

Test anxiety causes
university students to
underperform in their
examinations



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Essay | Comment | This essay examines the relationship between test anxiety in university students and their performance in examinations.

Typically universities use examinations to test part or even all the knowledge of students, particularly in first year courses. As Burns (2004, p.

120) noted examination results can determine if a student passes a course or can progress onto further study, and may even influence employment opportunities. Understandably educators are concerned that examinations are a fair indication of a student's knowledge. One area of special interest is the role anxiety plays in relation to examination performance. This essay argues that in general, test anxiety lowers performance slightly, although this is not evident in all situations, nor with all types of students. Further, it is argued that the main mechanism for this result appears to be that test anxiety leads to the development of interfering thoughts, which prevent a proper focus on examination tasks.

The essay also points out that although many factors impact on examination performance, test anxiety is one of particular interest as it appears to lead directly to unfair results. Test anxiety is normally understood as a form of debilitating anxiety, although how it is measured varies. Early research indicated there were two forms of test anxiety: facilitative and debilitating. Facilitative anxiety is understood as a type of anxiety which students recognise as being helpful.

Read about For example, students answer positively to a question such as “ Nervousness during a test helps me to do better” (Alpert ; Haber, 1960, p. 213). Facilitating anxiety helps students succeed and has been found to be present in students with better results in tests of all kinds (Hembree, 1988, p. 59). However, since the 1960’s.

it is debilitating anxiety which has come to be called test anxiety. It is defined by Sarason (1984) as the anxiety experienced in “ one important definable class of threatening situations, those in which people are evaluated” (p. 29). Most researchers have recognised that test anxiety is complex.

It can include a large range of features including thoughts, emotions, behaviours and body reactions such as tension or headache (Sarason, 1984. . 931 Following from the work of Liebert and Morris (as cited in Hembree, 1988, p. 48) test anxiety has generally been examined in terms of Worry and/or Emotionality or some extension of these.

Worry, covers the worrying thoughts which interfere either with examination preparation or with the processing of examination tasks. Emotionality, captures the awareness of bodily reactions to anxiety_Evidence points to the fact that, in general, test anxiety lowers performance slightly. This relationship has been studied for well over 60 years. During that time some studies have reported that test anxiety does not lead to lower results (Burns, 2004; Sansgiry, Bhosle, & Sail, 2006). However, these findings are not likely to be true of all students. Burns (2004, p.

21) examined general anxiety rather than the more specific test anxiety, thus limiting what he can claim. Equally, Sansgiry, Bhosle, and Sail's (2006, p. E3) research findings are limited to their sample as it is skewed to a very particular group of students with 72.5% being female and 51% Asian/Pacific Islander. More importantly, is the fact that most other studies have found that test anxiety does lower performance.

For example, Hembree (1988) after analysing 562 studies of test anxiety concluded that for all students at all levels of education including university "test anxiety harms performance" (p. 75). More recent research involving university students has provided additional support for the earlier findings. Musch and Broder (1999, Discussion section, Para.

1) claimed that test anxiety lowered performance of students sitting an examination in statistics at the University of Koblenz explaining about 5% of the variance in examination results. Most impressively, in a large study of 5414 undergraduate and graduate students at three American universities, Chapell et al. (2005, p. 270-1) similarly found that test anxiety was significantly negatively correlated with Grade Point Average for undergraduate students.

Those who had low test anxiety received an average of a 8+ grade, while the students who had high test anxiety received a third of a grade lower on average with a B. However, in some specific situations examination results are not negatively impacted by test anxiety. Despite the general agreement about the negative relation between test anxiety and achievement, the issue is, in fact, more complex (Burns, 2004, p. 121).

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When the examination is less threatening, the impact of test anxiety is lower or even absent. Eysenck (as cited in Tobias, 1990, Cognitive capacity and drive theory section, Para. summarised the evidence for the relation between task difficulty and anxiety and found that anxiety tended to facilitate performance on easy tasks and hinder it on difficult tasks. It is certainly possible that such findings could be extended to examinations at a tertiary level. This is supported by Hembree's (1988, p. 56) claim that test anxiety does not affect performance in lective courses at university, probably because students' experience greater ease in dealing with the material in courses chosen by themselves.

