Japan, and various European nations report high prevalence of work-related stress, resulting in substantial economic costs. In Malaysia, mental health has become a national concern, with rising rates of mental illness among adults and higher education students, influenced by societal pressures, academic expectations, and financial challenges (Bernama, 2018; Mental Wellbeing, 2019). Surveys among teachers and civil servants further highlight the vulnerability of workplace environments to mental wellness issues, emphasizing the urgent need for effective strategies to address stress.

Managing workplace stress requires a multifaceted approach that includes both skill development and spiritual practices. Student leadership experience has been shown to enhance emotional regulation, self-management, conflict resolution, and resilience under pressure, enabling graduates to navigate workplace challenges more effectively (Noor et al., 2015; Hilliard, 2010). In addition, Islamic spiritual practices such as performing ablution, reciting dzikr, and listening to Quranic recitations have been associated with improved emotional stability, reduced stress, and better psychophysiological well-being (Awang Idris et al., 2017; Mirzaei et al., 2015; Mahjoob et al., 2016). These findings suggest that combining leadership skills with spirituality can play a significant role in promoting mental wellness and stress management in professional settings, a key focus of this study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative design using semi-structured in-depth interviews to explore the relationship between undergraduate leadership experiences and workplace stress management among IIUM alumni. Data were collected from February to April 2020, targeting alumni with at least ten years

since graduation and a minimum of five years of work experience, ensuring sufficient career progression (Kowarski, 2020). Participants had held leadership roles in various university-based organisations, including the Mahallah Representative Committee (MRC), Kulliyyah-Based Societies (KBS), Students' Representative Council (SRC), and external NGOs.

Interviews were conducted in English, lasting approximately 40 to 60 minutes, with participants' informed consent obtained beforehand. Sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis using NVivo (Release 1.3). The analysis involved familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, aggregating similar codes into themes, reviewing interrelationships among themes, and defining and naming final themes. Findings were discussed with the supervisor and co-supervisor to ensure rigor and accuracy.

FINDINGS

Throughout the interview progress, the respondents are coded according to the specific codes. The details of the codes are as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The Codes, Career and Leadership Background of the Respondents

Code	Inclusion Criteria	
	Leadership Background	Current Career
A1	Vice President of Students' Representative Council (SRC) 1992/1993	Executive Vice President of Etiqa Life Insurance Berhad
A2	Block Representative of Mahallah Representative Committee Maimunah 2008/2009	IIUM Kuantan Lecturer
A3	Vice President of Persatuan Pelajar Islam Negeri Sembilan (PPINS) 2008/2010	IIUM Centre for Foundation Studies (CFS) Lecturer
A4	Vice President of Allied Health Sciences Students' Society 2009/2010	IIUM Kuantan Lecturer

Factors of Stress in the Workplace

Under this code, the responses of the respondents also vary. Besides that, the factors can also come from different sources. Such as, internal, or external factors of stress that contribute to the negative experience in the workplace. The analysis of the responses will be discussed under this code. Overall, the factors have been obtained and summarized as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Factors of Stress in the Workplace

Themes	Sub-themes
Factors of Stress In The Workplace	Poor Communication Between the Stakeholders
	Overwhelming Deadlines
	Being Away from The Family Members

The respondents identified multiple sources of workplace stress. A1 highlighted stress arising from client expectations and communication issues with the company. A2 emphasized the pressure of meeting tight or late deadlines and external factors, such as being away from her parents. Similarly, A3 noted that long-distance separation from her husband and managing multiple roles—as a wife, lecturer, postgraduate student, and administrative staff which contributed to stress. Excessive workloads were also reported by A3 and A4, including managing teaching responsibilities, assisting students during and outside class hours, and handling additional technological and administrative tasks.

Management of Stress in the Workplace

Different management techniques of stress in the workplace are being practiced by the respondents according to the data gained through the interviews. The relationship between the contribution of the leadership skills gained during the undergraduate study years to the management of the stress in workplace will be discussed in the next code. The themes and sub-themes of this code are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Management of Stress in the Workplace

Themes	Sub-themes
Management of Stress in the Workplace	Communicating with Others
	Practicing Outdoor Activities
	Distracting the Focus from The Stressful Experience
	Practicing Proper Planning Management
	Increasing Self-Knowledge
	Practicing Self-Reflection
	Seeking Spiritual Strength
	Having Rational Mindset and Keep Calm

The respondents highlighted several strategies for managing workplace stress. Common approaches include communicating with others to share burdens (A1, A3), engaging in outdoor activities (A1, A2), and using distraction techniques to shift focus away from stressors (A1, A2, A4). Proper planning and time management, such as organizing deadlines in a diary, were also emphasized (A2, A3). Additionally, increasing self-knowledge to identify weaknesses and enable self-improvement was noted as an effective strategy (A3), alongside practicing self-reflection (A1). Spiritual practices, including prayer, ablution, reciting Zikr, and reading the Quran, were identified by A1 and A3 as vital mechanisms for maintaining mental wellbeing in the workplace.

