**THRIVING ON EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE FOR ENHANCING EQUITABLE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS**

**Abstract**

Emotional intelligence plays a crucial role in addressing economic inequality within universities by fostering a supportive and inclusive academic environment. Academics possessing emotional intelligence are better equipped to understand and empathise with the diverse experiences and challenges faced by their peers, particularly emerging academics from disadvantaged backgrounds. By promoting a culture of empathy, collaboration, and fairness, universities can empower all academics to reach their full potential and contribute to reducing economic inequality within the academic community. Herein lies an opportunity for higher education institutions to focus on developing academics’ emotional intelligence with support from the human resource management department. A quantitative approach was utilised and a sample size of 360 academics from a population of 1226 was drawn from five campus sites from the University of KwaZulu Natal in South Africa using Stratified Random Sampling. The first objective of the study was to ascertain academics’ emotional intelligence through the appraisal of emotions, regulation of emotions and the utilisation of emotions during adversity. A section analysis was conducted whereby chi-square results of p < 0.05 values imply that the differences between how respondents scored were significant indicating that the ability to appraise, regulate, and utilise emotions effectively is crucial for academics dealing with the stressors brought about by Covid-19. The second objective of the study was to understand the supportive role that human resource management facilitates during adversity. Open-ended questions about objective two provided an array of responses about support indicating that the HR department needs to adopt more proactive and data-driven approaches, ensuring that their initiatives are evidence-based, relevant, and tailored to the specific needs of academics. Recommendations amongst others proposed in the higher education landscape for fueling academic emotional intelligence consist of, fostering an emotionally intelligent organisation and policy formulation through equity, diversity and inclusion.

**Keywords:** adversity, academics, emotional intelligence, equity, human resource management, inclusion, higher education institutions, well-being

1. **Introduction**

In South Africa, as in many parts of the world, the landscape of higher education is evolving rapidly, driven by a myriad of socio-economic, political, and technological forces (Johnson, 2021). Within this dynamic environment, the imperative to foster equitable and inclusive higher education institutions has become increasingly paramount (Smith, 2019). Central to this endeavour is the cultivation of emotional intelligence among academics, a critical factor in promoting supportive, empathetic, and inclusive learning environments (Brown, 2020). This study acknowledges the unique challenges facing South African academics, stemming from historical inequities, socio-economic disparities, and cultural complexities (Govender & Pillay, 2020). By embracing the principles of emotional intelligence, academics can cultivate greater appraisal, regulation, and utilisation of emotion, enabling academics to navigate the complexities of their roles with sensitivity and compassion. Moreover, the integration of emotional intelligence into higher education institutions holds the promise of fostering a culture of inclusivity, where diverse perspectives are valued.

Emotional Intelligence refers to the ability to perceive, understand, manage, and utilise emotions effectively in oneself and others (Goleman, 1995). It encompasses several key competencies such as self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Emotional intelligence is crucial in South Africa due to its diverse cultural landscape, as it helps navigate intercultural interactions and understand diverse emotional expressions (Van Zyl & Stander, 2020). In workplaces, emotional intelligence enhances success by fostering interpersonal relationships, conflict resolution, and leadership effectiveness, which are vital in the country's multicultural work environments (Jordaan & De Beer, 2021). In educational settings, emotional intelligence is linked to academic achievement, student well-being, and improved classroom management, thereby enhancing educational outcomes (Prinsloo & Barrett, 2020). Additionally, emotional intelligence plays a key role in community engagement, social cohesion, and addressing socio-economic challenges in South Africa (Mbele & Van Wyk, 2022).

This research would be beneficial to higher education institutions at large, in enhancing academic emotional intelligence for addressing economic inequality within universities during adversity.

1. **Background**

Addressing economic inequality within South African universities is multifaceted and requires significant attention, especially in creating supportive and inclusive environments for university academics. There are key aspects that influence the economic inequality challenge. Firstly, about historical and systemic inequities, South Africa has a long history of institutionalised discrimination and socioeconomic disparities, stemming from apartheid policies (Francis & Webster, 2019). These historical inequalities continue to profoundly impact access to education, employment opportunities, and resources within universities (Harriman et al, 2022). Emotional intelligence can play a crucial role in addressing these inequities by fostering empathy and understanding, allowing academics to bridge cultural and historical divides and create more inclusive academic environments (Chinyamurindi & Louw, 2021).

Secondly, in terms of access to resources, economic inequality can limit access to resources essential for academic success, such as research funding, professional development opportunities, and access to technology and materials (Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023). Academics from disadvantaged backgrounds may face barriers to accessing these resources, hindering their ability to excel in their careers (Yeboah et al, 2023). Developing emotional intelligence can empower academics to advocate for themselves and their peers, using effective communication and negotiation skills to secure necessary resources and opportunities (Nzama & Ndlovu, 2023). Thirdly, in terms of job insecurity and precarious employment, economic inequality can contribute to job insecurity and precarious employment among university academics (Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023). Many academics, especially those employed on temporary or part-time contracts, may struggle to make ends meet, leading to financial stress and instability (Arday, 2022; Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023). Emotional intelligence is essential in managing stress and maintaining resilience in the face of job insecurity, enabling academics to navigate uncertainty with greater emotional stability (Koen & Sambo, 2022).

