

Emotional Intelligence and Undergraduate Persistence: A Systematic Review of Its Role In Student Retention and Intervention Effectiveness

Sharvinder Raj¹, David Wong², Deborah³, Sharala Subramaniam⁴, Vijayaletchumy⁵

¹School of General Studies and Languages, Faculty of Social Sciences and Leisure Management, Taylor's University, Malaysia

²School of General Studies and Languages, Faculty of Social Sciences and Leisure Management, Taylor's University, Malaysia

³School of General Studies and Languages, Faculty of Social Sciences and Leisure Management, Taylor's University, Malaysia

⁴School of General Studies and Languages, Faculty of Social Sciences and Leisure Management, Taylor's University, Malaysia

⁵Faculty of Modern Language and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia

***Corresponding Author Address: Dr. Sharala Subramaniam
School of General Studies and Languages, Taylor's University, Malaysia**

ABSTRACT

Student attrition continues to be a persistent challenge in higher education, despite a wide range of institutional support mechanisms. Increasingly, attention has shifted beyond cognitive ability to the role of non-cognitive factors, particularly emotional intelligence (EI), in shaping students' academic journeys. Skills such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management are now recognised as important in helping students navigate academic and social demands, especially during critical transition periods. This systematic review synthesises recent research examining the relationship between emotional intelligence and undergraduate persistence. Following a structured search of major academic databases, peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2026 were analysed using a thematic synthesis approach. The review focuses on three key areas: the relationship between EI and academic performance, the role of EI in managing academic stress and burnout, and the effectiveness of EI-based interventions in supporting student retention. The findings indicate that higher levels of emotional intelligence are consistently associated with stronger academic engagement, greater resilience, and a higher likelihood of continued enrolment. In particular, self-management and social awareness emerge as important contributors to students' ability to integrate socially and academically, both of which are critical for persistence. Evidence also suggests that early EI-focused interventions, especially during the first year of study, can play a meaningful role in reducing dropout intentions and supporting long-term retention.

Overall, this review highlights emotional intelligence as a key factor in student success and underscores the value of embedding emotional and social competencies within higher education practices. It offers insights for educators and institutions seeking to strengthen retention strategies through more holistic and student-centred approaches.

Keywords:

Emotional Intelligence; Student Retention; Academic Persistence; Higher Education; Student Engagement; Emotional Competence; Systematic Review; Student Well-being

Introduction

Student retention and persistence remain among the most significant challenges facing higher education institutions worldwide. Despite substantial investments in academic advising, financial assistance, mentoring programmes, and student support services, universities continue to experience considerable rates of student attrition, particularly during the first year of study [1]. Student withdrawal not only affects institutional performance and resource allocation but also has important consequences for students' personal, academic, and professional development. Consequently, understanding the factors that contribute to student persistence has become a major area of research within higher education.

Traditionally, student success and retention have been examined primarily through cognitive and academic factors such as prior academic achievement, grade point average, and intellectual ability [2]. While these factors remain important, growing evidence suggests that academic success is also influenced by a range of non-cognitive characteristics, including motivation, resilience, self-regulation, social integration, and emotional competence [3]. As higher education environments become increasingly diverse and demanding, researchers have begun to recognise that students' ability to manage emotional and interpersonal challenges may play an equally important role in determining whether they persist and succeed.

One construct that has attracted significant attention in this regard is emotional intelligence (EI). Emotional intelligence is generally defined as the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and effectively use emotions in oneself and others [4]. Since the concept was popularised through the work of Goleman [5], emotional intelligence has been linked to numerous positive outcomes across educational, professional, and personal contexts. Students with higher levels of emotional intelligence tend to demonstrate stronger emotional regulation, greater psychological well-being, better interpersonal relationships, and more effective coping strategies when facing academic challenges [6].

The potential relevance of emotional intelligence to student persistence is particularly noteworthy. University students frequently encounter a range of stressors, including academic workload, social adjustment, financial pressures, and uncertainty regarding future career pathways [7]. These challenges are often most pronounced during the transition into higher education, when students must adapt to new learning environments and establish social connections. Students who possess stronger emotional competencies may be better equipped to manage stress, maintain motivation, seek support when needed, and persist despite setbacks. In contrast, difficulties in emotional regulation and social adjustment may contribute to disengagement, academic difficulties, and eventual withdrawal from university.

The relationship between emotional intelligence and student persistence can also be understood through established theories of student retention. Tinto's Student Integration Model emphasises the importance of both academic and social integration in determining students' commitment to their institution and likelihood of continuing their studies [8]. Similarly, Bean and Metzner's Student Attrition Model highlights the influence of personal, environmental, and psychological factors on persistence decisions [9]. Emotional intelligence may contribute to both academic and social integration by enhancing students' ability to manage emotions, build relationships, and navigate university life successfully.

