

Academic Anxiety among Art Students in Chinese Universities: Levels, Barriers, and Priorities for Educational Intervention

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Abstract

Academic anxiety is widely documented among university students, but the experiences of art students remain underexamined, particularly in China, where creative work is assessed through a combination of written examinations, studio practice, public critique, performance, portfolios, and comparatively subjective judgement. This study examined the level and profile of academic anxiety among art students in Chinese universities, identified barriers to reducing it, and ranked student-preferred interventions. A descriptive cross-sectional survey was completed by 400 undergraduate and postgraduate art students recruited through university and student networks. The 59-item bilingual questionnaire assessed test anxiety, assignment anxiety, classroom participation anxiety, peer comparison anxiety, perceived barriers, and proposed improvements. Descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha were calculated in IBM SPSS Statistics 25. The overall academic anxiety score was moderate ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 0.62$) but close to the high-level threshold. Assignment anxiety was the only subdimension in the high range ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.70$), followed by peer comparison anxiety ($M = 3.64$), test anxiety ($M = 3.61$), and classroom participation anxiety ($M = 3.57$). The most serious barriers were the cost of art materials and tuition, insufficient art-specific mental health services, limited training in constructive critique, weak student-lecturer communication about well-being, and uncertain career prospects. Students gave highest priority to transparent grading rubrics, safe spaces for discussing emotional concerns, and counselling tailored to art students. The findings indicate that academic anxiety in art education should not be treated solely as an individual coping problem. Assessment design, critique practices, workload, support services, and career preparation are central components of an effective response.

Keywords: Academic Anxiety, Art Students, Chinese Universities, Assessment, Critique, Student Well-Being

Introduction

Academic anxiety refers to the cognitive, emotional, physiological, and behavioural reactions that arise when students perceive academic demands as threatening or beyond their available coping resources. It may appear as worry, impaired concentration, sleep disturbance, physical arousal, avoidance, or fear of failure. Although a limited degree of concern can encourage preparation, persistent or intense anxiety can disrupt attention and

memory, weaken engagement, reduce academic performance, and damage well-being (Cassady & Johnson, 2002; Hamilton et al., 2021; Putwain et al., 2023). The problem has become increasingly visible in higher education because students face demanding workloads, competitive evaluation, uncertain employment prospects, and rapid changes in learning and assessment. Research conducted during and after the COVID-19 period also showed that anxiety among university students was shaped by disrupted learning, social isolation, online assessment, and uncertainty about academic progression (Ewell et al., 2022; Wang & Liu, 2022).

The Chinese higher education context gives academic anxiety particular significance. Examination performance, academic ranking, family expectations, and competition for postgraduate study and employment can make educational outcomes feel highly consequential. Studies of Chinese students have connected anxiety with weaker academic engagement, lower achievement, psychological distress, and problematic patterns of comparison with peers (Hong et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023; Zhang & Zeng, 2024). Yet the literature has concentrated mainly on general university populations, medical students, science and engineering students, or test anxiety considered in isolation. This emphasis can conceal important disciplinary differences in the ways academic anxiety is produced and experienced.

Art education is a distinctive academic environment. Art students complete conventional academic work, but they also produce drawings, designs, performances, recordings, portfolios, and other creative outputs. These outputs are frequently developed over long periods, displayed publicly, discussed in critiques, and evaluated through criteria that combine technical competence, creativity, originality, communication, concept development, and personal expression. Unlike an examination in which the expected answer may be relatively clear, the standards applied to creative work can be interpreted differently by students and lecturers. This uncertainty may increase concern about whether the work is good enough, whether feedback is fair, and whether the student can complete a satisfactory product within the available time. Research on creativity anxiety has shown that apprehension can be specific to creative production itself, while studies of arts engagement also suggest that artistic activity can sometimes support well-being (Chen et al., 2022; Daker et al., 2020). Art education may therefore be both a source of meaning and a site of unusually complex academic pressure.

Several features of art programmes may intensify anxiety. First, studio and performance assignments are often time-consuming, iterative, and difficult to complete through last-minute study. Second, public display and critique expose unfinished or highly personal work to lecturers and peers. Third, scholarships, awards, internships, exhibitions, and entry to the creative industries encourage comparison of artistic progress. Fourth, students may face substantial financial costs for materials, specialist tools, instruments, software, production, travel, and tuition. Finally, the perceived instability of employment in cultural and creative occupations may place additional pressure on students to demonstrate that their educational choice is worthwhile. These pressures are not fully captured when academic anxiety is measured only through written examinations.

