EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE, ACADEMIC STRESS, AND SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract

This study looked at how emotional intelligence, academic stress, and subjective well-being are related among university students in North Macedonia. A total of 240 undergraduate students aged 18–25 years (120 men and 120 women) from Southeast European University in Tetovo, North Macedonia, completed three self-report measures: the Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire, the Academic Stress Scale, and the BBC Subjective Well-Being Scale. Data were analyzed with Pearson correlations, independent-samples t-tests, and Mann–Whitney U tests. Students with higher emotional intelligence reported clearly lower academic stress and higher well-being, and academic stress was moderately and negatively correlated with well-being ($r = -.489$). Older students (22–25 years) scored higher on emotional intelligence and well-being and lower on academic stress than younger students (18–21 years). Female students scored higher on emotional intelligence and well-being, but they also reported somewhat more academic stress than male students. All five emotional intelligence dimensions were negatively related to academic stress and positively related to the well-being dimensions, with motivation and empathy standing out most. The results indicated that emotional intelligence may act as a protective resource for students under academic pressure, which points to the value of building emotional skills into teaching and student support in higher education. Because the design was cross-sectional and based on self-report, no causal conclusions could be drawn.

Keywords: emotional intelligence; academic stress; subjective well-being; university students; higher education; North Macedonia

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, emotional intelligence (EI) has become a popular topic in psychology and education, largely because it helps explain how people notice, understand, and handle emotions in everyday life (Goleman, 1995). In its best-known ability-based form, it covers recognizing emotional states, using emotions to support thinking, understanding what emotions mean, and regulating them in adaptive ways (Mayer et al., 2004). These skills matter a great deal at university, where students face heavy workloads, deadlines, exams, and social pressure all at the same time.

Academic stress is just as familiar. It usually comes from workload, examinations, performance expectations, and uncertainty about future careers. Studies link high academic stress to anxiety, depressive symptoms, and lower well-being (Pascoe et al., 2020), and Barbayannis et al. (2022) reached a similar conclusion for college students, pointing to its effect on mental health and everyday functioning.

EI is often discussed as a possible buffer against this kind of stress. Students with higher EI seem to regulate their emotions better and to rely on more adaptive coping when things get difficult. Extremera and Fernández-Berrocal (2006) found that EI was positively linked to psychological adjustment and mental health in university students, and the meta-analysis by Schutte et al. (2007) showed a fairly consistent association between EI and well-being across different samples.

Subjective well-being (SWB) refers to how people experience and evaluate their own lives. Diener (1984) described it as a combination of positive affect, negative affect, and overall life

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satisfaction. Higher SWB goes together with better health, stronger relationships, and greater resilience to stress, and a meta-analysis by Martins et al. (2010) also tied EI to health outcomes. Studies that put all three constructs together are still rare, but some exist. Among Indonesian university students, EI and academic stress jointly predicted SWB (Julika & Setiyawati, 2019), and a more recent study added perceived social support, finding that it and EI together explained a substantial share of the variance in students' SWB (Wafi & Santosa, 2026). These results make the present model plausible, although the role of academic stress within it may differ across samples and instruments.

Still, most earlier work examined these constructs one at a time, and few studies have placed them in a single model, particularly in Balkan university settings. This study therefore examined the relationships among EI, academic stress, and SWB in university students in North Macedonia, and also checked for differences by age and gender, with a view to what the results mean for teaching and student support in higher education.

2. Literature review

2.1 Emotional intelligence in academic contexts

Mayer et al. (2004) treat EI as a set of related abilities: perceiving, understanding, and regulating emotions. In education, it has been associated with better academic adaptation, healthier relationships with others, and more effective coping. Students with higher EI appear to manage the emotional side of studying more easily. Schutte et al. (2007) found a consistent positive link between EI and psychological well-being, and Martins et al. (2010) reported significant associations with both mental and physical health indicators.

2.2 Academic stress among university students

Academic stress is usually tied to workload, examinations, time pressure, and worries about the future, and it is regarded as a real risk factor for mental health problems among students. Pascoe et al. (2020) reported strong associations between academic stress and anxiety, depression, and reduced well-being in both secondary and higher education. Barbayannis et al. (2022) later confirmed that it affects mental health and well-being in college students, especially when academic demands peak. Since high stress has consistently gone along with poorer functioning and lower life satisfaction, it makes sense to look for psychological factors that might soften its effects.

