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A Qualitative Exploration of the Motivations and Expectations of Lecturers Who Sign-up to Participate in an Emotional Intelligence Coaching Programme.

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Abstract.

Research has emphasised the importance of emotional intelligence (EI) in the work of higher education staff. However, little is known about the motivations and expectations of lecturers who decide to participate in EI coaching programmes. As part of a larger study pertaining to the efficacy of EI coaching for Irish higher education lecturers, qualitative data was collected by way of a questionnaire that contained two open-ended questions from all participants who signed up for coaching (N = 40). The findings indicate that the primary motivations for participants to sign-up for coaching were personal development and a desire to support research activities. Participants expected that their participation would give them an opportunity to enhance their self-awareness and learn about EI through their participation in the programme. The participants brought with them an openness to the experience. The findings also highlighted that lecturers had, for the most part, not received any formal training in this area, which suggests that a gap exists in lecturer training in this regard. Based on these findings, it is recommended that further research be conducted to acknowledge the importance of EI in the work of higher education lecturers in Ireland and to assess the motivations and expectations of participants in EI programmes in other contexts. It is also recommended that further research explore the reasons why lecturers may choose not to participate with EI coaching.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence; Expectations; Higher education; Lecturers; Motivations.

1. Introduction.

Recently, there has been increasing interest in the usefulness of EI across all aspects of life, including in work and educational settings. Mayer and Salovey (1990) first attempted to offer a

formal definition of the term EI as “*the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions*” (p. 198). In the intervening years, there has been much debate regarding the concept, which has led to an array of models and theoretical approaches emerging in the literature. The main prevalent distinction lies between the conceptualisation of EI as ability, mixed or trait (e.g. Bar-On, 2006; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Petrides & Furnham, 2000). Although there is overlap with respect to the different conceptualisations, there are also some important discrepancies between them. At its most basic, the ability based model is considered closer to the traditional conceptualisation of cognitive abilities, while the trait approach fits in to the personality hierarchy, whereas the mixed approach arguably adopts a stance that includes a broader range of social skills. There have been attempts to reconcile the differences between the models in the form of integrative models such as the tripartite model proposed by Mikolajczak (2009), and more recently, Drigas and Papoutsi's (2018) nine layer model. Given that EI is a rather new and emerging field, it is perhaps not surprising that it continues to evolve and develop. Although the literature has not reached consensus on EI as a concept, it has moved beyond a singular focus on conceptualising EI and now often tends to focus on the importance and benefit of EI across contexts.

Rather pertinently, there is a plethora of research that shows that it is possible for EI to be improved in numerous contexts (e.g. Hodzic, Scharfen, Ripoll, Holling, & Zenasni, 2017; Kotsou, Mikolajczak, Heeren, Grégoire, & Leys, 2019). EI is also associated with beneficial outcomes in certain contexts and therefore the development of EI for individuals can lead to an enhancement in aspects of their lives, with research often emphasising EI's role in work life. Seminal research has shown that EI has a significant relationship with occupational performance, and that EI might help explain why some leaders thrive and handle stressful situations more capably than others (Bar-On, Handley, & Fund, 2005). Many researchers have investigated the impact of EI in terms of job performance and suggest that EI can be of benefit in a wide variety of occupational settings (e.g. Joseph, Jin, Newman, & O'Boyle, 2015; O'Boyle, Humphry, Pollack, Hawver, & Story, 2011). The importance of EI varies from job to job. Joseph and Newman (2010) suggest that the determining factor in the importance of EI is the emotional labour requirements of the job. This means that jobs that require frequent interpersonal interaction and therefore high emotional labour have a greater need for employees with high EI (Joseph & Newman, 2010). Therefore, in professions that require interpersonal interaction as a fundamental aspect of their job role, such as salespeople, nursing, and teaching, EI is crucial. Darby (2017)

highlighted the high degree of emotional labour required for higher education lecturers in Ireland, suggesting that it is an essential aspect of the job that is often overlooked and tends to go unrewarded. Thus, this makes Irish higher education lecturer's ideal candidates to potentially benefit from an enhancement of their EI.

