

Emotional intelligence as a catalyst for resilience and mental health among university students: A Comprehensive Review

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Abstract

Emotional intelligence is a very crucial psychological capital concerning resilience and enhancing mental health among university students, especially education in competitive academic settings. This is a systematic review of empirical literature that has tested the interdependence of emotional regulation, stress, resilience and psychological well-being in the higher education context. All the articles analyzed indicate that there is a relationship between the increase in emotional intelligence and adaptive strategies of emotional regulation, decrease in perceived stress, decrease in anxiety and depressive symptoms and improvement in psychological well-being. Emotional regulation turns out to be a major process by which EI individuals deal with academic and social complications. However, emotional incompetence and stress are correlated with psycho distress. Overall, the findings relate to the conceptualization of emotional intelligence as a motivating factor that supports emotional health and resilience of university students. The review emphasizes that emotional intelligence (EQ) development programs in higher education should be integrated in order to promote psychological sustainability and academic success.

Keywords: Emotional Regulation; Stress; Resilience; Psychological Well-Being; Mental Health

1. Introduction

The mental health problems of university students in public health on a global scale, and there is growing evidence of heightened levels of stress, anxiety, emotional burnout and poor psychological health in university environments (Campbell et al., 2022). The academic environment can present a variety of stressors including academic workload, career uncertainty, performance pressure, and social comparison, all of which can add to psychological strain (Yang et al., 2025) (Ala and Ramos-campos, 2024). Empirical evidence shows that emotional intelligence is a useful psychological tool that can affect the way students experience, interpret and react to stressors in educational settings (H. Liu and Boyatzis, 2021). Emotional regulation is one of the four elements of emotional intelligence, which helps people regulate and adjust their emotional reactions in a way that is effective and helpful (Fang et al., 2025). Emotional intelligence dimensions like emotional clarity and emotional repair also showed positive correlations with resilience and negative correlations with perceived stress, thus demonstrating the protective effect of emotional intelligence on mental health outcomes (Gilar-corbi et al., 2024).

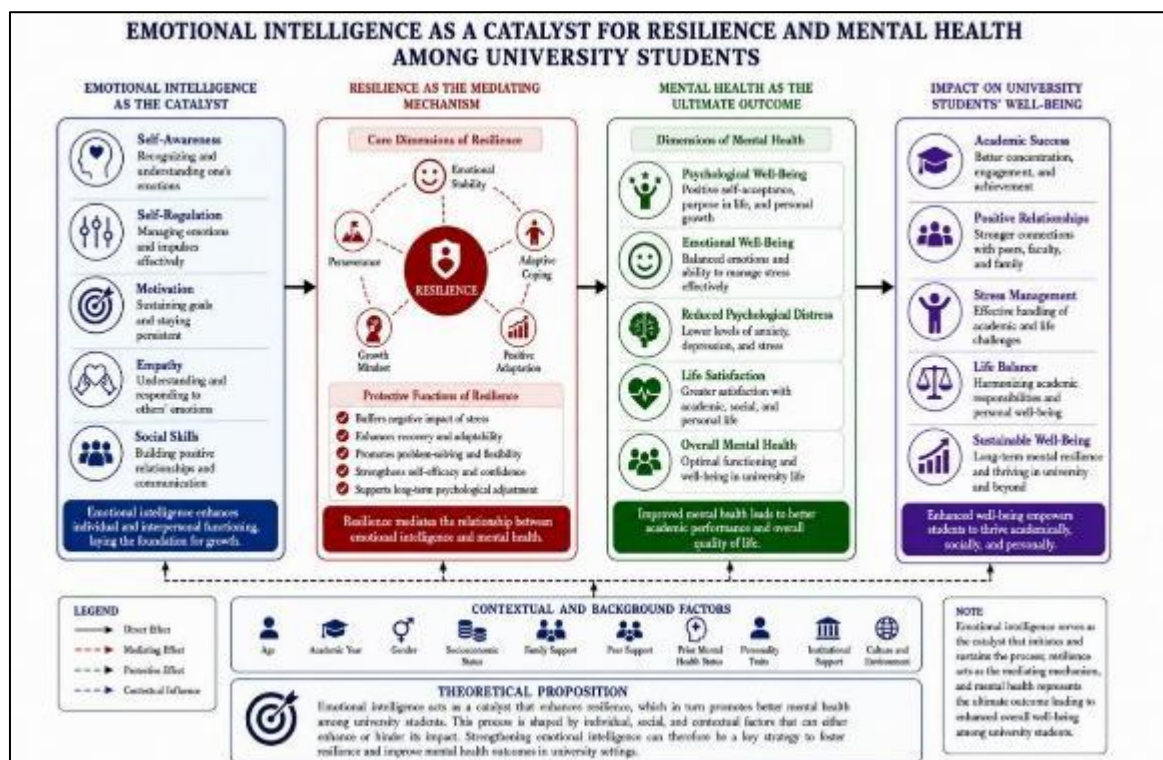
Students at the university are subjected to various stressors such as academic stress, financial stress, interpersonal stress, and career stress, which can lead to psychological distress when they are experienced repeatedly over time (Alduais et al., 2022). These stressors are closely associated with various outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion, especially in highly competitive academic settings (Guidotti et al., 2025). Individual psychological characteristics are modulated by contextual factors like institutional climate and peer support, which underlines that

