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Test Anxiety Among Special Education Students at the University of Dohuk, Iraq: Prevalence, Predictors, and Intervention Implications

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Abstract: Test anxiety remains a persistent and alarming phenomenon among university students, particularly in high-stakes academic environments. This study investigates the prevalence and determinants of test anxiety among special education students at the University of Dohuk, Iraq—a population often overlooked in regional educational research. Employing a quantitative cross-sectional design, data were gathered from 60 stratified participants using the Al-Ghadi Exam Anxiety Scale, covering cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and physiological dimensions. Results revealed significantly above-average levels of test anxiety (mean = 91.85), with no statistically significant differences based on gender or academic year. These findings challenge commonly held assumptions about demographic variation in anxiety and underscore the systemic, non-discriminatory nature of the issue. Contributing to both theory and practice, this study highlights that test anxiety in this context stems not only from personal psychological factors but also from structural rigidities in assessment and lack of institutional support. The study calls for culturally sensitive, curriculum-integrated interventions that address students' emotional well-being holistically. By identifying anxiety as a widespread and consistent educational barrier, especially in underrepresented regions like Kurdistan, this research advocates for evidence-based reforms to foster resilience, equity, and academic success in special education programs.

Keywords: Test anxiety, Special education, University students, Gender differences, Academic level.

1. Introduction

Test anxiety is a pervasive psychological concern among university students worldwide, significantly affecting academic performance, emotional well-being, and future career development. Prevalence rates of test anxiety among university students are estimated to range between 15% and 22%, and these rates are influenced by variables such as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background(Ahmed et al., 2023; Rhman Alghamdi, 2022; Von der Embse et al., 2018). Students experiencing test anxiety often undergo physical and psychological symptoms when confronted with evaluative environments, which can impair cognitive functioning and behavior(Jirjees et al., 2024; Ying et al., 2023). Furthermore, anxiety among students has been increasing globally, with median rates reported at 32% across studies, ranging from 7.4% to 55%, and with undergraduates, females, and students from Asian institutions showing higher incidences(Liu et al., 2023; G. X. D. Tan et al.,

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2023; Xiong et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this problem by introducing new learning stressors(Qolamani, 2022). In Kurdistan, similar trends are evident, where test anxiety is a common issue that negatively impacts students' academic performance and general well-being(Bashir et al., 2019). Despite the scope of the issue, local educational policies remain inadequate in accommodating students who experience exam-related anxiety(Karaevli et al., 2024).

A growing body of empirical literature has explored the multifaceted nature of test anxiety and its wide-ranging impact on students. Test anxiety has been conceptualized as a multidimensional phenomenon involving cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and physiological components(Putwain et al., 2021; Roos et al., 2021). Cognitively, it involves worry over potential failure; emotionally, it includes apprehension and nervousness(Eysenck et al., 2007a; Feng et al., 2022). Behaviorally, students may procrastinate or avoid studying, while physiologically, they may experience symptoms such as increased heart rate and gastrointestinal discomfort(Brenner, 2022a; Jerrim, 2023). Numerous studies have emphasized that students in demanding programs—such as medical and health sciences—are particularly vulnerable to test anxiety due to the intensity of academic preparation required(Hanfesa et al., 2020). Additionally, specific demographic and environmental factors such as gender, parental education, study environment, and personality traits have been identified as significant contributors(Morinaj & Hascher, 2022; Tsegay et al., 2019). Sex differences have consistently emerged, with female students often reporting higher anxiety levels than their male peers(Kumar & Bajaj, 2022; Parmasari et al., 2022). However, these findings are culturally contingent and may not generalize across educational contexts(Widlund et al., 2020).

