

Evaluating Anxiety towards Graduate Assessment Test among University Students of Pakistan

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Abstract:

National Testing Service conducts a test named Graduate Assessment Test which is certified by Higher Education Commission for the students who wish to apply for M.S/M.Phil programs. Students are required to score at least 50% marks in order to pass the test. Records and observations have shown massive failure in the test. The purpose of this paper was to enlighten test anxiety among Pakistani University students. The research aimed at finding out the true reasons behind such a large number of failures. Questionnaire was filled by 30 students each from six of the social science departments. Researcher delimited her study to 4 of educational institutes from Faisalabad including Government College University Faisalabad, National University of Modern Languages, Riphah International University and Government Post Graduate College. Results have shown that there are high levels of anxiety among student towards attempting this test. Participants of research have also objected on the pattern of the test considering it an unjustified and illogical one.

Students perceived GAT as a blockage between them and higher studies. The research provides reasons of large scale failure in the test and also describes some possible solutions to help overcome this problem.

Key words: GAT, Anxiety, Failure Rate, NTS, Social Sciences.

Introduction:

Higher Education Commission (HEC) Pakistan has authorized National Testing Service (henceforth, NTS) to conduct the test for students who want to apply for post-graduate studies in every discipline of studies. The scenario is that, many competent students fail to pass General Assessment Test (henceforth, GAT) and are subsequently left unable to apply for the admission in M.S/M.Phil programs. In this situation the failed students are experiencing an unpleasant pause in their studies; on the other hand the students of master's degree who wish to continue their studies are on verge of an unwanted stop. The fear creates a great deal of anxiety among final year students along with those who are attempting the test and are ready to take admission in postgraduate programs. The level of anxiety varies for the students of different departments as NTS has just one criterion and pattern for the applicants from every discipline of social sciences. If not terminated the test must have different patterns for different fields so that the students could feel some ease in attempting test and get over their unnecessary anxiety.

Several attempts have been made in order to abolish this test partly from different institutions and partly by the highly affected students as it is sometimes considered to be invalid and unjustified test. Finding the high failure rate, private and also some public sector universities have allowed the admission to the students without GAT but they require

students to pass the test before the completion of their degree. There are cases when students had completed their M.Phil and even Ph.D but they were not able to pass GAT even after several attempts and consequently under HEC rules their degrees were canceled altogether. These types of exceptions made serious moves in demolishing the obstruction of GAT in their way to higher studies by going to the court and filing cases against NTS to have wrong ways of testing what they claim to test. In these cases NTS is also identified to have plagiarized questions for its tests and being unofficially controlled by HEC.

Till now NTS has succeeded in sustaining every effort made against it. It results again in pressurizing the applicants with an urge to pass the test because they have no other option if they want to take their studies to another level. Researcher aims to find the actual reason of anxiety among students, to look if it is the difficulty of the test or it is the huge precedence of failed cases or some other possible reason which makes them tense about attempting the test. The research will unveil the true reason of anxiety among applicants towards GAT.

Objectives of the study:

There are two major goals for this investigation. The first objective is to explore level of anxiety among social sciences students by comparative analysis and second is to explain the anxiety factors and possible solutions.

Research questions:

Research questions are:

- What are the reasons of anxiety among final year students about GAT?
- Is the level of anxiety same across all departments?
- What are the possible solutions to overcome anxiety fear?

Review of Related Literature:

Researchers define anxiety at different levels and in different terms. Horwitz (1986) describes language anxiety as “a subjective experience” (p.125), which varies from individual to individual according to their cognitive abilities and actively influencing external environmental factors. Anxiety is also sometimes considered to be specially pertaining to process of language learning. Young (1992) emphasizes that language anxiety is a “complicated psychological phenomenon peculiar to language learning” (p.157). Psychologists Liebert and Morris (1967) attributed test anxiety to two main components: worry and emotionality. Worry refers to cognitive factors, such as negative expectations or feelings of inadequacy, and emotionality refers to the physical symptoms, such as increased heart rate, muscle tension, or butterflies. Both are aversive elements that can create anxiety, but it is the cognitive factors that have the strongest connection to performance.

