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Emotional Intelligence as a Protective Resource Against Academic Stress and Burnout: A Cross-Sectional Study of University Students in Haryana and Rajasthan

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Abstract

Background: Academic stress and burnout are increasingly recognised as threats to university students' learning, engagement, and psychological well-being. Emotional intelligence may operate as a personal resource by improving emotion recognition, regulation, coping, and help seeking, yet multi-institution evidence from northern India remains limited. Objective: This study examined the associations of self-reported emotional intelligence with academic stress and academic burnout and assessed whether emotional intelligence explained additional variance beyond demographic and academic characteristics. Methods: An analytical cross-sectional survey was conducted with 760 undergraduate and postgraduate students aged 18–29 years from public and private higher-education institutions in Haryana and Rajasthan. Emotional intelligence was assessed using the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale, academic stress using the Perception of Academic Stress Scale, and burnout using the Maslach Burnout Inventory–Student Survey. Correlations, hierarchical regressions with robust standard errors, and demographic comparisons were performed. Results: Emotional intelligence was inversely correlated with academic stress ($r = -.414$), exhaustion ($r = -.386$), and cynicism ($r = -.268$), and positively correlated with academic efficacy ($r = .489$; all $p < .001$). After adjustment for age, gender, state, institution type, study level, residence, financial strain, academic performance, and questionnaire language, emotional intelligence predicted lower academic stress ($\beta = -.409$, 95% CI $[-.470, -.348]$) and lower burnout ($\beta = -.507$, 95% CI $[-.565, -.450]$). It added 16.6% and 25.6% explained variance to the stress and burnout models, respectively. Women reported slightly higher stress and burnout, and hostel residents reported slightly higher stress. Conclusion: Emotional intelligence was a substantial correlate of lower academic stress and burnout, especially sustained academic depletion. Student-level emotional-skills programmes should be combined with workload reform, financial support, clear assessment practices, and accessible counselling.

1. Introduction

University education offers intellectual development, professional opportunity, and social mobility, but it also concentrates multiple pressures within a relatively short developmental period. Students must manage examinations, deadlines, competitive grading, changing relationships, financial demands, uncertain employment prospects, and expectations from family and society. These pressures can be motivating when demands are predictable and resources are available. They become harmful when students perceive that requirements exceed their time, competence, control, or social support. Academic stress is therefore not simply the amount of work assigned; it reflects the interaction between educational demands and students' appraisal of their ability to manage them (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015). Reviews consistently associate sustained student stress with poorer mental health, sleep, concentration, and academic functioning (Pascoe et al., 2020; Barbayannis et al., 2022).

Burnout represents a related but distinct condition. In student populations, it is commonly expressed through exhaustion, cynical or detached attitudes toward study, and reduced academic efficacy (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Stress may fluctuate around particular assignments or examinations, whereas burnout reflects prolonged depletion and weakening engagement. The Job Demands–Resources model proposes that high demands exhaust available energy when adequate resources are absent (Demerouti et al., 2001). Conservation of Resources theory similarly suggests that repeated losses of time, energy, confidence, sleep, social support, or financial security can create self-reinforcing loss spirals (Hobfoll, 1989). A student who compensates for backlog by sacrificing sleep may initially preserve performance but later require greater effort for the same result. Over time, this process can produce exhaustion, disengagement, and reduced belief in academic competence.

Emotional intelligence may interrupt these processes by improving the way students identify and use emotional information. The ability model describes emotional intelligence as capacities for perceiving, using, understanding, and managing emotion (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Mayer et al., 2016). Self-report approaches assess perceived competence in everyday emotional awareness, appraisal, use, and regulation. The Wong and Law model includes self-emotion appraisal, appraisal of others' emotions, use of emotion, and regulation of emotion (Wong & Law, 2002). These skills may support academic adjustment by helping students distinguish anxiety from fatigue, interpret feedback without global self-condemnation, regulate impulsive responses,

sustain motivation, communicate needs, and seek support before difficulties escalate. Emotion-regulation theory also emphasises that coping effectiveness depends on when and how strategies are used rather than on a single universally adaptive response (Gross, 1998).

