

*CONFERENCE PROCEEDING*

## **Under Pressure: Exploring Emotional Intelligence Levels in High-Achieving Students**

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### **ABSTRACT**

High-achieving students are often seen as emotionally resilient due to their academic success, yet the pressure they face may have hidden emotional consequences. This study investigates the emotional intelligence (EQ) of pre-university students and examines how academic stress affects their emotional regulation, self-awareness, and well-being. An online survey, primarily quantitative with a small qualitative component, was distributed to students across various tertiary pathways in Singapore, including Polytechnic, Junior College (JC), ITE, pre-university madrasah program, International Baccalaureate (IB), and DPI diploma program. The survey featured items adapted from the Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT) and the Educational Stress Scale for Adolescents (ESSA) to measure EQ and stress levels. Data were collected from both high-achieving and average-performing students for comparison. Quantitative results will be analyzed using average scoring and basic correlations to explore the relationship between EQ and academic pressure. Qualitative responses to open-ended questions will be thematically coded to identify recurring emotional experiences and coping strategies. It is expected that students reporting higher academic stress will demonstrate lower emotional regulation and increased emotional fatigue. Findings from this study may underscore the importance of integrating emotional literacy into curricula and strengthening emotional support systems for students in high-pressure environments. By understanding how academic demands influence emotional well-being, educators and policymakers can create interventions that foster healthier learning experiences and equip students with strategies to manage stress effectively.

**Keywords:** *Emotional intelligence, High-achieving students, Academic pressure, Student well-being.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Emotional intelligence (EQ)—the ability to perceive, understand, and manage emotions (Salovey & Mayer, 1990)—is critical for mental health, relationships, and academic success. Goleman (1995) notes that EQ can be as influential as cognitive intelligence in adapting to challenges and building resilience. In Singapore, high-achieving pre-university students in pathways like JC, IB, and Polytechnic programs face intense academic pressure, which can lead to stress, perfectionism, and burnout (Parker et al., 2004; Deb et al., 2015). Despite outward success, many students silently

struggle to manage emotions, and emotional intelligence may serve as a protective factor. Personality traits, such as the Thinking vs. Feeling dimension in MBTI, may further influence how students cope with pressure. This study investigates the EQ levels of high-achieving students in Singapore, examines the impact of academic pressure on emotional regulation, empathy, and resilience, and explores how personality preferences shape stress responses, aiming to guide strategies that support both academic achievement and emotional well-being.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Emotional intelligence (EQ) refers to the ability to recognise, manage, and express emotions effectively. Mayer and Salovey (1997) describe EQ as involving the awareness of one's own emotions, the regulation of these emotions, and the use of emotional understanding to guide thought and behavior. Goleman (1995) later expanded this framework, identifying five key components of EQ: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. These skills are increasingly recognised as crucial for success not only in academic environments but also in personal and social contexts.

Research consistently highlights a positive relationship between emotional intelligence and academic outcomes. Petrides and Furnham (2003) found that students with higher EQ demonstrate better stress management, stronger motivation, and improved focus in challenging learning situations. These findings suggest that emotional competencies may act as protective factors in demanding academic environments.

In Singapore, where the academic system is highly competitive, the Ministry of Education (2020) has acknowledged rising stress levels among students. As a result, schools have begun incorporating programmes that promote social-emotional learning in order to help students manage stress, enhance resilience, and develop healthy peer relationships. However, while studies have examined student stress and social-emotional support broadly, less attention has been paid to the role of EQ specifically in pre-university students, particularly those who are academically high-achieving.

Most existing studies focus on average-performing students, leaving a gap in understanding how high-performing students experience and apply emotional intelligence. These students often face unique pressures, including heightened expectations and competitive environments, which may affect their ability to regulate their own emotions and understand those of others. This study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic pressure among high-achieving pre-university students in Singapore.

## MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to explore emotional intelligence (EQ) levels among high-achieving students in Singapore. Primary data was collected through a Google Forms survey comprising both demographic questions and a set of Likert-scale statements measuring different aspects of emotional intelligence, such as emotional awareness, regulation, empathy, and resilience.

A total of 48 students between the ages of 17 and 20+ participated in the study. They were selected using convenience sampling and represented a variety of academic institutions, including polytechnics, junior colleges (JC), Institutes of Technical Education (ITE), madrasahs, and universities. Respondents were asked to indicate their academic standing (Top 10%, Top 25%, Top 50%, or Other). This allowed the study to include both high-achieving students and those with average performance for comparison.

To complement the quantitative data, the survey included two open-ended questions to capture students' personal experiences balancing academic performance and emotional regulation.

