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Perceptions of university students of a safe learning environment and its obstacles

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ABSTRACT

This study has multifaceted objectives. It investigated the safety level of the learning environment at Al-Ain University from the perceptive of its students, it sought to identify any physical, social, and psychological obstacles that may affect the students' sense of safety in their learning environment. It explored the role of demographic factors, such as age, gender, academic program and year of study in shaping these perceptions. This study adopted a quantitative descriptive research method and used a survey to collect data through a web-based questionnaire. The total sample number consisted of 89 undergraduate and graduate students at the College of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education at the university. The findings revealed that the students' perception of the safety level of the currently existing learning environment at Al-Ain University is high and that they do not experience any significant obstacles whether physical, social or psychological that could negatively impact their feeling of safety at the university premises. Moreover, the findings revealed statistically significant differences in the students' perceptions based on age with older students tending to have different perspectives compared to younger students. However, there were no statistically significant differences reported due to the student's gender, academic program, and year of study. These findings provide important insights for university administrators and policymakers aiming to enhance student well-being. Institutions can further improve the perceived safety and overall quality of the learning environment by addressing the specific needs of different age groups.

Contribution/Originality: This study is unique in its comprehensive examination of students' perceptions of learning environment safety at Al-Ain University, integrating physical, social, and psychological dimensions. It also explores the impact of demographic variables on students' perceptions which is an area that has received limited attention in previous research on learning environments.

1. INTRODUCTION

Creating a safe learning environment for students is a critical component of any educational institution. It significantly influences the behavior, learning, performance, academic achievement, and satisfaction of students (AlKhaza'leh, Obeidat, Abdel-Hadi, & Qaruty, 2023; Young, Williamson, & Egan, 2016). Students who experience safety, security and support in the learning environment are more inclined to achieve academic success, personal growth, develop positive attitudes towards their educational institution, and become lifelong learners. According to

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the perspectives of employees, teachers and students, a safe learning environment is one in which they feel physically, socially, and psychologically secure (AlKhaza'leh et al., 2023; Kibriya & Jones, 2021; Ugur, 2023).

Educational institutions such as universities improve students' academic attainment by creating a safe learning environment and contributing to their overall growth, self-confidence (Haidari & Karakuş, 2019), mental and emotional development and lifelong learning skills (AlKhaza'leh et al., 2023; Rusticus, Pashootan, & Mah, 2023). When learning occurs in a safe and secure setting, students feel comfortable, respected, and encouraged to take intellectual risks and grow without having to worry about being misjudged (Kibriya & Jones, 2021; Rusticus et al., 2023) or getting emotionally hurt. Educational institutions that eliminate distractions and foster a secure and safe learning atmosphere witness an improvement in their students' academic performance as well as their overall educational achievements (Ahmed, 2021; Schmidt, 2020).

Teachers are essential in fostering a secure and safe environment because they support equality, integration, and diversity (Lafair, 2023) and encourage communication. They can also reduce security risks and threats (Ahmed, 2021) and take prompt and instant actions to prevent any form of bullying and discrimination. Moreover, teachers should encourage students to be involved in the decision-making process to help students feel psychologically safe (Haidari & Karakuş, 2019) in their learning environment such as classroom rules, discipline policies and cultural initiatives. Teachers can better understand their needs and concerns (Ugur, 2023) and work collaboratively to build a secure, positive, and supportive learning environment that accommodates the various requirements of students by involving students in these discussions (Lafair, 2023).

Establishing a safe learning environment in universities is crucial for fostering students' overall development, supporting their mental and physical health, building positive social networks, enhancing academic performance, and promoting psychological well-being (AlKhaza'leh et al., 2023; Kibriya & Jones, 2021; Rusticus et al., 2023). It creates a productive classroom climate framework that enables learners to discover their greatest potential and fosters healthy social development. It also creates a pleasant, friendly and useful learning atmosphere which is considered a positive incentive for students (Dahoud, 2023). In this regard, Ugur (2023) asserts that through "creating a safe learning environment, schools empower students to develop essential life skills, build resilience, and become confident, lifelong learners ready to contribute to their communities" (p. 1).

Equal chances for participation and success are provided to all students in a safe learning environment that values diversity (Lafair, 2023). This environment helps students develop a sense of community, trust, respect, consideration and care for each other which empowers them to participate completely in their education process and realize their greatest potential thus ultimately reach their highest ambitions. Given that safety encompasses various facets, elements, and components, one could claim that it requires examination from various angles (Savolainen, 2023). To achieve safety in the learning environment, educational institutions must strive to implement quality standards. AlKhaza'leh et al. (2023) state that a safe learning environment plays an important role in achieving the goals of education along with the curriculum, the teacher, and modern teaching methods (p. 173).

