
Academic Anxiety Among First Year Students Living Away From Home During the Transition to Higher Education

Nining Maizura^{1*}, Parid Rilo Pambudi², Khairul Bariyyah³, Laily Tiarani Soejanto⁴, Santy Andrianie⁵, Henny Indreswari⁶

¹ Department of Guidance and Counseling, Faculty of Education, Universitas Negeri Malang, Malang, East Java, Indonesia.

Email: nining.maizura.fip@um.ac.id

² Study Program of Islamic Guidance and Counseling, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universitas Islam Balitar, Blitar, East Java, Indonesia.

Email: paridrilopambudi@unisbablitar.ac.id

³ Department of Guidance and Counseling, Faculty of Education, Universitas Negeri Malang, Malang, East Java, Indonesia.

Email: khairul.bariyyah.fip@um.ac.id

⁴ Study Program of Guidance and Counseling, Faculty of Education, Universitas PGRI Kanjuruhan Malang, Malang, East Java, Indonesia.

Email: lailytiarani@unikama.ac.id

⁵ Study Program of Guidance and Counseling, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Central Java, Indonesia.

Email: santy.andrianie@staff.uns.ac.id

⁶ Department of Guidance and Counseling, Faculty of Education, Universitas Negeri Malang, Malang, East Java, Indonesia.

Email: henny.indreswari.fip@um.ac.id

*Corresponding Author

Email: nining.maizura.fip@um.ac.id

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Abstract

Academic anxiety is an important concern among first-year university students, particularly those living away from home, as they must simultaneously adapt to academic demands and the challenges of independent living. This study aimed to describe the level of academic anxiety among first-year university students living away from home during the transition to higher education. A descriptive quantitative approach was employed, involving 2,695 first-year undergraduate students selected through purposive sampling based on predetermined inclusion criteria. Data were collected using an 18-item Academic Anxiety instrument measured on a five-point Likert scale. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, mean, standard deviation, median, quartiles, and score categorization. The results showed that the mean academic anxiety score was 55.12 (SD = 11.01), with an overall mean item score of 3.06. Most participants experienced moderate levels of academic anxiety, comprising 2,083 students (77.29%), while 350 students (12.99%) were categorized as having high academic anxiety and 262 students (9.72%) as having low academic anxiety. These findings indicate that academic anxiety is a relatively

common experience among first-year students living away from home during the transition to higher education. Although most students experienced anxiety at a moderate level, the proportion of students with high academic anxiety warrants preventive attention. Higher education institutions should provide responsive academic, psychosocial, and guidance and counseling support to help first-year students adapt more effectively to academic demands and independent living.

Keywords: academic anxiety; first-year students; students living away from home; transition to higher education; guidance and counselling.



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Introduction

Academic anxiety has become an important psychological concern in higher education because it is directly associated with students' learning processes, academic performance, and mental well-being. The increasingly competitive educational landscape, high academic achievement demands, and growing pressure to demonstrate optimal performance place university students in situations that make them particularly vulnerable to psychological distress (Adni dkk., 2024; Auliaunissa dkk., 2025; Evans dkk., 2018; Luthar dkk., 2020). In this context, academic anxiety can no longer be understood merely as a temporary response experienced before examinations. Rather, it represents a psychological experience that may arise throughout the learning process, including when students are dealing with assignments, presentations, classroom discussions, academic evaluations, and the preparation of scholarly work (Loveday, 2018; Nur, 2025; Revesai, 2025; Wilda, 2025).

Academic anxiety refers to an emotional state characterized by worry, fear of failure, psychological pressure, and a perceived inability to manage academic demands (Putwain dkk., 2021). This condition arises when students perceive academic tasks as threats to their success, self-esteem, or academic future. Thus, academic anxiety is shaped not only by the objective level of academic demands but also by how students interpret, manage, and respond to the learning demands they encounter (Hasty dkk., 2021). This perspective suggests that academic anxiety is a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing psychological, cognitive, social, and learning-related dimensions.

