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Factors Contributing to Research-Related Anxiety among University Students: A Case of the University of Iringa, Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the factors contributing to research-related anxiety among university students at the University of Iringa, Tanzania. A mixed-methods approach using a convergent parallel research design was employed. The study involved 150 final-year students, comprising 90 undergraduate and 60 postgraduate students, together with 15 key informants drawn from research supervisors, research methods lecturers and university counsellors. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires and analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were obtained through focus group discussions and key informant interviews and analysed thematically. The findings identified four major factors contributing to research-related anxiety: research skills and academic competence, supervisory and institutional support, time management and workload pressure and resource and financial constraints. Supervisory and institutional support recorded the highest mean scores among both undergraduate ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.83$) and postgraduate ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.70$) students, followed by research skills and academic competence, time management and workload pressure and resource and financial constraints. Qualitative findings further indicated that delayed feedback, difficulties applying research methods, competing academic responsibilities, limited research materials, internet access and financial demands contributed to students' anxiety. The study concludes that research-related anxiety is multidimensional and requires attention to both students' research competencies and the academic environment in which research is undertaken. Universities should strengthen supervisory support, practical research training, time-management skills and access to research resources.

Keywords: Research-related anxiety; university students; research skills; supervisory support; workload pressure; research resources; University of Iringa; Tanzania.

1. Introduction

Research is a central component of university education because it enables students to develop analytical skills, generate knowledge and demonstrate their ability to apply theoretical concepts to real-world problems. However, the research process can also become a significant source of psychological pressure, particularly when students are required to formulate research topics, prepare proposals, collect and analyse data and present or defend their findings. Anxiety is generally associated with persistent worry, tension and apprehension that can interfere with concentration, decision-making and task performance (Liu et al., 2024). In university settings, these experiences may become particularly pronounced when academic demands are combined with uncertainty about expectations, limited competence and pressure to complete research within prescribed academic timelines. The consequences may extend beyond temporary discomfort, affecting students' motivation, confidence, academic engagement and overall educational experience (Pérez Jorge et al., 2025). The present study therefore focuses specifically on the factors that contribute to research-related anxiety among university students at the University of Iringa in Tanzania.

Research-related anxiety differs from general academic anxiety because it is closely connected to the demands and uncertainties of conducting academic research. Students may experience apprehension when selecting a research topic, developing a proposal, choosing appropriate research methods, obtaining data, analysing findings and writing the final report. Such anxiety may arise when students perceive themselves as insufficiently prepared to perform these tasks or are uncertain about the procedures and standards expected of them. Evidence in the study's background indicates that inadequate research competencies, limited methodological knowledge, fear of failure, time constraints, supervisory difficulties and insufficient institutional support are among the conditions associated with research-related anxiety. Students who have limited exposure to research design and methodology may, for example, find proposal development particularly difficult, which can result in avoidance of research activities and reduced engagement with academic tasks (Mubofu & Kitili, 2024).

The problem is not confined to students' individual abilities. The institutional environment in which research is undertaken can either reduce or intensify the pressure associated with research. Supervisory engagement, the timeliness of feedback, availability of research resources and the efficiency of administrative procedures are important aspects of students' research experiences. Where students receive inadequate guidance, experience delays in

obtaining feedback or encounter difficulties accessing the resources required for their research, uncertainty may increase and confidence may decline. Previous evidence cited in the study associates inadequate supervisory engagement, delayed feedback, limited research resources and administrative barriers with increased research-related stress among university students (Diabat & Bellibaş, 2025). This suggests that research-related anxiety should not be understood solely as an individual psychological problem; it can also reflect weaknesses in the academic and institutional conditions surrounding the research process.

The issue assumes additional importance in African higher education institutions, where students may undertake research within environments characterised by limited research funding, inadequate infrastructure and constrained academic support. The study notes that such institutional limitations can undermine students' research experiences and restrict access to effective mentorship and research resources (African Union, 2020). At the same time, initiatives that strengthen research skills, critical thinking and problem-based learning demonstrate that institutional investment in students' research capacity can improve their competence and confidence (Swaniker, 2019). The implication is that students' anxiety cannot be separated from the quality of preparation and support provided by universities. Understanding the specific factors responsible for anxiety is therefore necessary before appropriate academic and institutional interventions can be designed.