The present study responds to this gap by examining four related dimensions: test anxiety, assignment anxiety, classroom participation anxiety, and peer comparison anxiety. These dimensions were selected because they represent four recurring sources of evaluative pressure in art education: formal assessment, sustained creative production, public participation, and visible comparison with peers. Their conceptualisation was informed by the Cognitive Test Anxiety Scale, the Perception of Academic Stress Scale, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale and Personal Report of Communication Apprehension, and the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure (Cassady & Johnson, 2002; Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015; Horwitz et al., 1986; McCroskey, 1982; Gibbons & Buunk, 1999), with items adapted to studio, performance, and creative-learning contexts. Test anxiety includes worry and physiological arousal associated with written, practical, studio, or skills-based examinations. Assignment anxiety concerns workload, deadlines, creative uncertainty, and subjective grading. Classroom participation anxiety refers to discomfort when presenting work, demonstrating a technique, speaking during critique, or participating in discussion. Peer comparison anxiety reflects concern about falling behind classmates, receiving less praise, or observing the achievements of others in class and on social media. Examining these dimensions together makes it possible to identify whether art students' anxiety is concentrated around one form of academic activity or distributed across the broader learning environment.

The study also moves beyond describing anxiety by asking students to evaluate barriers to reducing it and potential improvements. This needs-analysis component is important because support is often framed as counselling or personal stress management, whereas the sources of anxiety may also be embedded in curriculum, assessment, pedagogy, financial demands, and institutional culture. Student rankings can help educators distinguish between interventions that are desirable in principle and those perceived as most urgent by the affected group.

Accordingly, the study addressed three questions: (1) What is the level of academic anxiety among art students in Chinese universities, both overall and across the four subdimensions? (2) What challenges make academic anxiety difficult to reduce? and (3) What educational and institutional responses do students consider most important? By integrating these questions, the article contributes discipline-specific evidence on an underrepresented population and translates descriptive findings into priorities for curriculum design, teaching practice, student support, and policy.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Academic Anxiety and its Dimensions

Academic anxiety is broader than test anxiety. It encompasses concern arising from academic demands, evaluation, workload, participation, comparison, and uncertainty. Its effects can be cognitive, such as intrusive worry and difficulty concentrating; emotional, such as fear or discouragement; physiological, such as trembling and rapid heartbeat; and behavioural, such as procrastination, silence, avoidance, or withdrawal. These reactions can consume resources needed for learning and reduce students' capacity to perform even when they possess the relevant knowledge or skills (Schillinger et al., 2021). For this reason, a multidimensional approach is more informative than treating anxiety as a single undifferentiated score.

Test anxiety is the most established dimension in the literature. The Cognitive Test Anxiety Scale developed by Cassady and Johnson (2002) focuses on worry, cognitive interference, and concern about failure. In art education, tests may include practical or studio examinations in which students must demonstrate a technique or produce work under observation. Such assessments combine time pressure, performance exposure, and uncertainty about judgement. Evidence from Chinese art students indicates that stress, intolerance of uncertainty, and sleep quality are connected with test anxiety, suggesting that examination anxiety is influenced by wider academic and psychological conditions rather than by test content alone (Liu et al., 2024).

Assignment anxiety arises when workload, deadlines, quality expectations, and the complexity of tasks are perceived as difficult to manage. Bedewy and Gabriel's (2015) Perception of Academic Stress Scale identifies academic workload and performance expectations as central sources of stress. Creative assignments add further demands: the outcome cannot always be planned in advance, revision may continue until the deadline, materials may fail, and assessment may be partly subjective. Anxiety may therefore produce procrastination or cognitive disruption, which in turn makes the assignment more difficult to complete. This reciprocal pattern makes assignment anxiety especially important for programmes organised around projects, portfolios, performances, and exhibitions.

Classroom participation anxiety concerns speaking, demonstrating, presenting, and interacting in public learning settings. Horwitz et al. (1986) and McCroskey (1982) showed that communication apprehension can lead students to avoid participation even when they are capable of contributing. In an art classroom, participation includes presenting creative work, receiving critique, explaining a concept, demonstrating a method, and responding to questions. Because the object being discussed may represent considerable effort or personal expression, critique can be experienced as evaluation of both the work and the self. Silence during critique may therefore be a behavioural indicator of anxiety rather than a lack of preparation or interest.

Peer comparison anxiety results from monitoring one's progress relative to others. Social comparison can provide useful information, but it can also undermine self-confidence when students interpret classmates' achievements as evidence that they are falling behind (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999; Jansen et al., 2022). The public nature of art education makes comparison highly visible: works are displayed together, performances occur before shared audiences, and feedback may implicitly rank quality. Digital platforms intensify this process because students repeatedly encounter curated images of classmates' work, awards, internships, and exhibitions. Hong et al. (2022) found that social comparison was associated with cognitive anxiety and self-confidence in a Chinese educational context, supporting its inclusion as a distinct dimension in the present study.

Academic Anxiety in Art Education and the Chinese Context

International research shows that academic anxiety is common across disciplines, but its triggers vary according to curriculum and assessment. In creative disciplines, anxiety may arise from perfectionism, fear of judgement, public performance, subjective criteria, and uncertainty about future work. Daker et al. (2020) described creativity anxiety as a domain-specific form of anxiety linked to creative thinking and production. Shaughnessy et al. (2022)

further highlighted the insecurity experienced by early-career arts professionals during disruption to the cultural sector. These findings suggest that anxiety in art education cannot be understood simply by applying evidence from examination-centred programmes.