The increasing prevalence of anxiety among late adolescents and university students has become a growing concern in global mental health research. (Chi dkk., 2023) Evidence indicates that anxiety among adolescents has increased significantly and has emerged as one of the most prominent psychological concerns. Data from the World Health Organization, as cited by (Auerbach dkk., 2018) Evidence also suggests that approximately one-third of the late-adolescent population experiences anxiety symptoms of varying severity, ranging from mild to severe. In the context of higher education, this condition indicates that university students are in a vulnerable developmental stage, as they must adapt to academic demands, greater learning autonomy, social pressures, and increasingly high expectations for achievement.

In Indonesia, academic anxiety has also emerged as a significant concern. This is supported by research conducted by (Nabila dkk., 2023) Evidence indicates that more than 50% of university students experience moderate to high levels of academic anxiety. Such anxiety does not arise only in evaluative situations, such as examinations, but may also persist throughout the learning process, including when students are required to complete assignments, participate in discussions, deliver presentations, and prepare academic papers (Ananda & Surawan, 2025). This finding indicates that academic anxiety is both

situational and persistent, and therefore should be understood as an integral part of students' learning dynamics in higher education.

Academic anxiety becomes increasingly complex when experienced by first-year students who are living away from home (Ardi dkk., 2025). During the early stages of university life, students living away from home face dual demands: adapting to the academic system of higher education while simultaneously adjusting to a new social environment and managing daily life away from their families. Emotional distance from parents, limited access to immediate social support, homesickness, differences in academic culture, and the demands of independent living may further intensify students' psychological distress. In this situation, academic anxiety is triggered not only by assignments, examinations, or academic achievement, but also by feelings of insecurity, fear of falling behind, difficulties in establishing new social relationships, and concerns about being unable to meet family expectations. Therefore, the experience of first-year students living away from home constitutes an important context for understanding academic anxiety in higher education, particularly because academic adaptation and personal-social adjustment occur simultaneously.

The impact of academic anxiety is not limited to emotional aspects but also affects students' cognitive functioning and learning behaviors. Students with high levels of academic anxiety tend to experience impaired concentration, difficulties in understanding course material, a reduced ability to retain information, and challenges in making academic decisions (Chew & Cerbin, 2021; Putri dkk., 2025; Syafii dkk., 2024; Vasiou dkk., 2025). Theoretically, this condition can be explained through cognitive interference theory, which posits that anxiety disrupts working memory capacity, thereby preventing students from processing information optimally. Consequently, academic anxiety may reduce learning effectiveness and negatively affect students' academic achievement.

In the long term, untreated academic anxiety may develop into more serious psychological problems, such as academic burnout, decreased learning motivation, and depression (Menacho-Rivera dkk., 2025; Simarmata dkk., 2023). This condition indicates that academic anxiety is associated not only with academic performance but also with students' overall psychological well-being (Conley dkk., 2017; Cruz dkk., 2026; Utami dkk., 2025). Therefore, academic anxiety should be addressed as a preventive concern within mental health and guidance and counseling services in higher education, rather than being viewed merely as an individual problem arising from students' limited ability to cope with academic demands.

Conceptually, academic anxiety does not arise from a single factor but rather from the interaction between psychological and learning-related factors (Han dkk., 2024; Scandurra dkk., 2024). Psychological factors, such as academic self-efficacy, perceived academic pressure, emotion regulation, resilience, and fear of failure, can influence how students appraise academic demands (Hernández dkk., 2019; Shengyao dkk., 2024). Students with low academic self-efficacy, difficulties in regulating their emotions, or a tendency to perceive failure as a major threat are more vulnerable to experiencing anxiety when faced with academic tasks (Ozdemir & Papi, 2022; Zeb dkk., 2025). Conversely, students with strong self-efficacy, self-regulation, and resilience tend to be better able to cope adaptively with academic pressure (Fullerton dkk., 2021).