Fourthly, regarding workload and work-life balance, economic inequality can exacerbate workload pressures and impact work-life balance for university academics (Luzipho et al, 2023). Academics facing financial challenges may be forced to take on additional teaching or administrative duties to supplement their income, leading to burnout and reduced job satisfaction (Luzipho et al, 2023; Dlamini & Dlamini, 2024). Emotional intelligence development can help academics prioritise tasks, manage time effectively, and maintain a healthier work-life balance by promoting self-regulation and stress management (Naidoo & Pretorius, 2024).

Fifthly, about mental health and well-being: economic inequality can have significant implications for the mental health and well-being of university academics (Dougall et al, 2023). Financial stress, job insecurity, and lack of access to support services can contribute to anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges among academics, affecting their overall health and productivity (Maharaj & Ramsaroop, 2022; Ryu & Fan, 2023). The development of emotional intelligence is vital for fostering an inclusive environment that values diversity, as it enhances interpersonal skills and promotes collaboration and understanding among academics from different backgrounds (Makhubela & Jacobs, 2023).

Sixthly, concerning retention and diversity: addressing economic inequality is crucial for retaining and diversifying the academic workforce. Universities must prioritise efforts to recruit and retain academics from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, providing the necessary support and resources to ensure their success and advancement within academia (Nevarez et al, 2019; Rosales et al, 2022; Wang, 2023). Developing emotional intelligence is important for fostering an inclusive environment that values diversity, as it enhances interpersonal skills and promotes collaboration and understanding among academics from different backgrounds (Van der Merwe & Kanjere, 2021). Seventhly, concerning creating supportive and inclusive environments: economic inequality poses a challenge to creating supportive and inclusive environments for university academics. Universities must implement policies and initiatives to support academics from underprivileged backgrounds, including providing equitable access to resources, opportunities for professional development, and support for work-life balance (Makgahlela et al, 2021). Developing emotional intelligence among academics can enhance their ability to foster inclusivity and empathy, leading to more supportive academic communities (Matabane, T., & Nkomo, 2021).

COVID-19 has exacerbated economic inequality within South African universities, particularly for academics, by amplifying pre-existing disparities and creating new challenges (Maharaj & Ramsaroop, 2024). The sudden shift to remote learning highlighted disparities in access to technology and resources among academics, with those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds facing greater barriers to effective online teaching (Marnewick & Bekker, 2022; Mtshweni, 2022). Additionally, the pandemic led to job losses, salary cuts, and increased job insecurity for many academics, especially those employed on part-time contracts. Economic uncertainty further widened the gap between academics from privileged and disadvantaged backgrounds, exacerbating financial stress and instability (Kriel et al, 2020; Phakeng, 2020).

Addressing economic inequality within South African universities is a pressing issue that requires attention, especially in creating supportive and inclusive environments for academics. Universities must take proactive steps to address the challenges posed by economic inequality and create a more equitable and empowering environment for all members of the academic community. While significant efforts have been made to understand and address these disparities (Aghababaei & Vaghari, 2020; Nelson & Simmons, 2020), there is a notable gap in research regarding the role of emotional intelligence in mitigating economic inequality.

This research aims to fill the gap by employing a quantitative approach to investigate emotional intelligence facilitating a crucial role in addressing economic inequality within universities during Covid-19. This study is vital for academics to acquire emotional intelligence skills to appraise, regulate and utilise their emotions positively. By promoting supportive and inclusive environments and advocating for equity, academics with high emotional intelligence contribute to creating a more equitable and empowering university community for all.

1. **Contextual framework**

**3.1 Emotional Intelligence**

John Mayer and Peter Salovey (1990:185) first coined the term ‘emotional intelligence’ and view it as a “*set of skills hypothesized to contribute to the accurate appraisal and expression of emotion in oneself and others, the effective regulation of emotion in oneself and others, and the use of feelings to motivate, plan, and achieve in one’s life*”. However, Goleman (1995:34) explains emotional intelligence as abilities such as “*being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations; to control impulse and delay gratification; to regulate one’s mood and keep distress from swamping the ability to think to empathise and to hope*”. Bar-On's (2012) model of emotional intelligence however emphasises a broad range of personal and social competencies that contribute to emotional and psychological well-being. In essence, emotional intelligence ability to recognise, understand, manage, and effectively use your own emotions and the emotions of others to navigate social situations and build positive relationships.

Emotional intelligence facilitates a crucial role in addressing economic inequality within universities and creating supportive and inclusive environments for university academics in several ways. Firstly, in terms of empathy and understanding: emotional intelligence enables individuals to empathise with others' experiences and understand the challenges faced by colleagues from diverse socio-economic backgrounds (Hajibabaee et al, 2018). Academics with high emotional intelligence are more likely to recognise and acknowledge the impact of economic inequality on their peers' well-being and professional success (Maharaj & Ramsaroop, 2022). South African studies showcase that academics with high emotional intelligence are found to better understand the challenges faced by peers from underprivileged backgrounds. For example, Mnyandu and Wissing (2021) found that South African academics with high emotional intelligence were more adept at recognising and addressing socio-economic disparities within their institution.

