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Reasons for Non-Engagement with the Provision of Emotional Competency Coaching: a Qualitative Study of Irish First Year Undergraduate Students

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Title: Reasons for non-engagement with the provision of emotional competency coaching: A qualitative study of Irish first year undergraduate students

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Abstract:

Very little is known as to why students choose not to participate in emotional intelligence coaching programmes. This qualitative study was undertaken with a sample of Irish undergraduate students (n=20), who chose not to engage with the provision of coaching at a technical college in Dublin. The reasons for non-engagement were explored by means of face-to-face interviews. The four principal reasons for non-engagement were: failing to appreciate the value of coaching; a perceived heavy academic workload; the fact that coaching was not a mandatory component of the academic curriculum; and fear that coaching may reveal weaknesses of character. Based on the findings from this study, it is recommended that institutes of higher education consider providing emotional competency coaching to First Year undergraduate students.

Key Reference Terms: Emotional intelligence, emotional competency, student support, education.

1. Introduction:

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that, although IQ tests measure skills which are important to learning and educational attainment in school, they do not predict general life outcomes (Bar-On 1997, 2006, Cherniss 2000). In today's global economy, employers are increasingly seeking graduates who possess not only academic knowledge, but also appropriate and well developed inter- and intra-personal skills (Cherniss and Goleman 2006, Stanley 2001). Indeed, some researchers claim that, beyond a certain minimal requisite level of cognitive intelligence, emotional intelligence (EI) is a stronger predictor than IQ of life success, business acumen and personal satisfaction (Goleman 2000, Schutte and Malouf 2002). Therefore, many educationalists have come to realise the value of developing students' emotional intelligence in academic settings (Gardner 1993, Kingston 2008, Myers and Tucker 2005).

A number of studies have found a positive relationship between academic attainment and EI (Gumora and Arsenio 2002, Myers and Tucker 2005, Schutte and Malouf 2002, Yost and Tucker 2000). These findings have stimulated the development and examination of educational strategies for the promotion of emotional intelligence and the findings, to date, suggest that emotional intelligence can be improved through the provision of coaching or classroom-based activities (Boyatzis 2008) and that the promotion of emotional competencies can lead to enhanced academic attainment at all levels of education (Boyatzis and Saatcioglu 2008, Côté and Miners 2006, Elias et al 2004). Research has also confirmed that promoting the development of EI can be particularly beneficial for students who may be at risk of drop-out or academic failure (Edwards et al 2007, Izard et al 2001, Kingston 2008, Petrides et al 2004). For example, Edwards et al (2007) argue that the provision of positive personal attention can help to counter some of the disadvantages peculiar to

students who are considered to be 'at risk' of academic failure. This could involve providing encouragement to students, rewarding effort as well as achievement, or simply using students' first names to help them feel at ease. Petrides et al (2004), have argued that engagement with EI development may also be of greater advantage for students who have lower IQ but higher EI scores, as they claim the relationship between EI and IQ may not be directly linear. In other words, students with fewer cognitive resources are more likely to feel stressed which may put them at risk of academic failure; thus, higher levels of emotional resources may help them to cope better.

There is some debate as to the exact relationship between EI and academic performance (Bastian et al 2005, O'Connor and Little 2003). EI is a relatively new field and it is possible that, as further research findings emerge in this area, more refined measurement techniques and methodologies may help to explain any anomalies. Nevertheless, at present, a reasonable body of evidence supports the hypothesis that developing students' EI can lead to increased academic attainment thereby and justifying a continued focus on this topic.

Although there is considerable evidence of a positive association between higher levels of emotional intelligence and academic attainment, no research has been conducted, to date, with students who choose not to avail of coaching in order to ascertain the reasons underlying their decision. This study was undertaken as part of a larger study, to explore the reasons for non-participation in emotional competency coaching in a small group of students who were attending an Irish Third Level institution. The specific objectives of the study were: (1) to profile participants' emotional competencies; (2) to assess whether EI scores differed significantly across subject area; (3) to assess participants' understanding of EI; and (4) to explore reasons for non-engagement with EI coaching. It was hoped that the findings would help to inform the design of interventions or initiatives aimed specifically at encouraging academic engagement and help to combat school drop-out.

