

IMPROVING THE UNDERSTANDING OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AMONG ACADEMIC STAFF IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract: *The primary goal of this study will be to determine whether self-awareness, empathy, and social skills impact academic staff in Malaysia. Identifying the key determinants affecting emotional intelligence will be crucial, especially given the ongoing changes in higher education teaching and learning. The study will focus on 367 academic staff from a higher education institution (HEI) in Malaysia who are directly involved in teaching and learning. Through correlational analysis, the study will explore how self-awareness, empathy, and social skills impact emotional intelligence. The results will inform recommendations to address the effects on academic staff, students, the institution, and the wider societal and national contexts.*

Keywords: *Emotional intelligence, Self-awareness, Empathy, Social skills, Academic staff*

Introduction

In today's global world, organizations must implement structured tactics to achieve their goals, with employee productivity and effectiveness playing a key role. Although factors such as education and position influence performance, emotional intelligence (EI) is increasingly recognized as critical to organizational success. EI helps employees adapt to change, foster commitment and drive organizational growth. Amid concerns of AI replacing jobs, emotional intelligence remains a competitive human advantage, especially in roles that require social and emotional skills.

According to the WHO's World Mental Health Report published in 2022, 15% of working adults experienced a mental disorder, largely due to work-related factors that have further contributed to societal issues such as discrimination and perceived inequality (WHO, 2022). This aligns with the introduction of the ILO (International Labour Organization) framework, which includes the ILO Occupational Safety and Health Convention (No. 155) and Recommendation (No. 164), aimed at safeguarding employees' health and safety. However, the WHO Mental Health Atlas revealed that only 30% of countries have national programs addressing work-related mental health, signaling a lack of serious commitment from the remaining 70%. The COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a 25% increase in anxiety and depression worldwide, exposed how unprepared governments were for its impact on mental health and highlighted the chronic global shortage of mental health resources. In 2020, governments spent an average of just 2% of their health budgets on mental health, with lower-middle-income countries allocating less than 1%.

In education, EI is important for improving performance, behaviour and decision making. However, educators face significant pressures due to constant social interactions, workloads and systemic pressures, such as managing student behaviour and navigating institutional demands. This pressure is exacerbated by expectations from stakeholders and institutions, leading to emotional exhaustion among academic staff, as seen at one higher education institution (HEI) in Malaysia, where faculty are burdened with multiple responsibilities (Narehan, 2015). To ensure effective teaching, educators must develop emotional intelligence to manage these challenges and create a positive learning environment. Several factors contribute to the issue of emotional intelligence (EI) among academic staff. Mehrad (2020) suggests that many academic staff are uncertain about what brings them satisfaction or dissatisfaction in their roles, but understanding key factors can help them improve their success. Dissatisfaction arises when staff do not receive basic motivational support, whereas job satisfaction is achieved when they are provided with fundamental resources and recognition from workplace leaders, managers, and supervisors.

Ahsan et al. (2009) highlight that with the increase in the number of universities in Malaysia over the past decade, employment satisfaction has become a critical organizational factor, and this will impact EI of academic staff. Furthermore, as universities expand, academic staff face greater challenges and diverse reactions due to heightened demands from institutions aiming to achieve world-class status, which ultimately enhances the prestige of educational institutions. For example, UiTM (2014) outlined several key focuses: Enhancing the competitiveness of academic programs to improve graduate employability. Realigning the A.D.A.B Model (Analysis, Design, Access, Built in Trust) and integrating Ethics in Teaching and Learning (PdP) to foster self-improvement that benefits individuals, society, and the country. Intensifying the use of academic resources to optimize skills and expertise across various programs, campuses, and both domestic and international universities. Chong et al. (2020), in their study involving 368 academic staff from private higher education institutions in the Klang Valley

(Selangor and Kuala Lumpur), Malaysia, concluded with the phrase, "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire," meaning that students at all levels should be passionate about something, and education should ignite that passion. This aligns with one of their findings that general mood was positively correlated with job performance. Among the five components of emotional intelligence (EI) studied, the general mood variable showed the strongest correlation with job performance. It was shocking how some lecturers failed to understand the struggles students faced (Kamaludin & Sundarasan, 2023). Many students reported that their lecturers were overly strict, even using harsh language. Despite UiTM's guidelines emphasizing participation over attendance during ODL (Online Distance Learning), many lecturers still prioritized strict attendance policies, which was disheartening. Even worse, some students had their marks unfairly reduced due to video lags during presentations or slight delays in submission caused by tech issues, such as poor internet connections or platform glitches—issues that should have been met with understanding, not punishment.

