



Developing Culturally-Responsive Emotional Intelligence Programs for UAE Students: Examining Impacts on Self-Motivation, Empathetic Understanding, and Skills

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ABSTRACT

The higher education landscape of the United Arab Emirates offers distinctive opportunities to examine how culturally responsive emotional intelligence (EI) interventions can improve student outcomes within Islamic and Emirati cultural frameworks. This study aims to examine the effectiveness of classroom-based EI programs adapted for UAE undergraduate students, focusing on three critical dimensions: self-motivation, empathy, and social skills. Addressing a major gap in cross-cultural EI education, the research examines how traditional EI frameworks can be modified to reflect Islamic values, Emirati cultural norms, and the multicultural nature of UAE classrooms. Using a quasi-experimental design with both qualitative and quantitative approaches, the study involved 200 undergraduate students from six universities in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Pre- and post-intervention assessments employed a culturally adapted EI test featuring three validated subscales—Self-Motivation, Empathy, and Social Skills—aligned with local communication patterns and Islamic principles. Independent t-test results showed significant improvements across all subscales for the experimental group, indicating that culturally tailored interventions effectively improve collaborative emotional competencies among UAE students. Overall, the findings highlight that integrating local cultural and religious values into EI programs significantly strengthens social-emotional learning outcomes in higher education.

KEYWORDS

Emotional intelligence; cultural adaptation; self-motivation; empathy; Islamic education; cross-cultural intervention.

INTRODUCTION

The higher education landscape in the United Arab Emirates represents a balanced integration of traditional Islamic values, modern global practices, and the diverse multicultural environment that defines the nation's rapid development. The national educational framework aligns with the UAE National Program for Tolerance and its seven foundational pillars: Islam, the UAE Constitution, the legacy of Sheikh Zayed and Emirati ethics, international charters, heritage and history, human nature, and shared values (Ministry of Education, 2018). Within this framework, developing emotional intelligence (EI) among undergraduate students has become essential for fostering success in academic and professional settings. However, the direct application of Western-designed EI interventions may overlook the cultural and value-based factors shaping student experiences in UAE universities. Emotional intelligence—the ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions in oneself and others—has been widely associated with academic achievement, social competence, and psychological well-being (Mayer et al., 2008). Yet, the expression and development of EI competencies are deeply influenced by cultural contexts, communication patterns, and social expectations that differ across societies (Matsumoto et al., 2008; Triandis, H. C., & Suh, E. M., 2002).

In the UAE, where Islamic principles emphasize emotional regulation, collective responsibility, and social harmony, EI frameworks must be thoughtfully adapted to align with these principles for maximum effectiveness (The Curriculum Committee at Mohamed Bin Zayed University for Humanities, 2024). The importance of this research lies in bridging the gap between universal EI theories and their culturally appropriate application within UAE higher education. Existing literature offers limited insight into how EI interventions can be adapted to integrate Islamic values, Emirati cultural traditions, and the multilingual, multicultural nature of UAE university classrooms. This study focuses on three key dimensions of emotional intelligence—self-motivation, empathetic understanding, and the capacity to support others' emotional well-being—which align with both Western theoretical foundations and Islamic educational principles. Self-motivation, understood within Islamic culture as the pursuit of personal excellence and continuous self-improvement, serves as a fundamental pillar of both academic achievement and spiritual development.

This concept is grounded in the management and regulation of emotions, as reflected in the Qur'anic verse, "man is ever aware of himself" (Qur'an, 75:14), which emphasizes one of the core elements of emotional intelligence—self-awareness and the mindful regulation of one's emotions. Such awareness fosters intrinsic motivation, guiding students toward self-understanding, alignment with their natural disposition, and the development of a deeper sensitivity to themselves and others (Ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusi, 1980). In UAE culture, motivation extends beyond personal accomplishment to encompass contributions to community well-being and the reinforcement of shared values such as compassion, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence (Abo Hamza et al., 2024). These principles are instilled early through the UAE's Moral Education curriculum, which emphasizes emotional intelligence and prepares students to

apply these competencies in higher education (Ministry of Education, 2024). Likewise, empathy—though universally vital for social functioning—holds special importance in Islamic teachings, which regard understanding and compassion toward others as essential expressions of faith and moral character (Hodge, 2005; Keshavarzi & Haque, 2013). The third focus area, social skills, reflects the collective orientation of Arabic and Islamic culture, which views society as an interconnected human fabric rooted in compassion, unity, tolerance, and mutual respect.

These values emphasize emotional and spiritual awareness, enabling individuals to perceive and respond to others' emotions with empathy and understanding. Within this framework, emotional intelligence extends to active listening, inclusion, altruism, and thoughtful engagement with diversity, fostering social environments grounded in respect and cooperation (Khoulah, 2018). Goleman (1995) identifies social skills as the culmination of emotional intelligence, encompassing the capacity to manage relationships effectively, communicate clearly, collaborate within teams, and navigate social contexts with poise. He further describes them as the outward expression of emotional intelligence that allows individuals to build rapport, resolve conflicts, and promote harmony in interpersonal interactions. In the UAE's multicultural society—home to over 200 nationalities—developing social competence requires cultural awareness, adaptability, and respect for both traditional Emirati values and international social norms. Thus, mastering social skills is essential for thriving in the UAE's diverse and globally integrated environment.

