

A Lens on Exams: EFL Students' Feelings, Metaphors, and Wellbeing

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Abstract:

Exams are the highlight of the academic year for many students and teachers since they are the main yardstick used to measure success and failure in many institutions. This form of summative evaluation engenders several feelings in students, such as fear, stress, worry, doubt, threat, and anxiety. Thereby, this research studies EFL students' exam feelings, metaphors, and practices. It aims to understand how learners view exams, what they feel during them, and how they alleviate their emotional effects. To achieve this goal, 20 university students took part in a qualitative case study that relied on five main open-ended questions. The content and thematic analysis methods are employed to examine participants' replies, unfolding and confirming the phenomenon of exam fear, stress, and anxiety. The study recommends using self-regulated study skills, meta-cognitive strategies, and stress-relieving practices to surmount unpleasant emotions during the exam period. Updating examination methods and modes is also encouraged.

Keywords: Exams; assessment; metaphor; feeling; wellbeing; EFL.

1. INTRODUCTION

Written paper exams do not appear to be students' cup of tea, even if they are still the commonest and most relied-on evaluation tool by several universities. This form of assessment is perennial, and it engenders several concerns for both teachers and students. The latter may find taking exams terrifying for different reasons like fear of failure, past experiences, teachers' methods, the social importance given to them, lack of self-confidence, or unreadiness. Exams are often accompanied by stress and panic. They are famous for being a stressful and hectic period of the academic year (Bueno, 2021). From observation, few students would be relieved and comfortable while taking exams. Indeed, many students (53%) report having nightmares and stress about exams or "being better off dead" (Istasy et al., 2021, p. 133). Generally speaking, university students suffer from depression, anxiety, and stress. These symptoms have been recorded globally in countries like China, Iran, Malaysia, and Turkey (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008; Istasy et al., 2021). In Algerian studies about the emotional effect of exams on learners, most focus has been on high-stakes exams like the baccalaureate (Azouz et al., 2021; Boufatah, 2019). Stress has been documented to be closely associated with such exams. Nevertheless, there are very few studies that explore stress in general and exam stress in particular for Algerian university students. Thereby, this research paper wishes to address this research gap by investigating exam feelings of, specifically, EFL university students in Algeria.

This research is further rationalized by the fact that student mental health and wellbeing have bloomed as areas of interest worldwide (Lister & McFarlane, 2021). While so, "psychological suffering is inherent in academic life" (Ribeiro et al., 2018). The suffering and the "academic distress" (Jones et al., 2018), that are caused by factors such as the environment of learning, difficulties with studies, different university systems, academic performance and results, and success pressure (Markoulakis & Kirsh, 2013; Jones et al., 2018; Lister & McFarlane, 2021), can deeply affect student wellbeing. All these are quite linked to examination and do lead to anxiety (Jones et al., 2018). Consequently, the main questions to be researched are:

1. How do Algerian EFL students feel about exams?
2. What helps them to surmount exams and regain their wellbeing?

This study seeks to:

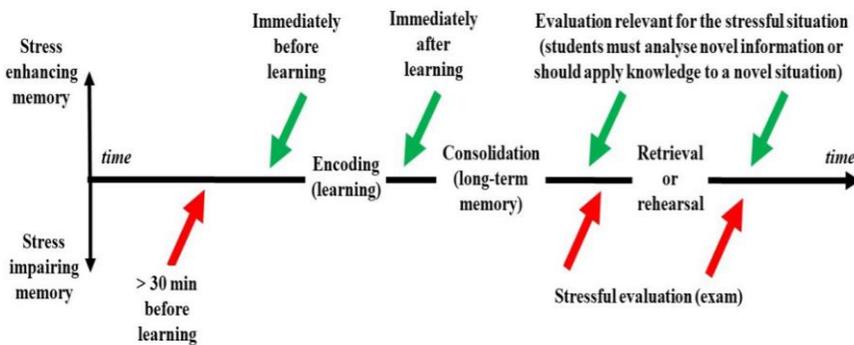
1. Identify students' feelings about exams;
2. Find out how students view exams;
3. Suggest tips and practices that alleviate exam stress and maintain student wellbeing.