1.1. Problem Statement

According to Kibriya and Jones (2021) safety is a major concern for top management, teachers, parents or students in educational institutions worldwide; therefore, "Guaranteeing safety in educational institutions presents a challenge for many developing countries particularly those experiencing or recovering from conflict"(p. 15). Educational institutions must set their sights on providing students, teachers, and employees with a safe and secure environment to reach excellence and competitiveness. A safe learning environment is one of the contemporary strategies that educational institutions aim to implement because it fosters an atmosphere centered around security, care, and trust (Ahmed, 2021). In addition, it fosters an atmosphere in which students are inspired to think critically and creatively, respect others' viewpoints and collaborate while adhering to demanding standards and guidelines (Modzeleski et al., 2012).

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The foundation of planning for a comprehensive learning environment safety is multi-hazard risk assessment (ADPC et al., 2013). This should be integrated into national, subnational, and local educational management systems. The Ministry of Education in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) identified the strategic objective ensure safe, conducive and challenging learning environments (Ministry of Education, 2020) based on the United Arab Emirates Vision 2021 and the national indicators of the vision which aim to reach the greatest levels of learning and knowledge and contribute to students' motivation and encouragement. Thus, the ministry established in 2015 the Directorate of Environment, Health, and Safety to work on developing the educational or learning environment. It aims to prevent and control risks and dangers regarding the learning environment protect the health and safety of learners, staff, and others and sustain the sustainability of the learning environment.

Educational institutions must include safety procedures and requirements in all their programs and operations and reduce or eliminate any risks, threats, or hazards to students, teachers, employees, and staff to provide a safe learning environment (Owaisi, 2006). A safe learning environment contributes to students' academic achievement, intellectual development and personality building. Teachers should actively listen to their students' input and remarks and consider their perceptions and feedback to create a safe learning environment. The current study aims to investigate the reality of the learning environment safety at Al-Ain University focusing on the physical, social and psychological obstacles that the students may encounter, which could prevent them from feeling safe and secure based on the aforementioned discussion.

1.2. Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following research questions based on the above objectives:

1. What is the safety level of the learning environment at Al-Ain University from students' perspective?
2. How many hours do students spend at the university and how frequently do they use the university premises?
3. Which physical, social, and psychological obstacles prevent students from feeling safe at Al-Ain University?
4. Are there any statistically significant differences in the students' perceptions due to gender, age, academic program and year of study?

1.3. Research Significance

Studies of the perceived safety of learning environments contribute to the development of a more thorough understanding of safety in educational settings. Findings from this study will serve as a guide for decision-makers to prompt new ways of addressing this issue and will greatly benefit various stakeholders in higher educational institutions including teachers, students, and the administration or management. The teachers will realize the need to change their attitude, mentality, and teaching method used in teaching students to enhance their academic performance. Moreover, students will change their motivation, interests and attitude towards the learning environment to more positive attitudes which will provoke their interest in what they are learning, and have an impact on their academic performance (see (Aliwa, 2024)). For administration or top management, the design of the learning environments will gain more care and attention especially concerning its components and facilities which will assist students in feeling comfortable and encouraged and assist teachers in providing support. Furthermore, policymakers in governmental bodies will be better equipped to understand which safety-ensuring mechanisms are working and which need to be reconsidered.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Rusticus et al. (2023) indicate that the psychological, social, cultural and physical context in which learning takes place and affects students' motivation, learning and achievement is referred to as the learning environment. Hence, creating a safe learning environment is critical to supporting students' academic progress, personal growth,

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and general well-being. It is important to comprehend the elements involved in creating a learning environment that is safe in educational institutions to promote students' intellectual and personal development. Ugur (2023) argues that a safe and secure learning environment promotes a sense of belonging, respect and support for all individuals involved in the learning process, including students, teachers, and staff (p. 1). No doubt that a safe class in a pleasant, friendly, and beneficial learning environment positively enhances students (Dahoud, 2023).

AlKhaza'leh et al. (2023) state that "when the material aspects (all educational facilities) and the moral (human) aspects are all available" (p.173), then the learning environment becomes safe. Only students can have a sense of safety and security; feel mentally stable enough to attain integrated growth and be aware of their mental, skillful and psychological development (Han, Liu, & Lv, 2022). Students will achieve their learning objectives such as cognitive, academic, and personal growth, if safety needs are addressed. In addition, a safe learning environment motivates the teachers as it affects their positive attitude towards teaching (Dahoud, 2023).

Students' perceptions of their safety in the educational institution are a key factor that can either promote or undermine a safe learning environment. Both national and international laws and policies mandate the establishment of a safe and secure learning environment. During its Transforming Education Summit in 2022, the United Nations advocated for and encouraged policymakers to create a safe learning environment for everyone involved in the educational process that is free from physical, sexual, psychological, and gender-based violence as well as from bullying, harassment, xenophobia, discrimination, racism, sexism, ableism, and ageism.

