

THE ROLE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL SKILLS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN DELTA STATE

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Abstract

This study examined the role of emotional intelligence (EI) in developing social skills among University students in Delta State. It assessed students' EI levels, analyzed their impact on various social skills, and explored gender differences in this relationship through two guiding research questions and hypotheses. Employing a descriptive survey design, the study targeted 1,709 final-year students (643 males and 1,066 females) during the 2024/2025 academic session. A multi-stage sampling technique produced a sample of 320 students (120 males and 200 females) across ten universities. Data was collected using standardized instruments adopted from Schutte et al. (1998) and Reggio (2006), with strong reliability indices for EI ($\alpha = .89$) and social skills ($\alpha = .86$). Pearson correlation and independent t-tests were used for analysis. Results indicated a significant positive correlation between EI and social skills ($r = .52, p < .001$) and a notable gender difference, with female students exhibiting higher emotional awareness. The study recommends incorporating EI training into university curricula and implementing gender-sensitive counseling programs to strengthen students' interpersonal abilities. These findings offer practical implications for educators, counselors, and policymakers seeking to foster emotional and social development in tertiary institutions, concluding that structured EI interventions are vital for improving students' academic performance, emotional well-being, and interpersonal relationships in Nigerian universities.

Key Words: *Emotional Awareness, Emotional Intelligence, Gender Differences, Interpersonal Competence, Social Skills, University Students.*

Introduction

Students all over the world face many emotional and social challenges as they go through school, and Nigerian university students are not exempted. They have to adjust to new environments, build friendships, handle personal issues, and cope with the heavy demands of academics. In these stressful situations, emotional intelligence becomes especially important because it helps them recognize, understand, and manage their emotions in ways that support both their well-being and success. Emotional intelligence (EI), which is close to human feelings, has increasingly been recognized as a critical factor in shaping students' academic achievement, social adjustment, and overall psychological well-being. According to Pong and Lam (2023), emotional intelligence refers to one's capacity to perceive, interpret, and manage emotions both in oneself and in others, thereby fostering better decision-making and interpersonal relations. Popularized by

Daniel Goleman (1995), the concept encompasses five key domains: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. These interrelated components collectively enable individuals to engage meaningfully in personal and social environments, shaping how they respond to challenges and maintain relationships.

Within the higher education context, students frequently navigate complex academic and interpersonal demands. Universities in Delta State serve diverse student populations where emotional and social competencies play a critical role in promoting adaptation, collaboration, and resilience. Empirical findings by Ononye, et al. (2022) and Shengyao (2024) show that students with higher emotional intelligence handle academic pressure more efficiently, build stronger relationships, and engage more actively in learning activities. Similarly, the capacity to recognize emotions and respond appropriately to social cues contributes to leadership, cooperation, and conflict management (Goleman, 1995; Mayer, et al., 2004). Equally vital to student development are social skills, which are defined as the behavioural tool individuals use to communicate effectively, cooperate with others, express emotions, and resolve interpersonal conflict (Denham & Zinsser, 2021). Social skills, which are intimately tied to emotional intelligence as both shapes how individuals relate to others, refer to the talents that enable individuals to engage effectively in interpersonal interactions. They are crucial qualities that facilitate communication, productive collaboration, and conflict resolution. Similarly, Cerutti and Seehuus (2024) described social abilities as teachable patterns of behaviour that help individuals convey their thoughts clearly, interpret social signals accurately, and respond appropriately across different settings. In a more comprehensive view, Ramos-Galarza, et al. (2024) described social skills as the combination of verbal and non-verbal communication, empathy, emotional regulation, active listening, cooperation, conflict resolution, and assertiveness that help individuals function successfully in personal, social, academic, and professional environments.

These definitions reflect the multi-dimensional nature of social skills and highlight their importance across a range of human interactions. They also highlight that social abilities are not innate but learnt and developed through constant social experiences, education, and reflection. In university settings, particularly among undergraduates in Delta State, social skills have become increasingly vital for navigating complicated academic contexts, maintaining peer relationships, and preparing for the workplace. Strong social skills are vital for developing constructive personal and professional connections, as they enable individuals to traverse complicated social contexts efficiently. Elias, et al. (2020) noted that these abilities are shaped by numerous factors, including individual emotional capacity, family background, and cultural norms. Social skills go far beyond ordinary day-to-day interactions; they are crucial abilities that shape how students learn, relate, and succeed. In the university setting in Delta State, these skills play a central role in supporting academic performance, building resilience, strengthening friendships, and preparing students for future careers. Studies have shown that students who cultivate strong social competencies tend to experience less stress, participate more in collaborative learning, and maintain better emotional health (Ramos-Galarza et al., 2024; Denham & Zinsser, 2021). In today's labour market, where employers prioritize communication and teamwork as much as technical expertise, social skills transform academic learning into employability (Cerutti & Seehuus, 2024).