Building on this, Manley (2009) emphasized the importance of continuing this discussion in future research, exploring how academics can function more effectively in their workplaces with higher EI levels. Improving EI not only enhances their job performance but also positively impacts their students' academic achievements, benefiting both parties. Therefore, self-awareness, empathy, and social skills are essential factors to consider when evaluating the impact of emotional intelligence on educators in UiTM.

Literature Review

In the dynamic and challenging environment of public universities, the role of academic staff encompasses much more than knowledge dissemination. These professionals are tasked with nurturing intellectual growth, addressing diverse student needs, and fostering collaboration with colleagues, all of which demand high emotional intelligence (EI). Academic staff, with their unique professional demands, require a deep understanding of the factors that influence their emotional intelligence. This study aims to investigate three primary factors—self-awareness, empathy, and social skills—that shape emotional intelligence (EI) and their practical significance within the setting of public universities. By analysing the current literature on these factors, we can gain valuable knowledge about their impact on the emotional intelligence of academic personnel. This, in turn, can inform strategies to enhance their effectiveness in their roles.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) encompasses more than just the ability to control one's feelings. It involves the ability to identify, interpret, and control one's own emotions, which is an essential component for achieving success in both one's personal and professional life. The theory of Emotional Intelligence (EI) has undergone tremendous expansion, since its inception resulting in the emergence of various models that aim to conceptualize and measure this construct. One of the earliest and most influential concepts of EI was introduced by Salovey, DiPaolo & Mayer (1990) that discovered new perspectives of EI. They characterize themselves as a collection of skills connected to understanding, expressing, and effectively controlling emotions, which is essential for intelligent behaviour, particularly in social circumstances, according to their argument. According to Goleman (1995), emotional intelligence comprises not only the capacity to identify, comprehend, and control one's own feelings, but also the feelings of other people. The importance of this factor in determining success in a variety of professional fields, including education, is starting to become more widely acknowledged.

There has been a significant amount of theoretical work that has taken place since the initial introduction of the concept of emotional intelligence (EI). Numerous models have been developed, each of which offers a unique viewpoint on the relationship between EI and its significance. Caruso, Salovey, Brackett, & Mayer (2015) introduce the ability model, which is one of the most foundational ideas of emotional intelligence (EI). In this approach, emotional intelligence is conceptualized as a collection of cognitive abilities that include the processing of information pertaining to emotions. It is composed of the following four branches: (1) perceiving emotions, which involves accurately recognizing emotions in oneself and others through facial expressions, tone of voice, and other nonverbal cues; (2) using emotions to facilitate thought, which refers to the ability to harness emotions to prioritize thinking and foster cognitive activities such as problem-solving and creativity; (3) understanding emotions, which includes the capacity to comprehend emotional language and the complex relationships among emotions; and (4) managing emotions, which entails the ability to regulate emotions in oneself and others to promote emotional and intellectual growth. Performance-based assessments, such as the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT), are frequently utilized to examine this model. These tests are intended to evaluate the level to which individuals can successfully complete activities that are associated with these four branches. The purpose of this test is to determine how effectively individuals do tasks that are associated with the four primary branches of the ability model. Self-report questionnaires, on the other hand, are often used to test the trait model of emotional intelligence. These surveys give individuals the opportunity to evaluate and report on their own emotional and social competencies, such as empathy, flexibility, and interpersonal skills (Mayer, 2002).

In contrast to the ability model, which considers emotional intelligence to be a cognitive skill, the mixed model of emotional intelligence by Goleman (1995) considers both cognitive talents and personality qualities. The concept of emotional intelligence is presented in this model as a multidimensional construct that encompasses a collection of talents that contribute to the professional and personal success of an individual respectively. In corporate settings and educational institutions, where emotional and social skills are essential for growth and achievement, the mixed model implies that emotional intelligence can be built via learning and experience. This makes it particularly appropriate in these types of contexts. Goleman's model comprises five components: (1) self-awareness, the capacity to identify and comprehend one's own emotions; (2) self-regulation, the act of effectively controlling one's emotions and impulses; (3) motivation, the drive to succeed for the sake of personal accomplishment; (4) empathy, the ability to understand and empathize with the emotions of others; and (5) social skills, a capacity for managing relationships and establishing networks. However, in contrast to the ability model, the mixed model proposed by Goleman implies that emotional intelligence may be acquired via learning and experience. This makes it particularly appropriate in organisational contexts, such as educational institutions, where emotional and social abilities are essential. On the other hand, Kanesan and Fauzan (2019) argue that the inclusion of new personality traits such as honesty, conscientiousness, and adaptability into Goleman's model of emotional intelligence has the potential to hinder the fundamental concept of emotional intelligence. They indicate that emotional intelligence should primarily concentrate on the cognitive capabilities associated with the perception, comprehension, and management of emotions, rather than spanning a wider variety of human qualities. In their research, they also highlighted the fact that Goleman's mixed model incorporates both trait-based and ability-based components may be one of the factors that contributes to the difficulty of designing reliable and valid measurement tools for evaluating emotional intelligence abilities. They believe that a more targeted approach, focusing on the essential skills for processing emotions, could lead to

