

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Developing Emotional Intelligence in University Leaders: Evidence from A Structured Training Intervention

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Abstract

Emotional intelligence has become an increasingly important competence for university leaders who must manage interpersonal relationships, organizational pressure, conflict, staff motivation, and complex decision-making. This study evaluated changes in emotional intelligence following a structured social-psychological training program for higher education leaders in Uzbekistan.

The broader diagnostic study involved 421 university leaders from three higher education institutions. Based on their initial diagnostic profiles, 38 leaders demonstrating comparatively low or moderate levels in selected emotional intelligence components participated in the developmental intervention. The program consisted of ten training sessions integrating emotional awareness, empathy, active listening, emotional self-regulation, stress management, constructive conflict resolution, reflective analysis, role play, case-based activities, and feedback. Emotional intelligence was assessed before and after the intervention using D.V. Lyusin's EmIn methodology. Paired-samples Student's t-tests were used to evaluate pre-post changes.

Significant improvements were identified in seven of the ten assessed indicators. Overall emotional intelligence increased from 9.98 to 11.35, representing a 13.7% improvement ($t = -3.42, p = .001$). Interpersonal emotional intelligence increased by 13.3%, while intrapersonal emotional intelligence improved by 9.4%.

The findings indicate that participation in structured, context-sensitive social-psychological training was associated with meaningful improvements in emotional intelligence among university leaders.

KEY WORDS

Emotional intelligence; university leadership; higher education management; leadership development; emotional regulation; social-psychological training; empathy; pre-post intervention.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary university leadership requires more than administrative knowledge and formal authority. Higher education leaders operate in complex social environments in which they must manage organizational change, staff

relationships, conflict, motivation, psychological pressure, and communication while maintaining institutional effectiveness. Emotional intelligence (EI), broadly associated with the ability to perceive, understand, and regulate emotional information,

has therefore become increasingly relevant to educational leadership [1, 2].

Recent literature has shifted from asking whether emotional intelligence matters for leadership toward examining how EI operates within specific educational and organizational contexts. A 2026 systematic review of emotional intelligence in educational leadership concluded that EI is closely associated with leadership behaviour, professional relationships, decision-making, and leadership development, while also emphasizing the importance of contextual and cultural factors [2].

The relevance of these competencies is particularly visible in higher education. Kalakesh and Hachana found that academic leaders viewed emotional intelligence as a relational and situational competence connecting leadership behaviour with institutional quality [3]. Similarly, a 2026 study of university leadership reported that leaders' emotional and social intelligence—particularly empathy, communication, and relationship management—was significantly associated with faculty job satisfaction [4].

Recent evidence also suggests that EI is related to broader leadership processes. A study involving 637 academics from Chinese private universities demonstrated that emotional intelligence positively predicted teacher leadership and that interpersonal relationships partly explained this association [5]. A 2026 systematic review and correlational meta-analysis likewise found positive relationships among emotional intelligence, transformational leadership, and team effectiveness [6].

Educational leadership research increasingly emphasizes particular EI competencies rather than treating emotional intelligence as a single undifferentiated characteristic. A 2025 systematic review identified self-awareness, empathy, and relationship management as particularly important leadership competencies and concluded that emotionally intelligent educational leadership can influence teacher well-being, collective efficacy, organizational climate, and professional performance [7].

Emotional intelligence may also be relevant when leaders face interpersonal tension. Zhou et al. found significant differences in conflict-management behaviour according to principals' emotional intelligence profiles: leaders with higher EI demonstrated more problem-solving behaviour, whereas lower EI profiles were associated more strongly with forcing

or avoidance strategies [8].

The central question for leadership development, however, is not simply whether emotional intelligence is associated with desirable outcomes, but whether it can be systematically developed.

Recent evidence supports this possibility. Mehler et al.'s 2024 systematic review and meta-analysis synthesized 50 workplace intervention studies and reported a moderate overall pre-post improvement in emotional competencies ($SMD = 0.44$). In 27 controlled studies, the intervention effect was also moderate ($SMD = 0.46$), and benefits remained detectable more than three months after training [9].

Evidence from higher education also reinforces the importance of context. Asmamaw and Semela identified a strong positive association between emotional intelligence and transformational leadership among academic leaders in Ethiopian higher education [10]. Their separate qualitative study found that relationship management, empathy, self-management, and self-awareness were regarded as key EI competencies contributing to faculty engagement [11].

Broader meta-analytic research has similarly connected EI with positive career and organizational outcomes. Pirsoul et al. found positive relationships between emotional intelligence and career-related outcomes [12], while Doğru's meta-analysis linked EI positively with job satisfaction, performance, organizational commitment, and organizational citizenship behaviour and negatively with job stress [13].