In China, the interaction between competitive education and the distinctive conditions of art study may create a particularly complex profile. Students often enter university after years of specialist training and may be accustomed to intensive comparison of technical ability. At university, they must adapt to broader expectations involving concept development, originality, research, and independent practice. Family members may also question the security or status of arts careers, increasing pressure to obtain visible achievements. Meanwhile, the cost of materials and production can make experimentation financially risky. The result is a learning environment in which students are evaluated academically, creatively, socially, and economically.

Existing studies nevertheless leave three gaps. First, art students are usually combined with other groups or examined only during exceptional circumstances such as the pandemic. Second, studies often focus on a single outcome, particularly test anxiety, rather than comparing multiple dimensions relevant to art education. Third, many studies identify anxiety without asking students which structural, pedagogical, or support changes they consider most useful. The current study addresses these gaps through a descriptive profile of four anxiety dimensions and a ranked needs analysis of barriers and interventions.

Theoretical Framework

Cognitive Appraisal Theory and Achievement Goal Theory were used as complementary interpretive frameworks. Cognitive Appraisal Theory proposes that stress does not arise automatically from an event; it depends on how the person evaluates the event and available coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Primary appraisal concerns whether a demand is interpreted as a threat, loss, or challenge. Secondary appraisal concerns whether the individual believes that sufficient knowledge, time, control, support, and coping strategies are available. In art education, ambiguous grading, public critique, high workloads, and practical examinations can heighten threat appraisal. Clear rubrics, staged deadlines, constructive feedback, and adequate support may strengthen perceived control and coping capacity.

Achievement Goal Theory distinguishes goals oriented towards learning and improvement from goals oriented towards demonstrating ability or avoiding negative judgement (Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1986). Mastery-oriented environments encourage students to view errors and feedback as part of development. Performance-oriented environments direct attention towards ranking, comparison, and the need to appear competent. Public display, competitive awards, and praise distributed unevenly across students may encourage performance goals and thereby intensify peer comparison and participation anxiety. The theory therefore supports pedagogical responses that emphasise progress, process, experimentation, and individual development rather than constant comparison.

Together, the theories locate academic anxiety at the intersection of individual interpretation and educational design. They do not imply that all anxiety can be removed, nor that rigorous evaluation should be abandoned. Instead, they suggest that educators can reduce unnecessary threat by making expectations comprehensible, increasing students' resources

for coping with feedback, and structuring achievement around development. The present descriptive design did not directly measure appraisal processes or achievement goals; the theories were used to guide the selection of dimensions and to interpret the pattern of findings.

Method

Research Design and Participants

A descriptive, cross-sectional quantitative design was used to examine the current level and profile of academic anxiety. This design was appropriate because the purpose was to estimate mean levels, compare dimensions, and rank perceived barriers and interventions rather than test causal relationships. The target population comprised undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in art-related programmes at Chinese universities, including fine arts, design, music, and performing arts.

Participants were recruited online through university associations, student networks, and WeChat groups. Recruitment was purposive because only students in the target disciplines were eligible, while distribution was guided by strata for art stream and level of study to avoid excessive concentration in a single group. Because the survey link circulated through accessible networks, the resulting sample should be understood as a large, structured non-probability sample rather than a nationally representative random sample. A minimum of 384 participants was targeted using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) guideline for large populations. A total of 412 responses were received; 12 incomplete or patterned responses were removed, leaving 400 usable cases.

Instrument

The bilingual online questionnaire contained seven demographic questions and 59 five-point Likert items. Thirty-five items measured four dimensions of academic anxiety: nine test-anxiety items, nine assignment-anxiety items, nine classroom-participation items, and eight peer-comparison items. Twelve additional items assessed challenges in reducing anxiety, and 12 assessed the perceived importance of proposed improvements. Anxiety items were rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Challenge items were rated from 1 (not a challenge at all) to 5 (very serious challenge), and suggestion items from 1 (not important at all) to 5 (very important).

Test-anxiety items were adapted from the Cognitive Test Anxiety Scale (Cassady & Johnson, 2002), with two items contextualised for practical and studio examinations. Assignment-anxiety items drew on the Perception of Academic Stress Scale (Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015) and the Second Language Writing Anxiety Inventory, with wording adapted from writing to creative production. Classroom-participation items were adapted from the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale and the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (Horwitz et al., 1986; McCroskey, 1982). Peer-comparison items drew on the Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation Measure and research on social comparison in educational settings (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999; Hong et al., 2022). The challenge and intervention lists were developed from the literature review and the curricular conditions of art education.

