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The Role of Emotional Intelligence in Managing Stress Among University Students in Tanzania: A Case of Higher Learning Institutions in Dodoma, Tanzania

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Abstract: *This study investigated the empirical role of emotional intelligence in mitigating student stress across higher learning institutions in Dodoma, Tanzania. Rooted in the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping and the Four-Branch Model of Emotional Intelligence, the research evaluated how specific sub-dimensions of emotional intelligence—self-emotional appraisal, others' emotional appraisal, regulation of emotion, and use of emotion—predict student stress levels when controlling for key demographic factors. A cross-sectional survey design was deployed across three purposively and stratified sampled institutions: the University of Dodoma, St. John's University of Tanzania, and the Institute of Rural Development Planning. A structured survey administered 5-point Likert-scale items to an effective sample of 418 undergraduate and postgraduate students. Data analysis employed hierarchical multiple regression analysis across four distinct modeling stages to test hypotheses tied to specific research objectives, assessing beta coefficients (), -statistics, -values, model, and changes (). The findings demonstrated that baseline demographic covariates account for a modest proportion of variance, whereas subsequent stage-wise introductions of emotional regulation and appraisal dimensions yield statistically significant and substantial incremental variance in reducing perceived academic and psychosocial stress. By integrating empirical science with real-world institutional policy, the study proposed systemic interventions, including emotional competence curricula, institutionalized mental health frameworks, and targeted socioeconomic safety nets.*

Keywords: Emotional intelligence, perceived stress, higher education, hierarchical regression, academic persistence, mental health policy, Tanzania.

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1. Introduction

HEIs in sub-Saharan Africa are a critical driver of human capital development, social mobility, and national economic modernization (Owuor et al., 2026; Suyuhan et al., 2026). The growth of higher education institutions in the United Republic of Tanzania has greatly increased tertiary education access for marginalised groups that have historically had limited access (Anami, 2026; Likoko & Minxiang, 2026). However, there have been no similar institutional developments in mental health, counselling services, or institutionalized student support systems, which was a gap identified by Huerta (2026) and Inostroza et al. (2026). As a result, tertiary-level students from Tanzania, especially those in the country's fast-growing

legislative and administrative seat of power, Dodoma, suffer from growing psychological distress (Ongito, 2026a, 2026b). There are also well-known tertiary institutions in the city of Dodoma, namely the University of Dodoma (UDOM), St. John's University of Tanzania (SJUT), College of Business Education and Institute of Rural Development Planning (IRDP). In these learning spaces, the university students experience a heavy academic burden, intense examination pressure, high competitiveness amongst peers, and socio-economic concerns regarding employment after university and survival (Mhlongo, 2026; Owuor et al., 2026).

Stress among university students cannot be simply described as a normal part of life, but rather as a growing public health issue that negatively impacts academic performance, cognition, interpersonal relationships, and overall physiology (Journal & Elfaaize, 2026a; Journal & Elfaaize, 2026b; Micheluzzi et al., 2025). In stress-free environments, students may experience a range of psychological issues, such as academic underachievement, interpersonal violence, substance abuse, demoralization, and anxiety disorders, which all have a direct impact on the learning process (El-Naggar & Zayed, 2025; Juniar et al., 2025). University students in the developing world are collectively burdened with high expectations and are expected to be the main economic support for the extended families they are from as well as facing extreme personal financial insecurity, delayed loan disbursement from the Higher Education Students' Loans Board (HESLB), and substandard housing conditions (Matarirano & Muza, 2025; Mhlongo, 2026).

Although such stressors are common among university students globally, little empirical research has been conducted on psychological resilience processes among students in East Africa University. Emotional intelligence is one of the major psychological resources that has become an integral part of the psychological context of the behavioural medicine in contemporary psychology and emotional medicine that can buffer against the negative effects of environmental stress (Mahmood et al., 2026; Shengyao et al., 2026). Emotional intelligence is defined as a person's ability to recognize, assess, comprehend, and manage their emotions, which helps them to reframe a crisis as a challenge, manage the negative emotional responses, and keep their problem-focused coping strategies positive (Lomas et al., 2026; Raisani et al., 2026). The exact mechanism(s) by which different dimensions of emotional intelligence buffer against perceived stress in collectivist African socio-cultural contexts, however, are less well understood and are hotly debated.

This paper aims to examine the role of emotional intelligence in stress management of university students in higher learning institutions in Dodoma, Tanzania based on empirical approach. This study aims to connect theoretical dimensions of behavior science, executive leadership within the university, and national educational policy by addressing the intersection of these areas.This study focuses on the intersection of these issues to connect the abstract dimensions of behavior science with the pragmatic and bottom-line dimensions of national educational policy making. It seeks to support the development of actionable insights which can be utilized by University Administrators, Psychologists and Mental Health Counselors and National policy makers in Tanzania to improve students' wellbeing, safeguard human capital development and create educational equity.

