



# The role of trait emotional intelligence in academic performance during the university transition: An integrative model of mediation via social support, coping, and adjustment



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## ABSTRACT

The authors propose conceptual models linking trait emotional intelligence (TEI) with achievement both directly and indirectly via perceived social support (PSS), engagement coping (EC), and adjustment, in the context of the university transition. The models were tested in a multiwave design with a sample of incoming Australian undergraduates ( $N = 470$ ). In structural equation analyses, TEI was found to be a direct predictor of higher PSS and the greater use of EC strategies. Further, mediation analyses revealed that TEI was indirectly associated with academic adjustment via EC and psychological adjustment via EC and PSS operating in parallel. TEI was also found to be indirectly associated with achievement via EC and academic adjustment linked serially in a three-path mediated sequence. These direct and indirect relations were robust when controlling for known confounding influences. The empirically supported mediating processes extend the literature by elucidating some of the pathways through which TEI is linked with better adjustment and achievement.

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## 1. Introduction

There is considerable interest in the role of trait emotional intelligence (TEI) in academic performance (AP). From the TEI theory perspective, TEI refers to affective dispositions and self-perceptions located at the lower strata of personality frameworks. These dispositions and self-perceptions reflect typical patterns of feelings, thoughts and behaviors related to the perception, regulation, management, and expression of emotion-related information as well as self-control, self-motivation, and optimistic dispositions (Petrides, 2011). Higher TEI has been linked to AP across several educational settings (Perera & DiGiacomo, 2013) as well as specific educational stressors (Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan, & Majeski, 2004). However, the pathways by which TEI is associated with AP have received only little investigation.

The present research is designed to address these gaps in the TEI literature. Specifically, we test a conceptual model linking TEI, perceived social support (PSS), engagement coping (EC), adjustment, and AP. The present model specification is conceptually predicated on models of personality processes in AP

posited by Matthews, Zeidner, and Roberts (2006). According to these models, dispositional constructs influence the cognitive-social and self-regulative strategies that people use to manage environmental demands, which, in turn, influence their adjustment and AP. We test this model and plausible alternatives in the context of the university transition – a typically stressful life event, involving the experience of novel academic and social challenges in the first term of university study.

### 1.1. TEI and AP

Although TEI theory posits null effects of TEI on cognitive abilities, at least small associations of TEI with AP are expected as emotion-related personality traits may play a role in meeting the demands of educational environments (Petrides, Frederickson, & Furnham, 2004; Sanchez-Ruiz, Mavroveli, & Poullis, 2013). Consistent with this theorizing, meta-analytic evidence affirms that TEI and AP are modestly, but non-trivially, positively related (Perera & DiGiacomo, 2013; Richardson, Abraham, & Bond, 2012). Furthermore, in the context of the university transition, and the university environment more generally, TEI has been found to be positively associated with GPA (Parker et al., 2004; Sanchez-Ruiz et al., 2013). This positive association may be attributed, in part,

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to a direct pathway involving emotion regulation dispositions. A propensity for regulating emotion among high TEI individuals may foster AP by minimizing susceptibility to the deleterious effects of negative emotions on cognitive functioning in stressful academic settings (Perera & DiGiacomo, 2013). Furthermore, emotional self-efficacy may play a role in emotional self-management in academic activities (Qualter, Gardner, Pope, Hutchinson, & Whiteley, 2012). Notwithstanding these arguments and evidence for a positive link, several studies have reported null or near null associations. However, inconsistent or null total effects do not preclude the possibility of important indirect relations.

### 1.2. Distal mediational pathways

TEI may be indirectly associated with AP during the university transition. One potential mediating mechanism linking TEI with AP is academic adjustment (AA). AA is defined as positive academic functioning, involving engagement in academic activities (e.g., preparing for exams and assignments, regular coursework study, organizing class information; Perera & McIlveen, 2014). There are at least two plausible explanations for an association: (a) it may be that TEI dispositions (e.g., self-motivation) foster the mobilization of effort to engage in tasks (Akhtar, Boustani, Tsivrikos, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2015); and (b) self-control dispositions among high TEI individuals could offset the influence of externally-elicited motives on behavior, thereby sustaining engagement notwithstanding exposure to transition stressors (Perera & DiGiacomo, 2013). To the extent that people engage in academic activities, they may be expected to perform better than those who are less engaged (Credé & Niehorster, 2012).