Empirical research generally supports a protective relationship, although findings vary with measurement and context. Emotional intelligence has been associated with academic performance in meta-analytic evidence (MacCann et al., 2020), lower academic stress among medical and health-profession students (Shahin, 2020; Khorasani et al., 2023), and lower burnout among healthcare and arts students (Taylor et al., 2024; Zhang & Fah, 2025). Social support may also partly explain the association between emotional intelligence and academic stress (Ullah et al., 2023). However, many studies rely on specialised disciplines, convenience samples, or single institutions. Ability measures and self-report measures are sometimes discussed as though they were interchangeable, and cross-sectional associations are occasionally interpreted as causal protection. These limitations reduce the precision with which findings can inform university policy.

Measurement precision is especially important in emotional-intelligence research. Performance-based tests assess maximal ability under structured conditions, whereas self-report scales assess perceived typical functioning. These approaches may predict different outcomes and are influenced by different sources of error. A self-report score can capture confidence and everyday emotional habits, but it may also reflect mood, personality, self-presentation, or cultural norms concerning emotional expression. The present study therefore used the term self-reported emotional intelligence and examined the proposed factor structure before interpreting substantive relationships. This distinction avoids overstating what the instrument can demonstrate and clarifies that the findings concern students' perceived emotional competence rather than an objective test of emotional problem solving.

The Haryana–Rajasthan higher-education context is particularly relevant because it combines metropolitan and semi-urban institutions, public and private sectors, residential and commuter students, and varied professional and general academic streams. Students may also move between Hindi-dominant home environments and English-medium programmes, balance education with family obligations, or face intense competition for professional and public-sector employment. A multi-institution design can therefore test whether emotional intelligence retains an association with stress and burnout after demographic, academic, financial, and residential differences are

considered.

The present study examined emotional intelligence as one modifiable personal resource rather than a complete solution to student distress. It had three aims: to describe emotional intelligence, academic stress, and burnout in a diverse university sample; to examine their bivariate relationships; and to test whether emotional intelligence predicted stress and burnout after adjustment for relevant covariates. It was hypothesised that emotional intelligence would be negatively associated with academic stress, exhaustion, and cynicism, positively associated with academic efficacy, and would explain additional variance in stress and burnout beyond demographic and academic characteristics.

2. Methods

Design and setting. An analytical cross-sectional survey was conducted in selected universities and university-level colleges across Haryana and Rajasthan, northern India. The design was selected to estimate construct levels, compare groups, and test multivariable associations within one academic period. Data collection avoided the first two weeks of the semester and the final examination week to reduce exceptional transition and examination effects. The study covered public and private institutions, undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, residential and non-residential students, and five broad academic streams.

Participants and sampling. Eligible participants were enrolled students aged 18–29 years who could read an approved English or Hindi questionnaire and provide informed consent. School students, coaching-only students, doctoral scholars, alumni, and students outside the participating campus frame were excluded. A multistage stratified cluster strategy was used. State formed the first stratum, followed by institution type, geographic cluster, faculty or academic stream, programme or year group, and selected classes. The target allocation was 380 students from each state, with approximately equal public and private representation and monitored balance by study level, gender, course stream, and residence. A total of 842 students were approached; 760 records met the prespecified eligibility and quality criteria and formed the analytical sample.

Measures. Emotional intelligence was measured using the 16-item Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS), which assesses self-emotion appraisal, others-emotion appraisal, use of emotion, and regulation of emotion (Wong & Law, 2002). The scale was interpreted as self-reported emotional competence rather than objective ability. Academic stress was measured using

the 18-item Perception of Academic Stress Scale (PAS), covering academic expectations, workload and examinations, and academic self-perceptions (Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015). Academic burnout was measured using the licensed Maslach Burnout Inventory–Student Survey (MBI-SS), with exhaustion, cynicism, and academic efficacy reported as separate dimensions. A higher-burnout profile was defined by higher exhaustion and cynicism together with lower efficacy (Schaufeli et al., 2002). A demographic schedule captured age, gender, state, institution type, study level, academic stream, residence, questionnaire language, self-reported academic performance, and perceived financial strain.

Language adaptation and administration. Approved English and Hindi forms were used. Where adaptation was required, bilingual translation, reconciliation, back-translation, expert review, and cognitive interviews were conducted to preserve conceptual rather than merely literal equivalence. The complete questionnaire took approximately 20–25 minutes. Paper forms were completed privately and returned in sealed collection arrangements; secure online administration was used where authorised. Faculty members did not view individual responses, and participation was unrelated to grades, attendance, scholarships, hostel status, or access to support.