2. Method:

Carthy et al (2010) recently conducted a study on the provision of EI coaching to first year undergraduate students (n=304) at a technical college in Dublin. All incoming First Year students were invited to participate in this research and the final participation rate was 41% (304/736). Participants were assessed in the first instance to determine their EI profiles using the Bar-On EQ-i. This measures 5 principal and 15 sub-domains of emotional functioning and emotional reasoning, including areas such as emotional problem solving, stress management, self-regard and reality testing. Following assessment, participants were randomly assigned to either an experimental or control group. Each participant in the experimental group was invited to attend an individual EI coaching session. Coaching involved outlining participants' EI profiles in order to help them to appreciate their emotional strengths and weaknesses; each participant was also given an individualised personal development plan based on their EI profile, detailing exercises and techniques

designed to help them capitalise on strengths and improve on weaknesses. Examples of exercises which were outlined to participants included, keeping reflective emotional diaries, relaxation exercises and learning to recognise patterned behaviour such as negative mindset or unrealistic optimism. At the end of their first semester in First Year, all participants were re-assessed with respect to their EI profiles. In order to assess the effectiveness of the provision of coaching on emotional skills development and academic attainment, grade point averages (GPAs) (as measured by end of semester one examinations), attrition rates and EI profiles of students in the experimental and control groups were then compared. The results indicated that, although the provision of emotional intelligence coaching did not impact GPAs, there were significant increases in EI scores amongst those students who attended for coaching whilst these students were also statistically less likely to withdraw from college. However, the participation rate for this study was relatively low and the drop-out rate was high; only 26% (80/304) of the students who initially had their EI profiles calculated, attended for coaching. Once the experiment had concluded, coaching was offered to students in the control group, who were also still in their First Year of study.

This e study reported here, builds on the findings from that study by targeting those students who did not avail of the opportunity to receive EI coaching. A total of 656 students were invited to participate in this aspect of the research including those who did not participate in the study from the outset (n=432) and those who initially had their EI profiles compiled and subsequently dropped out of the study and did not attend for coaching (n=224). Twenty of these 656 students agreed to participate from a range of disciplines (6 from Business, 6 from Engineering, 7 from Humanities and 1 from Computing). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each student individually. A semi-structured approach was adopted where themes were pre-selected for discussion with participants, based on the findings from the quantitative element of the research outlined above.

An interview schedule was devised to explore four key themes considered important in terms of identifying reasons for nonparticipation. These included: (1) students' understanding of the term 'Emotional Intelligence'; (2) the perceived value of developing EI with respect to educational and career development; (3) reasons for non-engagement with the opportunity to avail of EI coaching; and (4) participants' suggestions as to how engagement with EI coaching might be encouraged. As interviewees had chosen not to avail of coaching, a small incentive in the form of a shopping voucher was offered to all participants to encourage them to take part. All but five of the participants were male, Humanities (four male : three female), Business (four male : two female), Engineering (six male), Computing (one male). The lack of female Engineering or Computing participants reflects the fact that both professions are male dominated and as a result, most students in both subject areas are male. All interviews were transcribed and subjected to a thematic analysis in order to identify and examine each of the key themes and any sub-themes that emerged.

3. Results:

3.1 Theme one: Students' understanding of the term 'Emotional Intelligence'.

This theme explored participants' understanding of the term emotional intelligence in order to ascertain if students chose not to attend for coaching due to a lack of understanding in this respect.

When asked to state their understanding of the term 'emotional intelligence', most participants had no difficulty in so doing and responded quickly and confidently. . Eleven referred directly to at least one of the three principal components that fall under the rubric of emotional intelligence (understanding/managing one's emotions, understanding/managing the emotions of others and dealing with stress/change) and a further six mentioned areas which are somewhat related to the concept of EI, with three participants alluding to 'acting ethically and helping others', 'human rights' and 'body language'. Just three of the 20 participants stated that they were unsure as to the meaning of the term. The interview data reveal that, with respect to the majority of participants, non-participation with coaching was not due to a failure to understand emotional intelligence. However, further analysis revealed that, although most students had no difficulty in defining EI, the manner in which they did so varied by subject area. For example, five of the seven Humanities students who were interviewed, alluded to focusing on the needs of others: *'Maybe like to help the needs of other people'* (Humanities student two) *'Ethical issues, social issues'* (Humanities student three).

