



Academic Anxiety among Non-Pesantren IQT Students: An Islamic Educational Psychology Perspective

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article History: Received : 24-Jun-2026 Revised : 03-Oct-2026 Accepted : 05-Oct-2026 Available online : 30-Sep-2026 Keyword: Academic Anxiety; Islamic Education; Psychology.	This study examines the academic anxiety of non-pesantren graduates in the Quranic Sciences and Tafsir (IQT) Study Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta through Islamic Educational Psychology lens. Employing descriptive phenomenology with six purposively selected informants, five key findings emerged: (1) all informants (100%) experienced cognitive and affective anxiety alongside Arabic language and Quranic memorization competency deficits; (2) 83.3% considered dropping out due to deficient Islamic academic cultural capital; (3) upward social comparison with pesantren-background peers exacerbated self-efficacy deficits; (4) dominant coping strategies were spiritual followed by peer support and self-directed intensive study (66.7% each); and (5) anxiety was reframed as tazkiyah al-nafs, yielding identity transformation and psychological maturation. Findings corroborate Pekrun's (2024) Control-Value Theory and Islamic psychology perspectives. Implications include the urgency for program-level counseling, structured mentoring, and Islam-based self-efficacy enhancement.

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INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is one of the most frequently reported mental health problems among university students. An umbrella review of 25 systematic reviews and meta-analyses found a median prevalence of anxiety among university students of 32%, ranging from 7.4% to 55%, with higher rates among female students, students in Asia, and undergraduate students (Tan et al., 2023). A meta-analysis of 83 studies involving undergraduate students reported a weighted mean prevalence of approximately 39.65% (Ahmed et al., 2023). These figures differ due to variations in measurement instruments and study designs; however, both findings indicate that approximately one-third to two-fifths of university students experience significant levels of anxiety.

University students' mental health is often dynamic due to a variety of internal and external factors (Farhan & Shobahiya, 2024). Anxiety associated with academic situations is also related to academic achievement. A meta-analysis conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic found a negative correlation between anxiety and university students' academic achievement (Tang & He, 2023). This finding should be interpreted with caution because of the limited number of studies and the specific pandemic context. To understand how academic anxiety develops, Control-Value Theory (CVT) provides a relevant framework. The theory emphasizes the role of control and value appraisals in shaping emotions related to learning (Pekrun, 2024). Within this framework, anxiety can be understood as emerging when an academic demand is perceived as important, but its outcome is perceived as difficult to control.

This perspective is particularly relevant to students in the Department of Qur'anic Sciences and Exegesis (IQT). The program requires students to develop proficiency in Qur'anic reading and memorization, Arabic language skills, and an understanding of Qur'anic and exegetical sciences [refer to the curriculum/learning outcomes documents of the IQT Department at UMS]. For students from non-pesantren backgrounds, these demands may become a source of pressure because their prior academic and religious preparation differs from that of peers who have attended Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). Research in Arabic language education programs has documented differences in initial competencies among students graduating from general secondary schools and non-madrasah educational backgrounds (Khasanah & Tantowi, 2023; Tungkagi et al., 2022). A recent phenomenological study at IAIN Sultan Amai Gorontalo similarly found that non-pesantren students initially experienced anxiety and low self-confidence. However, these challenges also encouraged motivation and academic adaptation, while interactions with peers from pesantren backgrounds served as a source of learning support (Batalipu et al., 2026). Upward social comparison has also been associated with anxiety: among 463 Chinese university students, upward social comparison was positively correlated with relative deprivation, rumination, and social anxiety (Xu & Li, 2024). Differences in prior educational preparation can therefore be examined through

the concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) as a sensitizing lens, rather than as an established causal explanation.

From the perspective of Islamic psychology, experiences of dealing with pressure are not understood solely as emotional disturbances but are also associated with the spiritual dimension of human beings (Rassool & Luqman, 2023). Research on students' mental health dynamics from the perspective of Islamic educational psychology has been conducted at Pondok Pesantren Modern Assalaam (Farhan & Shobahiya, 2024). However, this study focused on a pesantren context rather than on non-pesantren university students.

