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Emotional Intelligence, Academic Stress, and Subjective Well-Being among University Students in North Macedonia

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Research Article

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Abstract

The present study examined the relationship between emotional intelligence, academic stress, and subjective well-being among university students in North Macedonia. The study aimed to explore emotional intelligence as a psychological resource in relation to academic stress and well-being in higher education settings.

The study sample comprised 240 university students aged 18–25 years enrolled at universities across North Macedonia. Emotional intelligence was measured using a self-report questionnaire, academic stress was assessed with an academic stress scale, and subjective well-being was evaluated using a standardized instrument.

Data were analyzed using Pearson correlation and independent samples t-tests. The results showed a significant negative relationship between emotional intelligence and academic stress, indicating that higher emotional intelligence is associated with lower stress levels. In contrast, emotional intelligence was positively related to subjective well-being, suggesting better psychological, physical, and social functioning. Academic stress was negatively associated with subjective well-being.

Group comparisons indicated that older students reported higher emotional intelligence and subjective well-being and lower academic stress compared to younger students. Female students scored higher in emotional intelligence and subjective well-being but reported slightly higher academic stress.

Overall, emotional intelligence appears to function as a protective factor that reduces academic stress and enhances subjective well-being among university students.

1 Introduction

Emotional intelligence has gained considerable attention in psychological and educational research over the past decades due to its relevance in understanding how individuals perceive and manage emotions in everyday life. It refers to the ability to recognize emotional states, use emotions to support thinking, understand emotional meanings, and regulate emotional responses in an adaptive way (Mayer et al., 2004). In university settings, these abilities become particularly important, as students are frequently exposed to academic demands, deadlines, evaluations, and social pressures that require emotional and cognitive adjustment.

At the same time, academic stress has been identified as a common experience among university students. It is typically related to workload, examinations, performance expectations, and uncertainty about future career paths. Research shows that high levels of academic stress are associated with negative psychological outcomes, including anxiety, depressive symptoms, and reduced well-being (Pascoe et al., 2020). Similar findings have been reported by Barbayannis et al. (2022), who highlighted that academic stress significantly affects mental health and overall functioning in college populations.

In this context, emotional intelligence is often considered a protective factor. Students with higher emotional intelligence tend to regulate emotions more effectively and use more adaptive coping strategies when facing stressful situations. Evidence suggests that emotional intelligence is positively associated with better psychological adjustment and mental health outcomes (Extremera & Fernández-Berrocal, 2006). A meta-analytic study by Schutte et al. (2007) further confirmed a consistent relationship between emotional intelligence and well-being across different samples.

Subjective well-being represents how individuals evaluate and experience their lives, including emotional reactions and cognitive judgments such as life satisfaction. According to Diener (1984), it reflects the balance between positive and negative affect along with overall life satisfaction. Higher subjective well-being has been linked to better health, stronger social relationships, and greater resilience to stress. Meta-analytic findings also suggest that emotional intelligence is positively associated with well-being and health-related outcomes (Martins et al., 2010).

Although previous research has examined these constructs separately, fewer studies have explored the combined relationship between emotional intelligence, academic stress, and subjective well-being within a single model, particularly in Balkan university contexts. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate these relationships among university students in North Macedonia, with additional consideration of age and gender differences.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Emotional Intelligence in Academic Contexts

Emotional intelligence has been widely studied as a key psychological construct that influences how individuals perceive, understand, and regulate emotions. Mayer et al. (2004) define emotional intelligence as a set of abilities related to emotional perception, understanding, and regulation. In educational settings, emotional intelligence has been associated with better academic adaptation, improved interpersonal relationships, and more effective coping strategies.

Research suggests that students with higher emotional intelligence are more capable of managing emotional demands in academic environments. Schutte et al. (2007) found a consistent positive relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological well-being, indicating that emotionally intelligent individuals tend to experience better mental health outcomes. Similarly, Martins et al. (2010) highlighted that emotional intelligence is significantly associated with both mental and physical health indicators.

2.2 Academic Stress Among University Students

Academic stress is a common phenomenon among university students and is typically linked to academic workload, examinations, time pressure, and future career concerns. It has been recognized as a significant risk factor for mental health problems in student populations.

Pascoe et al. (2020) emphasized that academic stress is strongly associated with anxiety, depression, and reduced well-being among students in both secondary and higher education. More recent evidence by Barbayannis et al. (2022) confirms that academic stress significantly impacts mental health and well-being in college students, particularly during periods of high academic demand.