Having stated these purposes, the in-hand study does not assume that exams cause only feelings similar to stress, anxiety, and panic. It is open to receiving new perspectives that different students may have toward examination.

2. Literature Review

Putting a lens on examinations indicates that they are incessantly used because they fulfill important pedagogical objectives such as “grading, classification, promotion, and in fewer cases for determining the efficiency of teaching techniques” (Johnson, 1938). Since 1938, when Johnson stated these purposes, much has altered but exams are still employed for similar ends. One thing that also has not changed is the fact that exams count in strong feelings and internal states that deeply impact students (Grigorescu, 2021). To clarify, these intense emotions often have lasting consequences and meanings in student life (Grigorescu, 2021). For instance, the feeling that is often associated with exams, stress, has an impact on the learning process, memory formation, and physiology (Bueno, 2021). Bueno (2021) confirms that the stress that goes with the examination period as well as with exam preparation can disrupt some features of memory retrieval and consolidation. Stress can either enhance memory or impair it depending on its type and time. When it occurs immediately before learning, it helps to enhance learning leading to long-term memory consolidation which eases retrieval during evaluation and/or examination (Bueno, 2021; Vogel & Schwabe, 2016). However, when it is felt more than 30 minutes before data encoding, it leads to stressful evaluation (Bueno, 2021; Vogel & Schwabe, 2016) (Figure 1).

Fig.1. The Effects of Stress on Memory



Source: (Bueno, 2021; Vogel & Schwabe, 2016)

Stress can be defined as a disagreeable and irritating emotional state where the person feels worked up due to facing personal and/or environmental threats and stressors (Sehlo et al., 2018; Rais et al., 2021). Stress often leads to pressure. During exams, the pressure is often about achieving satisfactory results, which in turn becomes “a stimulus that triggers psychosocial stress and increased release of cortisol” (Borghetti et al., 2021). This latter, cortisol, is known to be the stress hormone whose levels augment during exam week, possibly leading to mental disorders such as depression

(Borghi et al., 2021). Nevertheless, Borghi et al. (2021) think that university students do adapt to stressful situations like exams, which protects them from mental disorders and illnesses. Furthermore, stress can engender nightmares such as “anxious dreams of uncompleted assignments” (Istasy et al., 2021, p. 135). In their study, Istasy et al. (2021) found that 53% and 36% of participants reported having nightmares and anxious dreams of uncompleted tasks, respectively. The authors accentuate that these anxious dreams should be taken into consideration because they represent symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), meaning that previous exams could have been traumatic to students.

Today, university students’ mental health has gained growing concern in many regions, and for this, “epidemiological data are needed” (Eisenberg et al., 2007). In point of fact, wellbeing cannot be experienced without stable mental health. Thus, student wellbeing is essential because when students endure mental health issues and pains, they are less likely to succeed in a course (Mojtabai et al., 2015; Richardson, 2015). Statistically, they get lower grades and often do not pass the module (Eisenberg et al., 2009). On this account, Bueno (2021) suggests that the examination methods ought to be chosen meticulously and attentively to achieve the prime functions of evaluation which are “to serve as verification that a student is qualified and also as an educational tool to improve the learning process”. Following the highlight on student mental health, a major parameter to be considered while planning examination methodologies is to reduce exam stress and foster mental health and wellbeing.

Another vital element is exam preparation. The latter is an activity that is based on self-regulated learning, particularly at university (Zhang et al., 2023). University students often choose their studying process for exams, they choose how to use the provided resources (Zhang et al., 2023), and they revise independently from the course professor. Teachers provide some materials, techniques, sometimes review sessions, and practice for exams, yet the majority of exam preparation studying is done by students on their own (Zhang et al., 2023). Many students end up building revision strategies to cover the content, perform well, and relieve stress. Zhang et al. (2023) contemplate that:

“When engaged in self-regulated learning tasks, such as preparing for exams, students need to monitor their current level of knowledge or understanding, then compare their perceived understanding to their goal for the exam. By monitoring the discrepancy between a self-assessed current state and an internal model representing the desired state, a student makes decisions about whether to continue studying, change study strategies, or stop studying.”