Despite this growing literature, intervention-based research focusing specifically on university leaders remains comparatively limited. Much of the available higher education literature is cross-sectional, correlational, or qualitative. This creates a need for intervention studies examining whether targeted developmental activities are accompanied by measurable changes in university leaders' emotional competencies.

The present study addresses this gap by evaluating a structured social-psychological emotional intelligence development program implemented with university leaders in Uzbekistan.

The study addressed three research questions:

1. Does participation in the training program produce statistically significant changes in specific emotional intelligence dimensions?

2. Which dimensions demonstrate the largest pre–post improvements?
3. Do interpersonal, intrapersonal, and overall emotional intelligence indicators improve after the intervention?

METHODS

1. Research design and participants

The study employed a single-group pretest–posttest intervention design.

The broader empirical phase involved 421 higher education leaders working at Bukhara State University, Andijan State University, and Gulistan State University. The sample included university managers, heads of structural units, department chairs, and other personnel directly involved in institutional management, staff communication, decision-making, conflict resolution, and organizational coordination.

Following the initial diagnostic assessment, a purposive subsample of 38 leaders was selected for the developmental intervention. Participants were selected because their diagnostic profiles indicated comparatively low or moderate development in one or more emotional intelligence-related domains. Selection was based on an integrated diagnostic profile rather than on a single test score and considered emotional awareness, emotion regulation, empathy, communicative functioning, stress tolerance, and overall emotional intelligence.

Accordingly, the intervention sample should be regarded as a targeted developmental group rather than a randomly selected subsample of the broader population.

2. Assessment instrument

Pre- and post-intervention emotional intelligence was assessed using D.V. Lyusin's EmIn Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire [16]. The instrument was selected because its structure enables differentiated assessment of the understanding and regulation of both one's own and other people's emotions and provides interpersonal, intrapersonal, and integrative emotional intelligence indicators.

In the present study, the EmIn scales were interpreted separately rather than being combined with scores from other diagnostic instruments. This approach was adopted because the broader research employed several measures based on different theoretical models and scoring systems. Consequently, the present article reports only EmIn-based

pre–post outcomes in order to maintain conceptual and measurement consistency.

The following indicators were included in the pre–post analysis:

- understanding others' emotions;
- managing others' emotions;
- understanding one's own emotions;
- emotion management;
- expression control;
- interpersonal emotional intelligence;
- intrapersonal emotional intelligence;
- general emotion understanding;
- general emotion management;
- overall emotional intelligence.

The broader dissertation study employed additional instruments measuring emotional intelligence, communication, organizational abilities, leadership characteristics, leadership styles, and self-regulation. However, the present article focuses exclusively on EmIn outcomes to provide a focused assessment of change associated with the intervention.

3. Training intervention

The developmental intervention consisted of ten structured social-psychological training sessions delivered as a sequential program. The sessions targeted emotional awareness and identification, empathy, active listening, emotional self-regulation, stress management, constructive conflict resolution, reflection, and self-analysis.

The program was developed on the basis of five interconnected groups of social-psychological determinants identified in the broader study: individual-personal, communicative, motivational, organizational-managerial, and ethnopsychological determinants. Rather than treating emotional intelligence as an isolated individual trait, the intervention connected emotional competencies with real managerial communication, interpersonal relationships, stress regulation, decision-making, and team interaction.

The training followed a developmental sequence comprising initial diagnosis, targeted developmental activities, reflection, and post-intervention assessment.

The first module focused on self-awareness and emotional reflection. Participants analysed their emotional reactions in managerial situations and examined relationships between emotional states, behavioural responses, decisions, and outcomes.

The second module addressed emotional regulation and stress tolerance, incorporating emotional pauses, breathing regulation, cognitive reappraisal, constructive internal dialogue, and decision-making exercises under psychological pressure.

The third module focused on empathy and social sensitivity. Participants practised perspective taking, active listening, emotional reflection, recognition of non-verbal signals, and understanding different positions in conflict situations.

The fourth module developed communicative flexibility and constructive interaction, particularly feedback, difficult conversations, emotionally appropriate criticism, employee dissatisfaction, and interpersonal conflict.

The fifth module connected emotional intelligence with leadership and positive psychological climate, emphasizing employee motivation, trust, cooperation, mutual respect, and collective decision-making.

Each training session was organized around active participant involvement rather than lecture-based instruction. The activities included analysis of problem situations, group discussion, paired work, case studies, role play, individual reflection, and structured feedback. Training scenarios were drawn from authentic higher education management situations, including staff communication, employee

dissatisfaction, task non-compliance, interpersonal disagreement, collective decision-making, and conflict resolution.

