

Harnessing Emotional Intelligence in Understanding How Malaysian College Students Manage Stress, Enhance Focus, and Improve Study Habits

Aminath Nahudha Mauroof¹, Zaida Binti Mustafa², Akeem Olowolayemo³

*aminath.nahudha@ur.unirazak.edu.my*¹, *zaida@unirazak.edu.my*², *akeem@iium.edu.my*³

Universiti Tun Abdul Razak^{1,2}, *International Islamic University*³

ABSTRACT

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is increasingly recognized as an important skill influencing students' academic performance and well-being. However, there remains limited understanding of how students consciously utilize EI to manage stress, maintain focus, and build effective study habits. Therefore, this study explores Malaysian college students' perspectives on how EI assists students in coping with academic stress, enhancing focus, sustaining study habits, and balancing emotional well-being with academic demands. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed to understand the lived experiences of 15 college students selected through convenience sampling. Data were collected using semi-structured interview and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. Findings revealed that students with strong EI demonstrated greater resilience to academic stress, more adaptive and disciplined study habits, and higher levels of sustained focus. The analysis revealed themes such as perception of EI in managing stress, influence of EI on concentration, relationship between emotional response and academic productivity, strategies to balance emotional well-being with academic responsibilities. The findings suggest that EI significantly shapes students' ability to navigate academic stress and maintain productive study behaviours. Enhancing EI among students can contribute to healthier academic lifestyles and improved academic performance. These insights hold practical implications for educators, counsellors, and policymakers to integrate EI training into academic support services, thereby promoting student resilience, academic success, and overall well-being in higher education environments.

Keywords: Academic stress, College students, Focus, Emotional Intelligence, Study habits

INTRODUCTION

In today's competitive and fast-paced academic landscape, college students are increasingly confronted with overwhelming levels of stress and emotional pressure. From managing academic tasks to balancing social life and preparing for their future, students face numerous challenges that affect both emotional well-being and academic performance. When students are unable to manage stress effectively, motivation decreases,

and cognitive functions such as concentration, memory, and decision-making are disrupted. These emotional burdens accumulate, negatively affecting students' ability to develop and sustain effective study habits that are essential for academic success. Emotional Intelligence (EI) has emerged as a critical construct in this context, enabling students to navigate emotional complexity, sustain concentration, and develop study habits conducive to learning and performance. Understanding

how students harness EI is not only relevant in educational settings but also significant within broader psychological frameworks emphasizing emotional regulation, cognitive control, and personal development.

Existing empirical studies suggest that students with higher EI tend to experience lower levels of academic stress, as EI enhances self-confidence, happiness, and sociability, enabling more effective coping with academic demands (Stevens, 2020). EI-based interventions have also been shown to reduce academic stress significantly (Ibrahim et al., 2024). Moreover, EI moderates the effects of stress on depression, particularly during challenging periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Cheema, 2022; Robbins et al., 2024). Prior studies further indicate that EI enhances students' ability to regulate emotional responses, thereby improving concentration and cognitive functioning (Caesarania et al., 2024; Khorasani et al., 2023). Additionally, EI positively influences study habits by fostering motivation (Tang & He, 2023), effective coping strategies (Iqbal et al., 2021), and strong social support systems (Shuo et al., 2022).

While the importance of EI is widely acknowledged, research in the Malaysian context remains limited in scope and depth. Existing studies highlight the need for institutional programs and classroom interventions to raise emotional awareness and equip students with coping skills (Abdul Patah & Harun, 2024; Yee Von et al., 2022). Yet, many students continue to struggle with recognizing and managing their emotions effectively, particularly in post-pandemic academic environments. Much of the existing research is quantitative, relying on surveys often limited to single institutions or specific programs, which restricts generalizability (Sook Khuan & Chai Lin, 2021). Furthermore, inconsistencies in reported findings on the relationship between EI and academic performance emphasize the need for further investigation, particularly involving larger

and more diverse samples from both public and private universities (Dasor et al., 2023; Yee Von et al., 2022).

Filling these research gaps is vital as higher education institutions struggle with rising rates of student anxiety, burnout, and detachment. A deeper understanding of how EI operates in students' daily academic lives can inform targeted interventions, improve support services, and influence pedagogical practices. This study contributes by exploring students' lived experiences of using EI to regulate stress, sustain concentration, and optimize study habits. The findings provide insights that can enrich theoretical perspectives, strengthen institutional support programs, and guide education policy.