In Tanzania, the available evidence points to similar concerns. Students may struggle with research because of limited research skills, inadequate academic guidance and insufficient institutional support. Research conducted at Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy, for example, found research-writing anxiety among social science undergraduate students associated with unfamiliarity with research processes, inadequate supervisory support and time-related pressures (Mubofu & Kitali, 2024). Evidence from other Tanzanian universities has also indicated the presence of mental distress and anxiety symptoms among undergraduate students, suggesting that psychological pressures within higher education may interact with the demands of academic work (Rweyemamu et al., 2024). These findings provide an important national context, but they do not sufficiently explain how research-specific academic, personal and institutional conditions combine to produce anxiety among students undertaking research.

Despite growing recognition of research-related anxiety as a concern in higher education, limited empirical evidence explains the specific factors that contribute to this problem among university students in Tanzania. Existing studies have identified issues such as inadequate research skills, unfamiliarity with research procedures, limited supervisory support and time pressure, but evidence remains limited regarding how these factors are experienced within particular university contexts. At the University of Iringa, concerns relating to research approval procedures, interaction with supervisors and access to research support have been identified, but their contribution to students' research-related anxiety has not been systematically examined. This study therefore examined the factors contributing to research-related anxiety among university students at the University of Iringa, Tanzania, focusing on the academic, personal and institutional conditions that shape students' experiences during the research process.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study is guided primarily by Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory, which explains how individuals' beliefs about their ability to perform particular tasks influence their motivation, effort, persistence, behaviour and emotional responses (Bandura, 1997). In the context of university research, students who have confidence in their ability to select a research topic, develop a proposal, apply appropriate research methods, analyse data and write a research report are more likely to approach these tasks with greater confidence and persistence. In contrast, students who perceive themselves as lacking the knowledge and skills required to conduct research may experience greater uncertainty, avoidance and anxiety when undertaking research tasks. Bandura (1997) further explains that perceived self-efficacy influences how individuals interpret challenging tasks and their capacity to manage emotional reactions associated with such tasks. This perspective is particularly relevant to research-related anxiety because inadequate research skills, limited methodological knowledge and lack of previous research experience may weaken students' confidence in their research capabilities. Empirical evidence also supports this relationship, as Mensah et al. (2023) found that research anxiety is negatively associated with students' self-beliefs, while research self-efficacy is associated with students' engagement and effort in research-related learning. Therefore, Self-Efficacy Theory provides a useful framework for understanding how students' perceptions of their research competence may contribute to research-related anxiety.