The mental health of university learners in Tanzania has hit a crisis stage with many experiencing high levels of distress and there being a lack of institutional supports in the formal structure of these universities. It is not surprising that Universities in Dodoma have made great strides in increasing students' access to education but have been plagued with structural, financial and pedagogical challenges that impact negatively on the student's experience (Lawrent, 2026; Mhlongo, 2026). Students regularly face substandard, improvised learning environments in the school, a cumbersome distribution of loans, rigid assessment criteria, and limited access to laboratory and library facilities (Inostroza et al., 2026; Mhlongo, 2026). Combined with external socio-economic stressors, these ambient academic strains heighten the cumulative risk of students suffering from somatic (physical) anxiety, chronic fatigue, emotional burnout and profound academic disengagement.

There are several gaps in the existing literature.There are a number of research gaps and contextual gaps. First, there is a massive empirical and geographical disconnect: most of the research on the study of emotional intelligence and stress management has been conducted in Western, high-income settings or in East Asian educational settings (Lin & Ma, 2026; Raisani et al., 2026). Very little research has been conducted with attention to testing transferability of findings from individualistic societies to communal, family-based and resource-poor contexts found in East African tertiary institutions, such as Essel et al., (2026); Tumuheki, (2025). Second, the empirical literature on Africa shows that the available studies mainly focus on bivariate correlations or conventional multiple regression analyses that do not take into account basic sociodemographic factors or the incremental contribution of each dimension of emotional intelligence (Coronado-Maldonado & Benítez-Márquez, 2023; Furnham & Taylor, 2026). The standard regression cannot confirm whether or

not psychological interventions are incrementally valid predictors over demographic predictors like age, gender, year of study, and financial sponsorship status.

Third, there is a significant gap between the theoretical and practical understanding of behavioral psychology and higher education policy in Tanzania. Current research tends to conceptualize stress as a singular medical phenomenon, instead of as a result of complex, dynamic processes of cognitive-emotional appraisal and internal mechanisms in response to stress from the environment. (Ayesha, 2026; Yan et al., 2026). Failure and dropout rates at the University are still being discussed from a punitive and administrative perspective, with little consideration of psychological health factors as determinants (Ayesha, 2026; Duan, 2026). In addition, there is a significant debate about whether emotional intelligence is a fixed quality of personality or a malleable set of skills that can be developed by purposeful institutional development (Abdelghany et al., 2025; Saleem et al., 2025). This study explicitly develops hierarchical regression models that test the incremental predictive value of the EI sub-dimensions to the mitigation of perceived stress, thereby providing empirical evidence that will be applicable for informing practical interventions in policy, curriculum and counselling in the context of Tanzanian Higher Education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

Two important theories are combined for this investigation: the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) and the Four-Branch Model of Emotional Intelligence, (Mayer and Salovey, 1997) conceptualized by Wong and Law (2002). According to Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress, the stress is not just the caliber of the environment, or just the person, but it is a result of a recursive and dynamic transaction between the person and the environment. Stress occurs when a person's appraisal of the environment demands more coping resources (internal or external) than they have. It identifies two types of appraisals: primary appraisal, which is the process whereby a person determines whether an event is threatening, challenging or benign; and secondary appraisal, where the person assesses their ability and what coping options are available to them to deal with the threatening event in the most effective way.

Combining Mayer and Salovey's (1997) ability model and Wong and Law's dimensional model, a detailed cognitive explanation of the impact of emotional competencies on these appraisal processes is provided. In this integrated perspective, emotional intelligence is used as a key psychological factor for secondary appraisal. People with high emotional intelligence are not necessarily less exposed to stressors; however, their advanced ability to perceive, assimilate, understand, and regulate their own and others' feelings can have a profound impact on how they interpret and respond to stressors. At their worst, high-EI students can in theory break through the negative affective spirals, prevent catastrophic primary appraisals, and successfully activate and utilize positive coping mechanisms, minimizing overall psychological load when they encounter academic failure, significant delays in pay, or institutional problems.

2.2 Dimensions of Emotional Intelligence and Stress Reduction

According to the operational framework that Wong and Law (2002) have developed, emotional intelligence is broken down into the four following, interrelated dimensions: Self-Emotional Appraisal (SEA), Others' Emotional Appraisal (OEA), Regulation of Emotion (ROE), and Use of Emotion (UOE). Behavioral impact on psychological stress management varies across the different dimensions of competition in the academic setting.

Self-Emotional Appraisal (SEA) is a person's ability to accurately perceive and communicate their own strong emotions. In university life, students with a higher SEA can identify the first signs of tension, fatigue and frustration in themselves, both somatic and affective. These students do not feel stressed as one large feeling of cognitive paralysis, but can break down specific cognitive feelings of stress, disappointment/exhaustion and this can make it easier for them to undertake direct self-care and timely psychological intervention.

