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Academic Efficacy, Test Preparation and Examination Anxiety among Working Class Students in Uganda

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***Abstract**: The study examined the relationship between academic self-efficacy, test preparation, and exam anxiety among working-class university students in Uganda. Specifically, it investigated the type of relationship among the variables, their joint contribution, and their relative influence on exam anxiety. Using a correlational design, data were collected from 177 working-class students selected through stratified random sampling. Standardized measures of exam anxiety, academic self-efficacy, and test preparation were administered, and data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, and multiple regression analyses with SPSS version 25. Findings revealed a significant negative relationship between academic self-efficacy and exam anxiety ($r = –0.277$, $p < .01$), while test preparation showed no significant direct correlation with exam anxiety ($r = 0.045$, $p > .05$). Jointly, academic self-efficacy and test preparation accounted for 18.9% of the variance in exam anxiety, $F(2,174) = 21.48$, $p < .01$. Relative contribution analysis showed that academic self-efficacy significantly reduced exam anxiety ($\beta = –0.634$, $p < .01$), while test preparation unexpectedly increased it ($\beta = 0.499$, $p < .01$). These findings suggest that self-efficacy serves as a protective factor against exam anxiety, whereas certain patterns of test preparation may heighten anxiety among working-class students. The study concludes that fostering academic self-efficacy may be more effective than emphasizing preparation alone in reducing exam-related stress. Recommendations are made for universities to integrate confidence-building interventions, balanced preparation strategies, and mental health support services for working-class students.*

Keywords: academic self-efficacy, test preparation, exam anxiety, working-class students, Uganda

Introduction

The navigation of academic pathways, particularly for students who must concurrently maintain employment, often results in unique and intense psychological pressure. This balance between survival associated with financial necessity, especially for those from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds and the demands of study creates an environment highly susceptible to examination anxiety. Examination anxiety is widely understood as the fear of tests and performance-evaluative situations. More broadly, it is a multidimensional phenomenon that can be described as a group of phenomenological, physiological, and behavioural responses accompanying concern about failure in evaluative scenarios (Roben Jr, 2025). Its key components often include worry, which involves cognitive concerns, and emotionality, which involves physical and affective arousal.

Students who experience high levels of examination anxiety often display specific characteristics, such as poorer study and test-taking habits compared to their low-anxiety peers. They may also demonstrate affective and cognitive manifestations, including anticipation of potential loss or harm, excessive worry, and avoidance-oriented cognitions and behaviours such as withdrawal of effort. Physically, students under pressure may bite their nails, shake, or sweat profusely. The consequences of examination anxiety are significant for academic outcomes. It can hamper the academic development of students and is strongly associated with poorer academic performance (Huang & Zeng, 2023). The worry dimension is often more strongly associated with examination anxiety than the emotionality dimension (Burcaș, S., & Crețu, 2021). Anxiety can also disrupt performance through psychological distress, negative feelings, and avoidance behaviours. A study analyzing student drawings revealed that 69% of students reported negative feelings when facing an important test, whereas only 8% reported positive feelings. A particularly strong fear for adolescents during exams is the fear of ridicule or social shaming.

Globally, examination anxiety is a major concern. A meta-analytic review of 53 studies involving university students found that examination anxiety was negatively associated with academic performance. In Africa, similar findings have emerged. At Makerere University in Uganda, researchers reported a statistically significant negative correlation between examination anxiety and academic

performance. Moreover, academic performance among the sampled students was generally moderate, with 55.3% falling into the second-class lower division (CGPA = 2.80–3.59). Research among secondary students in Uganda and Kenya suggests that environments with reduced stress are conducive to higher academic performance (Sserunkuuma, 2023). In Ethiopia, the relationship between examination anxiety and academic performance has also been established at Addis Ababa University Institute of Technology (Afework, 2023).

For working-class students, the challenges of academic life are compounded by the need to balance survival and study. Financial stress is widely recognized as undermining the well-being of college students (Chemagosi, 2024). Students from low SES backgrounds often experience difficulties that compromise educational achievement. Since SES is typically defined by parental income, parental education, and parental occupation (Hoff & Laursen, 2019), students working to support themselves frequently fall into this vulnerable category.