In addition to psychological factors, learning-related factors also play an important role in shaping academic anxiety. Heavy workloads, continuous assessment practices, the quality of learning interactions, student engagement, self-regulated learning, and pressures associated with digital learning may either intensify or alleviate students' anxiety (Edisherashvili dkk., 2022). The development of digital technology

in higher education has also created new sources of pressure, such as the expectation to remain constantly connected, information overload, and increasingly blurred boundaries between study time and rest (Erlam dkk., 2021; Sundgren, 2017). This condition may lead to prolonged mental exhaustion when students lack adequate learning strategies and psychological recovery mechanisms.

Although academic anxiety has been widely studied, most previous research has focused on examining relationships among variables in isolation. Several studies have investigated academic anxiety in relation to academic pressure, learning motivation, self-efficacy, or the learning environment separately (Oliveira dkk., 2021; Rof dkk., 2022). Although this approach provides important insights, it does not fully explain how psychological and learning-related factors operate simultaneously in shaping students' academic anxiety (Li dkk., 2025; Nwoye dkk., 2026). In other words, a model is still needed that can more comprehensively explain both the direct and indirect relationships among the variables influencing academic anxiety.

Another limitation is the scarcity of studies that have developed predictive structural models of academic anxiety within the context of Indonesian higher education (Ampuni dkk., 2020; Hamka dkk., 2025). However, sociocultural context, family expectations, a culture of academic competition, and the characteristics of learning systems in Indonesian higher education may shape the experience of academic anxiety in distinctive ways (Permatasari dkk., 2025). Therefore, findings derived from global contexts should be generalized to local settings with caution. Structural modelling research is needed to understand the mechanisms underlying the relationships among psychological factors, learning-related factors, and students' academic anxiety within the context of Indonesian higher education (Alhadihaq dkk., 2024; Wijaya dkk., 2023).

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on academic anxiety among first-year university students living away from home within the context of higher education. Unlike previous studies, which have generally examined academic anxiety among university students in broad terms, this study positions the experience of living away from home as an important context that can enrich the understanding of academic anxiety during the initial transition to university life. First-year students living away from home face not only academic demands, such as assignments, examinations, presentations, and adjustments to new learning patterns, but also personal and social challenges, including separation from family, limited access to direct support, difficulties in establishing new relationships, homesickness, and the demands of independent living. Accordingly, this study contributes to portraying academic anxiety as an experience that is associated not only with the learning process but also with first-year students' adjustment to a new social and academic environment.

Based on the preceding discussion, this study aims to describe the academic anxiety experienced by first-year university students living away from home. The study focuses on how academic anxiety emerges during the initial adjustment to university life, when students must cope with academic demands while simultaneously adapting to a new life away from their families. The findings are expected to provide empirical evidence regarding the forms, levels, and contexts of academic anxiety among first-year students living away from home. This evidence may serve as a basis for higher education institutions to design guidance and counseling services, first-year student support programs, and psychosocial support strategies that are more responsive to the needs of students living away from home.

Research Method

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative approach using a descriptive research design to examine academic anxiety among first-year university students living away from their families during the transition to higher education (Priadana & Sunarsi, 2021). A descriptive quantitative approach was considered appropriate because the study did not aim to test causal relationships among variables or evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention. Instead, it sought to provide an empirical description of the levels, forms, and contextual characteristics of academic anxiety experienced by first-year students. In this context, first-year students must adapt not only to the academic demands of higher education but also to independent living away from their families.

The study focused on mapping students' academic anxiety across several domains, including anxiety related to academic assignments, participation in classroom learning, examinations, presentations, adjustment to new learning practices, and perceived academic pressure. The study also documented relevant demographic and contextual characteristics, such as gender, age, study program, region of origin, current place of residence, distance from family, and length of time living away from home. These variables were included to provide a more comprehensive profile of academic anxiety among first-year students during the initial transition to higher.

Research Participants

The participants in this study were first-year undergraduate students who lived away from home to pursue higher education. The target population comprised first-year students who had moved from their family homes to another city or region to attend university. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the compatibility of their characteristics with the objectives of the study.