The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do college students perceive the role of emotional intelligence in managing academic stress?
2. In what ways does emotional intelligence influence students' ability to maintain concentration?
3. How do students describe the relationship between their emotional responses and their academic productivity?
4. What strategies do emotionally intelligent students use to balance emotional well-being with academic responsibilities?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Emotional Intelligence (EI)

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is widely recognized as a critical factor in both personal and academic success. Salovey and Mayer (1990) originally defined EI as the ability to monitor one's own and others' emotions, discriminate among them, and use this information to guide thinking and action. Later scholars expanded this definition, describing EI as a learned ability

to think constructively and act wisely (Nelson & Low, 2011), or as an array of non-cognitive skills and competencies that influence one's capacity to cope with environmental demands and pressures (AL-Qadri & Zhao, 2021; Qualter et al., 2007).

The conceptual foundation of EI draws on early theories that recognized the importance of non-cognitive aspects of intelligence. David Wechsler (1943) emphasized “non-intellective” elements such as social and emotional functioning, while Robert Thorndike (1930s) introduced the idea of “social intelligence” (Cherniss et al., 2006a). Howard Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences, particularly intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences, laid additional groundwork (Cherniss et al., 2006b; Petrides et al., 2016). Daniel Goleman popularized EI in the mid-1990s, later extending it to leadership and organizational contexts alongside Richard Boyatzis (Cherniss et al., 2006b; Goleman & Boyatzis, 2017). Reuven Bar-On contributed significantly with his EI model, framing EI as a set of emotional and social competencies essential for success in life (AL-Qadri & Zhao, 2021). Nelson and Low (2011) further emphasized EI's role in academic and career development, describing it as one of the most influential variables in personal achievement.

Several models have attempted to conceptualize EI. Salovey and Mayer's four-branch model identifies perceiving, using, understanding, and managing emotions as core abilities (Salovey & Grewal, 2005). Nelson and Low (2011) categorize EI into interpersonal, intrapersonal, leadership, and self-management competencies, including skills such as stress regulation, empathy, and time management. Goleman and Boyatzis (2017) highlight twelve competencies grouped under self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Similarly, Bar-On's model (2006) outlines intrapersonal skills, interpersonal skills, stress management, adaptability, and general mood as critical

dimensions.

Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates EI's impact on academic outcomes. Students with higher EI tend to perform better academically, remain motivated, and manage negative emotions such as anxiety and frustration more effectively (AL-Qadri & Zhao, 2021). Beyond academics, EI contributes to overall well-being by fostering emotional regulation, resilience, and positive relationships (Nelson & Low, 2011).

Academic Stress among College Students

Academic stress is defined as a psychological condition in which students perceive academic demands as exceeding their available coping resources. It reflects how students interpret present academic challenges, such as examinations, workloads, and expectations relative to their personal resources (Nakalema & Ssenyonga, 2014). Research highlights several contributors to academic stress. One of the most significant is academic workload and performance pressure. Demands such as coursework, assessments, and internships have been found to create psychological distress by increasing academic expectations (Dada et al., 2019; A. Liu et al., 2024). Students often experience increased pressure to maintain high performance, which intensifies stress levels.

Financial burdens also contribute to stress, particularly among international students who face tuition fees and living expenses alongside academic responsibilities. These financial challenges may lead to anxiety about sustaining studies while meeting daily living costs, especially for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Sasikumar, 2023). In addition, social isolation and lack of support can increase feelings of loneliness and depression, particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Hamza et al., 2021).

Expectations from family and society can also amplify stress, pushing students toward perfectionism. Such expectations often lead to chronic anxiety as students fear failure and

its consequences (A. Liu et al., 2024). Social support, however, can serve as a protective factor. Positive peer and family interactions provide emotional reassurance and buffer the effects of stress, underscoring the importance of supportive academic and social environments.

Importance of Focus and Concentration

Focus, often equated with sustained selective attention, refers to the ability to direct and maintain attention on relevant academic tasks while filtering out distractions. This cognitive process is crucial for managing workload and maximizing learning outcomes (Hobbiss & Lavie, 2023). Research demonstrates that impaired concentration disrupts cognitive functioning and exacerbates stress, ultimately harming academic achievement (He et al., 2022). Conversely, strong focus enhances study habits, organization, and academic outcomes (Avisar & Shalev, 2011).

Focus also contributes to emotional regulation. Students who maintain attention during challenging tasks tend to demonstrate greater resilience and reduced negative emotional responses (Huang et al., 2025). Cognitive flexibility, an ability intertwined with focus, allows students to shift between tasks efficiently, a skill vital in complex academic environments (He et al., 2022). Studies also show that EI interacts with focus. Students with higher EI regulate emotions more effectively, sustaining concentration and reducing susceptibility to distractions (Wen et al., 2020). On the other hand, negative emotional responses, such as frustration from academic feedback, can hinder focus and reduce study effectiveness (Hill et al., 2021).