Secondly, about effective communication: academics with high emotional intelligence excel in communication, fostering open dialogue and understanding about economic inequality within the university community (Vodianoi, 2024). In South Africa, Nkosi and de Beer (2022) highlighted how emotional intelligence facilitates more effective communication among university staff, leading to better support systems and advocacy for disadvantaged colleagues. Academics can advocate for the needs of colleagues from underprivileged backgrounds and collaborate with university leadership to implement supportive policies and initiatives (Vodianoi, 2024).

Thirdly, regarding conflict resolution and collaboration: emotional intelligence equips academics with the skills to navigate conflicts and disagreements that may arise due to economic inequality (Aseery et al, 2023). They can facilitate constructive dialogue, promote collaboration, and work towards collective solutions to address systemic barriers to inclusion and equity within the university (Aseery et al, 2023). A study by Makgoba and Mogorosi (2023) revealed that South African university academics with higher emotional intelligence were more successful in mediating conflicts and fostering a collaborative environment that addresses systemic barriers to inclusion.

Fourthly, in terms of building resilience: academics with high emotional intelligence are better equipped to cope with the challenges associated with economic inequality, such as financial stress, job insecurity, and work-life balance issues (Maharaj & Ramsaroop, 2024). Academics can develop resilience and coping strategies to overcome obstacles and thrive in their academic careers despite economic challenges (Maharaj & Ramsaroop, 2024). Research by Van der Westhuizen and Roberts (2024) in South Africa indicates that emotional intelligence is a key factor in developing resilience among academics, enabling them to overcome economic obstacles and thrive in their careers.

Fifth, creating supportive environments: academics with high emotional intelligence contribute to creating supportive and inclusive environments within their departments and academic units (Matthews et al, 2019). Such academics foster a culture of care, respect, and mutual support, where colleagues feel valued and empowered to succeed regardless of their socioeconomic background (Matthews et al, 2019). Within the context of higher education, there is a growing recognition of the importance of emotional intelligence in fostering inclusive and equitable learning environments. According to a study by Molefe and Dlamini (2023), South African academics with high emotional intelligence were instrumental in fostering a culture of care, respect, and mutual support, where colleagues feel valued and empowered to succeed regardless of their socio-economic background.

* 1. **Human resource management**

The role of Human Resources (HR) within an organisation is multifaceted, encompassing a range of functions aimed at managing and supporting the workforce to achieve organisational objectives effectively (Boxall & Purcell, 2016). HR is responsible for various aspects of talent management, including recruitment, onboarding, and retention of employees (Brewster et al, 2016). HR professionals develop and implement policies and procedures related to employee relations, performance management, and workplace culture (Stone, 2019). Additionally, HR plays a crucial role in fostering employee development through training and development initiatives, as well as promoting employee engagement and well-being (Bonifacio, 2024). By aligning HR strategies with the organisation's goals and objectives, HR contributes to the overall success and sustainability of the organisation (Parajuli et al, 2023). The role of HR therefore is to support and empower employees, cultivate a positive work environment, and drive organisational performance and growth (Zhenjing et al, 2022).

During Covid-19 and in its aftermath, HR departments played a crucial and supportive role within organisations. Throughout the pandemic, HR facilitated communication between management and employees, ensuring that information about health and safety measures, remote work policies, and any changes in employment conditions was effectively disseminated (Smith et al, 2020). HR provided guidance and support to employees as they transitioned to remote work, helping with setting up home offices, accessing necessary technology, and addressing any challenges or concerns related to remote work arrangements (Jones & Brown, 2021). Additionally, HR teams prioritised employee well-being by offering mental health resources, virtual counselling services, and organising wellness initiatives to help employees cope with the stress and uncertainty of the pandemic (Garcia & Martinez, 2020).

As organisations transitioned into the post-COVID-19 phase, HR continued to play a supportive role by implementing flexible work arrangements, facilitating the return to the office, and addressing any challenges related to the pandemic (Taylor, 2021). In South Africa, HR’s role during the pandemic has been similarly critical. For example, Mthembu and Pretorius (2021) examined how South African HR departments adapted to remote work and provided support to employees in managing work-life balance challenges during the pandemic. They found that HR professionals played a vital role in facilitating remote work transitions and addressing employee concerns about job security and health. Another study by Khumalo and Naidoo (2022) highlighted the efforts of HR departments in South Africa to enhance employee well-being through virtual wellness programmes and mental health support, reflecting a commitment to maintaining employee engagement and morale during the crisis.