a clearer definition of this significant psychological capacity as well as a more robust assessment of it. Furthermore, these EI concerns prompted numerous studies across various countries, including the educational sector (Gren, 2023; Abouhasera et al., 2023; Iqbal et al., 2022; Crompton & Burke, 2023). For instance, Nasir et al. (2023) focused on perceived EI among staff in higher educational institutions in the UAE, finding that EI components such as SEA (self-emotions appraisal), OE (others' emotions appraisal), and ROE (regulation of emotions) were related to staff task performance, which ultimately impacted their overall job performance.

Self-awareness

There have been several empirical studies that have investigated the roles of self-awareness among various professions, highlighting the significance of this trait in a variety of components of their professional jobs. According to Carden and Passmore (2022), self-awareness is an intricate process that comprises a wide range of elements, including but not limited to individual beliefs, values, mental states, physical sensations, personality traits, motivations, behaviours and the perceptions of others. It can be broken down into intrapersonal and interpersonal components and it necessitates both a comprehension of one's own internal existence and an awareness of how one perceives themselves. The development of self-awareness is possible through the use of systematic introspection and feedback from other people.

Educational institutions can benefit from the recommendations that are provided by the study that was conducted on the self-awareness abilities of through the utilisation of social and emotional intelligence learning methods. The findings of the study indicate that structured social-emotional learning has the potential to be an effective tool for developing students' self-awareness in high school settings (Thaintheerasombat & Chookhampaeng, 2022). In a study by Gómez-Leal et al., (2022) highlighted self-awareness is an essential component of emotional intelligence for school leaders because it enables them to identify their feelings, comprehend the impact those feelings have, and effectively control their responses. Leaders who have a high level of self-awareness are more equipped to deal with stress, make rational judgments, sustain relationships, and cultivate trust, which eventually results in the development of a positive school atmosphere. A key conclusion from research conducted in Islamic schools in Indonesia is that moral intelligence significantly influences the personality, actions, and self-awareness of educators (Saodi, Alshahrani et al, 2024). This, in turn, has positively impacted their relationships with others. If explored further, these crucial elements could potentially enhance the emotional intelligence (EI) of educators within the higher education system.

Empathy

Fernández-Abascal & Martín-Díaz (2019) argued that those who possess emotional intelligence possess a greater capacity to notice, comprehend, and control their own emotions, as well as the emotions of others. Emotional intelligence and empathy are two notions strongly tied to one another. Empathy is one of the most significant parts of emotional intelligence, especially in the context of interpersonal domains, which incorporate characteristics such as emotion management and social competence. Empathy is essential in the context of interpersonal domains. Even though they are intimately related to one another, empathy and emotional intelligence are two separate ideas that interact with one another in various and potentially complicated ways. In a study that included both nurses and patients, Prado-Gascó, Giménez-Espert & Valero-Moreno (2019) discovered that perspective taking is specifically associated with empathy and emotional clarity. These are all qualities that are essential for nurses to have in order to keep a positive attitude toward communication and to improve their understanding

of their patients. Instead of having natural and unchangeable qualities, these abilities can be developed through formal education and intentional instruction. Moreover, a lack of empathy in emotional intelligence might result in manipulative or aggressive behaviour, and there was the necessity to investigate further how emotional intelligence interacts with other personality traits to determine various social outcomes (Akamatsu & Gherghel, 2021).

Additionally, there is a connection between empathic care and interpersonal emotional intelligence, which is the capability of individuals to grasp and respond to the feelings of other people. Empathy encompasses the ability to care for others with compassion and understanding. Individuals with high levels of emotional intelligence experience less anxiety and discomfort when faced with challenging communication situations and are better able to understand others' perspectives. Vyatkin et al. (2021) emphasized that understanding and managing emotions are crucial for establishing meaningful communication and maintaining overall well-being. Interestingly, a study by Melweth, Al Mdawi et al. (2023) involving academic staff in Abha City, Saudi Arabia, found that empathy and social skills were positively correlated with teaching competencies and the frequency of AI (artificial intelligence) usage, reflecting the evolving nature of the educational landscape and highlighting the potential significance of emotional intelligence in this context.