Content validity was examined by three reviewers with expertise in educational psychology, art education curriculum, and research methodology. Reviewers considered relevance,

clarity, and appropriateness for Chinese university art students. The instrument was translated from English into Mandarin and independently back-translated following Brislin's (1970) procedure. Differences were discussed and revised to preserve conceptual meaning. A pilot study with 30 art students who were not included in the final sample assessed comprehensibility and completion time. The final study evaluated internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha. The study did not conduct exploratory or confirmatory factor analysis; consequently, evidence for the four-dimensional structure is based on theoretical alignment, prior instruments, expert review, and reliability rather than a new empirical validation of the measurement model.

Procedure and Ethics

The final questionnaire was hosted on an online survey platform and distributed through participating networks for approximately one month. The opening page described the study, estimated completion time, voluntary nature of participation, anonymity, right to stop, and intended academic use of aggregated data. No names, identity numbers, or direct identifiers were collected. Participants indicated informed consent before proceeding. Data were downloaded after the target sample had been reached and were screened before analysis. The study procedures emphasised confidentiality and minimisation of potential discomfort; participants could leave the survey at any time. Any journal submission should add the formal institutional ethics committee name and approval number if these were obtained and required by the target journal.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25. Frequencies and percentages described the sample. Prior to substantive analysis, cases were checked for completeness, response patterns, univariate outliers, skewness, and kurtosis. Standardised scores greater than |3.29| were used as an outlier screening criterion, and values within approximately -2 to +2 were treated as acceptable for skewness and kurtosis (Hair et al., 2019; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). Cronbach's alpha assessed internal consistency. Means and standard deviations were calculated for individual items, subdimensions, the overall anxiety composite, barriers, and interventions. Mean scores were interpreted as low (1.00-2.33), moderate (2.34-3.67), or high (3.68-5.00). As the study was descriptive, no causal or predictive claims were made and no inferential tests were used to compare demographic groups.

Results

Participant Profile and Data Quality

The final sample included 400 respondents. Women represented 61.5% of the sample, men 30.0%, and 8.5% preferred not to report gender. The largest age group was 21-23 years (37.8%), followed by 18-20 years (31.5%). Undergraduates in Years 1-2 accounted for 29.8%, undergraduates in Years 3-4 for 33.8%, master's students for 27.8%, and doctoral students for 8.8%. Design was the largest art stream (30.8%), followed by fine arts (23.2%), performing arts (22.0%), music (19.0%), and other art areas (5.0%). Respondents attended specialised art academies, comprehensive universities with art faculties, normal universities with art departments, and other institutions (Table 1).

Use of university mental health services was limited. Only 8.8% were currently using a service and 21.2% had used one previously. More than half (51.5%) had never used university mental

health services, while 18.5% did not know that such services were available. Thus, 70.0% were not current or former users, a pattern relevant to the later ranking of art-specific support. After the removal of 12 incomplete or patterned responses, the 400 retained cases had no missing values on the 59 Likert items. No extreme univariate outliers were identified for the composite scores. Skewness ranged from -0.464 to -0.156 and kurtosis from -0.461 to 0.075, remaining within the stated screening criteria. Internal consistency was excellent for every subscale and for the overall instrument. Alpha coefficients were .911 for test anxiety, .927 for assignment anxiety, .923 for classroom participation anxiety, .916 for peer comparison anxiety, .941 for challenges, .932 for suggestions, and .964 for the full 59-item instrument.

Table 1

Participant characteristics (N = 400)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	120	30.0
	Female	246	61.5
	Prefer not to say	34	8.5
Age	18-20	126	31.5
	21-23	151	37.8
	24-26	75	18.8
	27 and above	48	12.0
Study level	Undergraduate Years 1-2	119	29.8
	Undergraduate Years 3-4	135	33.8
	Master's	111	27.8
	Doctoral	35	8.8
Art stream	Fine arts	93	23.2
	Design	123	30.8
	Music	76	19.0
	Performing arts	88	22.0
	Other	20	5.0
Institution	Specialised art academy	74	18.5
	Comprehensive university with art faculty	167	41.8
	Normal university with arts department	124	31.0
	Other	35	8.8
Mental health services	Currently using	35	8.8
	Used in the past	85	21.2
	Never used	206	51.5
	Did not know available	74	18.5

Note. Percentages may not total 100 because of rounding.

Levels of Academic Anxiety

The overall academic anxiety composite was $M = 3.65$ ($SD = 0.62$). Under the pre-specified interpretation scale, this score was moderate, although it was close to the high threshold of 3.68. Assignment anxiety was the strongest dimension and the only one classified as high ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.70$). Peer comparison anxiety ranked second ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.70$), followed by test anxiety ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.68$) and classroom participation anxiety ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 0.70$); all three were moderate (Table 2). The narrow range among the latter three dimensions indicates that anxiety was not confined to one type of evaluation, even though assignment-related pressure was most prominent.