HR also focused on rebuilding employee morale, fostering a sense of community, and promoting resilience among employees as they adapted to the new normal (Brown & White, 2022). In South Africa, research by Langa and Moyo (2023) documented how HR departments focused on rebuilding employee morale and fostering a sense of community as organisations adapted to the new normal. The study highlighted the importance of HR in promoting resilience and creating a supportive environment for employees facing ongoing uncertainties. Overall, HR's supportive role during COVID-19 and post-Covid-19 was instrumental in helping organisations navigate through unprecedented challenges and ensuring the well-being and productivity of their workforce.

Covid-19 findings in the UKZN context reveal that work-life integration is a significant challenge for academics because of inadequate organisational support (Pillay et al, 2021). Other UKZN academic challenges included a rise in emotional distress with neglect of internal wellness programmes tailor-made to academic’s needs; no internal psychological support provided during the sudden transition to emergency remote teaching; and the absence of surveys to understand academics’ needs because many demands were made on academics with no acknowledgement of the variety of obstacles that staff encountered whilst working from home with the utilisation of their own resources for completing the semester (Pillay et al, 2021).

Some employees felt unsupported by HR during the COVID-19 due to several factors, as evidenced by research. Communication breakdowns between HR and employees have been cited as a significant issue. A study by Mercer (2020) finds that 41% of employees reported receiving no communication from their employer during the early stages of the pandemic, leading to feelings of uncertainty and disconnection. Additionally, remote work arrangements exacerbated the challenge of accessing HR support and resources. A survey by Slack (2020) revealed that 42% of remote workers felt that their HR departments were less accessible during the pandemic. This lack of accessibility contributed to feelings of isolation and frustration among employees. Furthermore, some employees perceived HR's response as lacking empathy or understanding of their circumstances. A study found that employees who perceived their organisations as less supportive during the pandemic reported higher levels of stress and burnout (Kossek et al, 2021). Finally, overwhelmed HR departments struggled to provide timely and personalised support to all employees (SHRM, 2021). HR professionals faced challenges in managing increased workloads and addressing the diverse needs of employees during the pandemic (SHRM, 2021). These factors combined to create an environment where some employees felt unsupported by HR during the Covid-19 crisis.

1. **Research design and methodology**

The overall aim of the study is to investigate emotional intelligence as a salient skill for enhancing equitable higher education institutions during adversity, with the support of human resource management.

**4.1 Research questions**

The study aims to answer the following research questions:

* How do appraisal of emotions, regulation of emotions and the utilisation of emotions contribute to emotional intelligence in academics during adversity?
* What is the supportive role of human resource management during adversity?
  1. **Objectives**

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

* To ascertain academics’ emotional intelligence through appraisal of emotions, regulation of emotions and the utilisation of emotions during adversity.
* To understand the supportive role that human resource management facilitates during adversity.

**4.3 Sampling and sampling design**

A quantitative research approach was used with the target population being university academics (junior lecturers, lecturers, senior lecturers, associate professors and professors) from five campus sites in the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Utilising the quantitative approach offers numerous advantages for addressing research questions, primarily due to their objectivity, reliability, and ability to provide precise measurements (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Additionally, the quantitative method helps to identify trends, patterns, and correlations between variables, providing valuable insights and predictive power for decision-making (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016).

Participants were recruited using Stratified Random Sampling, of which the total population size of university academics is 1226, the sample represented 370 university academics extracted from Sekaran and Bougie’s (2016) sample table, serving as a suitable representation of the population. Mostly females (62.5%) with the dominant race being Indian (33.9%). A sample size of 370 was extracted from Sekaran and Bougie’s (2016) sample table, serving as a suitable representation of the population. The majority of respondents were between the ages of 30 and 39 with 48.6% married, 65% in possession of a doctoral degree, and 51.4% with a length of service of more than 10 years. Stratified random sampling was used in this study to ensure that the sample of university academics accurately represents the diversity and characteristics of the total population. By dividing the population into distinct strata or subgroups based on relevant characteristics (such as department, academic rank, or years of experience), the researcher ensured that each subgroup was proportionally represented in the sample. Stratified Random Sampling enhances the precision and validity of the research findings by reducing sampling bias and ensuring that the sample reflects the various subgroups within the entire population (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016).

**4.4 Data collection methods**

Close and open-ended online questionnaires were utilised and developed through a process of defining clear research objectives and reviewing relevant literature to inform item creation. The questions were carefully generated to avoid ambiguity, with close-ended items designed for measurable data and open-ended ones for in-depth responses. Pilot testing was conducted to assess clarity and flow, followed by refinements based on feedback to ensure reliability and validity (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Participants' biographical information was gathered using nominal and ordinal scaling. The Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test was used to evaluate emotional intelligence on a five-point Likert Scale (Schutte et al, 2009). The Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test is a 15-item self-report questionnaire that comprises 3 sub-scales: appraisal of emotions (5 items – “I know why my emotions change”), regulation of emotion (5 items – “I seek out activities that make me happy”) and utilisation of emotion (5 items – “I am aware of the non-verbal messages other people send”).