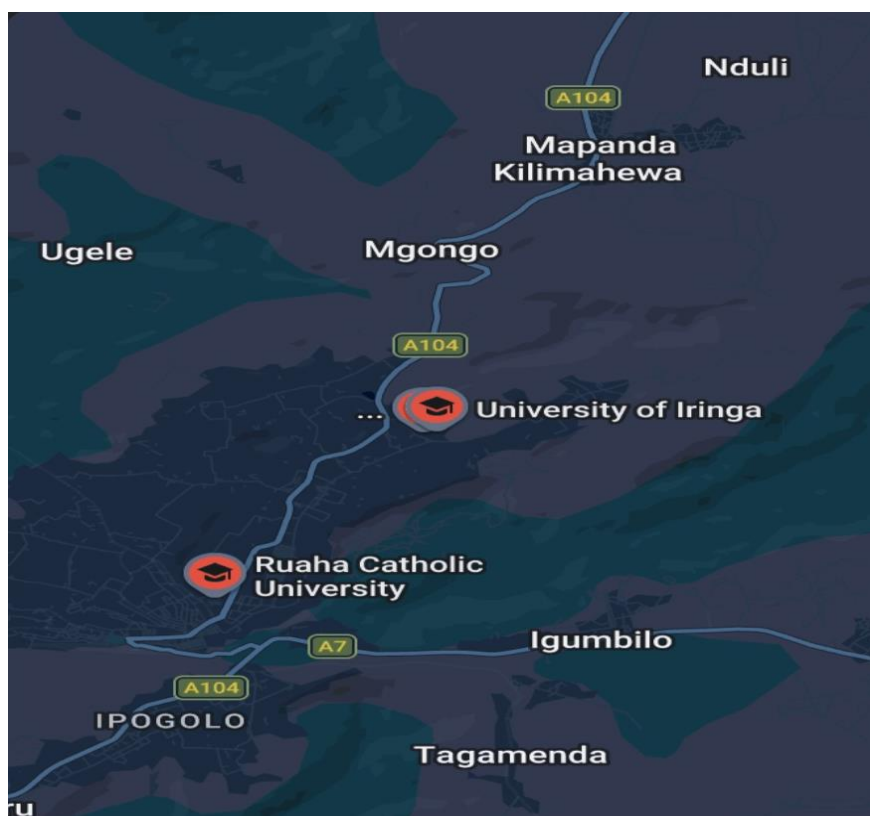
2.2 Empirical Literature Review

Empirical studies show that research-related anxiety is associated with students' research skills and academic competence, supervisory and institutional support, time management and workload pressure and resource and financial constraints. Mensah et al. (2023) found that research self-efficacy was significantly related to research methods anxiety, while Uçar et al. (2023) reported a relationship between students' research self-efficacy and research anxiety. In Tanzania, Mubofu and Kitali (2024) found that inadequate research writing skills, difficulties in understanding research requirements and time constraints contributed to research writing anxiety among social science students. Studies on supervision also indicate that effective guidance, constructive feedback and regular interaction are important for students' research experiences, whereas inadequate support may increase uncertainty and stress (Anttila et al., 2024). In addition, limited research resources, including academic materials, internet access and financial support, may create further difficulties in completing research activities. Despite these findings, existing studies have largely examined individual factors or specific student groups, with limited evidence examining these factors together among both undergraduate and postgraduate students in Tanzanian universities. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by examining the factors contributing to research-related anxiety among students at the University of Iringa.

3. Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods approach using a convergent parallel research design to examine factors contributing to research-related anxiety among university students at the University of Iringa, Tanzania. The study involved 150 final-year undergraduate and postgraduate students, comprising 90 undergraduate and 60 postgraduate students and 15 key informants, including research supervisors, research methods lecturers and university counsellors. Students for the questionnaire were selected through stratified and simple random sampling, while key informants were purposively selected based on their direct involvement in student research and support. Qualitative data were obtained through focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews. For the FGDs, participants were selected from the student population to ensure representation of students from different levels and academic programmes. The FGDs were conducted in a setting that allowed participants to freely discuss their experiences of research-related anxiety, including challenges associated with research skills, supervision, workload and research resources. The qualitative component comprised 15 key informants selected purposively based on their direct involvement in teaching, supervising and supporting student research activities. Each discussion was guided by semi-structured questions and facilitated by the researcher, with responses recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. During qualitative analysis, transcripts were reviewed systematically, relevant statements were coded according to emerging meanings and grouped into themes corresponding to the study objectives. Quotations used in reporting the findings were identified using participant codes rather than names, such as FGD Participant, Education Programme, 2026, as reflected in the study's findings. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their participation was treated confidentially; personal identifiers were excluded from the reporting of findings. Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires and analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations, while qualitative data from FGDs, interviews and open-ended responses were analysed thematically. Documentary review was also used to complement the primary data and strengthen triangulation. The integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence enabled the study to compare students' reported experiences with the perspectives of academic and support staff, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of factors contributing to research-related anxiety at the University of Iringa.

Figure 1: Location of Iringa University on Iringa Region Map



4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Factors Contributing to Research-Related Anxiety

The second objective of the study sought to identify the factors contributing to research-related anxiety among university students at the University of Iringa. The findings from the questionnaire, focus group discussions, key informant interviews and document review identified four main categories of contributing factors: research skills and academic competence, supervisory and institutional support, time management and workload pressure and

resource availability and financial constraints. The quantitative findings were assessed using mean scores and standard deviations, with higher mean scores indicating stronger agreement that the respective factor contributed to research-related anxiety.