Others' Emotional Appraisal (OEA) refers to the perception and interpretation of others' emotions, including that of peers, lecturers, and family. OEA is important for functioning in complex social contexts, forming collaborative study groups and obtaining social support, but its role in reducing personal stress is less clear. There is some empirical evidence that people with very high OEA who do not have concurrent emotional regulation can absorb the distress and anxiousness of their peer group, which may further add to their individual feeling of stress.

Regulation of Emotion (ROE) refers to the capacity for people to modulate, modulate and recover from strong negative feelings like despair, anger and panic. Numerous empirical studies in the field of educational psychology have established that ROE is the strongest emotional

barrier to acute psychological distress. Students with well-developed emotional regulation strategies in higher learning institutions can learn to consciously manage the anxiety they experience during exams, bounce back quickly from failures and avoid emotional burnout from falling into depression.

Use of Emotion (UOE): This is ability to channel emotional energy into positive activity and performance. This dimension is related closely with intrinsic motivation, cognitive perseveration and self-efficacy. Students who successfully use their emotion can turn physiological arousal caused by stress into effective concentration on learning. If students can use their emotion effectively, they can convert the physiological arousal caused by stress into focused learning attention and turn the perceived threats into stimulating learning challenges.

2.3 Controversies and Issues Open to Debate

Theories and empirical research on emotional intelligence are controversial. There is a general disagreement about construct validity and the operationalization of emotional intelligence, e.g., between ability-based models (assessment of maximum cognitive-emotional performance through objective problem-solving tasks) and trait-based or mixed approaches (assessment of typical behavior tendencies through self-report). Self-report measures of emotional intelligence are said to measure personality traits, like low neuroticism and high extraversion, or social desirability bias, instead of actual cognitive-emotional skills.

The second, more fundamental issue relates to the cross-cultural validity of conceptualizations of emotional intelligence. The mainstream EI models were developed mostly in western, individualistic frameworks which privilege personal autonomy, assertive emotional expression and individual coping approaches. Socio-emotional functioning is a deeply rooted dimension of the collectivist/communal philosophy that exists in sub-Saharan African contexts, especially in Tanzania, in both urban and semi-urban settings. Normative, highly adaptive behaviors in such contexts are emotional restraint, communal obligations, deference to hierarchical authority, and spiritual resilience. The use of mainstream EI scales with African university students is open to questions about the validity of such use because they may reflect local or culturally specific ways of being resilient to stress or may wrongly label culturally acceptable affective expressions as problematic.

A third thorniest issue is the danger of structural deflection in institutional policy. Emphasis on emotional intelligence as a remedy to student stress puts the responsibility on the student and removes the burden from the university and government ministries facing serious structural flaws. If stress management is regarded solely as a personal psychological responsibility, institutions may neglect to pay attention to the conditions of deteriorating physical facilities, too large student/lecturer ratio, inadequate loan provisions and arbitrary academic grading systems. This research attempts to directly tackle this issue by not setting structural reform against emotional intelligence, but by establishing emotional intelligence as an essential psychological coping mechanism at the individual level which will have to work in parallel with institutional policy reform.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Study Area

This study took an empirical, cross-sectional, correlational survey design, and tested quantitative hypotheses about the relationships among the sub-dimensions of emotional intelligence and perceived stress. The geographical area of study was the administrative and legislative capital of Tanzania, namely the city of Dodoma. Dodoma is seen as a micro-environment where modern higher education in Tanzania can be studied as it reflects the rapid institutional urbanisation, student migration from various rural and urban areas and a representative sample of both public and private universities. The study was carried out in three prominent higher learning institutions: University of Dodoma (UDOM), the largest public university in Tanzania; St. John's University of Tanzania (SJUT), a prominent faith based private university and Institute of Rural Development Planning (IRDP), a specialized public university that specializes in development management and economics.

3.2 Population, Sample Size, and Sampling Techniques

The study population included all the registered undergraduate and postgraduate students in the selected institutions for the 2025/2026 academic year. The students who could be accessed in the three campuses were around 38,000 based on institutional registry data. Determination of an adequate sample size to achieve statistical power greater than 0.80 at a 0.05 alpha level for hierarchical multiple regression with multiple predictors was calculated with the formula proposed by Yamane (1967) while

Cochran's (1960) sample size formula in continuous and categorical regression modeling was used.

$n=N/(1+N(e)^2)$

If N is the size of the target population (38,000) and e is the margin of error acceptable (0.05), then: This resulted in an estimate of 396 respondents as the minimum needed sample size. A total of 480 questionnaires were sent out, because of incomplete responses, attrition of respondents and unreturned questionnaires. The total number of questionnaires retrieved was 431 and 418 were completed, checked for data integrity and retained for statistical analysis, yielding an effective return rate of 87.1%.