This study aims to connect theoretical knowledge of emotional intelligence with culturally relevant methods applicable to universities in the United Arab Emirates. By evaluating the effectiveness of adapted classroom-based programs across three key variables, it seeks to advance both academic understanding and practical implementation of emotional intelligence in higher education. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for educators in UAE universities and contribute to the broader field of cross-cultural emotional intelligence education in global academic contexts. The main research questions guiding this investigation focus on the measurable and comparative effects of culturally specific emotional intelligence interventions on undergraduate student outcomes within the UAE's unique cultural context. The study aims to provide evidence-based insights into effective methods for enhancing emotional intelligence among university students while accounting for local traditions and values. It will examine key dimensions such as social competence, empathy, and self-motivation in depth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundations of Emotional Intelligence

The framework of EI has evolved since its initial formulation by Salovey and Mayer in the early 1990s. Their four-branch model—encompassing the perception, use, understanding, and management of emotions—provides a foundational structure for interpreting emotional information. Bar-On (1997) later introduced a hybrid model that broadened this concept to

include personality traits and emotional competencies. Goleman (1995) further popularized EI by emphasizing its relevance in educational and professional contexts. Research consistently shows that emotional intelligence is a critical factor influencing mental well-being, social adjustment, and academic performance across various age groups (Gündoğdu et al., 2024; Kgosiemang & Khoza, 2022; MacCann et al., 2020; Pretorius & Plaatjies, 2023). However, the predominance of foundational research conducted within Western cultural contexts raises concerns about the universal applicability of emotional intelligence theories and measurement scales. Cross-cultural studies on emotional intelligence remain limited, and existing research primarily compares Western and East Asian populations. This narrow focus leaves gaps in understanding how EI is expressed and developed in other cultural contexts, particularly within Arab and Muslim communities.

Cultural Considerations in Emotional Intelligence Development

Emotionally intelligent interventions must be culturally adapted, as culture profoundly shapes how emotions are expressed, regulated, and interpreted in social interactions. Differences in emotional intelligence between individualistic Western societies and collectivist cultures, such as those in the Arab world, can be effectively examined through Hofstede's cultural dimensions framework (Almutairi et al., 2020; Gunkel et al., 2013; Palaiologou et al., 2023). In contrast to the individualistic and direct communication styles typical of Western societies, collectivist cultures emphasize group cohesion, respect for authority, and indirect modes of expression (Chu, 2018; Triandis, 1995; Van de Vijver & Leung, 2001).

Research conducted in various Arab countries indicates that cultural values rooted in religious obligations, family honor, and social hierarchy influence how individuals experience, express, and manage their emotions (Baddar et al., 2017; Haj-Yahia, 1995, 2000; Nydell, 2012). As emphasized by Anwar et al. (2020), Al-Azri and Razak (2023), and Al Shidi et al. (2025), research on EI within Islamic educational settings provides valuable perspectives relevant to the UAE's academic context. Islamic teachings emphasize virtues such as *sabr* (patience), *tawadu* (humility), and *rahma* (compassion), which serve as culturally grounded foundations for understanding emotional competence. Although a distinct Islamic framework for emotional intelligence has yet to be established, the ethical and moral principles of Islam can be used to reinterpret and contextualize traditional Western models of emotional intelligence for application in UAE education systems (Al-Azri & Razak, 2023; Basurrah et al., 2022; Mohamed, 2024). While the connection between Islamic virtues and emotional intelligence competencies is clear, empirical research on applying these culturally grounded frameworks within UAE classrooms remains limited. Bridging this gap requires moving beyond theoretical discourse to the development and evaluation of practical, culturally responsive intervention strategies. The following sections discuss how Islamic ethical principles can be effectively integrated into evidence-based emotional intelligence programs, with particular attention to self-motivation within the cultural context of Emirati students.

Self-Motivation in Cultural Context

Self-motivation, defined as the internal drive to pursue goals and overcome challenges, exhibits distinct characteristics within the cultural context of the UAE. Research on student motivation in this region highlights the influence of family expectations, cultural values, and social responsibility as dominant determinants of academic motivation, often outweighing individual aspirations (Ang & Huan 2006; Khamis, 2008). Fulfilling family expectations can also be a major source of stress, particularly within the paternalistic family structures common in Arab societies, where educational and career choices frequently reflect parental ambitions rather than personal preference. Studies on motivational factors among middle- and high-school students in the UAE emphasize that, in collectivist cultures, societal expectations are closely linked to students' desire to learn. (Dev et al., 2023). This collective view contrasts with the Western emphasis on personal achievement and self-fulfillment. Consequently, motivational interventions in the UAE must account for both individual goal-setting and the broader social implications of success to achieve meaningful outcomes.

Religion plays a central role in educational institutions across the UAE, where Islamic teachings provide essential guidance on concepts of purpose, success, and achievement. Classical works in Islamic education emphasize *niyyah* (intention) and the spiritual value of seeking knowledge as core principles of learning (Al-Zarnuji, 13th century; Omar & Mohd Desa, 2023). However, contemporary research directly examining educational motivation within Islamic contexts remains limited. While these traditional perspectives offer culturally relevant foundations for designing motivational strategies, further empirical investigation is necessary to better understand and apply them within modern educational settings. Beyond motivation, another essential dimension of emotional intelligence that requires cultural contextualization within UAE settings is empathy. Understanding how Islamic values influence empathetic behavior and interpersonal sensitivity offers valuable insights for designing culturally grounded and comprehensive EI interventions.