Given the rising incidence and consequences of test anxiety among university students, this study aims to investigate the prevalence, determinants, and academic consequences of test anxiety within higher education settings, with particular focus on students in special and professional education programs. While considerable global research has been conducted on this topic, localized studies—such as in the Kurdistan region—are still limited and insufficiently integrated into educational policy(Muhammed & Qqdir, 2022). This study also seeks to explore how subjective perceptions of academic difficulty correlate with anxiety levels and learning outcomes, given findings that subjective course difficulty strongly influences both emotional and academic performance(England et al., 2019). A further objective is to evaluate whether current educational systems provide effective support mechanisms, especially in contexts where only a single form of assessment (e.g., written exam) is offered, potentially exacerbating anxiety for vulnerable students. Understanding these elements is essential for designing targeted interventions to improve student well-being and academic success, particularly in environments that face additional socioeconomic and institutional pressures(Jarso et al., 2024).

This study proceeds from the assumption that test anxiety is not merely an individual psychological condition but a systemic issue influenced by academic culture, structural rigidity in assessment systems, and social context. We hypothesize that students who perceive their courses as more difficult, particularly in professional programs like health sciences or special education, will experience significantly higher levels of test anxiety, thereby impairing their academic performance(Fishstrom et al., 2022; Hanfesa et al., 2020). We also argue that the prevalence and impact of test anxiety are moderated by demographic and contextual factors, including gender, cultural expectations, and access to mental health support(Tsegay et al., 2019). Moreover, we posit that the lack of flexible assessment options (e.g., choice between oral or written exams) and minimal

institutional support in certain regions—such as Kurdistan—amplify the emotional burden faced by students. Building from this, our central hypothesis is that introducing context-sensitive interventions and more diverse, student-centered assessment models will significantly reduce anxiety and improve academic outcomes(S. H. Tan & Pang, 2023; Von der Embse et al., 2018).

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Multidimensional Nature of Test Anxiety: Theoretical Frameworks

Test anxiety has been conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and physiological responses to evaluative situations(Putwain et al., 2021). The cognitive dimension involves worry about potential failure and its consequences, such as negative self-evaluations and racing thoughts during exams(Von der Embse et al., 2018). Emotionally, it manifests as feelings of tension, apprehension, and helplessness, while physiologically, it triggers symptoms like increased heart rate, sweating, and gastrointestinal distress(Jerrim, 2023). Behaviorally, test-anxious students may exhibit procrastination, avoidance, or ineffective study habits(Brenner, 2022b). This complexity necessitates theoretical frameworks that explain both its origins and mechanisms. The cognitive-attentional theory posits that anxiety impairs performance by diverting mental resources away from task-relevant thinking toward self-preoccupation and worry(Eysenck et al., 2007b). Neurocognitive studies support this, showing hyperactivity in emotion-processing brain regions (e.g., amygdala) and reduced activation in executive function areas (e.g., prefrontal cortex) during high-anxiety testing scenarios(Morgenroth et al., 2020). In contrast, the skills deficit model argues that anxiety stems from inadequate preparation, creating a vicious cycle where poor study skills fuel anxiety, which further undermines performance(Naveh-Benjamin et al., 1981). This may be particularly relevant for special education students, who must master both theoretical knowledge and practical teaching competencies(Fishstrom et al., 2022).

The self-regulation theory offers a holistic perspective, emphasizing how students' metacognitive abilities—such as monitoring their learning progress and adjusting strategies—can mitigate or exacerbate test anxiety(Brenner, 2022c). Students with strong self-regulation skills can reframe negative thoughts, manage time effectively, and employ relaxation techniques during exams(Silaj et al., 2021). However, cultural factors may influence these dynamics. In collectivist societies like Iraqi Kurdistan, where academic success is tied to familial honor(Yatkin et al., 2023). The emotional dimension of anxiety may be amplified by external pressures absent in individualistic cultures. Similarly, the cognitive-attentional model may require adaptation in contexts where high-stakes testing is the norm, as constant evaluation could normalize certain anxiety responses(S. H. Tan & Pang, 2023). Understanding these nuances is critical for developing culturally sensitive interventions, particularly in understudied regions like Kurdistan, where traditional theoretical frameworks have rarely been tested. This gap highlights the need to examine whether Western-derived models fully capture test anxiety's manifestations in Middle Eastern special education students, who navigate unique academic and societal demands.