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mental health pathways are influenced by both personal and environmental factors (Hu and Liu, 2025). In this review, results reveal that emotional intelligence contributes positively towards coping, emotional regulation, happiness, and psychological adjustment (Pathinettampadiyan and Thavaraj, 2025a). It helps an individual bounce back from challenges, stay motivated and emotionally balanced in challenging academic contexts (H. Liu and Boyatzis, 2021). Further evidence indicates that emotional regulation skills and supportive environments can enhance resilience, leading to better mental health outcomes among students (Y. Liu et al., 2025). In the current challenging academic setting, students at universities encounter more psychological problems. Emotional intelligence has become one of the key factors that facilitate resilience and improve mental well-being through stress management and adaptation to difficult situations (Thavaraj, 2012). Psychological well-being is a multi-dimensional construct, comprising of autonomy which captures overall functioning of mental health (Yang et al., 2025) Adaptive emotional regulation, effective coping, and high engagement in school positively relate to higher levels of well-being, which in turn positively relate to student functioning (Fang et al., 2025) These results emphasize that well-being is not just the lack of distress, but the positive psychological functioning. While there is extensive research on emotional intelligence, stress and resilience, there is a lack of integration between emotional intelligence as a catalyst for resilience and research is on emotional regulation, stress mechanisms, resilience development, and psychological well-being outcomes in this group of children as highlighted in previous studies (Campbell et al., 2022).

2. Conceptual framework

Emotional intelligence can be a catalyst for improving mental health in university students by influencing their emotional regulation, stress management, and resilience. Emotional regulation is identified as the key mechanism that will allow students to identify, understand, and regulate their emotional reactions appropriately in educational and personal situations. The stress is conceptualized as a contextual determinant that affects mental health outcomes and is a mediator between emotional competencies and psychological functioning. Resilience is a protective and adaptive resource that assists students in managing challenges and bouncing back from setbacks and in remaining psychologically resilient despite stressors. This framework proposes that increased EQ leads to adaptive emotional regulation, a less negative effect of stress, increased resilience and, ultimately, better psychological well-being, academic engagement, and mental health among university students.



Source: Developed by the authors based on the reviewed literature

Figure 1 Emotional intelligence as a catalyst for resilience and mental health among university students

3. Thematic review

3.1. Emotional regulation as foundational mechanisms

The basic psychological process by which emotional intelligence is manifested as adaptive mental health outcomes in the university environment is emotional regulation. Emotional regulation is the basic psychological process by which emotional intelligence is manifested as adaptive mental health outcomes in the university environment. It is a skill that requires an individual to identify their emotions, to understand why they are feeling them and what they mean, and to regulate them in a manner that enables them to act in a goal-directed fashion and maintain psychological homeostasis. Emotional Regulation is particularly important when it comes to higher education, as students are often subjected to academic achievement pressures, leadership demands, and highly competitive environments (Souza and Jacomuzzi, 2025). In the academic environment, students may also have extra socio-cultural expectations, which increases the difficulty of emotional regulation and requires to have this skill to maintain psychological stability and effective functioning in such demanding environments (Wu, 2024).