Within test anxiety, the highest item was difficulty concentrating during practical or studio examinations because of nervousness ($M = 3.74$). Difficulty relaxing after important tests ($M = 3.70$) and rapid heartbeat during important examinations ($M = 3.69$) were also high. These results show that practical assessment and prolonged post-test worry were salient features of the test experience. The overall score nevertheless remained moderate because the remaining items, including losing sleep, a blank mind, and careless errors, were below the high cut-off.

Assignment-anxiety scores were consistently elevated. Feeling that there were too many things to do, feeling overwhelmed by all assignments, and experiencing jumbled thoughts under tight creative deadlines each recorded $M = 3.85$. Anxiety about deadlines ($M = 3.83$) and pressure from subjective grading of creative work ($M = 3.82$) were also high. Eight of the nine assignment items fell in the high range. The pattern suggests that assignment anxiety was produced jointly by workload, time pressure, uncertainty in creative production, and perceived subjectivity of assessment rather than by a single isolated problem.

For classroom participation, general discomfort during classroom activities ($M = 3.72$) and trembling when expecting to be called on in art class ($M = 3.69$) were high. Remaining items were moderate, including choosing silence during critique ($M = 3.63$), self-consciousness when presenting work ($M = 3.61$), and nervousness during discussion. For peer comparison, worry about falling behind classmates in artistic skills was highest ($M = 3.75$), followed by anxiety when comparing with classmates on social media ($M = 3.69$). The emphasis was therefore not only on immediate praise or ranking but also on longer-term concern about the pace of artistic development.

Table 2

Descriptive results for study constructs

Construct	M (SD)
Test anxiety	3.61 (0.68)
Assignment anxiety	3.76 (0.70)
Classroom participation anxiety	3.57 (0.70)
Peer comparison anxiety	3.64 (0.70)
Overall academic anxiety	3.65 (0.62)
Challenges in reducing anxiety	3.66 (0.69)
Suggestions for improvement	3.98 (0.64)

Note. Mean interpretation: 1.00-2.33 = low; 2.34-3.67 = moderate; 3.68-5.00 = high. Subscale alpha coefficients ranged from .911 to .941; overall alpha was .964.

Barriers to Reducing Anxiety

The composite score for barriers was $M = 3.66$ ($SD = 0.69$), classified as moderate but close to the high threshold. Five of the 12 barriers were individually rated high. Financial pressure arising from art materials, tools, and tuition ranked first ($M = 3.82$). Lack of mental health services specifically designed for art students ranked second ($M = 3.79$). The next barriers were inadequate training in giving and receiving constructive critique ($M = 3.75$), insufficient student-lecturer communication about emotional well-being ($M = 3.72$), and limited career prospects or uncertainty about employment in the arts ($M = 3.69$).

The remaining barriers were moderate: social-media comparison ($M = 3.65$), limited curricular space for personal coping strategies ($M = 3.65$), family pressure regarding success in art ($M = 3.63$), heavy workload that reduced time for self-care ($M = 3.61$), frequent public critiques and exhibitions ($M = 3.53$), stigma when discussing anxiety ($M = 3.52$), and subjective or unclear evaluation criteria ($M = 3.52$). The relatively lower rank of unclear criteria should not be interpreted as evidence that assessment was unimportant, because subjective grading was one of the highest assignment-anxiety items and transparent rubrics later became the highest-rated intervention. The barrier list asks what makes anxiety difficult to reduce, whereas the anxiety and suggestion items capture related but distinct judgements.

Table 3

Barriers to reducing academic anxiety, ranked by mean score

#	Barrier	M (SD)
1	Financial pressure from art materials, tools, and tuition	3.82 (0.89)
2	Lack of mental health services specifically for art students	3.79 (0.88)
3	Lack of training in giving and receiving constructive critique	3.75 (0.89)
4	Insufficient student-lecturer communication on emotional well-being	3.72 (0.90)
5	Limited career prospects and uncertainty about arts employment	3.69 (0.91)

#	Barrier	M (SD)
6	Constant comparison with classmates through social media	3.65 (0.88)
7	Limited curricular space for personal coping strategies	3.65 (0.89)
8	Family expectations regarding success in art	3.63 (0.90)
9	Heavy curriculum workload leaving little time for self-care	3.61 (0.88)
10	High frequency of public critiques and exhibitions	3.53 (0.91)
11	Stigma or fear of judgement when discussing anxiety	3.52 (0.90)
12	Subjective and unclear evaluation criteria for creative work	3.52 (0.89)

Note. Scale: 1 = not a challenge at all; 5 = very serious challenge. Means of 3.68-5.00 were interpreted as high.

Preferred Interventions

Students rated all 12 proposed interventions in the high range. The overall suggestion composite was $M = 3.98$ ($SD = 0.64$), the highest composite in the study. Transparent and detailed grading rubrics for creative assignments and safe spaces for discussing emotional concerns tied for first place (both $M = 4.10$). Counselling tailored to art students followed closely ($M = 4.09$). Peer support groups or study circles and flexible deadlines for creative projects each recorded $M = 4.01$.

