

Investigating Research Anxiety Among Undergraduate English Major Students at Kabul University

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Abstract: Research has a crucial role in developing the academic achievements of undergraduate students. However, the majority experience extreme stress and anxiety while they are conducting their academic research. This study examines the factors contributing to research anxiety among undergraduate English major students at Kabul University. Although global studies have broadly explored academic stress, limited attention has been paid to the specific phenomenon of research anxiety within Afghan higher education, which this study aims to address. This investigation is conducted through a quantitative research design. Seventy-two students participated in this study. The findings revealed that most participants reported moderate to high levels of anxiety while conducting their research. It is attributed to a variety of factors. The primary cause of this anxiety is a lack of experience or training. Additionally, fear of failure and inadequate academic support are significant contributing factors. Generally, senior students exhibited lower levels of anxiety than the lower-level students. It is reflecting their growing familiarity with the research process. As a result, it highlighted the urgent need for academic institutions and universities to address this anxiety. The study recommends integrating research training, mentorship programs, and enhanced access to investigation resources to reduce anxiety among students. Furthermore, addressing this type of anxiety will enhance the academic quality of research.

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INTRODUCTION

In higher education, the ability to conduct research is crucial for developing critical thinking, academic independence, and professional skills. Bitzer (2005) asserts that research is significant for undergraduate English majors, as it strengthens their academic abilities and deepens their grasp of both theoretical and practical aspects of the field. Moreover, Miri and Joia (2023) observe that many students find academic writing daunting and stressful, marked

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by feelings of pressure, fear of failure, and uncertainty, which can limit their engagement in meaningful research.

Academic writing is a central component of undergraduate English programs, which allows students to express ideas clearly, engage critically with texts, and connect theoretical and practical knowledge (Noori, 2020). Nevertheless, students often struggle with the cognitive, structural, and linguistic demands of writing, leading to feelings of pressure, fear, and uncertainty that negatively influence their research efforts.

According to Rasid and Nor (2024), Research anxiety is a recognized barrier to academic achievement and personal growth. They suggest that this anxiety often arises from psychological factors, for instance, low confidence, worsened by inadequate training or support from instructors. These challenges emphasize the need to address research anxiety to help students appreciate their academic and professional potential.

Fear of failure and the perceived complexity of the research process significantly contribute to research anxiety among students. These challenges are widespread in academic environments where research infrastructure is still developing, and students face additional sociocultural and academic obstacles.

Higher education in Afghanistan faces ongoing challenges in improving its academic systems (Miri & Joia, 2023). Kabul University, a leading institution in shaping the intellectual and academic futures of Afghan students, faces significant limitations, including restricted access to academic resources, inadequate research training, and limited mentorship for undergraduates.

Research anxiety is studied in various contexts (Khayber et al., 2024). In Western and Asian educational systems, this topic has been widely investigated by various researchers; however, in the Afghan context, there is a lack of studies on this topic. Likewise, as Noori (2020) highlights, while several studies have investigated academic writing difficulties globally, there has been little to no research on this topic in Afghanistan. A notable gap exists in the current body of research concerning the academic writing and research-related challenges faced by Afghan students. While existing studies have primarily focused on general academic stress or mental health issues among undergraduates, they have scarcely looked into the specific phenomenon of research anxiety. For example, McKeachie (2013) examined issues such as presentation-related stress and performance anxiety, yet did not explicitly explore anxiety linked to the research process itself. Among the limited studies that do address research-related stress, most have focused on postgraduate students, leaving the experiences of undergraduate students—particularly those in the social sciences—largely unexplored.

The existing literature outlines several general causes of research anxiety. Papanastasiou and Zembylas (2008) identified a lack of familiarity with the research process, limited access to academic resources, and inadequate supervision as key contributors. Likewise, Prasetyaningrum et al. (2023) emphasized time constraints and fear of failing to meet

academic standards as significant sources of anxiety among undergraduate students. In addition, studies conducted in the Middle East and South Asia have pointed to cultural influences—such as fear of academic criticism, heightened parental expectations, and rigid educational norms—as significant factors exacerbating students' anxiety levels.

