



Prevalence of academic anxiety among research scholars in selected Universities of West Bengal

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Abstract

Academic anxiety among research scholars is becoming a growing concern in Indian higher education, but there is still very little solid evidence from West Bengal. This study aimed to understand how common academic anxiety is and whether there are any differences between male and female scholars. The research included 220 research scholars; 110 male and 110 female from three universities in West Bengal: the University of Calcutta, Vidyasagar University, and the University of Burdwan. Academic anxiety was measured using a standard questionnaire, with scores ranging from 11 to 44. Based on the scores, anxiety levels were classified as mild (15–20), moderate (21–29), or high (30–44). The results showed that 51.4% of the scholars had high academic anxiety, 35.0% had moderate anxiety, and only 13.6% had mild anxiety. Importantly, not a single scholar fell into the "not anxious" category. When looking at gender, a slightly higher percentage of female scholars (53.6%) reported high anxiety compared to male scholars (49.1%). However, a chi-square test showed that this difference was not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 0.546$, $p = 0.761$). In other words, gender did not play a significant role in determining anxiety levels. These findings make it clear that there is an urgent need for universities to provide mental health support and anxiety management programs for all research scholars, regardless of gender.

Keywords: Academic anxiety, research scholars, prevalence, mental health

Introduction

Doing a PhD is often seen as the highest point of formal education. It demands not just sharp thinking and hard work, but also a great deal of mental strength. Research scholars; the people who take on this journey; are involved in creating new knowledge, a process that comes with its own set of struggles, doubts, and high expectations. While the doctorate years are a time of intellectual growth and deep learning, they can also be a period of great vulnerability. Scholars often deal with financial instability, uncertain job prospects, tricky relationships with supervisors, and the heavy pressure to produce original, publishable research. In the middle of all these stressors, a very specific and common problem emerges: academic anxiety. Unlike general anxiety disorders, academic anxiety is the worry, fear, and physical stress that comes up specifically in educational or research settings (Zeidner, 1998) [23]. For research scholars, this anxiety is not just about exams; it touches every part of their academic life, from the early stage of shaping a research problem to the final defence of their thesis.

Understanding academic anxiety among research scholars is extremely important because it affects their personal well-being, the success of their institutions, and the larger world of research. High levels of anxiety have been repeatedly linked to negative outcomes like trouble concentrating, lower motivation, procrastination, and reduced research output (Cassady & Johnson, 2002; Hembree, 1988) [3, 13]. For the scholar, constant anxiety can grow into more serious mental health issues like depression and burnout, sometimes even leading them to leave the PhD program altogether. This loss of talent, time, and institutional resources is significant (Eisenberg *et al.*, 2007; Levecque *et al.*, 2017) [8, 16]. The anxiety experienced during doctoral training can also leave a lasting mark, affect a scholar's future career choices and possibly discourage them from staying in

academia (Golde, 2005) [11]. So, studying how common this anxiety is and what it looks like is an essential first step in creating targeted support for this important but vulnerable group.

Around the world, the mental health crisis in academia has been getting more attention. Studies from North America and Europe have reported very high levels of psychological distress among graduate students. A key study by Evans and colleagues (2018) [9] found that graduate students were six times more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety than the general population. Similarly, Levecque and colleagues (2017) [16] in Belgium found that PhD candidates are more than twice as likely to have mental health problems compared to highly educated people in the regular workforce, with one in three being at risk of a common psychiatric disorder. These findings have started a global discussion about the pressures within the academic system, pointing to issues like uncertain funding, the pressure to publish, and problematic relationships with supervisors (Woolston, 2019) [22]. The COVID-19 pandemic made things even worse, causing sudden disruptions in research, social isolation, and greater uncertainty, all of which led to a spike in anxiety and stress among early-career researchers (Byrom, 2020; Gewin, 2021) [10, 24].

In India, doctoral education comes with its own set of stressors that can make academic anxiety worse. India has one of the largest higher education systems in the world, and the number of research scholars is growing fast, thanks to national policies aimed at boosting research and innovation (University Grants Commission, 2016) [21]. But this growth has happened alongside systemic problems like large gaps in institutional resources, a high number of students per supervisor in many universities, and a cultural focus on hierarchy that can sometimes make open communication and good mentorship difficult (Agarwal & Sharma, 2019) [1]. Also, the socio-economic background of many Indian

research scholars; some of whom may be the first in their family to go to university or come from financially tight households; adds another layer of pressure. For them, completing the degree is not just a personal goal but also tied to family expectations and financial stability (Kumar & Radha, 2018) [15]. The pressure to publish in high-impact journals, a growing requirement for career progress, often comes without proper training or institutional support, adding to the anxiety (Dutta, 2020) [7].