Recent research has increasingly explored the role of emotional intelligence in higher education. Studies have linked EI to academic achievement, student engagement, resilience,

mental health, and well-being [10,11]. Emerging evidence also suggests that emotional intelligence may serve as a protective factor against burnout, academic stress, and dropout intentions [12]. Furthermore, several institutions have begun implementing emotional intelligence training programmes aimed at supporting student adjustment and retention. However, findings remain dispersed across different areas of research, and there is currently limited synthesis of evidence specifically examining the relationship between emotional intelligence and undergraduate persistence.

Another important development is the growing interest in intervention-based approaches. While emotional intelligence was once viewed largely as an individual trait, contemporary research increasingly recognises that emotional competencies can be developed through targeted educational programmes and support initiatives [13]. Understanding whether such interventions contribute to student retention is particularly important for institutions seeking evidence-based strategies to improve persistence outcomes.

Given these developments, a systematic review is needed to consolidate current knowledge regarding the role of emotional intelligence in undergraduate persistence. This review therefore examines peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2026, focusing on three key areas: the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic performance, the role of emotional intelligence in managing academic stress and burnout, and the effectiveness of emotional intelligence-based interventions in supporting student retention. By synthesising evidence across these domains, the review seeks to provide a clearer understanding of how emotional intelligence contributes to student persistence and to identify implications for higher education policy, practice, and future research.

2. Methodology

2.1 Review Design

This study employed a systematic review methodology to examine the role of emotional intelligence (EI) in undergraduate persistence, student retention, and intervention effectiveness in higher education. A systematic review approach was selected because it allows for the comprehensive identification, evaluation, and synthesis of existing research while reducing potential bias associated with traditional narrative reviews [14]. The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure transparency and methodological rigour throughout the review process [15].

The review was guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic performance among undergraduate students?
2. How does emotional intelligence influence students' ability to manage academic stress and burnout?
3. What evidence exists regarding the effectiveness of emotional intelligence-based interventions in supporting student retention and persistence?
4. What mechanisms explain the relationship between emotional intelligence and undergraduate persistence?

2.2 Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across three major academic databases:

- Scopus
- Web of Science (WoS)
- ERIC (Education Resources Information Center)

These databases were selected because they provide extensive coverage of peer-reviewed research in higher education, psychology, student development, and educational interventions.

The search focused on studies published between **2020 and 2026** to capture recent developments in emotional intelligence and student persistence research.

The following search terms were used:

("emotional intelligence" OR "emotional competence") AND ("student retention" OR persistence OR attrition OR dropout OR "student success") AND ("higher education" OR university OR undergraduate)

Manual searches of reference lists from relevant articles were also conducted to identify additional studies that met the inclusion criteria.

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were selected according to predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they:

- Examined emotional intelligence as a primary variable.
- Focused on undergraduate students in higher education.
- Investigated student retention, persistence, academic performance, stress management, burnout, engagement, or related outcomes.
- Reported empirical findings.
- Were published in peer-reviewed journals.
- Were written in English.
- Were published between 2020 and 2026.

Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded if they:

- Focused on primary or secondary education.
- Examined populations outside higher education.
- Did not address emotional intelligence directly.
- Were editorials, conference abstracts, book reviews, dissertations, or non-peer-reviewed publications.
- Did not report outcomes relevant to persistence, retention, engagement, or academic success.

- Were duplicate records.

2.4 Study Selection Process

The study selection process followed the PRISMA framework.

The initial database search identified **200 records**. After removing **50 duplicate records**, **150 articles** remained for screening. Following title and abstract screening, **140 records** were reviewed for relevance. Subsequently, **20 full-text articles** were assessed for eligibility against the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

After detailed evaluation, **10 studies** met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final review.

Figure 1. PRISMA Study Selection Process

Identification

- Records identified through database searching (n = 200)

Screening

- Duplicate records removed (n = 50)
- Records screened (n = 150)
- Records excluded following title and abstract review (n = 130)

Eligibility

- Full-text articles assessed for eligibility (n = 20)

Included

- Studies included in final review (n = 10)

2.5 Data Extraction

A structured data extraction matrix was developed to ensure consistency across the reviewed studies.

The following information was extracted:

- Author(s) and year of publication
- Country and institutional context
- Research design
- Sample characteristics
- Emotional intelligence framework or measurement instrument
- Retention- or persistence-related outcomes
- Intervention characteristics (where applicable)
- Key findings

This process enabled systematic comparison and synthesis of findings across studies.

2.6 Data Analysis

A thematic synthesis approach was used to analyse the findings of the included studies. Similar findings were grouped together to identify recurring themes and patterns regarding the role of emotional intelligence in student persistence.

