

PSYCHOLOGICAL VARIABLES AND RESEARCH PROFICIENCY AMONG LECTURERS IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS IN CROSS RIVER STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study examined psychological variables and research proficiency among lecturers in tertiary institutions in Cross River State, Nigeria. Specifically, it investigated the relationships between research self-efficacy, research anxiety, and lecturers' research proficiency. A correlational research design was adopted because the study sought to determine the nature and strength of relationships among the variables without manipulation. The population comprised 4,392 lecturers, from which a sample of 367 respondents was determined using the Taro Yamane formula. Stratified and simple random sampling techniques were employed to ensure adequate representation of the respondents. Data were collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire titled "Psychological Variables and Research Proficiency among Lecturers Questionnaire" (PVRPLQ), structured on a four-point Likert scale. The instrument was subjected to face and content validation by experts in Educational Psychology, Research and Statistics, and Measurement and Evaluation. Its reliability was established using the Cronbach alpha method. The hypotheses were tested using simple linear regression at the 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that research self-efficacy had a significant positive relationship with research proficiency and accounted for 22.7% of its variance. Research anxiety, however, had a significant negative relationship with research proficiency and accounted for 29.1% of the variance. The study concluded that lecturers' levels of research self-efficacy and research anxiety significantly influence their research proficiency. It recommended regular research training, mentoring programmes, institutional support, and supportive research environments to strengthen lecturers' confidence, reduce research-related anxiety, and improve research proficiency.

Keywords: Lecturers; Psychological Variables; Research Anxiety; Research Proficiency; Research Self-Efficacy



Introduction

Research proficiency has become an important component of academic work in contemporary higher education because universities are increasingly expected not only to transmit existing knowledge but also to generate new knowledge, address societal problems, foster innovation and provide evidence for policy and professional practice. For lecturers, research proficiency extends beyond producing publications for career advancement. It involves the capacity to identify meaningful research problems, engage critically with existing scholarship, select appropriate methodological approaches, collect and analyse evidence, interpret findings and communicate new knowledge through scholarly and professional channels (Salahuddin & Stupnisky, 2025; Adie et al., 2026). Consequently, lecturers who possess strong research competence are better positioned to integrate research with teaching, supervise student research effectively and contribute to institutional research performance. Salahuddin and Stupnisky (2025), in a systematic review of faculty research competence, identified literature searching and reviewing, study planning, data collection and analysis, research writing, dissemination and research project management as central components of effective faculty research practice.

Research proficiency can therefore be understood as the combination of research knowledge, methodological skills and practical competence required to undertake the major stages of scientific inquiry effectively. It encompasses the ability to conceptualise a researchable problem, formulate appropriate objectives, conduct systematic literature searches, synthesise previous evidence, select suitable research designs, develop or adapt instruments, manage data, apply quantitative or qualitative analytical procedures, interpret results, prepare scholarly manuscripts and disseminate findings through journals, conferences and other scholarly outlets (Salahuddin & Stupnisky, 2025; Adie et al., 2025). These dimensions are related but are not necessarily interchangeable. For instance, research productivity generally concerns observable scholarly outputs such as journal publications, conference presentations and related indicators, whereas research proficiency concerns the underlying competencies required to conduct the activities that can eventually produce such outputs (Kumburu & Jaffu, 2024; Salahuddin & Stupnisky, 2025; Ubi et al., 2026). This distinction is important because the systematic review by Salahuddin and Stupnisky (2025) further showed that research competence has frequently been assessed through self-reports, raising questions about whether perceived competence necessarily corresponds with demonstrated research proficiency.

Across African higher education systems, strengthening lecturers' research capacity remains important because universities are expected to generate locally relevant knowledge while participating in increasingly competitive regional and international research environments. Evidence from Tanzania illustrates the importance of individual psychological resources in this process. In a study of academics in public higher education institutions, Kumburu and Jaffu (2024) established that research self-efficacy positively influenced research productivity, suggesting that academics' beliefs about their research capabilities may be consequential for their scholarly performance. In Nigeria, research performance has also been associated with a combination of individual and institutional conditions. Ladipo et al. (2022), for example, found that institutional factors were significantly associated with research productivity among lecturers in Nigerian federal universities, while Igiri et al. (2021) identified several challenges affecting the productivity of researchers in Nigerian research

and tertiary institutions. These findings suggest that variations in research performance cannot be attributed solely to academic qualifications or research infrastructure, but should also be considered alongside individual-level and psychological factors (Igiri et al., 2021; Ladipo et al., 2022; Obogo & Adie, 2023). Nevertheless, much of this Nigerian evidence has focused on research productivity rather than the broader concept of research proficiency, leaving uncertainty about the factors associated with lecturers' competence across the full research process.