These mental metacognitive operations can be exam-stress soothing as they allow the student to prepare well before sitting for an exam. It is well-known that good preparation is the secret to success; it could also be a secret to reducing stress.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and Setting

The investigation takes place at ENSB, Ecole Normale Supérieure, Bouzareah, Algiers, Algeria. ENSB is a teacher training college with many departments. Precisely, the participants are third-year students at the Department of English at ENSB. 20 participants, who form a focus group, were invited to respond to the research tool through convenience sampling. Thanks to their availability and easy access to them, 18 female students and two male students were involved. Their ages range between 19 and 22. Informed consent has been obtained and anonymity is respected.

3.2 Data Collection and Data Analysis Procedures

According to (Creswell, 2012, p. 3), “research is a process of steps used to collect and analyze information to increase our understanding of a topic or issue”. The first step in this study was to choose the research method. The research study adopts a qualitative case study which is “an in-depth exploration of a bounded system [...] based on extensive data collection” (Creswell, 2012, p. 465). Since the investigation is about students’ feelings about exams, the qualitative case study method is considered suitable for collecting students’ experiences in depth. Because case studies are viewed as a holistic research method to seek data, they are often employed to explore a specific phenomenon in a real-life setting (Yin & Feng, 2012).

One research tool, a questionnaire, was developed consisting of five main questions. The participants were gathered in a classroom three weeks before their exam period started. They were given the questions and asked to answer them manually. Hence, the questionnaire was administered face-to-face. The participants were given 30 minutes to reflect and write their answers to the questions. Their answers were then collected by the researcher.

All five questions are open-ended. The second and the third questions may seem to be yes/no questions, but options were not provided. The questions were put without options to allow the respondents to express their feelings, explain, and justify them in case they wanted. After their responses to the questions and before the analysis of the obtained data, the researcher discussed with the participants about exams and their feelings. Afterward, all answers were read and analyzed using the content and thematic analysis methods.

4. Presentation and Analysis of Results

The first question is: “What do you feel about exams? What do exams make you feel?”. The participants’ replies to this question are displayed in Table 1 below after analysis.

Table 1. Students’ Feelings About Exams

Participants	Feelings
Student 1	Panic
Student 2	Nervous
Student 3	Anxious and stressed; stomach-ache
Student 4	Stressed

Student 5	Stress, fear of failure, angry sometimes
Student 6	Terrified
Student 7	Inferiority feelings
Student 8	Stressed, confused, afraid
Student 9	Stress and fear
Student 10	Bad, stressed, anxious
Student 11	Stressed and anxious
Student 12	Stomach-ache, nervous, anxious
Student 13	A lot of anxiety, fear, stress, and boredom
Student 14	Afraid, anxious, stressed, uncomfortable
Student 15	Scared, challenged
Student 16	Under pressure
Student 17	Nothing
Student 18	A bit stressed and excited
Student 19	Excited, confident, and ready when I prepare well
Student 20	I like exams

Examining Table 1, we can notice that the majority of participants have feelings that are described as negative. To name them, students mentioned feelings of panic, nervousness, stress, anxiety, anger, fear, fear of failure, terror, confusion, pressure, inferiority, badness, boredom, and discomfort. These feelings are experienced at different junctures. For instance, some students said that they feel anxious at the beginning of the exam, but they feel relaxed after they start answering. Others feel it before they begin preparing for the exam or during the preparation period. A student wrote: “I make great efforts before exams, and I prepare myself well. However, I feel scared of not having a good mark. The fact that scores decide my future is stressful. Exams make me feel bad. I do not appreciate them, and to be honest, when I hear the word ‘exam’, I directly feel stress and fear”. A few other students face such feelings during the exam-launching module, with modules they find difficult or whose teachers they do not trust, and/or when they are not sure about their preparation. One student confessed that he does not feel anything because he considers exams to be just a tool to rate his work. Meanwhile, few students stated feelings that are considered positive, like challenge, excitement, confidence, and liking. A student subscribed: “I feel confident and ready when I revise well”. Another one noted: “Not to brag, but I do not feel stressed; I feel excited before exams because I see them as a result of my hard work. It is always exciting to reach the final step of something you worked hard for”. Student 20 who revealed that she likes exams explained: “I think that through exams, I can know that I learned many things. I love the period of revision and putting all my energy into studying, searching, and asking for help”. This is an interesting point of view as it is not commonly shared.