Empathy Development Across Cultures

Empathy is a vital component of social interaction, yet its expression varies across cultural contexts depending on societal norms and intended outcomes. Research within Arab cultures indicates that empathic responses are often shaped by cultural expectations surrounding emotional expression and social hierarchy. Furthermore, Islamic teachings offer a strong moral basis for cultivating empathy through principles such as *rahmah* (compassion), mercy, and understanding others' perspectives. The Qur'an also underscores the importance of demonstrating mercy and kindness in human relationships, reinforcing empathy as both a moral and social virtue (Sapience Institute, 2024). Research on empathy and compassion training in educational settings indicates that these qualities can be systematically cultivated through well-designed curricula (Brunero et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2019). However, there remains a scarcity of studies exploring how traditional educational systems in Arab countries integrate empathy

development into their teaching practices. This gap highlights both a limitation in existing scholarship and a valuable opportunity to design culturally informed interventions that embed empathy training within local educational frameworks (UNESCO, 2019). Few studies have specifically examined empathy among students in the UAE, though international comparisons indicate that the country ranks relatively high in global empathy levels (Chopik et al., 2017). Research on cultural variations in empathy suggests that collectivist societies tend to express empathy differently from individualistic ones, with distinctions based on social group membership and gender (Yaghoubi Jami et al., 2023). Nonetheless, systematic investigations into how UAE students demonstrate empathy—particularly in interactions with authority figures versus peers or across genders—remain scarce, highlighting a critical area for future research.

Social skills and Peer Support and Collaborative Emotional Learning

The concept of social skills and peer support aligns closely with collectivist cultural values and the Islamic emphasis on community welfare. Studies conducted in Arab educational settings show that peer support systems are most effective when they integrate cultural principles of mutual assistance, shared responsibility, and collective well-being.

Traditional Islamic educational models, such as classical madrasas, emphasized collaborative learning, mutual support, and moral development. Contemporary research further suggests that culturally adapted social-emotional learning interventions yield greater effectiveness than standardized models (Rohman, 2021; CASEL, 2019; Castro-Olivo, 2010). However, limited research has explored how these traditional Islamic educational practices can be integrated into modern emotional intelligence programs to enhance both their effectiveness and cultural relevance, highlighting a critical avenue for future study. Studies on peer support programs in UAE schools have yielded promising results, especially when interventions reflect local communication styles and acknowledge social hierarchies. However, much of the existing research has concentrated on academic peer support rather than emotional assistance, underscoring the need for targeted studies on developing emotional peer support skills among students (Arya et al., 2019).

Classroom-Based Intervention Approaches

Classroom-based emotional intelligence interventions provide several benefits compared to individual or small-group formats, including greater implementation efficiency, enhanced peer learning, and seamless integration within existing educational systems. Research across diverse cultural contexts supports their effectiveness, though cultural adaptation remains essential to ensure relevance and acceptance (“Strategies for Implementing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in Education,” 2024; Puertas Molero et al., 2020). Effective classroom-based interventions in multicultural contexts such as the UAE must account for linguistic diversity, varied cultural backgrounds, and religious sensitivities. Research indicates that programs integrating multiple cultural perspectives while maintaining a consistent theoretical foundation are especially successful in promoting emotional intelligence and inclusivity in diverse educational

environments (From Theory to Practice, 2022; Zhu, 2018; Jules et al., 2022). Existing research on emotional intelligence interventions in UAE educational settings has largely concentrated on teacher training rather than direct student-focused programs, highlighting a substantial gap that this study seeks to fill. Evidence indicates that while UAE educators generally support the integration of emotional intelligence principles, they require culturally adapted resources and context-specific approaches to implement these interventions effectively.

This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of a culturally adapted EI intervention targeting three core competencies—motivation, empathetic understanding, and social skills—among undergraduate students in UAE higher education. It explored whether integrating Islamic ethical principles and local cultural values into EI programs could significantly strengthen students' collaborative and interpersonal emotional competencies. The research addressed a critical gap in empirical studies on culturally grounded approaches to emotional intelligence development within Arab educational contexts.

Research Questions

RQ1: Does a culturally adapted emotional intelligence intervention significantly improve motivation, empathetic understanding, and social skills among undergraduate students in the UAE compared to a control group?

RQ2: Which of the three emotional intelligence competencies—motivation, empathetic understanding, or social skills—shows the greatest improvement following the culturally grounded intervention?

RQ3: How does the integration of Islamic values and UAE cultural communication styles contribute to the development of collaborative emotional competencies among Emirati undergraduate students?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study utilizes a quasi-experimental design incorporating both qualitative and quantitative pre- and post-test measurements to compare intervention and control groups. The quasi-experimental approach was chosen as the most appropriate for educational environments where random assignment is often impractical due to established classroom structures and administrative constraints (Campbell & Stanley, 1963; Gribbons & Herman, 1997). This design has been widely validated for assessing educational interventions in naturalistic settings where maintaining intact groups is necessary to preserve ecological validity (Cohen et al., 2018; Shadish et al., 2002). The research design adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative measures for statistical analysis with qualitative methods to capture cultural nuances, participant experiences, and perceptions not fully represented in standardized assessments. This framework enables a comprehensive evaluation of the intervention's effectiveness while offering deeper insights into the process of cultural adaptation. The study spans a total of 14 weeks, comprising two weeks for baseline data collection, 12 weeks for intervention

implementation, and two weeks for post-intervention assessment and preliminary data analysis. A six-month follow-up assessment is planned to evaluate the sustainability of the intervention's effects, with those results to be reported in future publications.

Figure 1

Experimental Design

Group (Students with behavior problems)	Pre-test	Treatment	Post-test
Experimental group = E (R)	O1	X	O3
Control Group = C (p)	O1	---	O3

R= Random assigned group

O1, O2, O3 = Pre-test, and Post- test, X = Treatment

Participants and Setting

The study sample comprises 200 undergraduate students aged 18–22, enrolled across six universities in the Dubai and Abu Dhabi emirates. The universities were purposefully selected to reflect the diversity of higher education contexts in the UAE, including two public institutions, two private universities adhering to national curriculum standards, and two international universities with substantial Emirati student representation.

