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Thinking Outside the Box: Promoting Learning Through Emotional and Social Skills Development

Aiden Carthy

Technological University Dublin, aiden.carthy@tudublin.ie

Sinead McGilloway

National University of Ireland Maynooth, sinead.mcgilloway@nuim.ie

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‘Thinking outside the box’: promoting learning through emotional and social skills development.

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Authors: Aiden Carthy and Sinead McGilloway.

Contact information: Aiden Carthy, Institute of Technology Blanchardstown, PO Box G, Blanchardstown Road North, Dublin 15, Ireland. email: aiden.carthy@itb.ie Phone: 00-353-1-8851117

Abstract:

The European Qualifications Framework provides a useful insight into the kinds of outcomes and abilities that are promoted across the EU. However, beyond arguably vague references to concepts such as ‘integrity’ and ‘autonomy’, this framework makes no reference to the development of students’ social and emotional competencies. Based on initial research findings in an Irish context, and when considered against the backdrop of a convincing literature on the importance of emotional intelligence in academic attainment, there would appear to be considerable scope to modify this framework in order to accommodate more specific reference to the development of emotional and social skills. This paper addresses an important gap in educational practice at Third Level and presents a suggested reformulated version of the EQF that includes reference to social and emotional skills development at all levels of academic attainment. It is hoped that this may help to stimulate new thinking in this area and promote the incorporation of learning outcomes that are more directly relevant to the development of emotional competencies in qualifications frameworks at national level across the EU. However, a need for much further research in this area is indicated.

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

Introduction:

A considerable body of research has identified a strong positive correlation between levels of emotional intelligence and academic attainment (e.g. Low & Nelson, 2004; Duckworth and Seligman, 2005). Previous research has also shown that students with higher levels of emotional intelligence are less likely to drop out of third level education (Parker, Hogan, Eastabrook, Oke and Wood, 2006; Kingston, 2008). These findings have stimulated the development and examination of educational strategies for the promotion of emotional intelligence. The findings, to date, suggest that emotional intelligence can be improved through the provision of coaching or classroom-based activities and that the promotion of emotional competencies can lead to enhanced academic attainment at all levels of education (Durlak and Weissberg, 2005; Boyatzis and Saatchioglou, 2008).

With respect to primary (elementary) school children, Zins, Payton, Weissberg and O’Brien (2007), provide a comprehensive overview of research in this area and list a number of studies which have found positive associations between EI and academic attainment for primary school children. For example, a large-scale meta-analysis (n=270) conducted by Durlak and Weissberg (2005), found that school-based social and emotional learning interventions at secondary/high school level led to a wide range of benefits for students and teachers, including decreased anti-social behaviour and increased motivation. They further found that students who participate in such programmes are more likely to say that they like school and have better attendance records and higher GPAs than peers who do not participate in such programmes.

With respect to higher education, Boyatzis and Saatchioglou (2008) conducted a 20-year review of attempts to embed aspects of emotional competency in the curricula taught to students on an MBA programme in the United States; they concluded that, not only do such efforts impact positively on the development of emotional competencies such as interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, but they also have a knock-on positive impact on the development of cognitive abilities. Research also suggests that academic failure accounts for as little as one fifth of cases of drop-out and that students often discontinue their studies for reasons unrelated to their academic attainment, such as emotional and social pressures (Codjoe and Helms, 2005). In this regard, Kingston (2008)

found an inverse relationship between drop-out rates and coping skills for a sample of students at a teacher training college in the UK. Such findings suggest that working with students at all levels of academic attainment to help them increase their level of emotional intelligence/competence, may be of benefit to them academically and particularly those who are most at risk of 'drop-out'.

This paper is based on the findings from our recent research and contextualised with reference to work undertaken elsewhere. Its aim is to consider how to address the challenge of developing appropriate social and emotional skills in Third Level students and, in particular, to examine how existing qualifications frameworks might be revised to recognise more clearly the fundamental importance of emotional and social skills at Third Level.

