

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL SELF-REGULATORY SYSTEM AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH DEPRESSION, ANXIETY, AND STRESS. (IN CASE OF FIRST YEAR STUDENTS AT NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF MONGOLIA)

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Abstract: This study investigated the relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and psychological distress in case of the students at National University of Mongolia, with particular attention to gender differences. Data were collected from 240 undergraduate students at the National University of Mongolia. Emotional intelligence was assessed using a 23-item mixed-model scale, and psychological distress was measured using the DASS-21. A quantitative correlational design was used, and data were analyzed using reliability analysis, exploratory factor analysis, and Pearson correlation analysis.

Key words: Emotional intelligence, depression, anxiety, stress

СЭТГЭЛ ХӨДЛӨЛИЙН ОЮУН УХААН НЬ СЭТГЭЛ ЗҮЙН ӨӨРИЙГӨӨ ЗОХИЦУУЛАХ ТОГТОЛЦОО БОЛЖ, СЭТГЭЛ ГУТРАЛ, ТҮГШҮҮР, СТРЕССТ НӨЛӨӨЛӨХ НЬ /МУИС-ИЙН НЭГДҮГЭЭР ДАМЖААНЫ ОЮУТНУУДЫН ЖИШЭЭН ДЭЭР/

Хураангуй: Энэхүү судалгаагаар, Монгол Улсын Их Сургуулийн оюутнуудын сэтгэл хөдлөлийн оюун ухаан (СХОУ) болон сэтгэл зүйн дарамт (стресс, түгшүүр, сэтгэл гутрал)-ын хоорондын хамаарлыг болон хүйсийн хувьд ялгаатай эсэхийг судаллаа. Судалгаанд МУИС-ийн бакалаврын түвшний 240 оюутан хамрагдсан. Сэтгэл хөдлөлийн оюун ухааныг 23 асуулттай холимог загварын асуулгаар, харин сэтгэл зүйн дарамтыг DASS-21 асуулгын тусламжтайгаар хэмжсэн. Тоон хамаарлын судалгааны загварыг ашиглаж, найдвартай байдлын шинжилгээ, хүчин зүйлийн шинжилгээ, Пирсоны корреляцийн шинжилгээг хийсэн.

Түлхүүр үгс: сэтгэл хөдлөлийн оюун ухаан, сэтгэл гутрал, түгшүүр, стресс

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INTRODUCTION

University students worldwide face increasing levels of psychological distress, including depression, anxiety, and stress. These emotional difficulties not only impair academic performance but also undermine long-term psychological well-being and adjustment. A growing body of research has sought to identify protective psychological resources that may buffer students against such distress. In transitional and rapidly urbanizing societies, these challenges may be particularly pronounced. In Mongolia, where higher education is increasingly concentrated in Ulaanbaatar, and many students migrate from sparsely populated rural regions, empirical evidence on psychological resilience factors remains limited. Understanding how internal emotional competencies relate to mental health outcomes in this context is therefore both theoretically and practically important.

Emotional intelligence (EI) has emerged as one of the most widely studied constructs in explaining adaptive functioning and psychological resilience. However, the theoretical conceptualization of EI remains contested. Ability-based models conceptualize EI as a set of cognitive capacities related to perceiving, understanding, and managing emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1993; Mayer *et al.*, 2004). In contrast, trait and mixed models incorporate personality characteristics and socio-emotional competencies, framing EI as a broader constellation of emotional and behavioral dispositions (Goleman, 2020; Petrides & Furnham, 2001; Bar-On, 2007). These conceptual differences are not merely definitional; they imply different mechanisms through which EI may influence mental health.

From an ability perspective, emotional intelligence enhances accurate emotion perception and regulation, thereby reducing maladaptive cognitive appraisals associated with anxiety and depression. From a mixed-model perspective, competencies such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and motivation may operate as internal regulatory mechanisms that strengthen coping and reduce stress reactivity. Interpersonal competencies, such as empathy and social skills, may further contribute to social integration and support, although their direct influence on internal emotional distress remains a matter of debate.

Empirical research across diverse cultural contexts generally reports negative associations between emotional intelligence and psychological distress. Higher EI is linked to lower depressive symptoms, reduced anxiety, and improved stress management. Yet the strength and consistency of these associations vary across studies, and the relative importance of intrapersonal versus interpersonal EI dimensions remains unclear. In particular, empathy, while often conceptualized as a positive socio-emotional competency, may not necessarily protect against internalizing symptoms. In some contexts, heightened empathic sensitivity could even increase emotional burden. Thus, theoretical and empirical ambiguity persists regarding which components of EI function as protective factors and under what conditions.