2.1. Importance of Building a Safe Learning Environment

Students may experience various challenges during university, most of which have to do with academic pressure, the need to succeed academically, and the capacity to adjust to new norms and procedures. According to Kibriya and Jones (2021) the "threats to a safe academic environment have become increasingly more common affecting the quality of education" (p. 15) which leads to affecting the students' academic achievement and performance itself. Therefore, Ugur (2023) indicates that it is crucial to establish a safe learning environment for the following benefits that educational institutions will gain:

1. Psycho-emotional health: A safe learning environment enhances students' psycho-emotional health, making them more likely to grow in self-confidence, sense of belonging and self-esteem. Therefore, students are more inclined to take chances, ask questions and actively participate in the learning process which fosters a positive learning environment.
2. Academic performance: There is a direct relationship between academic success and a safe learning environment. Students are better able to concentrate and assimilate information when they feel safe and at ease and trust their teachers and peers. They are more inclined to work with peers, participate in discussions, and ask for assistance when needed.
3. Strong bonds: Creating a safe learning environment helps students and teachers form strong bonds with one another. It promotes cooperation, empathy, and communication. A supportive community where students feel appreciated, understood, and connected is fostered by strong relationships. These constructive relationships lessen bullying.
4. Students' mental health and well-being: A safe learning environment eases tension, lessens anxiety and gives a feeling of steadiness. Students are more likely to seek support and assistance for mental health issues when they feel comfortable which leads to early intervention and proper care. Learning environments that prioritize mental health and well-being help students succeed.
5. Positive conduct and discipline: A safe learning environment encourages the use of positive discipline techniques and establishes clear expectations for behavior. Students are more likely to behave well and follow the policies and principles when they feel valued and safe. All students benefit from a peaceful and effective learning environment as a result.

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2.2. Determinants of a Safe Learning Environment

Education's primary goal is to help students grow intellectually and personally so they can contribute to society and be engaged citizens (Shean & Mander, 2020). A supportive socio-psychological and physical environment with a positive culture has gained attention in recent years (Hattie, 2012). According to Al-Omari and Al-Shraifin (2015) an effective learning environment depends on the following two fundamental aspects: the social environment and the physical environment which overlap, complement each other, and are no less important than each other. Meanwhile, Savolainen (2023) argues that the psychological environment involves the attitude and the atmosphere of learning. One could argue that a safe and secure learning environment truly consists of physical, social and psychological components that ensure students, teachers, staff, and institutions are safe from injury or risk, both intentionally and unintentionally (Savolainen, 2023). This section discusses the three determinants that guarantee the safety and security of a learning environment in light of the reviewed literature.

2.2.1. Physical Safety

One of the key characteristics of a safe learning environment is physical safety. According to ADPC et al. (2013) education policies and procedures that are in line with disaster and risk management at the state, local, and educational institution site levels, address the comprehensive safety of the learning environment. This safety should be supported by safe facilities security systems, disaster management processes and risk reduction procedures (Savolainen, 2023). In other words, a safe learning environment is achieved through physical safety. Appropriate safeguards should be in place that include keeping the premises tidy and orderly, implementing safety procedures, taking immediate action to resolve any possible risks (Ugur, 2023) and ensuring that the buildings and premises are secure and free from any hazards or dangers that could potentially harm students. When students feel physically safe, they are better able to focus on their learning and feel comfortable exploring and engaging in their educational environment. Dahoud (2023) indicates that learning facilities play a main role in a safe learning environment and are one of the points used to measure the effectiveness of the educational system. Furthermore, there is a significantly positive relationship between the quality of facilities and the students' academic achievement. In addition, the level of available resources stimulates and shows the level of ingenuity and commitment of teachers toward providing effective teaching (Abdel Hameed, Khader, & Khader, 2020). Their learning environment must be well-prepared and equipped physically to make students feel protected, secured, safe, comfortable, challenged, and inspired to learn to protect students' physical safety and well-being. (see (Al-Tkhayneh, 2023)).

2.2.2. Social Safety

Social safety is another important aspect of a safe learning environment. Students' social safety is given top priority in a secure learning environment as it highlights how crucial it is for them to have good relationships with each other and with their teachers (Ugur, 2023). The involvement of others is crucial because our ideas of safety are shaped by the people we interact with on a regular basis both positively and negatively (Shean & Mander, 2020). Students need to feel supported and accepted by their teachers and peers. This means creating a culture of respect, kindness, and empathy within the learning setting. Teachers and staff play a crucial role in fostering a positive social climate by listening to students, validating their feelings and addressing any issues of bullying, harassment, or discrimination that may arise. Empathy, compassion, and understanding are deliberately encouraged in such a way that creates a sense of belonging and support (Ugur, 2023). When students feel safe in the learning environment, they can think deeply about the subject being studied (Dahoud, 2023). Oker (2021) indicates that the mind learns positively through active attempts to make what one learns meaningful and transforms learners into activists by building relationships between the ideas and facts they learn. Students are encouraged to share their

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ideas, worries, and feelings since they will be valued and listened to. Social safety is developed through supportive relationships (Shean & Mander, 2020).

