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## UNVEILING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAIT OF FEAR OF FAILURE ON LEARNERS' EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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### Abstract

University is an authorized high-level institution whereby learners transition to a new system of teaching facilities and academic research that is exclusively divergent from that of the secondary school level. This distinctiveness makes undergraduate students confused about how to meet the requirements of different modules, but most importantly, how to face the university/college challenges. Thereby, this work assesses the extent to which students at university have fear of failure. Our quantitative investigation is designed, mainly, to provide a concrete picture about how compulsory it is to understand the psyche of learners before final evaluation. To reach the aim of the work, we designed a survey for fifty four students in the Department of English at Mostaganem University. The results exhibit an accumulation of factors affecting learners at this level, mainly, the presence of fear of failure due to the learners' unfamiliarity with the criteria of assessment, the teachers' unawareness of addressing failure and in dealing with new bachelors who come with diverse profiles, learning needs and interests, besides homesickness and room-mate relationships.

**Keywords:** *Fear of failure; learning needs; homesickness; room-mate relationships.*

### Introduction

Failure is a normal step we go through; every one of us fails, success is not guaranteed all the time. In the educational context, the echoes of failure exists as well; students may fail in their school when they continuously obtain low grades. Psychologically speaking, failure can be overcome through time, but could it grow in individuals unconsciously? This research aims at raising awareness of the importance of dealing with students' failure in the English language subject, stressing its long term consequences, and to find out the strategies in order to reduce students' fear of exams. The scientific literature review put emphasis on the significance of tracking the psychological and cognitive aspects before assessing learners' competencies and performance respectively, because fear of failing is but an accumulation of failure experiences in secondary, middle and primary school. Henceforth, learners come to university overloaded with fear which inhibits their academic and professional development. We cannot disregard the behaviour of learned helplessness which could impact, to a far reaching extent, the self-regulation of individuals (Martin & Seligman, 1972) because redundant exposure to failure experiences results in the inability to control bad events as it impedes prospering academically.

### Literature review

Naturally, all individuals could probably sense perturbation and havoc in their lifespan (Gura, 2014), these traits are regarded as part of the process that we could never escape. Nevertheless, it impedes individuals from living an ordinary, charged and challenging life. De facto, there are things in this world that we need to be alerted from and always face prudently. Biologically speaking, we are programmed to handle situations fearfully; however, fear represents an adequate stimulus to manipulate our behaviour. From a scientific point of view, when facing a troublesome situation, a nervous message is transmitted to our brain in order to react. Generally speaking, fear

generates a conservative way of reflection vis-a-vis complex situations; that is to say, we prevent fearful situations whereby fear becomes a normal alarm (Sagar & Stoeber, 2009; Lap & Thao, 2021).

In fact, some people believe in performing tasks perfectly, hence, they set higher standards to do so, if they are not achieved the way they are planned and expected, failure is not embraced as a step to move forward. Psychologically speaking, our inner mind always rewinds our previous bad childhood experiences, it is noteworthy to mention that all people had been exposed to a number of failure experiences, they could be different only in context and outcome *“fear keeps building up because of other failure and embarrassment during childhood”* (Maina, 2010, p. 80). Accordingly, each time we experience a particular situation, our brain creates a flashback to the incidents that we negatively encountered. Probably, an individual could be raised in a family where s/he is always instructed to act in a certain way; if not, s/he is not going to be admired or appreciated, so this person could construct a trait of fear from disappointing others. Another category of people, for instance, may grow up in a poor family, so they will construct a replete of extensive stress from being penniless in the future. (ibid)

This genre of fear is characterized by its transformation into a mechanism that becomes socially impaired. It prevents people from investing their fullest potential. Fear can be convenient in certain situations in our daily life experiences, but remarkably dysfunctional in consequential contexts. To exemplify, *“job request”* for a person who is unemployed, s/he thinks that s/he will be rejected in case s/he applies for it; so from one’s imagination, a scenario of rejection is created before the application, and this holds the individual back from trial; to this end, many opportunities are overlooked.

Successful people go through trial and error, and failure can re-orient people towards successful pathways. Gura (2014) backs up his argument with children’s attitudes vis-a-vis their walk activity. It is conventional that the child learns how to walk unconsciously. In Gura’s words, the child struggles, tries, slides, falls down, but stands up all over again. Children learn through that ongoing process of falling down and getting up without frustration. Thereby, we have to be ‘self-actualized’ through failure; because life’s contentment is in its ups and downs.