Based on the foregoing discussion, the most closely related study (Batalipu et al., 2026) focused on Arabic language learning among students in Arabic Language Education and Islamic Religious Education programs, using social comparison and self-regulated learning as its analytical framework. To the best of the authors' knowledge, no phenomenological study has specifically examined academic anxiety as the primary focus among non-pesantren students in the Department of Qur'anic Sciences and Exegesis, including the demands of Qur'anic memorization, through the lens of Islamic educational psychology. Accordingly, this study aims to: (1) describe the experiences of academic anxiety among non-pesantren students in the IQT Department at UMS; (2) examine the competency gaps and social comparison experiences associated with academic anxiety; (3) identify the coping strategies employed by students; (4) examine the role of the institutional environment; and (5) understand how students make meaning of these experiences from the perspective of Islamic educational psychology.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The interview protocol was developed around six major themes, each grounded in specific theoretical frameworks and informed by relevant previous studies. *The first*, theme concerned participants' identities and academic backgrounds, examined through the perspectives of academic adaptation and Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. This theme was informed by the findings of Jin et al. (2026) and Habibi and Sholikha (2025), which are relevant to students' academic transitions and socio-educational backgrounds.

The second, theme explored participants' experiences of academic anxiety, drawing upon the academic anxiety theories proposed by Zeidner and Cassady. This theme was supported by studies conducted by Idoiaga-Mondragon et al. (2025) and Tang and He (2023), which discuss the dynamics of anxiety in educational settings.

The third, theme addressed competency gaps and social comparison experiences among participants, analyzed through Bandura's self-efficacy theory and Festinger's social comparison theory. The relevance of this theme was strengthened by the studies of Xu and Li (2024) and Lizarte Simón et al. (2024).

The fourth, theme focused on coping strategies and anxiety management, examined using Lazarus and Folkman's stress-coping theory as well as Subandi's

perspective on psychological coping. This theme was informed by the studies of Waterhouse and Samra (2025) and Saputra et al. (2022).

The fifth, theme investigated the role of the academic environment and institutional support in shaping participants' experiences. It was grounded in Baker and Siryk's theory of academic adaptation, particularly as operationalized in the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ). Relevant supporting studies include those by Bagdžiūnienė et al. (2025) and Ruiz-Camacho et al. (2025).

The sixth, theme explored participants' reflections and overall meaning-making processes regarding their experiences. This theme was analyzed through phenomenological inquiry and the perspective of Islamic Educational Psychology, drawing on the works of Liu (2025) and Rassool and Luqman (2022).

These six themes were systematically organized to ensure that the interview protocol comprehensively captured participants' experiences, encompassing their backgrounds, psychological challenges, adaptation strategies, environmental influences, and reflective interpretations of their lived experiences.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative method with a descriptive phenomenological design (Giorgi, 2009; van Manen, 2016), as academic anxiety is a subjective psychological experience that cannot be adequately reduced to statistical measurements (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Descriptive phenomenology aims to uncover the essential structure of a lived experience without imposing rigid theoretical presuppositions, thereby enabling researchers to move beyond surface descriptions toward invariant meanings and essences (van Manen, 2016; Zahavi, 2019). The perspective of Islamic Educational Psychology was integrated as an interpretive analytical framework to transcend the limitations of Western psychological approaches in understanding the experiences of students in Islamic higher education institutions (Mujib & Mudzakir, 2022; Rassool & Luqman, 2022).

The study was conducted in the Department of Qur'anic Sciences and Exegesis (Ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Tafsir/IQT) at Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS). Participants were selected through purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) based on the following criteria: (1) active students of the IQT Program at UMS; (2) non-boarding-school backgrounds (non-pesantren); and (3) completion of at least two semesters of study. Twelve primary participants were recruited according to the principle of data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015), supplemented by three supporting informants (academic advisors and a campus counselor) for source triangulation. Data were collected using three complementary techniques: (1) semi-structured in-depth interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015) guided by six thematic domains; (2) participant observation during academic activities; and (3) document analysis of the IQT Program's vision, mission, and curriculum.

Data analysis followed Giorgi's (2009) four-step phenomenological procedure: (1) holistic reading of interview transcripts; (2) identification of meaning units; (3) transformation of meaning units into psychological language through free imaginative variation; and (4) synthesis into a description of the essential structure of the lived experience. Trustworthiness was ensured through source triangulation, methodological triangulation, member checking, and researcher reflexivity (Tracy, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

FINDINGS

A. Participant Profile

This study involved six primary participants who were active students in the Department of Qur'anic Sciences and Exegesis (Ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Tafsir/IQT) at Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS) and came from non-boarding-school (non-pesantren) backgrounds. The participants consisted of three female students (P) and three male students (L), originating from general senior high schools (SMA), vocational high schools (SMK), and non-pesantren Islamic senior high schools (MA), with academic standing ranging from the first to the eighth semester.

