Article

University Professors' Emotional Competencies and Students' Academic Well-Being: A Qualitative Study of Student Perspectives

Camilla Brandao De Souza * and **Alessandra Cecilia Jacomuzzi**

Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, 30123 Venice, Italy; alessandra.jacomuzzi@unive.it
* Correspondence: camilla.brandaods@unive.it

Abstract

University professors' emotional competencies are increasingly discussed as relevant dimensions of teaching professionalism that may shape students' academic engagement, motivation, and psychological well-being. This qualitative study explores how university students perceive professors' emotional and relational practices and how students perceived these practices as shaping their academic experience. Twenty-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with undergraduate and master's students at an Italian university and analyzed through thematic analysis. Five interconnected themes were identified: (1) empathy and the humanization of the professor–student relationship; (2) relational and communicative styles shaping classroom climate and motivation; (3) emotional regulation in high-stress academic situations, particularly examinations; (4) perceived differences across teaching modalities and disciplinary contexts; (5) students' expectations regarding balanced emotional openness and faculty development. Students described empathetic, approachable, and emotionally regulated professors as helping to reduce stress, strengthen academic confidence, foster engagement, and support a sense of belonging. Conversely, rigid, distant, or humiliating interactions were associated with anxiety, withdrawal, and disengagement. Rather than treating emotional competence as an individual disposition, the study proposes that it should be understood as a professional and institutional dimension of university teaching. It further develops the notion of student-perceived academic psychological safety as a relational mechanism through which professors' emotional competencies may influence students' well-being and participation. The findings highlight the need for faculty development initiatives and institutional policies that recognize the emotional and relational dimensions of teaching as integral to higher education quality.

Keywords: emotional competencies; higher education; academic well-being; academic psychological safety; professor–student relationship; faculty development

Academic Editor: Jonathan Glazzard

Received: 8 May 2026
Revised: 7 June 2026
Accepted: 8 June 2026
Published: 10 June 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license.

1. Introduction

In higher education, professors' work extends beyond the transmission of disciplinary knowledge and contributes to shaping students' emotional, relational, and psychological experiences of academic life. Emotional intelligence (EI), commonly defined as the ability to perceive, understand, manage, and use emotions effectively (Salovey & Mayer, 1990), has increasingly been discussed as a relevant dimension of teaching professionalism, with potential implications for student engagement, motivation, academic performance,

 https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16060918

and well-being. A recent systematic review highlighted that professors' empathy, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills are associated with positive student outcomes, although direct empirical studies linking these competencies to students' academic and psychological well-being remain limited, particularly in university contexts (Brandao De Souza & Jacomuzzi, 2025). This gap has become especially relevant in the post-pandemic period, as higher education institutions face increasing concerns regarding student stress, anxiety, disengagement, and mental health (Cajachagua Castro et al., 2023). Emerging research suggests that emotional intelligence may support students' resilience, adaptive motivation, and socio-emotional adjustment in university settings, particularly after the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Cerutti et al., 2024; Sanz-Martín et al., 2025). At the same time, students increasingly appear to value professors who are able to recognize emotional states, communicate respectfully, and foster inclusive and supportive learning environments (Rakow et al., 2025). Although research on emotional and social competencies is well established in school settings, less is known about how such competencies are perceived and enacted within university teaching, particularly from students' perspectives. Unlike school teachers, university professors often receive limited formal preparation in teaching and relational pedagogy, despite working in contexts characterized by high academic pressure, asymmetrical assessment relationships, and increasing student mental health concerns. This makes higher education a particularly relevant setting for examining emotional competencies as professional teaching practices rather than as personal attributes. This study addresses this gap through qualitative interviews with university students, exploring how they perceive professors' emotional competencies and how they describe their relevance for academic well-being, satisfaction, engagement, and psychological safety. The study is guided by the following research question: "How do students perceive university professors' emotional competencies, and how do they describe the role of these competencies in shaping academic well-being, satisfaction, and perceived psychological safety?" Beyond describing students' experiences, the study aims to contribute to current debates in two ways. First, it proposes a reconceptualization of emotional competence as a professional and institutional dimension of university teaching, rather than merely an individual or dispositional trait. Second, it develops the notion of student-perceived academic psychological safety as a relational mechanism through which professors' emotional and communicative practices may support students' willingness to participate, make mistakes, ask for help, and cope with academic demands.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Emotional Intelligence and Emotional Competence in Higher Education

Emotional intelligence (EI) is commonly defined as the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and use emotions effectively. One of the most influential theoretical formulations of EI is the ability-based model proposed by Salovey and Mayer (1990), which conceptualizes emotional intelligence as a set of interrelated abilities organized into four branches: perceiving emotions, using emotions to facilitate thinking, understanding emotions, and managing emotions. This model emphasizes EI as a form of intelligence grounded in emotional information processing, rather than as a personality trait. Alongside this ability-based perspective, broader and more applied conceptualizations of EI have gained prominence, particularly following Goleman's (1998) work, which framed emotional intelligence in terms of competencies such as self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. In educational research, and especially in higher education, emotional intelligence is increasingly discussed through the notion of emotional competence. Emotional competence refers to the context-sensitive and learnable skills through which individuals perceive, express, regulate, and respond to emotions in socially and culturally appropriate

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16060918

ways (Saarni, 1999). This shift from EI as a general ability to emotional competence as situated practice is particularly relevant for university teaching, where emotional demands are embedded in complex relational, evaluative, and institutional dynamics. Within higher education settings, professors' emotional competencies therefore extend beyond individual psychological characteristics and can be understood as professional skills enacted in pedagogical interactions. The present study builds on this distinction by conceptualizing emotional competence not as a personal disposition or informal teaching style, but as a situated professional practice embedded in the institutional conditions of university teaching. From this perspective, professors' emotional competencies are not reducible to individual personality traits; rather, they are shaped by professional socialization, pedagogical training, assessment cultures, and institutional expectations regarding the professor–student relationship. This reconceptualization has significant implications: it shifts attention from individual professors alone to the institutions that train, support, and evaluate them. Research in educational psychology has shown that emotionally competent teaching is associated with positive student outcomes, including engagement, motivation, and adaptive coping with academic challenges (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Brackett et al., 2011). A recent systematic review by Brandao De Souza and Jacomuzzi (2025) synthesized evidence on university professors' emotional competencies, highlighting empathy, emotional regulation, and relational sensitivity as key dimensions linked to students' academic satisfaction and psychological well-being.