West Bengal, a state with a rich intellectual and academic tradition, is an important place for this kind of study. With a dense network of universities; including historic ones like the University of Calcutta, Jadavpur University, and Rabindra Bharati University, as well as many state and private universities; West Bengal attracts a large number of research scholars from across the country. While these institutions have a proud legacy of academic excellence, they also face the broader systemic challenges affecting Indian higher education. Problems like inadequate infrastructure, bureaucratic delays, periodic academic disruptions due to political or social factors, and fierce competition for limited post-doctoral and faculty positions create a high-pressure environment for research scholars in the state (Chakraborty & Mukherjee, 2019; Ray & Ghosh, 2021) [5, 18]. Despite West Bengal's significant contribution to research, there is very little empirical research focused specifically on the mental health and academic anxiety of its doctoral students. Most studies in India have looked at undergraduate or postgraduate students, leaving a major gap in our understanding of the unique struggles faced by those at the highest level of academic training (Deb *et al.*, 2015; Srivastava *et al.*, 2021) [16, 19].

Significance of the study

This gap is concerning because the factors behind academic anxiety are many and depend heavily on context. They go beyond individual personality to include the broader academic environment. Key factors consistently mentioned in the literature include the quality of the relationship between the scholar and their supervisor; arguably the most important interpersonal factor in a PhD journey. A difficult relationship can become a major source of ongoing stress and anxiety (Ives & Rowley, 2005; Pyhältö *et al.*, 2012) [14, 17]. The pressure to publish, often measured through simple metrics, creates a constant feeling of urgency and fear of failure (Grove, 2017) [12]. In addition, financial insecurity, social isolation, and the lack of a clear career path all add to a deep sense of uncertainty that feeds anxiety (Castelló *et al.*, 2017; Stubb *et al.*, 2011) [4, 20]. How all these factors play out in the specific cultural and institutional setting of West Bengal's universities deserves a careful and systematic study.

With this in mind, the present study aims to fill this important gap by looking at how common academic anxiety is among research scholars in selected universities in West Bengal. Using a strong empirical approach, this research tries to go beyond scattered personal accounts and provide a clear, systematic picture of the scale of the issue. Ultimately, by shedding light on how widespread academic anxiety is, this paper aims to contribute to a larger

conversation about building a more humane, sustainable, and psychologically safe research culture in West Bengal and beyond.

Research Questions

1. What is the rate of prevalence of academic anxiety Among Research Scholars in Selected Universities of West Bengal?
2. Does gender cause variation in academic anxiety among research scholars in selected universities of West Bengal?

Objectives of the study

1. To study the rate of prevalence of academic anxiety Among Research Scholars in Selected Universities of West Bengal
2. To understand gender cause variation in academic anxiety among research scholars in selected universities of West Bengal.

Hypotheses of the study

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between categories of gender and levels of academic anxiety among Research Scholars in Selected Universities of West Bengal.

Method/s

To achieve the purpose of this study, the researcher used a quantitative descriptive survey method. Participants were selected using purposive sampling. The overall group of interest or the population; was all research scholars in some selected universities of west Bengal. From this larger group, a sample of 220 (110 male & 110 female) scholars were chosen from three (3) selected universities.

In this research, research scholars' academic anxiety was treated as the dependent variable, while their gender was treated as the independent variable. To collect the data, a bilingual version of the Academic Anxiety Scale was used. The original English version of this tool was developed by Cassady, J.C. in 2020 [24]. It was a four-point scale. Before using the adapted version of the questionnaire, the researcher carefully checked and confirmed that it was both reliable and valid for the study.

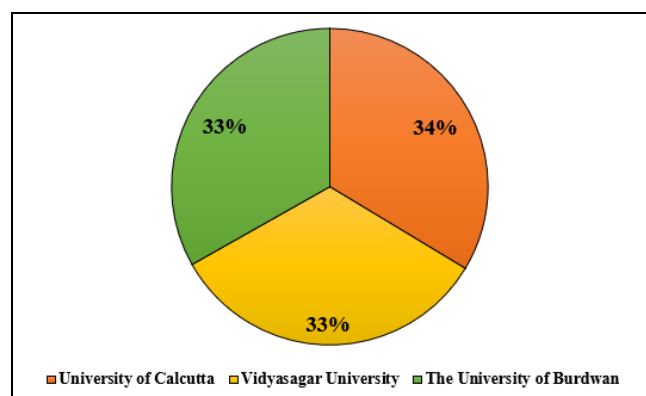


Fig 1: University wise sample distribution

Scoring Procedure

Level of Academic Anxiety	Score Range
Not Anxious	11 – 14
Mild Academic Anxiety	15 – 20
Moderate Academic Anxiety	21 – 29
High Academic Anxiety	30 – 44