Other highly rated measures included reducing the frequency of high-stakes examinations and exhibitions ($M = 3.97$), integrating mindfulness or meditation into the curriculum ($M = 3.96$), workshops on stress management ($M = 3.94$), training faculty in mental health awareness and supportive teaching ($M = 3.92$), career guidance for creative industries ($M = 3.92$), encouraging mastery-focused goals rather than performance comparison ($M = 3.92$), and replacing some public critique with one-to-one feedback ($M = 3.89$). The uniformly high ratings suggest that students did not view any single intervention as sufficient. They favoured a coordinated response spanning assessment, pedagogy, peer culture, counselling, workload, and career preparation.

Table 4

Proposed interventions, ranked by mean score

#	Proposed intervention	M (SD)
1	Transparent and detailed grading rubrics for creative assignments	4.10 (0.82)
2	Safe spaces for students to share emotional concerns	4.10 (0.82)
3	Counselling services tailored to art students	4.09 (0.84)
4	Peer support groups or study circles for art students	4.01 (0.81)
5	Flexible deadlines for creative projects when more time is needed	4.01 (0.81)
6	Reduced frequency of high-stakes examinations and exhibitions	3.97 (0.85)

#	Proposed intervention	M (SD)
7	Mindfulness or meditation activities integrated into the curriculum	3.96 (0.83)
8	Stress-management and mindfulness workshops for art students	3.94 (0.85)
9	Faculty training in mental-health awareness and supportive teaching	3.92 (0.87)
10	Career guidance and mentoring for arts and creative industries	3.92 (0.87)
11	Mastery-focused goals rather than performance comparison	3.92 (0.87)
12	Less public critique and more one-to-one feedback	3.89 (0.86)

Note. Scale: 1 = not important at all; 5 = very important. All listed means were in the high range.

Discussion

The Distinctive Prominence of Assignment Anxiety

The central finding is that academic anxiety was moderate overall but widespread across the educational experience, with assignment anxiety standing clearly above the other dimensions. This result is important because test anxiety often dominates the general literature on Chinese education. In the present sample, however, the most demanding academic event was not necessarily the written examination. Creative assignments involved prolonged exposure to deadlines, uncertain outcomes, iterative work, material costs, public presentation, and subjective evaluation. The anxiety profile therefore reflected the actual architecture of art programmes.

Cognitive Appraisal Theory offers a useful interpretation. Creative assignments may be appraised as threatening when students cannot predict how long a satisfactory outcome will take, whether an idea will work, or how lecturers will evaluate originality and quality. Secondary appraisal may also be weakened when students lack clear rubrics, staged guidance, time, materials, or confidence in handling critique. The exceptionally high scores for feeling overwhelmed, managing too many simultaneous tasks, and experiencing jumbled thoughts under deadline pressure support this explanation. Assignment anxiety was not merely worry about marks; it represented a perceived mismatch between open-ended demands and available resources.

The finding also clarifies an apparent paradox in art education. Creative work is often valued for freedom, experimentation, and personal voice, yet these same characteristics can produce uncertainty when assessment expectations are insufficiently explicit. The solution is not to standardise creativity into a rigid checklist. Rather, programmes can distinguish between transparent assessment dimensions and openness of creative response. Students can be told how technical execution, research, process, concept, risk-taking, reflection, and communication will be considered without prescribing a single acceptable artistic result. Transparent criteria may reduce avoidable uncertainty while preserving creative autonomy.

Workload design is equally important. Creative projects frequently expand to fill the available time because students revise repeatedly or because production involves unpredictable technical problems. When several modules set major projects with similar deadlines, students experience a concentrated burden that cannot be resolved through generic time-management advice. Programme-level assessment mapping, staged submissions, interim feedback, and coordination of deadlines may therefore be more effective than asking individual students to cope with an overloaded calendar.

Evaluation, Participation, and Peer Comparison

Test anxiety, classroom participation anxiety, and peer comparison anxiety were all moderate and tightly clustered. This indicates that art students faced a connected evaluative environment rather than separate, unrelated sources of worry. Practical examinations require performance under observation; critique requires public explanation and response; and exhibitions or social media expose work to comparison. Across these situations, students anticipate judgement and monitor how they appear relative to standards and peers.

The item-level results show that anticipation may be as important as the event itself. Trembling when expecting to be called on and general discomfort during classroom activities were more highly rated than several items describing the act of speaking. This pattern is consistent with communication-apprehension research: students may withdraw before they have an opportunity to discover that participation is manageable (Horwitz et al., 1986; McCroskey, 1982). In art classrooms, silence can limit learning because critique depends on articulating intentions, asking questions, and learning to interpret feedback. A punitive or humiliating critique culture may therefore reduce both well-being and educational value.