2.2. Academic Psychological Safety as a Relational Condition for Student Engagement and Well-Being

A central theoretical contribution of this study is the development of student-perceived academic psychological safety as a sensitizing construct for interpreting how professors' emotional competencies may be linked to students' academic experience.

Originally formulated by Edmondson (1999) in organizational research, psychological safety refers to the shared belief that interpersonal risk-taking is safe within a group context—that one can speak up, make mistakes, or ask questions without fear of negative consequences. Although this construct has been applied to learning environments and team dynamics, it has received more limited attention in the specific context of university teaching.

The present study suggests that professors' emotional competencies—particularly empathy, emotionally regulated communication, and responsive feedback—may function as relational antecedents of perceived psychological safety in academic settings. When students perceive their professors as emotionally approachable and non-judgmental, they may be more willing to engage actively, disclose difficulties, ask questions and persist through academic challenges. This interpretation is consistent with recent evidence showing that students perceive lecturers' emotional and relational well-being as closely connected to their own well-being and engagement. Rakow et al. (2025) found that students value emotionally available and supportive lecturers and perceive these qualities as influencing both learning practices and psychological well-being.

Conversely, emotionally rigid or indifferent teaching may create conditions of threat and self-monitoring that undermine participation, confidence and well-being. This interpretative mechanism helps to clarify how emotional competencies may operate in high-stakes contexts of university education, such as examinations, oral assessments, and public participation in seminars.

2.3. Academic Satisfaction, Well-Being and Relational Pedagogy

Academic satisfaction refers to students' perceived fulfillment with their academic experience, including teaching quality, relationships with faculty, learning conditions, and their broader sense of belonging within the university environment (Lodi et al., 2017). In

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16060918

higher education, academic satisfaction represents an important component of subjective well-being. Previous research has associated academic satisfaction with motivation, engagement, persistence, academic performance, and mental health outcomes, included reduced anxiety and increased life satisfaction (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Zalazar-Jaime et al., 2022, Bagdziūnienė et al., 2025; van Kessel et al., 2025). A growing body of empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that higher levels of academic satisfaction are associated with enhanced academic performance, greater persistence, and improved mental health outcomes, including reduced anxiety and increased life satisfaction (Bagdziūnienė et al., 2025; van Kessel et al., 2025).

Within a relational pedagogy framework, however, students' academic well-being should not be understood only as an individual psychological condition. It is also shaped by the quality of pedagogical relationships, institutional climates, and everyday interactions with professors. Relational pedagogy refers to educational approaches that emphasize the centrality of human relationships in teaching and learning processes. Drawing on the work of Noddings (2015) as well as Bingham and Sidorkin (2004), learning is understood not solely as a cognitive process but as one that is fundamentally shaped by trust, care, dialog, and recognition. Academic well-being refers to students' positive psychological functioning within educational contexts, including satisfaction with academic experiences, sense of belonging, engagement, perceived competence, and the capacity to cope effectively with academic demands (Konu & Rimpelä, 2002; Soutter et al., 2014).

Supportive, respectful, and emotionally responsive relationships may contribute to students' perceptions of being recognized, valued, and supported, thereby strengthening their sense of belonging and academic confidence. From this perspective, academic satisfaction and well-being are not treated as direct outcomes caused by professors' emotional competencies but as dimensions of students' academic experience that may be shaped by the relational quality of teaching.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

Drawing on a prior review (Brandao De Souza & Jacomuzzi, 2025), this study adopted a qualitative exploratory design aimed at understanding how university students perceive professors' emotional competencies and how these competencies shape their academic experience, motivation, perceived well-being, and sense of psychological safety.

The study did not aim to measure the objective level of professors' emotional competence, nor to establish causal relationships between professors' behaviors and student outcomes. Rather, it focused on students' subjective interpretations of emotionally significant pedagogical encounters. A qualitative approach was considered particularly appropriate because the study aimed to explore students' subjective meanings, lived experiences, and interpretations of emotionally significant pedagogical encounters. Qualitative inquiry is especially valuable when investigating complex social and relational phenomena that are not easily captured through predefined variables or standardized measures (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Tisdell et al., 2025).

The study was grounded in semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to describe concrete episodes involving university professors while also leaving space for unexpected themes to emerge. This design was particularly suitable for exploring emotional and relational dimensions of university teaching, as students' accounts often moved between classroom experiences, examination situations, perceptions of professor–student distance, and broader reflections on university belonging. A common interview guide was used across all participants regardless of study level (undergraduate or master's). The

guide was developed based on the literature on emotional competence, professor–student relationships, and academic well-being. Core questions included:

"How would you describe a professor who positively influenced your university experience?"

"Can you recall a situation in which a professor demonstrated empathy or emotional sensitivity?"

"How do professors' communication styles affect your motivation and participation?"

"How do professors respond to students' anxiety or stress, particularly during examinations?"

"What characteristics make students feel comfortable asking questions or making mistakes?"

"What recommendations would you make for improving professors' emotional and relational competencies?"

Follow-up questions were adapted to participants' experiences while maintaining the same core structure.