Nevertheless, these findings are often generalized and may not reflect the realities of students in conflict-affected and resource-constrained environments like Afghanistan. According to Wahyuni and Umam (2017), previous studies have primarily been conducted in homogeneous settings and have not considered demographic differences, such as academic years or prior research experience. This generalization reduces the effectiveness of interventions and policies. Therefore, a more localized and nuanced understanding of the factors contributing to research anxiety among specific student groups is needed. Undergraduate English majors at Kabul University, for example, are frequently expected to engage with complex academic tasks such as theoretical analysis, literary criticism, and cultural studies. Despite these expectations, they often receive minimal guidance in conducting empirical or library-based research, which may further intensify anxiety. This study aims to fill the existing gap by exploring the prevalence, causes, and levels of research anxiety among English major students at Kabul University.

The study is expected to contribute to several key areas. First, it offers data-driven insights into research anxiety, elevating the larger academic discourse on student mental health and performance in higher education. Second, the findings aim to inform curriculum developers, instructors, and university administrators by highlighting specific areas for intervention—mainly in improving research training and student support systems. Finally, the study provides a foundation for future qualitative or longitudinal research, offering a basis for further exploration of students' personal experiences, coping mechanisms, and developmental trajectories in managing research-related challenges.

A growing body of literature underscores that writing anxiety is a complex and multifaceted issue, especially within EFL contexts. Miri and Joia (2023) found that such anxiety is often tied to students' academic backgrounds and limited knowledge of linguistic features. Their participants reported feelings of embarrassment, perfectionism, and fear of judgment—factors that create significant emotional barriers to academic writing. In the same vein, Rasid and Nor (2024) emphasized that anxiety intensifies during the proposal writing stage, when expectations for originality and professionalism heighten students' self-doubt and slow their progress.

Pedagogical methods also appear to play a critical role. Khayber et al. (2024) demonstrated that traditional teaching approaches are more likely to exacerbate writing anxiety, whereas methods such as communicative language teaching can reduce stress and build confidence. These findings highlight the need for pedagogical reform to better support students.

In the Afghan context, Noori (2018) revealed that English majors at Kabul University often struggle with grammatical, argumentative, and citation-related issues—all closely linked to writing anxiety. These challenges not only undermine academic performance but also discourage students from engaging in research activities. This suggests that writing anxiety stems not only from psychological concerns but also from educational and contextual limitations.

Further compounding the issue is a lack of writing evaluation literacy. Cao et al. (2025) found a strong correlation between students' unfamiliarity with academic rubrics and heightened anxiety levels. This issue may be particularly acute in contexts like Afghanistan, where students often receive inconsistent or unclear feedback from instructors.

Instructional neglect of writing anxiety also remains a problem. Nazri and Asrobi (2023) noted that despite its prevalence, writing anxiety is rarely addressed in classroom instruction. As a result, students may resort to procrastination and fail to complete writing tasks.

Curriculum design and feedback practices also warrant attention. Nawawi, Nirwanto, and Widiastuty (2024) argued that the absence of formative assessment and individualized feedback marginalizes students suffering from writing anxiety.

Several researchers have framed writing anxiety not just as a psychological phenomenon but also as a structural and institutional issue. For example, Rabadi and Rabadi (2020) connected writing anxiety to broader issues such as low self-efficacy and fear of failure, which extend beyond language classrooms. Similarly, Aunurrahman (2019) emphasized the impact of systemic problems, including limited access to academic resources, underqualified instructors, and poor feedback mechanisms—conditions that mirror those in many Afghan institutions.

Ultimately, Wilson (2012) stressed that research anxiety is a legitimate and pervasive stressor in higher education. On the other hand, limited attention has been paid to how it affects English majors, particularly in under-resourced settings. This gap is significant in Afghanistan, where both academic preparation and psychological readiness for research are often lacking. By addressing these intersecting challenges, this study makes a timely and necessary contribution to the fields of educational psychology and higher education policy in Afghanistan and other similar contexts.