One psychological variable that may be associated with research proficiency is research self-efficacy. Research self-efficacy refers to academics' beliefs or confidence in their ability to organise and successfully execute activities required for research (Kumburu & Jaffu, 2024; Obogo & Adie, 2023; Li & Zhang, 2022). It may encompass confidence in identifying research problems, reviewing and synthesising literature, selecting appropriate methodological designs, developing instruments, collecting and analysing data, interpreting findings, preparing scholarly manuscripts and navigating publication processes. Research self-efficacy is particularly relevant because lecturers' perceptions of their research capabilities may shape their motivation, persistence and willingness to engage in demanding scholarly activities (Li & Zhang, 2022; Pentang & Domingo, 2024). Academics who possess stronger research self-efficacy may therefore be more willing to engage with unfamiliar methodological procedures, acquire new research skills and persist through difficulties associated with scholarly writing and publication. However, perceived confidence should not automatically be regarded as equivalent to demonstrated research proficiency because a lecturer may report high confidence without possessing corresponding methodological competence, while another lecturer may possess substantial skills but evaluate his or her abilities conservatively (Salahuddin & Stupnisky, 2025).

Recent empirical evidence generally supports a positive association between research self-efficacy and research-related outcomes, although findings vary across contexts. Li and Zhang (2022), in their investigation involving university EFL teachers, found that research self-efficacy played a mediating role in the relationships among institutional conditions, research motivation and research productivity. Pentang and Domingo (2024) similarly reported that research self-efficacy significantly predicted faculty research productivity, while Kumburu and Jaffu (2024) established a positive influence of research self-efficacy on academics' research productivity in Tanzanian public higher education institutions. Collectively, these studies suggest that confidence in performing research tasks may facilitate scholarly engagement and output. However, productivity and proficiency are conceptually distinct, and most of these studies relied substantially on cross-sectional and self-reported measures. Consequently, their findings cannot automatically demonstrate that academics who report stronger research self-efficacy also possess greater competence across research design, data analysis, academic writing and other dimensions of research proficiency.

A second psychological variable of interest is research anxiety. Research anxiety refers to feelings of worry, apprehension, tension or psychological discomfort experienced in relation to conducting research and undertaking research-related activities (Cooper et al., 2023; Stupnisky et al., 2025). Among academics, anxiety may emerge in relation to uncertainty about research methodology, statistical or qualitative analysis, unfamiliar research software, scholarly writing, publication expectations, manuscript submission, peer-review criticism, rejection and pressure to meet institutional research requirements. Faculty research is accompanied by a range of achievement-related emotions, and recent research has demonstrated that anxiety constitutes a meaningful negative emotion within academics' research experiences (Stupnisky et al., 2026). High levels of research anxiety may consume cognitive and psychological resources required for effective task completion, reduce concentration and work efficiency and encourage avoidance of demanding research activities

(Huang et al., 2026). Nevertheless, anxiety should not invariably be interpreted as dysfunctional, because emotional responses to research activities can vary in their intensity and consequences, and their relationship with performance may depend on perceived control, research environment and individual characteristics (Stupnisky et al., 2026).

Recent empirical evidence provides increasing support for the relevance of research anxiety, although comparatively fewer studies have focused directly on lecturers. Cooper et al. (2023), in a study involving 1,272 undergraduate researchers in the United States, found that research anxiety negatively predicted intentions to pursue scientific research careers, while experiences such as feeling unprepared and encountering research failure contributed to heightened anxiety. Although the population differed from university lecturers, the findings demonstrate the potential of research-specific anxiety to shape research engagement. More directly, Huang et al. (2026) found among Chinese healthcare professionals that research anxiety was negatively associated with research performance and mediated part of the association between research stress and performance. The authors explained that anxiety may reduce concentration and work efficiency by consuming psychological resources necessary for effective research performance. Faculty-specific evidence has also emerged from Stupnisky et al. (2026), who examined research-related emotions among STEM faculty and found that anxiety was among the emotions associated with faculty members' research experiences and outcomes. However, differences in populations, institutional environments and operational definitions of research performance make direct generalisation of these findings to lecturers in Nigerian tertiary institutions problematic.