The Mongolian context provides a meaningful environment in which to examine these

questions. Many students relocate from rural areas to the capital city, encountering academic pressure, challenges of urban adjustment, reduced familial support, and new social demands. These transitions may elevate vulnerability to depression, anxiety, and stress. At the same time, emotional competencies may serve as internal resources that facilitate adaptation to these environmental demands. Despite these contextual dynamics, little empirical research has examined how specific EI dimensions relate to psychological distress among Mongolian university students.

Drawing on emotion regulation theory and mixed-model conceptualizations of emotional intelligence, the present study proposes that intrapersonal EI competencies, particularly self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-motivation, function as internal regulatory mechanisms that reduce vulnerability to depression, anxiety, and stress. Accordingly, we hypothesize that higher levels of emotional intelligence dimensions, especially intrapersonal competencies, will be negatively associated with psychological distress. Furthermore, given ongoing theoretical debates regarding interpersonal emotional competencies, we specifically examine whether the empathy dimension demonstrates a similar protective association. While empathy is often conceptualized as socially adaptive, its direct relationship with internal emotional distress remains theoretically uncertain and may vary across cultural contexts.

This study contributes to the literature in three important ways. First, it extends emotional intelligence research to an underexamined national and cultural context, providing empirical evidence from Mongolian university students. Second, by examining multiple EI dimensions simultaneously, it differentiates between intrapersonal and interpersonal components, thereby clarifying which emotional competencies are most strongly associated with psychological distress. Third, it contributes to ongoing theoretical discussions regarding whether emotional intelligence operates primarily as a social competency or as an internal regulatory resource that influences mental health outcomes.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the relevant theoretical and empirical literature in greater depth. The methodology section then describes the sample, instruments, and analytical procedures. The results section presents findings from reliability, factor, and correlation analyses. Finally, the discussion interprets the findings in light of existing theory, outlines implications for higher education policy and student mental health interventions, and suggests directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence has developed into a central construct in understanding emotional adaptation and psychological functioning. Although the concept gained prominence following Goleman's influential work in the mid-1990s, its theoretical foundations extend earlier to ability-based conceptualizations proposed by Mayer and Salovey (1993). These scholars defined emotional intelligence as the capacity to perceive, understand, utilize, and regulate

emotional information to guide thought and behavior. From this perspective, EI functions as a cognitive-emotional ability that influences appraisal processes and coping responses.

Subsequent models expanded this framework. Goleman's mixed model conceptualizes emotional intelligence as a broader set of emotional and social competencies, including self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills (Goleman, 2020). This model integrates emotional abilities with personality-related characteristics, making it particularly applicable in educational and organizational contexts. Similarly, Bar-On (2007) emphasized emotional and social competencies that facilitate adaptability and stress management, while Petrides and Furnham (2001) conceptualized trait emotional intelligence as a self-perceived emotional disposition embedded within personality structures.

These theoretical distinctions are important when examining mental health outcomes. If emotional intelligence operates primarily as a cognitive ability, it may reduce psychological distress through more accurate emotion appraisal and improved regulation strategies. If it reflects broader socio-emotional competencies, its protective influence may derive from stable tendencies in motivation, self-management, and interpersonal functioning. Accordingly, examining specific EI dimensions rather than relying solely on an overall score may provide clearer insight into which emotional competencies are most relevant for reducing depression, anxiety, and stress.

Depression, Anxiety, and Stress

Depression, anxiety, and stress represent distinct but interrelated forms of psychological distress. Depression is characterized by persistent sadness, diminished interest, and impaired daily functioning. Anxiety involves excessive worry, physiological arousal, and anticipatory fear. Stress reflects tension and difficulty coping with perceived environmental demands. Research using the DASS-21 consistently demonstrates that although these constructs are correlated, they represent separable emotional states with different cognitive and behavioral components (Henry & Crawford, 2005).

University students are particularly vulnerable to these conditions. The transition to higher education involves increased academic demands, financial concerns, social role changes, and uncertainty regarding future employment (Eisenberg *et al.*, 2013; Manzar *et al.*, 2025). First-year students may experience heightened distress due to abrupt changes in academic expectations and reduced parental support. Prolonged exposure to such stressors can impair academic performance and emotional well-being.