Nonetheless, focus can be undermined by emotional overload, stemming from academic pressure, social expectations, and digital distractions. Excessive use of social media, for example, has been shown to reduce focus and impair academic success (Masood et al., 2022). Similarly, technostress from constant digital

engagement decreases concentration and academic outcomes through emotional overload (Yu et al., 2019).

Study Habits and Academic Behaviours

Study habits refer to consistent, strategic practices that students use to improve academic performance. These strategies vary by individual personality and external factors, but common effective practices include time management, motivation, note-taking, self-testing, collaborative learning, and environmental control. Time management is one of the most effective habits, enabling students to allocate sufficient time across subjects and meet deadlines. Structured study schedules enhance learning and retention (Jafari et al., 2019; Prasetyo et al., 2019).

Note-taking techniques also play a critical role by helping students synthesize and organize information. Active engagement through effective note-taking improves retention and recall during examinations (Mukherjee & Pal, 2024; Uslu & Körükcü, 2021). Collaborative learning is another key habit, allowing students to clarify doubts, exchange perspectives, and learn through peer interaction. Group study fosters motivation and a shared sense of responsibility (Kinoti & Mwita, 2021).

Finally, environmental management such as creating a quiet, well-lit, and distraction-free study space significantly impacts focus and academic performance (Fergina et al., 2022). Overall, effective study habits combine cognitive, behavioural, and environmental strategies that enhance students' ability to meet academic demands successfully.

Review of Relevant Theories

Bar-On's Emotional-Social Intelligence Model (2006) conceptualizes EI as a multidimensional construct comprising five key components: intrapersonal skills, interpersonal skills, stress management, adaptability, and general mood

(Bar-On, 2006). These components are highly relevant in understanding how Malaysian college students navigate academic demands. For instance, intrapersonal skills, such as emotional self-awareness and assertiveness, help students recognize their stress triggers (Richiteanu-Năstase et al., 2024) and express academic concerns constructively (Iqbal et al., 2021). Effective stress management through emotional self-regulation and impulse control enhances students' ability to handle academic pressure and emotional overload (Alwesmi et al., 2024), thereby supporting sustained focus and productive study habits.

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping developed by Lazarus & Folkman (1987) underpins this study by framing stress as a dynamic interaction between the individual and their environment. The model emphasizes two key cognitive processes: primary appraisal, where individuals assess whether an event poses harm, threat, or benefit, and secondary appraisal, where they evaluate their resources and coping options. These appraisals guide the use of coping strategies, which can be either problem-focused (aimed at addressing the stressor) or emotion-focused (managing the emotional response). The model also recognizes that emotional states, including positive emotions, can play a critical role in restoring coping resources (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). In the academic context, this theory helps explain how students assess academic stressors and utilize EI to regulate their responses and maintain performance under pressure. This recursive process supports adaptive functioning over time.

Theoretical Framework

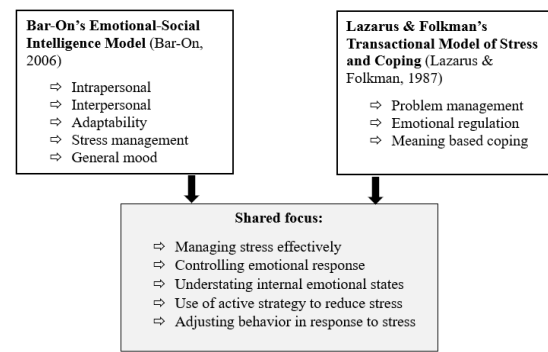


Figure 1: Research theoretical framework

2.6 Conceptual Framework

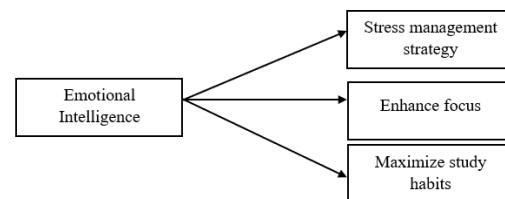


Figure 2: Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework illustrates how Emotional Intelligence (independent variable) influences students' ability to manage stress, enhance focus, and maximize study habits (dependent variables) to improve academic performance and well-being.

METHODOLOGY

Research methodology and approach

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in phenomenology, aiming to explore the lived experiences of Malaysian college students in harnessing EI to manage stress, enhance focus, and optimize study habits. A qualitative approach was chosen because it captures rich, detailed narratives that reveal participants' perceptions, feelings, and coping strategies, which quantitative methods may overlook (Creswell et al., 2007). Phenomenology focuses on understanding how individuals make sense of their experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019), making it particularly suitable for investigating how students consciously apply EI in their academic lives. This design allowed for an in-

depth exploration of students' inner thoughts and emotions regarding stress, concentration, and study practices, providing holistic insights. Importantly, the phenomenological method ensured that participants' voices were central, offering authentic perspectives on how EI functions as a protective shield in their academic journey.

