

Prevalence of Examination Anxiety among Undergraduates: Implications for Counselling

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Abstract

The paper examined the prevalence of examination anxiety among undergraduates and its implications for counselling. The study employed a cross-sectional survey design in which 368 students were sampled from a population of 8,989 (male 60.6%; female 39.4%) undergraduates at Federal University Gusau (FUGUS) following a stratified random sampling technique. Data were obtained via an instrument called the University Examination Anxiety Scale (UEAS) whose reliability coefficient of 0.699 was estimated through the Cronbach Alpha statistic. Five null hypotheses were tested with t-test and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) at 0.05 significance. Findings from the study revealed a significant prevalence of examination anxiety among undergraduates. Whereas the prevalence of examination anxiety did not differ with respect to gender, age group, and students-faculty, a significant difference was however established among the various levels of the undergraduate programme in the university. The implication of these findings for counselling is that the tension induced by test anxiety needs to be reduced to enable the students concentrate on their examination. This could be achieved by employing biofeedback and psycho-education approaches. The study recommends among others that counsellors should empower undergraduate students with simple strategies to reduce examination anxiety such as mindfulness techniques and simple deep breathing exercises.

Keywords: *Examination anxiety prevalence, Undergraduates, Gender, Counselling implications*

Introduction

University Examination Anxiety (UEA) is one of the most common problems undergraduate students face irrespective of their levels. University examination is a formal procedure for assessing student's cognitive achievement in an academic endeavor [1]. Naturally, there is a level of examination anxiety, which can significantly influence students' performance and their academic progress [2]. Ever since, psychologists have come to realize the significance of the bond between anxiety and learning. For instance, evidence from previous studies have shown that some students achieve lower than their actual ability level because of their increased anxiety. Hence, the term "examination anxiety" has been coined to refer to a type of anxiety that appears in certain situations associated with examinations and evaluation processes [3].

Examination anxiety has two types: a) disruptive anxiety which is a form of anxiety that affects an individual's behavior during examinations and may significantly affect an individual's performance in examination; and b) facilitative

anxiety which is the moderate or a normal level of anxiety that does not significantly affect an individual's performance in examination [4]. Psychological research studies which were conducted to investigate examination anxiety indicated that both high and low levels of anxiety were the main obstacles that negatively affect students' level of academic achievement and the accomplishment of their goals. A high level of anxiety hinders students' ability to remember, think, judge and perform mentally. On the other hand, a low level of anxiety leads to weakening motivation, while a medium level of anxiety increases motivation [5].

Hence, examination anxiety can be considered as a motive or an obstacle to mental and academic achievement based on its severity level and the individual differences within the study groups in educational institutions at any learning stage experts [6] posit that examination anxiety increases when performance is associated with the life decisions of students who aspire to achieve their special goals. The more individual's performance is associated with the exam to achieve their special goals, the

higher the level of examination anxiety will be and vice versa. Furthermore, academic achievement can be influenced by the general mental ability of students and can also be considered an important pattern of the student's mental activity during their study [5]. Examination anxiety is a pattern and a form of general anxiety that can be provoked by different exam situations. It represents an individual emotional and psychological issue experienced by students during the examination period which can be signified and intensified by fear of failure [7].

The trend in examination anxiety is not uncommon in Federal University Gusau (FUGUS). The University is one of the twelve new Federal Universities which were established in States where none existed, and offers programmes in Arts-based and Science-based disciplines. The establishment of the University commenced on 18th February 2013, while it started its first academic year in the 2014/2015 Session. The core academic structure of FUGUS is developed based upon the approved guidelines of the National Universities Commission (NUC) in the Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) documents, as well as other norms from

relevant stakeholders, e.g., professional societies [8]. The university started its academic activities with a School of Pre-Science Studies and the following three Faculties, Faculty of Humanities and Education; ii) Faculty of Management and Social Sciences and iii) Faculty of Science. Presently, FUGUS has 17 Departments that house 27 undergraduate academic programmes.

End of semester examination in universities is often characterized by tension due to insecurity [2]. This problem coupled with many other factors induces some degree of tension in the students, hence interfering with their ability to concentrate and adequately respond to examination questions. Although no study has revealed the prevalence of examination anxiety amongst students of FUGUS, observation has shown that many undergraduates in the university are struggling with anxiety associated with an examination.