Previous research has investigated interventions to reduce examination anxiety, including psychological, educational, and pharmacological treatments (Agah et al., 2023; Sulaiman, 2024). These interventions often aim to alleviate examination anxiety and improve academic performance. Researchers have also examined factors influencing examination anxiety, such as perceived academic self-efficacy, fear of failure, and learning adjustment (Wu et al., 2022; Lin, 2025). Counseling programs are frequently advised to incorporate self-efficacy techniques, given their effectiveness in reducing examination anxiety (Jolodar Naseri & Marashian, 2025). However, the specific confluence of low SES, self-beliefs, and preparatory efforts in mitigating anxiety among working students requires focused attention. The transactional model of anxiety suggests that an individual's cognitive judgment about a stressful situation, and their perceived coping capability, is paramount.

In this regard, academic efficacy and test preparation emerge as critical factors. Academic self-efficacy refers to a student's belief in their ability to successfully execute academic tasks (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2022). It is also conceptualized as the student's expectation of success in achievement-related choices (Jansen et al., 2021). Students with high academic efficacy typically demonstrate greater confidence and higher expectations of success, which lead to better performance outcomes (Schunk, 2023), while students with low efficacy tend to suffer from high levels of examination anxiety (Kurnia et al., 2025). Low self-beliefs about academic capability may also increase the risk of examination malpractice. Importantly, research has shown that academic self-efficacy is negatively associated with examination anxiety (Berdida et al., 2025). For example, among undergraduate students in Eastern Nigeria, self-efficacy was found to be a significant positive predictor of academic performance variability (Ozuome et al., 2024).

Similarly, test preparation plays an essential role in shaping academic outcomes and levels of anxiety. Test preparation involves the systematic effort and learned behaviours that students employ to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for efficient performance on tests (Kubiszyn & Borich, 2024). Students who engage in effective preparation are typically familiar with exam formats, understand how to approach questions, and employ structured preparatory strategies. Conversely, students with poor preparation often exhibit deficient study and test-taking habits, leaving them more vulnerable to examination anxiety, which is often triggered by feelings of inadequate preparation (Chakraborty, 2023). Structured strategies such as the use of flashcards have been shown to improve test performance (Rachmadi et al., 2023). Patterns of preparation significantly influence anxiety, as deficiencies in study-related behaviours are closely linked to examination anxiety (Liu et al., 2024). Effective preparation, when perceived as useful by students (response efficacy) and when they feel competent to carry it out (self-efficacy), has been shown to reduce anxiety and improve performance (Lauermann & ten Hagen, 2021; Luo & Li, 2024). From the foregoing, these findings underscore the need to investigate the interplay between academic efficacy, test preparation, and examination anxiety among working-class students in Uganda. This focus is particularly important in contemporary higher education, where financial and academic pressures intersect in ways that may uniquely affect this group of learners.

Objective of the Study

The general objective of this study was to examine the relationship between academic self-efficacy, test preparation, and exam anxiety among working-class university students in Uganda.

Specific Objectives

1. To investigate the type of relationship between academic self-efficacy, test preparation, and exam anxiety among working-class university students in Uganda.
2. To determine the joint contribution of academic self-efficacy and test preparation to exam anxiety among working-class university students in Uganda.
3. To assess the relative contribution of academic self-efficacy and test preparation in predicting exam anxiety among working-class university students in Uganda.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

The study adopted a correlational design, which is appropriate for examining relationships between psychological constructs without manipulating variables (Akintayo et al., 2024). This design enabled the researcher to establish both the joint and relative contributions of academic self-efficacy and test preparation to exam anxiety among participants.

Participants

The participants consisted of working-class undergraduate students enrolled in selected Ugandan universities during the 2025 academic year. These students were engaged in part-time or full-time employment alongside their academic programs, which made them uniquely susceptible to academic stress and anxiety.

Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select universities with a significant proportion of working-class students, followed by stratified random sampling to ensure representation across faculties and years of study (Farenga, 2019). A total of **177** participants completed the survey.

Measures

1. *Exam Anxiety*: Exam anxiety was assessed using a standardized Exam Anxiety Scale, which measures cognitive, affective, and physiological symptoms of anxiety during examinations (Abbasi & Ghosh, 2020).
2. *Academic Self-Efficacy*: Academic self-efficacy was measured using the Academic Self-Efficacy Scale, which evaluates students' confidence in performing academic tasks successfully (Greco et al., 2022).
3. *Test Preparation*: Test preparation was assessed using a self-report Test Preparation Behavior Inventory adapted from study-skills literature (Hao et al., 2025).