There has been much research that has looked at the importance of EI in educational contexts. However, often the emphasis is on the students. For example, research has shown that EI is positively related to academic performance (Sánchez-Álvarez, Berrios Martos, & Extremera, 2020). In an Irish context, Phillips (2021) explored postgraduate students' understanding of EI and found that students wanted to learn more about it as they viewed it as important to their future careers. Research has demonstrated that coaching can lead to enhanced EI for higher education students in Ireland (Carthy, Chalmers, Guiry, & Owende, 2022). However, there has been less recognition of the importance of EI or attempts to develop it for teachers or higher education lecturers in Ireland. Corcoran and Tormey (2012) attempted to develop teachers' EI, albeit with a student-teacher population rather than full-time qualified teaching professionals. Although there is evidently a dearth of research that focussed on EI in the context of Irish lecturers, elsewhere there has been some recognition of the importance of EI in the role of lecturers. Bonnici and Aquilina (2019) investigated lecturers' perception of the role of EI in their work in Malta and argued that it is crucial, one reason being that *"the role of the lecturer varies from that of facilitating knowledge to actually helping students self-develop and interact in a group as fully human beings, not just as students studying academic subjects"* (p. 193). In the UK, it has also been recognised that there has been little attention that has focussed on EI with staff in higher education and recommendations have been made to place a greater emphasis on developing and understanding EI in this context (Coleman & Ali, 2022). Meanwhile, research in both Pakistan and Malaysia suggests a positive and significant relationship between EI and teaching effectiveness for higher education lecturers and suggested that developing EI could lead to an enhancement of teaching, while also maximising the relationships between lecturers and students (Asrar-ul-Haq, Anwar, & Hassan, 2017; Hassan, Jani, Som, Hamid, & Azizam, 2015).

Irish higher education lecturers are ideally placed to benefit from EI development, not only because they experience a high degree of emotional labour in their role, as already mentioned, but also because they contend with a high degree of work-related stress (Lawless, McGuinness, Carthy, & McSweeney, 2016; Kenny, 2015). These studies suggested that a major reason for this work-related stress was the excessive workloads and time demands placed upon them.

Thus, this may act as a double edged-sword in terms of Irish lecturer's participating in EI coaching, as although this makes them ideal candidates to benefit from EI development, it also makes them a group that may find it difficult to put aside the time to engage in attempts to develop their EI. Perceived heavy academic workload has been acknowledged in the literature as a reason for non-engagement in EI development programme's in the past, as Carthy, McCann, McGilloway, and McGuinness (2012) found this was a key reason behind Irish student's non-engagement with EI coaching. One could also therefore assume that lecturers' academic workload could be a factor that acts as a barrier to them agreeing to participate in EI development coaching programmes.

An alternative approach to address the issue of recruitment and engagement and the one taken in the current paper, is to focus on the motivations and expectations of participants who do decide to sign-up to participate in EI coaching. This has not been examined previously with respect to higher education lecturers, or in an Irish context generally. Therefore, this study aimed to determine the factors that motivate lecturers to participate in EI coaching programmes and potentially offer avenues for future research to explore.

That this study was situated within a broader study measuring the impact and efficacy of EI coaching for higher education lecturers, presented an advantage with respect to collecting data concerning the motivations and expectations of lecturers who engage with coaching. Blinding was not possible due to it being obvious to both the participant and researcher whether they were in the experimental group and thus would partake in the EI coaching or were in the wait-list control, in which case they would not. The result of this meant that baseline measures, which included the motivations and expectations relevant to this paper, were collected before random allocation of participants. Grant et al. (2018) recommends that when blinding is not possible in social and psychological intervention trials, expectations should be assessed in some way. This is also consistent with Boot, Simons, Stothart, and Stutts (2013), who suggest the use of an active control does not rule out expectation or placebo effects and by extension neither does a wait-list control. Therefore, they suggest that it is necessary to control for expectations as not to do so "*is a fundamental design flaw that potentially undermines any causal inference*" (p. 445). The authors concede that research may not always be able to eliminate differences in expectations between the experimental and control groups, but it should at least try to recognise their impact by "*explicitly assessing expectations*" (p. 449). Therefore, another reason the current paper assesses expectations is to allow for comparison between what later became the experimental and control groups. However, it is worth acknowledging that this was not a way of

equating expectancy biases, particularly as the data for this paper was collected before the group allocation in the larger study, but it did allow for the exploration of potential baseline differences between the groups.

Overall, this paper aims to address this gap in the literature by asking what the motivations and expectations of higher education lecturing staff are when agreeing to participate in EI coaching. It was hoped that by addressing this question, the findings will help to inform the design of programmes and interventions that attempt to enhance EI and to ignite discussion on the importance of EI in the work of higher education lecturers in an Irish context.

2. Methodology.

This study is part of a larger, mixed methods postgraduate study that focusses on assessing the impact and efficacy of EI coaching for higher education lecturers. This larger study was prospectively registered with the ISRCTN (ISRCTN Registry, 2021). What is outlined in this paper is a qualitative aspect of this larger study that focusses on participants' motivations and expectations for participating in the EI coaching programme and as such, the research as a whole. Ethical approval was granted by the higher education institution where the research was being conducted prior to any data collection.