All participants acknowledged having limited prior experience in Arabic language studies and Qur'anic sciences before entering the IQT program. From Bourdieu's perspective (Jin et al., 2026), this condition reflects a deficit in Islamic academic cultural capital, which constitutes a structural source of the academic anxiety experienced by the participants.

B. Finding 1: Forms and Intensity of Academic Anxiety

Phenomenological analysis identified four dimensions of academic anxiety experienced by all participants: cognitive, affective, physiological, and behavioral. These findings are consistent with Zeidner's (1998) multidimensional framework of academic anxiety and are supported by the systematic review conducted by Idoiaga-Mondragon et al. (2025). The frequency distribution of each anxiety dimension is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution Aspects of Academic Anxiety Informant (n=6)

Aspects of Academic Anxiety	Frequency (n=6)	Percentage (%)	Category
Cognitive Anxiety: Concerns about Grades, Exams, and Assessment	6	100%	Universal
Affective Aspect: feelings of low self-confidence and inferiority.	6	100%	Universal
Arabic Language and Qur'an Memorization Competence: concerns about proficiency in Arabic and the ability to memorize the Qur'an.	6	100%	Universal

Behavioral Aspect: tendencies to give up or consider transferring to another study program.	5	83,3%	Dominant
Social Comparison: comparing oneself with students who have a pesantren (Islamic boarding school) background.	5	83,3%	Dominant
Physiological Aspect: excessive cognitive load and insomnia.	4	66,7%	Majority
Future Concerns and Career Prospects: worries about future opportunities and career outcomes.	3	50,0%	Partly

Source : result of informant interviews 2026

All participants (100%) experienced cognitive anxiety characterized by concerns about grades, examinations, Arabic language proficiency, and Qur'anic memorization. This finding confirms Pekrun's (2024) Control-Value Theory (CVT), which posits that anxiety emerges from the combination of high value and low control. The participants perceived mastery of the Qur'an as highly important yet felt that they lacked sufficient competence to achieve the expected outcomes. Participant 3 stated: "When my mind can no longer bear the burden, and there is no outlet to express it, sometimes the thought of dropping out of university crosses my mind." This statement further indicates that the participant's anxiety had reached a level that may require institutional attention and psychological support.

The behavioral dimension of anxiety, manifested as thoughts of giving up or transferring to another study program, was reported by 83.3% of participants (five out of six). This pattern is consistent with the findings of Tang and He (2023), who demonstrated that high levels of anxiety consistently predict avoidance behaviors, including intentions to leave one's academic program. Only Participants 2 and 5 did not report such tendencies. Both participants possessed a strong sense of identity commitment from the outset. Participant 2 explained, "Every decision must be carried through, regardless of the risks," while Participant 5 stated, "I committed from the beginning that even students from non-pesantren backgrounds can successfully graduate from IQT." This initial commitment functioned as a psychological protective factor that mediated the impact of anxiety on withdrawal intentions.

C. Finding 2: Competency Gaps and Social Comparison

All participants reported significant competency gaps compared with peers from pesantren backgrounds, particularly in the areas of classical text reading, Arabic language proficiency, and Qur'anic memorization. These disparities consistently triggered upward social comparison, whereby non-pesantren students evaluated themselves against the competency standards of pesantren-trained peers.

This phenomenon is supported by the findings of Xu and Li (2024) in *Frontiers in Psychology*, which demonstrated that upward social comparison initiates a mediating chain of relative deprivation, rumination, and social anxiety. This mechanism is highly

relevant to the IQT context, where religious competencies are publicly visible and socially measurable.

The consequences of social comparison were reflected in reduced academic self-efficacy. Lizarte Simón et al. (2024) found that self-efficacy exerts a direct protective effect against anxiety and positively influences academic engagement. Participant 5 described a distinctive strategy of exercising before examinations to stimulate endorphin release and enhance self-confidence. This form of physiological coping suggests the presence of initially low self-confidence. Meanwhile, Participant 4 demonstrated an adaptive process of cognitive reframing "It is normal to feel confused by Arabic at first, but if it is studied gradually, everything can be learned and eventually becomes familiar." This statement reflects a process of cognitive restructuring, which has been associated with long-term improvements in self-efficacy (Bagdžiūnienė et al., 2025).