These definitions contrasted somewhat with those given by students in all other subject areas who were more likely to define EI from a personal perspective, as shown by the following quotes: *'Like how you are with emotions... whether you'd be cheery or happy or sad or like that.'* (Business student five). *'If I was to sum it up, I would guess it would be personal emotions or form of body language.'* (Engineering student six). These differing perceptions by subject area were interesting and informative, especially with regard to devising and explaining EI interventions to students, as it helps researchers and educationalists to predict some of the reasons why students may choose not to engage. For example, the suggestion that non-Humanities students may not appreciate the interpersonal nature of emotional intelligence, highlights a need to ensure that a full explanation of the value of developing this aspect of EI is provided to them.

Students also differed with respect to the ease with which they discussed this topic. Humanities students tended to be less hesitant than those in other subject areas and a number of students in non-Humanities areas struggled a little to articulate a clear definition of EI: *'Eh, your feelings towards certain things and how emotionally you feel forwards*

certain things, I suppose.' (Business student six). *'Very little understanding now to be honest with you. In my knowledge, to be honest, it'd be something, I assume it's something to do with body language and something to do with you being able to read and interpret people before being able to do something else.'* (Engineering student five).

The above, highlights the significance of carefully explaining both what EI is and why developing emotional competencies may be beneficial to any students who may be involved with EI initiatives delivered in an educational context.

3.2 Theme two: The perceived value of developing emotional intelligence with respect to educational and career development.

This theme aimed to explore the perceived value placed by non-participating students on the development of EI as to was hypothesised that was likely to directly impact on levels of engagement. For the same reason, this theme also explored the extent to which participants believed that employers in their chosen subject area seek emotional intelligence skills in graduates.

Although interviewees were selected on the basis of their non-involvement with the opportunity to avail of EI coaching, all but two stated that incorporating aspects of EI into the third level curriculum would be of value. Although a range of opinions was expressed concerning the exact manner in which students believed EI coaching would be of value to them, the most common aspect of EI that was referred to was, stress management (n=11):

'…EI I believe would have something to do with you being happy with yourself and then being happy makes you work better because there's less stress and less pressure…' (Engineering student five). *'…there's so much book learning and all that to learn and so it would be good not to be as stressed.'* (Business student five). Another participant also referred specifically to improved emotional competency in an academic setting as a communicative tool which might help students to better relate to lecturers: *'If you don't understand a lecturer or a lecturer doesn't understand you, you could improve that and get along with the lecturer.'* (Engineering student two).

When asked to discuss the potential benefits of attempting to improve emotional competencies in an academic context, students focused predominantly on stress management. However, the findings also revealed a general consensus amongst participants that improved emotional intelligence could confer a range of potential advantages in various aspects of their day-to-day lives. This finding is important in terms of suggesting that it might be helpful to incorporate some element of stress awareness/management into any EI intervention designed for First Year students.

When discussing the value of emotional intelligence coaching with respect to career development, participants tended to give relatively domain-specific answers. For example, Computing student one indicated that because much of the work that takes places in the computing industry is relatively solitary (e.g. programming), that computing experts '…*tend to want to work on their own.'*. He continued that there are also times when teamwork is required and that emotional competency coaching may help to promote more healthy interaction with work colleagues. Similarly, Business student four stated that EI would be of value in the Business world *'If you're trying to get new contracts. If you're trying to close a deal'*. Therefore, with respect to encouraging student engagement with coaching initiatives, it may be beneficial to tailor the information that is delivered to particular student cohorts in order to highlight both the generic value of developing EI as well as the potential advantages within specific career areas.