Participants were eligible for enrolment in the study so long as they were an active lecturer at the technological university campus in Ireland where the research was being conducted. In total, there were 40 participants. There were 23 female and 17 male participants, and the mean age of participants was 47 years with a range of 29–62 years. Participants had a mean of 14 years' lecturing experience. Participants came from a broad range of disciplines across the four colleges within the campus where the research was conducted; 13 from the College of Arts & Tourism; 5 from the College of Business; 9 from the College of Engineering & Built Environment; and 13 from the College of Sciences & Health. Participants were aware that they were signing-up to participate in a study that included the provision of an EI coaching programme and that they would be randomised into either a wait-list control or an experimental group. They were made aware that the programme consisted of six sessions, two one-to-one sessions and four group sessions. These were conducted remotely online over a period of eight weeks between March and April 2021.

The data analysed for this paper was collected before the random allocation of participants into a control or experimental group and was collected as part of the baseline measurements from

all eligible participants who agreed to sign-up, regardless of their group allocation. The questionnaire was not anonymous as identifiable information was needed so that potential differences could be explored between those who were later randomised into the control or experimental group. The potential impact that this had on the responses is unknown. Research suggests that when responses are anonymous participants are more likely to reveal socially inappropriate behaviours or beliefs, but it may also distort answers by decreasing participant motivation to answer accurately and instead engage in survey satisficing (Lelkes, Krosnick, Judd, & Park, 2012).

The data was collected by means of two open-ended questions that were included as part of a demographic questionnaire; “*What is your motivation for participating in this study?*” and “*What are your expectations for participating in this study?*”. Data were analysed through thematic analysis, a qualitative analytic method most prominently outlined in Braun and Clarke (2006). The authors have clarified details regarding their approach in more recent publications (e.g. Braun, Clarke, Hayfield, & Terry, 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2020). Thematic analysis is a “*flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data*” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). The specific approach to thematic analysis used in this study is known as reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019). It is important to recognise that within reflexive thematic analysis, themes are understood as “*meaning-based patterns, evident in explicit (semantic) or conceptual (latent) ways as the output of coding*” (Braun et al., 2019, p. 848). In the case of the current research, it was primarily an inductive, semantic and realist approach that was taken, as this was deemed most suitable to answer the research questions. This means that the analysis was primarily data-driven, with themes identified through explicit meanings in the data. The findings are presented in two sections with the first focusing on participants’ motivations and the second on participants’ expectations.

3. Findings.

3.1 Motivations.

The data-set was analysed to allow for the exploration of participant motivations for taking part in the research. Two key themes were evident across the data-set, i) participating for personal development, and ii) support research – help out a fellow researcher.

3.1.1 Theme One: Participating for Personal Development.

A central motivation for participants was the opportunity for self-development and specifically to develop EI skills. By extension, participants wanted their participation to have a positive impact on their relationships across all aspects of daily life, including in work with their colleagues and students, but also in their personal life. This theme is consistent with self-determination theory, a prominent theory in human motivation, as it highlights that participants showed autonomous motivation, meaning they were motivated to participate for their own intrinsic reasons (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomous motivation has previously predicted teacher intentions to participate in relevant training (Goroziadis & Papaioannou, 2014).

In some cases, this motivation was based on the broader context of being interested in the topic, as expressed by one participant who had a *“growing interest in area [sic] of self-development including an interest in finding out more about emotional intelligence”*. Others were interested in developing specific skills related to EI, including stress management as one participant expressed, he wanted to *“deal with stress more effectively”*, while another participant wanted to *“identify why I sometimes react quickly in situations and I would like to identify triggers”*. Some participants were motivated beyond an interest or curiosity in the subject area, as they outlined that they had a self-perceived deficiency in EI, with one stating, *“I feel I lack emotional intelligence”*, while another had this expressed to him, *“Those close to me have suggested that I am not empathetic with others who don't behave rationally.”* The same participant gave an example of how this is impacting his work, *“A student of mine cried recently after feedback and I would like to aim to avoid this.”* Again, this highlights the motivation for personal development due to a perceived lack of competency in the area of EI and the hope that resulting improvements will also be of benefit to students.