All scales were pre-tested for validity and reliability among a pilot sample of Ugandan university students. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the scales ranged between 0.78 and 0.86, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

Method of Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 25)**.** Preliminary analyses included descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) to summarize the demographic and study variables. Pearson's product-moment correlation was employed to examine bivariate relationships among academic self-efficacy, test preparation, and exam anxiety (Mensah, 2023). Multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine both the joint and relative contributions of academic self-efficacy and test preparation in predicting exam anxiety. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Result

Three research questions were raised and analysed using pearsons product moment correlation and multiple linear regression.

Research Question 1: What type of relationship exist between academic self-efficacy, test preparation and exam anxiety among working class university students in Uganda?

Table 1: Multiple correlation summary of variables under investigation

Variables	Mean	St. dv	1	2	3
Exam anxiety	29.46	2.65	1.00		
Academic self-efficacy	22.50	6.82	-0.277**	1.00	
Test preparation	20.53	6.04	0.045	0.713**	**1.00**

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 1 reveals that there is a significant relationship between exam anxiety and academic self-efficacy ($r=-0.277$, $p<0.01$) while there is no significant relationship between exam anxiety and test preparation ($r=0.045$, $p>0.05$) among working class university students in Uganda. This implies that high influence of academic self-efficacy will increase exam anxiety among working class university students in Uganda.

Research Question 2: What is the joint contribution of academic self-efficacy and test preparation on exam anxiety among working class university students in Uganda?

Table 2: Regression summary showing joint contribution between Independent variables on the Dependent variable

R=0.445	**Adj R^2=0.189**
R^2=0.198	**Std error=2.382**

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	**Sig.**
Regression	243.95	2	121.98	21.48	**0.00**
Residual	987.98	174	5.68		
Total	1231.93	176			

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 2 reveals that there is a joint contribution of academic self-efficacy and test preparation to the prediction of exam anxiety among working class university students in Uganda. Regression coefficient R=0.445, R^2=0.198, Adj R^2=0.189. When the two factors are combined, they account for 18.9% variance in exam anxiety among working class university student in Uganda. However, the remaining percentage (81.1%) accounts for the change in working class university students' exam anxiety that are beyond this study. Therefore, academic self-efficacy and test preparation jointly predicted exam anxiety in working class university students in Uganda; $F(2,174)=21.48$, $p<0.01$.

Research Question 3: What is the relative contribution of academic self-efficacy and test preparation on exam anxiety among working class university students in Uganda.

Table 3: Multiple Regression summary showing relative contribution between academic self-efficacy and test preparation on exam anxiety

Model	**Unstandardized Coefficients**		**Standardized Coefficients**	**t**	**Sig.**
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	30.476	0.670		45.513	**0.00**
Academic self-efficacy	-0.244	0.037	-0.634	-6.521	**0.00**
Test preparation	0.217	0.042	0.499	5.130	**0.00**

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 3 reveals that the two factors (academic self-efficacy and test preparation) are significant predictors of exam anxiety among working class university students in Uganda. The most potent predictor of exam anxiety is test preparation (β=0.499, t=5.130, $p<0.01$) and academic self-efficacy (β = -0.634, t = -6.521, $p<0.01$). This implies that test preparation increases the likelihood of exam anxiety among working class university students in Uganda by 49.9% while academic self-efficacy will reduce exam anxiety by 63.4%

Discussion of Findings

The present study examined the relationships among academic self-efficacy, test preparation, and examination anxiety among working-class university students in Uganda. The findings provide important insights into how these psychological and behavioral variables interact within a context where students must simultaneously balance academic and financial demands.

For the first research question, the results revealed a significant negative relationship between academic self-efficacy and exam anxiety ($r = –.277$, $p < .01$). This implies that higher levels of self-efficacy are associated with lower levels of exam anxiety among working-class students. This finding aligns with prior research which consistently reports that academic self-efficacy is a protective factor against test anxiety (Liu et al., 2024; Nawawi, 2025). Wigfield and Eccles (2000) similarly argued that self-efficacy enhances motivation and coping, thereby reducing performance-related stress. In contrast, students with low self-efficacy often perceive exams as threatening, which elevates anxiety levels (Arora et al., 2021). Thus, the Ugandan context confirms the general theoretical position that academic efficacy functions as a buffer against anxiety, despite the added challenges of financial and work obligations.