D. Finding 3: Coping Strategies and Anxiety Management

Phenomenological analysis identified six coping strategies across the narratives of the six participants. These strategies can be categorized into three broad dimensions: problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and spiritual coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Saputra et al., 2022). The most dominant coping strategy identified was prayer and tawakkul (trust in God), reported by 83.3% of participants. This finding reflects a distinctive characteristic of Muslim students and is consistent with the study of Saputra et al. (2022), which found that tawakkul significantly predicts academic resilience. Participant 1 expressed this perspective as follows "Just follow the process sincerely and with good intentions; God willing, Allah will make everything easier."

This expression should not be interpreted as passivity. Rather, it embodies a form of positive reappraisal that functions as an adaptive emotional regulation mechanism within the positive psychology literature. Rassool and Luqman (2022) argue that tawakkul in Islamic psychology represents active surrender, the act of entrusting outcomes to God after exerting one's maximum effort, rather than fatalistic resignation.

The intensification of independent learning (66.7%) represents the most adaptive form of problem-focused coping, as students directly address the root cause of their anxiety, namely competency deficits. Peer support (66.7%) functioned as a source of emotional support that reduced feelings of isolation. A scoping review by Waterhouse and Samra (2025), encompassing 165 studies, confirmed that the combination of problem-focused learning strategies and social support constitutes two of the most effective approaches for managing academic stress among university students.

Participant 3's adaptive distraction strategy "replacing it with other activities" and Participant 4's engagement in leisure activities have similarly been identified as

active mediators of academic stress (Ruiz-Camacho et al., 2025). Likewise, Participant 5's exercise-based strategy is consistent with physiological evidence demonstrating the anxiolytic effects of endorphin release through physical activity.

E. Finding 4: The Role of the Academic Environment and Institutional Needs

All participants identified the lack of institution-specific support for students from non-pesantren backgrounds as a factor that exacerbated their academic anxiety. Three primary needs were consistently highlighted: (1) counseling services at the departmental level; (2) structured mentoring programs; and (3) intensive Arabic language support. Participant 3 expressed the most urgent concern "Provide a counselor in every department. Having a counselor in each department would help students stay motivated and prevent them from ending their lives."

The final statement suggests that, for some students, anxiety may have reached a critical level requiring professional intervention and institutional support. The Tahfidz (Qur'anic memorization) course was specifically identified by Participant 6 as the greatest source of anxiety "Most of the difficulties I experience are related to obstacles in Tahfidz."

Burhani and Al-Khawaldeh (2026), in *Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences*, found that religious-linguistic anxiety in Indonesian Islamic higher education is closely associated with fear of making mistakes in public settings. From the perspective of Baker and Siryk's Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) framework, this condition reflects low levels of academic adjustment resulting from a mismatch between students' initial cultural capital and the academic habitus required within the IQT program.

F. Finding 5: Reflection, Post-Anxiety Growth, and the Perspective of Islamic Educational Psychology

The most phenomenologically significant dimension identified in this study was the narrative of growth emerging from experiences of academic anxiety. Rather than interpreting anxiety solely as a destructive experience, all participants framed it as a turning point that fostered identity transformation and psychological maturity. Participant 4 reflected "This experience changed my perspective and made me more mature." Participant 6 stated "Alhamdulillah, we were able to prove that those of us without a pesantren background can overcome all these challenges." Similarly, Participant 2 explained "Every difficulty is accompanied by ease; ease always finds its way."

These narratives represent post-adversity growth, a process in which personal development emerges as a consequence of, rather than despite, adversity. Empirically, this finding is supported by Bagdžiūnienė et al. (2025), who found that lecturer support, academic feedback, and learning autonomy significantly predict academic resilience. Liu (2025) further demonstrated that a growth mindset—the belief that abilities can be developed through effort—mediates the relationship between

emotional intelligence and academic buoyancy. This pattern was clearly reflected in Participant 5, who internalized the belief that students from non-pesantren backgrounds are capable of succeeding in the IQT program. This belief became a foundation of identity commitment and functioned as a psychological protective factor.