Two students were unsure as to whether introducing EI into the third level curriculum would be of benefit, whilst three mentioned other reasons for doing so. Business student six stated, for example, that although she could see value in attempting to improve emotional competencies, as she believed it is largely genetically determined, it is unlikely that any improvement could easily be made: *'I still think that stress is something that you can deal with or you can't deal with'*. Another participant stated that EI coaching may be of benefit only to those who are interested and ready to engage *'If someone doesn't want to know, you're not going to be able to help them'* (Business student one). Similarly, Engineering student three stated that there is definite value in attempting to improve EI skills for students generically, although when asked if this might be of benefit to him specifically, he stated that he did not believe he required any help in this area: *'No, I'm grand. I move, I keep going. It doesn't matter what the situation is, I'll tramp on anyway.'*

Students may require help to better understand their emotional strengths and weaknesses in order to believe that coaching may be of benefit to them, yet it is only through engagement with the coaching process that such awareness can most effectively be developed. Students may also perceive EI coaching as being of relevance only to those who are experiencing specific stresses or issues in their lives. It may be important, therefore, when conducting EI informational sessions, to highlight to students the generic benefits of improving emotional competencies and to point out that research has found that EI scores can be increased through coaching and that previous research has also shown that EI coaching can lead to long-term improvement in emotional competencies (Boyatzis et al 1995). It may also be important to stress that because tests of EI measure several aspects of emotional intelligence, EI profiles will naturally contain a number of scores, some of which may be higher than others. In other words, everyone has relative strengths and weaknesses and engaging with coaching can help one not only to address weaknesses, but also to capitalise on strengths.

3.3 Theme three: Reasons for non-engagement with the opportunity to avail of EI coaching.
As previously stated, research pertaining to the provision of EI coaching in the educational sector, to date, has not been informed by the perspectives or opinions of non-participating students. This theme attempted to redress this imbalance by allowing such students to voice their opinions and discuss any possible concerns they may have with respect to EI coaching. It is hoped that this information may lead to the development of more student friendly initiatives into the future.

A range of responses was documented here, although the two most frequent reasons for non-engagement articulated by participants, were not having time to engage and not appreciating the value of coaching. Six participants stated that they were simply too busy to engage due to heavy college workloads and several specifically mentioned preparing for exams: *'I would have had a lot of exam work.' (*Business student two) '*I didn't have the time. I would have engaged with it. At the top of my list of priorities at the time was exams, dealing with the exams.'* (Computing student one).

It is important to note that, even though students felt that examination preparation prevented them from availing of coaching, EI coaching was, in fact, offered several weeks prior to the commencement of first semester exams for students in the experimental group and several weeks prior to the commencement of second semester exams for control group paticipants. A sub-theme which emerged from the data, related to participants' appreciation of the value of engaging with the research, even though they felt they did not have sufficient time to do so: '*It's quite interesting to understand and know your intelligence level or your EI level, cos it is important, well I think it's important anyway…I haven't had a spare moment.*' (Business student one).

A number of other students also clearly indicated that their non-participation was due to a strong sense of fear that engagement with emotional competency coaching, or even taking an EI test, might reveal potential flaws or weaknesses. For example, Humanities student four stated that he could not estimate what his level of EI was and also iterated a fear of finding out '*I'm kind of afraid.*'. Business student four stated that she had suffered a bereavement just prior to being invited to take part in this research and was afraid her EI score would be low as a result of this: '*I didn't want to go back, in case it was really low.*'. It appears likely that students may be discouraged from engaging with taking a test of EI in the first instance if they felt that perceived weaknesses or character flaws would be revealed. Thus, when EI initiatives are introduced in an academic setting, there is a need to carefully consider the impact that such initiatives may have, not only on those who choose to participate, but also on those who do not and on those who may drop-out of any such initiative. The mere act of taking a test of EI may, for example, stimulate reflection for students and highlight perceived inadequacies or emotional issues. In some instances, rather than encourage engagement, this may in fact act as a deterrent, particularly when

students believe that a specific emotional or social issue is beyond their power to change. Thus, ensuring that counselling and other relevant supports are available to students is vital in this regard.