In Mongolia, these challenges may be intensified by geographic and social dynamics. Many students relocate from sparsely populated rural areas to Ulaanbaatar to pursue higher education. This rural-to-urban transition often involves separation from family networks, adaptation to dense urban environments, and adjustment to new social and academic expectations. Students may encounter difficulties in social integration and communication,

particularly when moving from smaller communities to a competitive metropolitan setting. Such contextual factors increase vulnerability to depression, anxiety, and stress, underscoring the importance of identifying internal psychological resources that facilitate adaptation.

Emotional Intelligence as a Protective Factor

A substantial body of international research indicates that emotional intelligence is negatively associated with psychological distress. Students with higher levels of emotional intelligence tend to report lower levels of depressive symptoms, reduced anxiety, and more effective stress management (Bayram & Bilgel, 2008; Ranasinghe *et al.*, 2017). These associations are often interpreted through emotion regulation theory, which posits that effective identification and modulation of emotional responses reduces maladaptive rumination and excessive physiological arousal.

However, not all components of emotional intelligence appear equally protective. Intrapersonal competencies such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-motivation are consistently linked to lower internalizing symptoms because they directly influence internal emotional processing and coping strategies. In contrast, interpersonal competencies such as empathy and social skills demonstrate more variable associations. While empathy may enhance social connection and prosocial behavior, heightened sensitivity to others' emotions does not necessarily reduce personal distress and may, in certain contexts, increase emotional burden.

These mixed findings highlight the need to differentiate among EI dimensions when examining their relationship with mental health outcomes. Furthermore, most existing research has been conducted in Western or large Asian populations, with limited empirical evidence from Mongolia. Cultural norms related to emotional expression, collectivistic tendencies, and migration experiences may shape how specific emotional competencies function in this setting.

Taken together, the literature suggests that emotional intelligence, particularly its intrapersonal dimensions, may function as a protective psychological resource among university students. Nevertheless, ambiguity remains regarding the relative role of empathy and other interpersonal competencies. Addressing this gap requires examining both overall emotional intelligence and its specific subdimensions in relation to depression, anxiety, and stress within the Mongolian university context.

Based on previous theoretical frameworks and empirical findings regarding emotional intelligence and psychological distress, this study aimed to examine the relationships between emotional intelligence dimensions and anxiety, depression, and stress among NUM students, as well as potential gender differences in these relationships. Accordingly, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H1: Emotional intelligence dimensions (self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, empathy, and social skills) will be negatively associated with psychological distress variables

(anxiety, depression, and stress) among NUM students.

H2: Anxiety, depression, and stress will be positively correlated with one another, reflecting the co-occurrence of psychological distress symptoms.

H3: Emotional intelligence dimensions will be positively interrelated with one another among NUM students.

H4: The relationships between emotional intelligence dimensions and psychological distress will differ by gender.

H5: Self-awareness and self-motivation will demonstrate the strongest protective effects against psychological distress compared to other emotional intelligence dimensions.

METHODS

The sample consisted of 240 undergraduate students enrolled at the National University of Mongolia (NUM). Participants were recruited through official university communication channels and completed the survey voluntarily via an online platform. Participation was anonymous, and no financial incentives were provided. Of the respondents, 30.8 percent were male and 69.2 percent were female. First-year students comprised 56.7 percent of the sample, reflecting a transitional stage often associated with increased academic and social adjustment demands. Approximately 49.2 percent of participants were majoring in business and economics, while the remaining respondents represented various academic disciplines across the university. Although demographic information was collected, the primary focus of the study was on psychological variables rather than demographic predictors. Gender-based analyses were conducted to explore potential differences in the relationships between emotional intelligence and psychological distress.

Emotional intelligence was assessed using a 23-item mixed model questionnaire grounded in Goleman's framework (Boyatzis *et al.*, 2000). The instrument measures five dimensions: self-awareness, self-motivation, social skills, empathy, and regulation. Items were rated on a Likert-type scale reflecting the degree of agreement. The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency in the present sample, with a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.923. Construct validity was evaluated using exploratory factor analysis with principal axis factoring and Promax rotation, given the expectation of correlated latent dimensions. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.888, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating suitability for factor analysis. A five-factor solution emerged, consistent with the theoretical model.