In university, examination anxiety has been viewed as a notable problem faced by students. Experts have identified anxiety as an important area for research and there is an overabundance of information regarding the prevalence of anxiety [9] but little is

known about its trend in FUGUS. Existing literature on anxiety suggests that it has an unfavorable consequence for all persons. Prospects of university routine, economic, sometimes genetic, and individual stressors put students at higher risk [\[10\]](#).

Several studies attempt to unveil the prevalence of examination or test anxiety at different levels of education. Some scholars [\[4\]](#) conducted a study on ‘test anxiety prevalence and related variables in the students who intend to take the university entrance examination’. In the study, [\[4\]](#) and associates focused on finding the prevalence of test anxiety, its predictors and related variables among students who are going to take the university entrance exam. The authors recruited 436 students (girls=220, boys=216) following random sampling from four different schools to represent all the students who intend to take the university entrance examination in Sivas city. The students filled in the Socio-demographic Data Form sociodemographic form, Test Anxiety Inventory (TAI), Beck’s Depression Inventory (BDI), State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI), Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (LSAS), Wender Utah Rating Scale (WURS) and Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale

(ASRS). Results revealed that test anxiety was detected in the 48.0% of students (n=208). Additionally, exam anxiety was found in 40.3% of the males (n=87) and in 55.8% of the girls (n=121) and the difference between them was statistically significant.

Another study [\[6\]](#) focused on gender differences in test, trait, and math anxiety among university students, as well as differences in their academic achievement. The study employed 168 students from the University of Barcelona, who were administered measures of test anxiety, math anxiety, and trait anxiety. They were also asked about their expected level of anxiety when faced with four specific test situations: multiple-choice, open-question, oral presentation, and an exam involving calculations. At the end of the course in which they were enrolled, students were assessed through a multiple-choice and an open-question exam. Compared with their male counterparts, female students reported higher levels of test, math, and trait anxiety, as well as greater expected anxiety in three of the four test situations considered. However, females did not show lower academic achievement than male students in either the open-question or the multiple-choice exams.

A similar study [7] examined test anxiety in adolescent students: different responses according to the components of anxiety as a function of sociodemographic and academic variables.

The objective of the study was to investigate the repercussion of sociodemographic and academic variables on different responses for each component of anxiety and for the type of test in adolescent students. A total of 1181 students from 12 to 18 years old ($M = 14.7$ and $SD = 1.8$) participated, of whom 569 were boys (48.2%) and 612 girls (51.8%). A sociodemographic questionnaire and the Test Anxiety Questionnaire-Adapted were administered. Results revealed that girls scored higher on the cognitive and physiological components of TA than boys, the intensity of the physiological response increasing with age. Bachillerato level students reported more physiological anxiety than those of ESO level. Students with better marks in the previous year presented more anxiety in the cognitive component, while those who obtained lower marks presented higher anxiety values in the behavioral component. Participants reported that the types of tests that cause them more anxiety

were oral tests in front of the class, oral presentations in front of a panel, and mathematics tests.

A related study on the Level of schooling and gender differences in test anxiety among secondary school students in Port Harcourt Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria was conducted [10]. The study was carried out in Port Harcourt Local Government Area of Rivers State. The population of the study comprised all the Junior Secondary School class two (JSS 2) students and all senior secondary school class two (SSS 2) students in Port Harcourt Local Government Area of Rivers State. Simple random sampling and stratified random sampling techniques were used to draw a sample of 308 students which comprised 108 JSS and 200 SSS 2 students. The sample also comprised 136 females and 172 male students. The instrument used for the study was captioned Test Anxiety Inventory (TAI). The study found a significant difference between JSS and SSS students' test anxiety. Senior secondary school students significantly had more test anxiety than Junior Secondary School students. There was a significant difference between male and female students' test anxiety. The female

students significantly had more test anxiety than male students. The authors recommended that teachers should prepare students adequately for any examination they are to write especially external examinations so as to instill great confidence in the students.

Some scholars [9] examined the academic level and student-faculty as factors of test anxiety among undergraduates in Nigeria. Using a simple random sampling technique, a total of 197(126 males and 71 females) undergraduates participated in the study. Their ages ranged from 16 to 30 years ($M=21.6$, $SD=2.68$). Four hypotheses were tested with Pearson Product Moment Correlation and Multiple Regression analysis. The results revealed that academic level and students' faculty had no correlation with test anxiety. Moreover, the result of the multiple regression analysis showed that academic level and students' faculty have no independent and joint influence on test anxiety. It was concluded that irrespective of students' academic level and faculty, test anxiety is unavoidable.