The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) being enrolled as a first-year undergraduate student; (2) living away from parents or family during the study period; (3) having completed at least one semester of academic activities at the university; (4) being willing to participate voluntarily in the study; and (5) completing the research questionnaire in full. Students were excluded if they were not in their first year of study, lived with their parents or immediate family during their studies, or provided incomplete responses. The demographic information collected included gender, age, faculty or field of study, region of origin, current residential location, type of accommodation, distance between the family home and the university, and frequency of returning home.

Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Participants' demographic characteristics were collected to provide a clear contextual profile of first-year students living away from home. These characteristics are important because academic anxiety among first-year students is shaped not only by academic demands but also by social adjustment, emotional distance from family, financial independence, the development of new peer relationships, and adaptation to a new living environment.

Tabel 1. Karakteristik Demografis

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	975	36,18%
	Female	1720	63,82%
Age	17 Years	365	13,54%
	18 Years	1534	56,92%
	19 Years	651	24,16%
	20 Years	145	5,38%
Field of Study	Education	1168	43,34%

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
	Social Sciences and Humanities	754	27,98%
	Science and Technology	514	19,07%
	Health Science	259	9,61%
Region of Origin	Same province as the university	1052	39,04%
	Different Province	1196	44,38%
	Different island or region	447	16,59%
Current Place of Residence	Boarding house rented room	1598	59,29%
	Dormitory	512	19,00%
	Shared house with friends	381	14,14%
	Relative's house	204	7,57%
Distance from Family Home	Less than 50 km	453	16,81%
	50 – 200 km	1047	38,85%
	More than 200 km	1195	44,34%
	Every week	369	13,69%
	Every month	948	35,18%
	Once per semester	756	28,05%
	Rarely or only during holidays	622	23,08%
	Less than 6 moths	384	14,25%
	6 – 12 months	1912	70,95%
	More than 12 months	399	14,81%

Instrument

Data were collected using the 18-item Academic Anxiety instrument. This instrument was used to assess students' academic anxiety within the context of higher education, particularly among first-year students living away from home. In general, the instrument represents students' anxious responses to learning demands, academic pressure, task completion, preparedness for attending classes, academic evaluation, and adjustment to the learning process in higher education.

Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5. Higher scores indicated higher levels of academic anxiety. A total score was calculated by summing the responses to all 18 items, resulting in a possible score range of 18 to 90. In addition to the total score, a mean score was calculated to describe each respondent's overall tendency toward academic anxiety across all items.

Academic anxiety levels were categorized according to respondents' total scores. The total scores were classified into three categories: low, moderate, and high. These categories were used to descriptively map the distribution of academic anxiety levels among students. Therefore, the instrument was not intended for clinical diagnosis but rather to describe students' tendencies toward academic anxiety within the context of higher education.

Before the analysis was conducted, the data were examined to ensure that responses to all items were complete. The instrument's internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Based on the analyzed data, the instrument demonstrated adequate internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .797. In addition, the corrected item–total correlations ranged from .292 to .456, indicating that each item contributed to the overall measurement of the academic anxiety construct.

Data Collection

Data were collected using a questionnaire administered to first-year undergraduate students who met the study's inclusion criteria. Before completing the questionnaire, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, the confidentiality of their data, and their right to discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

The research questionnaire consisted of a demographic information section and the 18-item Academic Anxiety instrument. The demographic information was used to describe the participants'

characteristics, including gender, age, field of study, region of origin, current place of residence, distance from home, frequency of returning home, and length of time living away from home. Meanwhile, the Academic Anxiety instrument was used to assess students' levels of academic anxiety during the initial transition to higher education.

All submitted responses were screened before analysis. Responses that were incomplete, did not meet the participant eligibility criteria, or exhibited inconsistent response patterns were excluded from the final analysis. Following the data-screening process, responses from 2,695 participants were included in the analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The initial stage of analysis involved examining data completeness, response consistency, and whether the scores for each item fell within the expected range. Once the data were deemed suitable for analysis, each participant's total score was calculated by summing the responses to the 18 items of the Academic Anxiety instrument. Mean scores were also calculated to describe participants' overall response tendencies across all items.

