From the Perspective of Regional Educational Differences: An Analysis of Freshmen's Anxiety and Its Causes

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Abstract. This study explores anxiety among Chinese ordinary undergraduate freshmen, focusing on regional educational differences to clarify its manifestations, causes, and interventions. Freshmen's anxiety mainly includes three types: academic anxiety from uneven pre-college preparation and difficulties adapting to college assessment methods, social anxiety from limited prior social experience and poor campus integration, and life adaptation anxiety from independent living challenges, homesickness, cultural mismatches, and extra pressure on rural first-generation students. Regional educational differences are the core causes, involving uneven basic resource distribution, exam-centric models in less-developed regions lacking college-ready skill training, cultural disparities, plus high family expectations. Multi-level intervention strategies can effectively alleviate such anxiety, including targeted academic support, social integration activities, and professional mental health services provided by schools, realistic expectations and supportive communication maintained by families, as well as practical skill acquisition and a focus on personal progress adopted by students themselves. This study addresses gaps in elite university-focused research and informs targeted guidance.

Keywords: Freshmen; Regional Educational Differences; Adaptation; Anxiety.

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the continuous development of higher education in China, the number of general undergraduate institutions has been increasing, and more and more students from different regions have entered these institutions. However, due to the differences in education levels in regions, freshmen in different regions often face different challenges in adapting to college life, and anxiety has become a common psychological problem among them.

Existing studies have extensively verified the association between regional factors, freshmen adaptation, and anxiety. Deng and Li conducted an empirical study on freshmen from M University in Fujian Province, revealing that mental health issues such as somatization and depression significantly impair academic performance. For example, every 1-point increase in somatization scores reduces short-term comprehensive scores by 0.09 points and long-term scores by 0.12 points for females. Particularly, freshmen from less developed regions are more susceptible to such mental health problems, which in turn exacerbate academic anxiety [1]. Tang et al. studied local study centres of open universities and pointed out that regional location impacts educational quality and students' academic adaptation capabilities, with rural study centres facing greater challenges in resource allocation, which may indirectly affect freshmen's adaptation [2]. Liu et al. noted in their protocol for a systematic review on Chinese college students' social anxiety that cultural background and social environment factors may contribute to freshmen's anxiety, with cultural adaptation challenges potentially inducing avoidance behaviors and psychological distress [3].

Current research on this topic primarily focuses on three core directions: first, the influence of regional educational resource allocation on freshmen's academic adaptation and anxiety levels [2,4]. Second, the mediating role of cultural adaptation in the relationship between regional differences and social anxiety, exploring how factors like regional customs and communication styles regulate anxiety generation [5,6]. Third, the development of intervention strategies, such as optimizing the ratio of urban and rural students in dormitories and building regional cultural exchange platforms, to alleviate anxiety caused by regional differences [5,7].

Existing studies often lack an in-depth exploration of the unique anxiety performance and its impact mechanism of freshmen facing regional educational differences. Because the transition period of higher education is the first time for most students to be fully exposed to a diverse social environment, and the differences in resources, cultural norms and educational models between regions are more significant, which is also more likely to cause adaptive pressure. In addition, most of the existing interventions are universal, failing to fully consider the specific needs brought about by geographical differences, and lack personalised solutions for the geographical background of freshmen. Although longitudinal tracking research is an important direction of future research, this study aims to make up for the above core research gaps by systematically analysing the relationship between regional educational differences and the anxiety of freshmen.

Against this backdrop, this study focuses on the anxiety of higher education freshmen from the perspective of regional educational differences. This paper will analyze the causes of freshmen's anxiety from the dimensions of academic adaptation, social adaptation, and cultural adaptation, and propose corresponding multi-level countermeasures.

2. Classification and Manifestations of Freshmen's Anxiety

2.1. Academic Anxiety

For many freshmen from less-developed regions, the transition to college academics can be a daunting challenge. Research by Deng and Li has shown that they often find college courses to be more in-depth and faster-paced compared to high school [1]. This view comes from uneven pre-college education. Regional differences in teacher quality, curriculum standards, and access to learning resources make this problem worse. As a result, these students find it hard to keep up with core courses like mathematics and English [2].

