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Self-Efficacy as a Protective Factor Against Academic Stress and Anxiety: Evidence from a Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

High academic pressure can trigger stress and anxiety among students, adversely affecting their mental health and academic performance. This study aims to examine the role of self-efficacy in reducing academic stress and anxiety, identify effective interventions, and map existing research gaps. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted following the PRISMA protocol, searching the ScienceDirect and Google Scholar databases using Boolean search strategies within the 2019–2024 timeframe. Of the 100 articles initially identified, 10 met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed thematically. Findings indicate that self-efficacy plays a significant protective role, both directly and through the mediation of motivation, emotional regulation, and academic engagement. Effective interventions include CBT-based stress management training, self-directed learning programs, and the enhancement of regulatory emotional self-efficacy. This study underscores the importance of self-efficacy enhancement strategies as both preventive and curative measures in educational settings while encouraging longitudinal and cross-cultural research to strengthen empirical evidence.

Keywords:
Self-Efficacy, Academic Stres, Academic Anxiety

Introduction

Academic pressure has become a common phenomenon among students across various educational levels. In both higher education and secondary school contexts, students face numerous academic demands such as achieving high performance, managing heavy workloads, and coping with social pressures from their surrounding environment. These conditions frequently lead to stress and anxiety, which negatively affect students' psychological well-being and academic performance (Pascoe et al., 2020).

In higher education, students are expected to possess strong personal capacities and the ability to resolve and find solutions to problems encountered during their studies. However, in reality, students often face various challenges that affect their mental stability. According to a survey conducted by the American College Health Association (2024), approximately 37% of university students in the United States have been diagnosed with or treated for stress, 31% experience anxiety, and 21% suffer from sleep difficulties. This phenomenon is also reflected in Indonesia, where a report by the OECD (2024) revealed that 73.2% of students experience moderate to high levels of stress, with significant differences observed between genders. (OECD, 2024).

Academic stress is a psychological condition experienced by individuals in response to academic demands perceived as exceeding their capacity and abilities. This stress can arise from various sources, such as excessive workloads, examination pressure, parental expectations, and academic competition within the educational environment (Misra & Castillo,

2004). According to Sarafino and Smith (2014), academic stress occurs when individuals perceive that the academic demands they must meet surpass the internal resources available to cope with them (Sarafino et al., 2015). Such stress not only affects learning performance but may also disrupt students' emotional, physical, and social well-being (Nguyen et al., 2024).

Academic stress among university students is influenced by various internal and external factors that interact and contribute to the psychological pressure they experience. Internal factors include poor time management, inadequate learning skills, and a negative self-concept regarding academic abilities (García-Martínez et al., 2023). Students' inability to manage time effectively often leads to an accumulation of assignments and a perceived inability to complete academic responsibilities optimally (Macan et al., 1990).

In addition, external factors such as excessive coursework, examination pressure, high parental expectations, problematic social relationships, and a competitive academic environment further exacerbate the level of stress experienced by students (Md. Fajlay Rabbi & Md. Sefatul Islam, 2024). Not infrequently, students also experience stress as a result of uncertainty about the future and concerns regarding career prospects, which can heighten anxiety and negatively impact mental health (Beiter et al., 2015).

Academic stress experienced by students can lead to significant negative impacts on cognitive, emotional, physical, and social aspects. Cognitively, excessive stress can impair concentration, hinder critical thinking processes, and reduce memory and decision-making abilities, ultimately resulting in decreased academic performance (Almarzouki, 2024). Emotionally, students experiencing stress tend to exhibit symptoms such as anxiety, depression, irritability, and loss of motivation to learn (Beiter et al., 2015). The physical impacts are also substantial, as prolonged stress can lead to sleep disturbances, chronic fatigue, headaches, digestive disorders, and a weakened immune system (Wilks, 2008).

The impact of academic stress extends beyond academic performance, significantly affecting students' mental health. Research by Athirah Zubairi et al. (2025) revealed that high levels of academic stress can disrupt concentration, diminish learning quality, and lead to a decline in academic achievement. Moreover, prolonged stress may contribute to the development of more severe mental health disorders, such as depression and generalized anxiety (Az Athirah Zubairi et al., 2025).