2.2.3. Psychological Safety

Psychological safety definitions mostly center on the person, their emotions and their decisions depending on those emotions. For instance, Huysman (2014) defined psychological safety as the ability to recognize our emotions and then assume the ultimate risk of experiencing them. Meanwhile, Vincent (1995) defined it as "a perceived freedom from psychological harm that can be measured on a continuum from feeling threatened to feeling safe" (p. 76). Psychological safety is linked to emotional well-being and favorable social and academic outcomes and is thought to be a defining feature of a safe learning environment (Shean & Mander, 2020). Psychological safety is essential for students to thrive in their learning environment in educational institutions (Haidari & Karakuş, 2019). This involves creating a culture of openness, trust and collaboration where students feel at ease asking for assistance, taking risks, and making errors. Developing psychological safety requires being cherished and respected (Shean & Mander, 2020). Students should be encouraged to express their opinions and share their ideas without fear of judgment or ridicule (Ugur, 2023). They should also feel confident that they can engage in discussions without timidity or threat. Psychological safety offers a safe environment for exploration and inquiry which are crucial components of identity development as they play a significant role in helping people develop a cohesive sense of who they are Schwartz, Donnellan, Ravert, Luyckx, and Zamboanga (2013). Thus, students who are concerned about safety are less likely to take risks during discovery and inquiry because their primary focus is on getting accepted and avoiding mockery and derision.

2.3. Previous Studies

Holley and Steiner (2005) investigated some factors contributing to a safe learning environment based on a survey of 121 bachelor's and master's degree students. They concluded that being in a safe learning environment altered the way and the amount students learnt. There are different factors including teacher, peer, personal and classroom characteristics that influence the development of safe learning environments. No statistically significant differences were found due to program level, race or gender.

Owaisi (2006) investigated the safety of schools in the Sultanate of Oman from the perspectives of school teachers on five dimensions, namely management policies, school safety for students, for teachers, for school building, and for school buses. The results showed that the participants perceived the five dimensions of school safety from low to medium with the highest value for the school building. The results also showed significant statistical differences between the sample answers in favor of males.

In his study, Al-Assaf (2008) explored the perceptions of 677 tenth-grade students of a safe learning environment in Jordanian schools and its relationship with the students' social interaction and motivation to learn. The results showed that the students' perceptions were medium at the following five different levels: the classroom calendar, the teaching planning and implementation, the physical learning environment, the management of the learning environment, and the teacher's relationship with students. The results also found a significantly positive relationship between students' perceptions and both social interaction and motivation to learn.

Suleman and Hussain (2014) conducted a study to investigate how Pakistani secondary school students' academic achievement was impacted by their physical learning environment. They used an experimental method with a sample of forty students from grade nine. The findings showed that the students' academic achievement is significantly impacted by a safe physical learning environment in favor of the experimental group students outperforming the control group students.

Young et al. (2016) explored the essential elements of a learning environment that support constructive and transformative learning experiences and investigated the relationships between these elements and the students' feeling safe in the learning environment. They accomplished this by examining 77 medical students' essays. Half of

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the students mentioned the safety of the learning environment as one of the essential elements. They also listed characteristics of a safe learning environment as the provision of constructive support and immediate and individualized feedback.

Ekpoh, Edet, and Ukpong (2020) explored the security challenges and physical obstacles that impacted the safety of a learning environment in two universities in Nigeria. The data were collected from 325 security personnel using a questionnaire. The results showed that different challenges related to local safety, security and physical obstacles hindered having a safe learning environment at the universities.

The study of Kibriya and Jones (2021) assessed the influence of safe learning environments on primary-age students' learning outcomes in math addition problems, reading fluency, and English. Three EdData assessments were employed in the study to survey administrators, teachers, and students to collect data. The results found that a hazardous learning environment significantly and negatively influences the students' learning results in math and reading.

In Jordan, Abu Eisha (2022) conducted a study to investigate the effect of the learning environment on the academic attainment of primary school students. Employing a mixed-method approach, using two questionnaires and interviews, the data were collected from 29 students and their parents. The study results demonstrated that the student's level of educational attainment is influenced by their environment due to factors attributed to the students themselves and their families.

AlKhaza'leh et al. (2023) evaluated the relationship between a safe learning environment and students' growth in creative thinking from teachers' perception. The findings showed that the teachers' perceptions of the schools safe learning environment and of the students' growth in creative thinking were both high surveying 500 teachers in Emirati schools. No statistically significant differences were found in the teachers' perceptions due to gender or experience but rather to years of experience in favor of teachers with more than ten years. Moreover, a strong relationship was found between the schools' safe learning environment and students' growth in creative thinking.