High levels of academic stress have been consistently linked to poorer psychological functioning and lower life satisfaction, suggesting the need for protective psychological factors that can reduce its negative effects.

2.3 Subjective Well-Being in Students

Subjective well-being refers to individuals' cognitive and emotional evaluations of their lives, including life satisfaction and affective experiences. Diener (1984) defines subjective well-being as a combination of positive affect, negative affect, and overall life satisfaction.

In student populations, subjective well-being is an important indicator of psychological adjustment and life satisfaction. Higher levels of well-being have been associated with better academic performance, stronger social relationships, and improved mental health outcomes. Research also suggests that emotional and psychological resources play a crucial role in enhancing subjective well-being in academic contexts.

2.4 Relationships Between Emotional Intelligence, Academic Stress, and Well-Being

A growing body of research suggests that emotional intelligence plays a protective role in reducing academic stress and enhancing subjective well-being. Individuals with higher emotional intelligence tend to use more adaptive coping strategies, which helps them manage stress more effectively and maintain psychological balance.

Extremera and Fernández-Berrocal (2006) found that emotional intelligence is a significant predictor of mental health and emotional adjustment. Similarly, Schutte et al. (2007) demonstrated that emotional intelligence is positively associated with well-being across different populations.

The relationship between academic stress and subjective well-being has also been widely documented. Higher academic stress is generally associated with lower well-being, reduced life satisfaction, and increased psychological distress. This relationship highlights the importance of identifying psychological resources, such as emotional intelligence, that can buffer the negative effects of stress.

2.5 Research Gap and Study Rationale

Although previous studies have examined emotional intelligence, academic stress, and subjective well-being individually, fewer studies have investigated all three variables within a single integrated model, particularly in Balkan university populations. This gap is important because cultural and educational contexts may influence how these psychological constructs interact.

Therefore, the present study aims to examine the relationships between emotional intelligence, academic stress, and subjective well-being among university students in North Macedonia, contributing to the growing literature on psychological well-being in academic settings.

3 Research methodology

3.1 Research Problem

Despite growing evidence highlighting the importance of emotional intelligence for psychological adjustment, limited empirical research has simultaneously examined its relationship with academic stress and subjective well-being among university students in North Macedonia. Given the increasing academic demands faced by university students, understanding whether emotional intelligence functions as a protective psychological resource is of both theoretical and practical importance.

The aim of this study was to examine the relationships between emotional intelligence, academic stress, and subjective well-being among university students at the University of Tetovo, North Macedonia. The study also sought to investigate differences in these variables according to emotional intelligence level, age, and gender.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1 Is emotional intelligence associated with academic stress among university students?

2 Is emotional intelligence associated with subjective well-being?

3 Is academic stress related to subjective well-being?

4 Are there significant differences in emotional intelligence according to age and gender?

5 Are there significant differences in academic stress according to age and gender?

6 Are there significant differences in subjective well-being according to age and gender?

7 How are the dimensions of emotional intelligence associated with academic stress and the dimensions of subjective well-being?

3.2 Participants

The study included 240 undergraduate students enrolled at the University of Tetovo, North Macedonia. Participants were recruited from the Faculties of Psychology, Medicine, and Computer Science using a stratified sampling approach to ensure balanced representation across gender and age groups.

The sample consisted of 120 male (50.0%) and 120 female (50.0%) students aged between 18 and 25 years. Participants were equally distributed into two age groups: 18–21 years (n = 120) and 22–25 years (n = 120). Eligible participants were full-time undergraduate students who voluntarily agreed to

participate in the study and provided informed consent. Students who submitted incomplete questionnaires were excluded from the final analyses.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	120	50.0
	Female	120	50.0
Age	18–21 years	120	50.0
	22–25 years	120	50.0
Total		240	100

3.3 Instruments

Emotional intelligence was assessed using the Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (EIQ) developed by Boston Consulting Group (2012). The questionnaire consists of 50 self-report items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The instrument measures five dimensions of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, emotion management, motivation, empathy, and social skills.

Higher total scores indicate higher levels of emotional intelligence. According to the scoring procedure, total scores below 140 indicate lower emotional intelligence, whereas scores above 140 indicate higher emotional intelligence.

The instrument demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency in the present study, with an overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .762. Reliability coefficients for the five dimensions were .777 for self-awareness, .798 for emotion management, .755 for motivation, .764 for empathy, and .767 for social skills.