Sampling and participants

This study used convenience sampling to select participants, allowing easy access to students who were willing and available to share their experiences. A total of 15 students from diverse fields such as education, behavioural finance, computer science, business, and psychology were selected from different universities to ensure variety in perspectives and academic backgrounds. Convenience sampling was appropriate for this qualitative phenomenological study as it facilitated access to participants who could provide rich, in-depth insights into the role of EI in managing academic stress, maintaining focus, and developing effective study habits. Recruiting students from various disciplines enabled a broader understanding of how EI operates across different educational contexts in Malaysia. While convenience sampling may limit generalizability, it served the purpose of this exploratory research by prioritizing depth over breadth and capturing the unique lived experiences of students in Malaysian higher education.

Data collection method

For this study, data were collected using a semi-structured interview method, which allowed for in-depth exploration (Kakilla, 2021) of the lived experiences of college students in Malaysia. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provide the flexibility to explore individual perspectives while maintaining a consistent structure across participants. Each interview was guided by a set of pre-determined questions aligned with the study's research questions.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data collected through semi-structured interviews. Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-step approach was followed to identify patterns and themes from interview transcripts. The table below explains how each step was applied in this study.

Steps	Description
1. Familiarising with the data	Reading and re-reading transcripts to understand the content and take initial notes.
2. Generating initial codes	Systematically labelling meaningful features of the data.
3. Searching for themes	Grouping similar codes to form broader themes.
4. Reviewing themes	Checking if themes make sense in relation to the data.
5. Defining and naming themes	Giving clear names and explanations for each theme.
6. Producing the report	Writing up the findings with supporting quotes.

Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability were ensured through several measures. Credibility was enhanced via member checking, allowing participants to review and confirm the accuracy of their responses. A transparent audit trail, including interview guides, transcription procedures, and coding steps, supported reliability. Thematic analysis was systematically conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. To minimize researcher bias and enhance dependability, a second researcher reviewed the coding and theme development. These steps ensured that the findings accurately represent the lived experiences of Malaysian college students in using EI to manage stress, maintain focus, and enhance study habits.

FINDINGS

Demographic information

Table 1 Demographic information of participants

Student	Gender	Age range	Year of College	Field of study	Living arrangement	Employment	Previous exposure to EI training
1	Male	18-25	4th Year	Computer Science	In dorm	Unemployed	no
2	Female	36-45	2nd Year	Education	Alone	Unemployed	no

3	Female	36-45	2nd Year	Education	With family	Working part-time	no
4	Female	25-35	4th Year	Sport Science	With family	Full time	no
5	Female	46-55	3rd Year	Behavioural Finance	With family	Self employed	no
6	Male	25-35	1st Year	Aviation	Alone	Full time	no
7	Female	25-35	2nd Year	Science	Alone	Unemployed	no
8	Female	25-35	2nd Year	Biology	In dorm	Full time	no
9	Female	25-35	1st Year	Business	With family	Full time	no
10	Female	18-25	4th Year	Computer Science	In dorm	Working part-time	no
11	Female	18-25	3rd Year	Computer Science	Alone	Unemployed	no
12	Female	36-45	2nd Year	Psychology	Alone	Unemployed	yes
13	Male	18-25	4th Year	Computer Engineering	Alone	Full time internship (5.5 months)	no
14	Male	18-25	2nd Year	Computer Science Specialisation in Data Analyst	Alone	Unemployed	no
15	Male	46-55	3rd Year	Education	Alone	Full time	no

Research Question -1 How do college students perceive the role of emotional intelligence in managing academic stress?

Theme 1 - Academic Overload as a Major Stressor

Most participants described being overwhelmed by the volume of academic tasks such as assignments, presentations, thesis work, and examinations.

“Too many assignments, presentations, and exams...” - [student 1]

“...Doing all the assignments along with presentations...” – [student 9]

“...A lot of assignments due the same week...”