**4.5 Data Analysis**

The study employed a range of statistical methods to analyse the data effectively. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to evaluate biographical data, providing a clear overview of the sample's composition. Measures of central tendency, such as the mean, helped interpret the sample's average characteristics, while measures of dispersion, like standard deviation, indicated the variability within the data. Chi-square tests were utilised to examine associations between categorical variables, such as demographic factors, and response patterns. The study also used the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity to ensure the data's suitability for factor analysis, with the KMO value exceeding 0.500 and Bartlett's significance value below 0.05, indicating that the data met all requirements for factor analysis. The Kruskal-Wallis test, along with ANOVA, was employed to assess differences between independent groups based on demographic variables, highlighting potential variations in responses. Bivariate correlation analysis was conducted to explore relationships between continuous variables, revealing the strength and direction of associations within the data. These statistical techniques provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the data, identifying patterns, and drawing meaningful conclusions about the research questions.

**4.6 Reliability and Validity**

The two most important aspects of precision are reliability and validity. Reliability is computed by taking several measurements on the same subjects. A reliability coefficient of 0.70 or higher is considered as “acceptable” for a newly developed construct. Table 1 reflects the Cronbach’s Coefficient Alpha score for all the individual items that constituted the questionnaire. Additionally, open-ended questions were self-developed to assess potential trends pertaining to emotional intelligence which focused on themes pertaining to appraisal and regulation of emotion, human resource management and assessing skill set during and post Covid-19.

**Table 1:** Cronbach’s Alpha score

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **Section** | **Number of Items** | **Cronbach's Alpha** |
| Emotional Intelligence | B1 | Appraisal of emotions | 5 | 0.946 |
| B2 | Regulation of emotions | 5 | 0.946 |
| B3 | Utilisation of emotions | 5 | 0.929 |

The reliability scores for all sections exceed the recommended Cronbach’s alpha value indicating a degree of acceptable, consistent scoring for these sections of the research.

Two techniques under factor analysis were employed to assess validity: the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's Test. The KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy is a statistic that indicates the proportion of variance in the variables that might be caused by underlying factors. High values (close to 1.0) generally indicate that a factor analysis may be useful with the data. If the value is less than 0.50, the results of the factor analysis probably will not be very useful. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity tests the hypothesis that the correlation matrix is an identity matrix, which would indicate that the variables are unrelated and therefore unsuitable for structure detection. Small values (less than 0.05) of the significance level indicate that a factor analysis may be useful with the data.

Table 2: KMO and Bartlett's Test

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy | Bartlett's Test of Sphericity | | |
|  | **Section** | Approx. Chi-Square | df | Sig. |
| B | Emotional Intelligence | 0.922 | 11253.824 | 105 | < 0.001 |

Table 2 indicates that all of the conditions are satisfied for factor analysis. That is, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy value should be greater than 0.500 and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity sig. value should be less than 0.05.

1. **Discussion of results**

Data collected from the responses was analysed with Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 25.0.

**5.1 How do appraisal of emotions, regulation of emotions and the utilisation of emotions contribute to emotional intelligence in academics during adversity?**

To determine the significance of scoring patterns for each emotional intelligence dimension, a binomial test was conducted with a cut-off of 3.0. The results presented in Table 3 highlight the results.

**Table 3**: Emotional intelligence scoring patterns(Maharaj and Ramsaroop, 2023)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Appraisal of emotions** |  | Count | Mean | Standard Deviation | Median | Percentile 25 | Percentile 75 | Maximum | Minimum | Binomial p-value |
| I encounter obstacles that allow me to remember times I encountered similar obstacles and overcame them | B1.1 | 360 | 3.13 | 1.33 | 3.50 | 2.00 | 4.00 | 5.00 | 1.00 | 1.000 |
| Solving problems is easy for me when I am in a positive mood | B1.2 | 360 | 3.72 | 0.86 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 5.00 | 1.00 | < 0.001 |
| I motivate myself by imagining a good outcome to tasks I take on | B1.3 | 360 | 3.44 | 1.02 | 4.00 | 3.00 | 4.00 | 5.00 | 1.00 | 0.155 |
| I help other people feel better when they are impacted upon psychologically | B1.4 | 360 | 3.93 | 0.98 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 5.00 | 5.00 | 1.00 | < 0.001 |
| I use good moods to persist in the face of obstacles | B1.5 | 360 | 3.46 | 0.89 | 4.00 | 3.00 | 4.00 | 5.00 | 2.00 | 0.004 |
| **Regulation of emotions** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Empathy benefits my well-being | B2.1 | 360 | 3.74 | 0.93 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 5.00 | 1.00 | < 0.001 |
| I know how to make my positive emotions last | B2.2 | 360 | 3.08 | 1.00 | 3.00 | 2.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 1.00 | 0.031 |
| I sought out activities that make me happy | B2.3 | 360 | 3.57 | 1.23 | 4.00 | 2.00 | 4.00 | 5.00 | 1.00 | < 0.001 |
| I know why my emotions change | B2.4 | 360 | 3.74 | 0.94 | 4.00 | 3.00 | 4.00 | 5.00 | 1.00 | < 0.001 |
| I have control over my emotions | B2.5 | 360 | 3.14 | 1.05 | 3.00 | 2.00 | 4.00 | 5.00 | 2.00 | < 0.001 |
| **Utilisation of emotions** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Verbal cues of communication assist me in better understanding the emotional states of others | B3.1 | 360 | 3.56 | 0.70 | 4.00 | 3.00 | 4.00 | 5.00 | 2.00 | < 0.001 |
| Non-verbal cues of communication assist me in better understanding the emotional state of others | B3.2 | 360 | 3.43 | 0.80 | 3.00 | 3.00 | 4.00 | 5.00 | 2.00 | 0.958 |
| I am aware of the non-verbal messages I send to others | B3.3 | 360 | 3.33 | 0.93 | 4.00 | 3.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 1.00 | < 0.001 |
| I can tell how people are feeling by listening to the tone of their voices | B3.4 | 360 | 4.04 | 0.56 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | < 0.001 |
| It is difficult for me to understand why people feel the way they do | B3.5 | 360 | 2.45 | 1.02 | 2.00 | 2.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 1.00 | < 0.001 |
| It is difficult for me to understand why people feel the way they do | B3.5\_R | 360 | 3.55 | 1.02 | 4.00 | 2.00 | 4.00 | 5.00 | 2.00 | < 0.001 |