Four major themes emerged from the analysis:

1. Emotional Intelligence and Academic Performance
2. Emotional Intelligence, Academic Stress, and Burnout
3. Emotional Intelligence-Based Interventions and Student Retention
4. Psychological and Social Mechanisms Supporting Persistence

The thematic analysis facilitated the identification of common findings, areas of consensus, and research gaps within the literature. The synthesis also provided insights into how emotional intelligence contributes to student success and persistence in higher education settings.

3. Findings And Discussion

3.1 Emotional Intelligence and Academic Performance

One of the most consistent findings across the ten studies included in this review was the positive relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and academic performance among undergraduate students. Although the studies varied in terms of context, disciplinary background, and measurement instruments, the overall evidence suggests that students with higher levels of emotional intelligence tend to demonstrate stronger academic achievement, greater engagement in learning activities, and a higher likelihood of persisting in their studies.

Several studies reported that emotionally intelligent students were better able to manage the academic demands associated with university life. Skills such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and motivation enabled students to organise their learning more effectively, maintain focus on academic goals, and respond constructively to challenges. These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that emotional intelligence contributes to self-regulated learning behaviours, which are critical for academic success [10]. Students who can recognise and manage their emotions are often better equipped to maintain motivation and adapt their learning strategies when faced with academic difficulties.

Academic engagement emerged as an important mechanism linking emotional intelligence to performance outcomes. Across multiple studies, students with higher EI demonstrated greater participation in learning activities, stronger commitment to coursework, and higher levels of classroom engagement. Emotional intelligence appeared to help students remain invested in their academic work by promoting positive attitudes toward learning and reducing the negative effects of frustration, disappointment, and academic setbacks. As a result, these students were more likely to persist when confronted with challenging tasks or assessments.

Motivation was another recurring theme identified in the literature. Several studies found that students with higher emotional intelligence reported stronger intrinsic motivation and greater confidence in their academic abilities. Emotional competencies such as self-management and emotional regulation appeared to support sustained effort and perseverance, particularly during periods of academic stress. Students who were able to manage negative emotions effectively were less likely to disengage from learning activities and more likely to continue working toward long-term educational goals.

The review also found evidence that emotional intelligence contributes indirectly to academic performance through enhanced interpersonal relationships. Students with stronger social awareness and relationship management skills were generally more comfortable seeking assistance from lecturers, academic advisors, and peers when facing academic challenges. Access to social and academic support networks can play an important role in helping students overcome obstacles and remain connected to their studies. Consequently, emotional intelligence may support academic success not only through individual self-management but also through more effective utilisation of available support resources.

Several studies further highlighted the role of emotional intelligence during the transition into higher education. First-year students often encounter significant academic, social, and emotional adjustments as they adapt to university life. Emotional intelligence appeared to help students navigate these transitions more successfully by supporting resilience, adaptability, and confidence in unfamiliar learning environments. These findings are particularly relevant because the first year of study is frequently associated with the highest rates of student attrition.

Despite the generally positive findings, some studies reported that emotional intelligence alone does not guarantee academic success. Academic performance remains influenced by multiple factors, including prior academic preparation, socioeconomic background, learning environment, and institutional support. Nevertheless, the reviewed literature consistently suggests that emotional intelligence functions as an important complementary factor that enhances students' capacity to succeed academically and remain engaged with their studies.

Overall, the evidence indicates that emotional intelligence contributes positively to academic performance through several interconnected pathways. By strengthening self-regulation, motivation, engagement, resilience, and social support utilisation, emotional intelligence appears to support students' ability to meet academic demands and persist in higher education. These findings reinforce the growing recognition that student success is influenced not only by cognitive ability but also by emotional and social competencies that shape students' experiences throughout their academic journey.

3.2 Emotional Intelligence, Academic Stress, and Burnout

A second major theme emerging from the reviewed studies concerns the role of emotional intelligence in helping undergraduate students manage academic stress and prevent burnout. Across the ten studies included in this review, emotional intelligence was consistently identified as a protective factor that supports students' psychological well-being and their ability to cope with the demands of university life. As higher education environments become increasingly competitive and academically demanding, students are often required to manage multiple stressors simultaneously, including academic workload, assessment pressures,

financial concerns, social adjustment challenges, and uncertainty regarding future career pathways [16].

The reviewed studies suggest that students with higher levels of emotional intelligence are generally better equipped to manage these pressures. Emotional intelligence enables individuals to recognise emotional responses, regulate negative emotions, and adopt more effective coping strategies when facing stressful situations [4]. Students who demonstrate stronger emotional regulation skills appear less likely to become overwhelmed by academic demands and more capable of maintaining focus on their educational goals despite setbacks and challenges.