– [student 10]

Another student reflected,

“During my first semester, I felt particularly overwhelmed when I had to submit the complete research proposal. I wasn’t sure about my research topic and was struggling to manage my time. The pressure to perform well led to anxiety and sleepless nights.” – [student 2]

For students who worked part-time, the clash of academic and professional responsibilities was stressful. One student expressed,

“When both work and assignment deadlines were clashing, I felt completely exhausted and unable to give my best to either.” - - [student 3]

Thesis and research work were significant stress contributors,

“During the final stages of my proposal defense, I was juggling data collection planning, multiple readings, and continuous feedback from my supervisors. At one point, I felt extremely overwhelmed because I questioned whether my research was heading in the right direction and if I could meet the expectations set by my committee.” – [student 4]

Group work also emerged as a stress factor. One student noted,

“My groupmates made no effort to do an assignment even when it was close to being due. It was a 4 person assignment. One had no clue what was to be done. Another had only worked on the introduction. The last one promised to deliver but then only added 2 points into the document. I had to pull through and finish it all on my own...” – [student 11]

Theme 2 - Emotional Awareness and Self-Regulation in Coping with Stress

Students expressed that being emotionally aware enabled them to control reactions and manage stress more effectively.

“Try to calm myself down and try to do small things that I can do first” – [student 1]

Another described,

“I divided each chapter into manageable parts and prioritized the most pressing deadlines to develop a clear strategy. I also made sure to chat to my mother about how I was feeling, take little breaks that included naps, and do more prayers. I felt more rooted and less alone as a result. Those techniques helped me restore control and go through the week with a clearer head, even though it was still a difficult period...” – [student 2]

Some students admitted struggling with managing their emotions. One said,

“Emotionally, I cried a lot. Mentally, I tried to compartmentalize and prioritize what was urgent,” – [student 3]

while another admitted, “Not well. I cried for quite some time every whenever I take breathers in between my work” – [student 11]

Research Question 2 - In what ways does emotional intelligence influence students' ability to maintain concentration?

Theme 1 - Emotional Disturbance as a Barrier to Focus

Participants revealed that negative emotions such as anxiety, frustration, and sadness significantly impaired their focus. One participant reflected,

“When I am stressed out or exhausted, I can't do anything, so I just go to sleep and after that I will be much better” – [student 1]

“There was a period when I received multiple rejections from journal submissions, which really affected my confidence. I found myself rereading the same paragraph for hours without progress. Emotionally, I felt frustrated and mentally exhausted.” – [student 4]

Another shared,

I was stressed out during a tight deadline and it made me panic more to the point where I could not do any work till, I shut myself off under my bed sheets for few hrs” – [student 14]

Personal and family-related worries further hampered attention,

“There were tough times managing things with my son as he is staying away that left me feeling emotionally drained and distracted. I found it really difficult to concentrate on my assignments” – [student 2]

“If there are family issues or situations affect my ability to concentrate on work” – [student 6]

Theme 2 - Emotional Regulation Enhancing Concentration

On the other hand, students who employed emotional regulation techniques demonstrated improved focus. One explained,

“... I often take a step back and check in with myself through journaling or mindfulness meditation. Sometimes, I switch to a different academic task like organizing references or reviewing literature which feels more manageable and helps me regain emotional control. Exercise, especially walking, also helps reset my mindset. [student 4]

Another said,

“I remove all distractions, like putting my phone away, and set a timer for focused work sessions with short breaks in between” – [student 15]

Research Question 3 - How do students describe the relationship between their emotional responses and their academic productivity?

Theme 1: Positive Emotions Boosting Productivity

Several students described that positive emotions like confidence, curiosity, or satisfaction improved their productivity.

“There is a strong connection between my

mood and my ability to study effectively. When I am in a positive and relaxed, I am more focused, absorb information more easily, and stay motivated for longer periods.” – [student 2]

“When I am in a positive or calm emotional state, I find it much easier to concentrate, process complex readings, and stay organized.” – [student 5]

“My mood has a direct impact, when I feel calm and positive, I can focus better and work faster.” – [student 5]

“I focus way more and able to understand easily when I am feeling better” – [student 10]

Another noted,

“I work decently well under a bit of stress, but to a limit.” – [student 13]

Theme 2 - Negative Emotions Reducing Productivity

Negative emotions were associated with procrastination, carelessness, and detachment from studying. A participant said,

“... Negative emotions may slow down my work due to lack of attention span and me keep overthinking things.” – [student 1]

“On the other hand, when I am feeling anxious, frustrated, or overwhelmed, it becomes much harder to concentrate or retain what I am learning. My mind tends to race or focus on worst-case scenarios, which can make even simple tasks feel overwhelming. Frustration, especially when I am struggling to understand something, can lead to procrastination or second-guessing my abilities.” – [student 2]

“But when I am anxious or emotionally overwhelmed, my productivity drops. I either procrastinate or spend too long on simple tasks.” – [student 4]. Student further explained “negative emotions significantly disrupt my work. Anxiety makes it hard to focus, and I tend to second-guess my writing. Frustration usually kicks in when I feel stuck or unclear about what is expected, and

that leads to avoidance. It creates a cycle where the longer I avoid it, the more stressed I become”

“negative emotions slow me down, make me overthink, and sometimes lead me to avoid tasks altogether” – [student 5]

“Negatively. Poorly. I would not even start it when I am feeling bad” – [student 11]

“When I feel anxious, I tend to overthink everything and end up delaying things. It makes simple tasks seem impossible.” – [student 14]

Another explained,

“There a strong link, when I am in a low mood, I often find myself distracted or unmotivated, making study sessions less efficient and longer” – [student 15]. The same student mentioned “Anxiety makes it difficult to start tasks, leading to procrastination, while frustration causes me to lose focus and make more errors.”