Secondary sources, such as academic journals, research reports from the Ministry of Education (MOE), and relevant psychological studies, were consulted to provide background, validate findings, and contextualise results within the broader literature on student well-being and emotional development.

All responses were collected anonymously, and participants were informed about the voluntary and confidential nature of the research.

**Table 1.** Demographic Profile of Respondents

Statements	Answers
Age	16.7% - 17
	52.1% - 18
	18.8% - 19
	14.6% - 20 & above
Gender	77.1% - Female
	22.9% - Male
Current level of study	43.8% - Polytechnic
	14.6% - ITE
	8.3% - Diploma 2
	14.6% - JC
	2.1% - IB

Academic standing	60.4% - Top 50% of my cohort
	22.9% - Top 25% of my cohort
	16.7% - Top 10% of my cohort

### Objectives

This study aims to examine the emotional intelligence levels of high-achieving pre-university students in Singapore and assess the impact of academic pressure on their emotional abilities. It also seeks to investigate the common observation that students who excel academically may face challenges in managing their own emotions and understanding the emotions of others, particularly within social and interpersonal contexts.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Academic Pressure Among High-Achieving Students

As shown in Table 2, academic pressure is a common experience among respondents. 54.1% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they feel pressured to meet the academic expectations of parents or teachers. Similarly, more than half (52.1%) admitted to feeling guilty when taking breaks from studying, while 66.7% often compared their academic performance with that of others.

A notable 64.6% of students felt that their self-worth was tied to academic results, and 60.4% sacrificed sleep or rest to keep up with academic demands. These findings suggest that high-achieving students may place intense pressure on themselves or feel external expectations to perform, which could have long-term implications for their emotional well-being and stress regulation.

**Table 2.** Academic Pressure Responses

Statements	Answers
I feel pressured to meet the academic expectations of my parents or teachers.	8.3% - Strongly Disagree
	10.4% - Disagree
	27.1% - Neutral
	33.3% - Agree
	20.8% - Strongly Agree

I feel guilty when I take breaks from studying.	12.5% - Strongly Disagree
	14.6% - Disagree
	20.8% - Neutral
	29.2% - Agree
	22.9% - Strongly Agree
I often compare my academic performance with that of others.	2.1% - Strongly Disagree
	10.4% - Disagree
	20.8% - Neutral
	37.5% - Agree
	29.2% - Strongly Agree
I feel like my value is tied to my academic results.	2.1% - Strongly Disagree
	14.6% - Disagree
	18.8% - Neutral
	35.4% - Agree
	29.2% - Strongly Agree
I sacrifice sleep or rest to keep up with school tasks.	10.4% - Strongly Disagree
	12.5% - Disagree
	16.7% - Neutral
	22.9% - Agree
	37.5% - Strongly Agree

### Emotional Intelligence Patterns

Table 3 outlines responses related to emotional intelligence traits. While a majority of students showed positive emotional awareness — with 62.5% reflecting on their emotional responses and 60.5% able to recognise when peers were feeling down — other areas indicated room for growth.

Only 45.8% felt they could clearly think through strong emotions, and just 35.4% reported being able to express emotions in a healthy and appropriate way. Additionally, 29.2% of students said they do not bounce back quickly after academic setbacks, showing weaker emotional resilience despite high academic standing.

These patterns suggest that while many high-achieving students possess social awareness and empathy, they may struggle with emotional regulation and stress recovery, especially when overwhelmed by academic pressure.

**Table 3.** Emotional Intelligence Responses

Statements	Answers
I reflect on my emotional responses after difficult situations.	0% - Strongly Disagree
	10.4% - Disagree
	27.1% - Neutral
	35.4% - Agree
	27.1% - Strongly Agree
I am able to think clearly even when I'm feeling strong emotions.	2.1% - Strongly Disagree
	12.5% - Disagree
	39.6% - Neutral
	33.3% - Agree
	12.5% - Strongly Agree
I can recognise when my friends or classmates	0% - Strongly Disagree

are feeling down.	6.3% - Disagree
	10.4% - Neutral
	41.7%- Agree
	41.7% - Strongly Agree
I consider other people's emotions before responding to them.	0% - Strongly Disagree
	8.3% - Disagree
	12.5% - Neutral
	39.6% - Agree
	39.6% - Strongly Agree
I usually bounce back quickly after academic disappointments.	6.3% - Strongly Disagree
	22.9% - Disagree
	29.2% - Neutral
	22.9% - Agree
	18.8% - Strongly Agree
I am able to express my emotions in a healthy & appropriate way.	6.3% - Strongly Disagree
	16.7% - Disagree
	41.7% - Neutral
	25% - Agree
	10.4% - Strongly Agree

### Thinking vs Feeling: Personality Preference

As seen in Table 4, 64.6% of respondents identified as making decisions based on logic and objectivity (Thinking), while 35.4% prioritised emotional considerations (Feeling). This may explain why some students are more likely to suppress or overlook their emotional states, as they lean toward rational problem-solving over emotional expression.