“...Alhamdulillah for Muslims, we have the ability to perform Solat Dhuha. You know in the middle of the crisis of stress, maybe that's a good time for us to go...go back to Allah.” (A1, 2020)

“Finally, of course, instilling the spiritual strength. Spiritual strength is very important for me. For example, if we are in the level of stress, according to prophet, we have to take wudhu' and perform prayer. And sometime if we face with the worse stress experience we may do Dzikr and open the Quran and Surah that can give you the peaceful of heart. For me, this is also one of the tips to reduce stress. Of course, only Allah will cater our hearts, isn't it? Because sometimes you don't know what is the

factor of our stress. Because there are so many factors and we don't know which one is the biggest. That's why we have to rely on Allah and ask our God to help us by remembering Allah by mentioning His name and of course reciting Quran. These are some of what I do when I have the stress in my workplace.” (A3, 2020)

Respondents employed multiple strategies to manage workplace stress, including effective communication, time management, planning, and self-reflection. Engaging in outdoor activities, increasing self-knowledge, and maintaining a rational mindset were also important for coping with challenges. Additionally, spiritual practices, such as prayer and remembrance, provided significant mental resilience for respondents from Islamic backgrounds. These findings highlight the role of emotional regulation, emotional intelligence, and holistic approaches; cognitive, behavioral, and spiritual in effectively managing stress and maintaining mental wellbeing in the workplace.

Potential Skills Gained During the Leadership Experience Which Benefit the Positive Work Environment

Under this code, the respondents were asked if they agreed that the skills gained from the leadership experience benefit the positive work environment and whether the skills contribute to the management of stress at their workplace. They are also asked to share the potential skills if they agreed with the statement. Various responses were obtained from all of the respondents including additional statements from the respondents which help this study to achieve and answer the research objectives and questions respectively. The themes and sub-themes for this code are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Potential Skills Gained During the Leadership Experience Which Benefit the Positive Work Environment

Themes	Sub-themes
Potential Skills Gained During the Leadership Experience Which Benefit the Positive Work Environment	Task Oriented Skill
	Decision-Making Skill
	Communication Skill
	Multitasking Skill
	Professionalism Skill
	Personal Character Development Skill

The findings indicate that while leadership experience is a significant source of stress management skills, it is not the only one; family teachings also contribute to developing these abilities (A2, A3). Leadership experience during undergraduate years provides student leaders with task-oriented skills such as project management, event management, task delegation, professionalism in documentation, and decision-making (A1, A3). Other key skills gained include communication (A1, A3, A4), multitasking (A2, A3), and personal character development skills such as emotional management, troubleshooting, focus shifting, and self-control (A3, A4). Additionally, participation in leadership roles fosters maturity, rational judgment, and a wise mindset, which enhances professionalism in crisis situations and help reduce the impact of workplace stress on mental wellbeing.

The Importance of Student Involvement in Leadership During Undergraduate Years

Overall, all of the four respondents who came from various leadership backgrounds have agreed that it is very important for students to get involved with the leadership experience during the undergraduate study period. Different responses have been obtained when they were elaborating the importance of the involvement. The importance has been categorized according to the sub-themes as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: The Importance of Student Involvement in Leadership During Undergraduate Years

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Sub-themes</i>
The Importance of Student Involvement in Leadership During Undergraduate Years	Early Exposure with Realistic Experience
	Accelerates Self Development
	Platform for Students to Experience Doing Decisions and Mistakes
	Exposed with Essential Skills
	Platform to Achieve Excellence

All respondents agreed that undergraduate leadership experiences provide early realistic exposure, preparing students for post-graduation challenges, everyday situations, multiple roles, and developing soft skills (A1–A4). Participation in student leadership also accelerates self-development through continuous growth of essential skills, including self-leadership, and fosters accurate and flexible mindsets (A1, A3, A4). Moreover, leadership roles serve as a low-risk platform for learning, allowing students to develop skills—including those for stress management—without real-world consequences such as job loss or financial penalties (A1, A2).