Descriptive analyses included the calculation of frequencies, percentages, minimum and maximum scores, means, and standard deviations. Academic anxiety levels were subsequently classified into three categories: low, moderate, and high. This categorization was used to describe the proportion of students within each level of academic anxiety.

Cross-tabulations could also be used to provide a more detailed description of the findings according to selected demographic characteristics, such as gender, age, field of study, region of origin, type of accommodation, distance from home, frequency of returning home, and length of time living away from home. Although this study employed a descriptive quantitative approach, additional descriptive comparisons across demographic groups could be conducted to provide a more detailed account of variations in students' academic anxiety. These analyses were not intended to test causal relationships but rather to clarify the patterns of academic anxiety experienced by first-year students living away from home.

Results and Discussion

This study involved 2,695 first-year university students who lived away from home while pursuing higher education. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to provide an overview of students' academic anxiety levels during the initial transition to university. Academic anxiety scores were obtained from the 18-item Academic Anxiety instrument, with a theoretical total score ranging from 18 to 90. Higher scores indicated a greater tendency to experience academic anxiety.

Based on the descriptive analysis, students' academic anxiety scores ranged from 18 to 90. The mean total score was 55.12, with a standard deviation of 11.01. The median score of 55.00 indicated that the distribution of scores was centered within the moderate category. The first quartile was 49.00, while the third quartile was 61.00, indicating that most students had academic anxiety scores within the middle range. The mean item score of 3.06 further indicated that, overall, students' academic anxiety was at a moderate level.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Academic Anxiety Scores

Statistic	Value
Number of Respondents	2695
Number of Items	18
Minimum Score	18

Statistic	Value
Maximum Score	90
Mean Total Score	55,12
Standard Deviation	11,01
Median	55,00
First Quartile (Q1)	49,00
Third Quartile (Q3)	61,00
Mean Item Score	3,06

The distribution of academic anxiety scores was also visualized using a raincloud plot. The figure shows that respondents' scores were largely concentrated within the moderate range, with the highest density occurring around scores of 50 to 60. Nevertheless, some respondents obtained very low and very high scores. This indicates variation in the experience of academic anxiety among first-year students living away from home. In other words, although most students experienced academic anxiety at a moderate level, a certain subgroup showed a high tendency toward academic anxiety and may require further attention.

Raincloud Plots Academic Anxiety

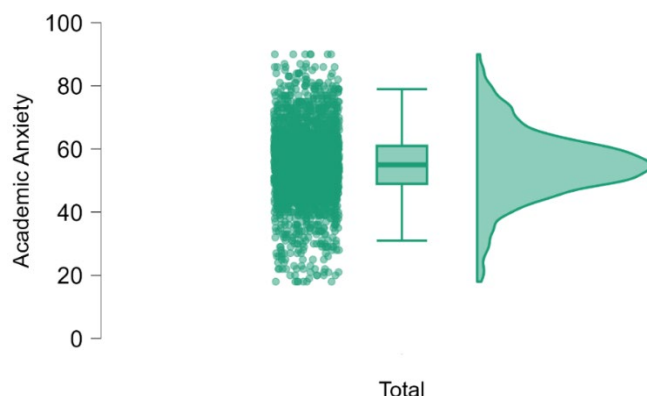


Figure 1. Raincloud Plot of Academic Anxiety Scores

The raincloud plot illustrates the distribution of individual scores, the median, the interquartile range, and the density of the academic anxiety score distribution. This visualization reinforces the descriptive statistical findings, indicating that academic anxiety among first-year students living away from home was not concentrated in the low category. Instead, it was predominantly distributed within the moderate category, with a proportion of respondents falling into the high category.

Academic anxiety levels were categorized by dividing the total scores into three categories: low, moderate, and high. The results showed that most respondents were in the moderate academic anxiety category, comprising 2,083 students or 77.29% of the sample. A total of 350 students, or 12.99%, were classified in the high category, while 262 students, or 9.72%, were classified in the low category.