Within the framework of educational psychology, self-efficacy is recognized as a key construct believed to serve as a protective factor against academic pressure. Bandura (1997), through his Social Cognitive Theory, defines self-efficacy as an individual's belief in their ability to organize and execute the actions required to achieve specific goals. Individuals with high levels of self-efficacy tend to manage stress effectively, respond adaptively to academic challenges, and maintain positive expectations regarding their own success (Sim & Moon, 2015)

This belief is not merely a form of optimism but a perception that shapes how individuals think, feel, and act. Bandura emphasizes that self-efficacy plays a crucial role in the process of self-regulation, particularly when individuals face high-pressure or challenging situations. In other words, self-efficacy functions as a psychological mechanism that strengthens one's resilience to stressors, including the academic stress commonly experienced by students (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). In the educational context, students with high self-efficacy are better able to manage academic demands, demonstrate greater resilience, and possess stronger intrinsic motivation for independent learning. Therefore, self-efficacy can be regarded as a vital protective factor in maintaining students' mental health amidst complex academic demands (Putwain et al., 2023).

Previous studies have highlighted the crucial role of self-efficacy in coping with academic stress and anxiety. However, these investigations remain dispersed and have yet to be compiled into a systematic and thematic synthesis. To gain a deeper understanding of how

self-efficacy functions as a protective factor within the context of academic stress, a comprehensive mapping of existing empirical evidence is essential. Furthermore, there are notable limitations in the identification of empirically validated interventions that effectively enhance self-efficacy while reducing stress and anxiety among students. Therefore, a systematic review of the scientific literature is warranted to consolidate recent empirical findings, identify consistent relational patterns, and propose intervention strategies that can be practically implemented within educational settings.

This study aims to examine the role of self-efficacy in reducing academic stress and anxiety among university students. It is designed to address three key research questions: (1) What is the role of self-efficacy in mitigating academic stress and anxiety? (2) What intervention approaches have been employed to enhance self-efficacy in academic contexts? and (3) What research gaps and future directions can be explored? The findings of this review are expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions for educators, counselors, and educational policymakers in addressing mental health issues within academic settings more effectively and based on empirical evidence.

Method

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to identify, evaluate, and synthesize empirical findings on the role of self-efficacy in reducing academic stress and anxiety among university students. The SLR procedure was designed and reported in accordance with the *Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses* (PRISMA) protocol to ensure transparency, systematic rigor, and replicability of the review process (Page et al., 2021). The SLR approach was selected for its capacity to provide robust and comprehensive scientific evidence, particularly in addressing research questions grounded in practical issues within the educational context (Siddaway et al., 2019).

Data Source

Data for this review were obtained from two reputable academic databases ScienceDirect and Google Scholar both widely recognized as credible repositories for research in the social sciences and education (Gusenbauer & Haddaway, 2020).

Search Strategy

The search strategy employed Boolean search techniques using a combination of primary keywords and their variants, namely: *"self-efficacy" AND "academic stress" OR "academic anxiety" AND "students."* Additionally, synonymous and related terms such as *"student stress," "academic pressure," "learning anxiety,"* and *"academic self-beliefs"* were incorporated to broaden the search coverage. The search queries were adapted to the syntax requirements of each database and conducted iteratively to minimize potential retrieval bias (Booth et al., 2012)

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for this review were as follows: (1) articles based on empirical studies; (2) populations consisting of students or university undergraduates; and (3) studies that explicitly examined or measured *self-efficacy* alongside academic stress or academic anxiety, published between 2019 and 2024. The exclusion criteria comprised: (1) articles that were not peer-reviewed; (2) studies of a purely conceptual or theoretical nature without empirical data; and (3) articles irrelevant to the educational context

Selection Process

The literature selection process followed the four PRISMA stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion. In the identification stage, articles retrieved from the two databases were compiled and automatically deduplicated. Screening was conducted based on titles and abstracts, after which studies meeting the inclusion criteria were advanced to the eligibility stage for full-text review. Articles that fulfilled all criteria were

included in the final analysis. A PRISMA flow diagram was constructed to visualize the selection process in accordance with systematic reporting standards.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic and narrative synthesis approach to explore the conceptual patterns emerging from various studies. The process began with open coding of key information units from the selected articles, followed by data categorization, and concluded with the identification of major themes reflecting the relationship between self-efficacy and academic stress or anxiety.