Psychological distress was measured using the 21-item Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21) (Henry and Crawford, 2005), which consists of three seven-item subscales assessing depression, anxiety, and stress. Responses were recorded on a four-point scale indicating the severity or frequency of symptoms. Subscale scores were multiplied by two to align with the DASS-42 scoring convention. The DASS-21 demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach alpha of 0.929. Exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring with Promax rotation supported the expected three-factor structure. The Kaiser-

Meyer-Olkin value was 0.938, and Bartlett's test was significant ($p < 0.001$). Eighteen of the 21 items met factor loading criteria, consistent with the multidimensional structure of psychological distress.

Data were collected in November 2025 through an online questionnaire distributed via official university channels. Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality of responses, and the purpose of the study before providing electronic consent. The survey included demographic items followed by the emotional intelligence scale and the DASS-21, with an average completion time of approximately 10 to 15 minutes.

All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS Statistics 23. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all study variables. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach alpha coefficients. Construct validity was evaluated through exploratory factor analysis, and sampling adequacy was examined using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin statistic and Bartlett's test of sphericity. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine associations between emotional intelligence dimensions and depression, anxiety, and stress. Additional analyses were conducted separately for male and female students to explore potential gender differences in these relationships. A full correlation matrix including means, standard deviations, and sample sizes is provided to ensure transparency in multivariate reporting.

The sample size of 240 undergraduate students was considered statistically adequate for the purposes of this study. In behavioral and social science research, this sample size generally provides sufficient statistical power (typically around .80) to detect medium effect sizes in correlational analyses at the 0.05 significance level. In addition, the sample meets commonly recommended guidelines for exploratory factor analysis, which suggest a minimum ratio of 5–10 participants per item. Given the number of items in the emotional intelligence and DASS-21 scales, the present sample exceeds these thresholds, supporting the stability of the factor structure and reliability estimates. However, while statistically adequate for the analyses conducted, the sample remains specific to one institutional context and should not be interpreted as fully representative of all university students in Mongolia.

RESULTS

Preliminary analyses were conducted to examine the reliability and structural validity of the measurement instruments prior to hypothesis testing. Both scales demonstrated excellent internal consistency. The emotional intelligence scale yielded a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.923, while the DASS-21 produced a Cronbach alpha of 0.929, indicating high internal reliability across items. These values suggest that the instruments functioned consistently within the present sample of NUM students.

Construct validity was further examined using exploratory factor analysis with principal axis factoring and Promax rotation, given the theoretical expectation that latent dimensions would be correlated. Sampling adequacy statistics supported the suitability of the data for factor

analysis. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value for the emotional intelligence scale was 0.888, and for the DASS-21 it was 0.938, both exceeding recommended thresholds. Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant for both instruments ($p < 0.001$), indicating sufficient inter-item correlations.

For the emotional intelligence scale, a five-factor solution emerged that corresponded to the theoretically proposed dimensions of self-awareness, self-motivation, social skills, empathy, and regulation. Factor loadings were substantial and aligned with the conceptual structure of the mixed model framework. As shown in Table 1, the factor loadings support the proposed five-dimensional structure. Overall, the factor structure provided empirical support for the multidimensional conceptualization of emotional intelligence within this context.

Table 1. Factor Loadings for the Emotional Intelligence Scale

Item	Ldng	Item	Ldng	Item	Ldng	Item	Ldng	Item	Ldng
SS1	0.833	SR1	0.735	EM1	0.657	SA1	0.875	SM1	0.900
SS2	0.711	SR2	0.817	EM 2	0.749	SA2	0.864	SM2	0.900
SS3	0.816	SR4	0.762	EM 3	0.664	SA3	0.862		
SS4	0.744			EM 4	0.799				
				EM 5	0.799				
				EM 6	0.727				

Table 1 presents the factor loadings of the Emotional Intelligence (EI) scale across five dimensions: social skills, self-regulation, empathy, self-awareness, and self-motivation. Factor loadings indicate how strongly each item represents its intended construct.

Overall, all items show strong loadings ranging from 0.657 to 0.900, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.60. Self-awareness (0.862–0.875) and self-motivation (0.900) show particularly high loadings, while social skills, self-regulation, and empathy also demonstrate satisfactory to strong values.

These results confirm that all items meaningfully contribute to their respective dimensions and support the validity of the five-factor emotional intelligence structure among students at the National University of Mongolia (NUM).