Multistage stratified sampling technique was adopted. Stratification was done in the first stage according to the institutions proportional to the numbers of students enrolled in the three institutions, namely UDOM, SJUT and IRDP. The second phase involved stratification of departments and faculties in each institution based on category (humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and health). The third phase adopted simple random sampling within the selected lecture groups, where students were selected according to their lists of identification, ensuring that each group had equal opportunities in terms of gender, age group and years of academic study.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

The study tool was a structured and self-administered survey questionnaire that was divided into three parts. Demographic data, such as age, gender, year of study and financial sponsorship source were collected in section A. Section B assessed emotional intelligence in terms of four sub-dimensions (Wong & Law, 2002) corresponding to the four components of the EI. The WLEIS consists of four subscores: Self-Emotional Appraisal (SEA, 4 items), Others' Emotional Appraisal (OEA, 4 items), Regulation of Emotion (ROE, 4 items), and Use of Emotion (UOE, 4 items). Section C was based on the adapted Perceived Stress Scale - 10 (PSS-10) (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983), adapted to reflect academic, economic and interpersonal stressors in Tanzanian universities. Items in Section B and C were all operationalised using a standard 5-point Likert scale from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" and negative items in the stress scale were re-reversed before calculating composites.

3.4 Reliability and Validity Analysis

The instrument was balloted by the panel of experts from the field of educational measurement, organizational psychology, and senior academic faculty at the University of Dodoma to validate construct and content. To help clarify the wording of the questionnaire a pilot study of 45 students from College of Business and Economics, UDOM (not part of the final sample) was conducted and some minor changes in wording were made.

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with Principal Axis Factoring (PAF) followed by Promax rotation was also used to confirm the construct validity. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy for the entire instrument was 0.891, which is greater than the recommended minimum of 0.70, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant ($\chi^2 (325)=4821.16$, $p<0.001$), indicating good factorability. Cronbach's α coefficients and composite reliability (CR) were used to assess reliability. The internal consistency estimates indicated good reliability: Self-Emotional Appraisal ($\alpha=0.842$), Others' Emotional Appraisal ($\alpha=0.811$), Regulation of Emotion ($\alpha=0.886$), Use of Emotion ($\alpha=0.854$), and the Perceived Stress Scale ($\alpha=0.873$). Reliability coefficients were all above the psychometric criterion of .70.

3.5 Data Screening and Testing of Parametric Assumptions

Data (N=418) were carefully checked for all the classical assumptions of parametric regression before performing the hierarchical multiple regression analysis.

To test the normality of the continuous variables, standardized residual histograms, normal P-P plots and mathematical calculations of skewness and kurtosis indices were conducted first. All composite variables showed skewness values between -0.482 and +0.315 and kurtosis values between -0.612 and +0.540, which were within the acceptable limit of psychometric error of ±1.5.

Second, the important linear relationship of the independent predictors and the dependent variable was checked by visual inspection of bivariate scatterplots of the independent predictors and the dependent variable and bivariate Pearson correlation matrices, which showed clear linear configurations with no curvilinear deviations.

Third, to check for homoscedasticity (constant variance of residuals), scatterplots were plotted of the standardized residuals (ZRESID) by the standardized predicted values (ZPRED). Special mention should be made of the residuals which showed no systematic fan-shaped or funnel patterns, but showed an even rectangular dispersion over all predicted levels. The results of the Breusch-Pagan test showed that there was no heteroscedasticity ($\chi^2 (7) = 9.84$, $p = 0.198$).

Fourth, the multicollinearity was assessed using Tolerance statistics and Variance Inflation Factors (VIF). All tolerance values were much higher than 0.20 (range 0.512-0.874), and all VIF values were far below the strict criterion of 5.0 (range 1.144-1.953) indicating that parameter stability is not affected by multicollinearity.

Fifth, the independence of residuals was confirmed by Durbin-Watson statistic. The test produced a value of d=1.942 which is within the optimum range of 1.5<d<2.5, indicating no first order autocorrelation between the residuals.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Statistical Hypothesis Testing and Hierarchical Regression Analysis

4.1.1 Formulation of the Empirical Models

To determine the applied empirical relationship between study variables, a stage-wise Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis was executed. The general algebraic regression equation is formulated as follows:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \sum_{i=1}^{k} \beta_i X_i + \varepsilon$$

Where Y represents the dependent variable (Perceived Stress), β_0 represents the intercept parameter (the expected status of Y when all independent predictors equal zero), β_i represents the partial regression slope parameter capturing the magnitude and direction of the change in Y associated with a one-unit change in predictor X_i holding all other variables constant, and ε represents the random error term capturing unexplained variation.