2.2 Demographic and Contextual Predictors of Test Anxiety

A variety of demographic and contextual predictors have been identified as important factors influencing exam anxiety levels. One of the most researched topics is gender. Global findings, as

reported by Memon (2023), suggest that women tend to experience higher exam anxiety than men, likely due to differences in coping style, social pressure, and self-perception(Memon et al., 2023). However, these results are not universal. Research in the Middle East, including a study by Jirjees et al. (2024), found that there was no significant difference between men and women in terms of exam anxiety, suggesting a cultural influence on anxiety expression and experience(Jirjees et al., 2024). In addition, the academic year is also an important variable. According to Khalaila (2021), first-year and final-year students tend to experience the highest levels of anxiety due to adaptation pressure and graduation demands(Khalaila, 2015). However, these results are not always consistent in non-Western contexts. A study in the United Arab Emirates by Jirjees et al. (2024) shows a different pattern, reinforcing the importance of considering local dynamics in understanding test anxiety(Jirjees et al., 2024).

Cultural and social contexts also play an important role in predicting exam anxiety. In regions such as Kurdistan, an education system that relies heavily on *high-stakes testing* creates great pressure on students, as noted, a variety of demographic and contextual predictors have been identified as important factors influencing exam anxiety levels. One of the most researched topics is gender. Global findings, as reported by Memon (2023), suggest that women tend to experience higher exam anxiety than men, likely due to differences in coping style, social pressure, and self-perception(Memon et al., 2023). However, these results are not universal. Research in the Middle East, including a study by Jirjees et al. (2024), found that there was no significant difference between men and women in terms of exam anxiety, suggesting a cultural influence on anxiety expression and experience. In addition, the academic year is also an important variable(Jirjees et al., 2024). According to Khalaila (2021), first-year and final-year students tend to experience the highest levels of anxiety due to adaptation pressure and graduation demands(Khalaila, 2015). However, these results are not always consistent in non-Western contexts. A study in the United Arab Emirates by Jirjees et al. (2024) shows a different pattern, reinforcing the importance of considering local dynamics in understanding exam anxiety(Yatkin et al., 2023). These exams that determine the future of education and careers often increase the cognitive and emotional dimensions of anxiety. In addition, prolonged conflict and socioeconomic pressures in the region add a layer of stress that worsens students' psychological conditions(Qolamani, 2022). These factors suggest that exam anxiety is inseparable from the social and political realities surrounding it. Special education students also face unique challenges. The combination of academic pressure and field practice creates a double burden that increases susceptibility to anxiety, especially in terms of professional readiness and institutional expectations(Fishstrom et al., 2022). Therefore, it is important to understand the predictors of exam anxiety holistically, including individual, academic, and structural variables, so that the designed interventions are truly relevant and effective.

2.3 Effective Interventions for Test Anxiety: Lessons for the Kurdish Context

Various interventions have been shown to be effective globally in managing exam anxiety, with diverse approaches according to the targeted dimensions of anxiety. *Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy* (CBT) is one of the most widely used methods and has proven to be effective in reducing anxiety at the cognitive level, especially in changing negative mindsets and increasing confidence when facing exams(Parrish, 2022; Salartash et al., 2022). In addition, *mindfulness* training has shown significant results in reducing physiological symptoms of anxiety, such as heart palpitations and muscle tension,

by training awareness and acceptance of current conditions(X. Chen et al., 2021). For students who experience anxiety due to a lack of academic preparation, *academic skill training* is the right solution. This training helps students improve their learning skills, time management, and problem-solving strategies, which directly lowers anxiety levels(Kaur Khaira et al., 2023). This diversity of approaches suggests that effective interventions should be tailored to the main causes of anxiety experienced by individuals.