Ethics and participant protection. Ethical and institutional permissions were obtained before recruitment. Information sheets described the study purpose, voluntary participation, potential discomfort, privacy arrangements, and withdrawal conditions. The wider survey included a suicidal-ideation measure; therefore, all sites followed a written safety protocol, provided support information, and had access to a qualified mental-health professional. The main research records were pseudonymous, direct identifiers were excluded, and optional support requests were stored separately. The relevant ethics committee name and approval number should be inserted in the manuscript before journal submission.

Statistical analysis. Data were screened for eligibility, missingness, duplicate indicators, implausibly short completion, long response strings, and contradictory responses. Extreme distress scores were not excluded merely because they were high. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega, and confirmatory factor analyses evaluated the expected measurement structures. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations were calculated. Hierarchical regression models entered age, gender, state, institution type, study level, residence, financial strain, academic performance, and questionnaire language in the first block and emotional intelligence in the second. HC3 robust standard errors were used. The burnout outcome

was represented by a standardised factor combining higher exhaustion and cynicism with lower academic efficacy. Group comparisons used Welch tests or analysis of variance with effect sizes. Statistical significance was evaluated at two-sided $p < .05$, but interpretation prioritised effect sizes, confidence intervals, and model consistency. Measurement invariance was also examined across the major state, language, institution-type, and gender groups where sample sizes permitted. Configural and metric invariance were supported, and scalar comparisons were interpreted only after limited, theoretically defensible adjustments. A one-factor diagnostic model and the proportion of variance accounted for by the first unrotated factor were used to assess whether a single response tendency dominated the data. These procedures could not eliminate common-method bias, but they provided evidence against treating all associations as products of one undifferentiated response factor.

3. Results

Participant characteristics and data quality. The final sample included 760 students, equally divided between Haryana and Rajasthan and between public and private institutions. Women comprised 50.7%, men 46.6%, and the remaining participants identified as non-binary/another identity or preferred not to disclose. Seventy percent were undergraduates, 32.2% lived in hostels, and all five broad academic streams were represented. The mean age was 21.30 years ($SD = 2.16$). Item-level missingness did not exceed 1.9%. The maximum variance inflation factor was 2.08, the largest Cook's distance was 0.06, and institution-level intraclass correlations ranged from .018 to .034. These diagnostics did not indicate serious multicollinearity, single-case influence, or clustering that altered the substantive conclusions.

Table 1. Demographic and academic profile of the sample (n = 760)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
State	Haryana / Rajasthan	380 / 380	50.0 / 50.0
Institution type	Public / Private	380 / 380	50.0 / 50.0
Gender	Female / Male / Other or undisclosed	385 / 354 / 21	50.7 / 46.6 / 2.8
Study level	Undergraduate / Postgraduate	532 / 228	70.0 / 30.0
Residence	Hostel / Day scholar or other	245 / 515	32.2 / 67.8

Questionnaire language	English / Hindi	472 / 288	62.1 / 37.9
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Note. Percentages may not total exactly 100 because of rounding.

Measurement quality and descriptive findings. Internal-consistency estimates were satisfactory in the thesis-reported analysis: the WLEIS total had $\alpha = .91$ and $\omega = .92$; the PAS total had $\alpha = .89$ and $\omega = .90$; and the burnout dimensions had ω values from .86 to .89. The four-factor WLEIS, three-factor PAS, and three-factor burnout models showed acceptable fit. The mean emotional-intelligence score was 77.25 ($SD = 8.37$) on a possible range of 16–112. Regulation of emotion had the lowest mean among the four emotional-intelligence dimensions. Mean academic stress was 55.68 ($SD = 10.78$) on a possible range of 18–90. Mean exhaustion was 16.48 ($SD = 5.76$), cynicism 10.42 ($SD = 4.92$), and academic efficacy 23.38 ($SD = 5.55$).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and internal consistency

Variable	Mean	SD	Alpha	Omega
Emotional intelligence total	77.25	8.37	.91	.92
Academic stress total	55.68	10.78	.89	.90
Burnout: exhaustion	16.48	5.76	.88	.89
Burnout: cynicism	10.42	4.92	.84	.86
Burnout: academic efficacy	23.38	5.55	.86	.88

Note. Reliability coefficients are reproduced from the thesis draft and must be verified against the raw item-level dataset before submission.

Bivariate associations. Emotional intelligence was negatively correlated with academic stress ($r = -.414, p < .001$), exhaustion ($r = -.386, p < .001$), and cynicism ($r = -.268, p < .001$), and positively correlated with academic efficacy ($r = .489, p < .001$). Academic stress was positively correlated with exhaustion ($r = .587$) and cynicism ($r = .500$) and negatively correlated with academic efficacy ($r = -.383$; all $p < .001$). The pattern indicated that emotional intelligence was related not only to lower immediate stress but also to lower depletion, lower disengagement, and stronger confidence in academic functioning.

