

# Emotional Intelligence and Academic Leadership in Higher Education in Saudi Arabia: Advantages and Challenges

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## Abstract

Higher education institutions face continuous changes and challenges, which require leaders to develop better social interactions in the workplace. Emotional intelligence has been recognized as a relevant component of organizational effectiveness. The aim of this study crystallized in exploring academic leadership perceptions of emotional intelligence on leading and the challenges of implementation if any. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 educational leaders. The findings were characterized by three themes. They are a means for a stable self-base for work, safe humanistic working culture, and a streamlined working environment with escalated productivity. Three themes emerged regarding the challenges of practicing emotional intelligence in Saudi Arabian higher education: personality differences, centralization, and culture. The study is a response to the new trend in organizational behaviours and the attention given to human resources for organizational effectiveness.

**Keywords:** Emotional intelligence; academic leaders, effective leadership; higher education; challenges

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## I. Introduction

Higher education institutions are one of the segments that necessitate unstoppable development, especially in today's dramatically changing world. Therefore, sustainable development strategies have been imperative for such institutions in the new normal (Warrier, John & Warrier, 2021).

Emotional intelligence (EI) is a powerful emerging concept in today's effectiveness and organizational behaviors. Lately, considerable research has concentrated on the idea as it has proven its effectiveness in improving social relations and the educational environment (Salceanu & Agapie, 2022). Previously, the traditional intelligence IQ was the criteria for competence and effective organizational performance. However, many studies have recently highlighted the significance and need for emotional intelligence as a reinforcer for effective personal relationships and organizational effectiveness. Moreover, mental intelligence indicates the minimum level of success factor at work. It represents 20 percent, while emotional intelligence is 40 percent of the success factor (Rida, David, Litz & Scott, 2020). Olawoyin (2018) pointed to the component of a competent professional, EI was one among individual personality and intelligence quotient.

Since leadership, as Grint (2010) pointed out, indicates having followers, the interaction between leaders and followers necessitates efficient interpersonal skills for effective outcomes. Allen and others (2006) suggested, "The function of leadership then becomes the creation of the system, structures, and environment where this interaction and learning can occur." In their systematic literature reviews on emotional intelligence and school leaders, Gómez-Leal and others (2022) asserted that EI is a key to effective leadership in an educational context.

Leadership is a challenging responsibility in a higher education setting due to the nature of higher education institutions' burden resulting from globalization, budget cuts, and inevitable changes (Barnes and Gearin, 2022). Moreover, administrative positions are usually filled with academic staff who lack experience in leadership roles, which increases the complexity of administration in such situations. In addition, many studies assert that higher education lacks formal leadership preparation. Therefore, they could miss lead or disengage workers accordingly. However, considering interpersonal skills such as EI can alleviate the burden of such responsibilities and increase leadership effectiveness in these institutions. Therefore, the aim of this study crystallized in exploring academic leadership perceptions of emotional intelligence on leading performance and the challenges of implementation, if any.

Value: The study is one of the first studies in the region to investigate the academic perception of emotional intelligence and implementation challenges. It is also a response to the latest direction in organizational behaviors and the attention given to human resources as a source of organizational effectiveness.

## **II. Research Problem**

There is no doubt that in today's world, organizations in different sectors, including higher education institutions, have been under pressure to achieve higher standards to preserve their existence and reputation. Furthermore, the quality of education and the management of its services have been a policy focus within sustainable development goals (Sanchez-Carrillo, Cadarso & Tobarra, 2021). Implementing sustainability factors for higher education necessitate giving considerable attention to institutional behaviors and human relationship. Human resources are an asset for the sustainability and effectiveness of such institutions. In their study, Warrier and Warrier (2021) asserted that leveraging emotional intelligence in higher education increases leadership competency and efficacy.

Leadership effectiveness results from various components; emotional intelligence has been one of the significant components in today's world. Social and psychological studies indicate that emotional intelligence is a guide for leaders' behaviors, decisions, and how he interacts with the environment. Further, the level of EI is determined by the individual's ability to learn new information and engage in analytical thought to guide reactions and behaviors (Olawoyin, 2018). However, although many studies asserted the significance of EI for promoting leadership effectiveness, there is a lack of practicing EI among higher education leaders besides the lack of clarity of EI traits that are most relevant for academic leaders (Parrish, 2015). In addition, it has been suggested that further study should focus on linking EI and educational leadership outcomes, besides EI traits for educational leadership (Coco, 2011).