Peer comparison produced a similar pattern. The highest item concerned falling behind in artistic skill, not simply receiving less praise in one class. Students were worried about the trajectory of development. Achievement Goal Theory helps explain why this concern becomes anxiety. When students define success mainly as demonstrating greater ability than classmates, each peer achievement may be interpreted as evidence of personal decline. Social media extends the comparison beyond scheduled classes and presents highly selected achievements without the failed attempts, revisions, and support behind them. The finding supports the need to teach students how artistic development varies across individuals and how to use comparison for information rather than self-evaluation.

A mastery-oriented environment does not eliminate standards or competition, but it changes the dominant question from 'Am I better than others?' to 'What have I learned, and what is my next step?' Process portfolios, reflective commentary, individual progress reviews, and feedback linked to personal goals can make development visible. Group critique can also be structured around descriptive observation, questions, interpretation, and actionable suggestions rather than ranking or unqualified judgement. Such approaches address both participation and peer comparison anxiety while strengthening disciplinary learning.

Structural Barriers and the Limits of Individual Coping

The barrier rankings challenge explanations that locate anxiety mainly within individual vulnerability. The highest barrier was financial pressure from materials, tools, and tuition. For many art students, participation in the curriculum requires continuing expenditure, and the

fear of wasting materials may constrain experimentation. Financial support, shared equipment, material libraries, transparent cost information, and assignments designed with affordable alternatives are therefore mental-health interventions as well as equity measures. The second-highest barrier was the lack of art-specific mental health services. This result is reinforced by the service-use profile: 51.5% had never used university mental health services and 18.5% did not know services were available. Low use cannot be interpreted automatically as low need. General counselling may seem disconnected from the realities of performance, critique, creative block, perfectionism, and career insecurity. Universities should improve visibility and referral pathways while ensuring that counsellors or designated staff understand the educational conditions of creative disciplines. Collaboration between counselling centres and art faculties may make support feel more relevant and accessible.

The third and fourth barriers concerned critique training and communication about well-being. These findings place lecturers at the centre of prevention without turning them into therapists. Educators shape the immediate environment in which anxiety is appraised. They can explain the purpose of critique, model respectful language, separate evaluation of the work from judgement of the person, provide preparation time, and establish options for follow-up. They can also recognise warning signs, communicate available support, and refer students appropriately. Faculty development in mental health literacy and supportive pedagogy is therefore consistent with the educational role of lecturers.

Career uncertainty ranked fifth. Anxiety about employment may intensify every assignment because students view current performance as evidence about future viability. Career support for art students should therefore begin before the final semester and include realistic information about multiple creative occupations, portfolio development, freelancing, entrepreneurship, intellectual property, digital platforms, internships, and transferable skills. Career guidance can reduce uncertainty while helping students connect academic tasks to longer-term pathways.

Interventions Preferred by Students

The intervention rankings provide a coherent response to the barriers. Transparent grading rubrics were rated highest, directly addressing uncertainty in assignment appraisal. Safe spaces for emotional discussion and art-specific counselling addressed the need for relevant support. Peer groups, flexible deadlines, reduced high-stakes assessment, mindfulness, faculty development, career guidance, mastery goals, and more individual feedback formed a broader ecology of intervention.

The high rating of flexible deadlines requires careful interpretation. Unlimited extensions could create inequity, delay feedback, and shift pressure to a later point. A more defensible policy would define circumstances and procedures for limited flexibility, use staged milestones, and provide early intervention when students encounter technical or health-related difficulties. Similarly, reducing public critique should not mean removing an essential art-education practice. Programmes can balance group critique with one-to-one feedback, small-group formats, written options, and gradual exposure. The goal is to preserve learning while reducing unnecessary threat.

Mindfulness and stress-management workshops can help students regulate attention and emotion, but the results imply that these should supplement rather than replace structural reform. Teaching students to breathe through an unreasonable workload does not resolve the workload. Effective intervention should combine individual skills with clearer assessment, coordinated scheduling, supportive critique, accessible counselling, financial assistance, and career preparation. This integrated approach is consistent with Cognitive Appraisal Theory because it both changes the demand and strengthens coping resources. It is also consistent with Achievement Goal Theory because it reduces comparative performance pressure and supports mastery.

Theoretical Contribution

The study extends Cognitive Appraisal Theory into a discipline-specific educational context. The data suggest that the most anxiety-provoking demands were those characterised by duration, uncertainty, subjectivity, and limited control. Practical tests, creative deadlines, unclear outcomes, and public evaluation all increase the likelihood of threat appraisal. The highly ranked interventions - clearer rubrics, safer communication, tailored support, and flexible structures - can be understood as attempts to increase predictability, control, and coping resources.

The study also extends Achievement Goal Theory by showing how performance-oriented conditions are embedded in the ordinary practices of art education. Public display, critique, awards, and social media make comparison difficult to avoid. The high concern about falling behind peers indicates that students evaluate not only current products but their perceived rate of development. Mastery-focused feedback and progress-based evaluation may therefore be especially valuable in creative disciplines. Because appraisal and goal orientation were not directly measured, these interpretations remain theoretically informed rather than tested mediation mechanisms; future studies should examine them explicitly.