#### Fear of failure in the educational context

Savage & Savage (2010) have emphasized that all learners appreciate their inclusion in the learning process. School is one of the important settings in one’s life; it should provide for people all they need psychologically and cognitively, but *“unfortunately, for many students, it is one of the few places where they have the opportunity to feel significant and worthwhile”* (ibid, 153). Hence, fear of failing is a type of fear in society which hinders much risk taking. In the classroom setting, learners who fear failure are unwilling to take initiatives and participate in the classroom; this fear of failure could result in under-achievement at school. Yet, positive attitudes toward FOF could ensure good performance and problem solving aptitude. (Mandel and Marcus, 1988; Timmermans, 2020)

It is compulsory for teachers to be able to manage the class in order to provide a safe and secure environment for learners. Savage & Savage have clarified the role of teachers and schools in encouraging the students to become more productive in a supportive environment. As the following quote suggests, *“teachers and schools that work hard at helping students feel significant and important to discover that even the most difficult students can develop an excitement about learning and commitment to maintain a productive school climate”* (Ibid, 153).

Students come to school with their previous background experiences to the classroom, and these attitudes represent an impairment to the learning and teaching process. Remarkably, not all students who subscribe in schools or universities are motivated to learn. Some students *“may have experienced difficulty in school and have no expectation that things will be different”* (ibid, 135). Others may come from deprived backgrounds (Nsiah, 2017) while some may have unconscious competences or conscious incompetences in the language and a considerable rate of anxiety. These aforementioned competences require the teachers’ expertise to unveil the students’ strengths and flaws and work on them deliberately.

Despite the fact that students’ backgrounds cannot be altered, educators should not consider it as a reason to categorize them as under-performers. Thus, one of the crucial roles of teachers is to see the introvert, anxious and reluctant learners becoming self-actualized and confident. Simons and Bibb (1974), as cited in Mandel and Marcus (1988), design a test of anxiety for a number of learners; fear of failure was found to be tightly linked with low performance or underachievement, additionally, they have discovered that male students underachieve more than females. This aforementioned outcome could bring new horizons to the existence of anxious thought patterns among genders.

#### Causes of failure

Failure as a concept is re-framed not by the environment or by certain circumstances, but through the way every individual perceives it and reframes it respectively, Cole (2014), in her research, articulated that *“there are several approaches to our fear of failure. We overanalyze. We become fixated. We engage in negative self-talk.*

*We ponder. We avoid. We give up. We wallow. We are ashamed. We become so overwhelmed with how to approach failure that we start writing papers on failure”* (p. 187)

Why do we have fear of failure? A serious question discussed by the certified hypnotherapist Knudson (2014). In his published article, he has established a quiz which gives the opportunity to verify whether we are overwhelmed by this fear of failure or not. The questions of the quiz are as follows: do you ever put off doing something because you are not sure how it will turn out? Do you avoid situations where you will have to try something new in front of people? Have you ever put off doing something you know will improve your life, even though you have no good reason not to do it? According to him if you answer positively to one of the aforesaid questions, it means that you are overwhelmed.

He argues that his experience as a hypno-therapist makes him find out that the main factor that prevents individuals from fulfilling their goals is fear of failure. And this is linked to a number of reasons. As a matter of fact, he clarifies that we do not fear failing of doing something after a considerable period of practice, but what terrifies people the most is failing to fulfil a peculiar task from the first time of experience and trial. Thus, fear of failure is *“a kind of neurosis that keeps us from attempting to accomplish anything at all”* (Knudson, 2014, para, 9).