The available literature therefore reveals several unresolved issues. First, much of the existing research conceptualises research success in terms of publication counts, citations, presentations or general research productivity instead of the broader set of competencies constituting research proficiency (Kumburu & Jaffu, 2024; Salahuddin & Stupnisky, 2025). Second, research self-efficacy has generally been associated with favourable research outcomes, but most available studies have focused on productivity rather than demonstrated competence across different stages of research (Li & Zhang, 2022; Pentang & Domingo, 2024). Third, the literature on research anxiety is comparatively less developed, with substantial evidence derived from undergraduate researchers, healthcare professionals and STEM faculty outside Africa (Cooper et al., 2023; Huang et al., 2026; Stupnisky et al., 2026). Furthermore, many of the studies relied on cross-sectional and self-report designs, which limit causal interpretation and may blur the distinction between perceived and actual research competence. These conceptual, methodological and contextual limitations make it inappropriate to assume that relationships identified in other populations will operate similarly among lecturers in tertiary institutions in Cross River State.

Against this background, investigating psychological variables in relation to research proficiency among lecturers in tertiary institutions in Cross River State is necessary. While Nigerian studies have examined several determinants of lecturers' research productivity (Igiri et al., 2021; Ladipo et al., 2022), available evidence remains insufficient for explaining how lecturers' confidence in undertaking research and anxiety associated with research activities relate to their broader research proficiency. The present study therefore focuses specifically on the relationship between research self-efficacy and research proficiency and between research anxiety and research proficiency among lecturers in tertiary institutions in Cross River State. By examining a potentially facilitative psychological belief alongside a potentially inhibiting research-related emotion and by focusing on proficiency rather than publication output alone, the study responds to an identifiable conceptual and contextual gap in the literature.

Aim and objectives of the study

The main objective of the study is to examine the relationship between psychological variables and research proficiency among lecturers in tertiary institutions in Cross River State. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. examine the relationship between research self-efficacy and research proficiency among lecturers in tertiary institutions in Cross River State.
2. investigate the relationship between research anxiety and research proficiency among lecturers in tertiary institutions in Cross River State.

Research questions

The following research questions are formulated to guide the study:

1. What is the relationship between research self-efficacy and research proficiency among lecturers in tertiary institutions in Cross River State?
2. What is the relationship between research anxiety and research proficiency among lecturers in tertiary institutions in Cross River State?

Research hypotheses

The following null hypotheses are formulated for the study:

1. There is no significant relationship between research self-efficacy and research proficiency among lecturers in tertiary institutions in Cross River State.
2. There is no significant relationship between research anxiety and research proficiency among lecturers in tertiary institutions in Cross River State.

Methodology

The study adopted a correlational research design. This design was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to determine the relationship between psychological variables, specifically research self-efficacy and research anxiety, and research proficiency among lecturers in tertiary institutions in Cross River State. The population of the study comprised 4,392 lecturers in tertiary institutions in Cross River State. The sample size was determined using the Taro Yamane formula at a 0.05 level of precision, which yielded a sample of 367 lecturers. A stratified random sampling technique was adopted to ensure adequate representation of lecturers from the different tertiary institutions, while simple random sampling was subsequently used to select the required respondents from the respective institutions. The instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled "Psychological Variables and Research Proficiency among Lecturers Questionnaire (PVRPLQ)." The questionnaire was divided into three sections measuring research self-efficacy, research anxiety and research proficiency, respectively, and was structured on a modified four-point Likert scale of Strongly Agree (SA = 4), Agree (A = 3), Disagree (D = 2), and Strongly Disagree (SD = 1).

The instrument was subjected to face and content validation by experts in Educational Psychology, Research and Statistics, and Measurement and Evaluation. Their observations and recommendations were used to improve the clarity, relevance and adequacy of the questionnaire items. The reliability of the instrument was established through a trial test involving lecturers outside the study area who possessed characteristics similar to those of the study population, and the data obtained were analysed using the Cronbach alpha method to determine the internal consistency of the instrument. The completed questionnaires were coded and analysed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis. The first hypothesis examined the relationship between research self-efficacy and research proficiency, while the second examined the relationship between research anxiety and research proficiency among

lecturers in tertiary institutions in Cross River State. All null hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance.

Presentation of results

The results of the study are presented in this section based on the research questions and hypotheses formulated to guide the study. The data collected from the respondents were analysed using simple linear regression statistical techniques, and the findings are presented in tables with corresponding interpretations for clarity and ease of understanding.