Academic stress was measured using the Academic Stress Scale (ASS) developed by Alam and Halder (2018). The instrument consists of 40 items rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Total scores range from 40 to 200, with higher scores indicating greater perceived academic stress.

The Academic Stress Scale demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency in the present sample, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .775.

Subjective well-being was assessed using the BBC Subjective Well-Being Scale (BBC-SWB) developed by Pontin et al. (2013). The questionnaire consists of 24 items rated on a five-point Likert scale and

measures three dimensions: psychological well-being, physical health and well-being, and social relationships.

Higher scores indicate greater subjective well-being across all dimensions.

The overall internal consistency of the scale was satisfactory (Cronbach's α = .779). Reliability coefficients for the three subscales were .722 for psychological well-being, .743 for physical health and well-being, and .765 for social relationships.

Table 2
Internal Consistency of the Study Instruments

Instrument	**Cronbach's α**
Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (Overall)	.762
Self-awareness	.777
Emotion Management	.798
Motivation	.755
Empathy	.764
Social Skills	.767
Academic Stress Scale (Overall)	.775
BBC Subjective Well-Being Scale (Overall)	.779
Psychological Well-Being	.722
Physical Health and Well-Being	.743
Social Relationships	.765

3.4 Procedure

Data were collected during the 2025–2026 academic year at the University of Tetovo. Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from the university administration and ethical approval was granted by the appropriate institutional authority.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without any consequences. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before questionnaire administration.

The questionnaires were administered in classroom settings under the supervision of the researcher. Completion of the survey required approximately 20–25 minutes. Responses were collected anonymously, and no personally identifiable information was recorded. All completed questionnaires were screened for completeness prior to statistical analysis.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki governing research involving human participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional authority at the University of Tetovo before the commencement of data collection.

Participation was entirely voluntary, and all participants provided written informed consent prior to participation. Participants were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential and that all collected data would be used exclusively for scientific research purposes.

3.6 Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 20.0.

Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum values, were calculated to summarize participants' demographic characteristics and study variables. The internal consistency of the study instruments was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients.

Independent-samples *t*-tests were performed to compare academic stress and subjective well-being between students with lower and higher emotional intelligence. Differences according to age and gender were examined using the Mann–Whitney U test, as preliminary assessment indicated that the assumptions for parametric analyses were not fully satisfied for these comparisons.

Relationships among emotional intelligence, academic stress, and subjective well-being were examined using Pearson's product–moment correlation coefficient (r). Correlation coefficients were interpreted according to Cohen's (1988) guidelines. Statistical significance was established at $p < .05$, whereas $p < .01$ was considered highly statistically significant.

4 Results

To examine differences in academic stress and subjective well-being according to emotional intelligence, participants were classified into two groups based on their emotional intelligence scores (EI < 140 and EI ≥ 140). Independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare the two groups.

Table 3

Academic Stress According to the Level of Emotional Intelligence

Academic Stress (ASS)	**EI < 140 (n = 93)**	**EI ≥ 140 (n = 147)**
Mean (M)	120.39	86.60
Standard Deviation (SD)	14.87	24.25
Minimum	69	54
Maximum	163	147
Note. Independent-samples *t*-test: $t(238) = 12.07$, $p < .001$.		

Table 4

Subjective Well-Being According to the Level of Emotional Intelligence

Subjective Well-Being (BBC)	**EI < 140 (n = 93)**	**EI ≥ 140 (n = 147)**
Mean (M)	68.01	83.74
Standard Deviation (SD)	8.70	8.92
Minimum	55	59
Maximum	87	106
Note. Independent-samples *t*-test: $t(238) = -13.43$, $p < .001$.		

The analyses revealed significant differences between students with lower and higher emotional intelligence. Students with higher emotional intelligence reported significantly lower academic stress ($t(238) = 12.07$, $p < .001$) and significantly higher subjective well-being ($t(238) = -13.43$, $p < .001$) than students with lower emotional intelligence. These findings indicate that higher emotional intelligence was associated with lower perceived academic stress and better subjective well-being.

Pearson's product-moment correlation analysis was performed to examine the association between academic stress and subjective well-being.

Table 5

Correlation Between Academic Stress and Subjective Well-Being

Variables	**1**	**2**
1. Academic Stress	1.00	–.489**
2. Subjective Well-Being	–.489**	1.00
Note. $p < .01$ (two-tailed).		