Implications for Art Education

Curriculum and Assessment

Programme teams should map major assessments across modules to identify deadline clusters and excessive simultaneous workload. Large creative projects can be divided into proposal, experimentation, draft, critique, revision, and final-submission stages, with feedback at key points. Rubrics should clarify the dimensions of quality while allowing multiple creative solutions. Students should receive examples of how criteria are interpreted, opportunities to ask questions, and explanations of how originality and experimentation are evaluated. Where materials are costly, programmes should provide shared resources, reusable alternatives, subsidies, or equivalent low-cost pathways to the learning outcomes. Assessment diversity can also reduce dependence on a small number of high-stakes events. Portfolios, reflective journals, process documentation, peer feedback, individual presentations, and staged practical tasks can distribute evaluation over time. Changes should preserve academic rigour: the aim is not to lower standards but to make standards transparent and learning-oriented.

Pedagogy and Critique

Lecturers should explicitly teach critique as a disciplinary skill. Ground rules can require comments to be specific, evidence-based, respectful, and actionable. Critique can begin with

the student's intentions, proceed to observation and questions, and end with prioritised suggestions. Students may first practise on anonymous or professional examples before discussing classmates' work. Small-group critique and written feedback can be used as transitional formats for students with high participation anxiety.

Feedback should emphasise process, revision, and improvement as well as final quality. Individual progress reviews can help students recognise development that is obscured by comparison with highly visible peers. Lecturers should avoid public ranking unless it serves a clear educational purpose and should explain the limitations of social-media representations of creative success. Faculty training can cover mental-health literacy, inclusive communication, referral procedures, and ways of responding when a student becomes distressed.

Institutional Support and Policy

Universities should make counselling services visible through orientation, studio spaces, course platforms, and faculty referral. Art-specific support can be provided through counsellors familiar with creative-performance pressures, embedded workshops, peer-support programmes, and scheduled drop-in sessions near major assessment periods. Safe spaces for emotional discussion should have clear boundaries, confidentiality expectations, and referral routes for concerns requiring professional care.

Career services should collaborate with art faculties to offer discipline-relevant mentoring and exposure to diverse pathways in the creative industries. Financial policies should recognise the hidden costs of art education through material grants, equipment lending, emergency support, and transparent cost planning. At policy level, student well-being should be included in programme review and quality assurance rather than treated as separate from curriculum. Indicators might include assessment clustering, accessibility of feedback, student awareness of services, and the affordability of required learning materials.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should guide interpretation. First, the cross-sectional design provides a snapshot and cannot establish whether particular curricular conditions cause anxiety. Second, online purposive recruitment through accessible networks limits national representativeness and may underrepresent students who were disconnected from the participating networks or unwilling to discuss anxiety. Third, all measures were self-reported and may be influenced by social desirability, current mood, and common-method bias. Fourth, the four-dimensional structure was adapted from several established instruments but was not revalidated through exploratory or confirmatory factor analysis. Fifth, the study focused on test, assignment, classroom participation, and peer comparison anxiety; career, financial, creativity-specific, and general clinical anxiety were not measured as separate outcomes.

Future research should use probability-based or multi-stage sampling across provinces and institution types where feasible. Longitudinal studies could examine how anxiety changes across the semester, especially before critiques, examinations, exhibitions, and graduation. Mixed-methods studies could explore how students interpret subjective assessment, financial pressure, social media, and career uncertainty. Measurement studies should test the factor structure and invariance of the adapted scale across art streams, gender, level of study, and

institution type. Intervention research could evaluate transparent rubrics, staged deadlines, critique training, peer support, faculty development, and art-specific counselling using pre-post or controlled designs.

Conclusion

Academic anxiety among the surveyed art students was moderate overall and close to the high threshold, with assignment anxiety reaching a clearly high level. The pattern reflects the distinctive demands of creative education: open-ended production, concentrated workload, subjective judgement, practical assessment, public critique, and visible comparison with peers. The strongest barriers were not limited to students' personal coping abilities; they included financial costs, insufficient discipline-specific support, weaknesses in critique practice and communication, and uncertainty about arts careers. Students consequently prioritised transparent grading, safe emotional spaces, tailored counselling, peer support, flexible structures, and mastery-oriented teaching. Within the Chinese higher-education context, these pressures may be further intensified by strong academic expectations, visible peer competition, family concerns about artistic success, and uncertainty surrounding employment in the creative industries.

The findings support a shift from an individual-deficit model towards an educational-systems approach. Art students still benefit from coping and self-regulation skills, but sustainable reduction of anxiety also requires changes in assessment design, workload coordination, critique pedagogy, support visibility, financial access, and career preparation. Academic rigour and student well-being are not opposing goals: clearer, fairer, and more supportive learning environments can strengthen both creative development and educational quality.

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