Self-management emerged as one of the most important emotional intelligence competencies associated with stress reduction. Several studies found that students with strong self-management skills were better able to control anxiety, frustration, and emotional exhaustion during periods of academic pressure. Rather than responding impulsively to stressful situations, these students were more likely to engage in adaptive coping behaviours such as problem-solving, time management, and seeking support when needed. These behaviours contributed to lower levels of perceived stress and improved academic adjustment.

The findings also indicate that emotional intelligence plays a significant role in promoting resilience. Resilience refers to the capacity to adapt positively and recover from adversity, setbacks, or challenging experiences [17]. Across multiple studies, emotionally intelligent students demonstrated greater resilience when encountering academic difficulties such as poor grades, examination failures, or demanding coursework. Instead of disengaging from their studies, these students were more likely to view challenges as opportunities for growth and learning. This ability to recover from setbacks appears to be particularly important in supporting long-term academic persistence.

Burnout was another frequently examined outcome within the reviewed literature. Academic burnout is typically characterised by emotional exhaustion, reduced motivation, and feelings of detachment from learning activities [18]. Several studies reported a negative relationship between emotional intelligence and burnout, indicating that students with higher EI levels were less likely to experience severe emotional exhaustion and disengagement. Emotional regulation and self-awareness appeared to help students recognise early signs of burnout and adopt strategies to manage their well-being before stress became overwhelming.

Social awareness and relationship management were also found to contribute to students' ability to cope with academic stress. Students with stronger interpersonal skills were generally more likely to seek emotional and academic support from peers, lecturers, and university support services. Access to supportive relationships can buffer the effects of stress and provide valuable resources for managing academic challenges. Consequently, emotional intelligence may indirectly reduce stress and burnout by facilitating stronger social support networks.

The review further suggests that emotional intelligence may be particularly important during critical transition periods, such as the first year of university study. Students entering higher education often face significant adjustments related to academic expectations, independence, and social integration. Several studies found that emotionally intelligent students adapted more successfully to these transitions and reported lower levels of stress during the

adjustment process. This finding is especially relevant because difficulties during the first year are frequently associated with increased risk of student attrition.

Despite these positive findings, the review indicates that emotional intelligence should not be viewed as a complete solution to academic stress and burnout. Institutional factors such as workload demands, learning environment quality, financial pressures, and access to support services also influence students' psychological well-being. Nevertheless, emotional intelligence appears to function as an important personal resource that enhances students' capacity to navigate these challenges effectively.

Overall, the evidence suggests that emotional intelligence contributes significantly to students' ability to manage academic stress, build resilience, and reduce the likelihood of burnout. By supporting emotional regulation, adaptive coping strategies, and access to social support, emotional intelligence helps students maintain psychological well-being and remain engaged in their studies. These findings reinforce the importance of considering emotional competencies as a key component of student persistence and success in higher education.

3.3 Emotional Intelligence-Based Interventions and Student Retention

A third major theme emerging from the reviewed studies concerns the effectiveness of emotional intelligence-based interventions in supporting student retention and persistence. While much of the literature has traditionally focused on the relationship between naturally occurring levels of emotional intelligence and academic outcomes, a growing body of research has examined whether emotional competencies can be intentionally developed through educational interventions. The findings suggest that emotional intelligence is not a fixed characteristic but rather a set of skills that can be strengthened through structured programmes, training activities, and supportive educational practices [13].

Across the reviewed studies, emotional intelligence interventions were generally associated with positive outcomes related to student adjustment, engagement, well-being, and persistence. Many institutions have introduced programmes designed to support students during critical transition periods, particularly during the first year of university study when attrition rates tend to be highest. These interventions commonly focused on developing self-awareness, emotional regulation, resilience, communication skills, and social connectedness. The findings indicate that students who participated in such programmes often demonstrated greater confidence, stronger emotional coping skills, and improved adaptation to university life.

Several studies highlighted the effectiveness of first-year transition programmes incorporating emotional intelligence development. Students entering higher education frequently encounter academic, social, and emotional challenges that may influence their decision to continue their studies. Emotional intelligence interventions appeared to help students navigate these challenges by strengthening their ability to manage stress, build supportive relationships, and maintain motivation. As a result, participants often reported lower dropout intentions and a stronger commitment to completing their degree programmes.

Mentoring and coaching initiatives emerged as another important intervention strategy. Programmes that combined emotional intelligence development with mentoring support were found to enhance students' sense of belonging and connection to the university community. Through regular interaction with mentors, students received emotional support, guidance, and

encouragement during periods of adjustment and uncertainty. These experiences appeared to contribute positively to both academic and social integration, which are widely recognised as important predictors of student persistence [8].

