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ACADEMIC-RELATED ANXIETY AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: PERCEPTIONS, CONTRIBUTING FACTORS, AND COPING STRATEGIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate academic-related anxiety, its major contributing factors, and the coping strategies employed by university students at the University of Education, Attock Campus. A quantitative descriptive survey design was employed, and data were collected from 80 students ($N = 80$) enrolled in the Department of Education using a simple random sampling technique. A standardized, self-administered research instrument structured into three subscales—comprising 9 items on anxiety perceptions, 4 items on contributing factors, and 4 items on coping strategies evaluated on a binary (Yes/No) response scale—was administered following ethical consent and confidentiality protocols. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically frequencies (f) and percentages ($\%$). Results indicate that a substantial majority of students experience high levels of academic anxiety, primarily driven by coursework overload (77.5%), fear of failing exams (62.5%), and pressure to maintain a high GPA (57.5%). Additionally, time management difficulties (60.0%) and parental expectations (52.5%) emerged as the leading environmental and socio-personal contributing factors. Regarding coping strategies, students predominantly rely on seeking social support from friends and family (75.0%), structured study planning and organization (70.0%), and relaxation or spiritual techniques (65.0%) to mitigate academic strain. The study emphasizes the critical need for institutional mental health support services, targeted stress-management workshops, and proactive faculty interventions to foster a healthier and more supportive learning environment for higher education students.

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education is an important period in students' lives. The academic and professional outcomes of this period have significant effects on their personal and professional lives. Obtaining admission to a university can significantly alter one's life (Zada et al., 2021). University is fundamental not only in educating students but also in stimulating their social and personal development. This development impacts both their lives as students and their future (Skoglund et al., 2021). It includes desired knowledge and academic activities completed by the students (Kumar et al., 2021).

Students enter the university with enthusiasm to demonstrate high performance and enjoy learning opportunities, but some of them are unable to achieve their dreams (Kauser et al., 2021). These students often become stuck due to academic-related anxiety, which affects their persistence, cognitive processing, and overall academic adjustment (Hsu & Goldsmith, 2021).

Academic anxiety is mental sensitivity, emotional tension, or uneasiness in students' responses to the educational environment. It is not detrimental in all situations, but when experienced at high intensity, it severely interferes with students' working memory and academic performance (Mahato & Jamgir, 2012). Nuriyyatiningrum et al. (2023) noted that it is an unpleasant emotional reaction to real or perceived academic danger, creating tension and fear among learners. Anxiety disturbs students' cognitive, emotional, and physical behaviors, frequently appearing as fear, avoidance, and physiological stress (Sadeghnejad et al., 2021). High anxiety hinders optimal learning by promoting avoidant behaviors and reducing academic engagement (Hasty et al., 2021).

Anxiety is a prominent affective characteristic in higher education settings. A high intensity of worry, fear, and uneasiness in academic environments hinders students' ability to survive even manageable challenges. Students frequently face various manifestations of this issue, including test anxiety, subject anxiety, and social-evaluative anxiety. This negatively affects their everyday thinking about academic tasks and challenging activities, increasing adverse cognitive reactions during the teaching-learning process where their intentional focus remains fixated on threat-related stimuli (Cassady, 2010; Nihaya et al., 2021).

Furthermore, academic anxiety is not an inherent characteristic of a situation; rather, it is a subjective assessment of academic demands. More anxious students interact vulnerably with their academic environment, often underestimating their personal coping resources and adopting maladaptive behavioral responses when faced with rigorous workloads (Abbasi & Alghamdi, 2015; Ghattas & El-Ashry, 2024).

According to the Attentional Control Theory (Eysenck et al., 2007), anxiety disrupts attentional regulation, impairing working memory and task efficiency. This theory is highly relevant to the present study as academic anxiety heightens psychological distress by reducing students' ability to focus on academic demands, creating an urgent need to examine student perceptions, the specific factors contributing to this anxiety, and the coping strategies students employ to manage it in local university contexts such as the University of Education.