The above-stated studies have shed light on the prevalence of test or rather examination anxiety among students at

various levels of test taking. Although most of the research was conducted elsewhere, the findings obtained from the studies have significantly established the fact that anxiety due to examination is a potent impediment to test results. This study therefore would examine the prevalence of examination anxiety among undergraduates at Federal University Gusau and its implications for mental health counselling.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to assess the prevalence of examination anxiety and its differentials among gender, age group, student faculties, and their levels of study at Federal University Gusau. Specifically, the study was designed to determine whether the prevalence of examination anxiety is significant among undergraduate students; find out the difference in the prevalence of examination anxiety between male and female undergraduates; examine the difference in the prevalence of examination anxiety among undergraduate students in the four faculties of the University; determine the difference in the prevalence of examination anxiety among the various age groups of undergraduate students and examine the difference in the

prevalence of examination anxiety among the various levels of undergraduate students in Federal University Gusau respectively.

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant prevalence of examination anxiety among undergraduate students in Federal University Gusau.
2. There is no significant difference in the prevalence of examination anxiety between male and female undergraduates at Federal University Gusau.
3. There is no significant difference in the prevalence of examination anxiety among undergraduates in the four faculties of Federal University Gusau.
4. There is no significant difference in the prevalence of examination anxiety among students in the various age groups in Federal University Gusau.
5. There will be no significant difference in the prevalence of examination anxiety

among undergraduate students in the various levels of study at Federal University Gusau.

Methodology

The research design adopted for the study was a cross-sectional survey design. This design is considered apt as one expert [\[11\]](#) asserts that a cross-sectional survey involves the study of a cross-section of a group of subjects, at the same time hence, enables the researcher to generate standardized collection procedures based on highly structured research instrument(s) and well-defined study concepts and related variables. The population for this study comprised all the undergraduate students of Federal University Gusau Zamfara state. The total population stands at 8989 students as revealed by the Enrolment Records of the University (2021 session).

Table 1: Population of the study

S/N	Faculties	Male	Female	Total
1	Education	1507	1005	2512
2	Humanities	997	354	1351
3	Science	1531	1348	2879
4	Management & social science	1412	835	2247

Total	5447	3542	8989
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A total sample size of 368 students was selected using a stratified random sampling technique from the total population

of 8,989 students which cut across all the faculties in the university. The breakdown of the sample is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Sample Size of the study

S/N	Faculties	Male	Female	Total
1	Education	57	46	103
2	Humanities	33	22	55
3	Science	61	57	118
4	Management & Social science	72	20	92
	Total	223	145	368

A well-constructed inventory designed by the researchers titled “University Examination Anxiety Scale (UEAS)” was used to get the desired information from the students. The inventory is a closed-ended format that was based on a 4-point Likert scale of Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Agree (A), and Strongly Agree (SA). The scale is divided into two sections. Section A is designed to provide demographic information of the respondents. Section B addresses the prevalence of examination anxiety among undergraduate students at the Federal University Gusau. The initial version of the scale was validated by two experts to determine the items’

appropriateness with the objectives of the study. The experts’ judgment of the appropriateness of the scale was analyzed using Cohen’s Kappa statistics [\[12\]](#) and the result shows an average coefficient of 0.71 for all the items. Items with less than a 0.60 coefficient were reframed in line with the expert’s suggestion.

The reliability coefficient of UEAS was computed using an internal consistency measure. To achieve this, data collected from the pilot study was subjected to Cronbach’s Alpha statistics. So, therefore, the reliability coefficient of UEAS obtained via the Cronbach Alpha procedure reveals a coefficient of 0.699. This indicates that

University Examination Anxiety Scale was a reliable instrument used for data collection. Consequently, 368 copies of the scale were administered on the participants via class captains who served as research assistants.

Results

Hypothesis 1

There is no significant prevalence of examination anxiety among undergraduate students at Federal University Gusau.

To test this hypothesis, a one-sample t-test was used to analyze students’ responses to UEAS at 0.05 significance, the result of the statistics is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: One-sample t-test for significant prevalence of examination anxiety among UG students in Federal University Gusau

Parameter	N	Mean	Std. Dev	df	T	P<0.05	Decision
Prevalence of EA	368	37.0326	6.91080	367	95.857	0.000	Reject H ₀₁

Data presented in Table 3 shows the mean score, standard deviation, and t-value of undergraduate students’ responses to UEAS at Federal University Gusau. A total of 368 participants who responded to the scale had a t-value of 95.857 at P< 0.05. This indicates that; examination anxiety significantly prevails among undergraduate students at Federal University Gusau.