The basic source behind fear of failure is school. As a first requirement, teachers expect learners to answer correctly and understand implicature right from the start. In parallel, if the answers are incorrect, learners are penalised in a variety of ways as: providing low grades, ascribing negative feedback, marginalizing them, and so forth. Generally, school does not develop an attitude towards trials and remedy; the students are learning in a judgemental environment without regarding the contextual factors to help them build a healthy self-image, that is why they develop negative attitudes towards failure. (Alaoui & Penta, 2022)

In fact, most learners at school already know that if they fail, they will be penalised. Thus, by the age of 18, they will be well-trained to fear failure and certainly not welcoming failure as an important step in the learning process. Thus, from the age of five to eighteen, we have been confronted with an accumulation of failure experiences. In parallel, people who are strong-willed learn to follow their dreams, regardless of the traumas they have been through; they overcame failure and prove their record of achievement, as Maina (2010) displayed *“winners are not afraid of losing, but losers are. Failure is a process of success; people who avoid failure also avoid success.”* (p. 74)

#### Fear of success

How could success be feared? There seems to be a contradictory vision in the equation. In fact, hard work and personal efforts are not always a guarantee of achievement; fear of success is another psychological issue that results in losing a myriad of opportunities in life. When we become afraid from taking risks and moving on; we get stagnant in one position, neither moving forward nor backward. And hence no advancement and no improvement will be made. Many scientists and psychologists agree that fear of success exists in both genders. Fear of failure and fear of success are similar, they share approximately the same symptoms, and both hold us back from pursuing our aims and aspirations. However, the problem with fear of success is that it is shaped in people’s brain unconsciously; they do not know that they are holding themselves back from achieving remarkable performances (Sijuwade, 2008; Afshinfar, Aminpoor & Mostafaei, 2012; Stuart, 2013; Nelson et al., 2013)

A person who has developed fear of success tends to procrastinate or avoid working on big projects. Consequently, s/he sabotages his/her dreams through regularly convincing himself/herself, that s/he is not good enough to achieve them. But, in fact this kind of feeling is unrealistic. If people are intrinsically motivated, negative emotions could be manipulated, as Vincent (1991) has exhibited *“every negative emotion is removable, once you fully understand this concept, you are ready to make important changes in your life”* (p. 4)

Essentially, an individual suffering from fear of success should have a strong will to believe in him/her self, and confirms that fear is normal and failure is an advantage to perform better, but fearing success and procrastinating is a negative attitude that should be suppressed (You, 2015). When individuals fail, they should not underestimate themselves, thus the best strategy is to continue striving for better performance until it is attained. Perseverance is important, failure is not an ending moment to despise the world for, but should be regarded as a challenge to self-regulate, double efforts and increase performance respectively. From a gender perspective, females are highly evoked with fear of success due to their concerns from social rejection and loss of femininity. In a nutshell, challenging a masculine world, for females, is still threatening their emotional and psychological stability amidst fear of success considerations (Faturahman & Dwiyantri, 2021)

## Methodology

Most EFL students fear having tests and final exams. It is noticeable that this fear starts before exams, and will not easily disappear once they finish their exams, but it will remain until the marks are given. If this fear is not overcome, it will lead to a serious problem of fear of failure. Nevertheless, the case might transcend the problem of exams due to the participants' psychological instability on-campus.

### Participants

First year undergraduate students are randomly selected to undertake our study. We select this sample, in particular, because they are new at a higher educational institution, they find it intricate to cope with its independent system including: norms, higher coefficients, tutorials, lectures and so forth. In addition, learners are not acquainted with the criteria of assessment. Therefore, we have opted for first year undergraduate students in the Department of English, at Mostaganem University. Fifty four (54) students are selected randomly from the total population (males~ 20%; females~ 80%) for the survey. Dealing with psychological issues and relevant results require inexperienced learners at university; hence, we target this population in peculiar.

### Instruments

For the present work, we have constructed a survey. It includes multiple choice questions by which students are asked to cross the answer that is appropriate besides likert items. The rest are open-ended questions, where they are not delimited with a certain response, but to express themselves freely. The information provided by the questionnaire investigates whether students have fear of failure or not; additionally, it shows the impact of parents' and teachers' behaviours and contributions on the students' growth of fear.

## Discussion

Our research found evidence that most L1 students have fear of failure; this latter is observed in their replete of fear instances whereby the outcome is undetermined, psychologically speaking it is fear from the unknown. Hence, there are plenty of reasons behind this psychological state.