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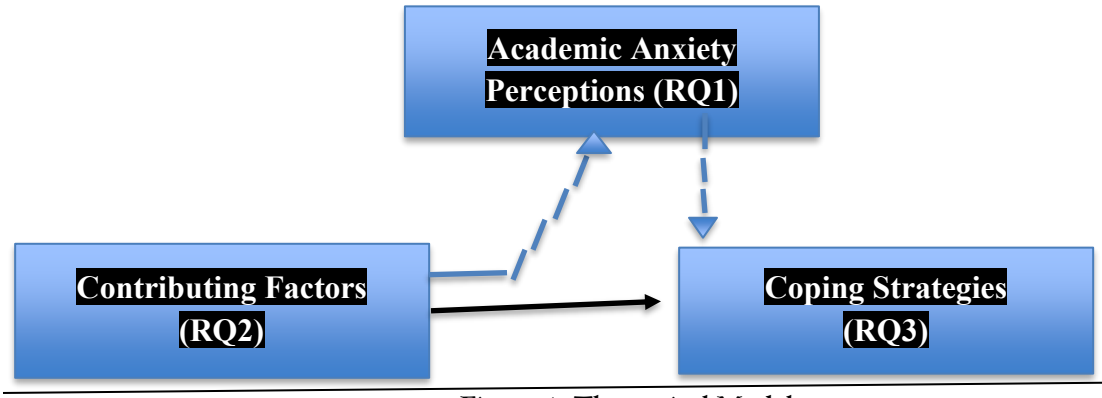


Figure 1: Theoretical Model

Although extensive global literature has examined academic-related anxiety, its underlying causes, and student coping mechanisms, empirical research specifically addressing these dynamics within the local context of Pakistani higher education remains scarce. In particular, there is a need to systematically explore how university students perceive academic anxiety, the major factors contributing to their distress, and the strategies they employ to manage it. This study aims to fill this empirical gap by investigating student experiences at the University of Education, ultimately offering practical implications for institutional policy and student well-being.

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the perceptions of university students regarding academic-related anxiety?
RQ2: What are the major factors contributing to academic-related anxiety among students at the University of Education?
RQ3: What coping strategies do university students use to manage academic-related anxiety?

Significance of the Study

The significance of investigating academic-related anxiety among university students lies in systematically understanding and addressing mental health dynamics within the higher education context. Academic anxiety directly impacts learners' cognitive processing, emotional equilibrium, and overall academic performance. By empirically investigating student perceptions, contributing environmental and academic factors, and employed coping strategies at the University of Education, this study offers multifaceted contributions to educational psychology and institutional practices. On a theoretical level, it contextualizes cognitive anxiety models—such as the Attentional Control Theory and the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping—within the Pakistani higher education landscape, bridging a critical geographical research gap. Practically, the findings equip students with self-awareness regarding adaptive coping mechanisms, while providing university administrators, curriculum designers, and student counselling services with data-driven insights to reform academic workload structures, refine evaluation policies, and implement targeted psychological support initiatives tailored to student needs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Causes and Solutions of Anxiety among Students

University students face a great deal of anxiety, especially during their study processes. Factors such as the difficulty of subjects, new roommates, identity crises, culture shock, and relationship problems increase this anxiety, with anxiety disorders steadily rising among students (Leta, 2001). Sustained anxiety can severely interrupt

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student performance, and individuals experiencing high anxiety levels often encounter symptoms throughout their university years. Research indicates that various academic obstacles—such as exam anxiety, mathematical anxiety, language anxiety, social anxiety, family anxiety, and library anxiety—act as major predictors of academic performance (McCarty, 2007; McCarty et al., 2000), with numerous studies demonstrating its detrimental effects. Studies examining the correlation between sources of anxiety and academic performance confirm that students with high anxiety levels achieve lower academic results (Luigi et al., 2007; McCarty, 2007).