2.3 Subjective well-being in students

Diener (1984) defines SWB through three components: positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction. For students, it is a useful indicator of how well they are adjusting. Higher well-being has been linked to better academic performance, stronger social relationships, and better mental health, and emotional and psychological resources are generally seen as important for sustaining it.

2.4 Relationships among emotional intelligence, academic stress, and well-being

A growing body of research suggests that EI protects against academic stress and supports well-being. People with higher EI tend to cope more adaptively, which helps them handle stress and keep their psychological balance. Extremera and Fernández-Berrocal (2006) identified EI

as a significant predictor of mental health and emotional adjustment, and Schutte et al. (2007) showed positive EI–well-being associations across different populations.
The link between academic stress and SWB is also well documented: more stress generally goes with lower well-being, lower life satisfaction, and more psychological distress. That is exactly why resources such as EI, which might buffer these effects, deserve attention.
Direct support for a negative EI–academic stress association comes from a study of health sciences students, in which higher EI predicted lower academic stress even after digital literacy and self-regulation were taken into account (Ibrahim et al., 2024). The evidence is not uniform, though. A cross-sectional study using the same instruments with a broader sample of health science undergraduates found a significant positive correlation instead, which was read as a sign that highly emotionally intelligent students may be more alert to academic demands and so report similar or even higher stress (Ibrahim et al., 2024). Among Indonesian university students, academic stress no longer predicted SWB significantly once EI was in the model, although the model as a whole remained significant (Oktarisa et al., 2023). Taken at face value, these mixed results suggest that the strength, and perhaps the direction, of the EI–stress relationship depends on the sample and context, which is one reason to study underrepresented regions such as the Balkans.

2.5 Research gap and study rationale

Most earlier studies looked at EI, academic stress, and SWB separately, and only a few have combined all three in one model, especially with Balkan students. That matters because cultural and educational context may change how these constructs interact. The present study was therefore designed to examine the relationships among EI, academic stress, and SWB in university students in North Macedonia.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Research problem and aims

Even though EI is widely seen as important for psychological adjustment, little empirical work in North Macedonia has examined it together with academic stress and SWB in the same sample. With academic demands rising, it is both theoretically and practically useful to know whether EI works as a protective resource for students. The aim of this study was to examine the relationships among EI, academic stress, and SWB among students at Southeast European University in Tetovo, North Macedonia, and to explore differences by EI level, age, and gender.
The research questions were:
Is EI associated with academic stress among university students?
Is EI associated with SWB?
Is academic stress related to SWB?
Are there significant differences in EI according to age and gender?
Are there significant differences in academic stress according to age and gender?
Are there significant differences in SWB according to age and gender?
How are the dimensions of EI associated with academic stress and with the dimensions of SWB?

3.2 Participants

The sample consisted of 240 full-time undergraduate students from Southeast European University in Tetovo, North Macedonia, recruited from the Faculties of Psychology, Medicine,

and Computer Science through stratified sampling meant to balance gender and age groups. There were 120 men (50.0%) and 120 women (50.0%), aged 18 to 25 years, split evenly into two age groups: 18–21 years (n = 120) and 22–25 years (n = 120) (Table 1). Participation was voluntary and informed consent was required; students who returned incomplete questionnaires were excluded from the 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

EI was measured with the Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (EIQ) developed by Boston Consulting Group (2012). It has 50 self-report items rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and covers five dimensions: self-awareness, emotion management, motivation, empathy, and social skills. Higher totals mean higher EI; following the scoring procedure, totals below 140 were classed as lower EI and totals of 140 and above as higher EI. In this sample the overall Cronbach's alpha was .762, and the subscale values were .777 for self-awareness, .798 for emotion management, .755 for motivation, .764 for empathy, and .767 for social skills.

Academic stress was assessed with the 40-item Academic Stress Scale (ASS) by Alam and Halder (2018), rated on the same five-point scale. Total scores range from 40 to 200, and higher scores reflect more perceived academic stress. Cronbach's alpha in this sample was .775.

SWB was measured with the BBC Subjective Well-Being Scale (BBC-SWB) by Pontin et al. (2013). It has 24 items rated on a five-point scale and covers three dimensions: psychological well-being, physical health and well-being, and social relationships. Higher scores indicate greater well-being. The overall alpha was .779, and the subscale alphas were .722, .743, and .765, respectively. All reliability coefficients are listed in Table 2.