Hypothesis 2

There is no significant difference in the prevalence of examination anxiety between male and female undergraduates at Federal University Gusau.

Independent samples t-test was used to analyze male and female undergraduates’ responses to UEAS and the result is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Independent Samples t-test of difference between male and female UG students’ responses to UEAS

Parameter	N	Mean	Std. Dev	df	T	P>0.05	Decision
Male	223	36.9865	6.58040	366	-0.158	0.874	Retain H ₀₂
Female	145	37.1034	7.41313				

From the figures presented in Table 4, the p-value of 0.874 at t -0.158 is greater than the decision threshold of 0.05 hence, null hypothesis 2 is hereby retained. This reveals that male and female UG students at Federal University Gusau do not differ in prevalence of examination anxiety.

Hypothesis 3

Table 5: ANOVA on the prevalence of Examination Anxiety among undergraduates in the four faculties of Federal University Gusau

Parameter	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Decision
Between Groups	237.318	3	79.106			
Within Groups	17290.291	364	47.501	1.665	0.174	Retain H ₀₃
Total	17527.609	367				

Figures presented in Table 5 reveal ANOVA of respondents’ ratings of the examination anxiety scale. The F-value of 1.665 is not significant at P>0.05. Therefore, the postulated null hypothesis 3 is hereby retained. This shows that examination anxiety does not significantly differ in its prevalence among UG students in the four faculties of Federal University Gusau.

Table 6: ANOVA on the prevalence of Examination Anxiety among UG students in various Age Groups in Federal University Gusau (N=368)

There is no significant difference in the prevalence of examination anxiety among undergraduates in the four faculties of Federal University Gusau.

To test this hypothesis, one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was employed to analyze UG students’ responses to UEAS, and result of the statistics is presented in Table 5.

Hypothesis 4

There is no significant difference in the prevalence of examination anxiety among students in various age groups at Federal University Gusau.

This hypothesis was tested using One-way ANOVA at 0.05 significance and the result is presented in Table 6.

Parameter	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Decision
Between Groups	227.372	2	113.736			
Within Groups	17300.136	365	47.398	2.400	0.92	Retain H ₀
Total	17527.609	367				

Data presented in Table 6 is the statistics showing Analysis of Variance for ratings of the various age groups of undergraduates in relation to the prevalence of examination anxiety in Federal University Gusau. The figures show that the F-value of 2.400 at P= 0.92 is not significant. This indicates that there is no significant difference in the prevalence of examination anxiety among UG students in the various

age groups in FUG. So, therefore, the null hypothesis 4 is hereby retained.

Hypothesis 5

There is no significant difference in the prevalence of examination anxiety among undergraduate students in the various levels of study at Federal University Gusau.

To test this hypothesis, UG students' responses to UEAS were analyzed via One-way ANOVA at 0.05 significance and the result is presented in Table 7.

Table 7: ANOVA on the Prevalence of Examination Anxiety among UG students in various Levels of Study (N=368)

Parameter	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Decision
Between Groups	413.091	3	137.687			
Within Groups	17114.518	364	47.018	2.929	0.034	Reject H ₀
Total	17527.609	367				

The statistics in Table 7 reveal a significant difference in the prevalence of examination anxiety among undergraduate students. The P-value of 0.034 (F= 2.929) is

less than the decision threshold of 0.05 significance. Therefore, the postulated null hypothesis 5 is hereby rejected. This shows that a significant difference exists in the

prevalence of examination anxiety among the various levels of undergraduates in FUG.

Discussion of Findings

Analysis of the first hypothesis revealed that a significant prevalence of examination anxiety exists among undergraduates at Federal University Gusau. This finding corroborates [4] in their study on ‘test anxiety prevalence and related variables in the students who intend to take the university entrance examination’. Results of their study revealed that test anxiety was detected in 48.0% of students (n=208). Additionally, exam anxiety was found in 40.3% of the males (n=87) and in 55.8% of the girls (n=121) and the difference between them was statistically significant.

Another finding from the analysis of the second hypothesis does not reveal gender differences in the prevalence of examination anxiety among undergraduates in FUGUS. The result deviates from the finding [6] on gender differences in test, trait, and math anxiety among university students, as well as differences in their academic achievement. According to experts [6], female students reported a higher level of a test than their male counterparts. They added that females did not show lower academic achievement

than male students in either the open-question or the multiple-choice exams.