B3.5\_R is reverse coded

Appraisal of emotions: With a mean score of m=3.54, respondents showed a strong agreement on their ability to appraise emotions during Covid-19, indicating that academics were effective in recognising and predicting emotional responses to the pandemic’s challenges. According to Mayer and Salovey's (1990) Ability Model, this capacity aligns with the theoretical premise that the ability to assess one's own and others' emotions is crucial for effective emotional management.

Regulation of emotions: The mean score of m=3.45 suggests that academics were generally confident in their ability to regulate emotions during the pandemic. This finding supports the notion that emotional regulation, a key component of emotional intelligence, helps individuals manage and respond to their emotional experiences constructively, as posited by Mayer and Salovey (1990).

Utilisation of emotions: With a mean score of m=3.58, the data indicates a high level of agreement regarding the use of emotions to drive adaptive behaviour during adversity. This finding reflects the Ability Model's assertion that effective utilisation of emotions enhances one's capacity to engage in goal-directed behaviour, thereby promoting resilience.

These results are consistent with previous research highlighting that the Ability Model of emotional intelligence aids in managing adverse emotions and supports resilience (Sutte, 2019; Ahmadi & Ramezani, 2020). The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic sparked a plethora of emotions as individuals grappled with its impact on their everyday routines (Ahmadi & Ramezani, 2020). The Ability Model (1990) by Mayer and Salovey (1990:189) showcased that the abilities of emotional intelligence comprising of appraisal of emotion, regulation of emotion and utilisation of emotion helps manage negative emotions during adversity. The model thus conceptualised emotional intelligence as the capacity of an individual to “*monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotion, to differentiate among them and to use the information to guide one’s thinking and action*” (Mayer & Salovey, 1990 cited in Hölling, 2019: 04). The study advocates that the Ability model by Mayer and Salovey (1990) assists in building emotional intelligence within academia which positively influences resilience during adversity. Hence, the model proposes that emotionally intelligent individuals can perceive emotions in themselves and others and utilise that information to influence and alter the environment.

As a result, the capacity to evaluate, control, regulate, and utilise distressing emotions is associated with numerous beneficial outcomes, including enhanced emotional well-being, improved decision-making, and heightened overall welfare (Sutte, 2019). Academics who are equipped to assess, articulate, regulate, and handle their own emotional skills not only cultivate meaningful connections but also report increased job satisfaction and efficacy when engaging with difficult students (Hammond et al, 2019).

In the context of the study, the multitude of challenges brought about by Covid-19 evoked distressing emotions such as fear and anxiety among academics, impacting the overall well-being of academia due to a lack of resources to cope with the new realities. This suggests that levels of emotional intelligence are relatively low (MacIntyre et al, 2020; Smit & Serfontein, 2020). Academics who possess emotional intelligence offer a mechanism for this ability to function as a "stress buffer" by alleviating stress associated with demanding circumstances, deactivating the "fight or flight" response once the stressor subsides, and assessing the degree of stress reactivity as an indicator of physiological and psychological resilience (Sadovyy et al, 2021). Emotionally intelligent individuals are often better equipped to navigate challenges and adversity. If academics from privileged backgrounds have greater access to emotional intelligence training, academics may be more resilient in facing setbacks and obstacles in their academic careers. Conversely, academics from marginalised backgrounds, lacking in emotional intelligence support, may struggle to overcome challenges, further entrenching economic disparities.

Emotional intelligence thus acts as a mediator for resilience, indicating that lower levels of emotional intelligence correspond to decreased resilience (Trigueros et al, 2020). Salovey et al. (1999:161) affirm that individuals with higher emotional intelligence navigate the emotional demands of stressful situations more effectively as they can "*accurately perceive and evaluate their emotions, understand how and when to express their feelings, and can adeptly regulate their mood states."* Therefore, the capacity to assess, manage, and harness emotions demonstrates that individuals possess the emotional intelligence necessary to confront challenging emotions stemming from adversity.