Social Skills

Social skills are an essential element of emotional intelligence (EI), especially for academic personnel who frequently interact with students, colleagues, and administrators. Effective communication, conflict resolution, collaboration, and relationship management are just a few of the many talents that go under the umbrella of social skills. These abilities are necessary to improve the learning environment, encourage teamwork, and improve the educational process. The ability to develop suitable interpersonal relationships, sense well-being, achieve goals without hindrance, and communicate successfully with others are all essential components of social skills. Social skills are a collection of habits, behaviours, ideas, and emotions that enable individuals to achieve these things. They are essential not just because of the relational aspect of their existence, but also because of the influence they have on other aspects of the lives of individuals (Trigueros, et al., 2020).

In addition, social skills refer to the attitudes and behaviours individuals exhibit to gain a place in society by behaving according to their social environment. Leisure activities contribute positively to physical and mental development, as people are social beings who interact with each other in society (Unlu & Çeviker, 2022). Riggio (2020) has proposed that self-reporting or ratings from others or colleagues are two methods that can be utilised to get information about differences in social skills. Assessing the behavioural display of social skills at work is another way. This involves providing evaluations or scores based on how well individuals demonstrate each ability in the context of interactions that take place in the workplace. The identification of persons who can make successful use of workplace social skills is facilitated by this. Social skills can also be interpreted as manifestations of many types of intelligence, particularly emotional and social intelligence. There are many distinct types of intelligence. The study by Skura & Swiderska (2022) found that there is a correlation between teachers with higher EI and fewer challenges encountered while working with pupils with special needs, suggesting that these teachers are more prepared to deal with socially challenging situations. They can satisfy their social demands without having a detrimental impact on other people, they are good at expressing their feelings, and they can successfully generate positive feelings in the social environment. Furthermore, Pranata, et al., (2023) describes the significance of social

skills depends on the fact that they play a vital role in facilitating productive collaboration and good relationships among students, not just in the classroom but also in their participation in larger school activities. The recognition of the areas in which social skills should be improved can serve as a guide for academics in the process of cultivating a more cooperative learning environment. According to Sharma, Srivastava et al. (2023), individuals with a greater capacity for emotional management or emotional intelligence tend to exhibit stronger social skills, such as open, effective, empathetic, and affective communication. These abilities are rooted in a more effective communicative approach, where clearer information is provided about treatments and their consequences, along with active and empathetic listening, as noted by Raeissi, Zandian et al. (2023).

Methodologies

This study will focus on academic staff from a higher education institution (HEI) in Malaysia who are directly involved in teaching and learning. The participants will be approached individually. The main objective is to assess the perception of emotional intelligence among academic staff and explore the relationship between self-awareness, empathy, social skills, and emotional intelligence. The target population will consist of 8,932 individuals, and according to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), a minimum sample size of 367 will be required. However, it is expected that responses from 147 participants, representing 40% of the required sample size, will be collected. This response rate is consistent with Vanderleest (1996) and will therefore be considered satisfactory. Additionally, Roscoe (1975) suggests that a sample size between 30 and 500 is appropriate for most studies.

Data collection will be conducted using self-administered questionnaires, with simple random sampling. Participants will be assured of confidentiality, and it will be emphasized that there are no right or wrong answers. It is anticipated that 147 completed questionnaires will be usable for analysis. Established measures from previous studies will be used, including the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS) by Wong and Law (2002) for emotional intelligence, the scale by Fenigstein et al. (1975) for self-awareness, the Social Skills Rating System by Gresham and Elliott (1990) for social skills, and the Hogan Empathy Scale by Greif and Hogan (1973). All items will be rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The use of this scale will be based on Chomeya's (2010) argument that it allows respondents to express neutrality by selecting the middle point (3) without negatively impacting data analysis. Dawes (2008) also suggests that 5, 7, or 10-point scales are equally effective for analytical tools such as structural equation modeling or confirmatory factor analysis.

To ensure internal consistency, the reliability of each construct will be examined. As these constructs have not previously been studied at this institution across different faculties and levels, the focus will be on establishing internal consistency, or the degree to which the items within each construct are interrelated. Cronbach's alpha coefficient will be used to assess this, with Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) recommending that values above 0.7 indicate good internal consistency. Items falling below this threshold will be removed to improve construct reliability. Additionally, Pearson's Correlation will be run to test the association between the variables, and it is expected that the results will reveal significant associations between self-awareness, empathy, social skills, and emotional intelligence among university academic staff in Malaysia.

Conclusion

This research aims to clarify academic staff perceptions of emotional intelligence, specifically within public higher education institutions. Using correlational analysis, the study will examine how self-awareness, empathy and social skills influence emotional intelligence. Based on the findings, recommendations will be made to address impacts on academic staff, students, the institution, as well as society and the country.

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