Emotional Intelligence as a Resource Generator: A Conservation of Resources Perspective on Academic Burnout

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ABSTRACT	Published Online: January 16, 2026

Anchored in Conservation of Resources theory, this study synthesizes three empirical pathways (emotion regulation, social support and self-efficacy) into a single "emotional intelligence as resource generator" tri-path model that explains both the emergence and the buffering of academic burnout. A narrative meta-integration of ten cross-stage, cross-cultural studies published 2015–2025 reveals that the salience of each pathway shifts with context: emotion regulation dominates in high-pressure roles, social support is amplified in collectivistic campuses, and self-efficacy becomes pivotal under outcome-oriented assessment regimes. Universities should therefore bundle emotional-skills training, resource-sharing platforms, and efficacy-building activities to escape the one-size-fits-all trap. Future work needs longitudinal designs to track how resource spirals evolve across different educational systems, providing both theory and tools for the early identification and precision prevention of academic burnout.

KEYWORDS:

Emotional intelligence; Academic burnout; Resource conservation; Emotion regulation; Social support; Self-efficacy

INTRODUCTION

The word "academic burnout" is borrowed from the term "job burnout" in the workplace. Although students are not employees in the traditional sense, from the standpoint of psychology, bachelor studies consist of scheduled activities like as course attendance, coursework, and quizzes, which may be considered "work.". Academic burnout refers to a combination of emotional exhaustion(EE), cynicism(CC) and professional inefficacy(PI) because of their fail to meeting academic requirement (Salmela-Aro et al., 2009).

A review analysis, encompassing 55 articles published between 2006 and 2020, involving 27,940 university students/graduates from 24 low- and middle-income countries, revealed an overall prevalence of academic burnout at 12.1%(Kaggwa et al., 2021). The prevalence rates for emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment were 27.8%, 32.6%, and 29.9%, which means that about one in every four people experience emotional exhaustion, one in every three people experience depersonalization, and approximately one in every three people feel a significant reduction in personal accomplishment. Sudents in Africa exhibited the highest prevalence of academic burnout at 35.4%, followed by Asia at 30.2%, and Europe at 20.7% (Kaggwa et al., 2021). It means that burnout among student populations is a global issue.

Intervening in student burnout is the responsibility of both the students themselves and the university administrative departments. Personal resources such as emotional intelligence

and locus of control can determine the extent to which students can cope with stress in the environment and prevent severe burnout without experience.

The emotion regulation model proposed by Gross (2015) posits that individuals with higher emotional intelligence (EI) are more inclined to employ cognitive reappraisal rather than expressive suppression. When faced with academic stress, students with elevated EI can swiftly identify negative emotions and utilize reappraisal strategies to mitigate emotional arousal, thereby preventing the transition from emotional exhaustion to burnout. A meta-analysis (Mendonça et al., 2023) further highlights emotion regulation pathways as the most direct mechanism explaining the protective function of EI.From the empathy-prosociality framework proposed by Eisenberg (2003), individuals with high EI exhibit an enhanced ability to accurately perceive peers' emotions and engage in more helping behaviors, thereby activating reciprocal networks within the classroom. Through knowledge sharing and emotional support, they acquire both instrumental and evaluative resources, buffering chronic stress induced by academic demands and leading to a significant reduction in burnout levels. Multiple studies (Ju et al., 2015; Ullah et al., 2023) indicate that the social support pathway contributes to a greater decline in burnout within collectivist contexts compared to individualistic cultures.

Multiple scholars have empirically demonstrated the significant impact of emotional intelligence (EI) on academic burnout. However, existing studies tend to examine the mechanisms of "emotion regulation" and "social support" in isolation, lacking a unified explanatory framework. To address this gap, the present study employs Conservation of Resources (COR) theory as an integrative framework, synthesizing three pathways—emotion regulation, social support, and self-efficacy. We propose that EI mitigates academic burnout through: (1) reducing personal energy depletion, (2) acquiring external resources via knowledge sharing, and (3) enhancing personal efficacy beliefs, thereby establishing a testable tri-path integrated model(Fig.1).

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Conservation of Resources (COR) theory was introduced by American psychologist Stevan Hobfoll in the late 1980s (Hobfoll, 1989). It describes the ongoing exchange of resources between individuals and their social environment, positing that people strive to obtain, retain, and protect resources they value

in order to forestall resource depletion.

Hobfoll (1989) defines "resources" as "objects, conditions, personal characteristics, and energies that are valued by the individual, or that serve as a means to obtain what is valued." These resources fall into four categories: (1) Material resources—goods required for survival, such as food, water, shelter, and transportation. (2) Conditional resources—social relationships, sought-after social status, credentials, experience, and social support. (3) Personal characteristics resources— enduring traits such as emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, self-concept, and self-esteem. (4) Energy resources—sources that energize the individual, including sense of identity and knowledge/skills (Hobfoll, 1989; Duan et al., 2020).