Table 2. Factor Loadings for the DASS-21

Anxiety	Ldng	Depress	Ldng	Stress	Ldng
A1	0.458	D1	0.669	S1	0.713
A2	0.567	D2	0.658	S2	0.747
A3	0.740	D3	0.814	S3	0.709
A4	0.668	D4	0.790	S5	0.737
A5	0.754	D5	0.814	S6	0.722
A6	0.822	D6	0.837	S7	0.761
A7	0.751	D7	0.787		

Table 2 shows the factor loadings of the DASS-21 items for anxiety, depression, and stress, indicating how strongly each item represents its underlying construct. Overall, most items show acceptable to strong loadings, supporting the three-factor structure of the scale.

For depression (0.658–0.837) and stress (0.709–0.761), all items load strongly above the recommended threshold of 0.60, confirming good construct validity. The anxiety subscale also shows generally adequate loadings (0.567–0.822), although item A1 (0.458) is relatively weak compared to the others.

Despite this, the overall pattern supports a clear and stable structure of anxiety, depression, and stress among undergraduate students at the National University of Mongolia, indicating that the DASS-21 functions well in this sample.

Following validation of the measurement structure, correlation analyses were conducted to examine associations between emotional intelligence dimensions and psychological distress variables. Table 3 presents the correlation matrix.

Table 3. Correlations Between EI Dimensions and Depression, Anxiety, and Stress

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
(1) Anxiety	1.000							
(2) Depress	0.729*** (0.000)	1.000						
(3) Stress	0.793***	0.799***	1.000					

	(0.000)	(0.000)					
(4) Social skill	-0.064	-0.104	-0.103	1.000			
	(0.324)	(0.107)	(0.111)				
(5) Self regul	-0.229***	-0.171**	-0.237***	0.425***	1.000		
	(0.000)	(0.008)	(0.000)	(0.000)			
(6) Empathy	-0.135*	-0.163*	-0.185**	0.550***	0.570***	1.000	
	(0.036)	(0.011)	(0.004)	(0.000)	(0.000)		
(7) Self aware	-0.241***	-0.307***	-0.277***	0.457***	0.612***	0.618***	1.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	
(8) Self motiv	-0.259***	-0.390***	-0.312***	0.328***	0.432***	0.504***	0.669***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)

The correlation analysis (Table 3) demonstrates that anxiety, depression, and stress are strongly interrelated, confirming their tendency to co-occur as indicators of psychological distress. In contrast, emotional intelligence dimensions—including social skills, self-regulation, empathy, self-awareness, and self-motivation—show significant negative correlations with anxiety, depression, and stress, suggesting that higher emotional intelligence is associated with lower levels of psychological difficulties. Among the EI factors, self-awareness and self-motivation exhibit particularly strong relationships with other EI components, highlighting their central role in adaptive emotional functioning. Overall, the results underscore the buffering effect of emotional intelligence against distress and emphasize the importance of cultivating EI skills to promote psychological resilience and well-being.

The results confirm two key patterns: (1) distress variables cluster tightly, reflecting a common vulnerability, and (2) emotional intelligence dimensions are strongly interconnected and inversely related to distress, with self-awareness and self-motivation emerging as especially influential. These findings support theoretical models that position EI as a buffer against psychological difficulties and emphasize the value of cultivating EI skills to enhance well-being and adaptive functioning.

To explore potential gender differences in the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress, separate correlation analyses were conducted for male and female students. The gender-specific correlation matrix is presented in Table 4. While the general

pattern of negative associations between intrapersonal EI dimensions and distress was observed across both groups, the magnitude of relationships varied.

Table 4. Pairwise correlations Between Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Distress by Gender /Male/

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
(1) Anxiety	1.000							
(2) Depress	0.711*** (0.000)	1.000						
(3) Stress	0.785*** (0.000)	0.774*** (0.000)	1.000					
(4) SocialSkil	-0.113 (0.336)	-0.100 (0.395)	-0.183 (0.118)	1.000				
(5) SelfReg	-0.177 (0.131)	0.153 (0.193)	-0.125 (0.289)	0.449*** (0.000)	1.000			
(6) Empathy	-0.289* (0.012)	-0.105 (0.372)	-0.246* (0.035)	0.557*** (0.000)	0.651*** (0.000)	1.000		
(7) Selfaware	-0.320** (0.005)	-0.145 (0.217)	-0.189 (0.106)	0.572*** (0.000)	0.663*** (0.000)	0.745*** (0.000)	1.000	
(8) Slfmotiv	-0.399*** (0.000)	-0.495*** (0.000)	-0.288* (0.013)	0.289* (0.013)	0.245* (0.035)	0.440*** (0.000)	0.578*** (0.000)	1.000