Specifically, this study addresses the following questions:

1. What is the level of research anxiety among undergraduate English major students at Kabul University?
2. What are the primary causes contributing to research anxiety among these students?
3. Do levels of research anxiety differ across academic years?
4. What are some practical factors that reduce research anxiety and improve students' engagement in research activities?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a quantitative research design, using a cross-sectional survey to collect numerical data on students' research-related anxiety. This approach enabled a systematic analysis of students' perceptions, attitudes, and emotional responses toward academic research tasks. A structured questionnaire was developed to identify and quantify the underlying causes of anxiety. The quantitative method was deemed most appropriate for this study, particularly due to its effectiveness in examining psychological constructs such as anxiety. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) argue, quantitative approaches facilitate the precise measurement of attitudes, perceptions, and emotional reactions across diverse demographic groups.

The target population for this study comprises 278 undergraduate English major students at Kabul University. They were from four academic years, from first class to fourth class. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure proportional representation of each academic year. As Lei (2008) notes, this method minimizes sampling bias and enhances the representativeness of the sample. Moreover, this stratification was based on the academic year. It ensures that each population subgroup is correctly represented in the sample.

A sample of 72 students was selected using a standard sample size formula, with a 9.95% margin of error and a 95% confidence level. Respondents were randomly selected from each stratum to represent the entire population proportionally. According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), this sample size is acceptable for exploratory and social science research.

Instrumentation

For this study, data were collected using a structured questionnaire. Main concepts, such as emotional responses to research tasks, perceived competence, time-related stress, and institutional support, were adapted from recent studies (Miri & Joia, 2023; Rasid & Nor, 2024; Prasetyaningrum et al., 2023; Cao, Zhong, & Wang, 2025). These studies provided closely related questionnaire models. They were polished and contextualized for the Afghan higher education setting. Special care was taken to ensure cultural relevance and linguistic clarity while preserving construct validity. The final instrument included both Likert-scale and categorical items. This questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first was about the respondents' demographic information. Through this section, age, gender, academic year, and prior research experience were identified.

The second part concerns the Research Anxiety Scale. In this section, a series of Likert-scale items is used. For example, from one, which indicates "strongly disagree," to five, which indicates "strongly agree," are given to each question. Through these cognitive, emotional, and behavioral indicators, research anxiety is measured. The third part of the questionnaire is designed to identify perceived causes of anxiety. Respondents rated the extent to which

various factors, such as a lack of research training, limited access to academic resources, fear of failure, and insufficient instructions, contribute to overall anxiety.

Data collection was conducted over two weeks in May 2025. After obtaining formal informed consent from the participants, online questionnaires were distributed through Google Forms. Participation in this survey was voluntary and confidential. Besides, identifying information is not collected to ensure anonymity and to encourage honest answers. The students were given 2 weeks to complete the questionnaire. The completed questionnaire was collected directly to prevent any loss. All data were securely stored in password-protected digital files accessible only to the researchers.

Data Analysis

After collecting the data, the answers were coded and entered into SPSS version 26 for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions, were used to summarize the general trends in research anxiety levels and their primary causes. One-way ANOVA was used to test for differences in anxiety across academic years. Pearson's correlation was applied to assess relationships between research anxiety and variables such as prior research experience. All statistical tests were conducted at a significance level of 0.05. Where applicable, effect sizes were calculated to interpret the practical significance of the results.

Ethical Considerations

This research adheres to the ethical standards of educational research. All participants were properly aware of their rights and the main rules. They were aware of the voluntary nature of their participation and the confidentiality of their responses. No psychological or academic risks were posed to participants.

FINDINGS

The sample for this study consisted of 72 undergraduate English majors. All of them were male and students of the English department at Kabul University. Regarding age, the majority of respondents (48.6%) were between 21 and 23 years old. Additionally, 29.2% were aged 18-20. Also, 22.2% were 24 years of age or older.