The second question wondered whether students fear exams: “do you

fear exams?”. Although this seems like a yes/no question, no options were provided to allow the participants to respond openly. The gathered data are classified in Table 2.

Table 2. Do EFL Students Fear Exams?

Participants	Do you fear exams?
Student 1	It depends on the module.
Student 2	Not really fear, but maybe excitement with nervousness.
Student 3	Yes, when it is a module that I do not like or understand.
Student 4	Yes, at some point I do.
Student 5	Not really
Student 6	Yes, I do sometimes when I am not ready.
Student 7	Yes, I do fear especially difficult modules.
Student 8	Yes, I do.
Student 9	Yes, I do.
Student 10	Yes, a lot.
Student 11	Yes, a bit.
Student 12	Yes, a little bit, but I can control it.
Student 13	Yes, I do, but it depends on the subject.
Student 14	I think I do.
Student 15	Sometimes I do, but it depends on the module, teacher, and more than all, my preparation.
Student 16	Not really, I fear being nervous because if I feel nervous, I will forget everything.
Student 17	No, I do not.
Student 18	No, I do not fear exams unless I do not prepare for them.
Student 19	I used to fear them in the past, but currently, I do not.
Student 20	No, not at all.

Fearing exams can find its genesis in previous exam experiences, lack of preparation, or the value of the exam. As can be read in Table 2, 12 participants voiced that they fear exams because the outcomes determine their future. Participants also pointed out that this feeling depends on the nature of the exam subject, the teacher, and their readiness. They fear a subject/module they consider difficult; they fear when they do not trust the teacher, and when they are not ready with solid revisions. Two students mentioned stomach-ache to indicate fear. One of them worded: “Exams give me that weird feeling in my stomach every time. It is fear”. Moreover, student 17, who reported that she does not fear exams, admitted that she feels lost sometimes when there is a lot to do, and that organization helps her to get rid of this feeling.

The third question aimed at knowing whether students feel anxious

about exams. For this, the question: “do exams make you anxious?” was asked. No options were given, so respondents were free to write short-length answers. After analyzing their content, the obtained answers are demonstrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Do Students Feel Anxious About Exams?

Participants	Do exams make you anxious?
Student 1	Yes
Student 2	Sometimes
Student 3	Yes, it is a lot of pressure.
Student 4	Yes, a lot.
Student 5	Yes, a lot.
Student 6	Somehow, yes.
Student 7	Yes
Student 8	Yes
Student 9	Yes
Student 10	Yes, they do.
Student 11	Yes
Student 12	Yes
Student 13	Yes, they do.
Student 14	Yes, mostly before I finish my revisions.
Student 15	Yes, for the difficult subjects, not the ones I can handle.
Student 16	Yes, preparing for exams makes me anxious.
Student 17	No, they do not.
Student 18	The period of exams makes me feel anxious, but not the exams themselves.
Student 19	Yes, they stress me a bit.
Student 20	No, they do not, because I have enough confidence that I can pass them and succeed even if I am stressed.

For this question, it is quite surprising that some of the students who announced that they do not fear exams said that they feel anxious about them, not necessarily while taking one, but some students mentioned that they feel anxious while preparing for exams. A student jotted down: “Preparing for exams makes me anxious”, whereas another one observed: “The period of exams makes me feel anxious, but not the exam itself”. According to the findings, anxiety seems to be more associated with exams than fear. This said, some participants commented that they tend to feel relaxed with the modules that they like, master, and understand. “When I like the module, I feel comfortable and enjoy answering questions,” shared one respondent.

The fourth question says: “If I ask you to compare exams to something, what would you compare them to?”. Participants stated different metaphors that are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Students' Metaphors for Exams

Participants	Metaphors
Student 1	Something very heavy on my back
Student 2	A special event
Student 3	A roller-coaster with many ups and downs
Student 4	Climbing stairs
Student 5	A challenge
Student 6	Climbing a mountain
Student 7	Cooking a new recipe
Student 8	War
Student 9	Being in a narrow room that makes me breathless
Student 10	A race
Student 11	A messy room that needs tidying up and cleaning
Student 12	A disease
Student 13	A race or a sport
Student 14	Disorder that needs to be organized
Student 15	Taking a medicine
Student 16	Swimming and drowning
Student 17	A job interview: if I do not get the job, it is fine, I am going to find another one.
Student 18	A soldier going to a battle with a weapon without knowing whether the enemy's weapon is stronger or his own.
Student 19	Escape rooms
Student 20	Being late for an important thing