Through the researcher's years of experience in academic leadership positions, they have seen many hard-working leaders and disengaged, unmotivated employees. Effective leadership in higher education promotes a culture of outstanding learning, teaching, and academic excellence (Barnes & Gearin, 2022). Therefore, investigating EI perceptions contributes to understanding leadership in higher education and the view of such a component for effective academic leadership. Accordingly, the current study asks about educational leaders' perceptions and obstacles to EI applications in their practices and performance.

### **Research Questions**

- 1) How do academic leaders perceive the practice of emotional intelligence in their leadership in higher education in Saudi Arabia?
- 2) How do academic leaders perceive the challenges of practicing emotional intelligence in higher education in Saudi Arabia?

#### **Theoretical Framework**

Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB): The idea started as a Theory of Reasoned Action in 1980 to predict a person's intention in engaging in behavior at a specific time and place to explore people's behaviors and their ability to exert self-control. TPB affirms that behaviors depend on motivations and behavioral control; it asserts that understanding workers' behaviors and planning their behaviors contributes to positive behaviors (Ajzen, 2011). The theory assumes that people use available information implicitly and then, according to it, they plan their actions. The approach consists of six constructs that characterize a person's control over behaviors:

1. Attitude: it entails the consideration of the outcome of the behaviors.
2. Behavioral intention: apply to the motivations that affect behaviors.
3. Subjective norms: people approve or disapprove of behaviors.
4. Social norms: refers to the customary code of behavior in a cultural context.
5. Perceived power: refers to the factors that affect behavioral performance.
6. Perceived behavioral control refers to the individual perception of the difficulty or easiness of performing the behaviors.

The theory has limitations, especially in considering environmental influence; it has more utility in public health.

## **III. Literature Review**

### **Emotional Intelligence**

Thorndike proposed the earliest contribution to the subject of EI in (1920). He views social intelligence as essential for functioning in any interpersonal situation. Afterward, Howard Gardner (1983) proposed multiple intelligences, "intra-physics capacities," in presenting emotional intelligence. Knowledge and studies of EI have emerged since 1960 and manifested widely after Daniel Goleman's book in 1998.

According to Mayer and Salovey (1997), EI is the ability to perceive and generate emotion to assess the understanding, generation, and regulation of emotions to promote better behaviors feelings and thoughts. It represents the ability to use a set of skills that will enable perceptions of one's feelings and others and then use them to guide behaviors (Olawoyin, 2018).

Studies have indicated that EI is related to the desired aspect socially and individually (Suleman & others, 2020). Further, the positive correlation between EI and better results is due to the superior level of moral

maturity and regulated emotions and behaviors (Olawoyin, 2018). Therefore, Olawoyin asserted that EI contributes to organizational safety.

Although emotional intelligence significance has exceeded mental ability, there is no doubt that the combination of EI and IQ creates a better person who can deal effectively with everyday situations (Suleman & others, 2020). Moreover, it promotes personal life satisfaction, social adaptation, connection, leadership skills, striking balance in 'life's commitments, and increase team performance. Further, studies asserted that EI reinforces the efficiency of organizations.

EI is not valuable barely in the workplace. It has various applications in different areas of life with family, society, and personal communication. Olawoyin (2018) asserted that investigating many studies showed that developing 'employees' emotional intelligence contributes to better results and longevity. In his investigation of the link between EI and professional safety behaviors, he found a positive correlation between the two. He added that transformational leadership, unlike transactional leadership, enhances followers' satisfaction; further, adding emotional intelligence increases their effective influence. EI can be attained, improved, and developed through training methods, which are considered features of EI (Coco, 2011; Golman, 1996).