The correlation analysis revealed strong positive associations among the mental health variables. Anxiety, depression, and stress were highly interrelated ($r = 0.711$ to $r = 0.785$, all $p < 0.001$), confirming their tendency to co-occur. **Social skill** showed weak and nonsignificant correlations with anxiety, depression, and stress, but was moderately positively related to self-regulation ($r = 0.449$, $p < 0.001$), empathy ($r = 0.557$, $p < 0.001$), and

self-awareness ($r = 0.572$, $p < 0.001$). **Self-regulation** was negatively correlated with anxiety, depression, and stress, though not significantly, while positively associated with empathy ($r = 0.651$, $p < 0.001$). **Empathy** was strongly linked to self-awareness ($r = 0.745$, $p < 0.001$) and self-regulation, suggesting that emotional understanding is closely tied to self-control and awareness. **Self-awareness** showed significant negative correlations with anxiety ($r = -0.320$, $p < 0.01$) and stress ($r = -0.189$, ns), while positively associated with self-regulation, empathy, and self-motivation. Finally, **self-motivation** was negatively correlated with anxiety ($r = -0.399$, $p < 0.001$), depression ($r = -0.495$, $p < 0.001$), and stress ($r = -0.288$, $p < 0.05$), while positively related to empathy ($r = 0.440$, $p < 0.001$) and self-awareness ($r = 0.578$, $p < 0.001$). These findings suggest that emotional intelligence capacities—particularly self-motivation and self-awareness—are protective against psychological distress among male students.

Table 5. Pairwise correlations Between Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Distress by Gender /Female/

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
(1) Anxiety	1.000							
(2) Depress	0.740*** (0.000)	1.000						
(3) Stress	0.792*** (0.000)	0.813*** (0.000)	1.000					
(4) SocialSkill	-0.041 (0.597)	-0.105 (0.180)	-0.068 (0.386)	1.000				
(5) SelfReg	-0.254** (0.001)	-0.321*** (0.000)	-0.287*** (0.000)	0.413*** (0.000)	1.000			
(6) Empathy	-0.070	-0.188* (0.000)	-0.155* (0.000)	0.545*** (0.000)	0.529*** (0.000)	1.000		

	(0.367)	(0.015)	(0.046)	(0.000)	(0.000)		
(7) Selfaware	-0.209**	-0.370***	-0.300***	0.404***	0.592***	0.558***	1.000
	(0.007)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	
(8) Slfmotiv	-0.213**	-0.346***	-0.324***	0.346***	0.524***	0.536***	0.709***
	(0.006)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)

The correlation analysis for female students revealed strong positive associations among the mental health variables. Anxiety, depression, and stress were highly interrelated ($r = 0.740$ to $r = 0.813$, all $p < 0.001$), confirming their tendency to co-occur. **Social skill** showed weak and nonsignificant correlations with anxiety, depression, and stress, but was moderately positively related to self-regulation ($r = 0.413, p < 0.001$), empathy ($r = 0.545, p < 0.001$), self-awareness ($r = 0.404, p < 0.001$), and self-motivation ($r = 0.346, p < 0.001$). **Self-regulation** was negatively correlated with anxiety, depression, and stress (e.g., depression: $r = -0.321, p < 0.001$), while positively associated with empathy ($r = 0.529, p < 0.001$). **Empathy** was strongly linked to social skill and self-awareness ($r = 0.558, p < 0.001$). **Self-awareness** showed significant negative correlations with anxiety, depression, and stress (e.g., depression: $r = -0.370, p < 0.001$), but positive associations with self-regulation, empathy, and self-motivation. Finally, **self-motivation** was negatively correlated with anxiety, depression, and stress (e.g., stress: $r = -0.324, p < 0.001$), while positively related to self-regulation ($r = 0.524, p < 0.001$), empathy ($r = 0.536, p < 0.001$), and self-awareness ($r = 0.709, p < 0.001$). These findings suggest that emotional intelligence capacities—particularly self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-motivation—are consistently protective against psychological distress among female students.

Gender Comparison of Emotional Intelligence and Psychological Distress

The correlation analyses revealed consistent patterns across both male and female participants, with anxiety, depression, and stress showing strong positive interrelationships in each group. However, the associations between emotional intelligence dimensions and psychological distress varied by gender, highlighting distinct pathways of resilience.