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF):

Each individual member country of the European Union (EU) has developed its own national framework of qualifications. However, there is also an overarching framework of educational qualifications that has been developed for use throughout the EU. This European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF) aims to enable the recognition and comparison of learning outcomes across educational curricula throughout the EU by listing the principal learning outcomes that should be achieved by graduates at each stage of their educational attainment (http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/home_en.htm). Notably, no explicit reference is made in these descriptors, or elsewhere in this framework, to the development of emotional competencies.

Non-participation:

Although a wealth of research has examined the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic attainment, the findings suggest that coaching or mentoring programmes are only valuable for participants who avail of opportunities to engage with them. Until recently, no research had been conducted to ascertain the reasons why students may opt not to avail of coaching, or to assess the viewpoints and understanding of emotional intelligence amongst non-participants and, arguably, such students are those that may derive most benefit from the provision of EI coaching. In order to address this limitation, the authors recently conducted two studies at an Institute of Technology (IoT) in Dublin (Carthy, McCann and McGilloway, 2010; Carthy, McCann, McGilloway and McGuinness, 2012).

Our first study (Carthy, McCann and McGilloway, 2010) was a randomised controlled trial involving the provision of EI coaching on a voluntary basis to a sample of First Year undergraduate students ($n = 304$) at the IoT. All participants ($N=304$) had their emotional competencies assessed using the Bar-On EQ-i and were then assigned to either a control ($n=151$) or experimental group ($n=153$). Participants in the experimental group were invited on an individual basis, to attend an emotional intelligence coaching session at which their EI scores were outlined and explained to them and a personalised EI development plan presented to them. Three months after the coaching sessions took place, participants in both the control and experimental groups had their EI re-tested. In order to allow for measurement of any intervention effect, participants in the control group did not receive their EI scores or coaching until after the study had concluded. Although the provision of coaching did not impact grade point averages, it led to significant increases in EI scores. Students who attended for coaching were also statistically less likely to drop out.

The participation rate for study one was low (41%) and there was also a high rate of drop out from the study (74%). A second qualitative study was therefore undertaken with a sample of students ($n = 20$) who chose not to participate in the above study (Carthy, McCann, McGilloway and McGuinness, 2012). A series of semi-structured interviews was conducted to ascertain the reasons why students chose not to avail of coaching. The results indicated that participants articulated four principal reasons for non-engagement: (1) failure to appreciate the value of developing emotional skills in an academic context; (2) time pressures due to a perceived heavy academic workload; (3) fear that engagement with coaching may highlight potential emotional weaknesses; and (4) that engagement with emotional intelligence coaching was not mandatory. It is worth noting that a majority of participants indicated that EI coaching should, in fact, be a mandatory aspect of the academic curriculum.

Implications of the research:

An important question raised by our previous research findings and one that contradicts research undertaken elsewhere (e.g. Boyatzis and Saatcioglu, 2008; Myers and Tucker, 2005), relates to why, in this instance, EI coaching did not impact GPA. This may be explained, at least in part, by the fact that the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), which details the learning outcomes for Irish students at all levels of academic

attainment, makes only scant reference to a small number of elementary emotional and social competencies. Thus, the development of such skills would appear to be under-valued in educational institutions in Ireland. Indeed, the findings from our qualitative study support this assertion. Participants in that study articulated a commonly held belief that employers value emotional competencies and that developing their emotional competencies could help them learn more effectively. However, due to time constraints, these students did not engage with the opportunity to receive EI coaching.

With respect to encouraging engagement with social skills development, the findings from our research suggest that the mandatory provision of social and emotional skills development (or some other incentive such as additional credits) may not only encourage the development of social competencies in Irish students, but may also help to increase academic attainment and reduce attrition rates. Therefore, on the basis of the available research and our, albeit preliminary, findings, we have suggested a reformulated version of the NFQ that made explicit reference to emotional and social skills development at all levels of academic attainment (Carthy, McCann, McGilloway and McGuinness, 2013).