Anxiety is both a psychological and physical response to perceived threats to one's self-concept, characterized by subjective, consciously perceived feelings of tension (Spielberger). Anxious students frequently experience cognitive deficits, such as the misapprehension of information or the blocking of memory and recall. Steinberger categorized anxiety into two forms: state anxiety, which is a response to a particular stimulus or set of circumstances, and trait anxiety, an intrinsic personal characteristic. Furthermore, Hancock (2001) concluded that students with high levels of anxiety show significantly less motivation in classrooms perceived as highly evaluative compared to those with low anxiety.

Stress and anxiety levels are consistently elevated among university and college students (Haidar et al., 2018). While high stress levels can influence physiological changes, university-related stress is heavily linked to the status of family relationships, difficulties understanding lectures, challenges in adapting to university life, solving problems independently, and satisfaction with one's department of study (Haidar et al., 2018). Specific risk factors for state anxiety include boarding conditions, chronic diseases, and exam periods, whereas risk factors for trait anxiety scores involve anxiety about the future, preparation for work life, class standing, private relationships, and family attitudes (Haidar et al., 2018). Consequently, families, secondary education institutions, and universities must cooperate to eliminate these risk factors for anxiety among university students (Haidar et al., 2018). Furthermore, given the rising prevalence of mental disorders and suicidal ideation globally, understanding these symptoms remains critical (Paula et al., 2020).

Separation from the Support System of Family and Friends

Even the most confident high school student is likely to experience a dip in confidence when leaving home—often for the first time—and moving into a new environment filled with unknown stressors. Familiar people, family, and old friends are no longer present to reinforce the identity students have created for themselves, leading to disorientation and a diminished sense of self (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010).

Uncertainty and Fear of the Future

Anxiety thrives on the unknown, and college students face significant uncertainty regarding employment after graduation, student loan repayment, and future living arrangements. Some students feel lost regarding their life direction, which is intensified when peers appear to have found their calling. Fear of an unsuccessful transition to adult life serves as one of the primary triggers of student anxiety (Carleton, 2016).

Academic Factors

Academic pressures and expectations are frequently cited as major contributors to student anxiety. Rigorous coursework, demanding deadlines, and competitive academic environments trigger feelings of overwhelm, inadequacy, and a fear of failure. Students often struggle with effective time management, increased workloads, and maintaining high performance, while the transition to independent learning requires taking greater responsibility for academic success (Bandura, 1997).

Social and Environmental Factors

The transition to university life involves profound social and environmental adjustments. Navigating

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a new campus, forming fresh friendships, and maintaining existing relationships can cause substantial stress. Social anxiety and loneliness are common, while the pressure to fit in, homesickness, cultural differences, and financial concerns further exacerbate anxiety symptoms (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

Lack of Sleep

Regular, quality sleep is vital for reducing anxiety symptoms. However, college lifestyles—characterized by all-nighters, excessive caffeine intake, parties, and substance abuse—make achieving healthy sleeping habits difficult, thereby elevating anxiety risks (Killgore, 2010).

How to Cope with Anxiety at University

While university is a period for personal growth, independence, and new friendships, the prospect of living away from home, encountering student debt, and managing academic deadlines can feel extremely overwhelming. Although these feelings are normal, they can trigger chronic anxiety—a common mental health condition characterized by persistent fear, panic, worry, or unease (Hofmann et al., 2012).

Reach Out and Talk to Someone

Students struggling with anxiety should avoid isolation, which typically worsens symptoms. Talking to seminar peers or flatmates often reveals shared anxieties, allowing students to support one another under the principle that "a problem shared is a problem halved" (Simmons et al., 2018).

Challenge Your Thoughts

Anxiety often triggers negative thoughts and incorrect beliefs, such as convincing oneself of imminent module failure despite a lack of evidence. Challenging these thoughts by differentiating between "facts" and "opinions" prevents unnecessary anxiety (Beck, 1976).