Participants in some instances stated that they did not attend for EI coaching as they failed initially to appreciate the importance of focusing on EI development, although as a result of engaging with the research process, they came to realise the value of doing so: '*Knowing now what it does, like what EI is, I probably would have done it, but I didn't know what it was*'. (Business student six). '*It's like at that time I didn't have much knowledge, but now I know I need to do these things because it's important to know myself before I go involve myself with other people.*' (Humanities student two). Therefore, the introduction of some element of discussion during class time on the value of EI may stimulate thought and awareness in this regard and encourage participation in any initiatives that may be introduced for students; this may also help to alleviate any fears about participation.

3.4 Theme four: Introducing emotional intelligence into the third level academic curriculum. The final theme explored participants' thoughts concerning the best means of introducing aspects of emotional intelligence to students. This theme was included in order to ascertain if there were specific aspects of the provision of coaching that may have been off-putting for students and to explore what, if any, changes could potentially be made to encourage participation in the future. As well as discussing the content and means of delivery of potential future EI initiatives, participants' opinions were also sought concerning the best time to introduce emotional intelligence into the third level curriculum.

During the course of the interviews, most participants indicated that they believed EI initiatives should be prioritised within the Third Level academic curriculum and, in fact, seven students reported a belief that EI should be a mandatory aspect of the academic curriculum. Specifically, all but three participants indicated a belief that the development of emotional competencies would have a positive impact on their academic progress. Only two students stated that they were unsure whilst one reported that, although he believed the development of emotional competencies would have a generic benefit in his everyday life, this would only marginally impact upon his academic progress. Students were also quite emphatic in their viewpoints here. For instance, Business student one simply stated that: '*I think it would be very good if it was mandatory.*' This naturally ties in with the comments made above with respect to theme three, whereby students stated in many instances that they did not engage with the quantitative element of the study because it was not compulsory for them to do so: '*I knew I didn't have to do it and so I wouldn't be pushed to do it and to me, I don't think there was much academic reward and I was trying to put my studies ahead and I guess I didn't prioritise it as that vital.*' (Humanities student four). In contrast to those who believed that EI training should be mandatory, one student (engineering student two), stated that EI development should be offered on an optional

basis: *'It should be up to them (students) to decide if they want to do it'*. As with the other themes, several participants mentioned that they did not initially comprehend the importance of focusing on this area: *'I think if it was explained more and we got an idea of what it should have been and how important it was, I think people would have taken it more seriously…'* (Engineering student four).

When questioned as to the optimal time to introduce EI into the academic curriculum, five students did not express an opinion. However, all of the remainder stated that First Year was the best time to do so: *'Really, if you haven't got EI in first year, you're going to really drop out.'* (Business student three).

3.5 Summary of results:
Three principal findings emerged from this research: (1) participants' decision not to avail of EI coaching was not due to a lack of understanding of EI; (2) participants chose not to engage due to a number of factors including time pressures, fear that coaching would expose emotional weaknesses, a lack of appreciation of the potential value of EI coaching and because coaching was not mandatory; and (3) participants believed that it would be beneficial for coaching to be provided for students in their first year of study.

4. Discussion:
Research participants indicated that the principal reasons for non-engagement with EI coaching were time pressures, failure to appreciate the value of focusing on the development of emotional competencies, the fact that emotional skills development is not a mandatory aspect of the academic curriculum and fear that coaching may reveal weaknesses of character. Participants articulated a commonly held belief that employers value emotional competencies and that better stress management could help them to achieve higher grades. However, due to time constraints, they did not engage with the opportunity to receive EI coaching.

These findings suggest that the academic work of students is curriculum- and assessment–driven; that is, when students are busy, they are likely to focus their efforts according to the indicative syllabi for the programmes that they study, as these are the areas that are formally assessed. Where assessment is standardised, for example with respect to state examinations such as the Leaving Certificate, research evidence suggests that this encourages both students and teachers to focus only on aspects of the curriculum that are most likely to be tested/assessed and that this can negatively impact student attainment (Sacks 2000, Volante 2004). With respect to emotional competencies, the findings from the current study indicate that even though EI coaching can be of benefit to students, they tend not to focus on these areas because emotional competencies are not highlighted as being of importance to them and are not formally assessed as part of the official syllabi that they study. Ironically, it seems from this research that students are less likely to engage with

coaching when they have busy study schedules, yet this is exactly when coaching may be of greatest benefit to them. This mirrors results from the quantitative element of the research which found that students who attended for coaching had achieved higher grades at secondary school than students who did not attend for coaching; that is, that students who may have derived most benefit from attending for EI coaching were less likely to do so (Carthy et al 2010). One solution suggested by research participants was a mandatory introduction to emotional intelligence in the first year curriculum to encourage engagement.