The respondents of the study were distributed correctly across the academic years. It was with a slightly higher proportion of about 30.6% from the fourth class. It represents a balanced representation among undergraduate academic students.

73.6% of the sample reported having no prior research experience. It may have an application to their levels of research anxiety. Lack of experience is usually connected with higher anxiety in academic research activities. These demographic factors were further examined in subsequent analyses of anxiety levels.

Table 1. *Participant Demographics (N = 72)*

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	18–20 years	21	29.2%
	21–23 years	35	48.6%
	24 years and above	16	22.2%
Academic Year	First Year	13	18.1%
	Second Year	17	23.6%
	Third Year	20	27.8%
	Fourth Year	22	30.6%
Prior Research Experience	Yes	19	26.4%
	No	53	73.6%
Gender	Male	72	100%

Distribution of Research Anxiety Levels

To evaluate overall research anxiety levels, responses to the 15-item Likert-scale research anxiety scale were summed to produce individual composite scores. After that, the scores were categorized into three levels: low (15-34), medium (35-54), and high (55-75) anxiety levels. This cut-off system produces balanced groupings across the score range.

Table 2. *Distribution of Research Anxiety Levels Among Students (N = 72)*

Anxiety Level	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Low (15–34)	11	15.3%
Moderate (35–54)	41	56.9%
High (55–75)	20	27.8%
Total	72	100%

The majority of the students (56.9%) reported a medium level of research anxiety. On the other hand, 27.8% mentioned high-level and 15.3% experienced low-level research anxiety.

Primary Contributing Factors to Research Anxiety

In this research, students rated 10 potential causes of research anxiety on a five-point Likert scale. Mean scores of each factor were calculated to identify the most common reasons for the anxiety.

Table 3. *Mean Scores for Perceived Causes of Research Anxiety*

Cause of Anxiety	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Lack of research training	4.42	0.64
Fear of failure	4.26	0.71
Limited access to academic resources	4.01	0.81
Inadequate supervision and mentorship	3.89	0.90

Lack of confidence in academic writing	3.74	0.88
Difficulty understanding research methodology	3.68	0.85
Time constraints	3.59	0.79
Peer comparison pressure	3.28	0.95
Negative past research experiences	3.15	1.02
Language barriers (reading academic texts)	3.03	0.91

The most important reasons for research anxiety were insufficient research training ($M=4.42$). The second was fear of failure ($M = 4.26$). Besides limited access to academic resources, another main reason for research anxiety was $M=4.01$. Lower scores ($M=3.03$) and peer comparison pressure ($M=3.28$) are also significant reasons for research anxiety.

Differences in Research Anxiety by Academic Year

In this part, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine whether research anxiety differs significantly by academic year (from first to fourth class).

Table 4. One-Way ANOVA: Research Anxiety by Academic Year

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p-value
Between Groups	319.24	3	106.41	3.72	0.015*
			28.61		
Within Groups	1945.67	68			
Total	2264.91	71			

* $p < 0.05$

Results of this ANOVA show a statistically significant difference in research anxiety. This difference is significant ($F = 3.72$, $p = 0.015$) across different academic years. A post hoc Tukey test showed that the first-year students had higher anxiety scores than the fourth-year students.

Correlation Between Prior Research Experience and Anxiety

In this section, a Pearson correlation analysis is conducted to investigate the relationship between prior research experience and overall research anxiety. It was shown using a coding scheme (0 = no experience, 1 = some experience).

Table 5. Pearson Correlation Between Research Experience and Anxiety

Variable	r	p-value
Research experience vs. anxiety	-0.41	0.001**

** $p < 0.01$

The results of this part showed a significant negative correlation ($r = -0.41$, $p = 0.001$). It reveals that the students with prior research experience tended to have lower levels of research anxiety than the others.