Researchers claim that language anxiety affects students' confidence and self-esteem and on the whole hampers proficiency in language acquisition. Owens (2008) claims that, “Anxious children often have to exert more effort to perform well because they're trying to manage their anxiety while executing a task” it directly means one cannot be completely active in doing any task if he/she is suffering from any kind of anxiety. Hopko (2005) notes effects of anxiety as “a student with high anxiety can fall behind academically because he or she is distracted and has impaired verbal working memory skills when anxious”, these claims relate the failure of students in GAT directly with anxiety because the test checks their second language proficiency and their analytical reasoning skills within a very limited time frame.

A large number of students are suffering from NTS fear, which is the cause of cognitive anxiety among them while solving the test and even before the test day. Cognitive test

anxiety is composed of individuals' cognitive reactions to evaluative situations, or internal dialogue regarding evaluative situations, in the times prior to, during, and after evaluative tasks. Several reasons for anxiety have been proposed by the experts including many different interrelated factors. Cognitive test anxiety center on (a) comparing self-performance to peers, (b) considering the consequences of failure, (c) low levels of confidence in performance, (d) excessive worry over evaluation, (e) causing sorrow for their parents, (f) feeling unprepared for tests, and (g) loss of self-worth (Def-fenbacher, 1980; Depreeuw, 1984; Hembree, 1988; Morris et al., 1981). If untreated, anxiety can persist for years (Mychailyszyn, Mendez, & Kendall, 2010), but proper interventions can decrease anxiety and improve learning (Ozsivadjian, Knott, & Magiati, 2012). These types of arguments given by the scholars urge the researcher to work in decreasing or finishing the anxiety among students towards GAT because it will help them on large scale in saving their time and money.

Like Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) and Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), GAT General is the test administered by NTS for the admission in all MS / MPhil classes in all Pakistan universities, Colleges, and Research Institute. It is compulsory for all applicants to qualify GAT prior to they apply for admission to the university for M.Phil or MS classes. The minimum qualifying score of GAT is 50. In every batch more than 1000 people apply for registration and take test. The passing ratio is not more than 4% to 5%. The test result remains valid for just two years. Test pattern of the GAT consisted of following sections:

- Quantitative Ability – Mathematics
- Verbal Ability - Analogies, Antonyms, Sentence Completion, and Reading Comprehension -- English
- Analytical Ability - Analytical Reasoning and Logical Reasoning

Applicants with masters in mathematics fail in GAT General. Similarly, the failure ratio of master in English applicants is above 90%. Reason of this situation is that the standardized aptitude tests are not based on any subject. If mathematics and English are the roots of such tests, then why these tests are designed also for subjects opposite to Math and English. Actually, no subject matter is the part of the test. The whole of the test is said to be of general nature which is not the actual case because it definitely has a subject matter of English comprising 50% of the test. It cannot be considered of general nature because for many departments English is no way a general subject because they don't have any interaction with this foreign language in their classes and any related subject.

Methodology:

The present study is designed to investigate university students anxiety in six disciplines of social science students who are supposed to clear GAT-general (Graduate Assessment Test) to appear in further studies, in M.S/M.phil. The main purpose of the study is to evaluate the level and causes of anxiety that students experience regarding NTS testing system. The study is descriptive in nature. A suitable tool for this kind of investigation is quantitative research which finds correlation between variables through statistics. By numeric, objective and deductive approach it is easy to describe human practices.

Participants:

Participants in this study are volunteers from discipline of social sciences at Government College University Faisalabad, National University of Modern Languages, Riphah International University and Government Post Graduate College. The target participants were 180 in number. All were final year students of disciplines of social sciences. Students were selected randomly. Departments included were

Mathematics (n=30), English (n=30), Law (n=30), Urdu (n=30), Psychology (n=30) and Islamic studies (n=30). “n” is number of students selected randomly. Material in this study includes data regarding anxiety, graduate course content and graduate examination performance.