Emotional regulation has been shown to be an important factor in decreasing perceived stress and psychological strain among university students. Experience less academic anxiety and more adaptive coping strategies, such as controlling negative emotions and staying on task during challenging situations (Alduais et al., 2022). Conversely, emotional regulation problems may exacerbate psychological vulnerability, resulting in greater emotional fatigue and susceptibility to stress-related symptoms. In developing resilience and good mental health amongst university students is gaining more recognition (Pathinettampadiyan, 2025). This is especially true for higher education students who tend to have more complex emotional needs in educational settings, where emotional regulation is a key protective factor in mitigating psychological distress and burnout (Ala and Ramos-campos, 2024).

Emotional clarity (the capacity to clearly identify and understand one's emotional experiences) and emotional repair (the capacity to recover from negative emotional states) are both important elements that enhance resilience capacity (Gilar-corbi et al., 2024). These emotional skills help students bounce back from academic failures, social conflicts and performance issues. This increased resilience over time leads to better psychological functioning, more emotional stability, and more stable mental health. Furthermore, emotional intelligence components of long term by fostering emotional balance, positive emotional appraisal and adaptive psychological functioning in academic settings (Guidotti et al., 2025). The aspects of emotional intelligence affect psychological wellbeing, stress management, coping, and resilience of individuals in a positive manner (Pathinettampadiyan et al., 2026).

Research on the intervention of emotional regulation skills also strongly suggests that this is a psychological ability that can be learned rather than a fixed characteristic. Emotion regulation capacities of students are significantly enhanced through structured programs that include reflective exercises, emotional awareness training, and creative/arts-based interventions. These interventions aim to increase students' awareness of their emotional reactions, provide healthier coping mechanisms and enhance their capacity to manage stress in educational settings (Man, 2025). Likewise, the emotional regulation can be reinforced by specific educational and therapeutic methods, such as expressive and reflective intervention strategies, which further support emotional awareness and psychological balance (Ma et al., 2025). Emotional intelligence is a vital psychological resource that enhances resilience and this systematic review examines its role in emotional regulation, stress management, coping, and well-being (Karthigeyini and Thavaraj, 2016).

Emotional regulation is also important for improving academic engagement and psychological self-efficacy, and is a regulatory process and have better relationships in the learning environment. This emotional control helps them to stay involved in learning activities when stressed and to react positively to academic demands (Fang et al., 2025) (Y. Liu et al., 2025).

Emotional regulation is generally regarded as a fundamental psychological process linking emotional intelligence and psychological functioning, particularly resilience. It decreases the negative effects of academic stress, enhances adaptive coping strategies, and facilitates long-term mental health in university students. In the case of university students, emotional regulation becomes a key competency for safeguarding against psychological suffering and fostering emotional resilience.

3.2. Stress as a contextual determinant of mental health

Stress is also strongly associated with emotional intelligence and behavioral factors influencing psychological outcomes. Evidence suggests that emotional intelligence is a mediating factor between physical activity and psychological distress, whereby greater emotional intelligence is linked to lower levels of perceived stress and greater psychological health.

This implies that stress cannot be considered a separate entity (Dev et al., 2016). At school, stress can often be caused by work demands, performance expectations, and shifts in learning systems, particularly following and during the COVID-19 era. The findings from the post-pandemic educational context reveal that online education well-being and stress levels, indicating that sudden changes in the delivery of education can have a profound impact on psychological stability and coping abilities (Nuryana et al., 2023). Moreover, stress is tightly related to resilience in predicting psychological adjustment of university students. The researchers found that the more resilient a student was, the less they felt stressed and that resilience was a protective factor against the psychological effects (Khan et al., 2023). This helps to reinforce the concept of stress as a mediator that is affected by internal psychological resources, like resilience and coping capacity. Stress responses are also influenced by underlying psychological and neurobiological processes, on a broader level. Those who have more resilient systems can control their stress reactions, which means they can reduce the long-term psychological impact and enhance their ability to adapt to school pressures (Details, 2020). Stress is overall a contextual factor related to academic and environmental factors, and a mediator between emotional intelligence, resilience and mental health outcomes (Latif et al., 2024). In general, stress is a contextual risk factor and a mediating psychological mechanism that affects mental health outcomes of university students. Knowledge of stress is crucial for comprehending the psychological consequences of academic stress and the ability to buffer against these stressors by drawing on emotional and cognitive resources (Wu, 2024).