In the context of Kurdistan-Iraq, the implementation of such global interventions requires adjustments to be relevant to local social and educational realities. One important recommendation is to integrate psychological support into the formal curriculum, for example, through stress management modules and emotional skills training, which can be provided from the first year of college. In addition, given the strong collectivist culture, collaboration with families is essential to reduce external pressures that are often a source of emotional anxiety, as outlined by Jarso(Jarso et al., 2024). Training for lecturers to recognize anxiety symptoms early is also crucial so that interventions can be carried out preventively. However, there is a significant gap in the literature, namely the lack of studies on the effectiveness of exam anxiety interventions in Iraq, particularly for special education students who face academic and practical challenges simultaneously(Aspelin et al., 2021a). Therefore, further research and trials of context-based interventions are urgently needed to formulate appropriate and sustainable strategies in this region.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study used a quantitative approach with *a cross-sectional design* to evaluate the level of exam anxiety among special education students at Dohuk University. This design is descriptive, allowing researchers to observe the prevalence of anxiety and variation between groups without performing experimental manipulations. This approach was chosen because it is in accordance with the research objectives, namely to understand the distribution and characteristics of exam anxiety based on demographic and academic variables, without intervening in the learning process or the psychological condition of the participants.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

The target population in this study includes all 384 regular (morning) students of special education study programs at Dohuk University in the 2024–2025 academic year, consisting of 105 males and 243 females. Through *the stratified random sampling* technique, a sample of 60 students was selected, representing a balanced representation of two academic classes and two genders: 30 second-year students and 30 fourth-year students, with 15 males and 15 females in each year. The selection of the second and fourth years is based on the argument that these two stages are crucial transition periods: the second year is marked by adjustments to the core courses of the department, while the fourth year is marked by preparation for professional certification (Khalaila, 2015). This strategy is expected to be able to capture variations in exam anxiety that may appear at important moments in a student's academic journey.

3.3 Instrumentation

The instrument used in this study was the Al-Ghadi Exam Anxiety Scale (2011) which consisted of 34 items and measured four dimensions: cognitive (e.g., "I'm worried about failing the exam"), emotional (e.g., "I felt nauseous before the exam"), physiological (e.g., "My heart pounded during the exam"), and behavioral (e.g., "I procrastinated studying until I was close to the exam"). The language adaptation process was carried out through translation into Kurdish by two bilingual education experts, then translated back into English to test conceptual equivalence, with an equivalence result of 92%. Furthermore, a panel of psychologists reviewed the content to ensure local cultural appropriateness, including adjustments to sample questions such as the replacement of the "visit a doctor" reference to fit the context of health services in the Kurdistan region. Psychometrically, this scale shows high reliability with a *Cronbach's alpha* of 0.89 for the overall scale, as well as alpha values of 0.82 (cognitive), 0.78 (emotional), 0.75 (physiological), and 0.71 (behavioral), respectively. The *Confirmatory Factor Analysis* (CFA) supports the original four-factor structure, with *a CFI* value of 0.91 and *an RMSEA* of 0.06, indicating good construct validity.

3.4 Data Collection

Data collection is carried out directly during regular lecture hours to ensure maximum participation and reduce disruption to students' academic routines. The research team provided standard instructions to all participants and guaranteed the confidentiality of their identities. The average time it takes to complete the questionnaire is about 20 minutes. Data collection was conducted over two weeks in January 2025, strategically scheduled outside of the exam period to avoid bias due to actual exam stress.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS software version 28. Descriptive analysis was performed to calculate the mean values and standard deviations of the total score and score of each anxiety subscale. A single-sample *t-test* was used to compare the observed average anxiety with the hypothetical value (85). In addition, an independent t-test was applied to identify differences by gender and academic year, supplemented by *a measure of Cohen's effect d* to assess practical significance (d = 0.20 = small; 0.50 = medium; 0.80 = large). Subgroup analysis was also conducted to explore differences in scores based on the dimensions of anxiety in different strata. All comparisons were reported with a *95% confidence interval*.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

This research has received approval from the Institutional Ethics Council of Dohuk University. Each participant provides written consent after receiving an explanation of the research objectives and procedures, and is given the option not to participate without consequences. The data is stored securely and can only be accessed by the research team to guarantee the privacy and confidentiality of participant information.