Don't Fall into the Avoidance Trap

To escape discomfort, individuals often avoid feared situations, such as entering a lecture hall full of strangers. Rather than avoiding lectures entirely, adopting structured routines—such as arriving early to settle in—helps bypass the avoidance trap (Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

Take Time Out

Scheduling time to relax and engage in enjoyable activities—such as listening to music, watching shows, or reading—helps calm worries and supports mental well-being (Sonnentag, 2001).

Look After Yourself

Maintaining consistent sleep schedules and regular exercise is essential. Although busy schedules during initial terms pose challenges, establishing routines and participating in stress-reducing campus activities, such as yoga, significantly lowers anxiety (Orem, 1991).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research was quantitative in nature, employing a descriptive survey design to examine academic-related anxiety, its contributing factors, and coping strategies among university students. A simple random sampling technique was used to collect data from 80 students (N = 80) enrolled in the Department of Education at the University of Education, Attock Campus. A standardized research instrument was administered to measure the study variables, structured into three distinct subscales corresponding to the study's research questions. The first subscale, measuring students' perceptions of academic-related anxiety, contained 9 items evaluating cognitive, emotional, and social distress. The second subscale comprised 4 items assessing the major contributing factors to academic anxiety, including time management, parental expectations, resource availability, and assignment preparation. The third subscale included 4 items identifying the coping strategies utilized by students, such as seeking social support, study planning, and relaxation techniques. All items across the three subscales were rated on a

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binary response scale (Yes / No).The study adhered to ethical research guidelines. Participants were provided with a consent form that explained the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any stage, and assurances of strict data confidentiality and anonymity. The form also clarified that participation involved no physical or psychological harm. After providing consent, participants completed the self-administered questionnaires on campus. The collected data were tabulated and analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically frequencies (f) and percentages (%), to evaluate student responses across all research dimensions.

Results

Table 1: Students' Perceptions of Academic Anxiety (N = 80)

Sr. No.	Statement	Yes (f)	Yes (%)	No (f)	No (%)	Total (N)	Total (%)
1	I feel overwhelmed by my coursework.	62	77.5%	18	22.5%	80	100%
2	I worry about failing exams.	50	62.5%	30	37.5%	80	100%
3	I feel pressure to maintain a high GPA.	46	57.5%	34	42.5%	80	100%
4	I feel anxious about presenting in front of my class.	28	35.0%	52	65.0%	80	100%
5	I feel stressed about balancing academic and social life.	32	40.0%	48	60.0%	80	100%
6	I feel overwhelmed by the amount of reading assigned.	34	42.5%	46	57.5%	80	100%
7	I experience anxiety when interacting with professors.	24	30.0%	56	70.0%	80	100%
8	I feel anxious about the group project.	20	25.0%	60	75.0%	80	100%
9	I have not met my academic expectations.	34	42.5%	46	57.5%	80	100%

***Note**: f = Frequency, % = Percentage, N = Total Sample Size*

The table presents the frequencies and percentages of university students' perceptions regarding academic-related anxiety across nine items. The results indicate that a vast majority of the

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respondents, 62 (77.5%), reported feeling overwhelmed by their coursework, making it the most prominent perception of academic anxiety. Additionally, 50 (62.5%) students expressed anxiety regarding the fear of failing exams, and 46 (57.5%) reported feeling significant pressure to maintain a high GPA.

Regarding academic reading and performance expectations, 34 (42.5%) participants indicated feeling overwhelmed by assigned reading, and an equal number of 34 (42.5%) felt they had not met their personal academic expectations. Balancing academic and social life caused stress for 32 (40.0%) students. Conversely, interpersonal and classroom presentation stressors were reported at lower rates: 28 (35.0%) participants felt anxious presenting in front of the class, 24 (30.0%) experienced anxiety when interacting with professors, and 20 (25.0%) reported anxiety regarding group projects. Overall, the findings demonstrate that internal performance pressure, exam anxiety, and heavy coursework loads form the primary perceptions of academic anxiety among university students.

