THE ROLE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN ENHANCING ACADEMIC SELF-EFFICACY AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

In an era of escalating academic pressures and emotional challenges, university students' success increasingly depends on non- cognitive skills beyond traditional intelligence. Emotional intelligence (EI)—the ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions—and academic self-efficacy (ASE)—the confidence in one's capacity to achieve educational goals—stand out as key drivers of student resilience, engagement, and performance. This systematic literature review explores the vital relationship between EI and ASE among undergraduate and postgraduate students across global higher education contexts.

Following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, a comprehensive search across major databases identified 295 records published between 2015 and 2025, with 31 high-quality empirical studies ultimately included after stringent screening. The collective evidence reveals a compelling pattern: higher emotional intelligence consistently fosters stronger academic self-efficacy, which in turn enhances motivation, persistence, and overall academic achievement. These connections are often mediated by processes such as effective stress regulation, increased engagement, and adaptive coping, positioning EI as a powerful, developable asset for student success.

Despite the robustness of these positive associations, the current body of research is limited by predominant cross-sectional designs, heavy reliance on self-report measures, and a geographic concentration in Asian settings, with underrepresentation of diverse institutional environments in regions like India. These constraints highlight exciting opportunities for future longitudinal and cross-cultural studies to establish causality and uncover nuanced mechanisms.

By illuminating EI's transformative role in building student confidence and performance, this review provides educators, administrators, and policymakers with evidence-based insights to design interventions that cultivate emotionally intelligent, self-efficacious learners—equipping the next generation to thrive in

an increasingly complex higher education landscape.

Keywords

emotional intelligence, academic self-efficacy, university students, higher education, systematic review, academic performance

Introduction

Background and Context

Higher education has transformed into a high-stakes environment where students must balance rigorous coursework, competitive peer dynamics, and personal growth amid societal expectations (Arnett, 2015). Traditional focus on cognitive abilities has shifted to include psychological factors, as emotions significantly affect how students handle exams, feedback, interactions, and setbacks. Emotional intelligence, encompassing the recognition and regulation of emotions in oneself and others (Mayer et al., 2004; Goleman, 1995), helps navigate these challenges. Academic self-efficacy, the confidence in one's ability to execute academic goals (Bandura, 1997), influences effort, persistence, and resilience (Zimmerman, 2000).

Although EI and ASE have been studied in educational psychology, their interrelationship is often underexplored, particularly in non-Western contexts where cultural diversity and competition create unique stressors (Misra & Castillo, 2004). Existing research highlights EI's role in bolstering self-efficacy, but systematic synthesis is needed to identify patterns and gaps.

Objective

This review aims to synthesize empirical studies on how emotional intelligence enhances academic self-efficacy among university students, highlighting key findings, theoretical bases, and research limitations.

Scope and Limitations

The review focuses on empirical English-language studies from 2015 to 2025 involving undergraduate and postgraduate students in higher education settings. It excludes non-empirical work, school-level studies, or non- academic contexts. Limitations include potential publication bias toward positive results and reliance on self-reported data in included studies.

Methodology

This systematic literature review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines to ensure a transparent and reproducible selection process.

Search Strategy

A comprehensive search was conducted across four databases: **Google Scholar**, **PubMed**, **Semantic Scholar**, and **ResearchGate**. Keywords included combinations of "emotional intelligence," "academic self-efficacy," and terms related to university students (e.g., "higher education," "college students"). Results were limited to English- language publications from 2015 to 2025 to capture contemporary research. The initial search identified **295 records**.

Screening and Selection

- **Identification phase**: 30 duplicates and 5 non-English records were removed, leaving **260 records**.
- **Screening phase**: Titles and abstracts were reviewed; **217 records** were excluded for lacking focus on the core constructs (EI and ASE) or targeting non-university populations/non-academic contexts.
- **Eligibility phase**: Full texts of **43 records** were assessed (3 inaccessible); **9** were excluded due to absence of empirical data or misalignment with objectives.

This resulted in **31 empirical studies** included for synthesis (see PRISMA flow diagram in Figure 1).

Data Extraction

Key data extracted from each study included authors/year, objectives, sample characteristics, methodology/tools, major findings (e.g., correlations, mediation effects), and limitations/gaps. Extraction

was structured to facilitate thematic analysis and is summarized in Appendix B.

This rigorous process minimized bias and ensured relevance to the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic self-efficacy in higher education settings.