Dahoud (2023) identified the school learning environment influence on the academic performance of students in the science subject. The study sample consisted of 300 students in Jordanian public schools. The results revealed that the academic performance of students depends on the learning environment and its facilities. Teachers' commitment and ability diversify teaching strategies and students' interest in science and motivation to learn.

2.4. Research Gap

The majority of previous studies were conducted in a school setting while two studies by Ekpoh et al. (2020) and Holley and Steiner (2005) were conducted in a university setting. Moreover, the previous studies discussed the relationship between a safe learning environment and academic performance or achievement (Abu Eisha, 2022; Dahoud, 2023; Kibriya & Jones, 2021; Suleman & Hussain, 2014) , motivation to learn (Al-Assaf, 2008) and critical thinking growth (AlKhaza'leh et al., 2023). Moreover, a couple of studies examined the extent of a safe learning environment on certain dimensions (Al-Assaf, 2008; Owaisi, 2006). Only security issues and some social and physical aspects were included in the research that examined the factors that help or impede a secure learning environment. In addition, only one study was conducted in the UAE (AlKhaza'leh et al., 2023) yet it was in schools. However, the current study addresses the gap in the literature by (a) examining several physical, social and psychological obstacles that affect the safety of students in private university learning environment. (b) Exploring the safety level of the learning environment itself. (c) The hours and the premises that students spend at the university which could implicitly affect their perceptions. (d) The statistical differences of students' perceptions due to age and academic program.

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3. METHODOLOGY

The current study adopted a quantitative and descriptive research approach using a survey questionnaire. It surveys the opinions of a sample about a particular phenomenon or problem (Alotaibi & Skaik, 2019). This approach consists of straightforward questions that provide numerical answers allowing the researchers to compare those results and draw meaningful conclusions (Skaik, 2016). Descriptive survey research aims to fully and accurately recognize a certain state or condition or describe a phenomenon and its characteristics (Şahin, 2013). The data were collected through a web-based and cross-sectional survey since it could gather lots of data and perform appropriate statistical tests to address the objectives of the study and answer the research questions (Skaik, 2016). The web-based survey was selected because of its benefits for overcoming restrictions on time and location, data entry convenience and affordability when creating and disseminating over an internet link (Jaradat, Jibreel, & Skaik, 2020; Skaik, 2016).

3.1. Setting and Sample

The current study was conducted at Al-Ain University located in Al-Ain city in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. The population consisted of all students at the College of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education who are enrolled in the undergraduate, graduate and professional diploma programs. The study sample was composed of 89 students who answered the questionnaire correctly and completely using the stratified random sampling technique.

3.2. Research Instrument

The researchers selected to employ a questionnaire to get data from the study participants. They created the questionnaire based on the literature review and similar questionnaires used in previous studies that addressed the same subject. The researchers modified the wording of some items and sentences to fit the current study, the sample and the setting. The questionnaire was based through Google Forms (https://docs.google.com/forms) which allows building questionnaires simply and clearly and sending them electronically through an e-mail link to the participants. The questionnaire included a paragraph clarifying the study objectives and inviting the students to participate in the survey by answering all the questions in the questionnaire. Internal consistency was measured employing the Cronbach's alpha coefficient which has a range of 0 to 1 with 0 denoting lack of internal consistency and 1 denoting perfect internal consistency to verify the reliability of the questionnaire (Skaik, 2016). The Cronbach's alpha value of 0.88 indicates a high internal consistency in the reliability test result which means that the questionnaire was very suitable for the study.

The questionnaire consisted of three sections, the first contained two parts: part one included personal information about the participants (gender, age, academic program and year of study), and part two contained two questions about the number of hours spent at the university and the frequency of using the university's premises. The second section contained 12 sentences to measure the students' perceptions of a safe learning environment, and the third section contained 15 sentences to inspect the physical, social and psychological obstacles to a safe learning environment. The researchers used a 5-point Likert scale to measure the second part of the first section (1= rarely, 2= sometimes, 3= often, 4= usually, 5= always), the second section (1= very low, 2= low, 3= medium, 4= high, 5= very high) and the third section (1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neutral, 4= agree, 5= strongly agree).

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection phase lasted six weeks from the end of the second semester to the early summer semester of the academic year 2023/2024. The researchers decided to employ a web-based questionnaire since it is one of the simplest methods to collect data through an online survey (Jaradat et al., 2020). The data were downloaded into a spreadsheet by Google Forms which allowed the researchers to import it into SPSS to perform the necessary statistical analyses once all the participants finished submitting their responses.