3.2. Participants

The study was conducted at a university in northern Italy. Twenty-one university students participated in the research. Participants were enrolled primarily in humanities-related degree programs, including philosophy, pedagogy, social sciences, and related fields. The sample included both undergraduate and master's students, with different levels of university experience: some participants were at the beginning of their university pathway, while others had already completed a bachelor's degree or were enrolled in a master's program. The sample was not intended to be statistically representative. Rather, it was constructed to generate rich qualitative accounts of how students interpret professors' emotional and relational practices in everyday academic life. Given the concentration of participants in humanities and education-related fields, the findings should be understood as analytically transferable rather than generalizable to all disciplinary contexts. The study therefore provides insight into how emotional competencies are perceived in specific disciplinary and institutional contexts, while also generating theoretical categories that may be explored in future research across other settings. Participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant characteristics (*N* = 21).

Characteristic	Category	*N*	%
Study level	Undergraduate	14	66.7%
	Master's	7	33.3%
Disciplinary area	Philosophy	9	42.9%
	Pedagogy	8	38.1%
	Other humanities	4	19.0%
Interview timing	After lecture	13	61.9%
	After exam	8	38.1%

3.3. Recruitment and Data Collection

Participants were recruited through a combination of convenience and purposive sampling. Recruitment focused on students who had recently attended lectures or completed examinations in order to collect accounts grounded in recent and emotionally salient academic experiences. Students were invited to participate in short semi-structured interviews

focused on their experiences with university teaching, with particular attention to professors' emotional, relational, and communicative practices. Interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes and were conducted in Italian and followed a semi-structured format. This allowed the interviewer to use a common interview guide across participants while also adapting follow-up questions to each student's experience. The guide included questions on students' general university experience, positive and negative interactions with professors, perceived empathy and emotional attentiveness, communication style, classroom climate, management of anxiety or stress, examination experiences, differences between online and in-person teaching, and suggestions for improving professors' relational and emotional competencies.

Interview questions referred specifically to university professors responsible for course teaching and assessment. Graduate teaching assistants were not explicitly included unless participants spontaneously referred to them.

In the reporting phase, all identifying information was removed or replaced with participant codes. Because some participants spontaneously named professors or courses, particular care was taken to anonymize references that could identify individual staff members or students. Quotations included in the article were translated from Italian into English by the authors. Translation aimed to preserve the semantic meaning, tone, and relational nuance of students' accounts rather than producing a strictly literal rendering. When idiomatic expressions were present, the authors selected the closest English formulation while retaining the original pragmatic meaning.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts; (2) initial coding to identify recurring patterns and meaningful units; (3) generation and aggregation of preliminary themes; (4) review and refinement of themes; (5) definition and naming of final themes; (6) reporting. Codes were iteratively grouped into higher-order themes, with attention to internal coherence, distinctiveness across themes, and the interpretative richness of students' account. Throughout the analytical process, particular attention was paid to preserving students' voices while interpreting emerging patterns in dialog with key sensitizing concepts related to emotional intelligence, such as empathy and emotional regulation, rather than imposing predefined theoretical categories. The adequacy of the dataset was assessed iteratively during the analytic process. By approximately the fifteenth interview, the dataset appeared sufficiently rich to support the developing interpretative analysis; subsequent interviews contributed mainly to refining and nuancing the themes. Initial coding was conducted manually on the original Italian transcripts before translation. Thematic categories were therefore generated from the original language data to preserve contextual meanings and linguistic nuances. Translation into English was undertaken only during the reporting stage when selecting illustrative quotations for publication. The analysis was conducted by the first author and subsequently reviewed by the second author, who provided critical feedback on theme development and interpretation. The analytic phases followed in the thematic analysis are summarized in Table 2.

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16060918

Table 2. Analytic phases followed in the thematic analysis.

Phase	Activity	Output
1. Familiarization	Repeated reading of all 21 interview transcripts	Immersion in data
2. Initial coding	Line-by-line coding of meaningful units	Preliminary code list
3. Theme generation	Grouping codes into candidate themes	Candidate theme map
4. Theme review	Checking themes against coded data and transcripts	Refined theme map
5. Theme definition	Naming and defining each theme clearly	Final 5-theme structure
6. Reporting	Writing up findings with illustrative quotes	Findings narrative

3.5. Use of AI as an Analytic Support Tool

Alongside researcher-led thematic analysis, an AI-assisted tool (ChatGPT 5, OpenAI) was used as a complementary and strictly bounded support resource during the later stages of analysis. Its use was limited to three functions: (1) checking the internal consistency between anonymized excerpts, codes, and preliminary themes; (2) identifying possible overlaps or underdeveloped areas within the thematic structure; (3) supporting researcher reflexivity by prompting consideration of alternative interpretations of ambiguous excerpts. The AI-assisted tool was not used to generate codes autonomously. Rather, it was employed after researcher-led coding had been completed as a reflexive support tool to examine the coherence between excerpts, codes, and themes and to consider alternative interpretations.

The AI tool was used only after transcripts had been anonymized, and no directly identifying information about participants, professors, courses, or institutional actors was entered. Outputs generated by the AI tool did not replace researcher interpretation. Instead, they were used as prompts for reflexive review, with all analytic decisions remaining under the responsibility of the authors.

This use of AI therefore functioned as a limited reflexive support tool within a researcher-led qualitative process.

3.6. Trustworthiness and Rigor

Several strategies were adopted to strengthen the trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis. First, the analytic process was grounded in repeated engagement with the interview transcripts and continuous comparison across participants' accounts. Second, each theme was developed through multiple excerpts rather than isolated statements in order to ensure that the findings reflected recurrent patterns within the dataset. Third, the analysis moved iteratively between students' concrete descriptions and broader theoretical concepts, avoiding the imposition of predefined categories during the initial coding phase. Reflexive attention was paid to the researchers' interpretive role, particularly given the study's focus on emotional competencies in education. The authors sought to remain close to participants' language and examples before moving toward conceptual interpretation. The use of illustrative quotations also served to make visible the connection between students' accounts and the analytic claims advanced in the findings.