Develop Research Question

The research questions developed for this study are: **RQ 1:** How does self-efficacy play a role in reducing academic stress and anxiety? **RQ 2:** What intervention approaches have been used to enhance self-efficacy in the academic context? **RQ 3:** What are the research gaps and potential directions for future research that can be explored?

Result

Below is the PRISMA flowchart presenting the stages of the article selection and screening process used in this study.

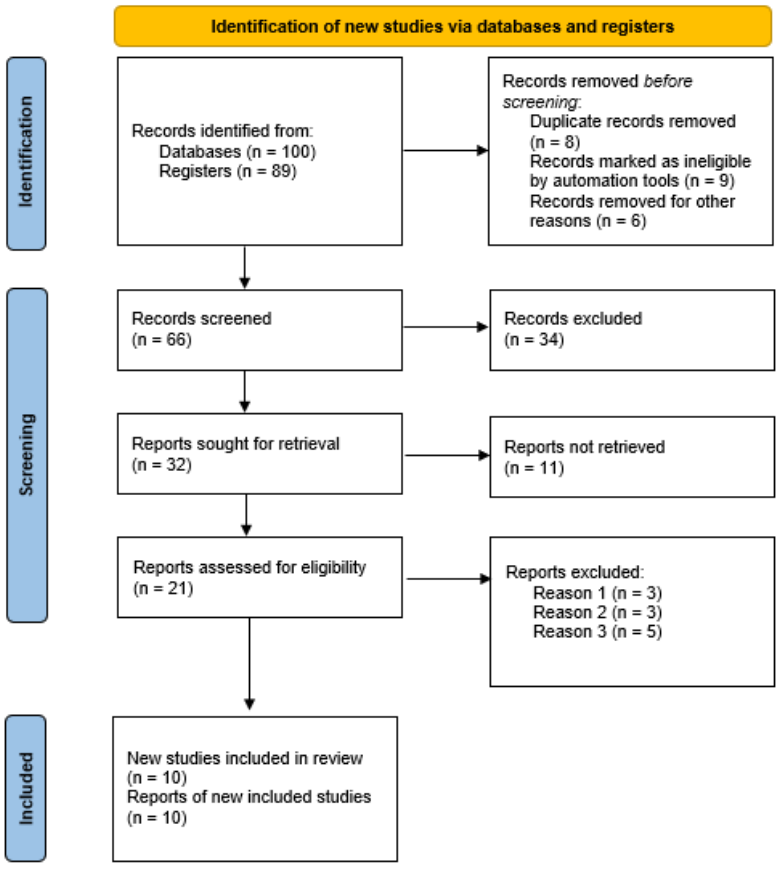

Figure 1. Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) Method for Topic Research

Out of the 100 articles collected from the ScienceDirect and Google Scholar databases, an identification and screening process was carried out. A total of 10 articles were selected that met the inclusion criteria.

Table 1. Critical Analysis of Articles with Reputation

No	Author	Title	Result
1.	(Hitches et al., 2022)	Building self-efficacy without letting stress knock it down: Stress and academic self-efficacy of university students	High stress is negatively associated with self-efficacy; females and younger students tend to experience higher stress levels and lower self-efficacy.
2.	(Shang & Ma, 2024)	Classroom anxiety, learning motivation, and English achievement of Chinese college students: The mediating role of self-efficacy	Self-efficacy mediates the relationship between anxiety and motivation towards academic achievement.
3.	(Acosta-Enriquez et al., 2025)	The mediating role of academic stress, critical thinking and performance expectations in the influence of academic self-efficacy on AI dependence: Case study in college students	This study indicates that competence satisfaction and relatedness have a significant direct effect on academic engagement, while autonomy satisfaction does not. Academic self-efficacy and positive emotions mediate the relationship between competence and relatedness satisfaction with academic engagement, while negative emotions only mediate the relationship between relatedness satisfaction and academic engagement. A dual mediation exists through academic self-efficacy and a combination of positive-negative emotions, and cultural differences influence the role of autonomy satisfaction.
4.	(Carranza Esteban et al., 2022)	Academic self-efficacy, self-esteem, satisfaction with studies, and virtual media use as depression and emotional exhaustion predictors among college students during COVID-19	High self-efficacy reduces depression and emotional exhaustion in students during the pandemic.
5.	(Zhang et al., 2024)	Effect of stress on study skills self-efficacy in Nursing students: the chain mediating role of general self-efficacy and self-directed learning	The results of this study show that positive stress enhances nursing students' study skills self-efficacy, both directly and through the mediation of general self-efficacy and self-directed learning. In contrast, negative stress has no direct effect but reduces study skills self-efficacy through both of these mediators
6.	(Lizarte Simón et al., 2024)	Influence of Self-Efficacy, Anxiety and Psychological Well-Being on Academic Engagement During University Education	Self-efficacy acts as a protective factor against the negative impact of anxiety on academic engagement; students with high