Table 2: Factors Contributing to Academic Anxiety (N = 80)

Sr. No.	Statement	Yes (f)	Yes (%)	No (f)	No (%)	Total (N)	Total (%)
1	I have difficulty managing my time effectively.	48	60.0%	32	40.0%	80	100%
2	I worry about not meeting my parents' expectations.	42	52.5%	38	47.5%	80	100%
3	I worry about not having enough resources.	30	37.5%	50	62.5%	80	100%
4	I worry about not being prepared for the assignment.	38	47.5%	42	52.5%	80	100%

The table illustrates the major environmental, academic, and socio-personal factors contributing to academic-related anxiety among students at the University of Education. The data reveals that time management difficulties served as the leading contributor, endorsed by 48 (60.0%) of the respondents. Socio-familial expectations also represented a major factor, with 42 (52.5%) students indicating persistent worry about not meeting their parents' academic expectations. Furthermore, assignment preparation anxiety was identified as a contributing factor by 38 (47.5%) participants, while 30 (37.5%) reported anxiety stemming from a perceived lack of adequate learning resources. These findings suggest that personal time management constraints and parental pressure are the predominant contributors driving academic anxiety among university learners.

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Table 3: Coping Strategies for Managing Academic Anxiety (N = 80)

Sr. No.	Statement	Yes (f)	Yes (%)	No (f)	No (%)	Total (N)	Total (%)
1	I worry about grades affecting future career prospects.	40	50.0%	40	50.0%	80	100%
2	I seek support from friends or family.	60	75.0%	20	25.0%	80	100%
3	I manage my academic anxiety by planning and organizing my study schedule.	56	70.0%	24	30.0%	80	100%
4	I use relaxation techniques (such as exercise, prayer, meditation, or deep breathing) to reduce academic anxiety.	52	65.0%	28	35.0%	80	100%

The table outlines the adaptive mechanisms, psychological strategies, and behavioral responses utilized by university students to manage their academic anxiety. Social coping emerged as the most prevalent strategy, with 60 (75.0%) participants actively seeking emotional and practical support from friends or family members. In terms of problem-focused coping, 56 (70.0%) students reported organizing and planning their study schedules to mitigate academic stress. Additionally, 52 (65.0%) respondents endorsed using relaxation techniques—including prayer, exercise, meditation, or deep breathing exercises—to manage psychological tension. Finally, exactly half of the sample, 40 (50.0%), reported that concern over grades affecting future career prospects served as a driving consideration during their coping process. Overall, the results demonstrate that students rely heavily on social support systems, structured time planning, and spiritual/relaxation practices to effectively cope with academic anxiety.

Discussion

The present study examined academic-related anxiety, its contributing factors, and coping strategies among university students at the University of Education, addressing a critical empirical gap within the Pakistani higher education context.

The findings regarding the first research question revealed that a substantial majority of university students experience significant cognitive and emotional perceptions of academic anxiety. Specifically, feeling overwhelmed by coursework (77.5%) and fear of failing exams (62.5%) emerged as the most predominant manifestations of academic anxiety, followed by pressure to maintain a high GPA (57.5%). These results align with Eysenck et al.'s (2007) Attentional Control Theory, which posits that academic anxiety heightens psychological distress by disrupting cognitive focus and task efficiency. These findings are further supported by global empirical literature; for instance, McCarty et al. (2000) and McCarty (2007) observed that evaluative stressors such as exam anxiety directly impair academic performance. Similarly, Haidar et al. (2018)

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highlighted that exam periods and academic demands serve as primary triggers for elevated state anxiety among university learners. In the local context of Pakistani higher education, high institutional expectations and rigid evaluation structures appear to consume students' cognitive resources, making coursework management a primary source of perceived psychological strain.