4. Result

The results of the study were presented based on two main objectives: (1) to identify the level of exam anxiety among special education students, and (2) to test for differences in anxiety levels based on gender variables and academic year.

First Objective: Identifying the Level of Test Anxiety Among Special Education Students

To achieve this goal, data from 60 respondents were analyzed using the SPSS program. The average score obtained from the exam anxiety scale was compared to the hypothetical average score (85), which reflects the threshold of a "moderate" anxiety level. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Results of the T-test for One Sample to Measure the Level of Test Anxiety

Sample Size	Observed Mean	Hypothetical Mean	Standard Deviation	Calculated T-value	Tabulated T-value	Significance
60	91.85	85	14.75	3.595	1.98	Statistically significant

Based on the results of the t-test of one sample, an average anxiety score of **91.85 was obtained**, which is statistically higher than the hypothetical average (**85**). The value **of t calculated = 3.595** is greater than **the t of the table = 1.98** at a significance level of 0.05 with degrees of freedom (df) = 59. This suggests that special education students in the study sample experienced **significantly higher levels of exam anxiety than expected**.

Interpretation: These findings confirm that exam anxiety is a fairly strong phenomenon among special education students. This can be influenced by academic pressure, practicum demands, and lack of psychosocial support in the context of inclusive education.

Second Objective: Identifying Significant Differences in Test Anxiety Levels According to Variables (Gender, Academic Level)

a. Differences in Test Anxiety Levels According to Gender

To verify this objective, the researchers analyzed male and female results on the research instrument and statistically processed them by applying the t-test for two independent samples using SPSS. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Statistical Differences in Test Anxiety Levels According to Gender

Gender	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation	Calculated T-value	Tabulated T-value	Significance
Males	30	91.93	15.68	0.043	1.98	Not significant
Females	30	91.76	14.03			

Interpretation: The results showed that the difference in average score between male and female students was very small (0.17 points), with **the t-value of the calculation (0.043)** much

smaller than **the t-table (1.98).** This shows **no significant difference** in exam anxiety levels between the two gender groups. The effect size (Cohen's d = 0.01, data not shown in the table) was also very small, confirming this similarity.

These findings are in line with regional studies in the Middle East, as reported by Jirjees et al. (2024), which show that cultural factors, social expectations, and education systems can result in a balanced distribution of anxiety between men and women.

b. Differences in Test Anxiety Levels According to Academic Level

To verify this objective, the researchers analyzed the results of second-year and fourth-year students on the research instrument and statistically processed them by applying the t-test for two independent samples using SPSS. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Statistical Differences in Test Anxiety Levels According to Academic Level

Academic Level	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation	Calculated T-value	Tabulated T-value	Significance
Second Year	30	93.66	16.53	0.939	1.98	Not significant
Fourth Year	30	89.86	14.76			

Interpretation: Although there was an average difference of about 3.8 points, with second-year students recording higher scores, this difference was not statistically significant (**t count = 0.939 < t table = 1.98**). The effect size (*Cohen's d = 0.24*) falls into the subcategory. However, the direction of this difference is still interesting to observe.

Analysis: Second-year students may experience higher anxiety because they are in a period of transition to the core of the course, which demands adaptation to a greater academic load. In contrast, fourth-year students may already have more mature experience and more stable study strategies, although they also face challenges leading up to graduation.