Interestingly, test preparation showed no significant bivariate relationship with exam anxiety ($r = .045$, $p > .05$). This result diverges from earlier findings which suggest that poor preparation often exacerbates test anxiety (Golea, 2022; Kafle, 2025). One possible explanation is that working-class students may perceive preparation differently, often constrained by limited time and resources. As Asare (2021) argued, preparatory practices only influence anxiety when students perceive them as effective and when they feel confident in their ability to implement them (self-efficacy). In the present study, preparation alone may not have been sufficient to reduce anxiety unless paired with strong beliefs in one's academic capabilities.

The second research question assessed the joint contribution of academic self-efficacy and test preparation to exam anxiety. Findings indicated that these two factors jointly accounted for 18.9% of the variance in exam anxiety ($R^2 = .198$, Adj $R^2 = .189$, $F(2,174) = 21.48$, $p < .01$). This suggests that both academic self-beliefs and preparatory practices meaningfully predict anxiety, though other factors (81.1%) outside the scope of this study remain influential. These findings corroborate earlier studies indicating that test anxiety is a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by both cognitive appraisals (e.g., self-efficacy) and behavioral strategies (e.g., preparation), but also by other psychosocial factors such as fear of failure, peer pressure, and family expectations (Adefisayo, 2024; Kafle, 2025).

For the third research question, the relative contributions of academic self-efficacy and test preparation were examined. Results demonstrated that both factors significantly predicted exam anxiety, with test preparation showing a positive predictive effect ($\beta = .499$, $t = 5.130$, $p < .01$), while academic self-efficacy exhibited a negative predictive effect ($\beta = –.634$, $t = –6.521$, $p < .01$). These results are somewhat paradoxical: although preparation is traditionally assumed to mitigate anxiety (Golea, 2022; Hester, 2025), in this study it appeared to heighten anxiety. This contrast may be explained by the unique context of working-class students in Uganda. For these students, preparation may be stressful because it competes with work demands and financial responsibilities. Consequently, the very act of preparing for exams could increase stress and heighten anxiety levels. This interpretation is supported by Lee et al., (2021), who observed that financial strain often intensifies psychological distress among students, influencing how they approach academic tasks.

In contrast, academic self-efficacy remained a strong negative predictor of anxiety, consistent with the transactional model of stress and coping, which emphasizes that perceived coping ability strongly influences emotional responses to stress (Furman, 2018). This finding aligns with empirical evidence from other African contexts, where academic efficacy significantly predicts resilience against test anxiety (Manzini, 2024; Obeng et al., 2025).

Conclusion

The present study examined the relationships among academic self-efficacy, test preparation, and exam anxiety among working-class university students in Uganda. The findings revealed a significant negative relationship between academic self-efficacy and exam anxiety, indicating that students with stronger beliefs in their academic capabilities tend to experience lower levels of exam anxiety. In contrast, test preparation showed no significant direct correlation with exam anxiety, suggesting that preparation alone does not necessarily reduce exam-related stress.

However, when considered jointly, academic self-efficacy and test preparation significantly predicted exam anxiety, accounting for 18.9% of the variance. Notably, the relative contribution analysis showed that academic self-efficacy served as a protective factor, reducing exam anxiety, while test preparation unexpectedly increased exam anxiety levels. This highlights the complex dynamics between cognitive beliefs, behavioural preparation strategies, and emotional responses to examinations, especially within the working-class university student population in Uganda.

Recommendations

1. *Student Support Programs*: Universities should design interventions that focus on strengthening students' academic self-efficacy through workshops, peer mentoring, and counseling services. Building confidence in academic capabilities may buffer against exam anxiety.
2. *Balanced Test Preparation*: While test preparation remains important, students should be guided to adopt healthier study strategies that reduce pressure and avoid over-preparation, which may paradoxically heighten anxiety.

3. *Integration of Mental Health Services*: Institutions should integrate stress-management and anxiety-reduction programs into student support systems. Techniques such as mindfulness, relaxation training, and time management could be incorporated.
4. *Lecturer and Staff Training*: Academic staff should be trained to identify signs of exam anxiety among students and offer supportive guidance to build resilience and confidence in their academic pursuits.
5. *Policy Implications*: University administrators and policymakers should consider flexible assessment methods that accommodate the unique challenges of working-class students, thereby reducing exam-related pressures.
6. *Further Research*: Future studies should explore other psychological and socio-economic factors that may contribute to exam anxiety, given that 81.1% of the variance in this study was unexplained by the two predictors.

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