



Influence of Empathy on Organisational Performance in Public Universities, Western Region, Kenya: The Moderating Role of Organisational Justice

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Abstract

This study sought to determine the influence of empathy on organisational performance and to establish the moderating influence of organisational justice on leadership emotional intelligence and organisational performance in public universities western region, Kenya. The research philosophy for this study was positivism, while a descriptive explanatory research design was adopted. 794 faculty members from four public institutions were the intended subjects of which 266 participated in the survey by means of a stratified random sample procedure. Primary data was gathered using questionnaires and interview schedules. Descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were used with the aid of SPSS 27. The results showed a significant influence of empathy on organisational performance ($R^2=0.464$, $P=0.000$). The interaction term has a positive effect on performance, indicating that organisational justice helps improve empathy, which in turn boosts organisational performance ($R^2=0.707$, $P=0.000$). The study concluded that empathy and organisational justice jointly enhance performance in public universities, with justice amplifying empathy's influence. Universities should embed empathy in leadership training, enforce fair policies, assess staff perceptions, and develop feedback systems; the Ministry of Education should also formalise emotional intelligence and fairness standards in the university governance framework.

Introduction

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is a psychological construct popularised by Daniel Goleman in the 1990s (Serrat, 2017). It refers to an individual's ability to recognize, understand, regulate, and effectively use emotions to guide thought and behaviour (Kotsou et al., 2019). EI plays a vital role in personal and professional settings by enhancing relationships, learning, decision-making, and overall well-being. Goleman (1995) categorised EI into four key domains: self-management, social awareness, relationship management, and empathy (Brownie, 2019). Empathy is the capacity to relate to and experience another person's feelings, ideas, or experiences. It is more than simple sympathy, or the capacity to perceive and assist others with tact or understanding (Gentry et al., 2021). Increased empathy, according to Kock et al. (2019), helps leaders understand and meet the needs of their followers in a way that boosts performance. Understanding and anticipating their followers' needs enables a leader to select a management style that can improve poor performance or enhance strong performance. Empathy is an essential concept in leadership. It fosters a collaborative and encouraging



work environment that boosts employee engagement, reduces stress levels, enhances loyalty, and increases productivity.

Organisational performance itself is defined as an institution's capacity to meet its goals through efficient resource utilisation (Sangiorgi & Siboni, 2017), or as the comparison between actual outcomes and intended objectives (Munir & Azam, 2017). High-performing employees drive productivity, innovation, and quality service delivery (Wattoo et al., 2020). In the context of public universities, performance is assessed using key indicators such as academic achievements, research productivity, student satisfaction, and financial sustainability (Muwardi et al., 2020), all of which require substantial human capital driven by emotional competence.

Organisational justice plays a critical role in enhancing organisational performance by promoting fairness and encouraging employee motivation and commitment. When employees perceive fairness in processes such as task allocation, compensation, and disciplinary actions, their engagement and satisfaction improve, leading to increased productivity and retention (Das & Mohanty, 2023). Emotional intelligence (EI) has been linked to organisational performance (OP), though findings are mixed; some studies report a strong relationship, while others find no significant connection (Moon, 2021; Said et al., 2021). Organisational justice can moderate this relationship, as employees with high EI tend to interpret fairness positively, further boosting job satisfaction and performance (Mustafa et al., 2022). Muchemi (2019) argues that organisational justice is a strong predictor of OP and recommends more research into its mediating and moderating roles.

Higher education institutions are increasingly challenged by globalisation, rising student enrollments, and the fast pace of knowledge generation (Igoki, 2021). These pressures demand a highly competent and motivated workforce to maintain and enhance institutional performance. Emotional Intelligence (EI), particularly in leadership, plays a pivotal role in addressing these challenges. According to Mendelson and Stabile (2019), leaders with high EI positively influence employee engagement, motivation, and overall performance, contributing significantly to organisational success.

Studies examining how EI is linked to OP have produced mixed results across different global contexts. In the United States, Moon (2021) affirmed that EI significantly contributes to leadership effectiveness and decision-making. However, De Los Santos (2023) found no significant link between faculty EI and OP at Abilene Christian University, while Lebeck and Chighizola (2018) observed that EI accounted for only a minor portion of the variance in organisational outcomes. In contrast, Sadeghi et al. (2018) in Iran found a negative correlation, suggesting contextual differences may influence outcomes. Mishra (2023) supported the relevance of EI, finding a significant relationship with job performance among Indian university faculty. However, Said et al. (2021) reported weak EI effects on teacher performance in Pakistan. In Africa, studies consistently affirm EI's importance. Adenuga et al. (2022) identified a positive relationship between empathy and task performance in Nigerian universities.