			self-efficacy tend to remain engaged even when experiencing anxiety.
7.	(Wafa et al., 2025)	Stress Management Training to Reduce Academic Distress and Increase Self-Efficacy in Students Memorizing the Quran	Stress management training significantly reduces academic distress and increases self-efficacy in students memorizing the Qur'an.
8.	(Jia et al., 2023)	Effect of Academic Self-Efficacy on Test Anxiety of Higher Vocational College Students: The Chain Mediating Effect	The results of this study show that academic self-efficacy is related to test anxiety through two factors: sense of life meaning and fear of failure. Among female students, this effect occurs through a chain mediation (a combination of life meaning and fear of failure). In contrast, among male students, the effect occurs separately through only one mediator
9.	(Kristensen et al., 2023)	Academic Stress, Academic Self-efficacy, and Psychological Distress: A Moderated Mediation of Within-person Effects	This study found that academic stress increases psychological distress in high school students, partly through academic self-efficacy, and psychological distress can also increase academic stress. This relationship is stronger among males at the interpersonal level, while for females, the effect is greater at the intraindividual level
10.	(Zheng et al., 2023)	The association between academic stress and test anxiety in college students: The mediating role of regulatory emotional self-efficacy and the moderating role of parental expectations	The results of this study show that academic stress is positively related to test anxiety. Regulatory emotional self-efficacy mediates this relationship, while parental expectations moderate the relationship between academic stress and regulatory emotional self-efficacy. High parental expectations tend to reduce academic stress and increase regulatory emotional self-efficacy, which ultimately helps to reduce test anxiety.

Discussion

RQ 1: How does self-efficacy play a role in reducing academic stress and anxiety?

The findings from this systematic review consistently demonstrate that self-efficacy acts as a significant protective factor against academic stress and anxiety across various educational contexts. Several studies report a strong negative correlation between academic self-efficacy and the levels of stress and anxiety experienced by students. Individuals with high self-efficacy are more capable of managing academic demands, regulating emotions, and maintaining academic engagement, even when faced with high-pressure situations. These results highlight the central role of self-efficacy in enhancing students' resilience and ability to cope with academic stress, thus contributing to their overall well-being and academic performance (Carranza Esteban et al., 2022; Hitches et al., 2022).

Furthermore, several studies have found that self-efficacy not only plays a direct role but also functions as both a mediator and a moderator in various conceptual models. For instance, in a study of Chinese students, self-efficacy mediated the relationship between classroom anxiety and motivation with academic achievement. Meanwhile, other research highlighted its role in moderating the negative impact of anxiety on academic engagement. These findings emphasize that self-efficacy can influence the dynamics between psychological factors like anxiety and motivation, enhancing students' capacity to stay engaged and achieve success despite emotional challenges (Lizarte Simón et al., 2024; Shang & Ma, 2024).

In addition, the nature of the stress experienced also influences this relationship; positive stress (challenge stress) tends to have a positive correlation with study-skills self-efficacy, while negative stress (hindrance stress) reduces self-perception of ability, with mediation effects through general self-efficacy and self-directed learning (Zhang et al., 2024). These findings reinforce the theoretical perspective that self-efficacy serves as a psychological mechanism that can transform the perception of threats into challenges, thereby mitigating the detrimental effects of academic stress and anxiety.

RQ 2: What intervention approaches have been used to enhance self-efficacy in the academic context?