Looking at the comparisons in Table 4, it is difficult to escape the negative connotations of the items that students chose to correlate to exams. Comparing exams to a burden, load, war, disease, mess, disorder, drowning, soldier in a battle, escape room, being late, or being breathless in a tight room denotes that students do not like exams because they make them feel deeply bad. Even the metaphors that do not seem distinctly negative, like racing, taking a job interview, taking medicine, swimming, climbing a mountain or stairs, sports, cooking a new recipe, a challenge, a roller-coaster, or a special event, may symbolize or imply difficulty, a trial, and a situation that tests. Some participants elucidated the metaphors they provided. Student 20 who compared exams to being late expounded: "I compare exams to the preparation for an event at the last moments because in both I fear not having enough time and end what I have to do". Student 19 contemplated that exams are like escape rooms because: "I do not have the time to feel down or

complain. I am running out of time, so the smarter I work, the sooner I will start solving the case”, whereas student 16 thought that: “when we are swimming, we are exposed to drowning, so we have to help ourselves otherwise we will drown. Same thing for exams, you have to study well or you will fail”. Students 14 and 11 who likened exams to a mess or a disorder justified it with not knowing how and where to start organizing, but “step by step, things start falling back into place”. This can be analogous with what student 4 said in equating exams with climbing stairs: “Stair by stair, exam by exam, you will reach the top and realize what you want”. In the meantime, comparing exams to a disease was rationalized as follows: “If you are strong and have a strong will, you can defeat the disease and succeed in the exam”. What is common between exams and taking a race or a sport is making a great effort and feeling tired afterward. Curiously, cooking a new recipe, for student 7, is quite similar to taking an exam: “We have the list of ingredients and the way of preparation. The same thing for exams, we have the lessons, and we should know how to revise for them. If we follow the steps properly, the recipe would succeed and we can pass the exam or fail and look for mistakes”.

“What helps you to surmount and survive during exams?” is the last question. The participants proposed techniques that aid them to go through exams and reduce their stress. After being analyzed, the answers are communicated in Table 5.

Table 5. What Helps Students to Surmount Exams

Participants	Techniques to Surmount Exams
Student 1	Speaking with myself and revising well
Student 2	Motivating myself and organization
Student 3	Sports Determination and will
Student 4	Creating a proper comforting environment for studying
Student 5	Encouragement from my family and friends
Student 6	Motivational videos
Student 7	Praying and supplications, reading Quran, faith Friends’ talk, sharing my feelings with friends, and knowing that I am not the only one who is stressed
Student 8	Parents’ help Talking to my sister or my classmates
Student 9	Faith in Allah Working hard Telling myself that: “if I successfully passed all the previous exams, I will pass

	this one too.”
Student 10	Faith in Allah, and the idea that everyone who works well will receive the outcome of his work and Allah will reward him.
Student 11	Organization and good preparation
Student 12	Praying and believing that Allah will help hard workers Good revision
Student 13	Breathing well and relaxing my mind to reduce stress Reminding myself that it is just an exam
Student 14	Praying and reading Quran when I feel scared or tired
Student 15	I keep reminding myself of this verse: “As for those who believe and do good deeds—We will not waste the reward of those who work righteousness.” (Surah Al-Kahf, Verse 30)
Student 16	Making my parents happy and proud Remembering that Allah will reward me for seeking knowledge
Student 17	Faith and resort to Allah Good preparation before exams
Student 18	The fact that I do not have to worry about things that I do not have control over, doing my best, studying hard
Student 19	Trying not to overthink and working hard Organizing my time
Student 20	Understanding before memorizing Preparing myself mentally Revising in the early morning

Scrutiny through Table 5 demonstrates that students make use of several techniques and habits to alleviate the stress of the exam period and preserve their wellbeing. Students do one of the following:

- Self-talk
- Mental preparation
- Self-motivation and motivational techniques
- Establishing a comfortable studying environment
- Good revision
- Good preparation
- Good organization
- Hard work
- Determination
- Understanding what they are doing and studying