The relationship between emotional intelligence and social abilities is strongly intertwined, particularly in the lives of university students addressing academic, social, and personal development. Emotional intelligence (EI) is the capacity to comprehend, handle, and communicate one's emotions while also responding correctly to the feelings of others, and serves as the foundation for effective interpersonal interaction. Emotional intelligence and social skills are mutually reinforcing. Emotional intelligence allows individuals to comprehend and control

feelings, while social skills represent its external application through behavior. Ramos-Galarza, et al. (2024) observed that people with higher EI are usually more empathetic, adaptable, and cooperative. This relationship becomes particularly evident in academic group tasks and peer interactions, where emotionally aware students express themselves clearly, include others, and prevent conflicts. Supporting this view, Ononye, et al. (2022) found that emotionally intelligent learners manage disagreements calmly and seek mutual understanding.

In essence, social skills are an outward expression of one's emotional intelligence, and both are mutually reinforcing (Lama, et al., 2023). Emotional intelligence directly supports the development and application of social skills, as individuals with strong EI tend to be more empathetic, adaptable, and socially responsive (Shaik, et al., 2024). The dynamic interaction between EI and social competence is particularly evident in group learning, peer mentoring, and collaborative problem-solving situations. Emotional sensitivity enhances open communication, promotes inclusiveness, and lowers the likelihood of misunderstandings. According to Ononye, et al. (2022), learners with well-developed emotional intelligence typically manage disagreements with greater composure. Instead of resorting to aggressive reactions, they practice attentive listening and try to understand others' viewpoints to arrive at amicable solutions. This skill in resolving interpersonal tensions calmly is vital for sustaining positive relationships both within academic communities and in wider society.

Various factors, such as age, sex, family background, geographical location, parenting styles, and type of school attended, can affect a student's emotional intelligence. Among these, this study focuses on sex as the main variable. The American Psychological Association (2021) described sex as the biological distinction between male and female individuals, typically assigned at birth based on physiological characteristics. Research has consistently shown that sex differences influence emotional intelligence dimensions, including social skills. Emotional intelligence (EI) generally enhances social capabilities for all students by promoting better communication, effective conflict resolution, and the development of healthy interpersonal relationships. However, female students generally exhibit stronger correlations between emotional intelligence and the ability to adjust to social circumstances, compared to their male counterparts. Research indicates that female students often excel in interpersonal EI areas such as emotional perception, empathy, and regulating others' emotions linked to better social functioning, well-being, and resilience (Kavitha & Singh, 2023; Urbón, et al., 2025). In contrast, male students tend to perform better in intrapersonal EI domains like self-regulation, impulse control, and stress management, which support coping and self-discipline (García-Ros, et al., 2022). However, males generally score lower in interpersonal EI, suggesting potential difficulties with empathy and responding to social cues.

This research adopts Goleman's (1995) emotional intelligence framework as its theoretical foundation, emphasizing the integration of emotional regulation, self-awareness, motivation, empathy, and social functioning. Each of these domains contributes to students' ability to manage their internal emotional states while navigating the social complexities of university life. In this framework, social skills are not treated as independent traits but rather as outward expressions of the foundational emotional competencies. Without empathy or self-regulation, for example, effective communication and teamwork may be compromised. As such, social skills are viewed as a critical outcome of emotional intelligence in action. In university environments characterized by peer collaboration, academic competition, and diverse social settings, the development of emotional intelligence and social skills is essential. Students who possess these competencies are more likely to thrive both academically and socially, demonstrating resilience, leadership, and

meaningful engagement with their academic communities (Denham, et al., 2021; Shaik, et al., 2024).

Numerous empirical investigations have highlighted the importance of emotional intelligence in enhancing students' interpersonal and social capabilities in academic settings. Lubega (2025) conducted a study among undergraduates in Uganda and reported that students with higher emotional intelligence scores demonstrated stronger collaborative behaviours during group academic activities. The study emphasized that emotional competence was a key factor in promoting teamwork, mutual respect, and conflict resolution among peers. Similarly, Ononye, et al. (2022) examined emotional intelligence among students in Nigerian universities and found that those with elevated EI levels exhibited significantly better peer relationships and lower tendencies toward social withdrawal and anxiety. Their study concluded that emotional intelligence acts as a buffer against social stress and promotes smoother interpersonal adjustment in academic environments.