Tool for data collection: Close-ended Likert scale was given to the students which helped to access that respondents were agree to particular statement and also helped to know how students felt towards such tests. The students responded to 15 questions on a 5-point scale (1. Strongly agree, 2. Agree, 3. Neither Agree/Disagree, 4. Disagree, 5. Strongly disagree). Total score is obtained by adding individual item score and high score at any level showed high ratio at that level. With SPSS analytics software, result was made.

Findings:

The goal of the research is to gain insight about test anxiety and to answer the research questions raised previously. Findings of the research are:

1. Test Validity: Test validity ensures a test measure what it is supposed to measure. The criterion of GAT-general is same across the social sciences disciplines; it has 25% for quantitative ability, 25% for analytical reasoning and the rest of 50% for English language knowledge. The students which come under the discipline like Islamic studies and Urdu have no contact with mathematics and English for last 4 to 6 years of their academic career. Large numbers of students are of the view that assessment criterion of GAT is invalid and faulty. See the figure 1.1

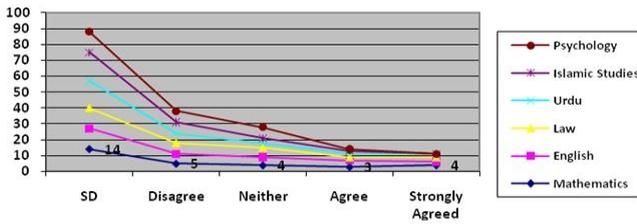


Figure 1.1: GAT is justified?

20 to 90% students from all departments are disagreed on the statement that GAT is a justified test, while the ratio of agreement is only 10%.

- ***Fear before attempt:***

It is natural for students to feel stressed before attempting a test but some tests have more effect on the applicants because of their already settled status of difficulty. GAT has a history of failing the applicants more than any logical test would fail. Exceptions are there with more than five attempts and having never been able to pass the test. These types of precedences make new applicants very much conscious and even fearful towards the test.

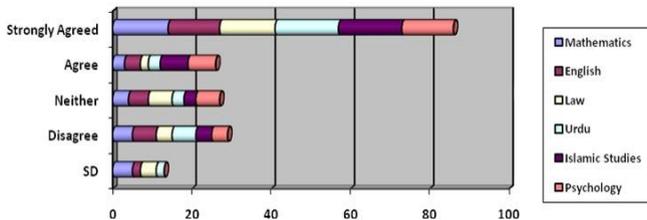


Figure 2.2: You have fear of getting failed in GAT, before even attempting it?

The graph in figure 1.2 shows that on the whole almost 80% students agreed on the statement that they feel terrified about GAT and they fear from getting failed even before making any attempt for the test. On the other hand 40% students disagreed

on the statement which is also a large proportion. So the question has a mixed response which shows that many students are determined to pass the test too.

3. Fear of English:

Language is a complex phenomenon, foreign languages are always considered difficult to learn and use by the non-natives. GAT has half of its portion devoted to a language which is not native to Pakistani: English. Departments like Islamic-Studies, Urdu and Mathematics involve minor or no subject of English in their degree programs which creates a very much expected situation on the part of students from these departments: having very little proficiency in English. Even if huge influence of media creates an English mixed sociolinguistics context, it will not be enough for applicants to pass the test because the kind of questions asked in the test need academic polishing.

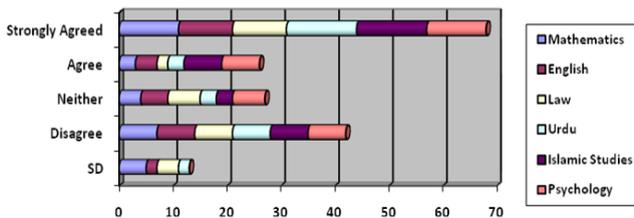


Figure 1.3 : Your major subject should be tested in place of English in the test.

Graphic representation in figure 1.3 shows that 70% students agreed on the statement that their major subject should be tested in place of English in the test while the rest of 30% strongly agreed on it (this question applies on the student of English department considering English their major subject i.e. English should comprise 50% of the test). Answers to this question show that students don't want to be tested in the subject not related to their own fields of studies and consider a reason of failure too.