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 in the 2025–2026 academic year at Southeast European University in Tetovo, after permission from the university administration and ethical approval from the appropriate institutional authority. Participants were told about the purpose of the study, that taking part was voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any time without consequences; written informed consent was obtained before they filled in the questionnaires. The questionnaires were completed in classrooms with the researcher present and took about 20–25 minutes. Responses were anonymous, no identifying information was recorded, and every questionnaire was checked for completeness before analysis.

3.5 Ethical considerations

The study followed the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki for research with human participants. Approval was granted by the appropriate institutional authority at Southeast European University before data collection began. Participation was voluntary and based on written informed consent, and participants were assured that their answers would stay anonymous and confidential and would be used for scientific purposes only.

3.6 Statistical analysis

Analyses were run in IBM SPSS Statistics 20.0. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum values) summarized the demographic characteristics and the study variables, and Cronbach's alpha was used to check the internal consistency of the instruments. Independent-samples t-tests compared academic stress and SWB between students with lower and higher EI. Age and gender differences were tested with the Mann–Whitney U test, because preliminary checks showed that the assumptions for parametric tests were not fully met for these comparisons. Relationships among EI, academic stress, and SWB were examined with Pearson's product–moment correlation coefficient (r), interpreted according to Cohen's (1988) guidelines. The significance level was set at $p < .05$, and $p < .01$ was treated as highly significant.

4. Results

To compare academic stress and SWB by EI level, participants were divided into two groups according to their EI scores (EI < 140 and EI ≥ 140), and independent-samples t-tests were run (Tables 3 and 4).

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

Subjective well-being (BBC)	EI < 140 (n = 93)	EI ≥ 140 (n = 147)
Minimum	55	59
Maximum	87	106

Note. Independent-samples t-test: t(238) = −13.43, p < .001.

Students with higher EI reported significantly lower academic stress, t(238) = 12.07, p < .001, and significantly higher SWB, t(238) = −13.43, p < .001, than students with lower EI. In other words, higher EI went together with lower perceived academic stress and better well-being.
The association between academic stress and SWB was tested with Pearson's correlation (Table 5).

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).

The correlation was moderate and negative, r = −.489, p < .01: students who experienced more academic stress tended to report lower SWB.
Differences between the two age groups were tested with the Mann–Whitney U test (Tables 6–8).

Table 6. Emotional intelligence according to age group

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 group

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 group

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.

All three variables differed by age (p < .001 in every comparison). Students aged 22–25 years scored higher on EI and SWB, while students aged 18–21 years reported more academic stress.
Gender differences are shown in Tables 9–11.

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.

Women scored significantly higher than men on EI and SWB, and they also reported somewhat higher academic stress. All three gender differences were statistically significant.
Table 12 shows how the individual EI dimensions relate to academic stress and to the three dimensions of SWB.

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). ASS = Academic Stress Scale; WB = well-being.

Every EI dimension correlated negatively with academic stress and positively with psychological well-being, physical health and well-being, and social relationships. Motivation had the strongest negative correlation with academic stress (r = −.579), and empathy had the strongest positive correlation with physical health and well-being (r = .620).

5. Discussion

This study looked at how EI, academic stress, and SWB are related among university students in North Macedonia, and at how they differ by age and gender. Overall, the results fit the idea that EI is a useful psychological resource in academic life.

For the first two research questions, EI was negatively associated with academic stress and positively associated with SWB. Students with higher EI (EI ≥ 140) reported much lower stress and much higher well-being than those with lower EI (EI < 140). This agrees with earlier work suggesting that people with higher EI use more adaptive coping strategies and so regulate their reactions to academic demands better (Extremera & Fernández-Berrocal, 2006; Schutte et al., 2007). The differences were large enough to suggest that EI is more than a correlate of low stress and good well-being; it may be a genuine protective factor for students coping with university pressure, although a cross-sectional design cannot confirm this.

For the third research question, academic stress and SWB were negatively correlated: students who felt more academic pressure reported lower well-being. That matches earlier evidence linking chronic academic pressure to poorer psychological functioning (Pascoe et al., 2020; Barbayannis et al., 2022). Read together with the EI results, the pattern fits a model in which EI lowers the stress students experience and lower stress in turn helps preserve their well-being. This is an interpretation, however, and was not tested directly in the present analyses.

Students aged 22–25 years scored higher on EI and SWB and lower on academic stress than those aged 18–21 years. One reasonable reading is developmental: emotional skills keep maturing with age and experience, and more advanced students may have built better coping habits and a clearer idea of their academic and professional direction, which could reduce uncertainty-related stress.