Participants were recruited through collaborations with university administrations and student affairs offices, with informed consent obtained directly from students as adult participants. The sample reflects diverse gender representation, with the experimental group consisting of 76% male students (n=76) and 24% female students (n=24), and the control group comprising 34% male students (n=34) and 66% female students (n=66). This distribution reflects the natural classroom demographics of participating universities and allows for the exploration of gender-specific effects. Overall, the sample includes 45% Emirati nationals, 35% students from other Arab countries, and 20% from various international backgrounds commonly represented in UAE universities. The inclusion criteria required participants to have completed at least one academic year at a UAE university to ensure adequate cultural familiarity with the higher education environment. Students with diagnosed emotional or behavioral disorders that could affect participation were excluded. The total sample of 200 students was evenly divided between the experimental (n=100) and control (n=100) groups, with assignments made at the course section level to minimize contamination effects while preserving existing classroom structures. In addition to the quantitative sample, 10 students from the experimental group were purposively selected for the qualitative component. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences with the intervention and added explanatory depth to

complement the quantitative findings, following the principles of a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design.

These students participated in semi-structured interviews after completing the 12-week emotional intelligence program to share their experiences, perceptions of the intervention, and reflections on its cultural relevance. Participants represented diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and interviews were conducted in Arabic, English, or a combination of both languages to ensure comfort and accurate expression.

Cultural Adaptation Process

The adaptation of the intervention was conducted in close collaboration with key educational stakeholders in the UAE, including teachers, administrators, parents, and religious education specialists. A cultural adaptation committee—comprising Emirati educators, Islamic studies scholars, and cross-cultural psychology researchers—was established to ensure that the intervention content was appropriately modified to align with local cultural norms, religious principles, and educational practices. The adaptation process followed established guidelines for culturally modifying psychological interventions. It included both surface-level adjustments, such as language translation and the incorporation of culturally relevant examples, and deeper structural adaptations that addressed core cultural values, communication styles, and religious principles to ensure cultural and contextual appropriateness. These adaptations incorporated Islamic teachings on emotional regulation and utilized Arabic and Islamic historical examples to illustrate emotional intelligence principles. Group activities were adjusted to align with gender interaction norms observed in certain educational settings, while family and community perspectives were integrated into goal-setting and motivational exercises to reflect the collectivist values central to UAE culture.

Intervention Description

The culturally responsive emotional intelligence intervention comprised 24 sessions delivered over 12 weeks, with two 45-minute sessions per week integrated into existing general education or Islamic Studies courses. The curriculum was organized into three modules corresponding to the study's primary outcome variables.

Module 1: Self-Motivation

This module focuses on goal-setting within the framework of Islamic principles, emphasizing personal strengths and weaknesses, inner perseverance, and resilience through religious and cultural examples. It also links individual achievement to service toward family and community. Activities include reflective journaling in both Arabic and English, goal-setting workshops incorporating the concept of *niyyah* (religious intention), and peer mentoring partnerships designed to reinforce motivation and self-awareness.

Module 2: Empathetic Understanding

This module focuses on recognizing emotions in others through an understanding of their cultural and religious perspectives, emphasizing compassion and mercy as central Islamic values. It highlights the importance of perspective-taking, cultural sensitivity, and the

appropriate expression of emotion across diverse social contexts. Activities include role-playing exercises inspired by Islamic stories and contemporary UAE settings, empathy mapping based on culturally relevant scenarios, and community service projects designed to foster compassion and social awareness.

Module 3: Social Skills/Peer Emotional Support Skills

This module addresses communication styles consistent with UAE cultural norms, emphasizing appropriate emotional support, ethical conflict resolution grounded in Islamic teachings, and leadership through positive example. Activities include peer counseling training tailored to adolescent contexts, group problem-solving exercises based on UAE-specific case studies, and the establishment of peer support networks within classrooms to strengthen social cohesion and collaborative skills.

Measurement Instruments

The outcome variables are measured using a comprehensive Emotional Intelligence Test specifically adapted for UAE educational contexts. This instrument integrates three subscales corresponding to the study's main focus areas and localizes all items to reflect Islamic principles, Emirati cultural norms, and the multilingual nature of UAE classrooms

Self-Motivation Assessment Subscale

The Self-Motivation Assessment subscale evaluates internal drive, goal-setting behaviors, and perseverance within culturally appropriate frameworks. It integrates Islamic principles of personal excellence and continuous self-improvement while framing motivation as a means of contributing to family honor and community well-being rather than focusing solely on individual accomplishment. The subscale comprises 28 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale, assessing intrinsic motivation, identified regulation, external regulation, and culturally specific motivational factors such as religious and family-honor motivation. The items focus on goal-setting within an Islamic framework, personal strength development, resilience inspired by religious and cultural examples, and linking individual achievement to community service. Cultural adaptation included translation into Arabic and the integration of Islamic concepts such as *niyyah* (religious intention), which relates to an individual's moral and spiritual awareness. By fostering sincerity of intention and self-reflection, learners enhance their ability to understand and regulate emotions while recognizing the social impact of their behavior (Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali, 2001). The instrument also incorporated examples from UAE and broader Islamic contexts. Pilot testing with UAE university students demonstrated strong reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$) and confirmed construct validity through factor analysis.

Empathy Measurement Subscale

The Empathy Measurement subscale evaluates empathetic understanding, perspective-taking, and compassionate response within the cultural context of the UAE. It integrates the Islamic value of *rahma* (compassion) and emphasizes understanding others' circumstances while maintaining respect for social hierarchies and culturally appropriate norms of emotional

expression. The subscale includes 32 items that assess perspective-taking, empathetic concern, personal distress, and culturally appropriate expressions of empathy.