5. Discussion

The results of this study offer crucial insights into the prevalence and nature of test anxiety among special education students at the University of Dohuk's College of Basic Education. Findings reveal that the degree of test anxiety experienced by students is significantly higher than the theoretical mean, indicating a widespread and serious issue(Von der Embse et al., 2018). These elevated anxiety levels are consistent with other global findings, particularly among students in demanding programs such as medicine, health sciences, and special education (Hanfesa et al., 2020; Tsegay et al., 2019). Students enrolled in these fields often face rigorous academic expectations and must master both theoretical knowledge and practical skills, increasing their susceptibility to test anxiety(Fishstrom et al., 2022). Interestingly, the study also found no statistically significant differences in anxiety levels across gender or between academic years. This absence of variation—despite literature suggesting otherwise—may stem from contextual or sampling factors(Putwain et

al., 2021; Widlund et al., 2020). In sum, the findings suggest that test anxiety is a generalized issue in the program, cutting across demographics and academic stages.

The findings challenge some established assumptions, particularly the lack of gender-based differences in test anxiety. While prior research often shows female students reporting higher anxiety(Putwain et al., 2021). The parity found here may relate to shared academic pressures across genders in the special education program at Dohuk(Yatkin et al., 2023). It's also possible that the relatively small and balanced sample size (30 males and 30 females) limited the ability to detect subtle differences(Aspelin et al., 2021b). Similarly, no significant differences in anxiety were found between second-year and fourth-year students, contrasting with studies that associate academic progression with either increased or decreased anxiety(Khalaila, 2015). However, this finding aligns with research from the UAE, indicating uniform anxiety across years of study(Jirjees et al., 2024). This consistency may reflect sustained high-stakes testing and a lack of coping development across the academic journey(Brenner, 2022c). These patterns underscore the systemic nature of anxiety in this context and highlight the necessity of interventions that are not limited to a particular demographic or academic level, but institutional in scope and responsive to the shared stressors experienced by all students.

The consistent test anxiety levels across gender and academic years raise educational concerns about the program's capacity to support student resilience. The findings suggest that students are not effectively developing coping mechanisms or adapting to evaluative pressures as they advance in their studies(Parrish, 2022). Rather than becoming more comfortable, students appear to experience stable levels of anxiety, implying constant pressure throughout the curriculum(S. H. Tan & Pang, 2023). This situation may reflect persistent assessment burdens and a lack of strategic, phased support in the program's design. Moreover, since the anxiety affects students broadly, institutional interventions must be comprehensive and continuous, addressing cognitive, emotional, and physiological dimensions of stress(Fishstrom et al., 2022). Academic performance is likely to be impacted significantly, as existing research has shown that test anxiety negatively correlates with examination outcomes(Von der Embse et al., 2018). Additionally, untreated anxiety can extend beyond academic difficulties, leading to broader psychological issues and reduced life quality(G. X. D. Tan et al., 2023). Thus, addressing test anxiety should be a matter of both academic effectiveness and student mental health. This further emphasizes the urgency of introducing structured support systems within the university setting.

The findings of this study mirror those from other educational systems with high-pressure environments. Studies from various countries, including Ethiopia and the UAE, reveal similarly high anxiety rates among students in medical and professional preparation programs(Hanfesa et al., 2020)(Jirjees et al., 2024). The Kurdish educational context, which heavily emphasizes exam scores as measures of competence and future success, parallels these pressures(Jarso et al., 2024). In Kurdish society, education is not only academically competitive but also culturally competitive, with strong expectations from families and communities(Yatkin et al., 2023). Such sociocultural norms may further exacerbate students' anxiety. Moreover, special education students face additional psychological burdens as they are preparing to work with vulnerable populations, which adds weight to their academic and practical training(Parrish, 2022). Compared to Western contexts where some flexibility in assessment or more developed student support structures exist, students in Dohuk face relatively rigid testing systems with limited accommodations. Unlike systems that offer options like

oral exams or test anxiety accommodations, the Kurdish system generally adheres to a uniform testing model. This rigidity reinforces anxiety and demands context-sensitive reform to reduce its psychological toll on learners(A. Y. Chen et al., 2021).