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The data were analyzed using SPSS descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients. The descriptive statistics were used to calculate the participants' demographic information. Moreover, descriptive statistics were used to answer the first, second, and third research questions by measuring the frequencies, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations. An independent samples t-test was used to detect the statistically significant differences due to gender, and an ANOVA test to detect the statistically significant differences due to variables of age, academic program, and year of study to answer the fourth research question.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section provides the results of the data analysis starting with displaying the participants' demographics, followed by answering and discussing the results of each research question. Table 1 displays the personal information of the participants where the majority were female students. The participants' ages varied from 20 to 50 and they were from the three academic programs and from the four levels at the college.

Table 1. Participants' personal information (N = 89).

Categories	Items	No.	Percentage
Gender	Male	18	20.2
	Female	71	79.8
Age	20-30	52	58.4
	31-40	26	29.2
	41-50	10	11.2
	50 and above	1	1.1
Academic program	Undergraduate	38	42.7
	Graduate	10	11.2
	Professional diploma	41	46.1
Level of study	Level 1	36	40.4
	Level 2	20	22.5
	Level 3	15	16.9
	Level 4	18	20.2

RQ1: What is the safety level of the learning environment at Al-Ain University from students' perspective? According to Table 2, students perceived the level of safety at the university as high where the total mean score for all 12 sentences measuring safety was 3.71. The highest mean scores were for the fourth sentence at 3.91, the ninth sentence at 3.83, the fifth sentence at 3.82, and the third sentence at 3.79 followed by the second and eighth sentences with the same mean score of 3.75. The results indicate that the students believe the university provides a safe learning environment in terms of teacher-student and student-student relationships, the educational facilities, the qualified teaching staff, the different events that take place and the curriculum itself. Moreover, the results indicate that the university facilitates students' participation in discussions and freedom of expression. The results are similar to the studies of Al-Assaf (2008) and Owaisi (2006) which revealed medium perceptions, and consistent with AlKhaza'leh et al. (2023) which revealed high perceptions. However, the current study is distinguished in that it targeted university students whereas the others targeted high school students and teachers.

Table 2. The safety level of the university learning environment.

#	Sentences	Very low	Low	Medium	High	Very high	Mean	SD
1	The learning environment standards in the university are flexible and adaptable to any security updates.	7	9	19	42	12	3.48	1.099
2	A safe learning environment is available to the student in the content of the curriculum.	6	7	10	46	20	3.75	1.100
3	The learning environment fosters a positive relationship among students.	4	7	11	49	18	3.79	1.005

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#	Sentences	Very low	Low	Medium	High	Very high	Mean	SD
4	The learning environment fosters a positive teacher-student relationship.	4	2	15	45	23	3.91	0.961
5	The availability of all educational facilities contributes to a safe learning environment.	3	5	15	48	18	3.82	0.936
6	The university provides a safe learning environment during all exams, tasks, and projects that students undertake.	5	3	22	44	15	3.69	0.984
7	The university provides a safe learning environment free from threats and intimidation.	5	5	22	42	15	3.64	1.014
8	The university offers a safe learning environment by encouraging students to express their opinions and participate in discussions.	3	5	21	42	18	3.75	0.957
9	The university has qualified teaching staff to provide a high-quality safe learning environment.	3	7	13	45	21	3.83	0.991
10	A safe learning environment is available to the student in the physical aspect.	4	9	27	37	12	3.49	1.001
11	A safe learning environment is available to the student in the social aspect.	4	7	17	46	15	3.69	0.995
12	A safe learning environment is available to the student in the psychological aspect.	7	5	17	43	17	3.65	1.099
	Total						3.71	1.010

RQ2: How many hours do students spend at the university and how frequently do they use the university premises? For the first part of the question, the results displayed in Figure 1 showed that 65% of the students spend one to four hours in the university daily and around 33% spend five to eight hours while only 2% of the students spend more than eight hours. For the second part of the question, the results showed that the most frequently used premises by the students are mainly their college, the mosque, the cafeterias, the administration offices, and the lounges, at the mean scores of 3.60, 3.15, 2.81, 1.94, and 1.91 respectively as seen in Table 3. These results indicate that the students mainly go to the university to attend their classes or lectures which justifies the reason for spending around four hours at the university and mainly in their college. These findings are a new contribution of this study as no previous studies have addressed this question. However, Hafferty (2020) found that a key predictor of feeling secure is a sense of belonging, one may argue that being on university premises is likely one element that contributes to students' understanding of security.