The items focus on recognizing others' emotions through cultural and religious perspectives, fostering compassion as an Islamic value, practicing perspective-taking while respecting cultural boundaries, and demonstrating suitable emotional responses across diverse social situations. The adaptation process involved extensive collaboration with Islamic education scholars and UAE educators to ensure cultural and contextual relevance. Items were designed to reflect scenarios common in the UAE's multicultural environment and to emphasize respect for authority figures as a culturally significant value. Reliability testing produced a Cronbach's α of .81 for the overall subscale, indicating strong internal consistency.

Social skills or Peer Emotional Support Skills/ Coaching Others' Emotion Scale

The Peer Emotional Support, or Social Skills Scale, evaluates students' capacity to offer emotional support to peers, communicate effectively within culturally appropriate boundaries, and act as emotional resources for their classmates. This subscale reflects the collectivist orientation of Arab cultures and the Islamic principles of community welfare, cooperation, and mutual support. The scale comprises 24 items assessing the provision of emotional support, help-seeking behaviors, conflict mediation skills, and cultural sensitivity in peer interactions. The items are grounded in the principles of effective communication consistent with UAE cultural norms, emphasizing supportive behavior within appropriate boundaries, conflict resolution guided by Islamic ethics, and the cultivation of peer leadership and collaboration.

The subscale was specifically developed for the UAE context following extensive consultations with students, educators, and cultural experts. Factor analysis identified four primary dimensions: emotional support provision, culturally sensitive communication, conflict mediation skills, and peer leadership abilities, yielding a reliability coefficient of $\alpha = .87$. Content validity was confirmed through expert evaluation and pilot testing with the target student population.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection adhered to standardized procedures across all participating universities to ensure consistency and reduce measurement error. Pre-intervention baseline data were collected during regular class sessions over a two-week period, with trained research assistants administering the comprehensive Emotional Intelligence Test. Research assistants fluent in both Arabic and English received comprehensive training on culturally sensitive data collection procedures and ethical standards for research involving university students. The Emotional Intelligence Test was administered in either Arabic or English according to student preference, with all three subscales—the Self-Motivation Assessment, Empathy Measurement, and Social Skills/Peer Emotional Support Scale—completed in a single session lasting approximately ten minutes. Post-intervention data collection followed the same standardized procedures immediately after the 12-week intervention period, using the identical Emotional Intelligence Test to measure changes across all three outcome variables. Additionally, qualitative data were

gathered through semi-structured interviews with participants from the experimental group to obtain insights into the cultural relevance and perceived effectiveness of the intervention's components.

Data Analysis

Before selecting statistical tests, data normality was evaluated using the Shapiro–Wilk test and visual inspection of Q–Q plots (Field, 2018; Razali & Wah, 2011). For variables meeting normality and homogeneity of variance assumptions, independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare quantitative parameters between experimental and control groups. Mann–Whitney U tests were applied to variables that violated normality assumptions or were ordinal in nature (Nachar, 2008). Levene's test assessed homogeneity of variance for parametric analyses (Levene, 1960). A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was used for all statistical interpretations, and analyses were performed using SPSS version 20.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY).

Qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Students' responses were coded through both deductive coding, guided by the core components of the emotional intelligence intervention, and inductive coding, which allowed for the emergence of new themes. The analysis explored participants' experiences related to self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, social skills, and the cultural and religious relevance of the program. Two researchers independently reviewed and verified the coding process, with any discrepancies resolved through discussion to ensure consistency and reliability in the thematic analysis. A comprehensive understanding of the intervention's effectiveness and cultural relevance was achieved by integrating qualitative insights with quantitative findings during the interpretation phase.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Abu Dhabi University (ADU) and the ethics committees of participating universities, ensuring adherence to UAE regulatory standards and Islamic ethical principles for research involving university students. Informed consent was obtained from all adult participants following a full explanation of study procedures, potential risks and benefits, and withdrawal rights, with special care taken to ensure comprehension across diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

RESULTS

Effectiveness of Classroom-based Emotional Intelligence Interventions on Students' Self-Motivation

The following section presents the findings on the effectiveness of the classroom-based emotional intelligence intervention in enhancing students' self-motivation, empathetic understanding, and social skills. Results for each competency are displayed in two formats: categorical distributions illustrating the proportion of students across performance levels, and continuous mean scores with standard deviations for between-group comparisons.

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to evaluate statistical differences between the experimental and control groups at both pre-test and post-test stages.

Table 1

Distribution of Level of Self-Motivation of Students at Pre- And Post- Level for Experimental and Control Group

Self-Motivation		Control		Experimental	
		Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Pre	Definite Strength	58	58.0	17	17.0
	Needs Some Development	17	17.0	39	39.0
	Needs Substantial Development	25	25.0	44	44.0
Post	Definite Strength	56	56.0	90	90.0
	Needs Some Development	15	15.0	10	10.0
	Needs Substantial Development	29	29.0	0	0.0

Table 2.

Effectiveness of Classroom-Based Emotional Intelligence Interventions on Self-Motivation of Students

Self-Motivation	Control			Experimental			t	p
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N		
Pre	31.5	7.9	100	26.7	3.7	100	5.44	p<0.01
Post	30.6	7.5	100	38.6	7.3	100	7.7	p<0.01

Note: Independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare motivation scores between control and experimental groups at each time point.

Analysis of self-motivation levels indicated significant improvement among participants in the experimental group following the emotional intelligence intervention. At baseline, the experimental group showed lower self-motivation, with only 17% demonstrating definite strength compared to 58% in the control group. After the intervention, 90% of experimental group students reached definite strength levels, while the control group remained relatively stable at 56%. Similarly, the proportion of students in the experimental group requiring substantial development decreased from 44% to 0%, whereas the control group showed minimal change, shifting from 25% to 29%).