4.1 Encouraging the development of emotional competencies – What can be done?

Importantly, students that participated in the qualitative element of this study were incentivised to do so. The cohort of students who were interviewed did not originally participate in the quantitative element of this research, although by participating in the qualitative study, they demonstrated a realisation of the value of focusing on emotional competencies in an academic environment. Whether a stand-alone module is developed and delivered to students, or whether EI is incorporated into the general curriculum, the findings here suggest that the mere provision of coaching can lead to increased awareness amongst students. This research has also highlighted that social desirability may limit participation, as students may believe that participation with EI coaching will reveal emotional weaknesses. Therefore, it is vital where coaching programmes are introduced, students should be alerted to the fact that emotional competencies can be taught and improved and that the value of focusing on such competencies in an academic environment is fully explained to them. It is also likely, in line with previous research, that the provision of coaching may be of particular benefit to at-risk students (Edwards et al 2007, Izard et al 2001) and to students with lower IQ scores (Petrides et al 2004). In this regard, arguably, one of the most useful aspects of research of this kind is that whilst emotional competency profiling draws attention to students' emotional weaknesses, it also highlights their emotional strengths. Thus, Edwards et. al. (2007) argue that, in the past, the emphasis has been on delineating the negative predictors of school related outcomes and therefore: "*Determining which variables 'positively' influence the trajectories of these students' school-related outcomes has important implications for developing successful intervention and prevention programs in all countries and among all cultures.*" (p30). The current study findings, in line with previous research conducted in the United States (Cherniss and Goleman 2006, Stanley 2001), also highlight the importance of explaining to students the value that employers may place on EI skills.

Sixty per cent of the participants in this research stated that they did not believe they could accurately predict their level of emotional competency, which means that many students may be unlikely to know on which competencies they might need to focus in order to improve their EI. On a related point, consideration should also be given for emotional competency coaching to be delivered to all undergraduate students as a mandatory aspect

of the academic curriculum and indeed, this was mentioned by some of the participants themselves. In an Irish context, all nationally approved academic courses must adhere to the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), which is published by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland. The NFQ details the learning outcomes for academic courses and is the entity through which learning achievements are measured. Therefore, a simple means of ensuring that emotional competencies are included in the learning objectives for all national syllabi is to include reference to social and emotional skills in the NFQ. In this regard, Carthy (2011), proposed a suggested amendment to the NFQ to incorporate specific reference to emotional competencies in the learning objectives for all nationally approved syllabi at all levels of educational attainment.

Almost one third of the participants in this study (30%) indicated that one of the principal breasons for non-engagement with EI coaching, was time constraints due to their perceived heavy academic workload. Such matters would need to be taken into account by academic course boards when implementing emotional competency coaching initiatives. Careful consideration should also be given to the manner in which such initiatives might be implemented so that workloads are not increased for students; it is likely that this will necessitate reducing the workload in other areas to create space in the academic curriculum to allow for the inclusion of emotional and social learning.

4.2 Limitations and directions for further research:

No previous research of this kind has been carried out and therefore there is no benchmark against which to compare findings. This was also a small, exploratory study conducted in only one higher education institution and a key limitation, and arguably one that may impact on any study of this kind, was the low level of student participation. Given that the cohort targeted for this study were those who had initially chosen not to participate with the quantitative element of this research, participants were reluctant to engage with this study, particularly from non-Humanities subject areas. Therefore, it is recommended that future research be conducted, both within Ireland and elsewhere, to build on the findings reported here. A further recommendation arising from this study is that future research be conducted specifically with students who are no longer engaged with the educational system. Identifying and assessing their perceptions and views of how their social and emotional skills might be developed, may prove enlightening and beneficial.

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