Table 1: Factors Contributing to Research-Related Anxiety among Students

Factor category	Undergraduate Mean	SD	Postgraduate Mean	SD
Research Skills and Academic Competence	4.14	0.81	4.35	0.70
Supervisory and Institutional Support	4.15	0.83	4.38	0.70
Time Management and Workload Pressure	4.14	0.81	4.31	0.72
Resource and Financial Constraints	4.13	0.87	4.27	0.76

Source: Field data (2026).

The results show that supervisory and institutional support recorded the highest mean score, with 4.15 (SD = 0.83) among undergraduate students and 4.38 (SD = 0.70) among postgraduate students. This indicates that inadequate guidance from supervisors, delayed feedback and limited institutional support were particularly important contributors to students' research-related anxiety. The qualitative findings reinforce this result. One student explained, "Sometimes you submit your work and wait too long for feedback, which makes you feel stuck and stressed" (FGD Participant, Journalism Programme, 2026). Another student stated, "When you are not sure whether you are on the right track and your supervisor is unavailable, you become worried about the quality of your work" (FGD Participant, Counselling Psychology Programme, 2026). Key informant evidence also pointed to supervisory workload and delayed feedback. One supervisor noted, "Students are capable, but supervision becomes difficult when lecturers have many supervisees. Delays in feedback are sometimes unavoidable and this can increase students' anxiety" (Key Informant Interview, Supervisor 5, 2026). Document review further identified variations in consultation frequency and feedback timelines.

Research skills and academic competence constituted another important contributor. The category recorded a mean of 4.14 (SD = 0.81) among undergraduate students and 4.35 (SD = 0.70) among postgraduate students. The findings show that limited research skills, inadequate academic writing experience, difficulties in understanding research methodologies and fear of making mistakes were strongly associated with students' anxiety. One undergraduate participant explained, "We are taught theory in class, but when it comes to writing a proposal, many of us struggle to organize ideas properly" (FGD Participant, Community Development Programme, 2026). Another student stated, "Understanding research methodology is difficult because there are many concepts and procedures that seem confusing when you start conducting your own study" (FGD Participant, Education Programme, 2026). A research methods lecturer similarly observed, "Many students understand research concepts theoretically, but they experience difficulties when applying them in actual research situations. This often creates anxiety, especially during proposal development and data analysis" (Key Informant Interview, Lecturer 3, 2026). These findings indicate that students' difficulties were not limited to understanding research concepts but also involved applying those concepts to actual research tasks.

Time management and workload pressure also emerged as a significant factor. The mean score was 4.14 (SD = 0.81) for undergraduate students and 4.31 (SD = 0.72) for postgraduate students. These results indicate strong agreement that limited time, competing responsibilities and difficulties in managing research activities contributed to anxiety. The qualitative findings provide a clear explanation of this pressure. An undergraduate participant stated, "You have lectures, assignments, exams and research at the same time. It becomes overwhelming, especially near deadlines" (FGD Participant, Mission and Theology Programme, 2026). A postgraduate participant added, "Most of us are balancing research with work and family responsibilities, so managing time becomes very difficult" (FGD Participant, Business and Economics Programme, 2026). A lecturer also explained, "Students often postpone research activities because of competing academic demands, but this creates panic when submission deadlines approach" (Key Informant Interview, Lecturer 1, 2026). These accounts show that anxiety was linked both to the amount of work students had to manage and to their ability to allocate sufficient time to different stages of research.

Resource availability and financial constraints recorded the lowest of the four category means, but the scores remained high: 4.13 (SD = 0.87) among undergraduate students and 4.27 (SD = 0.76) among postgraduate students. Thus, although this factor ranked below the other three categories, students still strongly agreed that limited research materials, internet access and financial resources contributed to their anxiety. One student stated, "Sometimes you want to read articles, but access is limited or the internet is not stable, so it becomes stressful" (FGD Participant, Science and IT Programme, 2026). Another explained, "Data collection requires transport, printing and internet bundles, which can be expensive for some students" (FGD Participant, Community Development Programme, 2026). A supervisor further noted, "Financial limitations affect students' ability to conduct fieldwork, print drafts and access online materials, especially for those undertaking extensive research projects" (Key Informant Interview, Supervisor 3, 2026). The document review also identified limitations in access to some subscription-based databases and occasional internet connectivity challenges.