3.3. Resilience as a protective and adaptive resource

Resilience is known as an important protective factor that helps people cope effectively with adversity, stress, and psychological challenges and achieve positive mental health outcomes. Resilience is a dynamic process that facilitates recovery from stressful experiences and adaptive functioning from a psychological and neurobiological standpoint (Bpf et al., 2013) pointed out that resilience is not the lack of vulnerability but an active process of adaptation that involves psychological, biological, and environmental influences. This view emphasizes the importance of resilience as a key asset in sustaining mental health in challenging academic settings. (Lv et al., 2024) found that both resilience with life satisfaction in young adults, indicating that emotionally intelligent people are more likely to be able to respond in a resilient way when experiencing academic and personal difficulties. In a similar vein, (Gilar-corbi et al., 2024) found that the latent profile analysis showed that university which confirms the protective role of psychological resilience in the university context.

Evidence also suggests that psychological resources are associated with emotional self-regulation, further supporting the relationship between resilience and emotional self-regulation. Previous studies on emotional self-efficacy in regulation demonstrated that positive psychological factors can diminish the negative impact of loneliness by increasing people's self-efficacy in emotional regulation and life satisfaction. The results indicate that resilience plays a role in psychological adaptation, helping to improve the ability to deal with emotional and social problems (Thomas and Zolkoski, 2020). Resilience and mental health among university students are shaped by emotional intelligence. This review synthesizes evidence on enhance adaptive coping, psychological well-being, and resilience across diverse educational contexts (Pathinettampadiyan and Thavaraj, 2025b).

Interpersonal relationships also have an impact on the well-being of students in educational settings, and resilience is also important. Autonomy support, positive peer relationships, and positive teacher-student interactions play significant roles in promoting students' psychological well-being through enhancing their adaptive coping strategies, as reported by (Hu and Liu, 2025). Similarly, (Stan et al., 2025) found that teacher empathy has a positive effect on student mental wellness because it promotes emotional support, which in turn helps them to manage stress and challenges. The findings suggest that supportive social and educational contexts are important for fostering resilience alongside individual factors. (Counseling et al., 2022) Higher levels of resilience were observed in students who were able to cope with the stress related to academic performance and future career concerns, which in turn helped to minimize anxiety and stabilize their psychological state. The mediating role emphasizes the role of resilience as a factor that can shape or modify stressful academic experiences into opportunities for growth and adaptation. Moreover, resilience has been linked to positive psychological traits that promote psychological well-being. (Wadhwa, 2023) found that adaptive coping and positive psychological functioning are important psychosocial factors that affect students' psychological well-being. It allows students to express themselves, become aware of their emotions and learn how to cope with them, all of which are important factors for building resilience in university students (Guo et al., 2025).

In addition, healthy behaviors that facilitate emotional regulation and self-efficacy help build resilience. Scientific studies have recently shown that physical activity has a positive effect on mental health, with its effects on emotion regulation and self-efficacy leading to greater resilience and psychological adjustment (Kartol et al., 2024) The evidence product of an interaction between emotional, cognitive, social and behavioral factors that all contribute to positive

mental health outcomes. Resilience is a key process that helps students to cope flexibly with adversity, regulate their emotions, draw on social resources, and adapt successfully during difficult school experiences.

Psychological well-being is the last and most holistic outcome variable in the emotional intelligence, stress and resilience framework of university students. It is a multi-dimensional construct comprising of emotional stability, life satisfaction, academic adjustment, and general psychological functioning in higher education environments. The development of psychological well-being in higher education is a dynamic process influenced by a complex interplay of emotional competencies, stress exposure, resilience capacity, and environmental factors (Guidotti et al., 2025). Emotion awareness and regulation are associated with better psychological functioning and less emotional distress in students who exhibit these skills (Fang et al., 2025). Emotional competence also contributes to the adaptation to academic requirements and to emotional stability under stress (Ma et al., 2025). Conversely, emotional regulation problems are linked to a lack of mental equilibrium and heightened risk of mental illness.

Academic stress is an important determinant of psychological well-being outcomes. The emotional pressure and mental instability among students are exacerbated by their high academic pressure and performance expectations (Qi et al., 2025). The academic competition also exacerbates the stress levels, which has a negative impact on students' emotional functioning and well-being (Alduais et al., 2022) (Ala and Ramos-campos, 2024). Under chronic stress, emotional exhaustion and diminished coping abilities are frequently seen (Wu, 2024). The ability to regulate emotions helps an entrepreneur make better decisions regarding opportunities, risks, relationships, and problems that may arise in the future (Dr. H. Samuel Thavaraj, 2025).