Hypothesis one

There is no significant relationship between research self-efficacy and research proficiency among lecturers in tertiary institutions in Cross River State. The predictor variable is research self-efficacy, while the criterion variable is research proficiency, both measured continuously. To test this hypothesis, simple linear regression analysis was used, and the results are presented in Table 1. The result showed that $R = .477$, indicating a moderate positive relationship between research self-efficacy and research proficiency among lecturers. This implies that increases in research self-efficacy are associated with corresponding increases in research proficiency. Furthermore, the adjusted R^2 value of .225 indicates that research self-efficacy accounted for 22.5% of the variance in research proficiency, while the remaining 77.5% may be attributed to other factors not included in the regression model. The regression coefficient also showed that research self-efficacy had a positive contribution to research proficiency ($B = .412$, $\beta = .477$, $t = 10.375$, $p = .000$). To determine the statistical significance of the relationship, the analysis of variance result was examined. The result showed that $F(1, 366) = 107.634$, $p = .000$. Since the p -value of .000 is less than the .05 level of significance, the null hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between research self-efficacy and research proficiency among lecturers in tertiary institutions in Cross River State was rejected. The alternative hypothesis was therefore upheld. This means that there is a significant positive relationship between research self-efficacy and research proficiency among lecturers in tertiary institutions in Cross River State.

Table 1: Simple linear regression analysis of the relationship between research self-efficacy and research proficiency among lecturers in tertiary institutions

Source of variation	SS	df	MS	F-ratio	Sig.
Regression	947.076	1	947.076	107.634*	.000
Residual	3220.443	365	8.799		
Total	4167.519	366			
Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
Constant	9.206	.645		14.283	.000
Research self-efficacy	.412	.040	.477	10.375	.000

*Significant at .05 level

$R = .477$

$R^2 = .227$

Adjusted $R^2 = .225$

Hypothesis two

There is no significant relationship between research anxiety and research proficiency among lecturers in tertiary institutions in Cross River State. The predictor variable is research anxiety, while the criterion variable is research proficiency, both measured continuously. To test this hypothesis, simple linear regression analysis was used, and the results are presented

in Table 2. The model summary reported $R = -.540$, indicating a moderate negative relationship between research anxiety and research proficiency among lecturers. This implies that higher levels of research anxiety are associated with lower levels of research proficiency. Furthermore, the adjusted R^2 value of .289 indicates that research anxiety accounted for 28.9% of the variance in research proficiency, while the remaining 71.1% may be attributed to other variables not included in the regression model. To determine the statistical significance of the relationship, the analysis of variance result was examined. The result showed that $F(1, 366) = 150.425$, $p = .000$. Since the p-value of .000 is less than the .05 level of significance, the null hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between research anxiety and research proficiency among lecturers in tertiary institutions in Cross River State was rejected. The alternative hypothesis was therefore upheld. This means that there is a significant relationship between research anxiety and research proficiency among lecturers in tertiary institutions in Cross River State

Table 2: Simple linear regression analysis of the relationship between research anxiety and research proficiency among lecturers in tertiary institutions

Source of variation	SS	df	MS	F-ratio	Sig.
Regression	1213.919	1	1213.919	150.425*	.000
Residual	2953.600	365	8.070		
Total	4167.519	366			
Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
Constant	7.761	.664		11.691	.000
Research anxiety	.501	.041	-.540	12.265	.000

*Significant at .05 level

$R = -.540$

$R^2 = .291$

Adjusted $R^2 = .289$

Discussion of findings

The findings revealed that research self-efficacy has a significant positive relationship with research proficiency among lecturers in tertiary institutions in Cross River State. This means that lecturers who demonstrate greater confidence in their ability to undertake research-related tasks tend to exhibit higher levels of research proficiency. The result implies that lecturers' beliefs about their capacity to identify researchable problems, review relevant literature, select appropriate research designs, develop research instruments, collect and analyse data, interpret findings, write scholarly manuscripts and communicate research outcomes are associated with their competence in carrying out research activities. Lecturers with stronger research self-efficacy may be more willing to engage in demanding research tasks, persist when difficulties arise and acquire new methodological and analytical skills, whereas those with lower research self-efficacy may be more hesitant to undertake complex research activities or may depend excessively on others when conducting research.

A possible reason for this finding is that confidence in one's research capability may influence motivation, persistence and willingness to engage in intellectually demanding research activities. Lecturers who believe that they can successfully perform research tasks are more likely to invest effort in developing research ideas, mastering research methods, using analytical tools and responding constructively to difficulties encountered during manuscript preparation and publication. Conversely, lecturers who doubt their research abilities may avoid technically demanding activities such as statistical analysis, instrument development or scholarly publication, thereby limiting opportunities to improve their research competence. The finding can be explained from the self-efficacy perspective, which

suggests that individuals' beliefs about their ability to accomplish particular tasks influence the amount of effort they exert, their persistence when confronted with challenges and their willingness to undertake difficult activities. Within research contexts, stronger research self-efficacy may therefore provide the psychological confidence necessary for lecturers to engage consistently in activities that strengthen research proficiency.