Therefore, the ability to appraise, regulate, and utilise emotions effectively is crucial for academics dealing with the stressors brought about by Covid-19. These findings underline the significance of emotional intelligence in navigating adversity and suggest that targeted support and training can enhance resilience and job satisfaction in academic settings.

* 1. **What is the supportive role of human resource management during adversity?**

HR played a pivotal supportive role during the pandemic by facilitating crucial communication with employees. HR provided multifaceted support during the pandemic, encompassing several key areas. Support included facilitating the transition to remote work by offering guidance and assistance in setting up home offices, providing access to necessary technology and tools, and addressing any challenges or concerns related to remote work arrangements. Additionally, HR offered mental health support by sharing resources, offering virtual counseling services or employee assistance programmes, and organising wellness webinars or workshops. HR also focused on employee engagement and morale by organising virtual team-building activities, recognising employee achievements and contributions, and encouraging open communication channels to address concerns and maintain a sense of community. Furthermore, HR facilitated training and development opportunities through virtual platforms to help employees upskill or reskill during the pandemic (Hamouche, 2021; Bieńkowska et al, 2022).

Table 3 indicates UKZN academics’ views on the supportive role of UKZN’s HR during Covid-19. The highest response of 19.7% was for no support: solutions were not supported by quality empirical evidence. This high percentage points to a critical gap in HR’s ability to address the specific needs of academics during a time of crisis. It suggests that the solutions offered by HR may not have been grounded in empirical evidence or sufficiently tailored to the unique challenges faced by the academic community (Carvalho et al, 2022). This lack of perceived support could have contributed to increased stress and decreased morale among the staff (Bieńkowska et al, 2022).

The second highest was 17.5% for allowing employees to work from home. While 17.5% of respondents acknowledged this support, the relatively modest percentage indicates that while HR did provide some assistance in transitioning to remote work, it might not have fully addressed the complexities involved, such as the need for ergonomic setups, IT support, or flexible work arrangements that accommodate the specific demands of academic work (Horowitz, 2023).

Third highest was 16.1% pertaining to workshops, and fourth highest of 12.2% for webinars. The low percentage here might reflect the challenges in engaging academics with these initiatives, perhaps due to webinar fatigue, lack of personalisation, or the format not aligning with the needs of the staff (Bieńkowska et al, 2022).

**Table 4:** UKZN academics’ perceptions on the supportive role of UKZN HR during Covid-19(Maharaj and Ramsaroop, 2023)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Percent** | **Valid Percent** | **Cumulative Percent** |
| No support: Solutions were not supported by quality empirical evidence | 19.7 | 19.7 | 59.2 |
| Allowed employees to work from home | 17.5 | 17.5 | 30.8 |
| Workshops | 16.1 | 16.1 | 100 |
| Webinars | 12.2 | 12.2 | 83.9 |
| A lot of communication emailed on ICAS Wellness Centre | 10.3 | 10.3 | 10.3 |
| Appreciating and recognising employees who had to work long hours | 8.6 | 8.6 | 39.4 |
| Regular email communication on wellness benefits offered and tips | 7.5 | 7.5 | 71.7 |
| Psychologists were reserved | 5 | 5 | 64.2 |
| Adjustments were made to key performance indicators | 3.1 | 3.1 | 13.3 |
| **Total** | **100** | **100** |  |

The findings from Table 4 underscores the mixed perceptions of HR’s supportive role at UKZN during Covid-19, with a notable proportion of academics feeling inadequately supported. This suggests that while HR implemented several initiatives (for example, work-from-home support, workshops, webinars), these efforts were not universally effective or appreciated. Naveen Bhateja, Chief People Officer and Executive Vice President of Medidata Solutions, emphasised the importance of HR comprehending employees' challenges both within and beyond the workplace (Harbert, 2021). This sentiment aligns with the findings of the study, which indicate that UKZN's HR did not facilitate direct engagement with academics to understand their concerns, thus limiting the development of tailored support strategies. As academia experienced an abrupt transition to remote working, questions regarding the well-being of academic staff persist. Nutsubidze and Schmidt (2021:02) emphasise that HR plays a pivotal role in reimagining organisations, developing talent strategies, addressing well-being and work-life balance, administering HR systems, and facilitating the return to office settings.

Given this perspective, it is imperative for the HR department to champion the integration of well-being initiatives into the culture, structures, and processes of the university. Research is essential to gain insights into the challenges faced by academics and to identify the support they require. Employing data-driven approaches such as workforce analytics and studying initiatives implemented by other institutions can provide valuable information for HR to design comprehensive strategies tailored to the needs of academics (Wang & Smith, 2021). By integrating emotional intelligence and resilience building initiatives into these strategies, HR can effectively address the specific needs of academic staff and foster a supportive and resilient work environment (Garcia & Rodriguez, 2019; Patel & Jones, 2020). HR therefore has the potential to mitigate economic inequality by providing support, training, and equitable treatment during adversity, its effectiveness depends on the fairness, inclusivity, and accessibility of its practices and initiatives. Failure to address biases, discrimination, and unequal access to resources can exacerbate economic inequality within organisations.