Women scored higher than men on EI and SWB, but also reported slightly higher academic stress. Higher emotional competence alongside somewhat higher perceived stress is consistent with research suggesting that women may notice, and be more willing to report, emotional and stress-related experiences, without that necessarily meaning poorer adjustment. Their higher EI may even help offset the effect of the extra stress. Gender differences in EI have also been reported in earlier work (Cabello et al., 2016), although that study used ability-based measures rather than self-report.

The dimension-level results (Table 12) show which parts of EI matter most. All five dimensions were related to lower academic stress and to higher psychological, physical, and social well-being. Motivation had the strongest negative link with academic stress, which suggests that goal-directed, self-motivating tendencies may be especially useful for handling academic demands. Empathy had the strongest positive link with physical health and well-being, possibly pointing to the role of social-emotional connectedness in students' broader health.

Compared with recent international studies, the findings are mostly in line with research on Indonesian students, where EI and academic stress jointly related to SWB (Julika & Setiyawati, 2019) and where EI was a stronger predictor of SWB than perceived social support (Wafi & Santosa, 2026). They differ from the study of health sciences students in which EI was positively, not negatively, related to academic stress (Ibrahim et al., 2024). One explanation offered there was that highly emotionally intelligent students may be more perceptive of academic demands and more self-critical, which could cancel out part of the stress-buffering effect usually attributed to EI.

Our results also differ from Oktarisa et al. (2023), who found that academic stress did not contribute to SWB in an Indonesian sample, whereas we found a significant negative correlation; this relationship may simply not generalize equally across cultural and educational contexts. Finally, Gómez-López et al. (2026) reported for Spanish and Italian university students that EI contributed to life satisfaction mainly through a direct association and not by

moderating the effect of stress. We did not test moderation, but the sizeable direct associations found here are compatible with that view, that is, EI may act mainly as an independent protective resource and not strictly as a stress buffer. In short, EI is consistently linked to student well-being, but its relationship with academic stress specifically seems more variable and needs further study with different populations and measures.

5.1 Pedagogical implications

The results have several implications for teaching and student support in higher education. First, because lower EI went together with higher stress and lower well-being, universities could include emotional skills, such as recognizing and regulating emotions, in first-year orientation programs and study-skills courses. Second, the age difference suggests that younger students (18–21 years) may need the most support, and early contact with counseling services or mentoring by more experienced students could help them through the first years of study.
Third, lecturers can reduce avoidable stress through clear assessment criteria, realistic workloads, and well-spaced deadlines, and by creating a classroom climate in which students feel able to talk about difficulties. Finally, female students reported somewhat more stress despite higher EI, so they should not be overlooked in stress-management initiatives. These are suggestions drawn from correlational data, and their effect should be tested in intervention studies; evidence that EI can be improved through training (Nelis et al., 2009) makes such studies feasible.

5.2 Limitations

Several limitations should be kept in mind. First, the cross-sectional design rules out causal conclusions about the direction of the relationships among EI, academic stress, and SWB. Second, all variables were self-reported, so social desirability and common-method bias may have affected the results (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Third, the sample came from a single institution, Southeast European University in Tetovo, which limits generalizability to other universities and cultural settings. Finally, only age and gender were examined; academic year, field of study, and socioeconomic background were not, and could be considered in future work.

6. Conclusions

This study examined EI, academic stress, and SWB among 240 university students in North Macedonia. Higher EI went together with lower academic stress and higher SWB, and academic stress was negatively related to SWB. Older students and female students reported higher EI and SWB, although female students also reported slightly more academic stress. All five EI dimensions were meaningfully related to lower stress and better well-being, with motivation and empathy standing out.
The results support seeing EI as a protective resource that helps students deal with academic stress and keep up their well-being. For universities and teaching staff, this suggests that programs aimed at strengthening emotional skills, such as emotion-regulation workshops, mentoring, and counseling built into academic life and teaching, might reduce stress and support well-being, especially for younger and less experienced students. Evidence that EI can be improved through training (Nelis et al., 2009) makes such programs a realistic option.
Future studies should use longitudinal designs to clarify causal paths, include several institutions and wider student groups across North Macedonia and the Balkans, and take into account factors such as coping styles, social support, and academic workload. Recent evidence

that perceived social support predicts SWB independently of EI (Wafi & Santosa, 2026) suggests that adding social support to integrated models could help show how much each resource contributes among Balkan students.

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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