4.2 Integrated Findings

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that research-related anxiety among students at the University of Iringa is associated with both student-related academic difficulties and conditions within the research environment. Supervisory and institutional support was the strongest reported factor, followed by research skills and academic competence, time management and workload pressure and resource and financial constraints. Importantly, all four categories recorded mean scores above 4.00 for both undergraduate and postgraduate students, indicating strong agreement that each contributes to

research-related anxiety. Postgraduate students recorded higher mean scores than undergraduate students across all four categories. The convergence of questionnaire findings with evidence from FGDs, key informant interviews and document review strengthens the conclusion that research-related anxiety is not attributable to a single cause but arises from several conditions surrounding the research process.

5. Discussion of Findings

The findings indicate that research skills and academic competence, supervisory and institutional support, time management and workload pressure and resource and financial constraints were important contributors to research-related anxiety among students at the University of Iringa. Research skills and academic competence recorded mean scores of 4.14 (SD = 0.81) for undergraduates and 4.35 (SD = 0.70) for postgraduates, suggesting that difficulties in research methodology, academic writing and data analysis may reduce students' confidence and increase anxiety, consistent with Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1997) and findings by Mensah et al. (2023) and Uçar et al. (2023). Supervisory and institutional support emerged as the strongest factor, with means of 4.15 (SD = 0.83) and 4.38 (SD = 0.70) for undergraduates and postgraduates, respectively, with qualitative evidence indicating that delayed feedback and limited access to supervisors increased uncertainty and stress. Time management and workload pressure also contributed substantially, recording means of 4.14 (SD = 0.81) and 4.31 (SD = 0.72), as students reported difficulties balancing research with other academic and personal responsibilities. Resource and financial constraints recorded means of 4.13 (SD = 0.87) and 4.27 (SD = 0.76), indicating that limited access to research materials, internet services and funds for research activities added to students' difficulties. Overall, the findings show that research-related anxiety is multidimensional, arising from the interaction of students' research competence with supervisory, workload and resource conditions; therefore, reducing anxiety requires strengthening practical research training, improving supervisory responsiveness, supporting effective time management and ensuring adequate access to research resources.

6. Summary of the Study

The study investigated factors contributing to research-related anxiety among university students at the University of Iringa, Tanzania, using a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative and qualitative data. The findings showed that research-related anxiety was associated mainly with inadequate research skills and academic competence, inadequate supervisory and institutional support, time management and workload pressure and limited research resources and financial constraints. Among these factors, supervisory and institutional support emerged as the most prominent, followed by research skills and academic competence, time management and workload pressure and resource and financial constraints. The findings further showed that these challenges were experienced by both undergraduate and postgraduate students, with postgraduate students generally reporting higher mean scores across the factor categories.

7. Conclusion

The study concludes that research-related anxiety among university students is substantially influenced by four interrelated factors: supervisory and institutional support, research skills and academic competence, time management and workload pressure and resource and financial constraints. Among these factors, supervisory and institutional support emerged as particularly prominent, indicating that the availability, accessibility and timeliness of academic guidance are important in shaping students' research experiences. Research skills and academic competence also contribute to anxiety when students lack sufficient knowledge and confidence in developing proposals, applying research methods, analysing data and preparing research reports. In addition, time management and workload pressure increase anxiety when students have to balance research activities with other academic and personal responsibilities. Finally, resource and financial constraints, including difficulties in accessing research materials, internet services, transportation and other research-related requirements, further increase students' anxiety. Overall, the findings indicate that addressing research-related anxiety requires attention not only to students' research competencies but also to the supervisory, institutional, time-related and resource conditions within which research is undertaken.

8. Recommendation

The University of Iringa and other higher learning institutions should strengthen research supervision and institutional research support by establishing clear supervision and feedback timelines, improving supervisor-student communication, expanding practical research-methodology and academic-writing training and improving students' access to research materials, online databases and reliable internet services. These measures should be complemented by support for students' time-management and research-planning skills so that the major academic, supervisory and resource-related factors identified in the study can be addressed systematically.

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