The mean self-motivation scores further confirmed these categorical results. Before the intervention, the experimental group exhibited significantly lower self-motivation ($M = 26.7$, $SD = 3.7$) than the control group ($M = 31.5$, $SD = 7.9$), $t = 5.44$, $p < 0.01$. After the intervention, the experimental group showed a substantial increase in self-motivation ($M = 38.6$, $SD = 7.3$), surpassing the control group ($M = 30.6$, $SD = 7.5$), $t = 7.7$, $p < 0.01$. Quantitative results revealed

a marked improvement in students’ self-motivation following completion of the intervention. These findings were reinforced by qualitative interview data, in which several participants reported greater awareness of their strengths and weaknesses and an increased determination for self-improvement. Many students identified the portfolio activity as particularly valuable for helping them reflect on personal goals, emotional triggers, and pathways for continued growth. One student reflected, “The portfolio helped me understand myself better. I didn’t realize before that I had anger issues, but now I know how to manage them. It made me feel more confident and motivated to work on myself.” Such reflections deepen the quantitative findings, illustrating that the intervention not only enhanced students’ self-motivation but also encouraged emotional self-awareness and a clearer sense of personal direction.

Effectiveness of Classroom-Based Emotional Intelligence Interventions on Empathy of Students

Table 3.

Distribution of Level of Empathy of students at pre and post level for experimental and control group

Empathy		Control		Experimental	
		Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Pre	Definite Strength	63	63.0	26	26.0
	Needs Some Development	25	25.0	39	39.0
	Needs Substantial Development	12	12.0	35	35.0
Post	Definite Strength	59	59.0	94	94.0
	Needs Some Development	26	26.0	4	4.0
	Needs Substantial Development	15	15.0	2	2.0

Table 4.

Effectiveness of classroom-based emotional intelligence interventions on Empathy of students

Empathy	Control			Experimental			t	p
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N		
Pre	33.1	7.6	100	27.1	5.3	100	6.54	p<0.01
Post	31.7	6.6	100	40.5	7.2	100	9.1	p<0.01

Similar trends were observed for empathy outcomes. Prior to the intervention, only 26% of students in the experimental group showed definite strength in empathy compared to 63% in the control group, while 35% of experimental participants required substantial development versus 12% in the control group. After the intervention, 94% of experimental group students achieved definite strength levels compared to 59% in the control group, and only 2% required substantial development, whereas 15% of control group students remained in that category.

Mean empathy scores supported these findings, showing significant improvement in the experimental group. Before the intervention, the experimental group scored notably lower ($M = 27.1$, $SD = 5.3$) than the control group ($M = 33.1$, $SD = 7.6$), $t = 6.54$, $p < 0.01$. After the intervention, however, the experimental group achieved substantially higher empathy scores ($M = 40.5$, $SD = 7.2$) compared to the control group ($M = 31.7$, $SD = 6.6$), $t = 9.1$, $p < 0.01$. Quantitative findings showed a significant increase in students' empathy levels following the program.

The qualitative interviews provided deeper insight into these results, with students describing greater awareness of others' emotions and an enhanced ability to respond with understanding, compassion, and emotional sensitivity. One student shared, "The activities made me notice how my behavior affects others. I've started paying more attention to people's reactions and try to respond in a kinder way." This reflection highlights the program's impact on developing emotional awareness and fostering more considerate interpersonal interactions. Several students noted that the case studies and class discussions encouraged them to view situations from multiple perspectives, enhancing their ability to connect with peers, friends, and family members. Collectively, these insights demonstrate that the intervention effectively strengthened both the awareness and practical application of empathy in students' everyday interactions.

Effectiveness of Classroom-Based Emotional Intelligence Interventions on Social Skills of Students

Table 5

Distribution of Level of Social Skills of Students at Pre and Post Level for Experimental and Control Group

Coaching Others' Emotions		Control		Experimental	
		Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Pre	Definite Strength	59	59.0	23	23.0
	Needs Some Development	19	19.0	40	40.0
	Needs Substantial Development	22	22.0	37	37.0
Post	Definite Strength	57	57.0	88	88.0
	Needs Some Development	19	19.0	9	9.0
	Needs Substantial Development	24	24.0	3	3.0

The Social Skills domain exhibited similar patterns of improvement. Before the intervention, only 23% of students in the experimental group demonstrated definite strength compared to 59% in the control group, while 37% of experimental participants required substantial development versus 22% in the control group. After the intervention, 88% of experimental group students achieved definite strength compared to 57% of controls, and those needing substantial development decreased sharply to 3%, while the control group's rate

increased slightly to 24 %. Mean scores further confirmed these improvements. Initially, the experimental group scored significantly lower ($M = 25.7$, $SD = 5.2$) than the control group ($M = 31.5$, $SD = 8.2$), $t = 5.95$, $p < 0.01$. After the intervention, the experimental group demonstrated notably higher social skills scores ($M = 37.9$, $SD = 7.3$) compared to the control group ($M = 30.5$, $SD = 8.0$), $t = 6.76$, $p < 0.01$. Quantitative results revealed notable improvements in students' social skills, which were further explained through qualitative interview findings.

Table 6

Effectiveness of Classroom-Based Emotional Intelligence Interventions on Social Skills of Students

Coaching Emotions	Others'	Control			Experimental			t	p
		Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N		
Pre		31.5	8.2	100	25.7	5.2	100	5.95	$p < 0.01$
Post		30.5	8.0	100	37.9	7.3	100	6.76	$p < 0.01$

Students reported increased confidence in communication, teamwork, and conflict resolution. Many identified activities such as peer review exercises and interactive case studies as particularly effective in strengthening these interpersonal and collaborative skills. One student reflected, "Before the program, I used to be shy and avoided speaking in class. Now I feel more comfortable sharing my ideas, listening to others, and working with different people" (Student 2). Students further noted that the program fostered a more respectful and supportive classroom atmosphere, enabling them to collaborate more effectively with their peers. These qualitative insights align with the quantitative results, underscoring the program's positive influence on students' social interactions and overall classroom dynamics.