Hierarchical regression was conducted in four distinct sequential stages to evaluate specific research objectives:

- **Objective 1 / Model 1 (Baseline Demographic Model):** Evaluates the baseline effect of student demographic covariates on perceived stress:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Age}) + \beta_2(\text{Gender}) + \beta_3(\text{Year of Study}) + \varepsilon$$

- **Objective 2 / Model 2 (Personal Emotional Appraisal Model):** Tests the incremental predictive validity of personal emotional appraisal while controlling for demographics:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Age}) + \beta_2(\text{Gender}) + \beta_3(\text{Year of Study}) + \beta_4(\text{SEA}) + \varepsilon$$

- **Objective 3 / Model 3 (Interpersonal Emotional Appraisal Model):** Tests the incremental contribution of social/other emotional awareness:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Age}) + \beta_2(\text{Gender}) + \beta_3(\text{Year of Study}) + \beta_4(\text{SEA}) + \beta_5(\text{OEA}) + \varepsilon$$

- **Objective 4 / Model 4 (Comprehensive Emotional Regulation and Application / Total Effects Model):** Evaluates the full predictive model incorporating active emotional regulation and behavioral application:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Age}) + \beta_2(\text{Gender}) + \beta_3(\text{Year of Study}) + \beta_4(\text{SEA}) + \beta_5(\text{OEA}) + \beta_6(\text{ROE}) + \beta_7(\text{UOE}) + \varepsilon$$

The coefficient of determination (R^2) reflects the proportion of variance in stress explained by the variables in each stage, while the R^2 Change (ΔR^2) assesses whether each successive block provides statistically significant incremental explanatory power through the F-change statistic (F_Δ).

4.1.2 Descriptive Statistics and Inter-Variable Correlations

Prior to presenting the regression models, baseline descriptive indices and intercorrelations were computed. Table 1 summarizes the sample means, standard deviations, and bivariate Pearson correlation coefficients for all variables.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Bivariate Correlations for Study Variables (N = 418)

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Perceived Stress (Y)	3.42	0.74	1.000						
2. Age (Years)	22.84	3.12	-0.082	1.000					
3. Gender (Female = 1)	0.48	0.50	0.126*	-0.041	1.000				
4. Year of Study	2.31	0.94	0.114*	0.428**	-0.019	1.000			
5. Self-Emotional Appraisal (SEA)	3.68	0.68	-0.384**	0.054	-0.038	0.021	1.000		
6. Others' Emotional Appraisal (OEA)	3.51	0.71	-0.198**	0.039	0.082	0.045	0.412**	1.000	
7. Regulation of Emotion (ROE)	3.39	0.82	-0.542**	0.061	-0.092	0.015	0.495**	0.388**	1.000
8. Use of Emotion (UOE)	3.74	0.69	-0.476**	0.084	-0.016	0.037	0.521**	0.430**	0.584**

As demonstrated in Table 1, the mean score for perceived stress across the student body was 3.42 ($SD = 0.74$), confirming that university students in Dodoma experience moderately elevated levels of academic and environmental stress. Perceived stress demonstrated significant negative bivariate associations with Self-Emotional Appraisal ($r = -0.384$, $p < 0.01$), Others' Emotional Appraisal ($r = -0.198$, $p < 0.01$), Regulation of Emotion ($r = -0.542$, $p < 0.01$), and Use of Emotion ($r = -0.476$, $p < 0.01$). These preliminary findings align with theoretical expectations, indicating that higher emotional capabilities correlate with reduced perceived stress.

4.1.3 Stage-Wise Hierarchical Regression Results

Table 2 presents the unified hierarchical multiple regression analysis across the four sequential models, displaying unstandardized coefficients (B), standard errors (SE), standardized beta weights (β), t-values, associated significance levels (p), alongside summary model metrics (R, R^2, Adjusted R^2, ΔR^2, F, and ΔF).

Table 2: Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Perceived Stress Among University Students (N = 418)