3.7. Researcher Reflexivity

Given the relational and interpretive nature of the study, reflexivity was treated as an integral part of the analytic process. The interviewer's position as a researcher in education and emotional competencies may have shaped both the formulation of interview questions and the interpretation of students' accounts. To address this, the analysis prioritized participants' concrete examples and language before moving toward broader theoretical interpretation. Reflexive attention was also paid to the possibility that students' accounts

might reproduce socially desirable narratives about “good” teaching or idealized forms of professor–student relationships. Rather than interpreting positive accounts as simple confirmation of the study’s assumptions, the analysis examined how students constructed emotional competence in practice, including its limits, tensions, and ambiguities. Several students valued warmth, empathy, and availability, but also emphasized the need for professional boundaries, fairness, and balance. These ambivalences were treated as analytically important rather than as exceptions to the main findings.

4. Results

The thematic analysis identified five interconnected themes describing how students perceived university professors’ emotional competencies and how these competencies shape their academic experiences, motivation, and well-being.

Across interviews, students frequently described emotional competencies not as secondary teaching qualities, but as meaningful elements shaping classroom climate, engagement, and psychological safety. Indeed, they did not describe emotional competence as a generic quality of “being nice” or “being friendly”. Rather, they referred to concrete pedagogical practices: listening, making students feel at ease, regulating evaluative pressure, using respectful communication, recognizing students’ emotional states, and maintaining a balance between approachability and professional authority. The five themes were: (1) empathy and the humanization of the professor–student relationship; (2) relational communication and classroom climate; (3) emotional regulation in high-stress academic situations; (4) disciplinary and modal differences in emotional climate; (5) students’ expectations regarding balanced emotional openness and faculty development. Although analytically distinct, the themes were strongly interconnected. Students often moved from describing a professor’s interpersonal style to reflecting on motivation, anxiety, participation, academic confidence, and sense of belonging.

Even though the main thematic pattern had emerged by the fifteenth interview, data collection continued in order to refine and deepen the interpretation of the themes. An overview of the five themes identified through the thematic analysis is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Overview of the five themes identified through thematic analysis.

		Core Construct	*N* Participants
1	Empathy and Humanization	Relational recognition; power distance reduction	21
2	Relational Communication and Climate	Communicative style; classroom engagement	19
3	Emotional Regulation in High-Stress Situations	Exam anxiety; academic psychological safety	18
4	Disciplinary and Modal Differences	Epistemic cultures; online vs. in-person	16
5	Expectations and Faculty Development	Balanced openness; institutional training	15

Participant counts are provided only as descriptive indicators of theme distribution and are not intended to quantify the significance or intensity of each theme.

4.1. Theme 1: Empathy and the Humanization of the Professor–Student Relationship

Empathy emerged as the most pervasive and salient theme across interviews. Students repeatedly emphasized the importance of professors who treated them as individuals rather than as anonymous learners, highlighting behaviors such as showing personal interest, maintaining eye contact, using humor, and acknowledging students’ emotional states. These behaviors were perceived as signals of respect and trust, contributing to a sense

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16060918

of human connection and reducing the perceived power distance between professors and students.

Empathy was described through small but meaningful gestures: greeting students informally, asking how they were, looking at them while speaking, noticing hesitation, being available after class, and showing trust in students' capacity to learn. One student explained that even a brief human exchange at the beginning of a lecture could reduce distance and remind students of their shared humanity:

> *"It would be enough, at the beginning of class, to exchange a few cordial words about how the day or the week is going, just to remind us that we are all human beings, with good days and bad days."* (N.1a)

Another student linked empathy to the professor's ability to understand students' position and emotional experience:

> *"What struck me was that the professor was able to put themselves in our place, to understand our thoughts and our position, without remaining only in the role of teacher. It was a great human quality. It made studying easier because we felt understood, and everything became lighter."* (N.3a)

Students therefore did not interpret empathy as emotional indulgence or as excessive familiarity. Rather, they described it as a form of relational recognition. Feeling recognized appeared to reduce the symbolic distance between professor and student and to make academic work more approachable. For several participants, the professor's gaze, tone, and presence were central to this process. One student described eye contact as unexpectedly important in the university context:

> *"What makes me feel good is, first, the use of the gaze. I have seen a lot of presence through the eyes, through eye contact, and this is something I did not expect to find at university. It is very pleasant. Even the comments at the beginning of the lesson, simply to make people feel at ease, make a difference."* (N.12)

A further dimension of empathy concerned trust. One student explicitly connected professors' emotional competence to their confidence in young people:

> *"What makes the difference in a professor is trust in young people, because when there is no esteem toward the people you are teaching, it is perceived, and it is demoralizing."* (N.12)

These accounts suggest that students understood empathy as a pedagogical condition that made them feel visible, trusted, and respected within an institutional environment often structured by hierarchy, assessment, and anonymity.