Test anxiety also appears to have different impacts at different levels of tertiary education. Chapell et al. (2005, p. 71) found that male students studying at postgraduate level experienced no significant impact of test anxiety on their performance. Additionally, the relation between test anxiety and examination results is also shown to be more complex when gender is considered. An early assessment of the role of gender was made by Hembree (1988, p.

31) in his comprehensive review of studies on test anxiety. He concluded that, although females experience higher test anxiety than males, it does not lower their performance. However, more recent research by Chapell et al. 2005, p.

272) showed the relationship between gender and anxiety to be more complex. They also found that females experienced higher test anxiety than males but, in addition, showed that females consistently scored higher Grade

Point Averages than males. Hence, when female undergraduate students only were considered, the level of their test anxiety did significantly impact on their Grade Point Averages, but because of the females' ability to score higher GPAs their results were better than for the males with similar levels of test anxiety. This difference in the impact of test anxiety is probably due to the fact that females tend to use more productive means of coping with high anxiety. Female anxiety was shown to be related to task orientation and preparation (Stber, 2004, Results section, Para.

3) both of which would help students to compensate for their high level of anxiety. On the other hand, males tended to favour avoidance coping as a means of dealing with anxiety. Clearly such behaviour would not be useful. It appears that when there is a reduction in performance as a result of test anxiety, it occurs mainly because of the presence of interfering thoughts.

There have been two main models to explain the impact of anxiety on examination results: the Deficit model and the Interference model. The Deficit model proposes that the anxiety itself is a result of some inadequate preparation, for example, in study habits or in test taking skills. The model thus suggests that it is the lack of skills which result in poorer examination results, rather than the anxiety which is merely a side issue (Tobias, 1990). The general view, however, is that the model is unsatisfactory. When students are taught study or test taking skills, the relation between test anxiety and lower performance still holds (Hembree, 1988, 74). Musch and Broder (1999, p.

108) also found that study habits had no impact on examination performance. Given these consistent findings over a considerable period of time, it is not surprising that the Interference model has gained support. It suggests that students have acquired the relevant knowledge but cannot recall it sufficiently well during an examination due to interfering thoughts which reduce the students' ability to focus on the examination tasks. It is accepted that such a model accounts for students' descriptions of 'freezing up' in an examination (Musch ; Broder, 1999, p. 105; Tobias, 1990). There is ample evidence to support this model.

Sarason (1984) used a number of experiments to examine the relationship and concluded that his Cognitive-Interference model explained what the experiments showed: that " the problem of anxiety is, to a significant extent, intrusive thoughts that interfere with task-focussed thinking" (p. 29). From a different direction, Hembree (1988, p. 4) provided support for the Interference model by noting that many studies show that techniques used to teach students ways of dealing with interfering thoughts, such as cognitive modification, lead to a positive impact on performance. Test anxiety is of special interest to educators and students. Certainly, many factors impact on examination performance.

As Zeidner (quoted in Chapell et al. 2005) noted " any reasonable model of school achievement needs to consider a wide array of factors scholastic abilities, study habits, school attitudes, self-perceptions and self-efficacy, student health, lassroom environment, opportunities for enrichment etc" (p. 273). Hence, test anxiety could be considered as just one of many issues surrounding examination performance. Yet, it is of special concern as it, <https://assignbuster.com/test-anxiety-causes-university-students-to-underperform-in-their-examinations/>

along with bias, is seen as one of the two “ primary problems inherent in the testing process” (Burns, 2004, p.

121) and so needs to be addressed in order to ensure fairness. This is particularly the case as test anxiety can have serious consequences, especially when a student is close to a pass grade. In this situation, test anxiety could reduce that student’s performance in an examination to a fail (Putwain, 2008, p. 028). The impact of anxiety on examinations has been very closely studied for a long time. There is general acceptance that debilitating anxiety negatively impacts examination performance slightly and that it does so via an interference mechanism in which task irrelevant thoughts undermine a student’s ability to recall previously learned material.

However, this essay also shows that not all examinations are impacted by anxiety. Test anxiety appears to have its greatest impact in difficult examinations and in earlier years of a degree programme. As well, not all students are equally affected. Female students have higher anxiety than male students, and while their examination scores are reduced, they are not as reduced as those of their male colleagues with lower anxiety. While the question of anxiety has been studied for many years it is still an important issue to consider as its presence does mean that a student’s knowledge is not fairly assessed during an examination.