Cultural Elements Emerging from Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interviews uncovered several culturally relevant themes illustrating how participation in the EI program influenced students. Most participants expressed strong appreciation for the program, linking its content and activities to Islamic teachings, family-oriented values, and the broader cultural norms of the UAE.

Theme 1: Alignment with Cultural and Religious Values: Students reported that the EI program resonated with their cultural and religious principles, making them more open to learning and comfortable discussing emotions. They valued the material more deeply because it reflected Islamic teachings such as empathy, patience, and mutual respect. *"I didn't feel at all that anything in the program went against my culture or religion. It actually helped me understand my feelings better and how to deal with people respectfully"* Student (4)

This cultural alignment fostered a sense of comfort and acceptance, enabling students to engage fully in EI activities without experiencing internal conflict.

Theme 2: Family and Community Connections: For many students, self-motivation and personal growth were closely tied to their families and wider communities. Setting personal goals became more meaningful when connected to family honor and social responsibility.

“I became more serious about improving myself because I want to make my family proud and also give back to my community.” (Student 7)

Another student reflected that the portfolio activity encouraged them to think beyond personal achievement and consider broader collective goals.

“The portfolio made me reflect on my goals, not just for myself but also for my family. It pushed me to think about how I can be a better person for them too.” (Student 6)

This demonstrates how students’ collectivist values shaped their motivation and engagement with the program.

Theme 3: Culturally Relevant Case Studies: Students consistently noted that the real-life case studies used in the program greatly enhanced their emotional connection to the material. When the examples reflected familiar social contexts and UAE-specific situations, they felt more engaged and able to envision themselves within those scenarios. *“The case studies were very close to our culture. They helped me see myself in those situations and think about how I would handle them.” (Student 4)*

For many students, the relevance of the examples made the lessons practical and relatable rather than theoretical or abstract. *“I understood the activities better because the situations felt real and similar to what we experience here. It made it easier to apply the ideas to my own life.” (Student 2)*

By incorporating culturally familiar case studies, the program promoted deeper reflection, empathy, and problem-solving, enabling students to meaningfully apply theoretical concepts to their everyday experiences.

4. Interpretation

The results show that culturally responsive, classroom-based emotional intelligence interventions were highly effective in enhancing students’ emotional competencies across diverse cultural backgrounds. The experimental group demonstrated substantial improvement in all three measured domains, suggesting that cultural integration increased both the relevance and overall effectiveness of the intervention.

The notable improvements observed may be attributed to the program’s culturally responsive design, which respected students’ cultural values while fostering universal emotional competencies. Its success in integrating cultural wisdom with contemporary emotional intelligence frameworks appears to have created optimal conditions for meaningful skill development.

The pre-intervention differences between groups, though possibly reflecting baseline inequities, may also indicate cultural variations in emotional expression and self-perception. The experimental group’s superior post-intervention outcomes demonstrate that culturally responsive interventions can both reduce initial disparities and leverage existing cultural

strengths. The minor changes observed in the control group underscore the importance of implementing active, culturally relevant interventions rather than assuming that emotional development occurs uniformly across diverse cultural settings.

DISCUSSION

These findings provide preliminary evidence supporting the effectiveness of the emotional intelligence intervention in enhancing students' self-motivation, empathy, and social skills. However, several methodological factors require cautious interpretation. A key limitation of this study is the significant baseline difference between the control and experimental groups across all three EI dimensions. The experimental group reported notably lower pre-test scores in self-motivation ($M=26.7$ vs. $M=31.5$), empathy, and social skills compared to the control group. Such pre-existing differences may stem from non-random group assignment inherent in quasi-experimental designs using intact classrooms, variations in students' prior educational experiences or exposure to emotional learning, differences in academic engagement or performance, or cultural factors influencing emotional expression and self-assessment styles (Matsumoto, 1999; van de Vijver & Leung, 2001). The lower baseline scores in the experimental group present both interpretive challenges and research opportunities. While regression to the mean may explain part of the improvement, as students with lower initial scores have greater potential for growth (Barnett et al., 2005), the substantial gains observed—particularly the shift from lower to higher performance levels—indicate genuine skill development. Future studies should employ matching procedures or statistical controls, such as ANCOVA using pre-test scores as covariates, to more accurately isolate intervention effects from baseline disparities (Dimitrov & Rumrill, 2003). These differences also highlight concerns regarding measurement validity across cultural contexts. The lower pre-test scores in the experimental group may reflect cultural variations in self-presentation, response styles, or familiarity with Western-developed assessment tools rather than true differences in emotional competency (He & van de Vijver, 2012; Johnson et al., 2005). In some cultures, norms of modesty or aversion to self-promotion may produce artificially low baseline scores that rise as students become more comfortable with Western assessment expectations (Heine et al., 2002). A key limitation of this study is the absence of an active control group that received an alternative, non-culturally adapted EI intervention. This limitation makes it difficult to determine whether the observed improvements resulted specifically from cultural adaptations or from the general effects of a well-structured emotional learning program (Shadish et al., 2002). The large effect sizes observed may reflect overall intervention benefits, as systematic attention to emotional learning, increased instructor involvement, and structured skill-building can enhance outcomes regardless of cultural framing (Durlak et al., 2011).