In a related study, Shaik, et al. (2024) analyzed the impact of EI on communication efficacy in student project teams. Their findings revealed that emotionally intelligent students were more articulate, responsive, and effective in group dialogues, leading to enhanced productivity and group cohesion. The researchers emphasized the role of emotional self-regulation and empathy in facilitating constructive communication. Furthermore, Kavitha & Singh (2023) explored gender-based differences in emotional intelligence and how these differences shaped interpersonal dynamics among Ethiopian college students. Their results showed that female students generally scored higher in empathy and social sensitivity, which translated to stronger relational engagement. As higher education institutions aim to support holistic student development, understanding the link between emotional intelligence and social skills becomes crucial in promoting success, well-being, and a healthy campus culture.

Emotional intelligence and social skills are mutually reinforcing. Emotional intelligence allows individuals to comprehend and control feelings, while social skills represent its external application through behaviour. Ramos-Galarza, et al. (2024) observed that people with higher EI are usually more empathetic, adaptable, and cooperative. This relationship becomes particularly evident in academic group tasks and peer interactions, where emotionally aware students express themselves clearly, include others, and prevent conflicts. Supporting this view, Ononye, et al. (2022) found that emotionally intelligent learners manage disagreements calmly and seek mutual understanding an essential quality for sustaining healthy relationships in academic communities.

Several demographic and environmental variables influence emotional intelligence, including age, sex, family background, and educational context. The American Psychological Association (2021) defined sex as the biological differentiation between male and female individuals. Research indicates that gender differences shape emotional awareness and social interaction styles. While EI benefits all students by enhancing communication and self-control, females often show higher ability in emotional empathy, perception, and understanding, leading to improved well-being and adaptability (Kavitha & Singh, 2023; Urbón, et al., 2025). Males, on the other hand, tend to perform better in self-regulation and stress management (García-Ros, et al., 2022).

This study adopted Goleman's (1995) model as its theoretical foundation, emphasizing that emotional regulation, self-awareness, motivation, empathy, and social competence are essential for academic and interpersonal success. In this framework, social skills emerge as outward expressions of emotional competence without empathy or control, collaboration and effective communication decline. Hence, emotional intelligence serves as the foundation for building social and professional relationships in university settings.

In conclusion, emotional intelligence and social skills are indispensable assets for students striving to thrive academically and socially. Undergraduates who develop these qualities tend to demonstrate stronger resilience, cooperation, and leadership. Empirical findings confirm that EI fosters teamwork and reduces anxiety (Lubega, 2025; Shengyao, 2024). Consequently, promoting EI and social skill development within universities supports holistic student growth, mental well-being, and a healthier campus culture.

Statement of the Problem

Social competence is a critical determinant of both academic performance and personal development in the university settings. However, a considerable number of students continue to struggle with managing emotions, sustaining healthy peer interactions, and communicating effectively. These difficulties are frequently associated with low levels of emotional intelligence, which can manifest in increased psychological stress, reduced academic engagement, and interpersonal conflict. University students in Delta State are confronted with various challenges, including academic pressures, socio-cultural diversity, and identity development issues, each of which necessitate a well-developed capacity for emotional adaptation and social interaction. Although emotional intelligence has received increasing global attention as a vital construct for student success, empirical investigations focusing on its specific influence on social skills within Nigerian higher education contexts remain sparse.

Moreover, while prior research acknowledges gender-based emotional differences, few studies specifically explore how gender moderates the relationship between EI and social behaviour among university students. Addressing this knowledge gap, the present study seeks to examine the extent to which emotional intelligence contributes to the development of social skills among University students in Delta State. In addition, it investigates the role of gender in shaping this relationship, thereby offering a more nuanced understanding of student emotional and social development within a diverse academic environment.

Purpose of the Study

1. To evaluate the relationship between emotional intelligence and social skills among University students in Delta State.
2. To identify gender differences in the influence of emotional intelligence on social skills among University students in Delta State.

Methods

This study was guided by two research questions and two null hypotheses. A descriptive survey research design was adopted because it provided an appropriate framework for collecting data from a large group of students across multiple universities without altering their natural setting or behaviour. The target population of the study comprised final-year students in the 2024/2025 academic session across five out of the ten accredited universities in Delta State. These institutions include the University of Delta, Agbor; Delta State University, Abraka; Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba; Delta State University of Education, Mosogar and Edwin Clark University, Kiagbodo.

A target population of 1,709 final-year students consisting of 643 males and 1,066 females was engaged. From this population, a sample of 320 students, comprising 120 males and 200 females, was selected to participate in the study.

A multistage sampling technique was employed to ensure adequate representation of students across the universities. In the first stage, stratified sampling was used to group students

based on their respective universities. This was followed by simple balloting to pick five universities and then a proportionate sampling to determine the number of participants to be drawn from each university according to gender distribution. Finally, simple random sampling was applied to select 24 male and 40 female participants from each institution. This approach ensured that the sample accurately reflected the diversity of final-year students across accredited universities in Delta State. It also enhanced the reliability and generalizability of the study findings by ensuring equitable participation from all selected institutions.