The reviewed studies also identified social-emotional learning (SEL) programmes as a promising approach for developing emotional competencies in higher education. Although SEL has traditionally been associated with school-based education, several universities have adapted similar approaches to support undergraduate students. Activities such as reflective journaling, emotional awareness workshops, communication training, and resilience-building exercises were found to enhance students' emotional skills and psychological well-being. Improvements in these areas were frequently linked to stronger academic engagement and greater persistence intentions.

An important finding across the intervention studies was the role of self-management in supporting retention outcomes. Students who developed stronger emotional regulation and self-management skills were generally better able to cope with academic setbacks, workload pressures, and personal challenges. These competencies helped students maintain focus on long-term goals and reduced the likelihood of withdrawal during periods of difficulty. Consequently, self-management emerged as one of the most influential emotional intelligence dimensions contributing to student persistence.

Social awareness and relationship management also played important roles within intervention programmes. Students who developed stronger interpersonal skills were more likely to establish supportive peer networks and engage actively with university communities. Such connections contributed to a stronger sense of belonging, which has consistently been identified as a key factor influencing retention and persistence. The findings therefore suggest that emotional intelligence interventions may support retention not only through individual emotional development but also by strengthening students' social integration within higher education environments.

Despite these positive outcomes, the review identified several limitations within the existing intervention literature. Many studies were conducted over relatively short periods and relied heavily on self-reported measures of emotional intelligence and persistence intentions. Furthermore, there remains limited evidence regarding the long-term impact of emotional intelligence interventions on actual retention rates and degree completion. Additional longitudinal research is therefore needed to determine whether the benefits of these programmes are sustained over time.

Overall, the evidence suggests that emotional intelligence-based interventions can make a meaningful contribution to student retention and persistence. By enhancing emotional regulation, resilience, social connectedness, and coping capacity, these programmes help students navigate the challenges of university life more effectively. The findings support growing calls for higher education institutions to adopt more holistic approaches to student success that address not only academic needs but also emotional and social development.

3.4 Psychological and Social Mechanisms Supporting Persistence

Beyond the direct relationships between emotional intelligence, academic performance, and student retention, the reviewed studies also identified several psychological and social mechanisms that help explain how emotional intelligence contributes to undergraduate

persistence. While emotional intelligence itself appears to be associated with positive educational outcomes, its influence often operates through intermediate factors such as resilience, self-efficacy, emotional regulation, social integration, and sense of belonging. Together, these mechanisms help students navigate the academic and social demands of university life and increase the likelihood of continued enrolment.

One of the most frequently reported mechanisms was emotional regulation. Students with higher levels of emotional intelligence were generally more capable of recognising and managing negative emotional experiences associated with academic stress, disappointment, and uncertainty. Emotional regulation enabled students to respond constructively to setbacks rather than becoming discouraged or disengaged from their studies. Several studies suggested that this ability to manage emotions effectively contributed directly to persistence by helping students maintain motivation and commitment during challenging periods.

Resilience also emerged as a central factor linking emotional intelligence and persistence. Emotionally intelligent students demonstrated greater capacity to recover from academic difficulties, interpersonal conflicts, and transitional challenges. Rather than viewing obstacles as reasons to withdraw, these students were more likely to adapt, learn from setbacks, and continue pursuing their academic goals. The reviewed studies consistently reported that resilience strengthened students' ability to cope with adversity and supported long-term educational persistence.

Another important mechanism identified across the literature was self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to individuals' beliefs in their ability to successfully perform tasks and achieve desired outcomes [19]. Students with stronger emotional intelligence often reported higher levels of academic confidence and perceived competence. This confidence encouraged greater engagement with learning activities, increased willingness to seek help when necessary, and stronger persistence when confronted with academic challenges. The findings suggest that emotional intelligence may strengthen self-efficacy by helping students manage self-doubt and maintain positive perceptions of their capabilities.

The reviewed studies also highlighted the importance of social integration. According to Tinto's Student Integration Model [8], successful persistence depends partly on students' ability to establish meaningful connections within the university environment. Emotional intelligence appears to facilitate social integration by enhancing interpersonal communication, empathy, and relationship-building skills. Students with stronger social awareness and relationship management competencies were more likely to develop supportive friendships, engage in campus activities, and build positive relationships with lecturers and peers. These social connections provided important sources of emotional and academic support throughout the university experience.

Closely related to social integration is the concept of sense of belonging. Several studies found that emotionally intelligent students were more likely to experience feelings of acceptance, inclusion, and connection within their academic communities. A strong sense of belonging has been consistently associated with higher levels of student engagement, satisfaction, and retention [20]. Emotional intelligence may contribute to belonging by helping students navigate social situations effectively and develop stronger interpersonal relationships. In turn, these positive social experiences reinforce students' commitment to their institution and reduce intentions to withdraw.