First of all, students discard the way they are going to be assessed; they come to university with a different mindset, they encounter a distinct system, and no one knows how exams are corrected, or what criteria are taken into account to be evaluated. Thus, they think that assessment at university and secondary school are alike. More than that, students' parents have a role in increasing their fear; this is shaped throughout their negative responses from failing in final examinations. Third of all, bachelors residence, the majority, is on campus, in this regard their life style and expectations are different; acting as independent and assuming responsibility at all levels should be measured alike for both genders. In the table below, our analysis leaned on the MDN and IQR rates in order to measure the likert items below, the rate of consensus or polarization are identified respectively.

Options/ Frequency	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	M DN	I QR
I appreciate my presence at university	00	7	5	38	04	4	0
I am aware of the criteria of assessment	00	42	04	07	1	2	0
I am anxious that I will fail	4	05	15	20	10	4	1
My failure is my responsibility	02	30	04	12	06	2	2
I appreciate my presence on campus	15	18	15	06	00	2	2
University does not determine my success in the future	3	10	03	30	08	4	1

**Table 1:** Students' frequency vis the higher education context

As mentioned in the table above, the majority of our sample approve their appreciation to be a bachelor at university (MDN= 4; IQR=0) and this is considered as a positive initiative though there are lower rates who

disapprove their presence at university probably their choice of studying English was beyond their wish or they have other prospects. On the contrary, many bachelors who live far away from their home-town opt for the campus/dorm to ease their transportation and residence and avoid the to and fro journey; though this aforementioned is a positive decision, yet we noticed polarization of opinions with reference to the campus (MDN=2; IQR=2) we can not disregard that our sample is divided between strongly disagree, disagree choices and they both exhibit disapproval, besides 15 participants reveal that they are undecided.

The availability of the necessary facilities on campus are important for students who would suffer from homesickness, that could probably explain their absence of comfort or accustomation to the new environment they are exposed to, thereby, the off campus preference could be a priority for a number of bachelors before the selection of an appropriate speciality is a given university. Third of all, it is important to detect the extent to which students are aware of the system in higher education and the criteria of assessment in particular. In this concern, we observed consensus of thoughts (MDN= 2; IQR= 0) whereby 42 of our sample revealed their disagreement vis-a-vis their awareness of assessment, though smaller rates approved this latter.

It is necessary to understand the psychological state of our sample since the topic at hand attempts to detects it. As exhibited in the table above, the majority of our sample assumed their anxious attitudes towards failing in exams, though 15 participants revealed their neutrality, yet the low rate of the IQR shows that there is consensus of opinions (MDN= 4; IQR= 1), as the majority displays tension. It is prerequisite to understand the extent to which our sample of bachelors are conscious about their full responsibility towards achievement, yet the majority (30) participants exhibited their disapproval (MDN= 2; IQR= 2) claiming that they are not the only pole to be blamed for any failure, a replete of reasons could be pinpointed too, including teachers, modules, educational system, homesickness, and so forth.

Speaking of learners' future prospects and achievement, as displayed in the table above, their is consensus of opinions regarding success and the tertiary phase, the majority approved that university does not determine their success in the future, this could be associated with the mindset of learners that there are other ports of success in life that could not be limited to college/university diploma's only.

Additionally, teachers are eager to teach students who are healthy psychologically or educationally, i.e., students who are good performers in the classroom and are intrinsically motivated to learn. In fact, these teachers are not aware of the fact that there are students who has an accumulation of failure experiences, hence this latter should not be disregarded otherwise their engagement in the classroom will be absent.

Conventionally, not all teachers are aware of the psychological problems faced by students, if they are, they are not able to attract their attention because they lack the necessary approaches and strategies.

Nevertheless, teachers who received extensive training in didactics and psychopathology are quite conscious of the process of inclusion regardless of the hurdles they might face. Therefore, teachers' educational background affect positively or negatively their role in class. Unlike secondary schools, at university, the lectures in amphitheatres are a handicap for students to show their capacities, and for teachers to know their students' learning preferences and needs, again, the context is different.

Similarly, teachers consider students' number as an impairment to treat them all equally and know their weaknesses. Furthermore, the majority of students seek for good grades through memorisation, but never through scientific research and other milestone literacies such as (visual literacy, media literacy and critical literacy) which are the main characteristics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learners.