In Kenya, public universities continue to face performance challenges despite the adoption of performance-enhancing strategies such as performance contracting. One of the persistent issues undermining these efforts is the perception of unfairness in institutional practices, which negatively affects staff morale and organisational outcomes (Cheche et al., 2017). Perceptions of unfairness in Kenyan public universities remain high. Between 2014 and 2019, over 60% of universities experienced strikes due to appraisal disputes (CUE, 2019). More than 70% of union members reported opaque appraisal processes (UASU, 2019), only ~35% linked individual to institutional targets (PSC, 2019), non-performance allowances persisted (SRC, 2019), and 65–72% of staff viewed performance systems as unfair (Cheche et al., 2017).



Current data indicate that Kenyan public universities are experiencing unsatisfactory organisational performance, reflected in financial, operational, and educational indicators. Financial distress is the most glaring concern. For the 2021/2022 financial year, the Auditor-General reported that all 31 public universities exhibited financial mismanagement, collectively accruing debts of Ksh 56.2 billion (Office of the Auditor-General [OAG], 2023). Key issues include the inability to meet operational costs, massive pending bills, and delayed staff salaries, which directly undermine morale and institutional functionality. Similarly, over 50% of public universities are reportedly financially insolvent, relying heavily on government bailouts and capitation, which adversely affects the quality of education and research output (Commission for University Education [CUE], 2023).

Educational performance also shows a decline. According to the January 2024 Webometrics ranking, only four Kenyan universities are within the top 2000 globally, with the University of Nairobi dropping to rank 1022, reflecting weakened research impact and global competitiveness (Cybermetrics Lab, 2024). Furthermore, growing student enrollment has strained resources, resulting in critically high student-lecturer ratios of 1:45 in humanities and 1:25 in sciences, far exceeding the recommended 1:15, thereby compromising teaching and supervision quality (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2023).

EI has been explored as a potential factor influencing OP, but findings remain inconsistent. For instance, Igoki (2021) and Kang'ethe and Waiganjo (2023) established a strong positive relationship between EI and OP, indicating that emotional competencies such as empathy, self-awareness, and relationship management can enhance employee engagement and institutional effectiveness. Conversely, Makokha et al. (2023) reported a weak association between EI and OP, suggesting that other structural or contextual factors may moderate the relationship. These mixed results point to the need for further context-specific research to better understand the conditions under which EI contributes to university performance in Kenya.

Higher education institutions play a crucial role in the economic and social development of nations. Universities are essential to national growth. They are guided by selected leaders from the academic staff, who are expected to exhibit leadership abilities to enhance performance. These attributes include integrity and ethics, transparent and effective communication, relationship cultivation, inspiration and motivation, accountability, adaptation and flexibility, and emotional intelligence. Although university leaders are meticulously chosen according to established criteria that include the assessment of their emotional intelligence, the organisational performance of several institutions in Kenya remains unsatisfactory. Kenyan public universities continue to face unsatisfactory organisational performance, evident in financial, operational, and educational indicators. Financial distress is acute: in 2021/2022, all 31 public universities were flagged for financial mismanagement, with a collective debt of Ksh 56.2 billion, an inability to meet operational costs, massive pending bills, and delayed salaries, all of which undermine morale and operations (OAG, 2023). Over 50% are financially insolvent, relying on government bailouts, which negatively impacts education quality and research output (CUE, 2023). Academic performance is also declining: The University of Nairobi ranked 1022 globally, with only four universities in the top 2000 (Cybermetrics Lab, 2024). Student-lecturer ratios remain critically high at 1:45 in humanities and 1:25 in sciences (KNBS, 2023). Mwangi and Waithaka (2018) contend that, despite their vital responsibilities in teaching, research, and community service, universities have obstacles in their daily operations. University leaders are required to use leadership qualities to maintain the competitiveness of their institutions in addressing these problems. Consequently, they are anticipated to possess emotional intelligence that would enable them to reconcile organisational expectations with those of their subordinates, among the difficulties outlined by Ayiro (2020). Multiple institutions have issued threats to initiate a strike. This



suggests issues with leadership ability in addressing management setbacks that leaders encounter in their responsibilities (Nyandika, 2024). This may indicate that workers believe they are being treated unjustly, which may require leadership to demonstrate emotional intelligence in addressing the issue of the strikes.