The findings agree with Kumburu and Jaffu (2024), who reported that research self-efficacy had a significant positive influence on research productivity among academics in Tanzanian public higher education institutions. Their study demonstrated that academics who possessed stronger beliefs in their research capabilities were more likely to demonstrate favourable research outcomes. The finding is also consistent with Li and Zhang (2022), who found that research self-efficacy contributed positively to university teachers' research productivity and played an important mediating role between their working environment and research performance. Similarly, Pentang and Domingo (2024) found that research self-efficacy significantly predicted faculty members' research productivity, indicating that confidence in undertaking research activities is associated with greater scholarly engagement and output. Salahuddin and Stupnisky (2025) further identified competence in literature searching, research planning, data collection and analysis, research writing and dissemination as important dimensions of faculty research competence. Although some of these studies focused on productivity rather than proficiency, their findings support the present result by indicating that lecturers' perceived capability to perform research activities is closely related to favourable research-related outcomes.

The findings further revealed that research anxiety has a significant negative relationship with research proficiency among lecturers in tertiary institutions in Cross River State. This means that increases in research anxiety are associated with decreases in lecturers' research proficiency. The result suggests that feelings of apprehension, tension, uncertainty and psychological discomfort associated with research activities may interfere with lecturers' ability to perform research tasks effectively. Research anxiety may arise when lecturers encounter difficulties relating to research methodology, statistical analysis, use of research software, academic writing, manuscript submission, peer-review processes, publication expectations or the possibility of rejection. Where such anxiety becomes persistent, lecturers may experience reduced concentration, diminished confidence, avoidance of demanding research tasks and reluctance to participate actively in research activities, thereby limiting the development and application of research skills.

A possible reason for this finding is that effective research requires sustained intellectual engagement, concentration, analytical reasoning and confidence in dealing with uncertainty. Lecturers experiencing high levels of research anxiety may devote substantial cognitive and emotional resources to worrying about possible errors, inadequate methodological knowledge, unsuccessful publication or negative evaluation of their research. Such psychological pressure may reduce the attention and mental resources available for problem conceptualisation, literature synthesis, data analysis and scholarly writing. Anxiety may also promote procrastination and avoidance, thereby reducing opportunities for lecturers to practise and improve their research skills. This finding is consistent with the control-value perspective on research-related emotions, which suggests that individuals' emotional reactions to academic and research tasks are influenced by their perceived control over those tasks and the importance attached to successful performance. When lecturers perceive limited control over difficult research activities while attaching considerable importance to successful outcomes, anxiety may increase and interfere with effective research performance (Stupnisky et al., 2026).

The findings agree with Huang et al. (2026), who reported that research anxiety was negatively associated with research performance among Chinese healthcare professionals and

that increased research stress contributed to anxiety that subsequently reduced research performance. Their finding suggests that persistent anxiety can consume psychological resources needed for effective research engagement. The present finding is also related to Cooper et al. (2023), who found that research anxiety negatively predicted undergraduate researchers' intentions to pursue research careers and that feelings of inadequate preparation and experiences of failure contributed to increased anxiety. Although their study involved undergraduate researchers rather than lecturers, it demonstrates the potentially inhibiting influence of research-specific anxiety on sustained research engagement. Similarly, Stupnisky et al. (2026) found that anxiety formed an important component of faculty members' research-related emotional experiences and was associated with perceived control and research outcomes among STEM faculty. Taken together, these studies support the present finding that research anxiety is negatively associated with research proficiency and suggest that lecturers who experience lower levels of research-related apprehension may be better positioned to develop and apply the competencies required for effective research.

Conclusion

The study concluded that research self-efficacy and research anxiety are significantly related to research proficiency among lecturers in tertiary institutions in Cross River State. Lecturers' confidence in their ability to perform research-related tasks and the level of anxiety they experience during research activities are important psychological factors associated with their competence in conceptualising research problems, applying appropriate research methods, analysing data, writing scholarly reports and disseminating research findings. Therefore, strengthening lecturers' research self-efficacy and reducing excessive research anxiety are important for enhancing research proficiency in tertiary institutions within the zone.

Recommendations

1. Management of tertiary institutions in Cross River State should organise regular research training and mentoring programmes to strengthen lecturers' research self-efficacy and improve their research proficiency.
2. Management of tertiary institutions in Cross River State should provide supportive research environments and appropriate psychological and methodological assistance to reduce research anxiety among lecturers.

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