Summary Table of the Selection Process

PRISMA Stage	**Action / Criterion**	**Count (n)**
Identification	Total records identified from databases (Filtered: Past 10 years)	295
Pre-Screening	Removal of duplicates and non-English papers	35
Screening	Records evaluated for relevance to the research topic	265
Excluded	**Reasons:** Lacked keywords (EI/ASE); focused on school-age children; or set in workplace/clinical/leadership contexts	222
Retrieval	Reports successfully retrieved for full-text review	40
Final Inclusion	**Studies meeting all criteria for the Literature Review**	**31**

Main Body (Literature Review)

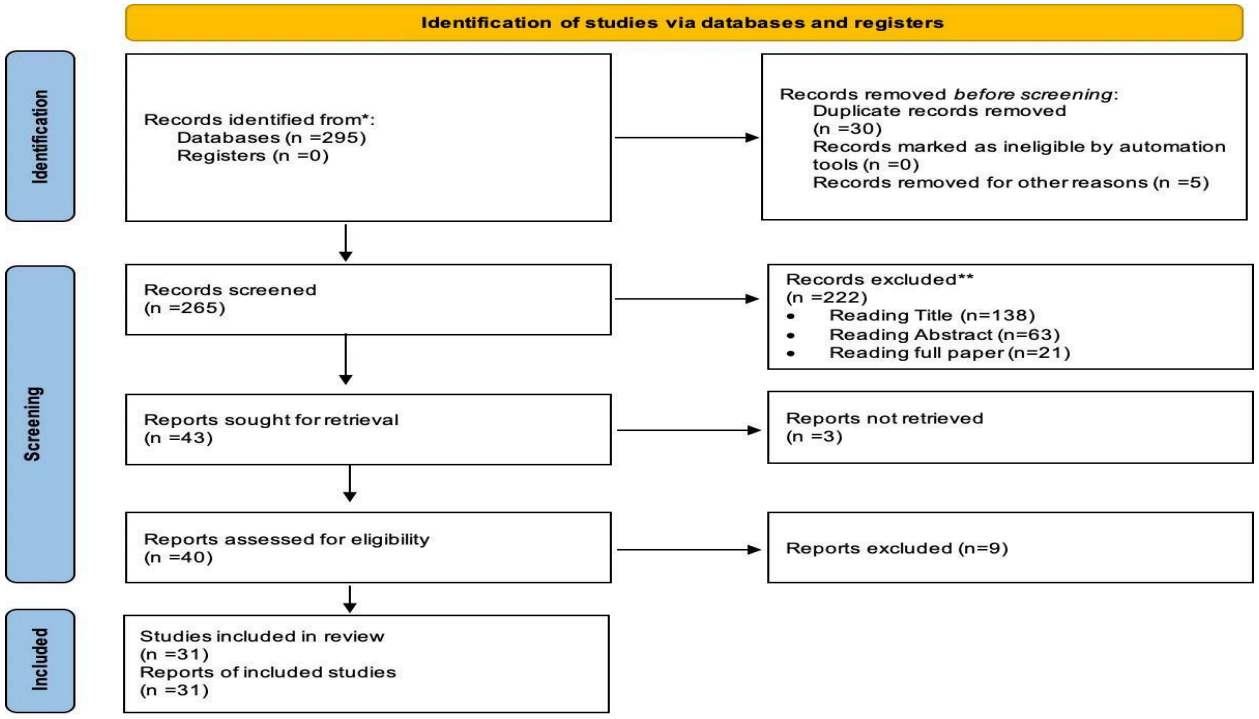

Figure 1

Theoretical Frameworks

The reviewed studies primarily draw on two EI models: the Ability Model, which conceptualizes EI as cognitive abilities involving emotion perception, facilitation, understanding, and regulation (Mayer & Salovey, 1997), and the Mixed Model, integrating traits like self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills (Goleman, 1995). These frameworks emphasize EI's malleability and role in academic adaptation.

For ASE, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1997) is foundational, positing that self-efficacy develops through mastery experiences, vicarious observation, verbal persuasion, and emotional states. The linkage between EI and ASE is conceptualized through emotional regulation: effective EI mitigates stress and negative emotions, fostering stronger beliefs in academic capabilities (Petrides et al., 2004). This integration provides a lens for understanding how EI supports ASE in stressful university settings.