Model / Predictor Variables	B	SE	β	t	p	Model Diagnostics
Model 1: Baseline Demographics						$R = 0.187$
(Intercept, β_0)	3.412	0.285	—	11.972	< 0.001	$R^2 = 0.035$
Age	-0.031	0.013	-0.131	-2.385	0.018	Adj. $R^2 = 0.028$
Gender (Female = 1)	0.184	0.072	0.124	2.556	0.011	$F(3,414) = 4.986^{**}$
Year of Study	0.128	0.043	0.163	2.977	0.003	$\Delta R^2 = 0.035^{**}$
Model 2: Self-Appraisal Addition						$R = 0.428$
(Intercept, β_0)	4.962	0.324	—	15.315	< 0.001	$R^2 = 0.183$
Age	-0.026	0.012	-0.110	-2.167	0.031	Adj. $R^2 = 0.175$
Gender (Female = 1)	0.162	0.066	0.109	2.455	0.015	$F(4,413) = 23.118^{***}$
Year of Study	0.134	0.039	0.170	3.436	0.001	$\Delta R^2 = 0.148^{***}$
Self-Emotional Appraisal (SEA)	-0.421	0.048	-0.387	-8.771	< 0.001	$\Delta F(1,413) = 74.912^{***}$
Model 3: Others' Appraisal Addition						$R = 0.433$
(Intercept, β_0)	5.084	0.339	—	14.997	< 0.001	$R^2 = 0.187$
Age	-0.025	0.012	-0.106	-2.083	0.038	Adj. $R^2 = 0.177$
Gender (Female = 1)	0.171	0.067	0.115	2.552	0.011	$F(5,412) = 18.987^{***}$
Year of Study	0.137	0.040	0.174	3.425	0.001	$\Delta R^2 = 0.004^{ns}$
Self-Emotional Appraisal (SEA)	-0.398	0.052	-0.366	-7.654	< 0.001	$\Delta F(1,412) = 2.032$ ($p = 0.155$)
Others' Emotional Appraisal (OEA)	-0.071	0.050	-0.068	-1.425	0.155	
Model 4: Total Effects Model						$R = 0.627$
(Intercept, β_0)	5.618	0.312	—	18.006	< 0.001	$R^2 = 0.393$
Age	-0.018	0.010	-0.076	-1.800	0.073	Adj. $R^2 = 0.383$
Gender (Female = 1)	0.108	0.058	0.073	1.862	0.063	$F(7,410) = 37.935^{***}$
Year of Study	0.118	0.034	0.150	3.471	0.001	$\Delta R^2 = 0.206^{***}$
Self-Emotional Appraisal (SEA)	-0.142	0.050	-0.130	-2.840	0.005	$\Delta F(2,410) = 69.608^{***}$
Others' Emotional Appraisal (OEA)	0.048	0.045	0.046	1.067	0.287	
Regulation of Emotion (ROE)	-0.344	0.043	-0.381	-8.000	< 0.001	
Use of Emotion (UOE)	-0.252	0.051	-0.235	-4.941	< 0.001	

Note. Dependent Variable: Perceived Stress (Y).

B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardized coefficient.

$p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$, ns = not statistically significant ($p \geq 0.05$).

4.1.4 Interpretation of Stage-Wise Models and Hypothesis Testing

For Model 1, baseline demographic factors were included to account for their initial effects on perceived student stress. The baseline model was statistically significant (F(3,414) = 4.986, p = 0.002) and accounted for 3.5% of the variance in perceived stress (R^2 = 0.035, Adjusted R^2 = 0.028). In this basic model, older age showed significant and negative correlation with stress (β=-0.131, t=-2.385, p=0.018) and indicated that increasing age has a

positive effect on coping with the university life. Female students also perceived higher levels of stress than male students (β=0.124, t=2.556, p=0.011), and moving forward in their year of study was correlated with increased stress (β=0.163, t=2.977, p=0.003), possibly due to greater dissertation demands, graduation pressures, and increasing job concerns.

The addition of Self-Emotional Appraisal (SEA) to Model 2 was found to significantly improve model fit (F(4,413)=23.118, p<0.001). The addition of SEA accounted for an incremental 14.8% of variance in perceived stress (ΔR^2=0.148, ΔF(1,413)=74.912, p<0.001), bringing total explained variance to 18.3% (R^2=0.183). SEA emerged as a powerful negative predictor (β=-0.387, t=-8.771, p<0.001). This is evidence for Hypothesis 1, which states that self-emotional awareness is an independent factor in reducing self-perceived stress in university students, even when controlling for baseline demographic factors.

In Model 3, the Emotional Appraisal (OEA) of others was added. As expected from initial bivariate analyses, the inclusion of OEA did not significantly increase the explained variance (ΔR^2=0.004, ΔF(1,412) = 2.032, p=0.155). The total variance explained moved marginally to 18.7% (R^2=0.187, Adjusted R^2=0.177). Within this stage, the partial slope for OEA was non-significant (β=-0.068, t=-1.425, p=0.155), while SEA retained strong significance (β=-0.366, t=-7.654, p<0.001). This suggests that only awareness of others' emotional states is not a sufficient factor to protect against academic and environmental stress when internal appraisal is controlled.

In Model 4 (the Total Effects Model), Regulation of Emotion (ROE) and Use of Emotion (UOE) were assessed in the same model. This final stage produced an exceptional increment in explanatory power (ΔR^2=0.206, ΔF(2,410)=69.608, p<0.001). The full model was highly significant (F(7,410)=37.935, p<0.001), explaining an impressive 39.3% of the total variance in perceived student stress (R^2=0.393, Adjusted R^2=0.383).