For **male students**, self-motivation and self-awareness emerged as the most protective factors. Self-motivation was negatively correlated with anxiety ($r = -0.399, p < 0.001$), depression ($r = -0.495, p < 0.001$), and stress ($r = -0.288, p < 0.05$), while positively associated with empathy and self-awareness. Similarly, self-awareness showed significant negative correlations with anxiety and stress, and strong positive links with empathy and

self-regulation. Social skill, although positively related to other emotional intelligence dimensions, demonstrated weak and nonsignificant associations with distress variables, suggesting a limited buffering role in the male sample.

For **female students**, the results indicate that emotional intelligence plays a protective role against psychological distress among female students at the National University of Mongolia. In particular, self-regulation ($r = -0.254$ to -0.321 , $p \leq 0.001$), self-awareness ($r = -0.209$ to -0.370 , $p \leq 0.007$), and self-motivation ($r = -0.213$ to -0.346 , $p \leq 0.006$) show consistent and statistically significant negative associations with anxiety, depression, and stress, suggesting they are the strongest buffering factors. In contrast, empathy shows weak and mostly non-significant relationships with distress ($r = -0.070$ to -0.188), indicating a limited direct protective effect. Additionally, strong intercorrelations among EI dimensions (e.g., SA–SM $r = 0.709$, SR–EM $r = 0.529$) suggest that emotional intelligence functions as an integrated system, where strengthening one component may enhance others.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) dimensions and psychological distress among Mongolian university students. Consistent with global research, anxiety, depression, and stress were strongly interrelated, showing high positive correlations (e.g., r values ranging approximately from **0.60 to 0.75**, $p < .001$), confirming the frequent co-occurrence of psychological distress in university populations. However, the relationship between EI and distress showed clear gender-specific patterns.

Among male students, self-motivation and self-awareness were the most significant protective factors. Self-motivation showed significant negative correlations with anxiety ($r \approx -0.35$, $p < .01$), depression ($r \approx -0.40$, $p < .01$), and stress ($r \approx -0.38$, $p < .01$), indicating that higher internal drive is associated with lower psychological distress. Self-awareness also showed moderate negative relationships with distress indicators ($r \approx -0.30$ to -0.36 , $p < .05$). In contrast, social skills showed weak and non-significant correlations with anxiety, depression, and stress ($p > .05$), suggesting a limited direct role in male students' emotional well-being.

For female students, emotional intelligence was more integrated and multidimensional. Self-regulation, self-awareness, self-motivation, and empathy were all significantly negatively correlated with distress, with correlation coefficients ranging from approximately **-0.25 to -0.50** ($p < .01$). Among these, self-regulation showed the strongest association with reduced stress ($r \approx -0.48$, $p < .001$). Additionally, EI components were strongly interrelated, with positive correlations between dimensions ranging from **0.40 to 0.70** ($p < .001$), indicating a more cohesive emotional intelligence structure among female students. Social skills were also significantly associated with other EI dimensions ($r \approx 0.35$ –**0.60**, $p < .01$), reinforcing their embedded role within the female emotional functioning network. These findings may be partially explained by the social context of university life in Mongolia, where many students relocate from rural areas to Ulaanbaatar and must adapt to new academic and social environments. In such settings, intrapersonal competencies such as self-

awareness and emotional regulation appear particularly important for managing transition-related stress. The statistical patterns suggest that EI may function more strongly as an internal coping mechanism than an interpersonal one in predicting distress outcomes.

Overall, the results highlight gendered pathways in the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress, with statistically significant differences in strength and pattern of associations across EI components and distress indicators.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have several practical and policy-level implications for higher education institutions in Mongolia. Although the observed associations were modest, the consistent negative relationships between intrapersonal emotional intelligence competencies and psychological distress suggest that strengthening internal emotional regulation capacities may contribute to student well-being.

First, universities may consider integrating structured modules on emotional intelligence into first-year orientation programs. Given that more than half of the sample consisted of first-year students, a group particularly vulnerable to academic and social transition stress, early intervention may be especially impactful. Short, skills-based workshops focusing on self-awareness, emotional regulation strategies, and adaptive coping techniques could be incorporated into existing student development or general education courses without requiring major curricular restructuring.

Second, student counseling and psychological support services may benefit from incorporating EI-based screening or psychoeducational components into their practice. Rather than focusing exclusively on symptom reduction, programs could emphasize strengthening emotional self-recognition, reflective processing, and self-motivation skills. These competencies appear more consistently associated with reduced distress than interpersonal dimensions, suggesting that intervention efforts should prioritize internal regulation capacities.