4.2. Theme 2: Relational Communication and Classroom Climate

Students repeatedly emphasized that professors' communicative style shaped the emotional climate of the classroom. Communication was not described only in terms of clarity or content delivery, but as a relational practice involving tone, rhythm, pacing, humor, responsiveness, and openness to dialog. Students valued professors who could explain clearly, use examples, ask questions, and create opportunities for interaction. One student described the difference between dialogic and frontal teaching in terms of participation:

> *"When communication is not fixed in the form 'I explain and you listen', but allows for discussions and moments of group reflection, a calmer and more proactive climate is created in the classroom."* (N.3a)

Another student explained that being invited to participate changed her own behavior:

> *"There was a professor who often asked for opinions and placed herself on a more dialogical level. I felt comfortable there. I am someone who had never raised her hand in three years, and from there I started speaking."* (N.5a)

By contrast, students described rigid, excessively frontal, or impersonal communication as reducing engagement and increasing distance. One participant compared a highly frontal lecture to studying alone:

> *"There was very little space for questions. It was a very straight lecture, without anecdotes. It was the equivalent of reading a book at home alone, so it was not very stimulating."* (N.1)

Students also linked classroom climate to professors' capacity to adjust their communication to students' needs. One participant suggested that clarity and pacing were themselves emotional and relational practices:

> *"Even during explanations, it would help to slow down a little. If there is a concept we have not understood, maybe not skip it and return to it only at the end but explain it in that moment. At the end of the lesson, maybe you have already forgotten what you did not understand."* (N.7)

These accounts show that students perceived communication as both cognitive and emotional. Clear, responsive, and dialogic communication supported understanding, but also reduced uncertainty, increased participation, and strengthened students' willingness to ask questions. Conversely, communication perceived as distant or excessively fast created conditions of passivity, anxiety, or disengagement.

4.3. Theme 3: Emotional Regulation in High-Stress Academic Situations

Emotional regulation, particularly during high-pressure moments such as exams, emerged as a clearly important theme. Exam anxiety was described by students as a common and unavoidable experience, and many were keenly aware of how professors' reactions could either help them feel calmer or make their anxiety worse. Supportive behaviors-reassuring words, humor, the offer of a break-were reported as reducing tension and improving performance. In contrast, indifference, hostility, or humiliation were described as heightening anxiety and undermining self-confidence.

In students' accounts, emotionally competent professors were those who remained calm, avoided humiliating reactions, gave students time to think, and framed the examination as an opportunity to show learning rather than as a judgment of personal worth. One student described a professor's framing of the examination as particularly reassuring:

> *"The words that came up were we are not here to judge. The professor said at the beginning of the exam that we are here to see what you have learned, what has remained with you, what you liked and what you did not like. We are not here to judge you as people, nor even only your preparation, because it can happen that someone is not adequately prepared."* (N.1)

Another student recalled a concrete episode in which a professor responded to visible anxiety by allowing the student to pause:

> *"A girl was very anxious because it was her first exam. The professor told her that the exam was not a judgment on the person, that she could go out for a moment, take a walk and then come back. He used a reassuring tone, and in fact the girl calmed down."* (N.2)

Similarly, students described patience, humor, and time to think as practices that supported performance under pressure:

> *"The anxiety is mostly visible during the exam, and most professors are patient. They tell you to relax, or they give you time to think and organize yourself for a moment. Sometimes they even ask the other students to leave while one person is taking the exam."* (N.7a)

By contrast, students described emotionally unregulated or indifferent responses as increasing stress. One student referred to examination situations in which the professor's expression created a sense of closure:

> *"There are cases where it feels like there is a wall. Whether you are anxious or not does not really matter to the professor. In other cases, instead, a brief conversation or comment helps you feel more at ease."* (N.9)

Another student described a negative experience in which a postponed exam, connected to a personal health concern, was experienced as a form of personal attack:

> *"I had asked to move the exam, and when I took it, the questions were different from what I had actually studied. I found myself failing. I experienced it as a personal attack, as something that classified me, that judged me."* (N.6a)

These narratives provide interpretive support for the construct of student-perceived academic psychological safety introduced in the theoretical framework. Students did not simply describe feeling more or less anxious during examinations; they explained how professors' emotionally regulated behavior shaped their perceived ability to think, speak, make mistakes, and remain engaged in high-stakes evaluative situations. Reassuring communication, patience, and the willingness to give students time appeared to reduce perceived threat and support academic confidence. Conversely, indifference, hostility, or humiliation were described as intensifying anxiety, undermining confidence, and encouraging withdrawal. Emotional regulation was therefore perceived not as a secondary interpersonal quality, but as central to students' experience of assessment fairness, participation, and performance under pressure.

4.4. Theme 4: Disciplinary and Modal Differences in Emotional Climate

Students often pointed out that the emotional and relational atmosphere varied depending on both the academic discipline and the teaching format. Humanities subjects—especially philosophy and pedagogy—were often described by participants as more open to dialog, more empathetic, and more relationally oriented, whereas other disciplinary contexts were sometimes perceived as more frontal or impersonal. Teaching format also made a noticeable difference. Most students preferred in-person classes, explaining that emotional signals and empathy were harder to pick up in online settings. Indeed, online teaching was often described as more distant, less dialogic, and more difficult to follow emotionally. One student contrasted online and in-person teaching by emphasizing the absence of shared reflection in online settings:

> *"Online, you opened the computer, and at the end of the lesson you closed it and remained with your own thoughts. There was no possibility of reflection, neither with the professors nor with the other students, on what had been learned during the lesson."* (N.3a)

Another student summarized this difference more directly:

> *"Empathy is more difficult through a screen. It is also harder to follow an online course, easier to get distracted, and the study becomes longer."* (N.2)

Students also noted that in-person teaching made it easier to ask questions, approach professors, and perceive their emotional availability. One participant explained that the advantage of in-person teaching was not only attentional, but relational:

> *"In-person classes are certainly better because you have the chance to talk with the professor at the end of the lesson, for example."* (N.2a)

With regard to disciplinary contexts, students' accounts suggest that perceived differences in emotional climate may be partly interpreted through the lens of epistemic cultures (Knorr Cetina, 1999), understood as the implicit norms, values, and social prac-

tices through which knowledge is produced, taught, and legitimized within different disciplinary communities. In fields where interpretation, dialog, and reflexivity are central to knowledge-making, emotional attunement between professor and student may be perceived as more pedagogically congruent. This may help explain why some participants described humanities and education-related courses as more open, dialogic, and relationally oriented, while other teaching contexts were experienced as more frontal, rigid, or impersonal.