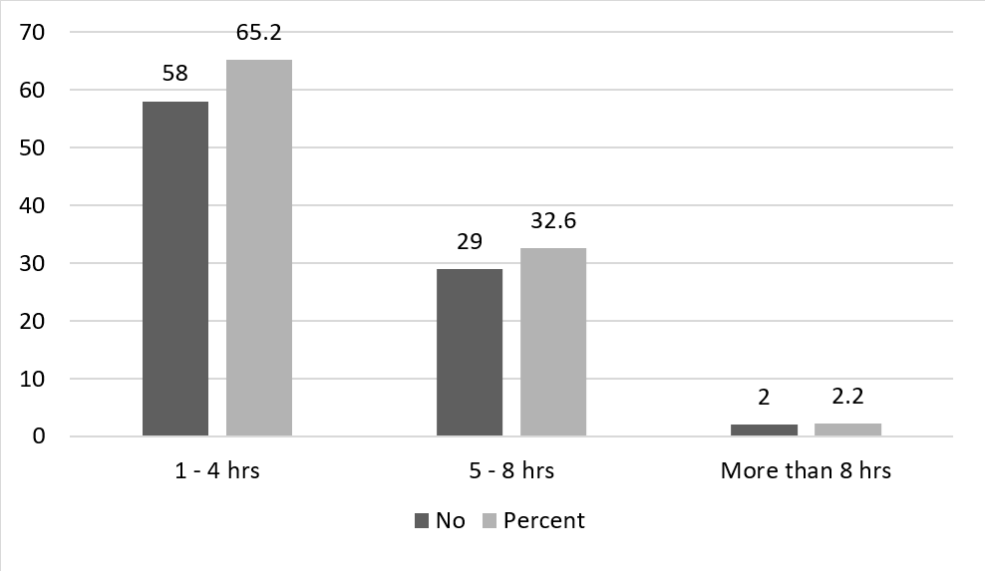


Figure 1. Number of hours students stay at the university.

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Table 3. Frequency of using university premises.

Premises	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Usually	Always	Mean score	Rank
My college	10	13	21	4	41	3.60	1
Other colleges	54	23	9	1	2	1.58	8
Administration	32	38	12	6	1	1.94	4
Library	54	18	14	2	1	1.63	7
Labs	49	21	12	4	3	1.78	6
Cafeterias	13	25	28	12	11	2.81	3
Sports and gym	72	9	8	0	0	1.28	9
Lounges	43	22	15	7	2	1.91	5
Mosque	19	13	22	6	29	3.15	2

RQ3: Which physical, social and psychological obstacles prevent students from feeling safe at Al-Ain University? According to Table 4, the majority of the students disagreed with all the sentences measuring the three types of obstacles. The mean scores for the physical, social, and psychological obstacles were 2.48, 2.15, and 2.15 respectively which are considered low mean scores. These results indicate that the students do not have any obstacles that could prevent them from feeling safe in the university which is consistent with the results revealed in the first research question showing that the university provides a safe learning environment for the students. The findings contradict those of previous studies by Al-Assaf (2008); Ekpoh et al. (2020) and Holley and Steiner (2005) which found that physical and social obstacles negatively influenced a safe learning environment in universities. However, what distinguishes the current study is that it is the first to address three different types of obstacles to the provision of a safe learning environment. Thus, the study contributes to the reviewed literature on the physical, social, and psychological obstacles.

Table 4. The physical, social, and psychological obstacles.

#	Sentences	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	SD
Physical obstacles								
1	Some classroom spaces are small, uncomfortable, or insufficient to accommodate students.	16	26	28	13	6	2.63	1.142
2	The university lacks enough facilities or lounges that help students rest or work and study.	9	27	28	16	9	2.88	1.136
3	The university premises are usually dirty, messy, and untidy.	39	15	23	6	6	2.16	1.251
4	The university premises are not equipped with facilities for students with special needs that help them feel comfortable.	24	18	31	7	9	2.54	1.253
5	The university premises lack security measures such as fences and gates, locking safes, surveillance cameras, and access control	29	25	26	6	3	2.20	1.079
	Total						2.48	1.172
Social obstacles								
6	The teacher-student relationship is weak and unmotivating.	31	23	26	7	2	2.17	1.069
7	Students do not have good and friendly relationships with each other.	31	19	31	4	4	2.22	1.116
8	My classmates refuse to collaborate on certain tasks assigned by the teacher.	31	27	22	6	3	2.13	1.079
9	Teachers are not cooperative in listening to students and giving advice.	36	28	18	6	1	1.97	0.994
10	The university administration is not cooperative in resolving issues of harassment or discrimination.	29	23	25	9	3	2.26	1.123
	Total						2.15	1.076
Psychological obstacles								
11	Teachers or administration do not take the necessary actions to prevent any	27	24	28	7	3	2.27	1.085

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#	Sentences	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	SD
	psychological problems such as lack of trust, stress, or anxiety.							
12	The university does not have a culture of openness and trust to make students feel comfortable.	31	24	21	11	2	2.20	1.120
13	Students are not encouraged to express their opinions and share their ideas.	30	23	23	6	7	2.29	1.227
14	My classmates make fun of me when I ask questions in my class.	41	19	21	4	4	2.00	1.138
15	My classmates ridicule me when I engage in discussions.	41	21	19	5	3	1.97	1.102
	Total						2.15	1.134