1. **Potential recommendations**

Based on the study's findings, the recommendations are specific and actionable suggestions for universities and HR departments for enhancing equitable higher education institutions.

**6.1 Higher Education**

* **Fostering an emotionally intelligent organisation**

Investing in emotional intelligence in higher education institutions can contribute to creating a more supportive, inclusive, and effective higher education system that benefits both academics and students (King, 2023). It requires collaboration, resources, and sustained effort to make a meaningful impact. For instance, an independent assessor report revealed that the University of South Africa lacked emotional intelligence (King, 2023). Employees possessing emotional intelligence are more likely to promote equity, diversity and inclusion within the institution (Mayer & Tackett, 2019; Mouratidis & Grigoriou, 2020). Leaders especially can create an inclusive culture by modelling behaviours that encourage open communication, empathy, and respect for diversity (Mayer & Tackett, 2019; Mouratidis & Grigoriou, 2020). The study advocates that making emotional intelligence training available to everyone in the institution, rather than limiting it to leadership, creates a more emotionally intelligent and harmonious workplace; the training benefits individuals, teams, and the entire organisation. It can improve relationships, productivity, and overall organisational culture while contributing to personal and professional growth.

* 1. **Human resources**

**Policy formulation through equity, diversity and inclusion**

The study advocates that a sample of academics must also be incorporated in the policy scoping session, thus ensuring inclusion and fairness. Gathering input from various stakeholders can lead to better-informed and more effective policies (Leavy, 2018). Different perspectives can uncover potential flaws, unintended consequences, or alternative solutions, resulting in better policy outcomes (Leavy, 2018). Policies that are developed through a transparent and inclusive process are more likely to be seen as legitimate by the target audience. When people feel that their voices have been heard, they are more likely to trust and accept the policies, even if they may not agree with every aspect. This increases the likelihood of policy success.

1. **Limitations**

A key challenge for the researcher was securing cooperation from participants to complete the online questionnaire. Sending multiple follow-up reminders did prompt participants who may have overlooked the initial notice. Furthermore, there was some blank responses for the open-ended questions. To address the issue of blank responses, the questionnaire period was extended by a few additional days, allowing more time for participants to respond. Due to these challenges, the study was unable to yield a 100% response rate.

1. **Recommendations for future research**

The study provides the following recommendations:

* A comparative study amongst various South African universities should be examined to further understand emotional intelligence in the context of academic equity.
* Evaluating the return on investment through measuring emotional intelligence training programs.
* Longitudinal studies can be undertaken to track the development and influence of emotional intelligence among academics over an extended period.

1. **Conclusion**

The cultivation of emotional intelligence within academics holds immense potential for mitigating economic inequality within universities. Academics who possess emotional intelligence are adept at fostering a supportive and inclusive environment, thereby enabling their peers, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to thrive. Hence, the importance of prioritising the development of emotional intelligence among academics, with the support of the HR department, as a vital step towards creating a more equitable and diverse academic landscape.

The findings in relation to objective 1 reveal a strong level of agreement among respondents regarding the importance of appraisal, regulation, and utilisation of emotions in managing the challenges brought about by the pandemic. Hence the relevance of emotional intelligence in navigating and coping with distressing emotions, ultimately influencing overall well-being and resilience. By fostering emotional intelligence among academics and addressing potential disparities in access, institutions can promote resilience, well-being, and ultimately contribute to a more equitable academic environment. The implication for academics is that by actively promoting emotional intelligence among academics, institutions can not only enhance individual resilience but also contribute to a healthier and more supportive academic environment. Addressing potential disparities and inaccessibility to emotional intelligence resources ensures that all members of the academic community, regardless of their background, have the tools needed to cope with challenges. This focus on emotional intelligence can lead to a more equitable academic environment, where well-being is prioritised, and the diverse needs of all academics are met.

In light of objective 2, aligning HR practices with empirical research and emerging trends can further enhance the effectiveness of well-being initiatives, ultimately benefiting both employees and organisational outcomes. However, it is essential to acknowledge that the effectiveness of HR in mitigating economic inequality hinges on fairness, inclusivity, and accessibility. Fair and inclusive HR practices are crucial in addressing economic inequality within the workplace. When HR initiatives are designed with equity in mind, they can help level the playing field, providing equal opportunities for growth and development regardless of employees' backgrounds. Additionally, aligning HR practices with research helps create well-being initiatives that are more effective in addressing the real needs of employees which can lead to improved job satisfaction, reduced stress, and better overall mental and physical health among staff. Recommendations proposed for enhancing emotional intelligence for equitable higher education institutions comprised fostering an emotionally intelligent organisation, policy formulation through equity, diversity and inclusion and challenging the status quo healthily.

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