Notably, academic anxiety is further intensified by unfamiliarity with college evaluation systems. Deng and Li emphasized that freshmen accustomed to high school's exam-focused model often find college's diverse assessment methods, which include assignments, group projects, and class participation perplexing [1]. Xiong Jing's study on 2233 freshmen from 5 "Double First-Class" universities also found that freshmen face difficulties in adapting to college academic requirements. About 25% of them have poor academic adaptation, especially in aspects like pressure perception and curriculum settings. They struggle with the differences between high school and college teaching and evaluation models [8]. Unlike high school's single exam-centric evaluation, college assessments integrate multiple components, creating uncertainty about performance outcomes. This uncertainty is worsened by the negative impact of mental health issues like somatization and depression on academic scores. For instance, each 1-point increase in somatization scores reduces short-term comprehensive scores by 0.09 points, short-term English scores by 0.11 points, long-term comprehensive scores by 0.12 points (for females)/0.03 points (for males), and long-term English scores by 0.07 points, ultimately amplifying feelings of inadequacy and anxiety among these freshmen [1].

2.2. Social Anxiety

Social anxiety among ordinary undergraduate freshmen is closely linked to difficulties in interpersonal interaction, group integration, and perceived social incompetence, which often stem from limited pre-college social experience and mismatches with campus social norms. Liu and colleagues looked at social anxiety among Chinese college students in their review plan. They found that almost 40% of freshmen avoid socializing. This is because they fear others will judge them negatively, like worrying people might think they're "bad at communicating" or that they have no shared interests with classmates [3]. This fear is especially prominent in situations that require active expression, such as classroom discussions, community interviews, or group project presentations. For example, college freshmen who rarely participated in public speeches or extracurricular activities in

high school may feel anxious because they are afraid of speaking in class, worried that they will make mistakes, or be judged by their classmates.

Furthermore, struggles to integrate into campus social groups worsen social anxiety. Sharp studied the First-Year Experience Peer Mentor Program. He found that freshmen who can't join clubs, dorm groups, or class activities are often more likely to feel lonely and have little social support [7]. This situation is especially prominent for introverted freshmen or students who are not familiar with campus social rules. They may not know how to take the initiative to talk to people, establish relationships with roommates, or participate in group activities, resulting in a sense of exclusion. Liu et al. further confirmed that poor social integration correlates with higher social anxiety: freshmen with fewer social connections report more frequent unease, restlessness, and even avoidance of campus public spaces to reduce social pressure [3].

2.3. Life Adaptation Anxiety

Leaving home for college marks a significant life change for freshmen, often bringing about life adaptation anxiety. English et al. have shown that for the first time, they are faced with the responsibility of managing money, doing laundry, scheduling their time, and handling daily tasks on their own [9]. These new responsibilities may make people feel very stressed and anxious.

Homesickness is a typical manifestation of life adaptation anxiety, which will further aggravate emotional distress. English et al. noted that while homesickness decreases slightly over time, it still induces negative emotions like loneliness and depression in most freshmen during the first term [9]. Additionally, regional cultural differences in diet, climate, and daily habits contribute to anxiety. Gong provided a specific case of a Chaoshan-born freshman in Foshan who suffered from poor appetite, physical weakness, and even needed to rest in the dormitory due to the inability to adapt to local food and avoided social interactions because of difficulty understanding Cantonese [5]. For rural first-generation college students (FGCS), these challenges are even harder. They face two kinds of pressure: fitting into a new culture and meeting their families' expectations. Cheng et al. found this is true when they started college. Parents often see college as a key way to move up in society. They have high hopes for their kids' grades and future jobs, and this makes these students more anxious [6].

3. Cause Analysis from the Perspective of Regional Educational Differences

3.1. Uneven Distribution of Basic Educational Resources

The uneven distribution of basic educational resources between developed and less-developed regions is a crucial factor contributing to freshmen's anxiety, as it creates gaps in students' pre-college preparation despite their shared experience of passing the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE). Tang et al., who studied 72 local study centres of Jiangsu Open University, highlighted that developed regions have more abundant high-quality educational resources: they not only have a higher proportion of well-qualified teachers but also provide continuous professional development for educators, ensuring students receive systematic and in-depth subject guidance [2]. In contrast, underdeveloped areas, especially rural areas, often face the problem of a shortage of teachers in professional subjects. For example, some rural schools lack full-time teachers for core courses such as higher mathematics or English, forcing students to study with limited professional support.