Moreover, students' awareness of participating in a special program may have boosted motivation and engagement through Hawthorne effects (McCambridge et al., 2014). Thus, the intervention's effectiveness may be largely attributable to its strong pedagogical design, clear

learning objectives, and effective scaffolding rather than cultural adaptation alone. Additionally, introducing a new curriculum on emotional competencies in a context where such initiatives are uncommon may have stimulated enthusiasm and engagement due to novelty effects. Despite these limitations, several patterns suggest that the cultural components likely enhanced engagement and relevance. The notable improvement in self-motivation, with students progressing from lower baseline scores to significantly higher post-test results, may reflect the program's linkage between personal achievement and culturally meaningful values such as family pride, community contribution, and collective success. Prior research indicates that culturally responsive practices can strengthen intrinsic motivation by making learning more personally meaningful (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014), though this study cannot confirm that mechanism directly. Likewise, the substantial gains in empathy and social skills may correspond to cultural emphases on interpersonal harmony, collective responsibility, and community care characteristic of collectivist societies (Triandis, 1995). The incorporation of traditional mentorship models and familiar communication styles may have supported skill development by building on existing cultural strengths rather than introducing unfamiliar approaches (Sue & Sue, 2019). However, without comparative data from a non-adapted intervention, these interpretations remain plausible hypotheses rather than definitive conclusions.

To deepen understanding of these factors and advance culturally responsive EI research, future studies should compare culturally adapted interventions with standard Western EI curricula delivered with equal intensity and instructional quality, as well as with attention-control conditions providing equivalent contact time on non-emotional content. Such comparative designs are necessary to isolate the specific effects of cultural adaptation on intervention outcomes (Castro et al., 2004). Future research should also use culturally validated assessment tools that reflect diverse expressions of emotional intelligence, incorporate behavioral observations and peer or instructor ratings to triangulate results, and examine potential cultural response biases through systematic cross-cultural validation. When randomization is feasible, researchers should conduct randomized controlled trials; otherwise, propensity score matching or similar statistical methods should be used to ensure group comparability. Additionally, process evaluations should identify which cultural elements students find most engaging and assess whether outcomes vary according to levels of cultural identification or acculturation.

While this study demonstrates that an intensive EI intervention can yield substantial pre-post improvements, the underlying mechanisms driving these changes remain uncertain. The observed effects may stem from cultural relevance, program intensity, instructor quality, student engagement, or a combination of these factors. Nonetheless, the findings provide promising preliminary evidence that an EI intervention integrating cultural elements can significantly enhance students' self-motivation, empathy, and social skills, even among those with lower initial performance. These results warrant continued exploration of culturally responsive approaches, though more rigorous comparative designs are needed to clarify the

distinct impact of cultural adaptation on emotional intelligence development and to assess whether such adaptations benefit all students or primarily those closely aligned with the cultural framework employed.

Limitations and Considerations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the study's findings. The unequal gender distribution between the experimental (76% male, 24% female) and control (34% male, 66% female) groups may confound intervention effects with gender-related differences, though statistical controls were applied to mitigate this concern. Additionally, the quasi-experimental design restricts causal inference compared to fully randomized trials, although it was the most practical approach for implementation within real educational contexts.

The relatively short intervention period may have limited the ability to capture long-term developmental changes in emotional intelligence competencies. Although the cultural adaptation was carefully designed and implemented, it may not encompass all cultural nuances within the UAE's diverse population. Furthermore, the measurement instruments, despite thorough adaptation, were originally developed in Western contexts and may not fully reflect culturally specific expressions of emotional intelligence. There is a potential for social desirability bias, especially given cultural norms emphasizing modesty and appropriate self-presentation. Although measures such as anonymous data collection and reminders to respond honestly for research purposes were implemented to minimize this bias, it cannot be entirely ruled out. The generalizability of the findings may be restricted to higher education contexts within the Gulf region, necessitating replication in other cultural settings before broader conclusions can be drawn about the effectiveness of culturally responsive emotional intelligence interventions in universities.

CONCLUSION

This study offers strong evidence for the effectiveness of culturally responsive, classroom-based emotional intelligence interventions in enhancing students' self-motivation, empathy, and social skills across diverse cultural contexts. The experimental group showed significant improvements across all measured domains, with particularly notable gains reflecting the successful integration of cultural values into contemporary emotional intelligence frameworks. The findings strongly advocate for implementing culturally responsive emotional intelligence programs that respect students' cultural backgrounds while fostering universal emotional competencies. The large effect sizes observed indicate that culturally integrated interventions can yield meaningful and practically significant improvements surpassing those typically achieved through standardized methods.

Key implications for practice include:

Emotional intelligence curricula should be adapted to reflect local cultural values, traditions, and understandings of emotion rather than relying on one-size-fits-all models. Successful EI interventions benefit from active collaboration with families, cultural leaders, and community

members who can provide cultural validation and reinforce learned skills. Evaluation methods must also consider cultural differences in emotional expression and self-assessment to ensure fair and accurate measurement of program effectiveness. Additionally, educators implementing EI programs require training in culturally responsive pedagogy and in understanding how various cultures conceptualize and express emotions.

The results make a significant contribution to the growing body of evidence supporting culturally responsive social-emotional learning initiatives, demonstrating that emotional intelligence development is most effective when it draws on students' cultural strengths and familiar frameworks for understanding emotions and relationships.

Future Research Priorities

Future research should prioritize replication studies using properly randomized designs across diverse cultural contexts, investigations into specific cultural components that enhance EI intervention effectiveness, and longitudinal studies assessing the sustainability of culturally responsive EI gains. Moreover, there is a pressing need to develop culturally appropriate assessment tools for emotional intelligence, examine family and community factors that influence EI development, and conduct cross-cultural validation of culturally responsive EI intervention models. These findings urge the field to move beyond universal approaches toward more nuanced, culturally responsive models that acknowledge the richness and diversity of human emotional experience and expression. The significant improvements observed demonstrate that when emotional intelligence education respects and builds upon cultural wisdom, it can produce transformative outcomes that benefit both individual learners and their wider communities.

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