The student also remarked on long-term effects,

“I have noticed that sustained frustration with a particular research problem can snowball into general academic apathy if not addressed promptly” – [student 15]

Research Question 4: What strategies do emotionally intelligent students use to balance emotional well-being with academic responsibilities?

Theme 1 -Use of Emotional and Spiritual Coping Mechanisms

Many students used spiritual and emotional strategies. One shared,

“Zikrullah, breathing, take some breaks and then continue do the work” – [student 1]

Another noted,

“When I'm feeling overwhelmed, one of the most helpful things I do is make lots of dua.... Talking to my mother, praying, and reciting the Quran all help me process my feelings and keep

things in perspective” – [student 2]

“Exercise and praying” – [student 12]

“... prayers before returning with a fresh perspective” – [student 15]

Journaling and mindfulness practices were also reported:

“I have adopted several strategies over time. Mindfulness meditation and reflective journaling help me process my thoughts and emotions. Journaling helps me process overwhelming thoughts and convert them into actions.” - [student 4]

“Sometimes journal to clear my mind when emotions pile up.” – [student 5]

“Mindfulness and journaling help a lot” – [student 10]

Student 12 also has mentioned journaling as a technique to manage emotions.

Theme 2 - Behavioural Strategies and Social Support

Time management techniques like scheduling, to-do lists, and the self-regulated breaks were popular among students.

“One of my favourites is time-blocking, where I schedule focused study periods followed by short breaks. This helps me stay productive while preventing burnout.” – [student 2]

“I also use time-blocking in my calendar manage workload, reduce last minute stress, ensure that breaks, meals, and even moments of reflection are planned and respected” – [student 4]

“... I use time-blocking to stay organized...” – [student 5]

Social support was also emphasized by majority of the students:

“They do help a lot because I can release my stress when I am with them laughing and smiling” – [student 1]

“Social support from friends, family, and

mentors is incredibly important in helping me maintain emotional balance. Having people, I can talk to openly about my struggles or achievements makes a huge difference in how I cope with stress and stay motivated. Friends and family provide emotional comfort and encouragement, which helps reduce feelings of isolation during tough academic times. Mentors offer guidance, perspective, and practical advice that not only help me navigate challenges but also inspire me to keep pushing forward. Knowing I am not alone and that there are people who believe in me gives me strength and reassurance. This network of support is a vital part of maintaining my mental well-being and staying resilient in the face of academic pressure.” – [student 2]

“It’s crucial. Having someone to talk to when I feel stuck or overwhelmed can make a huge difference. My friends provide emotional release, while my supervisor and mentors offer guidance that reduces uncertainty. Just knowing that support is available creates a sense of emotional safety, which helps me focus better” – [student 4]

“It’s very important just having someone to talk to when I feel low helps me stay grounded and motivated.” [student 5]

“Very important. I would say I am sane because of the unwavering support of my parents.” – [student 11]

“It’s moderately important, while I live alone, occasional check-ins with friends or family help prevent feeling of isolation.” – [student 15]

Physical self-care routines such as short walks, exercise, and sleep were cited as useful:

“I make sure to include physical activity like walking or stretching between study sessions to help reset my mindset” – [student 4]

“I use deep breathing, positive self-talk, and short walks to reset my mind.” – [student 5]

“Power naps. Talking to someone close or taking a walk or break.” – [student 7]

“Taking 10 mins walk after an hour of staring at the laptop screen” – [student 10]

“Walk back and forth in my room and take naps sometimes when it’s too much” [student 14]

“I try to step away from my desk and do something physically active like a quick walk or going to the gym or listen to the music to reset my mind.” – [student 15]

Theme 3 - Reflection and Positive Mindset towards Setbacks

Regarding responses to academic failures, most students emphasized reflection and learning from mistakes.