However, these disciplinary differences should be interpreted cautiously. Students' accounts were not uniform, and several participants emphasized that emotional climate depended less on the discipline itself than on the individual professor's communicative and relational style. The findings therefore do not support a strong claim about inherent disciplinary differences. Rather, they suggest that emotional competencies are enacted within disciplinary and pedagogical cultures that may shape what students expect, notice, and value in professor–student interactions. This has implications for faculty development: initiatives aimed at strengthening professors' emotional competencies may benefit from being sensitive to disciplinary cultures, rather than relying exclusively on uniform models applied across all teaching contexts. For example, one student contrasted courses connected to pedagogy with more frontal philosophical courses:

> *"Maybe the courses I took for teaching credits, such as pedagogy and similar subjects, were more dialogic, while courses in philosophical sciences were more rigid, more frontal."* (N.5a)

However, other students resisted a disciplinary explanation and attributed differences primarily to individual professors:

> *"For me it varies from professor to professor, independently of the subject."* (N.7a)

Taken together, these accounts indicate that students perceived emotional competence as situated: it was enacted differently depending on class size, teaching modality, assessment format, disciplinary norms, and the individual professor's pedagogical style.

4.5. Theme 5: Students' Expectations and Recommendations for Balance and Faculty Development

Students did not call for unlimited emotional openness or the dissolution of professional boundaries. On the contrary, they repeatedly emphasized the need for balance. Emotional competence was perceived as the ability to combine empathy with clarity, fairness, authority, and professional distance. One student articulated this explicitly through the language of balance:

> *"Perhaps it is about balance. It is a bit Aristotelian: not exceeding either on one side or the other. I appreciate when a professor tries to have a conversation, but sometimes it can seem like preferences are being created, while other times there is too little. Maybe the right middle ground is professional balance that does not exclude an emotional aspect."* (N.9)

Another student expressed a similar idea by recognizing that some distance between professor and student remains appropriate:

> *"Of course, there should be a minimum of distance, because the student is the student and the professor is the professor. But at this point in our education, it is also good for there to be a certain shared purpose."* (N.2a)

Students' recommendations were generally practical and concrete. They suggested greeting students, slowing down explanations, offering space for questions, being available after class, giving constructive feedback, and avoiding humiliating responses to mistakes. One student emphasized that professors should observe who they have in front of them:

> *"They should think from the students' point of view, and maybe also vary from student to student: observe who you have in front of you. Of course, you cannot do this with everyone, but it would help."* (N.7a)

Several students also supported the idea of faculty development in emotional and relational competencies, while recognizing that training alone may not transform every professor's style. One participant stated:

> *"Yes, even if there are people who, even by taking these courses, would not have the same emotional capacity as others, because it is part of their character. But it would be good for them to do it, to improve, as much as possible, an aspect that may otherwise be lacking."* (N.1a)

Another student framed training as an institutional responsibility rather than a purely individual matter:

> *"Some professors really would need it. There should be a system, a path within their career, not only publishing articles, products and deadlines, but also activities."* (N.8a)

Overall, students constructed emotional competence as a professional form of judgment. It involved knowing when to be warm and when to maintain distance, when to reassure and when to challenge, when to make space for personal difficulty and when to preserve the academic frame of the interaction. This theme therefore strengthens the broader interpretation of emotional competence as a learnable, situated, and institutionally relevant dimension of university teaching.

5. Discussion

5.1. Reconceptualizing Emotional Competence as an Institutional Dimension

The main theoretical contribution of this study is the proposal to understand emotional competence not only as a personal disposition, but also as a professional and institutional dimension of university teaching. Prior literature has often framed professors' emotional competencies in terms of individual psychological traits or informal relational styles (Goleman, 1998; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). The present findings complicate this framing. Across all five themes, students consistently described emotional behaviors—empathy, regulated communication, responsiveness to anxiety—not as optional extras or personality traits, but as central elements of perceived teaching effectiveness.

This reconceptualization has structural implications. If emotional competence is understood as a professional and institutional dimension of university teaching, then its absence should not be interpreted solely as an individual limitation. It may also reflect a systemic gap in the ways universities prepare, support and evaluate academic teaching. The variability that students reported in professors' relational quality may therefore be interpreted not only as a matter of individual personality, but also as the result of unbalanced professional formation, limited pedagogical preparation, and insufficient institutional support for the relational dimensions of teaching.

5.2. Academic Psychological Safety as a Relational Mechanism

The second theoretical contribution of this study is the development of student-perceived academic psychological safety as an interpretive mechanism linking professors' emotional competencies to students' reported academic experiences. Drawing on Edmondson's (1999) concept of psychological safety, this construct captures the interpersonal conditions under which students feel able to engage, make mistakes, ask questions, and disclose difficulties without fear of humiliation or judgment. The data offer qualitative support for this interpretation, particularly in Theme 3 (emotional regulation during exams), where students describe how professors' affective responses—calming words, patience,

or conversely, indifference and hostility—may alter students' perceived psychological conditions during assessment.

This mechanism appears particularly relevant in high-stakes situations such as oral examinations, which involve significant interpersonal vulnerability. The theoretical framework of psychological safety helps to explain why seemingly small behavioral acts-a reassuring word, a pause that allows the student to think may have significant perceived effects on students' academic experience and well-being.