A statistically significant moderate negative correlation was found between academic stress and subjective well-being ($r = -.489$, $p < .01$), indicating that students who experienced higher levels of

academic stress tended to report lower levels of subjective well-being.

Differences in emotional intelligence, academic stress, and subjective well-being between the two age groups were examined using the Mann–Whitney *U* test.

Table 6
Emotional Intelligence According to Age Groups

Emotional Intelligence	**18–21 years (n = 120)**	**22–25 years (n = 120)**
Mean (M)	137.39	181.15
Standard Deviation (SD)	21.55	17.62
Minimum	110	137
Maximum	189	219
Note. Mann–Whitney $U = 1503.50$, $Z = -10.60$, $p < .001$.		

Table 7
Academic Stress According to Age Groups

Academic Stress	**18–21 years (n = 120)**	**22–25 years (n = 120)**
Mean (M)	123.64	75.74
Standard Deviation (SD)	12.36	11.38
Minimum	97	54
Maximum	163	99
Note. Mann–Whitney $U = 3.00$, $Z = -13.39$, $p < .001$.		

Table 8
Subjective Well-Being According to Age Groups

Subjective Well-Being	**18–21 years (n = 120)**	**22–25 years (n = 120)**
Mean (M)	69.91	85.38
Standard Deviation (SD)	9.24	8.29
Minimum	55	69
Maximum	89	106
Note. Mann–Whitney $U = 1757.50$, $Z = -10.13$, $p < .001$.		

Significant age-related differences were observed across all three variables. Students aged 22–25 years reported significantly higher emotional intelligence and subjective well-being, whereas students aged 18–21 years reported significantly higher academic stress ($p < .001$ for all comparisons).

Table 9

Emotional Intelligence According to Gender

Emotional Intelligence	**Male (n = 120)**	**Female (n = 120)**
Mean (M)	145.83	172.71
Standard Deviation (SD)	23.60	28.63
Minimum	110	123
Maximum	185	219
Note. Mann–Whitney $U = 2788.50$, $Z = -8.21$, $p < .001$.		

Table 10

Academic Stress According to Gender

Academic Stress	**Male (n = 120)**	**Female (n = 120)**
Mean (M)	95.46	103.93
Standard Deviation (SD)	21.75	30.50
Minimum	56	54
Maximum	142	163
Note. Mann–Whitney $U = 5680.00$, $Z = -2.83$, $p = .005$.		

Table 11

Subjective Well-Being According to Gender

Subjective Well-Being	**Male (n = 120)**	**Female (n = 120)**
Mean (M)	71.64	83.65
Standard Deviation (SD)	9.70	10.38
Minimum	55	59
Maximum	89	106
Note. Mann–Whitney $U = 2904.50$, $Z = -7.99$, $p < .001$.		

Female students demonstrated significantly higher emotional intelligence and subjective well-being than male students. They also reported slightly higher levels of academic stress. All observed gender differences were statistically significant.

Table 12

Correlations Between Emotional Intelligence Dimensions, Academic Stress, and Subjective Well-Being

Variable	ASS	Psychological WB	Physical WB	Social Relationships
Self-awareness	− .507**	.463**	.514**	.453**
Emotion Management	− .561**	.462*	.564**	.499**
Motivation	− .579**	.517**	.608**	.565*
Empathy	− .480**	.521**	.620*	.590**
Social Skills	− .494**	.505**	.581**	.571**
Note. $p < .05$; $p < .01$ (two-tailed).				

Pearson correlation analyses showed that all dimensions of emotional intelligence were significantly and negatively associated with academic stress, indicating that stronger emotional competencies were related to lower perceived stress. In contrast, each emotional intelligence dimension demonstrated positive correlations with psychological well-being, physical health and well-being, and social relationships. The strongest negative association with academic stress was observed for motivation ($r = −.579$), whereas empathy showed the strongest positive correlation with physical health and well-being ($r = .620$). These findings suggest that different components of emotional intelligence are consistently linked to more favorable indicators of students' well-being.

5 Discussion

The present study examined the relationships between emotional intelligence, academic stress, and subjective well-being among university students in North Macedonia, together with age- and gender-related differences in these variables. The results provide clear support for the view that emotional intelligence functions as an important psychological resource within the academic environment.