Resilience is an important protective factor that helps to buffer the impact of stress and can be a crucial factor in promoting psychological wellbeing. Higher resilience is correlated with better emotional recovery and psychological stability of students in the event of academic difficulties (Li et al., 2025). Resilience also facilitates adaptive coping and lowers the magnitude of psychological disturbances associated with stress (Lv et al., 2024). Psychological wellbeing is also greatly affected by environmental and institutional factors. Favorable school climates and positive peer relationships are associated with positive emotional adjustment (Campbell et al., 2022). Conversely, unsupportive or competitive environments heighten psychological vulnerability and lower students' well-being levels (Gilar-corbi et al., 2024). The external environment is important in determining mental health outcomes, and these influences are context-dependent. Structured interventions that focus on emotional and coping skills have been proven to improve psychological well-being in the intervention-based evidence. The interventions for emotional skill development enhance students' effective regulation of emotions (Man, 2025). Creative and reflective programs also enhance emotional expression and psychological balance (Wang, 2025). These interventions illustrate that psychological well-being is a malleable outcome that can be supported using specific interventions. Cognitive and emotional appraisal processes also affect psychological well-being. Students who perceive stressful experiences in a more adaptive way are more likely to have high emotional stability and life satisfaction (H. Liu and Boyatzis, 2021).

Psychological well-being is also influenced by social and developmental contexts. Academic stress in higher education is related to early emotional environment and family support systems (Nuryana et al., 2023). Emotional adjustment and better mental health outcomes are also further supported by positive social engagement and prosocial behaviours (Yang et al., 2025). Stress, resilience, and contextual factors. It is a reflection of not only the lack of psychological distress, but also the emotional balance, engagement in academic pursuits and adaptive functioning of university students.

Future research directions

Although there is a growing body of literature on emotional regulation, stress, there are a number of gaps in the research. Previous research has focused on these constructs separately or in small combinations, but not in a comprehensive framework that accounts for the interrelatedness of these constructs. Specifically, there is a lack of evidence that is consolidated on how emotional regulation is a foundational process that shapes the perception of stress, supports the growth of resilience, and promotes psychological health. Stress has been regarded as a risk factor, and resilience as a protective factor, but few studies have focused on the joint mediating effect of stress and resilience in a single model that connects emotional regulation and psychological well-being. Moreover, most of the studies available were cross-sectional, limiting the understanding of the dynamic nature of these psychological processes over time. So, there is a gap in the literature that brings together the most recent empirical evidence in order to create an integrated understanding of these variables in the context of higher education.

4. Discussion

The results of this systematic review show a consistent relationship between emotional regulation, stress, resilience and psychological well-being among university students. Emotional regulation is identified as a core mechanism that helps students regulate their emotions in the face of academic stressors, maintain emotional balance, and respond adaptively to stressors, which in turn promotes overall mental health. Stress is defined as a contextual and mediating variable, meaning that the academic demands, performance expectations, and socio-cultural pressures contribute to psychological strain and negatively impact well-being, and also serve as a channel that links emotional competencies to mental health outcomes. Meanwhile, resilience acts as a protective and intermediate factor that assists students in overcoming setbacks and in mitigating the impact of stress and maintaining motivation in difficult school contexts. The overall effect of these factors is psychological well-being, which is not only the lack of psychological distress but also the presence of positive functioning like emotional stability, academic involvement and life satisfaction. Overall, the results indicate that emotional regulation starts the adaptive processes, stress is a contextual and mediating factor, resilience enhances psychological adaptation, and all these factors work together to promote psychological well-being in university students.

5. Conclusion

This is a systematic review that identifies emotional regulation and emotional intelligence-related processes as important psychological resources that enhance mental well-being among university students. Emotional regulation helps to enhance psychological outcomes directly and indirectly through the reduction of perceived stress and the increase in resilience. The proposed framework presented in this review offers a comprehensive explanation of the interactions between emotional competencies, stress and resilience in order to generate longer-term mental health outcomes in higher education settings. The results demonstrate the significance of embedding emotional regulation and resilience enhancement in the school setting for preventive mental health and long-term psychological well-being of students.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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