### **Emotional Intelligence Models**

EI has different models. The first model is the Ability Model, which Peter Salovey presented in 1990. At first, the model was crystallized in five components: self-awareness, primary readings, obedience to stormy emotion, empathy, and social skills. Lately, Salovey with Mayer presented the model in four parts: emotion as a facilitator for the process of thinking. Another model is the Mixed Model, presented by Bar-On in 1997 and described EI in the connections of emotional and social competencies and skills enablers that affect behaviors. Finally, Daniel Golman's model in 1998 presented EI in four dimensions: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and social skills. He explained that emotional intelligence consists of five essential skills: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. In contrast, MHS Inc. (2011) described the component of EI in self-perception, self-expression, interpersonal decision, and stress management.

### **Emotional Intelligence in Academic Institutions**

Higher Education institutions' leadership is featured as people processing institutions (Coco, 2011). Academic leaders face multiple challenges balancing stakeholders, leading changes, globalization ...etc. (Wolverton and Gmelch, 2002). These challenges affect academic 'leaders' stability. The tense relationship between leaders and faculties escalates disengagement and change resistance.

In investigating the relationship between emotional intelligence and leadership effectiveness in academic institutions, Aldawsari (2020), in his study in Hafir Albatin, one of the Saudi universities, found that the impact of emotional intelligence on leadership effectiveness was medium (25.6%). She found that emotional intelligence does not significantly affect leadership effectiveness. However, in a case study conducted to investigate the relevance of emotional intelligence and effective leadership in higher education, Parrish (2015) emphasized the correlation between the two. The semi-structured interview in his study for pre and post-leadership development and the illustration of EI derived that EI is a significant component of academic leadership in higher education. They identified traits most applicable for educational leaders that related to empathy, inspiring, guiding others, and responsibility for managing oneself.

Ayan and others (2017) perceived that school could be a source of fixing the deficit of emotional competence in society through the curriculum. Sanchez, Berrios, and Extremer (2020) pointed out that flexibility is an essential characteristic of leaders. It allows leaders to get closer to the followers, influencing them and fulfilling change to become viable.

## **IV. Methods**

Qualitative research was utilized as the proper approach for the investigation to explore the perception of EI for leadership effectiveness in practices and performance by academic leaders and its obstacles. To facilitate the exploration, the data was collected via semi-structured interviews with academic leaders from different Saudi Arabian universities. The invitation to the study was extended to former and current educational leaders in a particular administrative position whose academic leadership expertise is not less than two years and who have not left the job for more than two years. In addition, their administrative responsibilities have to involve explicit activities of engaging and communicating with others to ensure the relevance of EI exposure in leading others. To analyze the data, the NVIVO matrix was used in coding the interview to identify instances of the perceptions and obstacles of EI. From the NVIVO queries a mapping of perceptions and obstacles was generated.

### **Limitations**

Limitations associated with the study are identified in points. Firstly, generalizability is recognized for qualitative research conducted in a specific culture. Secondly, the researcher's enthusiasm and understanding of EI might affect the study's objectivity. However, the researcher was mindful throughout the survey that bias might affect the research and ensured neutrality at all times. Thirdly, the sample size was 13, which can be a limitation, yet the small size with consideration of saturation is an appropriate qualitative research strategy (Merriam, 2002).

### **V. Findings**

- 1) How do academic leaders perceive the practice of emotional intelligence in their leadership in higher education in Saudi Arabia?
- 2) How do academic leaders perceive the challenges of practicing emotional intelligence in higher education in Saudi Arabia?

After exploring the participants' perceptions of practicing emotional intelligence in their leadership in higher education in Saudi Arabia, three pieces describe the core findings of the current study. They are a means for a stable self-base for work, safe humanistic working culture, and a streamlined working environment with escalated productivity (Table. 1). In Saudi Arabia, participants' perceptions of challenges related to practicing emotional intelligence were categorized into three themes: personalities, centralization, and culture.

#### **Academic Leaders' Perceptions of Emotional Intelligence in Higher Education**

##### **A stable self-base for work**

The various codes extracted from the participants' perceptions indicated that EI is a factor in establishing a stable self-base for work. Self-awareness, self-management, Self-realization, and personal growth are the codes that stream into the stable self-base for work.