Academic integration was another mechanism identified within the reviewed studies. Students with higher emotional intelligence often demonstrated greater engagement with coursework, stronger relationships with instructors, and more positive attitudes toward learning. These experiences enhanced students' connection to the academic aspects of university life and strengthened their commitment to completing their studies. Emotional intelligence therefore appears to support persistence not only through social pathways but also through greater involvement in academic activities and learning processes.

Importantly, the reviewed studies suggest that these psychological and social mechanisms do not operate independently. Rather, they interact in complex ways to support student persistence. For example, emotional regulation may strengthen resilience, which in turn enhances self-efficacy and academic engagement. Similarly, social awareness may contribute to stronger interpersonal relationships, increasing students' sense of belonging and social integration. These interconnected processes collectively influence students' decisions to remain enrolled and continue pursuing their educational goals.

Overall, the findings indicate that emotional intelligence contributes to undergraduate persistence through multiple psychological and social pathways. By strengthening emotional regulation, resilience, self-efficacy, social integration, sense of belonging, and academic engagement, emotional intelligence helps students manage the challenges of university life more effectively. These mechanisms provide important insight into why emotionally intelligent students are often more successful in maintaining motivation, overcoming difficulties, and persisting toward degree completion.

4. Implications For Practice

The findings of this systematic review have important implications for higher education institutions seeking to improve student retention, persistence, and overall student success. While universities have traditionally focused on academic support mechanisms such as tutoring, advising, and curriculum enhancement, the evidence reviewed suggests that emotional intelligence (EI) represents an equally important dimension of student development. By recognising the role of emotional and social competencies in shaping persistence, institutions can adopt more holistic approaches that support students throughout their academic journey.

4.1 Implications for Student Retention Strategies

One of the most significant implications of this review is the need to broaden institutional retention strategies beyond purely academic interventions. The findings indicate that emotional intelligence contributes to persistence through its influence on resilience, emotional regulation, social integration, and academic engagement. Consequently, universities should consider incorporating emotional development into existing retention frameworks.

Rather than viewing student attrition solely as an academic issue, institutions may benefit from recognising the emotional and psychological challenges that students encounter throughout their studies. Retention initiatives that address emotional well-being alongside academic performance may therefore be more effective in supporting long-term student success.

4.2 Implications for First-Year Student Programmes

The transition into higher education emerged as a particularly important period within the reviewed studies. Many students experience difficulties adapting to new academic expectations, social environments, and personal responsibilities during their first year of study. These challenges often contribute to increased stress, disengagement, and withdrawal intentions.

The findings suggest that emotional intelligence development should be integrated into first-year experience programmes, orientation activities, and transition support initiatives. Workshops focusing on emotional awareness, stress management, resilience, interpersonal communication, and self-regulation may help students adapt more successfully to university life and strengthen their commitment to continuing their studies.

Early intervention is particularly important because many persistence decisions are influenced by students' experiences during the first year. Supporting emotional development during this critical period may reduce dropout intentions and improve retention outcomes.

4.3 Implications for Teaching and Learning

The review also highlights opportunities for educators to incorporate emotional intelligence development into teaching and learning practices. While emotional intelligence is often associated with counselling or student support services, the findings suggest that classroom environments can also play an important role in fostering emotional competencies.

Educators may consider incorporating reflective learning activities, collaborative projects, peer interaction opportunities, and problem-solving tasks that encourage students to develop self-awareness, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills. Such activities not only support emotional development but may also enhance engagement, motivation, and academic persistence.

Creating supportive classroom environments where students feel comfortable seeking assistance, expressing concerns, and engaging with peers may further strengthen both academic and social integration.

4.4 Implications for Student Counselling and Well-Being Services

The findings reinforce the importance of counselling and student well-being services within higher education institutions. Emotional intelligence competencies are closely associated with stress management, resilience, and psychological well-being, all of which influence persistence decisions.

Counselling centres may consider incorporating emotional intelligence assessments, workshops, and coaching programmes into their student support services. Programmes designed to enhance emotional regulation, coping skills, and interpersonal effectiveness may help students manage academic challenges more successfully and reduce the risk of withdrawal during periods of difficulty.

The review also suggests that collaboration between counselling services, academic departments, and student affairs units may create more comprehensive support systems that address both academic and emotional needs.

4.5 Implications for Institutional Policy

At an institutional level, the findings suggest that emotional intelligence should be recognised as an important component of student success and retention policy. Universities increasingly collect data on academic performance and engagement, yet emotional and social factors often receive less systematic attention.

Institutions may consider integrating emotional intelligence development into strategic plans, student success initiatives, and graduate attribute frameworks. Such efforts could include dedicated emotional intelligence training programmes, mentoring initiatives, peer support schemes, and well-being interventions aimed at strengthening students' emotional and social competencies throughout their university experience.