The analysis of the identified literature reveals several intervention approaches that have been effective in enhancing academic self-efficacy, which in turn contributes to reducing academic stress and anxiety. One of the most prominent strategies is stress management training based on cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) principles. In a quasi-experimental study, this intervention was found to reduce academic distress while simultaneously improving self-efficacy in students memorizing the Qur'an (Wafa et al., 2025). Another intervention focuses on strengthening general self-efficacy and self-directed learning skills, which, in a study involving nursing students, played an important mediating role between stress and study-skills self-efficacy (Zhang et al., 2024). These interventions highlight the potential of enhancing self-efficacy through structured psychological training and the development of autonomous learning strategies

The study by (Wafa et al., 2025) shows that stress management training designed to reduce academic stress significantly improves students' academic self-efficacy. This training involves techniques such as meditation, time management, and emotional regulation skills, which help students feel more capable of handling their academic challenges. This training-based intervention has a significant impact, particularly for students under high academic pressure, such as those preparing for exams or major assignments.

Furthermore, the study also explains that self-directed learning programs are effective in enhancing academic self-efficacy. (Zhang et al., 2024) reported that students involved in self-directed learning programs felt more in control of their learning process, leading to an increase in self-efficacy. These programs empower students to manage their study time, select appropriate resources, and assess their own progress, all of which enhance their confidence in their academic abilities.

In addition, several studies highlight the importance of developing regulatory emotional self-efficacy, which is the belief in one's ability to regulate emotions in the academic context, as a strategy to reduce test anxiety and improve performance (Lizarte Simón et al., 2024). Supporting approaches such as enhancing social support, optimizing the online learning environment, and improving study satisfaction are also recommended, as they have a positive impact on self-efficacy and students' mental health (Carranza Esteban et al., 2022). Overall, interventions aimed at enhancing self-efficacy show great potential as both preventive and curative strategies for addressing academic stress and anxiety issues.

RQ 3: What are the research gaps and potential directions for future research that can be explored?

This study identifies several research gaps that remain open for further exploration. First, the majority of the studies analyzed used cross-sectional designs, which are unable to explain the causal relationships between self-efficacy, stress, and academic anxiety in a longitudinal manner. This calls for research with randomized controlled trial (RCT) designs or longitudinal studies to examine the sustainability of the effects of self-efficacy-based interventions (Hitches et al., 2022)).

Second, there is heterogeneity in the measurement of self-efficacy, ranging from academic self-efficacy, study-skills self-efficacy, to regulatory emotional self-efficacy, which complicates cross-study comparisons. Standardization of instruments or the development of a comprehensive conceptual framework has become an urgent need.

Third, the existing research context is still limited to specific populations and regions such as China, Peru, Australia, and programs in nursing or teacher education, thus failing to represent the cultural diversity and other educational systems, including vocational education and Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) (Carranza Esteban et al., 2022; Wafa et al., 2025).

Fourth, the differences in effects between positive and negative stress on self-efficacy have only been explored in a small number of studies, so a deeper understanding is needed on how to utilize stress as an adaptive learning stimulant without triggering burnout. Lastly, while there is evidence supporting the effectiveness of interventions such as stress management training and the enhancement of self-directed learning, the number of experimental studies evaluating these interventions in a standardized manner with large sample sizes and long-term measurements remains limited. Addressing these gaps will allow for the development of more evidence-based strategies to enhance self-efficacy, making them relevant across various educational contexts.

Conclusion

This study affirms that self-efficacy plays a crucial role as a protective factor in reducing academic stress and anxiety in students, both directly and through mediation and moderation mechanisms related to learning motivation, emotion regulation, and academic engagement. Various interventions, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy-based stress management training, self-directed learning programs, and the enhancement of regulatory emotional self-efficacy, have proven effective in improving academic self-confidence while alleviating symptoms of stress and anxiety. These findings indicate that enhancing self-efficacy can be a relevant preventive and curative strategy for mental health in educational settings.

Nevertheless, the majority of studies still use cross-sectional designs and exhibit high variability in self-efficacy measurements, making it difficult to compare results across studies. Additionally, the research context is limited to specific regions and populations, thus failing to represent the cultural diversity and educational systems. Future research is recommended to employ longitudinal designs or randomized controlled trials, standardize measurement instruments, and expand the scope to include more diverse populations and educational settings in order to strengthen the empirical evidence regarding the role of self-efficacy in reducing academic stress and anxiety.

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