Participants frequently expressed that they wished to develop themselves to benefit those around them, particularly students, colleagues and other personal relationships. An example of this was one participant who outlined their motivation for participating as *“becoming a better lecturer, so I can help my students become better, happy, successful humans and professionals”*. This is consistent with Bonnici and Aquilina's (2019) findings that emphasised that lecturers view their role as encompassing more than helping students develop academically but rather helping them develop holistically. This was echoed by another who stated that her management position meant that she could benefit from participating, *“To help me develop my own emotional intelligence as I'm in a management position so deal with people and students*

a lot.” This is an important point to highlight as Coleman and Ali (2022) found that in a higher education setting in the UK, the perceptions of managers’ EI by team members impacted the team members mental health and their motivation, which consequently impacted important aspects of job performance. Other participants who lecture in the areas of management or professional development also recognised this, as one highlighted, *“I am a lecturer in Management and increasingly it is recognised the emotional intelligence is an important trait for a manager to have.”* Finally, motivation to improve relationships commonly crossed over into personal relationships, such as parenting roles, *“As a recently new mother I am more aware of the role emotional intelligence plays in the development and wellbeing of another person.”*

One of the most rounded responses came from a participant who discussed the essence of the theme of personal development. She too provided an example of how EI impacts her work when expressing her motivation to participate,

“To improve my emotional intelligence so I can deal with interpersonal challenges in work and in my personal life. For example, when students are under stress I (as year tutor) are [sic] their point of contact in the programme. I want to respond well but I find it hard to know where the appropriate boundaries are in terms of sympathy and pragmatic solutions. I haven’t had any training on this, I was just given the year tutor role a couple of years ago and I’m not sure I’m doing it well.”

The above was compressed by another who stated, *“I feel I lack emotional intelligence and hope this course can help me interact better with students, colleagues and friends.”* These examples highlight that participants were motivated to participate in search of personal development to benefit their relationships but also because of an interest and/or a perceived deficiency in the area of EI. It also highlights the lack of training lecturers get in this area, yet the expectation placed on them to fulfil multiple roles that require a high degree of emotional labour as previously highlighted by Darby (2017). This highlights the potential value of offering EI coaching programmes to lecturing staff, particularly given the significant level of emotional labour that is required of them.

3.1.2 Theme Two: Support Research – Help out a Fellow Researcher.

The second theme that was evident in the data regarding participants’ motivation was that they wanted to support research, particularly research in their own university. Although this theme was not as prominent in terms of occurrence as the first theme, it is still worthy of

acknowledgement as the researchers adjudged it to be a relevant meaningful pattern in the data. The theme is congruent with Carrera, Brown, Body, and Morello-Frosch's (2018) concept of '*research altruism*' in the sociological literature, which is a common motivation for participating in research. Participants expressed a sense of solidarity and empathy with how it can be difficult to recruit participants for research. One participant who voiced this expressed, "*I know how difficult it is to get participants for your PhD study*", while another wanted "*to support the research at TU Dublin*". Participants could empathise with the researcher trying to recruit participants for research and this acted as a motivating factor in them signing-up to participate. Interestingly, this theme suggests that for some it was a motivation to participate in research broadly rather than necessarily a desire to specifically engage with an EI coaching programme. Perhaps this is unsurprising given the population under study, given that they for the most part would have research experience themselves.

3.2 Expectations.

Thematic analysis conducted on this data-set revealed two main themes: i) learning about themselves and EI, and ii) openness to the experience. Both themes were evident throughout the data-set.

3.2.1 Theme One: Learning About Themselves and EI.

Participants expressed an expectation that they hoped to learn by improving and understanding EI, as well as potentially enhancing their work practices. Some participants mentioned specific areas where they hoped to make improvement, with one outlining that he hoped to learn "*how to become more empathetic towards other people*", while for others it was more general such as expecting to "*learn about emotional intelligence*". Participants were expecting that it was possible for their EI to improve through their participation in the coaching programme. As one participant outlined, she anticipated "*awareness and time to reflect on my own EI, and hopefully coaching to improve it*". The expectation around learning also crossed over into their work practices as they sought enhancement in areas of their professional life. This included areas related to their teaching methods and student interactions as well as in broader aspects of their work, such as relationships with colleagues. One participant encapsulated this theme when outlining that their expectations were to gain a "*greater understanding of concept [sic] of emotional intelligence and how I could use tools/concepts associated with it to assist in bringing about greater career fulfilment*". Similarly, another participant outlined that she expected to

“learn more about what emotional intelligence is, how I and my students could develop it, and how it may be beneficially applied in my own workplace”. This is consistent with Bonnici and Aquilina (2019) who qualitatively investigated lecturers’ perception of the role of EI in their work and suggested that it can be applied beneficially, particularly in helping build relationships and trust with students. Importantly, overall participants brought with them an expectation that engaging with EI coaching would be beneficial and that they could improve their EI skillset.