Hierarchical regression. Demographic and academic covariates explained 10.0% of the variance in academic stress. Adding emotional intelligence increased explained variance by 16.6 percentage points, producing a final R^2 of .266. A one-standard-deviation increase in emotional intelligence

was associated with a .409-standard-deviation decrease in academic stress ($\beta = -.409$, robust SE = .031, 95% CI $[-.470, -.348]$, $p < .001$). Financial strain and female gender were associated with higher stress, while better self-reported academic performance was associated with lower stress. For the standardised burnout factor, covariates explained 8.5% of the variance. Emotional intelligence added 25.6 percentage points, increasing final R^2 to .340. Its adjusted coefficient was $\beta = -.507$ (robust SE = .029, 95% CI $[-.565, -.450]$, $p < .001$). Financial strain and female gender were also associated with higher burnout. In an expanded model including academic stress, stress was positively associated with burnout ($\beta = .494$, $p < .001$), while emotional intelligence retained an independent inverse association ($\beta = -.305$, $p < .001$). The expanded model explained 51.9% of burnout variance.

Table 3. Emotional-intelligence coefficients in adjusted models

Outcome/model	β	Robust SE	95% CI	p	R^2
Academic stress	-.409	.031	$[-.470, -.348]$	< .001	.266
Academic burnout: primary model	-.507	.029	$[-.565, -.450]$	< .001	.340
Academic burnout: adjusted for stress	-.305	.028	$[-.360, -.251]$	< .001	.519

Note. Models adjusted for age, gender, state, institution type, study level, residence, financial strain, academic performance, and questionnaire language. The expanded burnout model additionally included academic stress.

Group differences. Women reported slightly higher academic stress than men (56.93 vs. 54.27; $d = .25$, $p = .001$) and a higher burnout-factor mean ($d = .28$, $p < .001$), although the effects were small. Hostel residents reported slightly higher stress than day scholars or students in other residence arrangements (56.96 vs. 55.06; $d = .18$, $p = .022$). State, institution type, study level, and broad academic stream did not show meaningful differences in emotional intelligence, stress, or burnout.