DISCUSSION

This study examines the prevalence, contributing factors, and demographic differences associated with research anxiety among undergraduate English majors at Kabul University, using a quantitative survey. This study achieves three main objectives: identifying the general level of research anxiety, recognizing its fundamental causes, and differences in anxiety across different academic years. The study's findings provide important insights into the psychological and academic factors affecting students' engagement with research, with significant implications for educational policy and curriculum development in the Afghan higher education context.

Findings of the study indicate that the majority of the students, 56.9%, report a medium level, while 27.8% report a high level of research anxiety. This indicates that research-related tasks are a significant source of academic stress, particularly in a developing research culture like Afghanistan's. These findings are consistent with previous research, such as that by Onwuegbuzie and Wilson (2003) and Papanastasiou and Zembylas (2008), which reported elevated anxiety among university students during research coursework and thesis preparation.

Conversely, a small percentage of students, about 15.3%, reported a low level of anxiety, indicating proper research readiness and confidence among participants. These students are typically required to complete their final-year monograph or undertake an independent research project. Such medium- to high-level anxiety may impede both academic performance and psychological well-being (Coterall, 2011)

Among the different reasons, the most significant sources of research anxiety are a lack of research training, fear of failure, and limited access to academic resources. These findings align with global research suggesting that insufficient instruction in research methodology and a lack of familiarity with academic writing skills are the main factors contributing to research anxiety (Pyhalto et al., 2009; Kiley & Wisker, 2009). In the Afghan context, these issues are worsened by foundational limitations, language barriers, and scarce digital and print resources. Additionally, insufficient supervision and lack of confidence in academic writing emerged as significant factors. This supports the idea that effective mentorship and skill-building are crucial for alleviating students' research anxiety, as suggested by Coterall (2011), who emphasized the central role of supervisory relationships in shaping students' practical research experiences. While peer pressure, language barriers, and negative past experiences were less dominant, they remain noteworthy, indicating that structural and pedagogical factors outweigh social comparisons as drivers of research anxiety in this setting.

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a statistically significant decline in research anxiety from first-year to fourth-year students. This suggests that familiarity with research activities over time, even in informal settings, helps reduce research anxiety. This finding aligns with studies by Bitzer (2004) and Lei (2008), who found that students' exposure to academic discourse and methods increases as they develop their academic skills. This trend underscores

the need to integrate research training early in the curriculum to prevent persistent anxiety in later academic years, which could otherwise impair research engagement and thesis quality.

A considerable negative correlation was revealed between previous experience and anxiety levels. Students' familiarity with research issues, whether through formal or informal ways, shows lower levels of research anxiety scores. This finding aligns with the work of Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006). He found that experiential learning in research significantly improves students' confidence and decreases perceived difficulty.

The results align with the existing global literature on research anxiety in higher education, which recognizes insufficient research preparation, limited access to sources, and poor supervision as the most significant stressors for students (Stubb et al., 2011; Kumar & Hamer, 2013). However, this study uniquely highlights institutional challenges in the Afghan context, such as limited research infrastructure and mentorship, which warrant greater attention than factors like language barriers and the perfectionism prevalent in Western and East Asian studies (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006).

From a theoretical perspective, this study supports the cognitive-behavioral model of anxiety. According to Hofmann et al. (2012), this theory declares that anxiety results from a combination of cognitive distortions, lack of skill, and environmental stressors- all evident in students' limited research understanding, lack of training, and unsupportive academic environments. In addition, low self-efficacy in research tasks, contributing to heightened anxiety and avoidance behaviors, aligns with Bandura's (1997) Self-Efficacy Theory, which links belief in one's abilities to motivation and performance. This suggests that learners' belief in their capability to succeed in specific academic tasks strongly influences their motivation, emotional responses, and performance.

Moreover, students in this research understood research as a highly valuable subject. However, they had doubts about their ability to succeed, which led to increased anxiety, which reflects expectancy-value Theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). This theory proposes that students' academic motivation —and, by extension, their anxiety —are influenced by their expectations of success and the value they assign to the task (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006).

Moreover, students in this research experience writing or research anxiety may have had diminished capacity to process academic instructions. This further limits engagement with research activities. This supports Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), which posits that emotional barriers impede learning.