#### Success versus avoidance of failure

In fact, the majority of students want to succeed, failure is never accepted even if a task is performed with no efforts; that what Atkinson (1964); Atkinson and Feather, (1966) quoted in Zeidner, (1998) "*according to the classical achievement motivation theory, all individuals have a basic motive or tendency to seek and approach success*" (p. 284)

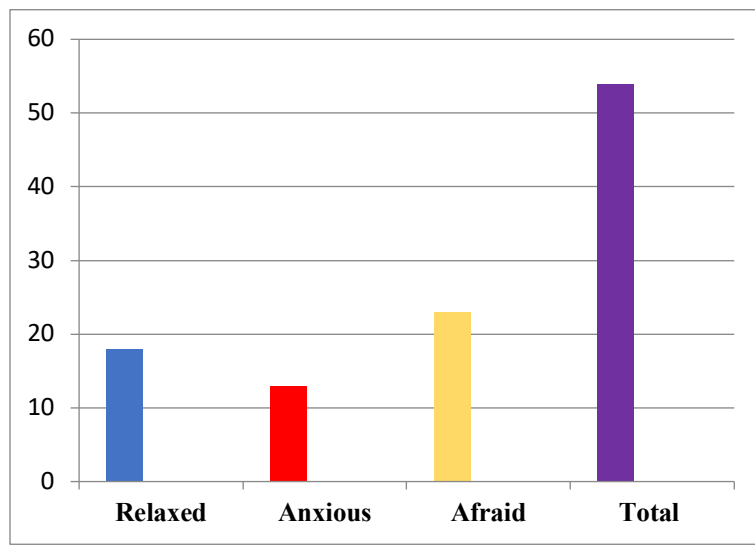
Unfortunately, there are factors that classify those students into two categories "*one that instigates and maintain actions directed at achieving success, at the same time, people have an antagonistic motive to avoid failure which seeks to direct behaviour away from the achievement task*" (p. 284) In this vein, we deduce that, all people want to achieve success, but it varies from one learner to another; we can find those who are acquainted with procedures which lead towards success; on the contrary, there is a category of learners who thinks it is in pursuit of success, but in fact, it unveils failure. However, we can not disregard that there is a certain mindset of success out of school. Any occupation that displays large sums of money is regarded as an opportunity if compared with the pursuit of one's educational career.

What was noticed before final examination is that the majority of students express their anxiety or fear from failing. Nevertheless, anxiety before exams is neither a stimulus to push students to avoid failure, nor a normal

state. This could be explained owing to the fact that they are not familiar with evaluation criteria. Though, this state could be positive at least to make efforts in order to prevent failing, yet the extent to which it might effect their overall performance is what should be highlighted.

Choices	Relaxed	Anxious	Afraid	Total
Number of Students	18	13	23	54
Percentage %	33%	24%	43%	100%

**Table 2.** Students’ psychological state after their first examination



**Figure 2.1** Learners’ psyche from final examination

According to the results mentioned in the table above, 43% of students claim that they are still afraid. 24% remains anxious. On the contrary, 33% of them feel quite relaxed. Those who are afraid or anxious explain this kind of feeling as having fear from failing in exams. Actually, most of them maintain that grades are important, even if preparation is done, the way questions are raised could mislead their understanding of the topics, especially for QSM exams or, on the other hand, essays form in which they are asked to give arguments and support them with illustrations of their own. Hence, they cannot feel relaxed until deliberation of grades is finalized. Some of them claim that they have worked hard, thus they expect excellent marks and are afraid that they will not fulfil the expected results. Evidently, students give great importance to marks. According to the data given, some students are perfectionist and too demanding, their number is limited though. They crave for good marks and are afraid of failing despite the fact that they had done their best. Some learners covet to get the average, yet they confirm that they are undecided regarding their overall performance.

**Students’ perfectionism**

According to Sagar & Stoeber (2009), and Sherman (2012), many perfectionists with high standards do not accept failure; if they fail, their inner mind convinces them that they are not intelligent enough. Consequently, these students believe in losing respect and sense of greatness, besides their self-esteem which will be on the edge of instability. It is as if they want to achieve success to please others; that is to say, they would feel proud when others constantly praise their work; it seems parallel with the ego-centric character.