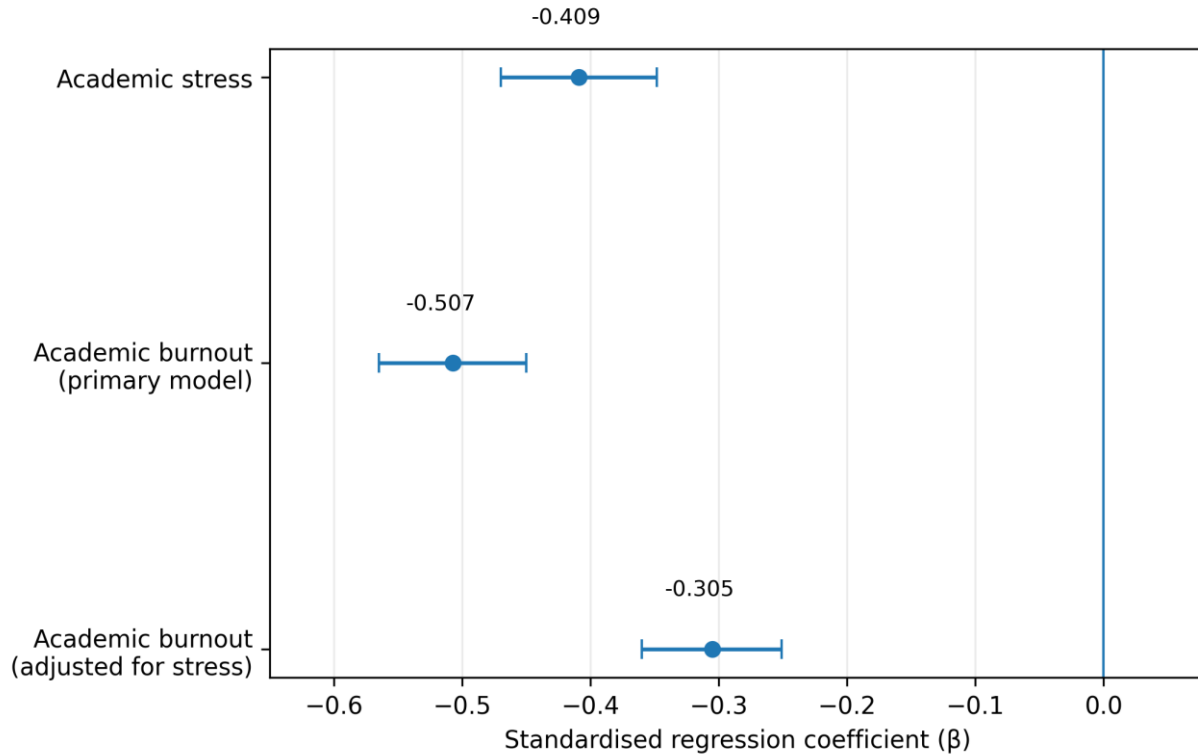


Figure 1. Standardised emotional-intelligence coefficients for academic stress and academic burnout. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

4. Discussion

This multi-institution study found consistent inverse associations between emotional intelligence and two central forms of academic strain. Students who reported stronger emotional awareness, use, and regulation also reported lower academic stress, lower exhaustion and cynicism, and stronger academic efficacy. These relationships remained after adjustment for demographic, academic, residential, financial, and language variables. Emotional intelligence contributed most strongly to the burnout model, where it added 25.6% explained variance beyond the covariates. This pattern suggests that emotional intelligence may be particularly relevant to sustained resource preservation rather than only to short-lived reactions around specific academic events.

The stress result is consistent with the transactional theory of stress and coping. Students do not respond to workload in a uniform manner; perceived controllability, clarity, support, and coping options shape whether demands are appraised as manageable challenges or threatening overload (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Emotional intelligence may contribute to more differentiated appraisal. A student who identifies anxiety early can seek clarification, divide a task into

manageable steps, or contact a peer or teacher. A student who interprets the same arousal as evidence of global failure may avoid the task, lose time, and intensify later pressure. The observed coefficient does not prove that emotional intelligence caused lower stress, but it supports a model in which emotional processes are meaningfully connected with academic appraisal.

The stronger burnout association is theoretically important. Burnout develops through repeated demands, inadequate recovery, and loss of engagement. Conservation of Resources theory proposes that people become vulnerable when valued resources are threatened or repeatedly lost (Hobfoll, 1989). Emotional intelligence may help conserve resources by improving recovery after setbacks, limiting impulsive conflict, preserving social support, and sustaining goal-directed motivation. It may also protect academic efficacy by preventing one disappointing result from becoming a global judgement of personal worth. The positive correlation with academic efficacy was the strongest bivariate emotional-intelligence association in the study, supporting the idea that students' emotional functioning is closely connected with whether effort still feels effective.

The findings also align with the Job Demands–Resources model. Emotional intelligence can be conceptualised as a personal resource that operates alongside structural resources such as clear teaching, manageable deadlines, accessible mentoring, safe housing, and financial support (Demerouti et al., 2001). Importantly, the expanded burnout model showed that both emotional intelligence and academic stress retained substantial independent coefficients. This means that emotionally skilled students were not simply students who reported fewer demands. Emotional intelligence was associated with lower burnout even after stress was entered, while stress remained strongly associated with burnout. The results therefore support a dual prevention approach: strengthen personal coping resources and reduce avoidable academic demands.

The findings are broadly consistent with previous student research. Khorasani et al. (2023) reported that emotional intelligence was associated with academic stress among medical students, while Taylor et al. (2024) found a strong negative relationship between emotional intelligence and burnout among healthcare-profession students. Zhang and Fah (2025) also identified links among emotional intelligence, perceived stress, and learning burnout. The present study extends this evidence by including a larger sample across two states, public and private institutions, undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and multiple academic streams. The absence of meaningful stream differences suggests that the core relationships were not confined to a single professional discipline.

Gender and residence differences require careful interpretation. Women reported higher stress and burnout, but the effects were small and should not be treated as fixed psychological deficits. Gendered family expectations, safety concerns, emotional labour, unequal responsibilities, and differences in willingness to disclose distress may all contribute (Graves et al., 2021). Hostel residents reported slightly greater stress, potentially reflecting separation from family, limited privacy, shared living conditions, adjustment difficulties, or financial pressure. These results support targeted support, but they do not justify stereotyping entire groups or assuming that all women or hostel residents are at elevated risk.