- Relying on a support system of family members (parents, siblings, cousins), friends, and comrades for encouragement, listening, help, and presence
- Sports and relaxation (through praying, reading Quran, deep breathing, sharing feelings)
- Knowing the value of seeking knowledge and hard work
- Faith in Allah's reward

5. Discussion

Overall, the findings show that most participants struggle with stress, fear, and anxiety during the examination period. These feelings are quite common among students, but they do not necessarily have a bad impact on them. For example, Istasy et al. (2021, p. 136) confirm that stress is not all bad as it may have “some activating value: when the stress is not excessive, it motivates the student to maintain attentional focus in the lectures, or when studying from textbooks, or while preparing assignments”. Furthermore, students associate exams with unpleasant items such as war and disease. They compare exams to some distressful situations such as being late or preparing for an important event, which verifies the displeasing feelings they bear towards exams. Some studies went to the extent of suggesting depression as an effect of exams. To illustrate, Ibrahim et al. (2013) detected that university students suffer higher levels of depression than the rest of the population. Nevertheless, Oliver and Burkham (1979) discerned that student depression is persistently present at three points as it did not alter over time during the academic year, which can entail that it is more of a lasting mental health problem than an examination period symptom. Consequently, stress in university students is not limited to the period of exams. It sounds like a constant in student life. Still, it is remarkable that there is additional stress during exams. From another angle, Saddler and Sacks (1993) refer to academic procrastination as the cause behind student depressive ideas. Some participants indicated this by saying that they feel more stressed, scared, and anxious before they prepare and study, but as soon as they feel ready, the stress declines. Some participants clearly stated that when their revisions are done, they feel confident and ready. Hysenbegasi et al. (2005) associated depression and stress with lower grades and averages, which participants in this study called fear of failure or the importance of marks in determining their future.

All things considered, “it is evident that young people adapt to the stressful stimulus” (Borghini et al., 2021). Students use some strategies to diminish the unpleasant feelings that come with exams. These practices, like self-talk, friend-talk, family support, self-motivation, self-monitoring, relaxation, sport, and good preparation may align with what White et al. (2019) label self-care. Some of them are metacognitive strategies that aid in self-regulated learning like understanding before memorization and mental preparation. According to Zhang et al. (2023), metacognitive strategies of

monitoring and other self-control processes guide self-regulated learning. The latter is paramount for university students to succeed, particularly during the examination period when they often rely on self-control, self-monitoring, and self-regulated learning.

Students brought up varied stress-reducing techniques. This variety can be justified by the different students' personalities and backgrounds. Precisely, the study was conducted with Muslim students in a Muslim country. Thus, it is indispensable to mention that seeking knowledge is held extremely valuable in Islam. The Islamic religion encourages people to seek knowledge by making it a duty upon every Muslim. The evidence of this is available in Islamic holy scripts and main sources, the Quran and the Hadith of the Prophet (PPBUH). Allah says in Surah Al-Mujadila (Chapter 58 of the Quran), verse 11: "Allah elevates those among you who believe and those given knowledge, many steps" (v.corequran.com). In Islamic primary sources, we can also find statements that prove that Allah will reward hard workers as the one mentioned by student 15 from Chapter 18 (Surah Al-Kahf), verse 30: "As for those who believe and do good deeds—We will not waste the reward of those who work righteousness" (v.corequran.com). These beliefs aid in enduring life's tests in general, but to some students, they also help in going through university exams with determination and will. They can also lead to transcendence, satisfaction, and deep purpose (Villani et al., 2019). It was unexpected to read about faith in students' replies, but more than one student recommended it. Studies about the impact of faith on wellbeing and mental health put forward that religiosity and spirituality make people more positive, reduce stress, and increase subjective wellbeing (Kim-Prieto & Miller, 2018; Villani et al., 2019). To reiterate, many people use religious beliefs to overcome stressful events (Koenig, 2012). There are even students who choose to perceive the stress of exams and studies in a positive and challenging manner (Istasy et al., 2021, p. 136), as do some of the participants in this study. Istasy et al. (2021, p. 136) observe that they do it "as if following the principles of cognitive behavior therapy", which is a very helpful technique in dealing with stress and anxiety (Kaczurkin & Foa, 2022).