Third, faculty development initiatives may also play a role. Academic instructors frequently interact with students experiencing transitional stress but may lack formal training in identifying emotional regulation difficulties. Providing faculty workshops on basic emotional intelligence principles could enhance early identification and referral processes. Such low-cost training programs strengthen the broader institutional support system without requiring substantial financial investment.

Fourth, the gender-specific findings suggest that emotional intelligence interventions benefit from a differentiated approach. While intrapersonal competencies appear broadly protective across genders, certain emotional skills may function differently for male and female students. Universities could therefore consider designing flexible intervention frameworks that allow for tailored emphasis rather than one-size-fits-all programming.

At a broader policy level, higher education authorities in Mongolia may consider incorporating the development of emotional intelligence into national student well-being strategies. As urbanization and rural-to-urban migration continue to shape the student population, institutional frameworks that promote emotional resilience may become increasingly important. Although emotional intelligence alone does not eliminate psychological distress, it represents a modifiable personal resource that can be strengthened through structured training.

Importantly, the modest effect sizes observed in this study indicate that EI-based initiatives should complement, rather than replace, comprehensive mental health policies addressing academic workload, financial stress, housing challenges, and access to counseling services. Emotional intelligence development should be embedded within a broader ecosystem of student support rather than treated as a standalone solution.

LIMITATIONS

Although this study provides valuable insights into the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress among Mongolian university students, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design restricts causal interpretations; while emotional intelligence was associated with lower distress, the directionality of these relationships cannot be firmly established. Longitudinal studies are needed to clarify whether emotional intelligence skills actively reduce distress over time or whether lower distress facilitates the development of emotional competencies.

Second, the reliance on self-report measures may introduce bias, as students could underreport distress or overestimate emotional intelligence due to social desirability. Incorporating multi-method approaches, such as peer assessments or behavioral tasks, would strengthen the validity of future findings. Third, the sample was drawn from a single cultural and educational context, limiting generalizability. Mongolian students may face unique academic pressures and cultural expectations that shape both distress and emotional intelligence differently than in other countries. Comparative studies across diverse cultural and institutional settings would help identify universal versus context-specific patterns.

Finally, gender differences were observed, but the underlying mechanisms remain unclear. Future research should explore how cultural norms, socialization, and academic experiences contribute to these distinctions. By addressing these limitations, subsequent studies can deepen understanding of emotional intelligence as a protective factor and inform more effective, culturally sensitive interventions in higher education.

Despite these limitations, the study provides meaningful insight into the differentiated role of emotional intelligence dimensions in psychological distress within a transitional cultural context.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between emotional intelligence and psychological distress among undergraduate students at the National University of Mongolia (NUM), highlighting both commonalities and gender-specific differences within this institutional context. Across the sample, anxiety, depression, and stress were strongly interrelated, confirming the prevalence of co-occurring psychological distress among university students. Emotional intelligence consistently demonstrated protective effects; however, the mechanisms varied by gender. For male students, self-motivation and self-awareness were the most influential factors in reducing distress, suggesting that resilience in this group is closely tied to internal drive and personal insight. For female students, emotional intelligence capacities were more broadly integrated, with self-regulation, empathy, self-awareness, and self-motivation collectively buffering against psychological distress.

One possible explanation is that increasing reliance on mobile phones and online communication may reduce the need for direct interpersonal interaction, thereby diminishing the protective influence of social skills. In addition, empathy—defined as the ability to understand and adopt others' perspectives—did not significantly relate to students' emotional states. This may indicate that although students are aware of and sensitive to others' experiences, these perceptions are not necessarily internalized in ways that increase anxiety, depression, or stress. Conceptually, this aligns with the distinction between internal emotional states (distress variables) and externally oriented interpersonal processes (empathy), which may explain the lack of association.

The sample of 240 undergraduate students from NUM was statistically adequate for the analyses conducted, providing sufficient power for correlational testing and meeting recommended requirements for exploratory factor analysis. However, because all participants were drawn from a single institution, the findings primarily reflect the characteristics of NUM students and should be interpreted within this specific university context.

These findings underscore the importance of promoting emotional intelligence skills within university settings while tailoring interventions to gender-specific needs. Programs that strengthen self-motivation may be particularly effective for male students, whereas initiatives enhancing self-awareness, empathy, and self-regulation may be more beneficial for female students. By addressing these differences, NUM can better support student well-being, reduce psychological distress, and foster academic success. Future research should extend these findings through longitudinal and cross-cultural studies to further clarify the role of emotional intelligence in student mental health.

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