Table 3. Categories of Students' Academic Anxiety Levels

Academic Anxiety Category	Frequency	Percentage
Low	262	9,72%
Medium	2083	77,29%
High	350	12,99%
Total	2695	100%

These findings indicate that academic anxiety is a relatively common experience among first-year university students living away from home. The largest proportion of students being classified in the moderate category suggests that most students experience academic worry, pressure, or tension, although these experiences have not yet reached a severe level. Nevertheless, the 12.99% of students classified in the high-anxiety category warrant particular attention, as they may be at greater risk of experiencing difficulties with concentration, learning engagement, task management, and academic adjustment.

Descriptive analysis at the item level showed that mean item scores ranged from 2.67 to 3.50. Item 13 had the highest mean score at 3.50, followed by Item 3 at 3.27, Item 2 at 3.26, Item 12 at 3.21, and Item 6 at 3.19. In contrast, Item 17 had the lowest mean score at 2.67, followed by Item 16 at 2.81, Item 8 at 2.84, Item 7 at 2.93, and Item 9 at 2.95. These findings suggest that although the overall level of academic anxiety was moderate, certain indicators were more prominent than others.

Discussion

The results showed that academic anxiety among first-year students living away from home was generally at a moderate level. This finding indicates that the transition from secondary education to higher education can be a challenging phase for some young people, particularly when they must adjust to academic demands while simultaneously learning to live independently away from their families. These challenges are related not only to assignments, examinations, presentations, and expectations regarding academic achievement but also to social adjustment, self-management, and limited access to direct family support. This finding is supported by Durand-Bush (2015), who demonstrated that academic anxiety among university students is influenced not only by academic pressure but also by adjustment processes, perceptions of learning demands, social support, and self-regulation abilities.

The findings of this study suggest that students experienced academic pressure at a level that remained manageable but nevertheless required attention. During the initial period of university study, first-year students must adjust to university learning patterns, increasing demands for independence, new social relationships, and higher academic expectations (Thompson, Pawson, & Evans, 2021). For students living away from home, these pressures may be intensified because they must also manage their daily lives independently, establish new social networks, and cope with homesickness.

The presence of students in the high academic anxiety category indicates that a particular group may be more vulnerable to difficulties in the learning process. High levels of anxiety can interfere with concentration, comprehension of course material, task completion, and engagement in academic activities (Su, 2017). Therefore, academic anxiety among first-year students living away from home should be understood as both an academic and a psychosocial concern. Students require not only academic support but also assistance with personal adjustment, emotion regulation, and the development of stronger social support networks.

These findings highlight the important role of higher education institutions in providing preventive services for first-year students living away from home. Student orientation programs should incorporate training in learning skills, time management, and emotion regulation, as well as clear information regarding access to campus counseling services. In addition, peer-mentoring programs, study groups, and communities for students living away from home may serve as supportive strategies to help students develop a sense of security, social connectedness, and readiness to cope with academic demands.

Overall, the findings indicate that academic anxiety is a relatively common experience among first-year students living away from home. Although most students were classified as experiencing moderate levels of anxiety, those with high levels of academic anxiety require particular attention. Higher education

institutions should therefore develop more responsive academic and psychosocial support systems to help first-year students navigate the transition to university life more adaptively.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that academic anxiety among first-year university students living away from home was generally at a moderate level. This was indicated by a mean academic anxiety score of 55.12 with a standard deviation of 11.01, with the majority of respondents, comprising 2,083 students or 77.29%, classified in the moderate category. These findings suggest that first-year students living away from home experience considerable academic pressure during the transition to higher education, particularly when adjusting to academic demands, independent living, and a new social environment. Although most students experienced anxiety at a manageable level, 350 students, or 12.99%, were classified in the high-anxiety category and therefore require further attention. Higher education institutions should consequently provide responsive academic and psychosocial support to help first-year students living away from home navigate the transition to university life more adaptively.

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