In addition to teacher resources, there are also substantial disparities in educational facilities. Tang et al. further pointed out that schools in developed areas are equipped with advanced laboratories, libraries with rich books and digital learning tools - these resources enable students to participate in practical experiments, obtain diversified learning materials and cultivate digital literacy [2]. In contrast, schools in underdeveloped areas often lack these necessary facilities. Without suitable laboratory equipment, students' opportunities for experiments may be limited, and the lack of digital tools may prevent them from developing the necessary digital skills. Therefore, students from less developed areas may be at a disadvantage compared with their peers from developed areas after entering university, which may lead to academic anxiety.

3.2. Differences in Educational Concepts and Models

Educational concepts and models vary significantly across regions, further exacerbating freshmen's adaptation challenges, as less-developed regions often adopt exam-centric models that differ from the college's demand for comprehensive abilities. Deng and Li analyzed 9,189 freshmen from M University. They found that in less-developed regions, the main educational goal is usually doing well in the NCEE [1]. The main content of high school education focuses on memorising textbook knowledge and repeatedly practising test questions, with little attention to cultivating critical thinking and problem-solving ability. For example, in these areas, English teaching often focuses on grammar rules and test-taking skills, rather than listening and speaking skills; mathematics teaching focuses on answering the standard NCEE question types, rather than applying knowledge to practical situations.

In contrast, developed regions have integrated more diverse learning content into their high school curriculum, such as project-based learning or interdisciplinary courses, to prepare students for the comprehensive assessment requirements of universities. Moreover, extracurricular activities, which are critical for building college-ready skills, are far less accessible in less-developed regions. They spent most of their spare time preparing for the NCEE exam. This lack of experience makes it difficult for them to cope with the rich and diverse learning tasks of the university: when faced with the requirements of the university, such as group research projects, independent literature reviews, or classroom presentations, it is often difficult for them to adapt because they have not cultivated teamwork, communication or independent learning skills through previous extracurricular exercises.

3.3. Regional Cultural and Family Expectation Gaps

Regional cultural differences and family expectations add to freshmen's anxiety, too. They create adaptation pressures that go beyond academic and social life. Gong studied how regional culture affects college freshmen. He pointed out that students from less-developed regions often go to colleges in big, developed cities. There, they find that daily cultural rules don't match what they're used to. For example, rural students may not be used to urban ways of talking, such as more direct and faster conversations. They might also not be familiar with city habits, such as what people usually eat. This makes them feel like "outsiders" and adds more stress to fitting in socially and in daily life [5]. A specific case cited by Gong involves a Chaoshan-born freshman in Foshan: he struggled to adapt to the local Cantonese-speaking environment and unfamiliar food, leading to physical discomfort and avoidance of social interactions, both of which heightened his anxiety [5].

Additionally, family expectations in less-developed regions add emotional pressure on freshmen. Cheng et al., who studied rural FGCS, found that in many less-developed families, college education is viewed as a key pathway to upward social mobility. Parents often set high expectations for their children's academic performance and future careers [6]. Ju Yunting, Zhang Xiaojing, and Chen Yumeng's study on freshmen in a "Double First-Class" university in Beijing noted that rural and poor students face greater pressure. They not only have academic adaptation problems like difficulty keeping up with course progress but also bear more psychological pressure due to economic factors and family expectations. These pressures affect their adaptation and growth in college [10]. These expectations are more entrenched because the children of rural families are often the first to go to college, and they hope that college can improve the socio-economic status of the family. When these freshmen from different backgrounds find it difficult to meet these expectations, such as poor college courses or being confused about their future careers, they will feel extremely anxious because they feel that their struggle has failed their families.

4. Suggestions

4.1. School Level Measures

Schools play a crucial role in helping freshmen relieve anxiety and adapt to college life. First and foremost, Sharp suggested that schools need to give targeted help with studies. For instance, they can set up bridging classes for subjects like English and math [7]. These courses are designed to help freshmen bridge the knowledge gap between high school and college so that they can better keep up with their academic progress. In addition, setting academic mentors is another effective measure. Academic tutors can teach freshmen various learning skills, such as how to take notes effectively, how to conduct research, and how to manage learning time. Sharp's research shows that the tutoring system and targeted counselling can significantly improve the academic performance of freshmen and increase their retention rate [7]. Xiong Jing also suggested that to solve freshmen's academic adaptation problems, universities should establish undergraduate learning and development guidance centers that provide tutoring, skill guidance, and other academic support to create a supportive campus learning environment [8].