DISCUSSION

This descriptive phenomenological study revealed five major conclusions regarding the academic anxiety experienced by non-pesantren students in the Department of Qur'anic Sciences and Exegesis (IQT) at Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS) from the perspective of Islamic Educational Psychology. Observational data further confirmed the interview findings. Several students from non-pesantren backgrounds tended to remain passive during classroom discussions, demonstrated hesitation when reading Arabic texts, and exhibited signs of tension when asked to explain concepts related to Qur'anic exegesis. Triangulation with curriculum documents revealed that the high competency standards articulated in the IQT Program's vision and learning outcomes were directly associated with the intensity of academic anxiety experienced by students, particularly those who entered the program without adequate prior preparation. These findings suggest the need for a recalibration between graduate competency expectations and the support systems available to non-pesantren students.

The study also highlights that the primary source of anxiety is not merely individual weakness but a structural gap in Islamic academic cultural capital. Non-pesantren students enter the IQT academic environment without competencies that are often implicitly assumed as prerequisites for success. Nevertheless, participants demonstrated adaptive coping through prayer and tawakkul, which functioned as spiritual forms of emotional regulation and positive cognitive reappraisal. These findings support previous studies linking religiosity and spirituality with academic resilience and psychological well-being.

In addition, participants emphasized the need for greater institutional support, particularly through counseling services, structured mentoring, and Arabic language assistance. This suggests that academic adaptation should be viewed as a shared responsibility between students and educational institutions. From the perspective of Islamic Educational Psychology, academic anxiety may also possess a transformational dimension, as experiences of hardship accompanied by sabr and tawakkul can facilitate tazkiyat al-nafs, strengthen identity, and promote psychological and spiritual growth. Therefore, interventions should address both academic competencies and students' spiritual-psychological development to foster successful adaptation and well-being.

From the perspective of Islamic Educational Psychology, academic anxiety that is experienced with patience (sabr) and tawakkul can be understood as a process of tazkiyat al-nafs—the purification and maturation of the self through trials and

challenges. Mujib and Mudzakir (2022) explain that hardship (*musibah*), when confronted with patience, is not merely a source of stress but also a mechanism of spiritual and psychological growth that contributes to the development of *nafs al-mutma'innah* (the tranquil and mature soul).

The internalization of Islamic values emphasizing that seeking knowledge (*ṭalab al-ʿilm farīḍah*) is a religious obligation serves as a form of transcendental motivation that extends beyond academic requirements alone, providing deeper meaning to the struggles associated with learning (Rachmat et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the coping strategies identified in this study operationally reflect core Islamic values. Peer support embodies *taʾāwun* (mutual assistance); intensified learning reflects *mujāhadah* (earnest striving in the pursuit of knowledge); and seeking guidance from lecturers or senior students demonstrates *tawāḍuʿ* (humility) and proper etiquette toward those possessing knowledge. The integration of spiritual, social, and problem-focused coping strategies among participants who successfully overcame academic anxiety confirms the relevance of Islamic Educational Psychology as a valid, contextual, and holistic analytical framework for understanding psychological phenomena within Islamic higher education institutions (Rassool & Luqman, 2022; Mujib & Mudzakir, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that academic anxiety among non-boarding school students in the Department of Qurʾanic Studies and Interpretation (IQT) at UMS is a universal and multidimensional phenomenon rooted in the limited Islamic academic cultural capital required within the study environment. Anxiety manifests in cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, as well as in challenges related to Arabic language proficiency and Qurʾan memorization, which are further intensified by social comparisons with students from Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) backgrounds. Nevertheless, students develop predominantly spiritual coping strategies through prayer (*duʿa*) and *tawakkul* (trust in Allah), which function as adaptive forms of emotional regulation. From the perspective of Islamic Educational Psychology, anxiety is understood not merely as an academic obstacle but also as a process of *tazkiyah al-nafs* (self-purification) that contributes to psychological growth, strengthened self-identity, and spiritual maturity.

For implication, these findings highlight that addressing academic anxiety among non-*pesantren* students requires an approach that focuses not only on individual adaptation but also on systematic institutional support. Therefore, the study program should provide counseling services, Arabic language and Qurʾan memorization matriculation programs, Islamic values-based self-efficacy training, and structured mentoring systems grounded in the principle of *taʾawun* (mutual assistance) to facilitate students' academic adjustment. Furthermore, future research

should expand the participant pool, conduct comparative studies across higher education institutions, and develop empirically validated intervention models based on Islamic Educational Psychology to enhance students' psychological well-being and academic success.

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