5.3. Complexity and Tensions in Emotional Competence

It is important to acknowledge that the relationship between professors' emotional expressiveness and student well-being is not uniformly positive. Students in Theme 5 explicitly cautioned against excessive familiarity, invoking the metaphor of an "Aristotelian balance" to describe ideal emotional conduct. This points to an important tension in the exercise of emotional competence: the risk of emotional performance—that is, the display of affect that is not genuinely felt, but enacted strategically for professional effect. This tension is particularly relevant in higher education, where professors are simultaneously educators, evaluators, disciplinary experts, and institutional representatives. Emotional competence therefore cannot be reduced to warmth, friendliness, or availability. It also includes the capacity to maintain boundaries, communicate expectations clearly, and manage asymmetrical power relations responsibly.

A related tension concerns the boundary between empathy and authority. Excessive relational proximity can confuse the evaluative function of the professor–student relationship, potentially generating confusion about expectations, fairness or autonomy.

5.4. Disciplinary Cultures and the Epistemics of Emotional Climate

Students' accounts suggest perceived differences in emotional climate across disciplinary contexts that may go beyond individual professor styles. Participants often described humanities disciplines as more dialogical, empathetic, and relationally oriented, while some other fields were perceived as more frontal or emotionally distant. As argued in Section 4.4, these perceived differences may be interpreted through the lens of epistemic cultures (Knorr Cetina, 1999): the implicit norms, values, and practices through which disciplinary communities define valid knowledge, legitimate authority, and appropriate forms of interaction. However, these disciplinary differences should be interpreted cautiously, given the composition of the sample and the predominance of students from humanities and education-related fields. The findings point to students' perceptions of disciplinary emotional climates rather than to objective differences between academic fields. Nevertheless, this analysis suggests that faculty development initiatives may need to be sensitive to disciplinary cultures, rather than relying exclusively on uniform training models applied across all faculties. Overall, the findings suggest that professors' emotional competencies are best understood as situated pedagogical practices embedded in institutional, disciplinary, and relational contexts. This interpretation opens the way for considering emotional competence not as an optional interpersonal quality, but as a dimension of teaching professionalism in higher education.

6. Conclusions

This study explored how university students perceive professors' emotional competencies and how they describe their relevance for academic well-being, satisfaction, engagement, and perceived psychological safety. The findings do not establish a causal relationship between professors' emotional competencies and student outcomes. Rather, they show how students interpret professors' emotional and relational practices as meaningful

conditions shaping their sense of academic safety, motivation, confidence, and capacity to cope with university demands. This study contributes to higher education research by reframing professors' emotional competencies as situated professional practices embedded in institutional, relational, and disciplinary contexts. Rather than conceptualizing empathy, emotional regulation, and relational sensitivity as individual dispositions, the findings suggest that students perceive these competencies as part of the pedagogical conditions that support participation, confidence, and academic psychological safety. These contributions also reveal important tensions. Emotional competence does not imply unlimited availability, emotional intimacy, or the weakening of academic standards. Rather, it involves a balanced professional capacity to combine empathy, authority, fairness, clarity, and emotional regulation. From an institutional perspective, the findings suggest the need for structured faculty development initiatives that recognize the relational and emotional dimensions of teaching as integral to the quality of higher education.

7. Implications: Emotional Competencies as Institutional, Not Individual, Responsibility

One implication of this study concerns the role of universities in preparing future teachers and educational professionals. In the Italian context, recent reforms (e.g., Italian Republic (2025). *Law No. 22 of 19 February 2025*) have emphasized the development of non-cognitive and socio-emotional competencies within school curricula. Although these reforms primarily address the school sector, they also raise questions for higher education institutions, particularly those involved in teacher education. If future teachers are expected to foster students' emotional awareness, self-regulation, relational competence, and well-being, universities should consider how these same competencies are modeled, taught, and supported within initial teacher education and academic teaching more broadly. The findings of this study point to a structural tension.

Universities are increasingly expected to prepare professionals capable of supporting students' emotional and relational development, yet university faculty often receive limited systematic preparation in the emotional and relational dimensions of teaching. Addressing this gap requires moving beyond the idea that emotional competence depends solely on individual sensitivity or personal inclination. Instead, emotional competencies should be integrated into faculty development, doctoral training, mentoring systems, teaching quality frameworks, and institutional cultures of higher education. Such initiatives should not reduce emotional competence to generic communication skills or prescriptive behavioral techniques. Rather, they should support professors in reflecting on the relational, evaluative, and affective dimensions of teaching, including classroom climate, feedback practices, assessment anxiety, student participation, and the management of professional boundaries.

Existing initiatives from school and teacher education contexts provide useful models. Programs such as RULER (Brackett et al., 2012), CARE (Jennings et al., 2017), and social–emotional learning frameworks have demonstrated positive effects on educators' emotional awareness, classroom climate, and relational practices. Although evidence remains limited in higher education, these approaches suggest promising directions for faculty development focused on emotional competencies.

8. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. The sample was drawn primarily from humanities disciplines within a single institutional context, which may limit the generalizability of these results. In addition, voluntary participation—often following positive academic experiences—raises the possibility of self-selection bias. The introduction of concepts such as academic psychological safety

and epistemic cultures, while theoretically motivated, requires empirical validation in broader and more diverse settings. In addition, the study did not systematically examine the influence of demographic variables such as gender, cultural background, socioeconomic status, or first-generation university status. Future research should investigate whether perceptions of professors' emotional competencies vary across social and cultural groups.

Future research should address these limitations through longitudinal and mixed-method designs. Longitudinal studies would allow for the examination of how professors' emotional competencies develop over time and their potential causal relationships with student outcomes, such as academic performance, retention, and well-being. Future studies may also benefit from engaging with feminist scholarship highlighting how emotional and care-related labor is often gendered within educational institutions.

A mixed-methods approach combining qualitative data with quantitative measures—including validated scales for psychological safety and emotional competence—would strengthen robustness and reduce reliance on self-report.