Three types of them are especially salient in educational settings: energy resources (time, effort), conditional resources (teacher and peer support, social networks), and personal characteristics (self-esteem, self-efficacy). When academic workload remains chronically high and replenishment is insufficient, energy resources are depleted first, triggering a cascading loss of conditional and personal resources that ultimately manifests as emotional exhaustion and academic burnout.

Hobfoll (2011) argued that the process of resource investment is complex and proposed the following three interrelated inferences based on these fundamental principles: Inference 1: Individuals with more initial resources are more likely to adopt riskier resource investment strategies and engage in more aggressive resource investment behaviors. They are less affected by resource losses and have a stronger ability to acquire resources. Conversely, individuals and organizations lacking resources are more susceptible to resource constraints and influences. Their willingness to protect resources is stronger than their awareness of acquiring additional resources, thereby reducing investment behaviors. Inference 2: The resource loss spiral. Individuals with fewer resource reserves are more vulnerable to the stress of resource losses. Moreover, the presence of this stress often results in insufficient resources to prevent losses, thereby accelerating the depletion of resource reserves and gradually increasing the psychological stress perceived by individuals. Therefore, in each iteration of the stress spiral, the momentum and scale of resource losses continue to increase, while the resources available to individuals and organizations to offset these losses gradually decrease, leading to further resource damage in the future. Inference 3: The resource gain spiral. Individuals with

more initial resources have more investment capital and opportunities, making them more capable of acquiring new resources, thereby leading to a spiral of resource gains. Compared to the resource loss spiral, the resource gain spiral forms more slowly and on a smaller scale, typically manifesting as a flat and gradual curve. Additionally, Hobfoll et al. (2018) proposed that resources do not exist in isolation; they are not only the result of cultivation, learning, and adaptation but also the product of synergistic development between individuals and their environment or organization. This environment can either cultivate and sustain resources or limit and hinder their maintenance, development, and creation.

Emotional intelligence's three roles as a "resource generator":

Inhibiting resource loss: High-EI students can promptly identify and re-appraise negative emotions, curbing the direct erosion of energy resources by emotional dissipation.

Facilitating resource acquisition: They are more likely to trade knowledge-sharing and proactive help-seeking for teacher and peer feedback, thereby replenishing conditional resources.

Launching resource spirals: Once depletion is promptly offset, high-EI individuals enter a gain cycle in which energy, conditional, and personal resources mutually reinforce one another, and the risk of burnout keeps declining.

As shown by Fig.1, Grounded in COR theory, this study positions emotional intelligence as a "resource generator" that simultaneously activates three pathways:
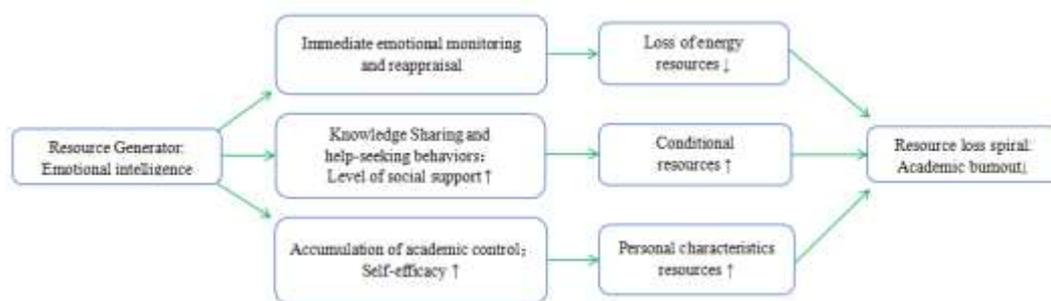

Figure 1: The "EI–Resource Conservation" tri-path model: from resource generation to academic-burnout buffering.

Boundary conditions: when collectivistic cultural orientation is stronger, assessment emphasizes process, or academic competition is moderate, the knowledge-sharing and social-support pathways show amplified effects. Conversely, individualistic cultures, outcome-oriented evaluation, or hyper-competitive environments may attenuate the protective power of the control- and self-efficacy pathways.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a theoretical integration review design: Using Conservation of Resources (COR) theory as the conceptual framework, it integrates three empirical pathways—emotion regulation, social support, and self-efficacy—into a tri-path "Emotional Intelligence-Resource Conservation" model, which is cross-validated through existing empirical literature. The literature selection criteria included: (1) studies published between 2015 and 2025; (2) samples from diverse learning stages or occupational contexts; (3) reporting on emotional intelligence (EI) and academic (or school) burnout (or exhaustion) with at least one mediating mechanism; a total of 10 empirical studies met these criteria. Employing narrative-

meta integration methodology, the study: (1) extracted effect directions, confidence intervals, cultural backgrounds, and professional contexts for each pathway; (2) conducted side-by-side comparisons across three contextual dimensions—high-pressure roles, collectivist campus environments, and outcome-oriented evaluation systems—to test the boundary hypotheses illustrated in Figure 1. As no primary human data were collected, ethical approval was not required.