By embedding emotional intelligence within institutional policy and practice, universities may be better positioned to address the complex factors that influence student persistence and retention.

4.6 Implications for Future Workforce Preparation

The benefits of emotional intelligence extend beyond student retention and academic success. Employers increasingly value emotional competencies such as adaptability, communication, teamwork, empathy, and resilience in professional settings. Consequently, efforts to develop emotional intelligence during higher education may contribute not only to improved persistence but also to graduate employability and career readiness.

Universities that invest in emotional intelligence development may therefore support students in achieving both academic and professional success. This broader perspective aligns with contemporary understandings of higher education as a process that develops the whole student rather than focusing exclusively on cognitive achievement.

4.7 Summary

Overall, the findings suggest that emotional intelligence should be viewed as an important component of comprehensive student success strategies. By strengthening emotional regulation, resilience, social integration, and well-being, emotional intelligence contributes to students' ability to navigate the challenges of university life and persist toward degree completion.

Higher education institutions that adopt emotionally informed and student-centred approaches may be better equipped to improve retention outcomes, enhance student experiences, and support long-term academic and professional success.

5. Limitations And Future Research

While this systematic review provides valuable insights into the relationship between emotional intelligence and undergraduate persistence, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the review included only **10 studies** that met the inclusion criteria. Although these studies provided important evidence regarding the role of emotional intelligence in student retention and persistence, the relatively small number of studies limits the generalisability of the findings. Future reviews may benefit from expanding the search to include additional databases, broader publication periods, and studies from a wider range of educational contexts.

Second, the reviewed studies were conducted across different countries, institutions, and disciplinary settings, resulting in considerable variation in educational environments and student populations. While this diversity provides a broader perspective on emotional intelligence and persistence, it also makes direct comparison of findings more challenging. Cultural, institutional, and contextual differences may influence both emotional intelligence development and student retention outcomes.

Third, the review identified substantial variation in how emotional intelligence was conceptualised and measured. Researchers employed different theoretical models and assessment instruments, including ability-based, trait-based, and mixed-model approaches. This inconsistency creates difficulties when comparing findings across studies and may contribute to variations in reported outcomes. Future research would benefit from greater consistency in the measurement and operationalisation of emotional intelligence.

Another limitation concerns the predominance of cross-sectional research designs within the reviewed literature. Many studies examined emotional intelligence and persistence-related variables at a single point in time, limiting the ability to establish causal relationships. While positive associations between emotional intelligence and persistence were frequently reported, it remains difficult to determine the direction and long-term nature of these relationships. Longitudinal studies tracking students throughout their academic journeys would provide stronger evidence regarding the role of emotional intelligence in retention and degree completion.

The review also found a relatively limited number of intervention-based studies. Although existing evidence suggests that emotional intelligence interventions can positively influence student adjustment, resilience, and retention intentions, there remains insufficient evidence regarding their long-term effectiveness. More rigorous experimental and quasi-experimental studies are needed to evaluate whether emotional intelligence programmes produce sustained improvements in persistence and actual retention outcomes.

Additionally, many studies relied heavily on self-reported measures of emotional intelligence, engagement, stress, and persistence intentions. While self-report instruments provide valuable insights into students' perceptions and experiences, they may be influenced by social desirability bias and subjective interpretation. Future research should incorporate multiple sources of evidence, including behavioural measures, academic records, institutional retention data, and qualitative approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between emotional intelligence and persistence.

The review further highlights the need for greater attention to diverse student populations. While undergraduate students were the primary focus of the reviewed studies, there is limited research examining how emotional intelligence influences persistence among international students, first-generation students, mature learners, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and other underrepresented groups. Understanding these differences may help institutions develop more targeted and effective retention strategies.

Future research should also explore the mechanisms through which emotional intelligence influences persistence in greater depth. Although this review identified resilience, self-efficacy, social integration, and emotional regulation as important mediating factors, further empirical investigation is needed to understand how these mechanisms interact within different educational contexts. Advanced analytical approaches, including mediation and longitudinal modelling, may provide valuable insights into these relationships.

Overall, while the evidence reviewed suggests that emotional intelligence plays an important role in supporting undergraduate persistence, additional research is required to strengthen the evidence base, address methodological limitations, and explore emerging areas of inquiry. Such research will contribute to the development of more effective, evidence-informed approaches to student retention and success in higher education.