Secondly, schools should strengthen social integration activities. Holding regional cultural exchange meetings for students to share local traditions, customs, and eating habits can promote mutual understanding and respect and break down cultural barriers [5]. Organizing group tasks also helps. For example, the school can host class projects and campus volunteer activities. Through collaborative work, students can develop better on developing communication and teamwork skills, build friendships, and reduce loneliness. Liu et al. argued that such activities effectively lower social anxiety by enhancing students' sense of belonging [3]. Liu et al. further noted that such initiatives help freshmen integrate into campus groups, such as clubs, dormitory communities, reducing feelings of exclusion and lowering social anxiety [3].

Moreover, improving mental health services is essential. Schools should establish counseling centers with professional counselors trained to address anxiety-related issues. Regular anxiety screenings can identify high-risk students early, and one-on-one counseling or targeted psychological interventions can be provided to these students [3]. Deng and Li emphasized that addressing mental health issues such as somatization and depression directly reduces their negative effects on academic adaptation, further alleviating academic anxiety [1].

4.2. Family Level Measures

Parents also have an important responsibility to relieve their children's anxiety. As suggested by English et al., parents should set realistic expectations for freshmen: instead of focusing only on academic performance, it is better to give priority to the comprehensive development of children, including physical health, social adaptation, and emotional health. Unrealistically high expectations, such as demanding top grades or specific career paths, often increase freshmen's pressure, exacerbating anxiety [9].

Maintaining supportive contact with their children is also vital. English et al. noted that regular communication, such as phone calls or video chats, helps freshmen feel cared for, reducing homesickness, which is a key trigger of life adaptation anxiety [9]. During these interactions, parents should listen attentively to their children's experiences, such as academic difficulties and challenges in cultural adaptation, rather than offering harsh criticism. This emotional support helps freshmen cope with setbacks. For rural FGCS, Cheng et al. added that parents of rural FGCS often lack prior knowledge of higher education, and learning about college life through communication with their children can help alleviate the pressure on FGCS to meet family expectations [6].

4.3. Student Level Measures

From the perspective of students themselves, there are several things they can do to deal with anxiety. First, learning practical skills is crucial: as English et al. highlighted, mastering time management skills helps balance study, social activities, and rest--adapting to college's flexible

schedule [9]. Cultivating daily life skills can also enhance independence and self-confidence, thus reducing the anxiety of life adaptation. When encountering difficulties, such as academic confusion or social embarrassment, students should actively seek help from teachers, peer tutors, or counselling centres. Sharp pointed out that seeking support is associated with better college adaptability because it can solve the problem before it escalates into anxiety [7].

Secondly, students should regard regional differences as learning opportunities rather than pressure sources. Instead of constantly comparing with peers in developed regions, it is better to focus on personal progress - set small and achievable goals and track gradual achievements. This method can enhance self-confidence and reduce the sense of inadequacy caused by regional disparities.

In addition, students can also participate in activities to relieve anxiety. Participating in mindfulness workshops or campus sports programs can help manage stress, and the use of online mental health resources can be used as supplementary support [9]. Cheng et al. added that rural FGCS can join peer support groups for students with similar regional backgrounds, sharing adaptation experiences and gaining emotional comfort, further alleviating anxiety [6].

5. Conclusion

This study explores the causes of anxiety for freshmen in ordinary universities in China and focuses on analyzing regional differences in education to clarify their manifestations, causes, and ways to deal with them. The anxiety of freshmen is mainly reflected in three aspects: academic anxiety stems from the uneven foundation before admission, which hinders students from adapting to college courses and assessment methods. Social anxiety arises from limited prior social experience, leading to interaction avoidance and poor campus integration. Life adaptation anxiety results from first-time independent living, early-term homesickness, and cultural mismatches, with additional pressure for specific student groups. At the same time, regional differences in education are the main cause of anxiety: the uneven distribution of basic resources leads to a gap in preparation for college, the education model in less developed areas focuses on rote memorisation rather than college essential skills, while developed areas adopt diversified teaching methods. In addition, regional cultural differences and the high pressure of families have also increased the non-academic pressure on students. However, multi-level strategies can effectively alleviate this anxiety: schools provide targeted academic tutoring, social activities, and mental health services. Families set realistic expectations and maintain supportive communication. Students master practical skills, pay attention to personal progress, and participate in activities to relieve anxiety. Future research can adopt a longitudinal research design to track changes in students' anxiety in different semesters and formulate personalised interventions for specific groups, such as rural freshmen.

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