Many researchers have conducted extensive research on empathy and organisational performance in higher education institutions; yet, the findings have yielded inconsistent outcomes. Kenyan-based empirical studies demonstrate the relevance of leadership emotional intelligence (EI) and organisational justice (OJ) to institutional performance. For instance, Kang'ethe and Waiganjo (2023) found a strong positive link between self-awareness and organisational performance at JKUAT, showing that emotionally intelligent leaders enhance productivity and institutional outcomes. Similarly, Biwott et al. (2019) revealed that self-awareness and self-regulation significantly influence knowledge-sharing behaviours in Kenyan universities, a vital driver of organisational success. Wangari et al. (2019) also established a positive, though weak, relationship between self-awareness and performance in Kenya's insurance sector, underscoring the broader applicability of EI across contexts. In addition, Muriithi and Karanja (2021) highlighted gaps in emotional regulation among academic staff in Nairobi's public universities, pointing to EI deficiencies that hinder adaptability and effectiveness. Collectively, these studies underscore that leadership EI and fair organisational practices are critical for enhancing staff engagement, sustaining competitiveness, and improving performance in Kenyan higher education institutions.

Method

Study Area: The study was conducted in Western Kenya, focusing on Alupe, Kibabii, Masinde Muliro, and Kaimosi Friends Universities. The area offers a rich cultural and educational context for examining leadership, emotional intelligence, organisational justice, and employee performance.

Research Philosophy: The study was grounded in the positivist paradigm, which emphasises objectivity, empirical evidence, and measurable observations to establish factual knowledge. This approach enables the statistical testing of hypotheses and the identification of cause-and-effect relationships. By applying quantifiable methods, the study ensured reliability, accuracy, and validity in investigating emotional intelligence, organisational justice, and performance.

Research Design: A descriptive explanatory design was adopted to capture both the current state of emotional intelligence and organisational justice in public universities, while explaining their effects on performance outcomes. This design enabled the systematic collection of data, the description of existing practices, and the statistical testing of relationships among variables to draw meaningful, evidence-based conclusions.

Target Population: The study's target population comprised 794 academic staff across four public universities in Kenya's Western region. This included professors, associate professors, senior lecturers, lecturers, assistant lecturers, and graduate assistants. The diverse representation of academic ranks ensured balanced insights into leadership emotional intelligence, organisational justice, and employee performance within the higher education sector.

Sampling Procedures: Stratified random, purposive, and simple random sampling techniques were used. Slovin's formula determined a sample size of 266 respondents, ensuring adequate representation across cadres. In this study, stratified sampling was employed to ensure representation of different categories of academic staff across the four public universities in the Western region of Kenya. Stratification was based on academic rank (professors, associate professors, senior lecturers, lecturers, assistant lecturers, and graduate assistants). Within each stratum, simple random sampling was applied to select participants proportionately from the total population in each university. This



approach ensured that respondents from different academic ranks and institutions were adequately represented in the final sample, minimising bias and enhancing the generalizability of the findings.

Data Collection Instruments: Data were collected using closed-ended questionnaires (based on the EI scale), interview schedules for administrators, and document analysis for institutional reports and metrics. The scale was structured as follows: 1 represented “strongly disagree,” 2 denoted “disagree,” 3 represented “fairly agree,” 4 denoted “agree,” and 5 stood for “strongly agree,”. After securing permits and approvals, questionnaires were administered with support from research assistants, ensuring voluntary participation and confidentiality.

Pilot Study

A pilot study with 27 respondents at Maseno University was undertaken to test and refine research instruments. Reliability was measured using Cronbach’s Alpha, a statistical technique for internal consistency. Social Skills, Organizational Justice, and Organizational Performance demonstrated good to excellent reliability with Cronbach’s alpha values of 0.837, 0.734, and 0.740, respectively, with no items dropped from the scales since their alpha values were above 0.7. Instrument validity was established through multiple approaches. Face and content validity were assessed by expert reviews and pilot feedback, ensuring comprehensiveness. Construct validity was tested using factor analysis to confirm that items appropriately measured the underlying variables. Social Skills, Organizational Justice, and Performance showed strong validity with factor loadings 0.756, 0.701 and 0.741 respectively greater than 0.4. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin values 0.832, 0.734 and 0.648 respectively greater than 0.5.