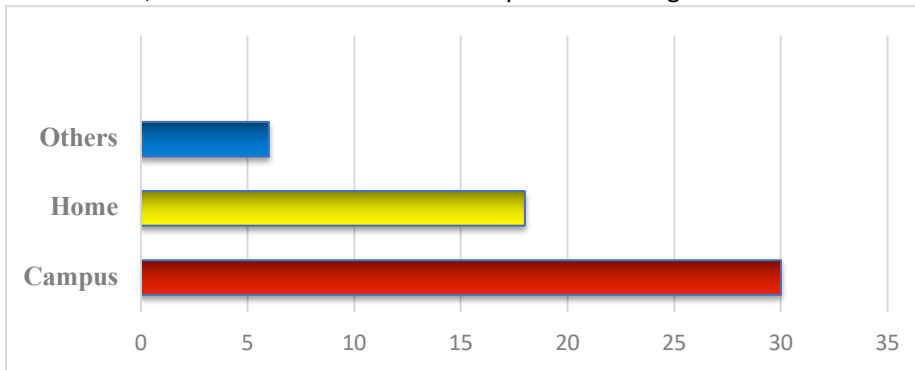
Sherman (2012) explains that it depends on the person himself/ herself on how to deal with failure. Some individuals experience sadness, then depression, what comes next is a paralyzing fear of confessing or accepting it. Or, others might “go back after a brief period of malaise with new determination to pass it” (p. 30). In this respect, failure, that we experience, depends on how individuals perceive it. It could be a stepping stone towards success, as it could be a hindrance that penalizes learners from accomplishment.

Some individuals are highly afraid of failure to the extent that they intend to set higher standards, and assure their performance will not be amiss. Unfortunately, this mindset does not allow them to take advantages from

what they are supposed to do in their social experiences, especially in the workplace. Apparently, the intention to perform well could, in certain cases, impair performance. Ironically, having high standards and working hard to maintain them could frustrate our future prospects. Indeed, this is the paradoxical nature of perfectionism. Nevertheless, establishing no standards urge people to achieve less, so the existence of those standards could often be positive, unless it is exaggerated and demanding.

#### Homesickness

Graduation from college or university is a developmental milestone since it marks the transition to the expectations of adulthood. Post-secondary education is nowadays perceived as a necessary step to be successful in a competitive workplace. It is noteworthy to mention that many bachelors are on campus, for this healthy adjustment to separation, it is important to maximize the educational and social benefits of the experience. Thurber & Walton (2012) maintain that students who are distant from their homes are highly depressed and anxious. Hence, this forces the students to adopt strict strategies so as to subsist their campus life.



**Figure 3.** Students' residence

As mentioned in the figure above, the majority of our sample 55.5 % lives on campus, this latter could affect their achievement besides their psychological insecurities; as our sample reveals, they do not feel comfortable on campus arguing that it does not have the necessary requirements for mental and psychological sanity besides room-mate disagreement and relationships instability. This aforementioned could exclude learners 33 % who are non-resident in dorms or off campus, their tension and anxiety rates could be diminished in this regard. In fact, research put emphasis on cooperation among parents, resident advisory, faculty, and mental health professionals -on and off campus- in order to escalate efforts for the sake of promoting adjustment and diminishing the degree of homesick feelings. Homesickness feelings increase anxiety and fear among genders especially females who are urged to act independently and assume responsibility towards their life as a bachelor.

#### Conclusion and further research

Fear of failure is a psychological phenomenon that represents a handicap in peoples' life. We saw it worth to mention that the first intention of the researcher was to test students' fear of failure. But, after a careful observation of the situation, we found out that, as a priority, homesickness and traits of fear could negatively contribute to the overall performance of learners. Thereby, we should raise the awareness of teachers, administrative staff and campus advisory team to the psychological effect of fear and tension on new bachelors. This study assesses the measurement of fear of failure and its effects on students' success in higher education. The literature review has reported that fear or anxiety can grow excessively, and become worse if it is not manipulated. In fact, the existence of fear of failure has been proved by the present study and results confirm what has been hypothesized in this work. Indeed, we discovered that the majority of students were overwhelmed by fear of failure. In a nutshell, Fear of Failure exists among students in a form of anxiety and develops in them gradually until it impairs their educational prospects, or urge them to choose an off campus and opt for other job prospects. It is prerequisite to re-think the psychological and emotional safety as a priority to diminish stress and anxiety at universities and ameliorate the students' output respectively.

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