RQ4: Are there any statistically significant differences in the students' perceptions due to gender, age, academic program and year of study? An independent samples t-test was used to determine whether there is a difference in students' perceptions between males and females. The results shown in Table 5 indicated that there is no statistically significant difference between males (M=42.67, SD=13.088) and females (M=44.96, SD=9.926), [t(87) = -.818, p = . 416> .05]. This result is consistent with those of AlKhaza'leh et al. (2023) and Holley and Steiner (2005) who did not find statistical differences between male and female perceptions of a safe learning environment. However, the current study differs from these two studies in that it was conducted in a university and targeted university students.

Table 5. T-test results based on gender.

Variables	N	Mean score	St. dev.	t value	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Sig.
Males	18	42.67	13.088	-0.818	87	0.416	0.108
Females	71	44.96	9.926	-0.694	22.20	0.495	

According to the demographic variables of age, academic program, and year of study, one-way ANOVA test was conducted to detect the significance of statistical differences. The results seen in Table 6 showed statistically significant differences in the students' perceptions due to age with the values ($F(3, 85) = 4.59$, $p = 0.005$) where p is below 0.05. Meanwhile, the results show no statistically significant differences in the students' perceptions due to the academic program with the values ($F(2, 86) = 0.14$, $p = 0.872$) and due to the year of study with the values ($F(3, 85) = 0.51$, $p = 0.680$), where p is above 0.05. The last result is similar to those of Holley and Steiner (2005) who found no statistically significant differences in the students' perceptions due to the program level. However, the current study contributes to the existing literature in terms of the new findings related to age and academic program.

Table 6. ANOVA test results based on age, academic program, and year of study.

Variables	Variances	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F value	Sig.
Age	Between groups	1377.09	3	459.03	4.59	0.005
	Within groups	8507.15	85	100.08		
Academic program	Between groups	31.56	2	15.78	0.14	0.872
	Within groups	9852.69	86	114.57		
Year of study	Between groups	173.16	3	57.72	0.51	0.68
	Within groups	9711.09	85	114.23		

5. CONCLUSION

The current study investigated the perceptions of students from undergraduate, graduate and professional diploma programs at the College of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education at Al-Ain University on the safety of the learning environment and the type of obstacles that might impact their safety perceptions. The findings revealed a high level of a safe learning environment which could be attributed to the overall highly safe and secure

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atmosphere in the UAE. The findings also revealed that the students do not experience any kind of obstacles whether physical, social, or psychological that may prevent them from feeling safe on the university premises. The findings of this study shed light on and underline the great efforts made by Al-Ain University to guarantee a safe and secure learning environment for its students, teachers, and staff. The procedures implemented by the university should be adopted by other universities in the country. Administrators, teachers, and counselors should prioritize providing a safe and secure learning environment for themselves and the students by implementing the necessary processes within the learning setting. For such an environment to effectively fulfill the different requirements of the students, it must be student-centered and sustainable which promotes the growth of their competence, autonomy and performance. Universities need to prioritize the safety and well-being of their students to create a positive and enriching educational experience for all because simply students learn better in a safe learning environment. Universities that support a safe learning environment help students become more confident and adaptable in the face of real-world obstacles, in addition to helping them perform better academically.

6. IMPLICATIONS

Creating a safe learning environment in universities is highly important for management, teachers, and students. For management, establishing such an environment is vital as it allows them to create a model of an exemplary environment for education and scientific research and build resolution strategies. It also helps management meet internationally recognized standards of safety and security, thus attracting more students and distinguished teachers to join the university. For teachers, a safe environment fosters open communication, improves their capacity to teach, encourages them to share ideas and exchange knowledge and helps them build effective leadership and teamwork skills. Moreover, a safe environment encourages them to offer psychological assistance which promotes enduring bonds with their colleagues and students. For students, being in a safe learning environment encourages them to actively participate in class activities and discussions, and to excel in their academic performance. It also helps them feel comfortable and supported which improves their critical and creative thinking skills, and meets their academic objectives. Students can openly express their viewpoints in a safe environment which motivates the sharing of ideas and perspectives that are important for creative problem-solving and collaborative thinking. Additionally, a safe learning environment lowers fear, stress, tension, discomfort, and anxiety levels and improves concentration and it helps both teachers' and students' mental and psychological health.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

In a nutshell, the researchers would like to offer the following recommendations:

1. The safety procedures of the university should be an example to follow by other universities.
2. Another research study should be conducted to inspect the teachers' and staff's perceptions.
3. Future research may examine the relationship between a safe learning environment and students' academic achievement.
4. Future research may explore some factors that support a safe learning environment such as parental involvement campaigns, curriculum improvements, and teacher training programs.

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