Cross-cultural and multi-institutional perspectives are especially needed to explore how disciplinary epistemic cultures and national pedagogical traditions moderate the expression and recognition of emotional competencies in higher education.

Finally, future research should incorporate professors' own perspectives to examine how emotional competencies are conceptualized, enacted, and supported (or not) within different institutional contexts.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, C.B.D.S.; methodology, C.B.D.S.; validation, A.C.J.; formal analysis, C.B.D.S.; investigation, C.B.D.S.; writing—original draft preparation, C.B.D.S.; writing—review and editing, A.C.J.; supervision, A.C.J.; project administration, A.C.J.; funding acquisition, A.C.J. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: Funded with the contribution of the Ministry of University and Research pursuant to Decree No. 1159 of 23 July 2023—PROBEN call, project: Promoting Individual and Social Resources in the Academic World—University for Well-being (code: PROBEN_0000002).

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Ca' Foscari University (protocol code: 106352 and date: 10 April 2026).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Due to the qualitative nature of the data and the need to protect participants' confidentiality, full interview transcripts are not publicly available. Anonymized excerpts supporting the findings may be made available from the corresponding author upon request.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

Bagdziūnienė, D., Žukauskaitė, I., Bulotaitė, L., & Sargautytė, R. (2025). Study and personal resources of university students' academic resilience and the relationship with positive psychological outcomes. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *16*, 1517359. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Bingham, C. W., & Sidorkin, A. M. (Eds.). (2004). *No education without relation* (Vol. 259). Peter Lang.

Brackett, M. A., Rivers, S. E., Reyes, M. R., & Salovey, P. (2012). Enhancing academic performance and social and emotional competence with the RULER feeling words curriculum. *Learning and Individual Differences*, *22*(2), 218–224. [CrossRef]

Brackett, M. A., Rivers, S. E., & Salovey, P. (2011). Emotional intelligence: Implications for personal, social, academic, and workplace success. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *5*(1), 88–103. [CrossRef]

Brandao De Souza, C., & Jacomuzzi, A. C. (2025). The role of university professors' emotional competencies in students' academic and psychological well-being: A systematic review. *Education Sciences*, *15*(7), 882. [CrossRef]

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. [CrossRef]

Cajachagua Castro, M., Miranda Limachi, K., Chávez Sosa, J. V., & Huancahuire-Vega, S. (2023). Concern about returning to face-to-face classes after the pandemic: Importance of emotional intelligence and stress coping strategies in health science students. *Advances in Medical Education and Practice*, *14*, 937–945. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Cerutti, J., Burt, K. B., Moeller, R. W., & Seehuus, M. (2024). Declines in social–emotional skills in college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *15*, 1392058. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage Publications.

Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *44*(2), 350–383. [CrossRef]

Goleman, D. (1998). *Working with emotional intelligence*. Bantam Books.

Italian Republic. (2025). *Law No. 22 of 19 February 2025: Introduction of the development of non-cognitive and transversal competencies in school and vocational education pathways*. Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana.

Jennings, P. A., Brown, J. L., Frank, J. L., Doyle, S., Oh, Y., Davis, R., Rasheed, D., DeWeese, A., DeMauro, A. A., Cham, H., & Greenberg, M. T. (2017). Impacts of the CARE for teachers program on teachers' social and emotional competence and classroom interactions. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *109*(7), 1010. [CrossRef]

Jennings, P. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). The prosocial classroom: Teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes. *Review of Educational Research*, *79*(1), 491–525. [CrossRef]

Knorr Cetina, K. (1999). *Epistemic cultures: How the sciences make knowledge*. Harvard University Press.

Konu, A., & Rimpelä, M. (2002). Well-being in schools: A conceptual model. *Health Promotion International*, *17*(1), 79–87. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Lodi, E., Boerchi, D., Magnano, P., & Patrizi, P. (2017). College Satisfaction Scale (CSS): Evaluation of contextual satisfaction in relation to college student life satisfaction and academic performance. *BPA-Applied Psychology Bulletin*, *65*(279), 51–64.

Noddings, N. (2015). *The challenge to care in schools*. Teachers College Press.

Rakow, K. E., Priestley, M., Byrom, N. C., Foster, J. L., & Dommett, E. J. (2025). Their wellbeing affects our wellbeing: Student perspectives of lecturer wellbeing and its consequences for student wellbeing. *Higher Education*, *90*(4), 1065–1082. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Saarni, C. (1999). *The development of emotional competence*. Guilford Press.

Salovey, P., & Mayer, J. D. (1990). Emotional intelligence. *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, *9*(3), 185–211. [CrossRef]

Sanz-Martín, D., Caracuel-Cáliz, R. F., Alonso-Vargas, J. M., & Ramírez-Granizo, I. A. (2025). Emotional intelligence in Gen Z teaching undergraduates: The impact of physical activity and biopsychosocial factors. *European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education*, *15*(7), 123. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Seligman, M. E., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2014). Positive psychology: An introduction. In *Flow and the foundations of positive psychology* (pp. 279–298). Springer.

Soutter, A. K., O'Steen, B., & Gilmore, A. (2014). The student well-being model: A conceptual framework for the development of student well-being indicators. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, *19*(4), 496–520. [CrossRef]

Tisdell, E. J., Merriam, S. B., & Stuckey-Peyrot, H. L. (2025). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. John Wiley & Sons.

van Kessel, G., Ryan, C., Paras, L., Johnson, N., Zariff, R. Z., & Stallman, H. M. (2025). Relationship between university belonging and student outcomes: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, *52*, 2511–2534. [CrossRef]

Zalazar-Jaime, M. F., Moretti, L. S., & Medrano, L. A. (2022). Contribution of academic satisfaction judgments to subjective well-being. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *13*, 772346. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.

https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci16060918