Data Processing and Analysis

Collected data were cleaned to address errors, missing values, and inconsistencies, then coded for analysis using SPSS. Descriptive statistics such as means, frequencies, and percentages summarised responses. Inferential analyses included hierarchical regression to examine the relationships among variables, testing hypotheses and moderation effects to derive meaningful interpretations.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical requirements were strictly adhered to. Research permits were obtained, alongside institutional approvals. Respondents were informed of study objectives and provided consent before participation. Voluntary participation was emphasised, with confidentiality and anonymity assured. Sensitive questions were avoided, ensuring respect, privacy, and protection of all participants throughout data collection and reporting.



Results

Descriptive Statistics of Variables in the Study

Table 1: Empathy

No	Empathy	5	4	3	2	1	Mean	SD
1	My supervisor can easily detect the difference between other people’s feelings and behaviour	143 (67.8)	45 (21.3)	21 (10)	2 (0.9)	0 (0)	4.56	0.71
2	People find it comfortable to discuss their problems with my supervisor	70 (33.2)	116 (55)	21 (10)	4 (1.9)	0 (0)	4.19	0.69
3	My supervisor is able to balance his/her individual own tasks with supporting others	66 (31.3)	104 (49.3)	26 (12.3)	11 (5.2)	4 (1.9)	4.03	0.90
4	My supervisor finds it easy to see things from another person’s perspective	71 (33.6)	120 (56.9)	15 (7.1)	4 (1.9)	1 (0.5)	4.21	0.69
5	My supervisor is sensitive to the feelings of others	67 (31.8)	108 (51.2)	34 (16.1)	2 (0.9)	0 (0)	4.14	0.71
6	My supervisor enjoy cooperating with others in accomplishing a task	66 (31.3)	121 (57.3)	22 (10.4)	2 (0.9)	0 (0)	4.19	0.649
7	My supervisor help others in coming out of difficult situations	79 (37.4)	108 (51.2)	23 (10.9)	0 (0)	1 (0.5)	4.25	0.682
8	My supervisor easily extent support and advice to others when needed	74 (35.1)	119 (56.4)	13 (6.2)	2 (0.9)	3 (1.4)	4	0.727
Aggregate scores							4.2	0.72

The findings in Table 1 revealed that a large majority of respondents demonstrate strong empathy-related skills. Notably, 67.8% strongly agreed and 21.3% agreed that they can easily distinguish between others’ feelings and behaviours, supported by a high mean of 4.56. This indicates high emotional perceptiveness, which is essential for interpersonal understanding and effective responses. Additionally, 88.2% of respondents reported that others feel comfortable sharing their problems with them (mean = 4.19), suggesting that most individuals are approachable and create psychologically safe environments. When asked whether they can balance individual responsibilities with helping others, 93% responded positively (mean = 4.03), indicating that most individuals can manage tasks while providing support crucial for teamwork and workplace productivity. The overall aggregate mean of 4.20 and a standard deviation of 0.72 indicate a strong presence of empathetic behaviours across the sample.

Moderating Influence of Organisational justices on the Relationship between Empathy and the Organisational Performance

The research used hierarchical regression analysis to investigate if organisational justices influence the association between the organisational performance in public universities western region, Kenya and empathy



Table 2: Hierarchical Regression Model Summary

Model	R	R ²	Adj. R ²	Std. Error of the Estimate	R ² Change	Change Statistics			
						F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.681 ^a	.464	.462	.304780	.464	181.058	1	209	.000
2	.833 ^b	.693	.690	.231198	.229	155.205	1	208	.000
3	.841 ^c	.707	.703	.226317	.014	10.068	1	207	.002

a. Predictors: (Constant), Empathy

b. Predictors: (Constant), Empathy, Organisational justice

c. Predictors: (Constant), Empathy, Organisational justice, Empathy* Organisational justice

Source: Field Data (2024)

The regression table 2 provides R values that can be interpreted as correlations, reflecting the strength and direction of associations between predictors and organisational performance. In Model 1, the correlation between empathy and performance was strong and positive (R = .681). With the addition of organisational justice in Model 2, the correlation increased to R = .833, indicating a robust joint relationship. Model 3, which included the interaction term, showed the highest correlation (R = .841), suggesting that the combined effect of empathy and organisational justice strengthens the link with performance. These results demonstrate consistent positive correlations, reinforcing the regression findings and showing that the predictors are not only statistically significant but also strongly associated with organisational performance.