The participants indicated that the ability to understand one's feelings, strengths, and weakness raises self-awareness, strengthening interactions with individuals and the external environment. For instance, N. A. pointed out, "the first person I have to know precisely is myself before interacting with others to prevent getting lost with others!" Whereas N. O. described, "if I 'wasn't aware of my strength, weakness, and needs, how can I figure which way to go and progress?"

The participants asserted that the unmistakable sense of one's self leads to a better approach to self-management. For example, N. E. explained, "sometimes at work, I feel that I want to argue with everyone! And then when I stop and think about myself, I get a chance to interpret my irritating feeling which can result from lack of sleep or not feeling well...etc." They emphasized that self-management prevents self-discomfort. R. B. put it this way, "why I oppress others by my chaos, why I don't organize and manage my chaos before interacting with others?" In addition, a person can be mindful and reach inner peace by controlling their behavior through self-awareness. N. H. said, "I don't need to compare myself or my leading performance with others since I'm aware of myself, which contributes to my satisfaction and inner peace."

The participants show that understanding and managing oneself increases and reinforces self-realization. R. R. pointed out, "when I gain insight into my feelings and emotions, I become more successful in coping with other emotions that hold me back such as anxiety, anger...etc." N. C. articulated differently, "it is crucial for me to know who am I. Where am I going? What do I want to achieve? Realizing that promotes my effective leading performance." Furthermore, the participants pointed out that personal growth is strengthened by understanding oneself and others. N. H. said, "most of my success occurred because of understanding and appreciating others!"

##### **Safe humanistic working culture**

The participants' perceptions of EI indicate that EI is a way of establishing safe humanistic working culture. The emergent code that supports the view is a safe and known communication language, a safe supported environment that embraces others' expectations, and humanistic foresight.

According to the participants, EI sets the stage for safe and known communication languages as they can understand each other's feelings and needs. R. D. explained, "a working environment with high EI leaders can be recognized by the bond, known interaction, and lasting relationship." N. E. added, "the variance of the tone in speaking has an indication which a leader has to be aware of and act upon it."

The participants also perceive EI as an approach to creating a safe, supported environment. For example, R. Z. explained, "the sudden death of my son affected my life immensely. However, the sympathy and understanding I received from work alleviate the pain and support getting back on my feet again." Further, that participant explained how they feel being in a safe hand when they are being understood, and their expectations are considered. R. W and N. C. articulated this: "when humanity is considered in planning and operation, we call it a trusted working environment."

**Streamlined working environment with escalated productivity**

Analyzing the participants' perspectives indicates that EI is a factor that creates a streamlined working environment with higher productivity. The codes emerged: inspirational environment, flexibility, initiative, and fairness.

Asound understanding of the workers strengthens relationships, as the participants emphasized. For instance, R. R., "understanding others is a crucial key for inspiring them." Whereas R. D. said, "inspirational working environment usually results from a leader who sets a stage for an effective relationship that respects humanity and their needs."

In addition, flexibility is another face for EI, as the participants indicated. N. B. and R. A. explained that "leaders' ability to adjust their behavior and attitude to a situation reinforces the flow of the work." Further, creativity and presenting initiative raise the work's reputation and increase productivity, a reflection of working under EI leaders. N. A. pointed out, "it is not the strongest with high QR leader who increases productivity. It is the understandable leader who considers others increases productivity."

The capacity to know others assist leaders in assigning each person to a suitable position. R. W. said, "the workflow usually gets disturbed by assigning an employee in a wrong position by choice of their leader!" R. C. added, "it is a circle that supports emotional intelligence: relationship, flexibility, accepting changes, creativity, and the result is a higher achievement."

**Table 1.**

Perceptions of Practicing Emotional Intelligence in Leaders' Practice in Higher Education in Saudi Arabia

Themes	Codes
Stable self-base for work	Self-awareness
	Self-management
	Self-realization
	personal growth
Safe humanistic working culture	Safe and known communicating language
	Safe supported environment
	Embrace 'others' expectations
	Humanistic foresight
Streamlined working environment with escalated productivity	Inspirational environment
	Flexibility and initiative
	Fairness

**The challenges of practicing emotional intelligence in higher education in Saudi Arabia**

The participants indicated that they could not fully practice EI due to challenges that emerged in three themes: personality differences, centralization, and culture (Figure. 1).