Regarding the second research question, the analysis identified poor time management (60.0%) and parental expectations (52.5%) as the major factors contributing to academic-related anxiety among students. These findings align with Bandura (1997), who noted that difficulties in managing academic workloads and adapting to independent learning environments trigger feelings of inadequacy and stress. Furthermore, the strong influence of socio-familial expectations reflects the cultural dynamics of Pakistan, where academic achievement is closely tied to family honor and parental approval (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Haidar et al., 2018). Concerns regarding assignment preparation (47.5%) and resource availability (37.5%) further emphasize that both self-regulatory challenges and academic environmental pressures act as key catalysts for student distress.

The findings for the third research question, grounded in Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, indicated that students actively utilize a combination of social, problem-focused, and emotional coping mechanisms to mitigate academic anxiety. Seeking support from family and friends was the most widely endorsed strategy (75.0%), supporting the social buffer hypothesis (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Simmons et al., 2018), which emphasizes the role of interpersonal relationships in buffering psychological stress. Additionally, a large proportion of students reported using structured study planning (70.0%) and relaxation practices—including prayer, exercise, and meditation (65.0%)—to regulate their anxiety. These results are consistent with Kabat-Zinn (1990) and Sonnentag (2001), who demonstrated that structured routines, mindfulness, and relaxation techniques effectively reduce autonomic arousal and prevent cognitive burnout. Overall, while academic anxiety remains highly prevalent among Pakistani university students, the widespread reliance on social networks, study organization, and spiritual/relaxation practices demonstrates adaptive resilience among learners navigating higher education demands.

Conclusion

The present study investigated academic-related anxiety, its primary contributing factors, and coping strategies among university students at the University of Education, Attock Campus. Overall, the findings demonstrate that academic anxiety is a prevalent issue among university learners, primarily driven by coursework overload, exam anxiety, and GPA maintenance pressures. Time management constraints and parental expectations were identified as the leading environmental and socio-personal contributors to student distress. However, students demonstrated significant adaptive resilience by utilizing social support networks, structured study planning, and relaxation or spiritual techniques to manage academic strain. Ultimately, this study highlights the critical need to address psychological distress in higher education to enhance both student well-being and academic efficiency.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Despite its valuable empirical contributions, this study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research:

- **Sampling and Contextual Scope:** The study was delimited to a sample of 80 students (N = 80) within the Department of Education at the University of Education, Attock Campus. This single-institution focus limits the generalizability of the findings to students across different academic disciplines, private institutions, or broader geographical regions. Future research should recruit larger, more diverse samples

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spanning multiple universities and fields of study across Pakistan.

- **Research Design:** The cross-sectional survey design captures student perceptions at a single point in time, restricting the ability to infer causal relationships between academic anxiety, environmental stressors, and coping outcomes over time. Future scholars are encouraged to employ longitudinal or experimental designs to trace the temporal progression of academic anxiety across different academic terms.

- **Data Collection Instruments:** Reliance on self-report questionnaires may introduce response bias, as participants might underreport or over report their anxiety levels due to social desirability. Future studies could incorporate mixed-method approaches, combining survey data with qualitative interviews, clinical assessments, or physiological stress indicators to achieve a more comprehensive evaluation.

- **Scope of Variables:** Future research should examine additional mediating or moderating variables such as self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, academic motivation, and institutional infrastructure to provide deeper theoretical insights into student mental health dynamics.

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study offer several practical, institutional, and policy implications for higher education in Pakistan:

- **For University Administration and Counselors:** Higher education institutions should establish dedicated student counseling services and stress-management centers to provide accessible psychological support. Implementation of routine mental health screening and stress-reduction workshops can assist students in building adaptive coping mechanisms.

- **For Faculty and Educators:** University teachers can mitigate academic anxiety by creating a supportive, low-anxiety classroom environment. Faculty members should consider adopting balanced assessment schedules, setting clear assignment guidelines, and offering flexible feedback to prevent coursework overload.

- **For Curriculum Designers and Policymakers:** Educational policymakers should integrate time-management skills, self-regulation, and resilience training into university orientation programs and general curricula. Allocating institutional resources toward mental health awareness initiatives will promote student well-being and academic success across Pakistani higher education institutions.

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