This personality trait may correlate with lower scores in areas like emotional expression or emotional recovery, which were among the weaker domains for some students in this study.

**Table 4.** Thinking vs Feeling Decision-Making Preferences

Questions	Answers
Which statement sounds more like you?	64.6% - A
A) I make decisions mostly based on logic & objectivity. (Thinking)	
B) I make decisions mostly by considering the emotions of others. (Feeling)	35.4% - B

### Coping Strategies: How Students Respond to Overwhelm

**Table 5.** Coping Strategies Responses

Coping Strategy	Percentage
Reflection	14.6%
Prayer	12.5%
Planning	10.4%
Talking to Others	10.4%
Avoidance	10.4%
Eat/Drink (Self-Care)	8.3%
Distraction (TV/Reading/Scrolling)	6.2%
Physical Activity	6.2%

Creative Outlet (Hobbies)	6.2%
Others	29.2%

### Perceived Support from Schools

Table 6 shows that only 30.4% of students believed their school supported their emotional well-being, while 39.3% said “no,” and another 30.4% were unsure or neutral. Several students acknowledged the existence of counsellors or mental health programmes but felt these were impersonal, inaccessible, or ineffective in practice.

**Table 6.** Perceived School Support for Emotional Well-Being

Question	Answers
Do you think your school supports your emotional well-being?	30.4% - Yes
	39.3% - No
	30.4% - Neutral

### Interpretation and Reflection

The results echo prior research suggesting that emotional intelligence, particularly self-regulation and resilience, can be underdeveloped in high-performing students who face constant academic demands. While these students may appear successful on the surface, they may be silently struggling to manage their emotional well-being.

As shown in the survey, many students demonstrate empathy and emotional awareness (e.g. recognising when friends are down), yet they often lack internal coping strategies such as healthy emotional expression or stress management. Coping behaviors like avoidance, overworking, or isolation were common, with fewer students engaging in proactive self-care or help-seeking.

This supports earlier studies, such as Goleman (1995), which emphasize that emotional intelligence is critical for managing stress, sustaining motivation, and achieving lasting academic success. Without healthy outlets for emotional processing and recovery, even top-performing students may eventually experience burnout, anxiety, or emotional detachment — all of which can negatively affect long-term performance and well-being.

Together, these findings highlight an urgent need for schools to not only recognize high achievement but also nurture the emotional lives of their students. Emotional intelligence should be considered not a soft skill, but a foundational one for academic and personal growth.

Most existing studies focus on average-performing students, leaving a gap in understanding how high-performing students experience and apply emotional intelligence. These students often face unique pressures, including heightened expectations and competitive environments, which may affect their ability to regulate their own emotions and understand those of others. This study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic pressure among high-achieving pre-university students in Singapore.

## IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight a crucial insight while high-achieving students often demonstrate empathy and emotional awareness, they struggle significantly with emotional regulation and recovery under academic pressure. This calls for a shift in how schools approach academic excellence — one that balances performance with emotional well-being.

First, structured emotional intelligence (EQ) education should be integrated into the formal curriculum. Lessons on self-awareness, emotion regulation, and resilience can equip students with lifelong coping strategies. Schools should also strive to maintain academic rigor without neglecting students' mental health. For example, by reducing high-stakes pressure or building in flexibility for reflection and rest.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) practices such as peer support, mindfulness, and emotional check-ins should be embedded in daily routines to help normalise emotional expression. At the same time, teachers must be trained to recognise and respond to signs of emotional strain with empathy and support.

Crucially, schools should create open channels for student voice. High-performing students must be allowed to express how academic expectations affect their emotional well-being so educators can make informed adjustments to teaching pace, assessment load, or school policies. Finally, it is essential to foster a culture where success is not defined solely by grades but also by emotional maturity, collaboration, and self-leadership. As this study relied on a small convenience sample, future research with a larger and more diverse cohort could provide further insights.

In conclusion, this study reveals that academic achievement and emotional health are deeply intertwined. If emotional intelligence is nurtured alongside academic skills, high-achieving students can thrive not just in school, but beyond.

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