Several practical implications follow. First, universities can incorporate emotional-skills development into orientation, mentoring, and student-success programmes. Training should include emotion identification, reappraisal, distress tolerance, communication, conflict management, coping flexibility, and help seeking. Randomised evidence indicates that emotional competence can be developed in higher education (Gilar-Corbí et al., 2018). Programmes should be evaluated using pre–post and follow-up designs rather than assumed effective because students report satisfaction.

Second, emotional-intelligence training must not become a way to individualise structural problems. No amount of emotion regulation can fully compensate for overlapping deadlines, unclear assessment criteria, humiliating feedback, discrimination, unaffordable fees, or inaccessible counselling. Academic departments should coordinate workload, provide timely and specific feedback, communicate expectations clearly, and monitor repeated failure points within programmes. Financial-support services and hostel-based adjustment resources are also relevant because financial strain and residence were associated with adverse outcomes.

Third, burnout prevention should receive specific attention. Universities often respond to acute stress with short workshops but overlook sustained exhaustion and disengagement. Regular, confidential screening can identify students who remain enrolled and apparently functional while experiencing severe depletion. Screening should be linked with support; it should not be used for disciplinary action, academic exclusion, or labelling. Faculty members can be trained to recognise changes in attendance, engagement, and performance, while remaining clear that diagnosis and treatment belong to qualified professionals.

Curriculum design is another important intervention point. Programme leaders can map assessment density across modules, identify weeks with excessive deadline clustering, and

coordinate major submissions. Transparent rubrics and formative feedback can increase perceived control, while predictable opportunities to recover from setbacks may reduce resource loss. These changes do not lower academic standards; rather, they reduce avoidable ambiguity and allow demanding learning to remain challenging without becoming unnecessarily destabilising. Similar attention is needed in hostels, where quiet study space, peer mentoring, conflict-resolution support, and accessible counselling can address residence-related stress without assuming that hostel living is inherently harmful.

The magnitude of the reported coefficients also deserves balanced interpretation. Emotional intelligence explained meaningful incremental variance, especially in burnout, but a large proportion of variance remained unexplained. Stress and burnout are influenced by teaching quality, workload, finances, sleep, physical health, discrimination, family expectations, prior mental health, and social support. Emotional intelligence should therefore be treated as one component of a broader ecological model. Interventions that select or rank students according to emotional-intelligence scores would be difficult to justify. A more appropriate use is to identify teachable skills and evaluate whether supportive programmes improve coping and engagement across the whole student population.

The study has several strengths. It included a comparatively large and diverse sample, balanced state and institution-type allocations, English and Hindi administration, multiple academic streams, psychometric checks, robust standard errors, and adjustment for financial and academic covariates. It also retained continuous scores rather than creating unsupported diagnostic categories. However, limitations remain. Cross-sectional data cannot establish whether emotional intelligence reduces stress and burnout, whether lower distress improves self-perceived emotional functioning, or whether reciprocal processes operate. Self-report measures may be influenced by mood, social desirability, and common-method variance. Students absent because of severe distress may be underrepresented, while highly engaged students may be overrepresented. The burnout factor summarises three dimensions and should not replace separate interpretation of exhaustion, cynicism, and efficacy. Finally, the results apply most directly to students aged 18–29 years in comparable Haryana–Rajasthan settings and should not be generalised uncritically to all Indian universities.

Future studies should use longitudinal designs across the academic year to examine whether emotional intelligence predicts changes in stress and burnout during transition and examination

periods. Intervention trials can test whether targeted emotional-skills programmes produce meaningful reductions beyond improvements in academic systems. Multi-source data, including attendance, academic performance, sleep, counselling use, and teacher or peer observations, may reduce same-source bias when privacy is protected. Further work should also examine whether emotional intelligence functions similarly across language, gender, first-generation status, and socioeconomic groups.

5. Conclusion

Emotional intelligence was significantly associated with lower academic stress and a more favourable burnout profile among university students in Haryana and Rajasthan. Its contribution was particularly strong for sustained academic burnout, where higher emotional intelligence was linked with less exhaustion and cynicism and greater academic efficacy. These findings support emotional intelligence as a meaningful personal resource, but not as a substitute for institutional responsibility. The most defensible prevention strategy combines emotional-skills development with manageable workload, clear assessment, financial support, inclusive teaching, hostel adjustment services, and confidential counselling. Longitudinal and intervention research is needed before causal claims are made.

Declarations

Competing interests: The authors should declare any competing interests.

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