By situating these findings within global and theoretical frameworks, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Integrate research methods and foundational skills into the first-year undergraduate curriculum through a mandatory introductory course on research fundamentals, covering research design, literature reviews, and basic data analysis tailored to each discipline.

- Include practical exercises, such as formulating research questions or conducting small-scale literature reviews, within existing first-year courses, and use low-stakes assignments, like annotated bibliographies, to assess understanding without performance pressure.
- Establish structured mentorship programs by pairing senior students or faculty with novice researchers, offering biweekly check-ins and training mentors in effective communication and feedback techniques to address anxiety.
- Provide free institutional subscriptions to academic databases (e.g., JSTOR, PubMed) and train students in their use through library-led workshops.
- Develop an online research portal with curated resources, including guides on academic writing and citation management tools (e.g., Zotero).
- Create dedicated research hubs with access to computers, software (e.g., SPSS, NVivo), and writing support services.
- Implement student-centered supervision by training faculty to provide constructive, regular feedback during research projects, focusing on building students' confidence and skills.
- Encourage participation in experiential learning through mini research projects, workshops, and student-led conferences to foster a research-oriented mindset and reduce anxiety.

Although this study offers significant insights into research anxiety among Afghan undergraduates, several limitations should be acknowledged:

- The sample was drawn exclusively from a single department at one public university, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other academic contexts or institutions. Future research should include participants from multiple universities and diverse academic disciplines to enhance the applicability of results.
- Although anonymity was ensured, some students may have under- or over-reported their anxiety levels due to social desirability or personal biases. Conducting longitudinal studies to track changes in research anxiety over time could provide a more accurate understanding of its progression throughout the undergraduate experience.
- The study relied solely on quantitative methods, which effectively identified patterns but failed to capture students' nuanced, personal experiences and coping strategies. Incorporating qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, into future studies would yield more profound insights into students' emotional and academic challenges related to research anxiety.
- The sample included only male students, limiting the study's relevance to female students who may experience research anxiety differently due to gender-specific

academic, cultural, or social pressures. Future research should include both male and female participants to explore potential demographic differences in research anxiety and ensure broader applicability.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the stress and anxiety experienced by undergraduate English majors at Kabul University during research activities. Data were collected via a structured questionnaire using stratified random sampling, with 72 students participating. Findings revealed that most students experienced moderate to high levels of research anxiety, primarily due to insufficient training in research methods, fear of failure, limited access to academic resources, and inadequate supervision and feedback.

This research contributes to understanding research anxiety within the Afghan academic context, highlighting both pedagogical and systemic challenges. The findings underscore the urgent need for multifaceted interventions. Universities should integrate research training into early undergraduate curricula and establish mentorship programs to provide guidance and feedback, thereby improving research quality and reducing student anxiety. These measures will foster academic engagement, critical thinking, and a robust research culture among undergraduates.

The study also paves the way for future research. Longitudinal studies should assess the impact of targeted training on anxiety levels, while qualitative studies can explore students' personal experiences with research anxiety. Expanding similar research to diverse contexts within Afghanistan and beyond will further enhance the understanding of research anxiety.

Finally, this study reveals that research anxiety in the Afghan context stems not only from psychological factors but also from structural and pedagogical shortcomings. By addressing these issues, universities can empower students to conduct research with greater confidence, viewing it as a meaningful and transformative part of their intellectual growth.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

This study was supervised and conceptualized by Pohanmal Abdullah Noori. Pohanyar Qyamudin Ziar conducted the investigation and data analysis of this research. Eventually, Pohanyar Arsalan Zaiel drafted the report with input and active feedback from all authors. All authors contributed to the interpretation of the results, reviewed, and approved the final version of the research report.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All the data produced and investigated in this study are available in this article. You can also find it in its supplementary files. If you need additional findings supporting data, you can reach out to the corresponding authors by reasonable request, subject to ethical approval from Kabul University's research committee.

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