The third finding from the analysis of hypothesis three does not reveal any difference in the prevalence of anxiety among undergraduate students in the four faculties of the university. Similarly, a related study [9] examined the academic level and student-faculty as factors of test anxiety among undergraduates in Nigeria. The results revealed that academic level and student-faculty had no correlation with test anxiety. Moreover, the result of the multiple regression analysis showed that academic level and students’ faculty have no independent and joint influence on test anxiety. It was concluded that irrespective of students’ academic level and faculty, test anxiety is unavoidable.

The result obtained from the analysis of the fourth hypothesis shows no significant difference in the prevalence of examination anxiety among age groups of undergraduates. This finding also deviates from the results obtained by [7] who examined test anxiety in adolescent students with respect to different responses according to the components of anxiety as a function of sociodemographic and academic variables. Results of the study

revealed that although girls scored higher on the cognitive and physiological components of TA than boys, the intensity of the physiological response increased with age. Bachillerato level students reported more physiological anxiety than those of ESO level. Students with better marks in the previous year presented more anxiety in the cognitive component, while those who obtained lower marks presented higher anxiety values in the behavioral component. Participants reported that the types of tests that cause them more anxiety were oral tests in front of the class, oral presentations in front of a panel, and mathematics tests.

The analysis of the fifth hypothesis reveals a significant difference among various levels of undergraduate study with respect to the prevalence of examination anxiety. This coincides with the finding from a related study on the level of schooling and gender differences in test anxiety among secondary school students in Port Harcourt Local Government Area of Rivers State [10]. The study found a significant difference between JSS and SSS students' test anxiety. Senior secondary school students significantly had more test anxiety than Junior Secondary School students. Similarly,

one study [9] examined the academic level and student-faculty as factors of test anxiety among undergraduates in Nigeria. The results revealed that academic level and students' faculty had no correlation with test anxiety. Moreover, the result of the multiple regression analysis showed that academic level and students' faculty have no independent and joint influence on test anxiety. Whereas one study [10] provides support for the present result in terms of gender difference, [9] in their study concluded that irrespective of students' academic level and faculty, test anxiety is unavoidable. The authors recommended that teachers should prepare students adequately for any examination they are to write especially external examinations so as to instill great confidence in the students.

Implications for Counselling

The counselling implications of examination anxiety prevalence among undergraduates are enormous hence, can be viewed from the bona fide perspectives of biofeedback and psycho-educational interventions. Consequently, since many students with examination anxiety do not truly experience difficult moments until they are about to take

their test, basic anxiety-reducing and mindfulness techniques can be a big help for these students [13]. Such students should be encouraged to practice simple deep breathing exercises, use positive self-talk and mantras, or do seated stretches to release tension once the test is underway.

In addition, anxious students should be trained on strategies and practices of test-taking [14]. Some of these best practices include reading questions completely before answering them, skipping over ambiguous questions in order to manage time, and reviewing answers as time allows [2]. Furthermore, students who struggle with test anxiety spend countless hours studying, reviewing, and cramming in frantic efforts to get ready for exams. Students should be urged to create study schedules to follow. Counsellors should encourage them to block out reasonable chunks of time during their week, taking into account other engagements, extracurricular activities, and leisure time for fun and relaxation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study found a significant prevalence of examination anxiety among undergraduates at Federal University Gusau. It also revealed that whereas no gender, age,

and faculty differentials exist in the prevalence of examination anxiety, there was however a significant difference in the prevalence among students in the various levels of undergraduate study in the university. The implication of these findings for counselling is that biofeedback techniques (such as basic anxiety-reducing and mindfulness) and psycho-education strategies (like test-taking skills training and use of study schedules) are some notable approaches employed in reducing examination anxiety.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the present study, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Counsellors should empower undergraduate students with simple strategies to reduce examination anxiety such as mindfulness techniques and simple deep breathing exercises.
2. Male and female students should be taught effective test-taking strategies in order to ensure calmness and confidence in test-taking skills.
3. The deaneries should encourage students in the various faculties to create study schedules in order to help learners

manage stress, gain confidence in their preparation efforts, and make more productive use of their study time.

4. Since undergraduate students across age groups are struggling with test anxiety, and are wrapped up in patterns of negative thinking when it comes to tests, counsellors and psychologists should help them reflect on some positive past records in order to shift their focus from the negative experiences.
5. Lecturers should create opportunities where getting something wrong does not have a negative impact, but rather one that helps improve success and can help students feel more prepared.

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