Psychological adjustment (PA) to the transition may be a second pathway linking TEI and AP. PA is defined as optimal psychological functioning. Higher TEI has been consistently linked to indices of better PA (Jacobs, Sim, & Zimmerman, 2015; Martins, Ramalho, & Morin, 2010). TEI may moderate pathogenic biological responses and minimize susceptibility to mood deterioration under stressful condition, thereby preserving psychological functioning in the face of adversity (Mikolajczak, Petrides, Coumans, & Luminet, 2009). In addition, research suggests that individuals who are psychologically well-adjusted to the university transition perform academically better than those who are poorly adjusted (Credé & Niehorster, 2012).

### 1.3. Proximal mediational pathways

There may also be proximal mediating mechanisms by which TEI promotes adjustment and, in turn, achievement. Extant literature points to EC as a self-regulative mechanism that mediates the link from TEI to adjustment (Downey, Johnston, Hansen, Birney, & Stough, 2010) and perhaps, in turn, achievement. EC refers to active attempts to manage a stressful situation, involving both primary and secondary control strategies (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007). Research demonstrates that high TEI individuals are more likely to report the use of engagement strategies (Mikolajczak, Nelis, Hansenne, & Quoidbach, 2008; Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007). Among those high on TEI, an optimistic disposition may promote the greater use of primary control engagement strategies because positive expectancies for eventual success lead to greater engagement and increased effort to overcome adversity (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010). Biologically-based motivation systems underlying TEI dispositions (e.g., self-motivation, assertiveness) may also serve as regulatory guides for approach behavior and the engagement of attention, which may be psychologically manifested as EC efforts when confronting adversity. The greater use of EC, initiated by TEI in response to stress, may lead to better AA and, conceivably, in turn, achievement (Leong, Bonz, & Zachar, 1997).

PSS constitutes a second proximal mediating pathway through which TEI may foster adjustment and, in turn, achievement (Kong, Zhao, & You, 2012). TEI has been consistently linked to greater PSS across university samples (Kong et al., 2012). These findings may be attributed to dispositional emotion expressivity and perception among those high on TEI, which sustains the flow of emotion-based communication between social partners in ways that enhance the individual's ability to identify, develop and maintain supportive social relationships (Perera & DiGiacomo, 2013). Furthermore, students reporting higher PSS have been shown to experience better PA (Brisette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002), which may, in turn, foster higher achievement.

### 1.4. The hypothesized model

Based on the preceding rationale and evidence reviewed, we specified and tested a mediation model implying the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1).** TEI is directly associated with (a) PSS, (b) EC, (c) AA, (d) PA, and (e) AP.

**Hypothesis 2 (H2).** TEI is indirectly associated with PA via (a) PSS and (b) EC.

**Hypothesis 3 (H3).** TEI is indirectly associated with AA via EC.

**Hypothesis 4 (H4).** TEI is indirectly associated with AP via (a) EC and AA linked serially, (b) EC and PA linked serially, and (c) PSS and PA linked serially in three-path mediated sequences.

In addition, three alternative models were tested to assess the tenability of complete mediation of the relations of TEI with (a) AP, (b) PA and (c) AA. The retained model was further tested, controlling for the effects of extraversion and neuroticism, which share considerable conceptual ground with TEI (Petrides et al., 2007), and may also be implicated in the prediction of PSS, EC (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007), PA, and AA (Lidy & Kahn, 2006).

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 470 freshmen enrolled at an Australian university. The mean age of the participants was 17.779 (SD = .721; 61.7% female). Data were collected in four waves consistent with the temporal ordering of constructs implied by the target model. Time one data were collected during the first week of the first semester via online measures of TEI and the covariates neuroticism and extraversion. Four weeks later (Time 2), online measures of PSS and EC were completed by the same participants. At mid-semester (Time 3), a third online battery of measures of AA and PA was administered. The final wave of measurement (Time 4) involved the retrieval of semester-end academic transcripts from the university registrar. The timing of the waves of measurement ensured that students had adequate time to develop relationships and encounter transition stressors.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. TEI

Latent TEI was estimated as a second-order factor from items in the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-Short-Form (TEIQue-SF) (Petrides, 2009). The TEIQue-SF is a 30-item self-report inventory, rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale, designed to measure global TEI in line with TEI theory, but can yield scores on the dispositional Well-being, Emotionality, Sociability, and

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