Reflective analysis was incorporated throughout the program. Participants were encouraged to examine their emotional reactions, identify newly acquired strategies, consider their application to managerial practice, and determine areas requiring further personal development.

This experiential design is consistent with contemporary evidence indicating that workplace emotional competencies are more effectively developed through structured and applied activities rather than informational instruction alone [9, 14].

4. Statistical analysis

Because the same 38 participants completed both measurements, pretest and posttest scores were compared using paired-samples Student's t-tests.

Statistical significance was evaluated at $p < .05$ and $p < .01$.

To complement significance testing, Cohen's d_z was calculated from the paired t statistic:

$$d_z = |t| / \sqrt{n}$$

This provided an approximate standardized measure of the magnitude of pre-post change.

RESULTS

All ten indicators demonstrated positive numerical change following the intervention, although three differences did not reach statistical significance.

Table 1. Emotional intelligence indicators before and after the intervention

Indicator	Pretest M	Posttest M	Change	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d_z</i>
Understanding others' emotions	9.45	10.62	+12.4%	-2.45	.018	.40
Managing others' emotions	8.73	9.51	+8.9%	-1.98	.049	.32
Understanding own emotions	10.12	10.45	+3.3%	-0.85	.398	.14
Emotion management	9.88	10.37	+5.0%	-1.67	.102	.27
Expression control	8.95	9.84	+9.9%	-2.12	.038	.34
Interpersonal emotional intelligence	10.34	11.72	+13.3%	-3.05	.003	.49
Intrapersonal emotional intelligence	9.67	10.58	+9.4%	-2.54	.014	.41
General emotion understanding	9.21	9.66	+4.9%	-1.21	.231	.20
General emotion management	8.87	9.74	+9.8%	-2.01	.047	.33

Overall emotional intelligence	9.98	11.35	+13.7%	-3.42	.001	.55
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Note. Cohen's *d*z was calculated from the paired *t* statistics reported in the dissertation.

The original data confirm significant pre–post differences in seven of the ten measured outcomes.

1. Interpersonal emotional competencies

Understanding other people's emotions increased from 9.45 to 10.62, representing a 12.4% increase ($t = -2.45$, $p = .018$).

Managing other people's emotions increased from 8.73 to 9.51, corresponding to an 8.9% improvement ($t = -1.98$, $p = .049$).

These results indicate improvement in competencies directly related to interpersonal interaction and social-emotional leadership.

2. Emotional regulation

Expression control increased significantly from 8.95 to 9.84 ($t = -2.12$, $p = .038$).

General emotion management also improved significantly, from 8.87 to 9.74 ($t = -2.01$, $p = .047$).

By contrast, changes in understanding one's own emotions ($p = .398$) and one specific emotion-management dimension ($p = .102$) were not statistically significant.

3.3. Interpersonal and intrapersonal emotional intelligence

The largest component-level change occurred in interpersonal emotional intelligence, which increased from 10.34 to 11.72, corresponding to a 13.3% improvement ($t = -3.05$, $p = .003$).

Intrapersonal emotional intelligence increased from 9.67 to 10.58, representing a 9.4% improvement ($t = -2.54$, $p = .014$).

4. Overall emotional intelligence

Overall emotional intelligence increased from:

9.98 to 11.35

corresponding to a:

13.7% improvement.

The difference was statistically significant:

$t(37) = -3.42$, $p = .001$, $d_z = .55$.

The dissertation likewise identifies the 13.7% increase in overall emotional intelligence as one of the central outcomes of the developmental program.

DISCUSSION

The study identified significant improvements in seven of the ten emotional intelligence indicators following participation in the social-psychological training program.

The overall finding is consistent with contemporary intervention evidence. Mehler et al.'s 2024 meta-analysis demonstrated moderate improvements in emotional competencies following workplace training and found that these effects were not restricted to a single professional group [9]. The present findings therefore contribute additional evidence from a population that remains comparatively underrepresented in intervention research: higher education leaders in Central Asia.

1. Interpersonal emotional intelligence showed the strongest development

One of the most important findings was the 13.3% increase in interpersonal emotional intelligence.

This outcome is theoretically consistent with the intervention because a substantial proportion of the program involved empathy, active listening, feedback, perspective taking, conflict analysis, and simulated manager–employee interaction.

Recent educational leadership studies similarly highlight the importance of these competencies. Nasr Saeed et al. identified empathy, effective communication, and relationship management as particularly important elements of university leaders' emotional and social intelligence [4]. Asmamaw and Semela also identified relationship management and empathy among the EI abilities considered most relevant to faculty engagement in higher education [11].