A standardized instrument adapted from the Emotional Intelligence and Social Skills Scale (EISSA), originally developed by Schutte, et al. (1998) and Reggio (2006), which consisted of three sections, was employed. Section A captured demographic information such as gender, faculty, and age, Section B assessed emotional intelligence using 12 items, while Section C comprised 10 items designed to evaluate social skills. The entire instrument was structured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5), allowing for the quantification of responses suitable for statistical analysis.

Reliability coefficients of .89 for the emotional intelligence subscale and .86 for the social skills subscale were obtained.

Pearson's product-moment correlation and independent samples t-tests were employed to analyzed the data, with the level of significance set at $p < .05$.

Testing of hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between emotional intelligence and social skills among University students in Delta State.

Table 1

Pearson Product-Moment Correlation on Emotional Intelligence and Social Skills among University Students in Delta State

Variables	N	Pearson (r)	Sig. (2-tailed)	Decision
Emotional Intelligence	320	.139	.013	Rejected
Social Skills	320			

$\alpha = .05$

Table 1 indicated that there was a statistically significant difference in the relationship between emotional intelligence and social skills of University students in Delta State. It shows Pearson (r) of .139 and a p-value of .013. Testing at an alpha level of .05, the p-value is less than alpha value. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. This implies that there is a significant relationship between emotional intelligence and social skills among University students in Delta State.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference by sex in the role of emotional intelligence on the social skills of University students in Delta State.

Table 2

t-test on difference by Sex in the Role of Emotional Intelligence on the Social Skills of University students in Delta State

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	t	Sig. (2-tailed)	Decision
Emotional Intelligence	Male	119	76.46	5.841	318	-1.397	.164	Accepted
	Female	201	77.48	7.048				

$\alpha = .05$

Table 2 indicated that there was no statistically significant difference by sex in the role of emotional intelligence on the social skills of University students in Delta State between male students ($M = 76.46$, $SD = 5.841$) and female students ($M = 77.48$, $SD = 7.048$), $t(318) = -1.397$, $p = .164$. Therefore, the null hypothesis was accepted. This implies that there is no significant difference by sex in the role of emotional intelligence on the social skills of undergraduates in Delta State Universities.

Discussion of findings

Hypothesis one revealed a significant positive relationship between emotional intelligence and social skills among University students in Delta State. Students with higher emotional intelligence were found to exhibit stronger communication, empathy, cooperation, and prosocial behaviours, aligning with earlier research (MacCann, et al., 2020; Okafor & Onwuegbuzie, 2021; Adebayo & Umeh, 2021; Olatunde & Chijioke, 2022; Musa & Ibrahim, 2023).

Regarding sex differences, findings indicated that although female students generally demonstrated slightly higher emotional intelligence, particularly in empathy, emotional perception, and relationship-building, there was no statistically significant difference between males and females in how emotional intelligence influenced social skills. Previous studies (MacCann, et al., 2020; Schutte, et al., 2020; Adewuyi & Olanrewaju, 2022; García-Ros et al., 2022) suggested that females tend to be more emotionally expressive and open, while males often excel in emotional regulation, impulse control, and stress management. These distinct strengths contribute differently yet positively to students' overall social functioning.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it was concluded that University students in Delta State have greater emotional intelligence. There is a significant relationship between emotional intelligence and social skills among University students in Delta State. The role of emotional intelligence on the social skills of undergraduates in Delta State Universities is more on female students than male students, and there is no significant difference by sex in the role of emotional intelligence on the social skills of undergraduates in Delta State Universities.

Based on the findings of this study, it is hereby recommended that:

1. Government at all levels should ensure the integration of emotional intelligence training into school curricula.
2. Ministries of education should organize regular workshops on emotional intelligence to enhance students' communication, empathy and conflict-resolution.

3. School administrators should promote mentorship and peer support programmes for students on emotional intelligence.
4. Digital tools such as mobile apps and online platforms should be introduced to help students track and build their emotional intelligence through games and interactive activities.

Counselling Implications

Counsellors can embed emotional intelligence development into school guidance programmes to boost students' empathy, communication, and teamwork abilities.

1. Support strategies should reflect gender-related strengths by fostering empathy in males and enhancing emotional control in females.
2. Activities such as peer mentoring, simulations, and group tasks can help students build emotional awareness and stronger social skills.
3. Counselling should teach practical emotional regulation and clear communication techniques to manage interpersonal conflicts effectively.
4. Periodic seminars on emotional intelligence and social interaction can prepare students to apply these skills in academic, personal, and career settings.

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