“Maybe stressed but need to calm down myself,” – [student 1]

while another detailed, “But I try to calm down myself by concentrating on what I can get from the circumstance. For example, if I receive a lower-than-expected mark, I would thoroughly study the criticism to see where I went wrong and how I may improve” – [student 2]

Many students demonstrated growth mindsets, as reflected in “I have learned to take feedback objectively rather than personally” – [student 4]

and “I reflect on what went wrong, talk to my lecturer if needed, and plan better for next time.” – [student 5]

Others shared emotional responses before regaining composure, such as “I cry, then figure out what I can do differently,” – [student 3]

or described perseverance despite frustration: “Poor grades are a huge punch in the gut. Takes me a while to recover mentally.” – [student 13]

Some resorted to intense efforts, saying,

“... set a plan and push myself to complete the tasks” – [student 7]

“work hard to improve for the upcoming exams.” – [student 9]

“I pull all-nighters” – [student 14]

Table 2 Summarization of themes emerged for each Research Question

RQ	Categories	Themes
1	Perception of EI in managing stress	⇒ Academic overload as a major stressor ⇒ Emotional awareness and self-regulation in coping with stress
2	Influence of EI on concentration	⇒ Emotional disturbance as a barrier to focus ⇒ Emotional regulation enhancing concentration
3	Relationship between emotional response and academic productivity	⇒ Positive emotions boosting productivity ⇒ Negative emotions reducing productivity
4	Strategies to balance emotional well-being with academic responsibilities	⇒ Use of emotional and spiritual coping mechanism ⇒ Behavioral strategies and social support ⇒ Reflection and positive mindset towards set back

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the important role of EI in how Malaysian college students navigate academic stress, sustain focus, and develop productive study habits. Using Bar-On’s Emotional-Social Intelligence Model (2006) and Lazarus and Folkman’s Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (1987) as guiding frameworks, the responses reveal how students perceive, utilize, and benefit from emotional competencies in the context of their academic demands and emotional well-being.

Perception of EI in managing stress

Students widely perceived EI as a personal asset in managing academic stress, which was most frequently triggered by workload, time constraints, and the need to balance multiple responsibilities. Postgraduate students in particular shared feelings of being overwhelmed by thesis writing, research work, and proposal defense as sources of academic stress. This supports prior literature reporting that graduate students commonly experience high level of anxiety and depression as a result of academic demands (Gin et al., 2021; Prakash et al., 2024). Similarly, students who worked part-time expressed difficulty in juggling professional and academic responsibilities, often leading to emotional exhaustion. Karaman et al. (2019) identified a comparable trend, finding that students who combine employment with studies are more vulnerable to stress due to the competing nature of

their responsibilities, which in turn compromises academic performance and emotional health.

The results also resonate with Bar-On's (2006) EI components, particularly stress tolerance (stress management) and emotional self-awareness (intrapersonal domain). Students who acknowledged their emotional limits were more likely to employ adaptive strategies such as deep breathing, prioritizing urgent tasks, or confiding in family members and friends. These coping behaviours align with Lazarus and Folkman's (1987) view of stress management as a transactional process, where individuals engage in emotion-focused or problem-focused coping based on their cognitive appraisal of a stressor. Interestingly, although some students admitted to crying or feeling emotionally overwhelmed, they were still able to identify their stress, indicating an awareness of their emotional state even if regulation was difficult. In contrast, students who managed their stress effectively exhibited behaviours such as task prioritization, time management, and seeking social support demonstrating higher EI and resilience in challenging situations.

Influence of EI on focus and concentration

Emotional regulation also emerged as a key facilitator of concentration and academic focus. Students reported that emotional dysregulation, particularly in the form of anxiety, frustration, or sadness, led to difficulties such as rereading the same content, halting tasks midway, or even withdrawing completely. These outcomes are consistent with Bar-On's stress management and impulse control domains, which emphasize the need for emotional stability to maintain attention and task persistence. Furthermore, several students cited personal or family-related concerns, such as loneliness or family responsibilities, as factors that negatively impacted their cognitive focus. However, these distractions were not necessarily tied to whether a student lived with family or alone, suggesting that emotional regulation rather than living circumstances was the key differentiator.

On the other hand, students who engaged in activities like journaling, mindfulness meditation, removing distractions, and taking restorative breaks were better able to sustain attention on their studies. These are examples of emotion-focused coping and reflect higher EI competencies, enabling students to regain clarity and reduce emotional interference in cognitive tasks. Rahmani et al. (2022) affirm that students with strong emotional regulation skills are better equipped to handle academic stressors, maintaining focus and academic performance more consistently than their peers.

Relationship between emotional response and academic productivity

A consistent theme across interviews was the link between emotional states and academic productivity. Students reported that positive emotions such as calmness, motivation, and curiosity directly improved their productivity by enhancing focus and cognitive flexibility. These findings align with Lv & Yang (2023), who emphasize that a positive emotional climate contributes to greater retention, understanding, and academic output. Similarly, Trigueros et al. (2019) found that positive emotions strengthen intrinsic motivation, leading to better academic participation and sustained effort over time.