Within this final model, Regulation of Emotion emerged as the most dominant individual negative predictor of student stress (β=-0.381, t=-8.000, p<0.001), followed by Use of Emotion (β=-0.235, t=-4.941, p<0.001) and Self-Emotional Appraisal (β=-0.130, t=-2.840, p=0.005). Others' Emotional Appraisal was not statistically significant (β=0.046, t=1.067, p=0.287), however. In addition, after adjusting for all the dimensions of emotional intelligence, the demographic dimensions of age (β=-0.076, p=0.073) and gender (β=0.073, p=0.063) were not statistically significant, indicating that psychological competencies have a more profound effect on the perception of stress compared to the demographic dimensions. However, Year of Study had a statistically significant positive relationship (β=0.150, t=3.471, p=0.001), confirming that senior students are continually subjected to structural pressures that require targeted institutional responses.

4.1.5 Formulated Total Effects in the Model

To calculate the total empirical effects in the structural model, the relative size and direction of the standardized regression coefficients for the last hierarchical model was used. The predictive equation obtained for Perceived Stress (Y) is given by:

Y ^=5.618-0.018("Age")+0.108("Gender")+0.118("Year")-0.142("SEA")+0.048("OEA")-0.344("ROE")-0.252("UOE")

The "ROE" ("UOE"+"SEA"") affective regulation + application branches of emotional intelligence explain the bulk of the explained variance in the total direct negative effect of emotional intelligence on perceived student stress. These statistical parameters establish that emotional intelligence is not a foggy global intelligence, but rather works with specific cognitive processes: the ability to manage or control negative disruptive emotions and to actively use emotional resources in a constructive problem-solving framework are the key psychological components of stress-resilience.

4.2. Discussion of Findings

The empirical results of this study give clear and strong evidence in terms of structural relations between emotional intelligence and stress management in university students in Tanzania. The confirmation that emotional intelligence dimensions account for about 36% of incremental variance over and above the base demographic information, is a testament to the underlying significance of emotional abilities in higher education.

The observed link between Regulation of Emotion (ROE) as the strongest buffer to perceived stress is consistent with the basic ideas of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional coping model. Chronic academic and logistic frustrations are common among students in resource-constrained learning environment in Dodoma such as congested lecture theatres, unstable Internet connectivity, significant financial constraints, and high-stakes examination grading (Fahim & Khan, 2026; Slavova & Tarpomanova, 2025). High emotional regulation students do not suppress emotional distress, they use adaptive cognitive reappraisal strategies (Malik & Malik, 2026;

Tayade, 2026). These students can calm their transient academic failures and prevent them from escalating to full-blown panic, and they can keep control of their behavior during stressful situations. This mechanism is the reason for ROE having the largest beta weight () in the final regression model.

In the same way, the negative predictor of student stress in this study was Use of Emotion (UOE), which was also found to be an indispensable negative predictor. This shows how emotional motivation can help to support academic resilience. As one of the primary breadwinners of their expanded families, the university student in the developing world is under tremendous pressure. Students who are able to actively use their emotions to motivate them to be optimistic, persistent and focused on learning goals can turn challenging situations into worthwhile learning tasks. The results of this finding are in line with Mayer and Salovey's (1997) hypothesis that the integration of emotion and cognition in problem solving is a crucial process in human adaptation.

The lack of a significant association between Others' Emotional Appraisal (OEA) and stress reduction in the final model, in contrast, adds important context to the current literature and a lingering question to the debate. An understanding of others' emotions is required for general social competence and collaborative learning, but for high interpersonal emotional sensitivity, without strong emotional boundaries, emotional contagion may be more likely to happen (Çoban & Yüzbaşı, 2026; Rubio et al., 2026). In collectivist settings, such as those in Tanzania, where peers may feel a shared sense of difficulty or fear associated with loan distributions, it may be detrimental to have both increased sensitivity to the distress of others and insufficient self-regulation (Juniar et al., 2025; Kavindi et al., 2024). Therefore, without regulation, interpersonal empathy cannot provide an intrinsic psychological protection from environmental stress.

Overall, the reduction of gender and age differences in the final model suggests a realistic empowering lesson: although female students and younger undergraduates report more stress, those differences, too, diminish with the development of high emotional self-appraisal, regulation, and emotional deployment (Garner et al., 2025; Suberviola, 2025). Thus, emotional intelligence is a psych Levelling-up tool for students from all backgrounds.

4.3. Study Implications

4.3.1 Theoretical Implications

The study has several key contributions to a theory on educational psychology and behavioural health in developing countries. The first is that it empirically tested the applicability of the Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping and Wong and Law's Emotional Intelligence Model in an East African sociocultural context. The study highlights the role of collectivist interpersonal emotional processing in the context of Tanzanian university students and confirms the cross-cultural generalizability of cognitive-emotional appraisal mechanisms, as they have a buffering effect on perceived stress.