Results

Table 1: Gender with Academic anxiety

Gender * Academic_Anxiety_Score Crosstabulation						
			Academic_Anxiety_Score			Total
			Mild Academic Anxiety	Moderate Academic Anxiety	High Academic Anxiety	
Gender	Male	Count	15	41	54	110
		% within Gender	13.6%	37.3%	49.1%	100.0%
		% within Academic_Anxiety_Score	50.0%	53.2%	47.8%	50.0%
		% of Total	6.8%	18.6%	24.5%	50.0%
	Female	Count	15	36	59	110
		% within Gender	13.6%	32.7%	53.6%	100.0%
		% within Academic_Anxiety_Score	50.0%	46.8%	52.2%	50.0%
		% of Total	6.8%	16.4%	26.8%	50.0%
Total	Count	30	77	113	220	
	% within Gender	13.6%	35.0%	51.4%	100.0%	
	% within Academic_Anxiety_Score	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	% of Total	13.6%	35.0%	51.4%	100.0%	

The table reveals that High Academic Anxiety is the most common issue among research scholars, with more than half - 51.4% of the total 220 participants; experiencing it. Looking at the overall numbers, 113 scholars (51.4%) reported High Academic Anxiety, followed by 77 scholars (35.0%) with Moderate Anxiety, and 30 scholars (13.6%) with Mild Anxiety. Interestingly, no scholar fell into the "Not Anxious" category. When we look at gender differences, a slightly higher percentage of female scholars (53.6%) reported High Academic Anxiety compared to male scholars (49.1%). On the other hand, a slightly higher percentage of male scholars (37.3%) fell into the Moderate Anxiety category, compared to their female peers (32.7%). The proportion of scholars with Mild Academic Anxiety was the same for both genders; 13.6% each.

Table 2: Chi-square table

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	0.546 ^a	2	0.761
Likelihood Ratio	.546	2	0.761
Linear-by-Linear Association	.223	1	0.637
N of Valid Cases	220		

The Pearson Chi-Square value is 0.546 with 2 degrees of freedom, and the p-value (Asymp. Sig.) is 0.761. Since the p-value (0.761) is greater than 0.05, researcher fail to reject the null hypothesis. The chi-square test of independence revealed no significant association between gender and academic anxiety levels, $\chi^2(2, N = 220) = 0.546, p = 0.761$.

Testing of H01: There is no significant relationship between categories of gender and levels of academic anxiety among Research Scholars in Selected Universities of West Bengal – *is failed to reject*.

In other words, the observed differences in anxiety levels between male and female scholars (reported in the crosstabulation) are likely due to chance and are not statistically meaningful.

Findings

1. The level of academic anxiety among research scholars in the selected universities of West Bengal is worryingly high. Most of them are dealing with moderate to severe anxiety. In fact, not a single scholar in the study fell into the "Not Anxious" category.
2. Although a slightly higher percentage of female scholars reported High Academic Anxiety compared to their male counterparts, the difference between the two groups was not statistically significant.

Educational Implications

a. Universities Must Set Up Proper Mental Health Support Systems Right Away

With more than 86% of research scholars experiencing moderate to high levels of academic anxiety and over half (51.4%) falling into the high anxiety category; it is clear that universities cannot afford to wait. They need to provide mental health services that are both affordable and easy to access. This should include regular counselling sessions, workshops on managing stress, and peer support groups designed specifically for research scholars. The fact that not a single scholar fell into the "Not Anxious" category shows that this is not just an individual problem but a systemic one. Institutions must step in and take responsibility, rather than leaving scholars to cope on their own.

b. Focus on Interventions That Work for Everyone, Regardless of Gender

Since the study found no significant difference in anxiety levels between male and female scholars, there is no need to create separate programs based on gender. Instead, universities should focus on universal support systems that benefit all scholars equally. This could include mandatory training for supervisors, more flexible submission deadlines, and structured mentorship programs that guide scholars through the research process. Such approaches ensure that everyone gets the help they need without unnecessary segregation.

c. Include Anxiety Management as a Regular Part of Doctoral Training

The high levels of academic anxiety point to a clear need for emotional resilience and stress management to be included in the formal training of research scholars. When new

scholars join a PhD program, their orientation should include sessions on how to recognise signs of anxiety, manage time effectively, build healthy relationships with supervisors, and know when and where to seek professional help. If we start having open, normal conversations about mental health from the very beginning of the doctoral journey, it can help reduce the shame or fear associated with seeking help. This, in turn, may encourage scholars to reach out earlier when they need support.

Conclusion

The study revealed that academic anxiety is very high among research scholars in West Bengal's universities. Over half (51.4%) are in the high anxiety category, and no one was found to be free of anxiety. This is a major concern. Female scholars had a slightly higher rate (53.6%) than males (49.1%), but the difference was not statistically meaningful. The findings make it clear that universities urgently need gender-neutral mental health support and should include anxiety management in their PhD training programs.

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