Model 1 included empathy as the sole predictor of organisational performance. The results showed a significant positive relationship (R = .681, R² = .464, F (1, 209) = 181.058, P<0.05), indicating that 46.4% of the variance in organisational performance can be explained by empathy alone. Model 2 introduced organisational justice as an additional predictor. The inclusion of this variable significantly increased the explained variance to 69.3% (R² = .693, ΔR² = .229, F Change = 155.205, P<0.05). Model 3 tested the interaction effect between empathy and organisational justice (Empathy × Organisational Justice) to examine moderation. The model showed a further increase in explained variance to 70.7% (R² = .707, ΔR² = .014, F Change = 10.068, p = .002). This confirms that organisational justice significantly moderates the relationship between empathy and organisational performance.

Table 3: Regression Coefficient of Moderating influence

Model	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients		t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
1 (Constant)	1.901	.182			10.467	.000
Empathy	.581	.043	.681		13.456	.000
2 (Constant)	.647	.171			3.792	.000
Empathy	.288	.040	.338		7.137	.000
Organisational justice	.591	.047	.589		12.458	.000
3 (Constant)	-3.553	1.334			-2.663	.008
Empathy	1.311	.325	1.538		4.035	.000
Organisational justice	1.570	.312	1.566		5.031	.000
Empathy* Organisational justice	.237	.075	1.943		3.173	.002

a. Dependent Variable: Organisational Performance

Source: Field Data (2024)

Based on the regression coefficient found in Table 3, Model 3, the regression model for the research is presented as follows.

$$Y = -3.553 + 1.311X_1 + 1.570Z + 0.237X_1Z$$

**Where:**

Y=The organisational performance

X₁=Empathy

Z= Organisational justices

in Model 1, the unstandardised coefficient ($\beta = 0.581, P < 0.05$) indicates a strong and positive influence of empathy on organisational performance. in Model 2, organisational justice was introduced as an additional predictor alongside empathy. Both variables remained statistically significant. The unstandardised coefficients were $\beta = 0.288, P < 0.05$ for empathy and $\beta = 0.591, P < 0.05$ for organisational justice. in Model 3, the interaction term between empathy and organisational justice was introduced to assess moderation. The interaction term yielded a statistically significant and unstandardised coefficient $\beta = 0.237, P < 0.05$. The significance of the interaction term confirms the moderating effect, indicating that organisational justice strengthens the positive impact of empathy on performance.

Discussion

The regression results of the current study reveal that empathy and organisational justice both significantly predict organisational performance, with their interaction producing a more substantial combined effect. These findings underscore the significance of soft relational competencies in shaping institutional outcomes. Consistent with Igoki (2021), who reported a positive link between leadership empathy and employee engagement in Kenyan universities, and Rana, Ka'ol, and Kirubi (2019), who found empathy and active listening improved performance in Kenya's coffee industry, the current results validate empathy's role across contexts. However, contrasting evidence from Sadeghi et al. (2018) in Iran and Saman et al. (2021) in Pakistan, where empathy showed weak or no significant impact, indicates the influence of cultural and institutional environments.

The addition of organisational justice in Model 2 significantly strengthened the predictive power, reflecting its importance in shaping perceptions of fairness and performance. This is consistent with Das and Mohanty (2023), who confirmed organisational justice as a strong determinant of performance in India's higher education sector. Similarly, Mustafa et al. (2023) in Malaysia demonstrated that distributive justice moderated the relationship between emotional intelligence and job satisfaction, underscoring justice's role in enhancing employee outcomes. Heffernan and Dundon (2018) in Ireland also emphasised that fairness perceptions mediate HR practices' effect on job satisfaction and commitment.

Finally, the significant interaction effect (Empathy \times Organisational Justice) confirms that justice amplifies the positive influence of empathy on performance. This mirrors findings by Kimwolo and Kimosop (2018), who found justice moderated work relationships in Kenyan organisations, validating its cross-sectoral and contextual relevance.

Conclusion

The study concluded that both empathy and organisational justice significantly influence organisational performance in the Western Region of public universities in Kenya. Empathy enhances workplace collaboration, emotional support, and mutual understanding, while organisational justice promotes fairness, transparency, and employee motivation. The interaction between the two further amplifies their positive effect on performance. Specifically, organisational justice moderates the relationship by strengthening the impact of empathy on performance outcomes. Universities should integrate empathy training into leadership development to foster emotional awareness, active listening, and compassion among managers and administrators. Institutions must also adopt and enforce comprehensive organisational justice policies that promote fairness in promotions, workload



allocation, and resource distribution. This study validates Equity Theory by demonstrating that fairness (organisational justice) not only directly influences performance but also enhances the effect of intrinsic motivators such as empathy. It affirms that perceived fairness drives employee motivation and performance, supporting the relevance of equity-based models in public sector HRM.

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