In line with the first and second research questions, emotional intelligence was significantly and negatively associated with academic stress, and significantly and positively associated with subjective well-being. Students classified as having higher emotional intelligence (EI ≥ 140) reported markedly lower academic stress and markedly higher subjective well-being than students with lower emotional intelligence (EI < 140). These results are consistent with previous findings indicating that individuals with higher emotional intelligence rely on more adaptive coping strategies, which allow them to regulate emotional responses to academic demands more effectively (Extremera & Fernández-Berrocal, 2006; Schutte et al., 2007). The magnitude of the observed differences suggests that emotional intelligence does not merely correlate with lower stress and better well-being but may act as a substantive protective factor for students navigating the pressures of higher education.

Addressing the third research question, a significant negative correlation was found between academic stress and subjective well-being. Students who reported higher academic stress also reported lower

subjective well-being, confirming earlier evidence linking chronic academic pressure to diminished psychological functioning (Pascoe et al., 2020; Barbayannis et al., 2022). Considered together with the emotional intelligence findings, this pattern is consistent with a model in which emotional intelligence may help reduce the level of stress students experience, which in turn contributes to the preservation of their subjective well-being.

With regard to age, students aged 22–25 years reported significantly higher emotional intelligence and subjective well-being and significantly lower academic stress than students aged 18–21 years. This pattern is compatible with developmental accounts suggesting that emotional competencies continue to mature with age and accumulated academic experience, and that more advanced students may have developed more effective coping repertoires and a clearer sense of academic and professional direction, which may reduce uncertainty-related stress.

Gender comparisons showed that female students scored higher than male students on both emotional intelligence and subjective well-being, while also reporting slightly higher academic stress. This combination of higher emotional competence alongside somewhat higher perceived stress is consistent with research suggesting that women may be more attentive to, and more willing to report, emotional and stress-related experiences without this necessarily reflecting poorer overall psychological adjustment; their comparatively higher emotional intelligence may in fact help buffer the potentially adverse effects of this additional stress.

The dimension-level analyses reported in Table 12 offer further insight into which components of emotional intelligence are most closely related to student outcomes. All five dimensions – self-awareness, emotion management, motivation, empathy, and social skills – were significantly related to lower academic stress and to higher psychological, physical, and social well-being. Motivation displayed the strongest negative association with academic stress, suggesting that goal-directed and self-motivating tendencies may be particularly important for managing academic demands. Empathy showed the strongest positive association with physical health and well-being, pointing to the potential contribution of social-emotional connectedness to students' broader health and functioning.

Taken together, these findings reinforce the view that emotional intelligence operates as a multidimensional protective resource that mitigates academic stress and promotes subjective well-being among university students, and they extend existing evidence into an underrepresented Balkan university context.

5.1 Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the cross-sectional design does not allow causal conclusions to be drawn regarding the direction of the relationships among emotional intelligence, academic stress, and subjective well-being. Second, all variables were assessed using self-report instruments, which may be subject to social desirability and common-method bias. Third, the sample was drawn from a single institution (the University of Tetovo), which may limit the

generalizability of the findings to other universities or cultural contexts. Finally, only age and gender were considered as demographic factors; other potentially relevant variables, such as academic year, field of study, or socioeconomic background, were not examined and could be addressed in future research.

6 Conclusions

This study examined the relationships between emotional intelligence, academic stress, and subjective well-being among 240 university students in North Macedonia. The findings showed that higher emotional intelligence was significantly associated with lower academic stress and higher subjective well-being, and that academic stress was, in turn, negatively related to subjective well-being. Older students and female students reported higher emotional intelligence and subjective well-being, although female students also reported slightly higher academic stress. All five dimensions of emotional intelligence – self-awareness, emotion management, motivation, empathy, and social skills – were meaningfully related to lower stress and better well-being outcomes, with motivation and empathy emerging as particularly important components.

Overall, the results support the conceptualization of emotional intelligence as a protective psychological resource that helps university students manage academic stress and sustain their subjective well-being. These findings carry practical implications for higher education institutions, suggesting that programs designed to strengthen emotional competencies – such as emotion-regulation workshops, mentoring initiatives, and counseling services embedded within academic life – may help reduce academic stress and support student well-being, particularly among younger and less experienced students.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to clarify the causal pathways among these variables, extend data collection to multiple institutions and broader student populations across North Macedonia and the wider Balkan region, and consider additional psychological and contextual factors, such as coping styles, social support, and academic workload, that may further explain how emotional intelligence contributes to student well-being.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript. The research was conducted independently, and no financial, institutional, or personal relationships influenced the design of the study, data collection, analysis, interpretation of results, or preparation of the manuscript.

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