**Personalities differences**

As the participants emphasized, the ability to function and behave at an emotional level can't be done without considering personalities. For instance, N. O. provided an example of EI with an extrovert, unlike an introvert: "I can easily practice EI with an extrovert person, unlike an introvert who is hard to understand!" R. B. added, "how can I show empathy and adjust my behaviors according to others' needs while they are vague and hard to understand." In addition, some people prefer to keep their distance from others and do not talk about themselves or their feelings, creating a boundary between them and their leader (N. A; R. C. & R. W.). On the other hand, as R. D. pointed out, EI for some followers creates doubt and wonder and asks: what is behind my boss's friendly behavior!; or can misinterpret their leader's behavior or vice versa misinterpret the followers' behavior or feelings by their leader.

Furthermore, competitions can also affect leaders' ability to practice EI as expressing it varies according to personalities, making it difficult to understand others. Besides, a vast ego can affect accepting advice, listening to others, or accepting help from others, which affects leaders practicing EI. R. Z. explained, "high ego is a person's worst enemy that pushes others away and blocks learning."

**Centralization**

Centralization is another challenge that comes in the way of practicing EI by leaders. Centralization of authority and decision-making prevent leaders from engaging others or sympathizing with them. N. O. explained, "in some cases, I know that I am supposed to behave in a certain way or present a decision for the sake of helping others, yet 'Centralized roles restrict me!'" Whereas R. A. pointed out, "due to centralized impulse control, I can't find time to listen to others and empathize with them!"

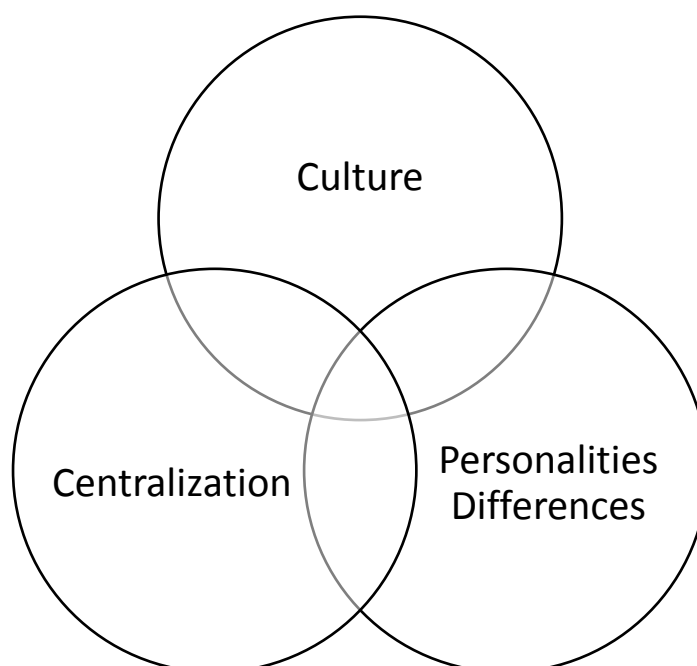


## **Culture**

As culture affects the way of behaving and working, it also affects the way and the level of practicing EI. For instance, N. B. pointed out, "in our culture, there are boundaries between a male and female relationship which as a result impact the way of interacting between the two." Furthermore, as collectivism is the norm in Saudi culture, leaders can be affected positively or negatively by others which consequently affects their way of practicing EI. For example, N. B. said, "I remember once, after listening to one's tragedy, my energy was consumed that I couldn't interact properly with others."

**Figure 1**

The challenges of practicing emotional intelligence in higher education in Saudi Arabia



## **VI. Discussion**

The purpose of this study is to explore academic leaders' perceptions of emotional intelligence in their leadership in higher education in Saudi Arabia and the challenges of implementation, if any. A close focus on the finding, jointly with a theoretical framework and previous studies, indicated significant outcomes. The results are compatible with the earlier contribution to the subject by Thorndike (1920) that EI is an essential component for functioning in any interpersonal situation, especially in a people-processing organization such as higher education, as Coco (2011) asserted. In addition, they reinforce the previous study as Suleman and others (2020) noted that EI is socially and individually related to the desired aspect socially and individually. Regardless of 'Aldawsari's (2020) findings which indicated a medium (25.6%) in the impact of EI on leadership effectiveness, the majority of the studies emphasized the positive correlation between the two in higher education institutions, as Parrish (2015) noted.