Conversely, negative emotional states were found to reduce academic productivity. Students described becoming preoccupied with overthinking, procrastination, and self-doubt when experiencing anxiety or frustration. These emotional barriers led to diminished attention spans and lower academic performance. It is found that negative academic emotions impair self-efficacy and increase procrastinatory tendencies (Chen et al., 2024). Jung (2022) further supports the moderating role of emotional regulation, asserting that students with higher EI can better control these negative emotions, thereby protecting their academic performance.

Strategies to balance emotional well-being with academic responsibilities

To maintain emotional equilibrium alongside academic demands, students implemented various intentional strategies. Many adopted journaling and reflection to process thoughts, while spiritual coping methods, such as prayer and reciting the Quran, offered comfort and perspective during emotionally challenging periods. These practices are supported by Rani & Ghazi (2023), who found that personal and spiritual rituals can reduce depressive symptoms and foster emotional resilience. Likewise, Musa (2015) argues for the incorporation of spiritual well-being components in university programs to enhance students' emotional management capabilities.

In addition to spiritual and emotional strategies, time-blocking emerged as a practical method for organizing academic workloads. Students scheduled focused study sessions with planned breaks which is a self-regulated approach that helped maintain productivity. While students in this study cited self-directed breaks, Smits et al. (2025) suggest that structured breaks systems such as the Pomodoro technique or Flowtime are more effective in sustaining motivation compare to self-regulated breaks. Nonetheless, time management tools, including time-blocking, are associated with reduced psychological burden and greater task efficiency (Espina & Monte, 2022; X. Liu et al., 2019).

Students also reported using physical self-care techniques like walking, deep breathing, positive self-talk, and short naps as behavioural strategies to reduce emotional exhaustion. The literature consistently supports these practices, physical activity has been shown to improve mood, reduce depressive symptoms, and enhance self-esteem (Kirschner et al., 2022; Lin et al., 2022). Napping has been associated with improved emotional stability and overall well-being (Lin et al., 2022), reinforcing the idea that physical rest and movement are crucial components of emotional

balance.

Social support was another prominent theme. Students consistently emphasized the emotional strength and reassurance they gained from friends, family, and mentors. While family provided emotional grounding, mentors offered practical academic guidance. Abbas et al. (2023) confirmed that perceived social support positively influences psychological well-being. However, individual preferences varied hence some students preferred occasional check-ins rather than frequent interaction. Halimah & Suralaga (2021) found that peer support significantly impacts happiness, while family support may not always yield the same effect, indicating the importance of personalized support mechanisms.

The most emotionally intelligent students employed a balanced combination of emotion-focused and problem-focused coping, aligning with the principles of Lazarus and Folkman's model. Practices such as reflective journaling, adopting a growth mindset, and using self-discipline to recover from academic setbacks demonstrated how EI supports both emotional processing and behavioural adaptation. These adaptive strategies are not only effective but also teachable and scalable suggesting that structured EI development programs could significantly enhance students' academic performance and emotional resilience in higher education settings.

Implications and recommendation for future research

Based on this study's findings, it is evident that EI plays a pivotal role in helping Malaysian college students manage stress, maintain focus, and adopt effective study habits. Therefore, universities are encouraged to embed structured EI trainings such as mindfulness sessions, reflective exercises, and workshops into student development programs to enhance emotional regulation and motivation. Institutions should also integrate emotional well-being assessments into academic counselling to

identify students at risk of burnout. For future research, expanding the scope to include diverse student groups can deepen understanding of EI's role across different contexts. Longitudinal and mixed-method studies are recommended to track the development of EI over time. Additionally, exploring mediating factors like self-efficacy, social support, and cultural identity may provide richer insight into how EI influences academic outcomes. Finally, with digital learning on the rise, investigating how EI helps students manage technostress and digital distractions could inform strategies for sustaining emotional resilience in tech-driven environments.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that EI plays an important role in helping Malaysian college students handle their academic challenges. Students with strong EI are better at managing stress, staying focused, and building good study habits. Using Bar-On's Emotional-Social Intelligence Model and Lazarus & Folkman's Stress and Coping Theory, the research found that emotionally intelligent students are more resilient when facing pressure from heavy workloads and responsibilities. Being aware of their emotions and knowing how to manage them helped students stay calm, concentrate better, and avoid procrastination. Positive emotions were linked to better performance, while negative emotions made it harder to focus. The students used different coping strategies like journaling, prayer, time management, self-care, and support from friends and family to stay emotionally balanced. These findings suggest that EI is not just a personal trait but a skill that can be taught. Therefore, universities should consider including EI training in student programs to support academic success and well-being.

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