6. Implications

The stress and anxiety that accompany exams are often a major motive for exam cheating and dishonesty (Hammoudi & Benzerroug, 2021). On another note, the issue of exam credibility is often worsened by students' unpleasant feelings during exams. Indeed, "a wide range of benefits and harms have been ascribed to tests and examinations" (Madaus, 1991). The concerns of examinations and e-examinations are numerous. In a study by AlSufayan and El-Dakhs (2023), the authors surveyed 144 students through written interviews to deeply investigate their feelings and emotional experiences in paper and computer exams. The researchers found that students feel more positive, hopeful, and proud about computer-based exams. When they compared the results with students' feelings about paper-based exams, they found that students may feel enjoyment, less anxiety, anger, and

hopelessness in computer exams, but they did not notice notable variations in the feelings of shame and relief between both exam modes. Looking into the reasons for these differences, AlSufayan & El-Dakhs (2023) discovered that students view computer-based examinations as more efficient and user-friendly in terms of language editing. Students like their auto-grading aspects, even if technical issues posed a serious obstacle. For paper exams, they “allowed students to avoid technical problems, draft their answers, and express ideas more effectively” (AlSufayan & El-Dakhs, 2023). Notwithstanding, students revealed disliking their lengthiness, too much writing, “difficulty of editing, and the pressure of maintaining legible handwriting” (AlSufayan & El-Dakhs, 2023). If we add the findings of this study, we can presuppose that educators and other stakeholders transfer to using computer-based exams instead of paper ones for all their emotional advantages. Their mental load on students seems to be less than that of paper exams. This step can be deemed as a promotion of examination environments.

Reducing exam stress is a pressing matter. Needless to say, a certain rate of stress is part and parcel of student academic life, yet some tertiary education systems, arrangements, and operations need to be adjusted, redesigned, and upgraded to get rid of unnecessary mental health strains and wellbeing disruptions (Lister & McFarlane, 2021). In this line, Lister et al. (2021) ponder that if the cause of student distress is in a certain area, such as the syllabus, the instructional environment, or the assessment manner, these areas need to be revised and re-adapted to remove the obstacles that students face. By the same token, when planning exams, it is advisable to take students’ feelings into account to alleviate unpleasant emotions and to render the exam period mentally and psychologically agreeable. It is possible to wonder: do students have to fear and stress about exams? Do they have to feel unwell during them? If we say no, some measures can help. Bayram and Bilgel (2008) underscore the fact that university students, as a prized yet vulnerable population group, ought to receive ample support and assistance services to sustain their mental health and wellbeing.

White et al. (2019) recommend optimizing self-care. Students may rely on several strategies to take care of their wellbeing and mental health. Some of these strategies are self-motivation, establishing a comfortable studying atmosphere, adequate preparation and revision, appropriate organization, avoiding procrastination, cognitive behavioral therapy, seeking help from a support system, sports, relaxation, and knowing the value of seeking knowledge and hard work. All these may both require and foster student resilience (Galante et al., 2018), which has become a chief social and emotional student skill nowadays. On these grounds, it is advantageous to train students on effective self-regulated study skills (Zhang et al. 2023), emotional self-monitoring, resilience, stress-relief mechanisms, organizational skills, and substantial values like faith, hard work, and seeking knowledge.

7. CONCLUSION

Evaluation and assessment are controversial and wearing processes for both teachers and students. Many examination techniques and options are re-used without weighing their emotional impact on students and other stakeholders. One main limitation of this study is the impossibility of generalization, yet it is often recorded that written paper exams provoke stress, anxiety, and fear in students, besides other daunting feelings and perspectives. There is probably no total relief for the issue of exam-accompanying stress, but student mental wellbeing needs to be prioritized through the application of specific study skills, stress-relief strategies, and the humanization of the examination mechanism. Humanizing assessment means taking into consideration the human being, which, in the case of this study, signifies caring for wellbeing. Interestingly, better student mental health is substantial for academic success and general wellbeing. As we could not go through many features due to limitations, for future studies, we recommend delving deeper into the topic of examination humanization and academics' wellbeing through other research designs and tools. It is also advocated to explore teachers' wellbeing during examination periods as it may have a direct influence on students.

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