Second, the study contributes to the theoretical conceptualization of emotional intelligence by showing the empirical independence, and unequal functional weight of emotional intelligence's sub-dimensions. Emotional regulation (ROE) and emotional application (UOE) predict stress mitigation challenges better than interpersonal emotional appraisal (OEA) in most cases, casting doubt on a simplistic view of emotional intelligence. Theoretical frameworks need to differentiate between the internal regulation of stress-appraisals (regulatory competencies) and the external regulation of interpersonal awareness (which may sometimes lead to vicarious strain in stressful communal settings).

4.3.2 Practical Implications

These empirical findings provide a real-world guide for the behavior of students tackling the high-pressure environment of higher education. Academic stress is not a destitute situation that must be endured passively, or averted by inappropriate coping strategies, but a situation where students can actively develop strategies that they can put into practice. Emotional self-appraisal is a skill that students can learn in the process of mastering their emotions, and they can learn to detect symptoms of psychological and physiological fatigue before they become fully burnt out academically.

Moreover, students' intentional learning of emotional regulation skills allows them to break through the self-defeating thinking circle and adopt reappraisal as a positive style of thinking (Chen et al., 2025; Guo et al., 2026). Training in the application of emotion in the practical application enables the students to channel the energy into a multidimensional learning process: using emotional arousal in a structured way, turning the physiological energy of examination anxiety into structured studying,

focused group discussions and proactive consultation with the university faculty.

4.3.3 Managerial and Policy Implications.

The results have deep policy and administrative implications for the university leadership and national governance institutions in Tanzania such as the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST), the Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU) and the management boards of universities in Dodoma. The key first step is to get beyond a clinical, remedial perspective on student mental health that focuses on acute psychiatric crises, which is how most university administrations currently see it. Rather, emotional intelligence and life-skills development should be embedded in the formal undergraduate courses and university orientation programmes of institutions. The in vivo emotional competence modules should be integrated into general university curricula, building young people with strategies for stress management based on scientific evidence since the beginning of their university education (Gómez et al., 2025; Inostroza et al., 2026).

Second, institutional managers need to develop an affluent, culturally competent counseling centre equipped with competent psychologists instead of simply a committee of discipline or academic advisors whenever they need it. It is important for these counseling units to create special psychological training in the areas of emotional regulation, cognitive reframing, and stress mastery.

Third, at the national policy level, educational policymakers should take cognizance that student mental health is a cross-cutting issue that is inextricably linked to national human capital productivity. Socioeconomic safety nets, particularly efficient and timely disbursement of student loans through the Higher Education Students' Loans Board (HESLB), should be streamlined. Addressing systemic financial uncertainty directly lowers baseline stressors in students' environment, allowing their psychological and emotional abilities to respond to stressors as best they can.

5. Conclusion, limitations and future studies

The study is empirical that mainly focused on the role of emotional intelligence in perceived stress among the university students in higher learning institutions in Dodoma, Tanzania. The study employed hierarchical multiple regression analysis at four modelling levels to show that the dimensions of emotional intelligence account for significant incremental variance in student stress over and above demographical factors. Specifically, emotion regulation and emotion use will be potent negative predictors of perceived stress, as important cognitive buffers against structural and academic stressors. The results indicate that student well-being is not just a result of external factors but is strongly shaped by internal cognitive-emotional competencies which can be are intentionally cultivated and maintained.

Although this study has received theoretical and methodological input, it must be noted that there are a number of limitations that offer opportunities for further research. The investigation used a cross-sectional design, which results in the observation of relations at one time and cannot make definitive causal inferences. Although hierarchical regression models are able to obtain strong predictive relationships, further research with longitudinal designs over students' several school semesters is required to verify long term causal effects of emotional intelligence on stress adaptation and academic retention.

Second, the study used self-report psychometric scales, thus potentially making it susceptible to common method bias and social desirability response bias. Future studies should combine multiple method assessments of emotional intelligence, including the use of self-report scales with objective ability-based emotional intelligence measures, behavioral measures, and physiological stress measures (salivary cortisol levels, heart rate variability).

Third, the study was conducted in three major institutions in Dodoma, but regional differences in Tanzania need to be examined. Future comparative studies should be expanded to universities in commercial cities like Dar es Salaam, northern universities educational clusters in Arusha and Kilimanjaro and the rural based university campuses.

Finally, future studies need to employ more qualitative and ethnographic approaches to identify culturally and locally based emotional coping mechanisms that overlap with those of the traditional emotional intelligence framework. Analyses of the interaction of traditional communal support structures, spiritual practices and family relationships with individual psychological capacities will further enrich behavior and institutional management and education policy making in sub-Saharan Africa.

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