Empirical Findings on Associations and Predictors

Across the 31 studies, positive associations between EI and ASE are prevalent. A meta-analysis aggregating data from 42,529 participants reported an overall corrected correlation (ρ) of .20 between EI and academic performance, with ability-based EI showing a stronger ρ =

.24 and incremental validity of 1.7–2.3% beyond intelligence and personality (MacCann et al., 2020).

Several studies confirm EI's predictive role on ASE. For example, in a sample of 404 Chinese students in online courses, EI had a direct effect on self-efficacy (path coefficient = 0.33, $p < 0.05$) and an indirect effect on achievement (0.19) through sequential mediation of motivation and self-efficacy (Chang & Tsai, 2022).

Mediation analyses further elucidate mechanisms. Academic engagement mediated 59% of the ASE-performance relationship (direct $\beta = 0.69$, $p < 0.001$; indirect = 0.41) in 258 Chinese students (Meng & Zhang, 2023). In 518 Chinese university students, positive psychological characteristics like self-efficacy mediated EI's impact on achievement and well-being, with indirect effects ranging from 0.18 to 0.20, stronger in postgraduates (Shengyao et al., 2024). Full mediation by self-efficacy was observed in EI's contribution to academic engagement among 395 Thai undergraduates (Villegas-Puyod et al., 2021).

Correlation studies reinforce these findings. In Pakistan, EI and achievement showed $r = 0.49$ ($p < 0.001$) among 400 students (Ahmad et al., 2019), while in Malaysia, EI and self-efficacy correlated at $r = 0.25$ ($p < 0.001$) (Aziz et al., 2020). Regression models in Nepal indicated self- regulation ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$) as the strongest EI predictor of performance, explaining 58% variance (Tiwari, 2025).

Demographic and Contextual Variations

Demographic findings are inconsistent. Gender differences appear in some studies, with females reporting higher self- efficacy ($p = 0.011$) in Malaysia (Ibrahim & Wah, 2020), but no differences in EI or achievement in Pakistan (Ahmad et al., 2019) or Kuwait (Halimi et al., 2021).

Discipline-specific patterns emerge in nursing, where high EI correlated with better performance (Joshi et al., 2025; Salih et al., 2024). Year of study effects vary, with postgraduates showing stronger EI impacts (Shengyao et al., 2024).

Geographically, 22 studies are from Asia (e.g., Malaysia, Pakistan, China), 5 from Middle East, and 4 from other regions. One Indian study found no significant EI- performance correlations ($r = 0.047$ to -0.074, $p > 0.05$) (Juyal et al., 2023), contrasting with broader positive trends.

Gaps and Controversies

The literature reveals several gaps. Geographically, there's limited representation of large public universities in India and other developing regions, with overrepresentation of Asian private or single-institution samples.

Methodologically, 28 studies use cross-sectional designs, hindering causal inferences (Britwum, 2023; Salleh et al., 2024). Self-report measures dominate, raising bias concerns.

Demographic moderators are inconsistently explored, with mixed gender and program effects. Mediating mechanisms are underexplored beyond basic models. Controversies include null findings in some contexts (Juyal et al., 2023), questioning EI's universal applicability.

Discussion

Synthesis of Findings

The synthesis confirms EI's role in enhancing ASE, consistent with theoretical models where emotional regulation builds confidence. Meta-analytic evidence (ρ =.20) and mediation studies (e.g., 59% via engagement) highlight practical pathways, with EI adding incremental value (1.7–2.3%).

Implications for Practice/Policy

Universities should integrate EI training into curricula to boost ASE and performance. Ability-based programs could yield measurable gains, supporting student well-being and retention.

Future Research Directions

Longitudinal designs are needed to track development. Expand to underrepresented regions like Indian public universities. Investigate advanced mediators/moderators and resolve inconsistencies in null findings.

Limitations of the Review

English-language bias; Possible positive publication bias; Dependence on self-reports in sources.

Conclusion

This review demonstrates that emotional intelligence significantly enhances academic self-efficacy, with robust evidence from correlations (r up to 0.49) and meta-analyses (ρ = .20). Yet, methodological and geographic gaps limit comprehensive understanding. Addressing these through diverse, rigorous research will advance theory and practice in higher education, fostering resilient students globally.

Appendix A: Search Protocol

Searches used keywords like "emotional intelligence" AND "academic self-efficacy" AND "university students." Inclusion: Empirical, English, 2015–2025, university level. Exclusion: Non-empirical, non-university, non-academic. Databases: Google Scholar, PubMed, Semantic Scholar, ResearchGate

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