Concerning participant perceptions of EI, it incorporates the pivotal component of EI in perceiving and generating emotion for better promoting self-control and behavior management, as the indication by Mayer and Salovey (1997) and Olawoyin (2018). Furthermore, although EI has different models: the ability model and mixed model, the findings incorporated the Golman component of EI, which is self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and social skills.

The literature indicated that EI is valuable for the workplace and any context involving human interactions (Golman, 1996). Considering this indication, the participants' perception of EI deciphers that the value of EI in the workplace resulted from what the participants perceived in self-stability, humanistic safe, and a streamlined working environment. The awareness of self and others and controlling emotions reinforce the productive working environment. Besides flexibility, it allows followers to get closer to the leaders and triggers creativity. This process is what Sanchez, Berrios, and Extremer (2020) consider essential characteristics for leaders. Further, this flexibility and fairness the participants pointed at assists in controlling others and taking unstoppable changes related to higher education institutions.

In addition, the findings of a streamlined working environment with escalated productivity are described by Olawoyin (2018) as a reinforcement for organizational safety efficiency, and longevity.

Understanding followers feelings and behaviors contribute to positive and suitable behaviors consequently, as Ajzen (2011) pointed out. The theory of planned behaviors deciphers the participants' perceptions of EI as a factor for a productive working environment. The theory assumes that when people use the available information and understand the surrounded environment, they can plan their behaviors accordingly. Unlike random response interaction, planning behaviors and activities lacks knowledge and understanding. In addition, according to this theory, the awareness of self and others provides sufficient information that increases leaders' confidence and results in better interaction with others.

The participants pointed to several challenges of practicing EI. They are congruent with the difficulties encountered by higher education institutions, which Wolveron and Gmelch (2002) pointed to, such as globalization, change resistance, and balancing stakeholders. Globalization, for instance, affects cultures that trigger the differences that affect the acceptance of practicing EI aspects. For example, personality differences have been more vivid in 'today's world in which people prefer to express what they like and dislike. Therefore, some might doubt sharing their emotions out of the fear of uncertainty of sharing their feelings. Centralization forms another challenge for practicing EI due to the urgency of some decrees or limited time for achieving, which affect understanding others or empathizing with them. However, regardless of application difficulties, the dimensions of EI are most relevant to dealing with the unknown, unstoppable future challenges which encounter higher education institutions.

EI can be earned and developed, as Coco (2011), Golman (1996) & Olawoyin (2018) asserted. EI dimensions are skills that can be attained by learning and training.

## **VII. Recommendation**

- Providing professional training in identifying personal differences to identify best leading practices.
- Incorporating EI training before appointing academic leaders and not only relying on academic achievement.
- Raising awareness and appreciation for practicing EI in the workplace to maximize application.
- Use EI measurement to maximize its use in the workplace.
- This original exploratory study can be a foundation for quantitative to add perspective for higher education leaders.
- Allocating more studies on the relation between IQ and EI in an educational context, as many studies in the area are from business perspectives.
- Construct more studies on EI, considering more variables such as academic achievement and teachers' effectiveness.

## **VIII. Conclusion**

Leadership in higher education institutions is challenging due to continuously encountered changes. Because the institution is a people-processing environment, practical interpersonal skills can be used to ease the challenges of leading people. This study investigated academic leadership perceptions of emotional intelligence on leading performance and implementation challenges. After interviewing 13 educational leaders to examine their perceptions of practicing emotional intelligence in their leadership in higher education in Saudi Arabia, the core findings were characterized by three themes. They are a means for a stable self-base for work, safe humanistic working culture, and a streamlined working environment with escalated productivity. Three themes emerged from participants' perceptions of the difficulties of practicing emotional intelligence in Saudi Arabian higher education: personalities, centralization, and culture. EI dimensions are skills that can be attained by learning and training. The study responded to the new trend in organizational behaviors and the attention given to human resources as a source of organizational effectiveness.

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