3. RESULT

Schoeps et al. (2021) showed that emotion repair, via cognitive reappraisal, mediates the link between EI and psychological exhaustion ($\beta = -0.12$ to -0.19) in teachers. Fiorilli et al. (2020) found anxiety regulation mediates the EI–school-burnout relation in 1 235 Italian adolescents ($b = -2.10$, 95 % CI [-2.86, -1.54], $\beta = -0.53$, $p < .001$). Sha et al. (2022) reported emotion regulation mediates the EI–subjective-well-being path ($\beta = 0.25$, $t = 4.63$, $p < .001$), and well-being strongly predicts burnout. Jahanzeb et al. (2023) demonstrated that controlling and regulating emotions separately mediate EI–burnout in physicians ($\beta_1 = .045$, SE = .072, $p < .001$; $\beta_2 = .217$,

SE = .041, p < .001). Liu et al. (2025) further showed cognitive reappraisal mediates the EI–emotional-exhaustion link (β = 0.23, p < .001). Collectively, the emotion-regulation pathway robustly attenuates psychological depletion across high-stress samples (high-school students, educators, doctors), supplying context-stable evidence for EI's resource-conservation function.

Ullah et al. (2023) found EI directly predicted social support (β = 0.389, p < .05) and social support inversely predicted academic stress and negative affect (β = –0.152, p < .05) in 429 Bangladeshi undergraduates, yielding a partial mediation of social support on EI–burnout symptoms. Ju et al. (2015) observed the same partial mediation in team-based workplaces (SE = .07, 95 % CI [–.39, –.15], p < .001). Farjam et al. (2023) showed EI reduced academic burnout indirectly via academic help-seeking in 368 Iranian university students. These studies confirm that the social-support pathway transmits EI's protective effect in collectivistic campus and team contexts by replenishing conditional resources through knowledge-sharing and help-seeking, thereby reliably lowering burnout.

Saeed et al. (2022) demonstrated academic self-efficacy significantly mediates the EI–burnout link (β_1= .55, β_2= .21) in Pakistani undergraduates. Zhang & Fah (2025) revealed that the Perceived Self-Efficacy facet of perceived stress partially mediates the EI–learning-burnout relation in 678 Chinese arts majors (β = –0.072, SE = 0.02, t = 4.61, 95 % CI [–0.103, –0.042], p < .001). Dan et al. (2024) showed high-EI students more accurately perceived teacher support and, via academic self-efficacy, reduced burnout (effect = –0.11, size = 31.68 %, 95 % CI [–0.16, –0.07]) in 371 Chinese junior-high students. Across cultures and educational stages, self-efficacy consistently transmits EI's burnout-buffering effect, underscoring this personal resource's pivotal role in outcome-oriented evaluation systems.

4. DISCUSSION

The narrative-meta integration across ten recent studies shows that the three pathways do not operate in isolation; instead, their salience is contextually choreographed. In high-pressure professional roles—such as clinicians or secondary-school teachers—the emotional labour demanded by daily practice is intense and continuous. Here, the first pathway (emotion regulation) dominates: students or staff who can quickly re-appraise setbacks protect their limited energy pool and postpone exhaustion. In collectivistic campus climates—where group harmony is prized and help-seeking is not stigmatised—the second pathway (social support) swells in importance. Knowledge is treated as a communal good; classmates readily share notes, explain difficult concepts, and offer affective encouragement, thereby replenishing one another's conditional resources. Conversely, in systems that rank students by standardised scores and prize individual mastery, the third pathway (self-efficacy) becomes the linchpin. When external audits leave little room for error, belief in one's capability to perform acts as the last line of defence against helplessness and withdrawal.

These contextual shifts are fully compatible with COR's boundary proposition: the same emotional-intelligence skillset is deployed differently depending on which resource domain is most vulnerable. When energy outflow is steep but collective networks are strong, EI is channelled into help-seeking and mutual aid; when energy outflow is steep but collective networks are thin, EI is channelled inward to fortify self-efficacy and private coping. Thus, the "resource generator" is not a fixed valve; it is a dynamic switchboard that reroutes investment to the reservoir closest to depletion. Practically, this means that universities must first diagnose which reservoir is leaking fastest before prescribing an intervention. A one-size-fits-all mindfulness course may miss students who already regulate emotions well but suffer from isolation; likewise, peer-tutoring schemes may falter if participants doubt their basic competence. Mapping the local ecology of resources should precede the design of any burnout-reduction programme.

5. CONCLUSION

For the first time, this study integrates "emotion regulation," "social support," and "self-efficacy" into the COR framework and proposes a three-path model that casts emotional intelligence as a "resource generator." Theoretically, the model fills the dynamic-mechanism gap in EI–burnout research; practically, it enables universities to design multi-component interventions that combine emotional-skills training, resource-sharing platforms, and efficacy-building exercises, avoiding the "symptom-only" pitfall of single-track programs. Future work should employ longitudinal designs to track resource spirals and test the model's generalizability across different educational systems, advancing early identification and precision prevention of academic burnout.

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