The present finding therefore suggests that interpersonal aspects of EI may respond particularly well to training that requires participants to perform, analyse, and revise interpersonal behaviour rather than merely discuss emotional intelligence conceptually.

2. The results support context-sensitive leadership development

The study did not conceptualize emotional intelligence as an isolated personal characteristic. Training activities connected individual emotional processes with communication,

motivation, organizational relationships, managerial responsibility, and culturally shaped patterns of interaction.

This feature is important in light of recent research.

Sasere and Matashu's systematic review concluded that the expression and effects of leaders' EI depend partly on sociocultural context and called for culturally responsive approaches to emotional intelligence in educational leadership [7]. Kalakesh and Hachana similarly demonstrated that academic leaders interpret and employ emotional intelligence within institutional and contextual pressures rather than in isolation from them [3].

The integration of ethnopsychological determinants in the present program therefore represents a potentially important feature, particularly in a higher education environment where respect, consultation, collective responsibility, hierarchy, and interpersonal restraint can influence how emotions are expressed and managed.

3. Changes in self-regulation were meaningful but uneven

Although expression control, intrapersonal EI, and general emotion management improved significantly, some internally oriented indicators did not reach statistical significance.

This is consistent with evidence suggesting that different emotional competencies may require different amounts and forms of practice.

For example, Caporale-Berkowitz et al. found significant improvement in emotional awareness following a short workplace program but did not identify comparable change in all emotion-management components [14]. The authors suggested that complex emotional-management skills may require longer and more applied practice.

The current results support a similar interpretation. Skills such as controlling outward emotional expression may respond relatively quickly to behavioural practice, whereas deep emotional awareness and automatic self-regulatory processes may require longer-term development, individual coaching, repeated reflection, or follow-up activities.

4. Implications for leadership practice

The findings have practical implications for university leadership development.

First, emotional intelligence training should not be limited to theoretical seminars. Recent meta-analytic evidence supports

structured training approaches that actively practise emotional competencies [9].

Second, leadership development programs may benefit from beginning with diagnostic assessment. In this study, participants were selected on the basis of specific developmental needs, enabling the intervention to focus on emotional competencies that required strengthening.

Third, EI development should be integrated with actual leadership challenges. Conflict resolution is particularly relevant in this regard. Recent evidence demonstrates that leaders with different EI profiles also differ significantly in their preferred approaches to conflict management [8].

Finally, EI development should be connected with broader organizational outcomes. Recent evidence links leaders' emotional intelligence with faculty engagement, job satisfaction, interpersonal relationships, transformational leadership, and team effectiveness [4–6, 10–13].

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings.

First, the intervention employed a single-group pretest–posttest design without a parallel untreated control group. Consequently, the observed improvements are associated with participation in the intervention but cannot be attributed exclusively to it with the same degree of causal certainty as in a randomized controlled trial.

Second, although the broader diagnostic sample consisted of 421 leaders, the developmental intervention involved only 38 participants.

Third, participants were purposefully selected because aspects of their initial emotional intelligence profiles were comparatively low or moderate. The findings should therefore not automatically be generalized to university leaders whose initial EI levels are already high.

Fourth, post-intervention assessment was conducted immediately after the developmental period. The study did not establish whether improvements remained stable several months later.

This is especially important because contemporary meta-analytic research has shown that follow-up measurement is necessary to distinguish immediate intervention effects from sustained emotional-competence development [9].

Finally, the program consisted of multiple interconnected components. The current design cannot determine whether empathy training, active listening, reflection, stress-management techniques, role play, feedback, or another specific component produced the greatest effect.

Future studies should therefore use controlled designs, larger intervention groups, delayed follow-up measurements, and behavioural or organizational performance indicators.

CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical evidence that a structured social-psychological training intervention was associated with improvements in emotional intelligence among university leaders.

Seven of ten emotional intelligence indicators demonstrated statistically significant pre-post changes. The strongest integrated result was observed in overall emotional intelligence, which increased from 9.98 to 11.35, corresponding to a 13.7% improvement ($t(37) = -3.42$, $p = .001$, $d_z = .55$).

Interpersonal emotional intelligence increased by 13.3%, while intrapersonal emotional intelligence increased by 9.4%. These values correspond directly to the experimental results reported in the dissertation.

The findings suggest that emotional intelligence development in higher education leadership is best approached as a systematic process integrating emotional awareness, self-regulation, empathy, communication, reflection, stress management, feedback, conflict resolution, and context-sensitive leadership practice.

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