4. Faulty Pattern:

Pattern is a pillar on which any test or exam bases, according to which it is made or developed. Patterns of tests are developed very carefully because the one passing everyone will not be having a standard pattern same is the case with difficulty level of it which should not be as much difficult to be able to fail everyone. Massive failure makes it obvious to consider the patterning of the test, which can be anticipated as not being a good one. When asked from the students there responses showed the large ratio of strong agreement on the statement displaying accumulatively 100% agreement on the question of need for the revision of test and having a wrong pattern presently. As shown in Figure 1.4:

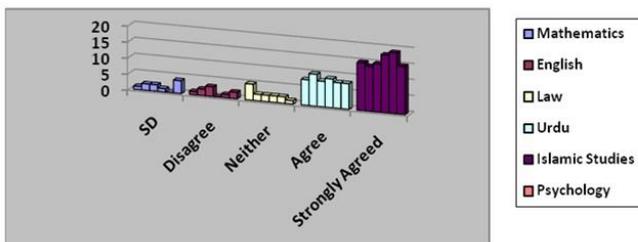
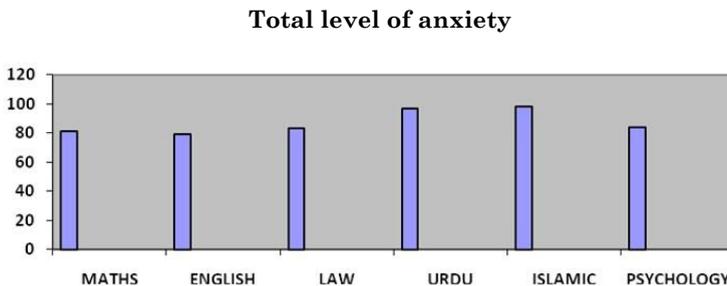


Figure 1.4: Your major subject should be tested in place of English in the test.

Result:

Overall result can be shown as following:



Accumulative results in the figure above are showing higher levels of anxiety in every department. It is between 70 to 98% having minimum of 70% anxiety level in English department and higher than this in all others with exception of Urdu and Islamic Studies departments showing 98% cases of anxiety level.

Conclusion:

Higher Education Commission's policy for selecting candidates for M.S/M.Phil programs via a test conducted by National Testing Services has completed quite a long time now. After a keen observation on the results of numerous students researcher was revealed with the fact that a massive number of applicants could not pass the test. This scenario urged the researcher to investigate through the reason of such a large number of failures among applicants. Results of selected sample bared the reason behind this massive failure. Different factors involved the reason of it first of which was anxiety among the applicants. Anxiety was most commonly caused by the previously failed cases. Same pattern of the test for every department of social sciences was another reason. Research showed that the results can be increased and the level of anxiety can be decreased if NTS revises its pattern and makes GAT a more valid test. Participants included in research did not oppose the test but its patterning scheme. Tests are not designed consciously to pass or fail the students but their purpose is to select few among many on the bases of certain skills. GAT fails more than an expected number of its applicants which consequently questions its credibility. A positive change or revision of its pattern can make this test a valid one.

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Appendix

Semester _____ **Department** _____

University _____

Please mark the write answer with (√).

	Question	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	GAT is a vindicated test?					
2	It is a good way to segregate the students for MS/M.Phil?					
3	The idea of attempting GAT creates anxiety among you.					
4	It is prone to fail the applicants.					
5	You have fear of getting failed in GAT, before even attempting it?					
6	Pressure from universities makes you more anxious.					
7	It creates monetary tension for you.					
8	It should not have same pattern for across the social sciences.					
9	Your major subject should be tested in place of English in the test.					
10	The test has no faults.					
11	GAT has a wrong pattern.					
12	NTS should revise the present pattern of					

	GAT.					
13	If it is really “Graduate Assessment Test” then it should test every subject’s knowledge studied by the applicant from primary to graduation level.					
14	The test should be abolished altogether.					
15	Anxiety (if yes) towards test is the sole reason of massive failure in it.					