

# Psychological and Academic Challenges During the Transition to University Among Students in War-Affected Middle Eastern Contexts: A Cross-Sectional Survey

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## ABSTRACT

The transition from high school to university is a crucial period marked by significant academic, social, and psychological changes. Students must adjust to new learning environments, different curricula, unfamiliar subjects, and higher expectations for self-directed study. Many relocate away from home for the first time, separating from family and established support networks, while forming new social connections with peers from diverse cultural and geographic backgrounds. These experiences, while fostering personal growth, often increase stress and anxiety.

First-year university students commonly face academic challenges such as heavier workloads, new subjects, and differences in curriculum structure. Social adjustment and independent living without parental support further compound stress. Across the Middle East—including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait—students pursue higher education in diverse internationalized environments, intensifying social and academic adjustments.

In conflict-affected areas, such as regions impacted by the ongoing US-Israel-Iran tensions, these challenges are amplified. High school students experience disruptions in exams, grading uncertainty, and school closures, which contribute to anxiety. First-year university students face combined stressors of academic transition and conflict exposure, increasing the risk of poor mental health outcomes.

This study assessed psychological well-being (anxiety and stress) and academic adjustment among high school and first-year university students in Middle Eastern contexts, examining the relationship between war-related experiences and transition outcomes.

## METHODS

**Study Design and Setting:** A cross-sectional survey was conducted among students in Middle Eastern countries, including Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait. Two groups were targeted: final-year high school students and first-year university students.

**Participants and Sampling:** A total of 500 participants were recruited using convenience sampling via peer networks and online forms: 260 high school students and 240 first-year university students (medical students). Inclusion criteria were enrollment in the target educational level and age  $\geq 16$  years. Students with incomplete responses or higher-level enrollment were excluded.

**Data Collection Tool:** An online self-administered questionnaire collected:

- Demographics (age, gender, country)
- Transition-related experiences (living away from home, adapting to new curriculum, new subjects, social adaptation)

- Academic disruption due to war/conflict (exam uncertainty, grading issues, school closures)

**Assessment of Anxiety and Stress:**

- Anxiety: **GAD-7** (0–21), with scores  $\geq 10$  indicating moderate/severe anxiety.
- Stress: **PSS-10** (0–40), with scores  $\geq 20$  indicating high stress.

**Pilot Testing and Reliability:** Questionnaire pilot-tested with 15 students. Internal consistency: GAD-7  $\alpha = 0.87$ , PSS-10  $\alpha = 0.85$ .

**Data Analysis:** Descriptive statistics summarized participant characteristics, anxiety, and stress scores. Independent t-tests and chi-square tests compared high school and university students. Multiple regression identified predictors of anxiety and stress, including educational level, conflict exposure, and transition challenges.

**Ethical Considerations:** Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and withdrawable at any time. The study adhered to ethical research standards.

**RESULTS****Participant Characteristics:**

- Total participants: 500 (260 high school, 240 university)
- Mean age:  $18.6 \pm 1.2$  years
- Gender: 280 females (56%), 220 males (44%)

**GAD-7 Anxiety Scores:**

- High school: mean  $7.1 \pm 3.2$ ; 35% (n=91) moderate/severe anxiety
- University: mean  $10.2 \pm 3.5$ ; 58% (n=139) moderate/severe anxiety
- Significant difference:  $t = 9.12$ ,  $p < 0.001$

**PSS Stress Scores:**

- High school: mean  $15.4 \pm 4.1$ ; 30% (n=78) high stress
- University: mean  $19.8 \pm 5.0$ ; 54% (n=130) high stress
- Significant difference:  $t = 8.76$ ,  $p < 0.001$

**Transition-Related Challenges:**

- University: adjusting to new curriculum (72%), living away from home (65%), forming new social networks (61%), independent academic management (58%)
- High school: academic uncertainty due to disrupted schedules (70%), confusion over grading (64%)

**Impact of Conflict Exposure:**

- High conflict-related stress associated with higher GAD-7 scores ( $11.0 \pm 3.1$  vs  $7.5 \pm 2.9$ ) and higher PSS scores ( $21.2 \pm 4.7$  vs  $16.1 \pm 3.8$ ),  $p < 0.001$

**Regression Analysis:**

Significant predictors of higher anxiety and stress:

- Educational level (university vs high school):  $\beta = 0.32$  for anxiety,  $\beta = 0.30$  for stress ( $p < 0.001$ )
- Academic disruption:  $\beta = 0.28$  for anxiety,  $\beta = 0.26$  for stress ( $p < 0.001$ )
- Conflict-related stress:  $\beta = 0.35$  for anxiety,  $\beta = 0.38$  for stress ( $p < 0.001$ )

**DISCUSSION**

First-year university students in Middle Eastern countries experience higher anxiety and stress than high school students, reflecting the combined challenges of academic transition and conflict exposure.

**Transition Stressors:**

- New academic system and subjects
- Adapting to unfamiliar curriculum
- Living independently away from family
- Forming new social networks with diverse peers

**Conflict-Related Stress:**

- High school: exam scheduling uncertainty, grading confusion due to war
- University: ongoing concerns about personal safety, family wellbeing, and regional instability
- Conflict strongly correlated with higher anxiety and stress scores

**Implications:**

- Early interventions, counseling, and orientation programs support student adaptation.
- Clear communication about academic schedules reduces high school uncertainty.
- Universities should provide structured support for first-year students living away from home.

**Limitations:**

- Convenience sampling may introduce bias
- Self-reported measures may over- or underestimate symptoms
- Cross-sectional design limits causal interpretation

**CONCLUSION**

Transitioning from high school to university is associated with significant increases in anxiety and stress, worsened by living away from family, adapting to new curricula, and war-related uncertainty. Both high school and university students in Middle Eastern countries require targeted interventions to support mental health during this critical period.

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**Figure 1. Anxiety and Stress Levels Among High School and University Students in Middle Eastern Contexts**

Indicator	High School	University
GAD-7 Anxiety Score	7	10
PSS Stress Score	15	20
Moderate/Severe Anxiety%	35	58