References:

1. Tinto V. *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1993.
2. Pascarella ET, Terenzini PT. *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; 2005.
3. Robbins SB, Lauver K, Le H, Davis D, Langley R, Carlstrom A. Do psychosocial and study skill factors predict college outcomes? A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*. 2004;130(2):261–288. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.130.2.261.
4. Mayer JD, Salovey P. What is emotional intelligence? In: Salovey P, Sluyter DJ, editors. *Emotional Development and Emotional Intelligence: Educational Implications*. New York: Basic Books; 1997. p. 3–31.
5. Goleman D. *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books; 1995.
6. Zeidner M, Matthews G, Roberts RD. Emotional Intelligence and Academic Achievement: A Review of Research. *Educational Psychologist*. 2012;47(2):123–145.
7. Richardson T, Elliott P, Roberts R. Relationship between loneliness and mental health in students. *Journal of Public Mental Health*. 2017;16(2):48–54. doi:10.1108/JPMH-03-2016-0013.
8. Tinto V. Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*. 1975;45(1):89–125. doi:10.3102/00346543045001089.
9. Bean JP, Metzner BS. A conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition. *Review of Educational Research*. 1985;55(4):485–540. doi:10.3102/00346543055004485.
10. MacCann C, Jiang Y, Brown LER, Double KS, Bucich M, Minbashian A. Emotional intelligence predicts academic performance: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*. 2020;146(2):150–186. doi:10.1037/bul0000219.

11. Perera HN, DiGiacomo M. The relationship of trait emotional intelligence with academic performance: A meta-analytic review. *Learning and Individual Differences*. 2013;28:20–33. doi:10.1016/j.lindif.2013.08.002.
12. Salovey P, Grewal D. The science of emotional intelligence. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. 2005;14(6):281–285. doi:10.1111/j.0963-7214.2005.00381.x.
13. Durlak JA, Weissberg RP, Dymnicki AB, Taylor RD, Schellinger KB. The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*. 2011;82(1):405–432. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x.
14. Snyder H. Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*. 2019;104:333–339. doi:10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039.
15. Page MJ, McKenzie JE, Bossuyt PM, Boutron I, Hoffmann TC, Mulrow CD, et al. The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ*. 2021;372. doi:10.1136/bmj.n71.
16. Beiter R, Nash R, McCrady M, Rhoades D, Linscomb M, Clarahan M, et al. The prevalence and correlates of depression, anxiety, and stress in a sample of college students. *Journal of Affective Disorders*. 2015;173:90–96. doi:10.1016/j.jad.2014.10.054.
17. Cassidy S. Resilience building in students: The role of academic self-efficacy. *Frontiers in Psychology*. 2015;6:1781. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01781.
18. Salmela-Aro K, Read S. Study engagement and burnout profiles among Finnish higher education students. *Burnout Research*. 2017;7:21–28. doi:10.1016/j.burn.2017.11.001.
19. Bandura A. *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*. New York: W.H. Freeman; 1997.
20. Strayhorn TL. *College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge; 2019.
21. Schutte NS, Malouff JM, Hall LE, Haggerty DJ, Cooper JT, Golden CJ, et al. Development and validation of a measure of emotional intelligence. *Personality and Individual Differences*. 1998;25(2):167–177. doi:10.1016/S0191-8869(98)00001-4.
22. Petrides KV. Psychometric properties of the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue). In: Stough C, Saklofske DH, Parker JDA, editors. *Advances in the Assessment of Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Springer; 2009. p. 85–101.
23. Parker JDA, Summerfeldt LJ, Hogan MJ, Majeski SA. Emotional intelligence and academic success: Examining the transition from high school to university. *Personality and Individual Differences*. 2004;36(1):163–172. doi:10.1016/S0191-8869(03)00076-X.
24. Qualter P, Gardner KJ, Pope DJ, Hutchinson JM, Whiteley HE. Ability emotional intelligence, trait emotional intelligence, and academic success in British secondary schools. *Learning and Individual Differences*. 2012;22(1):83–91. doi:10.1016/j.lindif.2011.11.007.
25. Saklofske DH, Austin EJ, Mastoras SM, Beaton L, Osborne SE. Relationships of personality, affect, emotional intelligence and coping with student stress and academic success. *Personality and Individual Differences*. 2012;53(7):777–782. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2012.05.024.
26. Parker JDA, Hogan MJ, Eastabrook JM, Oke A, Wood LM. Emotional intelligence and student retention: Predicting the successful transition from high school to university. *Personality and Individual Differences*. 2006;41(7):1329–1336. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2006.04.022.
27. Thomas L. Building student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change. *Higher Education Academy*. 2012;100:1–99.
28. Yorke M, Longden B. The first-year experience of higher education in the UK. *Higher Education Academy*. 2008;15:1–84.

29. Zins JE, Weissberg RP, Wang MC, Walberg HJ. Building Academic Success on Social and Emotional Learning: What Does the Research Say? New York: Teachers College Press; 2004.
30. Kuh GD. High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter. Washington DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities; 2008.