Given the widespread and persistent nature of test anxiety in this context, future interventions should be multi-tiered and embedded within the curriculum from early stages. Approaches may include cognitive-behavioral therapy, relaxation training, study skills workshops, and consistent academic counseling(Kaur Khaira et al., 2023; Parrish, 2022). Importantly, these interventions must consider the cultural context, especially the collectivist values in Kurdish society. Support systems involving family engagement, community leaders, and school counselors may increase the success of such efforts. Additionally, future research should address current limitations, including the small sample size (n=60) and the focus on a single institution. Broader, more diverse sampling will help in understanding whether the findings generalize to other regions or programs. There is also room to investigate which specific curricular or environmental factors most strongly influence test anxiety among special education students. Longitudinal studies could explore whether interventions reduce anxiety and improve academic outcomes over time. Ultimately, the goal should be to foster an academic environment that nurtures not only intellectual growth but also psychological resilience, allowing students to succeed both in their studies and future professional roles.

6. Conclusion

The current study found that students in the Special Education Department at the College of Basic Education, University of Dohuk, experience significantly above-average levels of test anxiety. Notably, this anxiety does not vary meaningfully by gender or academic year. The absence of significant differences between male and female students and between second and fourth-year students suggests that test anxiety affects students equally from the outset of their academic journey and remains consistently high throughout. This pattern indicates that students are not developing effective coping strategies as they progress through their studies, pointing to sustained evaluative pressures and the lack of targeted intervention. These findings emphasize the need for multifaceted support programs that address the psychological, emotional, and physiological components of test anxiety. Academic institutions should incorporate anxiety management skills into the curriculum, provide access to psychological counseling services, and train faculty to identify and respond to signs of test anxiety. Addressing this issue both as a learning challenge and as a mental health concern would help promote student well-being, enhance academic success, and better prepare future special education professionals with the stress-management skills necessary for their careers.

This study makes a valuable contribution to the existing body of knowledge by highlighting the non-discriminatory and consistent nature of test anxiety across student demographics in a Middle Eastern context. Contrary to much of the prior literature, which suggests test anxiety differs by gender or academic level, this research finds such differences to be statistically insignificant. This suggests that in demanding academic environments—such as special education programs—students may face uniform levels of stress, regardless of background, due to shared academic expectations and pressures. The findings provide culturally specific insights by examining test anxiety within the Kurdish educational system, which adds a much-needed perspective from non-Western academic settings. Furthermore, the results reinforce the conceptualization of test anxiety as a structural issue, not just a temporary psychological reaction, necessitating comprehensive

institutional strategies. By demonstrating that students do not naturally develop coping skills over time, this study challenges assumptions that academic progression leads to emotional adaptation. It urges academic institutions to adopt a more proactive, system-wide approach to mental health and learning support. Thus, the research contributes not only to the theoretical understanding of test anxiety but also offers practical implications for educational policy and institutional reform.

In light of these findings, future research is strongly recommended to explore the issue of test anxiety more deeply and address the limitations of the current study. The relatively small sample size (n = 60) and focus on a single department at one university limit the generalizability of the results. Expanding the study to include larger and more diverse samples across multiple academic disciplines and institutions would improve external validity and allow for broader comparisons. Comparative studies could also identify whether similar patterns exist in other high-demand academic programs, such as medicine, engineering, or law. Moreover, future research should investigate the effectiveness of specific intervention strategies, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, study skills training, mindfulness programs, and integrated curricular reforms. Given the collectivist nature of Kurdish society and the emphasis on exam-based achievement, further studies should consider community-based or culturally contextualized interventions involving families, educators, and counselors. Longitudinal research could track students over time to measure whether interventions reduce anxiety and improve academic performance. Ultimately, future studies should aim to inform the development of evidence-based, culturally responsive educational policies that promote student well-being and academic success in both local and broader regional contexts.

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