DISCUSSION

Workplace environments are highly vulnerable to mental wellbeing issues due to various stress-inducing factors. Previous studies suggest that student leadership experiences can enhance emotional regulation and conflict management skills, supporting better stress management in professional settings (Noor et al., 2015; Hilliard, 2010). However, there is a lack of research directly examining the impact of undergraduate leadership experiences on workplace stress management.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the association between leadership experience during undergraduate studies and stress management among IIUM student leader alumni using a qualitative approach. Findings indicate that workplace stress is influenced by multiple factors, with poor communication identified as a significant contributor. Miscommunication between stakeholders, including clients with differing expectations and communication styles, can exacerbate workplace stress, as reflected in participant accounts and previous studies (Manshor et al., 2003; Mohd Makhbul et al., 2013). The World Health Organization also highlights that inadequate leadership and communication quality are key sources of workplace stress (Maulik, 2017).

Pressuring deadlines and disorganized job demands were identified as significant contributors to workplace stress among the respondents. Participants reported that completing multiple tasks within tight timelines, especially when informed late or assigned urgent ad hoc tasks, created a high-stress environment. These findings align with previous studies, which highlight that excessive time pressure

and poorly structured job demands are major sources of stress in professional settings (Can et al., 2019; Antoniou, Davidson, & Cooper, 2003; Zehrer & Crotts, 2012). The respondents' experiences indicate that such time-sensitive demands not only create cognitive and emotional strain but also increase the perception of workplace challenges as difficult and uncomfortable.

In addition to deadlines, overwhelming workloads and role conflicts were reported as key stressors. Participants described managing multiple responsibilities, including work outside regular hours, as contributing to heightened stress. Separation from family and the accumulation of these stressors further exacerbated their mental strain, highlighting the interplay between personal and professional factors. Existing research supports these observations, indicating that excessive workloads, role conflicts, and family-related pressures significantly impact workplace stress and mental wellness (Can et al., 2019; Cooper, Sloan, & Williams, 1988; Eatough et al., 2012; O'Neill & Davis, 2011). These findings underscore that workplace stress is multifactorial, stemming from both organizational demands and personal circumstances.

To understand how leadership experience contributes to stress management, the study examined the coping mechanisms employed by alumni in the workplace. Respondents highlighted the importance of effective communication, time management, and proactive planning, including using to-do lists and scheduling tasks in advance, to mitigate stress related to deadlines and workload (Can et al., 2019). Maintaining a rational mindset during crises and exercising emotional intelligence were also emphasized as crucial for preserving mental wellbeing, reflecting skills developed through undergraduate leadership experiences (Noor et al., 2015; Hilliard, 2010). Additionally, spiritual practices emerged as a significant coping strategy among respondents, particularly the recitation of *dzikr*, which promotes calmness and patience in stressful situations. These practices, rooted in Islamic beliefs, provide psychological support and enhance resilience in the workplace (M et al., 2019). This finding underscores the role of both practical leadership skills and spiritual inputs in managing workplace stress, particularly among alumni of an Islamic university context.

The study revealed that leadership experience during undergraduate studies equips alumni with essential skills that contribute to a positive work environment and effective stress management. Key skills identified include communication, emotional management, decision-making, troubleshooting, focus shifting, and self-control, all of which help alumni navigate workplace pressures and maintain mental wellbeing (Hilliard, 2010; Noor et al., 2015; J. Hassan & A. Safar, 2010). Communication skills, both in documentation and interpersonal engagement, were highlighted as crucial for reducing misunderstandings and managing workplace stress. Emotional intelligence and the ability to manage emotions, coupled with practical problem-solving and decision-making abilities, further support alumni in handling challenges effectively. Overall, these findings underscore the value of student leadership experiences as a platform for holistic development, preparing graduates to manage stress and contribute positively to their professional environments.

The study highlighted the critical role of undergraduate student leadership experiences in preparing IIUM alumni to manage workplace stress effectively. Participation in leadership provided exposure to realistic work scenarios, opportunities to develop life skills, soft skills, and self-leadership, as well as the ability to handle multiple roles and adapt to uncertainties (Noor et al., 2015; J. Hassan & A. Safar, 2010; Hilliard, 2010). Respondents reported that these experiences accelerated personal development, fostered flexible mindsets, and enhanced their capacity to navigate workplace challenges. The findings affirm the effectiveness of IIUM's leadership ecosystem in equipping student leaders with essential skills for both professional and psychological resilience, supporting the study's hypothesis regarding the positive impact of leadership experiences on stress management.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed interviews with alumni from diverse backgrounds, categorizing the findings into five main themes: respondents' backgrounds, factors of workplace stress, stress management strategies,

leadership-acquired skills benefiting the work environment, and the importance of student leadership involvement during undergraduate years. The study identified five workplace stress factors supported by existing literature and eight coping mechanisms employed by alumni, including notable spiritual practices. Additionally, six leadership-acquired skills were found to enhance positive work environments and support effective stress management. The findings also highlighted five key benefits of student leadership involvement in undergraduate years. Further research is recommended to examine external factors and variables that may influence workplace stress and its management among alumni.

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