3.2.2 Theme Two: Openness to the Experience.

The second theme in relation to expectations was around participants’ openness. This was based on participants expressing that they were approaching their participation in an open manner with little expectations besides in some cases, wishing to have a fun and interesting experience. Some participants simply stated *“None”* when asked about their expectations, while others expressed this same line of thinking while giving a little bit more information *“None - I want this to be a joyful and exploratory experience, anything after that will be a bonus.”*

Overall, participants held expectations that they could learn from their participation and were open to the newness of the experience and hoped that it could be enjoyable and interesting for them. As one participant summarised *“I have no expectations actually, I don’t think I have done anything similar before so have an open mind and I’m sure that there will be things to learn from in any case.”* Again, this point highlights that the lecturers, for the most part, had not participated in anything of this sort before.

4. Discussion.

Research participants indicated that they were motivated to participate in the EI coaching programme for personal development while they also exhibited supporting behaviour in wanting to benefit the research community through their participation. With respect to participant expectations, they perceived that they would be able to learn more about themselves and about EI, while also approaching the experience in an open manner. By combining the analysis from both the motivation and expectation data-sets, it is evident that even before commencing the intervention, the research participants were on-board with the process and felt that there could be real benefit to them as individuals but also to those around them. The need for the coaching intervention was also evident as there was a recognised lack of training in this area for lecturers,

yet an acknowledgement that it was important to their roles and to their lives more broadly. This would suggest that there exists a gap at some level in the training of lecturers. This could be filled by the incorporation of a greater emphasis on EI in either, or indeed, both of the following ways: training for lecturers before they start lecturing; or incorporating EI training to a greater extent in the continuing professional development provided. This is consistent with recent international research that has also highlighted the importance of EI in the work of staff in higher education (Bonnici & Aquilina, 2019; Coleman & Ali, 2022). Therefore, these findings support the implementation of some form of coaching or training for lecturers in the area of EI.

Acknowledging the motivations and expectations of participants is also a valuable contribution to the overall study in which this paper was set by considering the recommendations made by Grant et al. (2018) and Boot et al. (2013) to examine motivations and expectations in psychological trials. There were no differences found between the participants who were later randomised to the control or experimental group in relation to their prior motivations or expectations, meaning that there was no baseline imbalance or bias that was apparent that would have needed to be considered when contextualising the results from the larger study.

Arguably both a strength and limitation of this research is that there has been no previous research of this kind that has been conducted and whilst this makes it innovative, it also means there is no basis for direct comparison with other research findings. Another limitation is that by design, the research only assessed the motivations and expectations of lecturers who did sign-up to participate in the research. This meant that the reasons why other lecturers chose not to sign-up went undiscovered. Perhaps future research could consider investigating this to build on the findings of Carthy et al. (2012) that explored this in the context of students. Additionally, it would be worthwhile to compare the motivations and expectations of lecturers who sign-up to EI coaching with those who sign-up for other training programmes. This could help researchers understand how lecturers prioritise training programmes and what value they place on EI learning compared to other training.

Overall, based on the findings in this paper, it is recommended that future research place a greater emphasis on EI for higher education lecturers both in Ireland and abroad. This future research can build on the current paper by bringing with it an awareness of the potential motivational and expectancy factors that participants bring with them to this type of research. Future research can focus on these areas as a way of attracting participants to their research. We also recommend for future research to investigate the motivations and expectations of

participants who participate in EI programmes in other contexts to see how they compare to the findings of this study. Specifically, given that participants were aware that the EI coaching programme in the current study was solely delivered online, it would be revealing to assess whether any differences exist in the motivations and expectations of participants in an online and a face-to-face EI coaching programme. The potentially sensitive subject matter of an EI programme means that motivations and expectations may vary in these differing environments. Similarly, given that the questionnaire in this study was not anonymous, it would be interesting to determine whether any differences exist when participants express their motivations and expectations for signing-up for an EI coaching programme anonymously as opposed to when they are identifiable.

The findings of this study indicate that any intervention focussing on EI development could benefit from explicitly assessing motivations and expectations of participants from the outset. This is because it allows for the results to be better contextualised in relation to participant motivations and expectations. This can be done in the case of the broader study in which this paper is situated, which investigates the impact of EI coaching on higher education lecturers compared with a control group. Although the results from this larger study are yet to be published, this too will offer a greater insight into EI in the context of higher education lecturers in Ireland.

In conclusion, it is necessary for future research to explore the role of EI in the work of higher education lecturers in Ireland in more depth and to further investigate the potential for implementing EI coaching programmes and to assess their impact across various outcomes.

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