No research has, as yet, been conducted to ascertain the extent to which references to emotional competencies could be expanded and embedded within the EQF. The EQF (European Commission, 2008) provides an overarching framework that identifies and recommends the kinds of learning outcomes that should be included in the learning frameworks employed throughout the EU. By its very nature, it needs to be somewhat generic in order to accommodate comparisons between the various educational curricula that are in use across the EU. The framework provides a basic structure on which each of the individual frameworks of qualifications within each EU country are aligned. Therefore, it offers a useful insight into the kinds of outcomes and abilities that are promoted across the EU. The framework consists of three broad categories within which learning outcomes are listed: knowledge, skills and competence (see Table 1). It is particularly notable, in the context of the findings from our previous research and from elsewhere, that no explicit reference is made in the EQF to the development of emotional or social competencies beyond the use of, arguably vague references, to concepts such as ‘responsibility’, ‘autonomy’ and ‘integrity’.

Table 1: The European Qualifications Framework Learning Outcomes Grid.

	KNOWLEDGE	SKILLS	COMPETENCE
Level One	Basic general knowledge.	Basic skills required to carry out simple tasks.	Work or study under direct supervision in a structured context.
Level Two	Basic factual knowledge of a field of work or study.	Basic cognitive and practical skills required to use relevant information in order to carry out tasks and to solve routine problems using simple rules and tools.	Work or study under supervision with some autonomy.
Level Three	Knowledge of facts, principles, processes, and general concepts in a field of work or study.	A range of cognitive and practical skills required to accomplish tasks and solve problems by selecting and applying basic methods, tools, materials and information.	Take responsibility for completion of tasks in work or study. Adapt own behaviour to circumstances in solving problems.
Level Four	Factual and theoretical knowledge in broad contexts within a field of work or study.	A range of cognitive and practice skills required to generate solutions to specific problems in a field of work or study.	Exercise self-management within the guidelines of work or study contexts that are usually predictable, but are subject to change. Supervise the routine work of others, taking some responsibility for the evaluation and improvement of work or study.
Level Five	Comprehensive, specialised, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field of study and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge.	A comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems.	Exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change. Review and develop performance of self and others.
Level Six	Advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles.	Advanced skills demonstrating mastery and innovation, required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialised field of study.	Manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts. Take responsibility for contributing to professional knowledge and practice and/or for reviewing the strategic performance of

			teams.
Level Seven	Highly specialised knowledge, some of which is at the forefront of knowledge in a field of work or study, as the basis for original thinking and/or research. Critical awareness of knowledge issues in a field of study and at the interface between different fields.	Specialised problem-solving skills required in research and/or innovation in order to develop new knowledge and procedures and to integrate knowledge from different fields.	Manage or transform work or study contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches. Take responsibility for contributing to professional knowledge and practice and/or for reviewing the strategic performance of teams.
Level Eight	Knowledge at the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study and at the interface between fields.	The most advanced and specialised skills and techniques, including synthesis and evaluation, required to solve critical problems in research and/or innovation and to extend or redefine existing knowledge or professional practice.	Demonstrate substantial authority, innovation, autonomy, scholarly and professional integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes at the forefront of work or study contexts including research.

A suggested reworking of the EQF is proposed here (see Table 2) which incorporates specific reference to emotional and social skills development vis-à-vis the learning objectives at all levels of educational attainment. The proposed revised learning outcomes grid expands the number of categories from three to four and the additional ‘insight’ category is designed to support the development of students’ inter and intra-personal skills. Although each of the categories within the learning outcomes grid, measures specific capacities, they are not designed to be mutually exclusive and learning in one domain will naturally impact learning in others. Therefore, some degree of overlap between categories is to be expected. For example, within the ‘competence’ category, the level 5 learning outcome includes the ability to ‘*Exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change.*’; this requires social interaction, thereby necessitating a required level of social skill.

The incorporation of emotional and social skills development in academic curricula is not without its challenges. For example, one of the most fundamental difficulties which educationalists encounter, lies in clarifying what exactly education is and what it should entail. In this regard, Sharp, Ward and Hankin (2006) consider whether formal education should focus solely on the development of cognitive abilities, or encourage the development of democratic thought, morality or self-awareness and if so, to what extent? Such areas are incorporated into formal education programmes across Europe. However, the extent to which this occurs, varies from one country to the next. A detailed discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper, but an awareness of this debate is necessary for researchers in this area, as educational systems vary across the EU and this will naturally impact on the level and ease with which EI may be incorporated into any given curriculum. The effective implementation of the changes proposed here also require careful consideration of logistical and financial factors. For example, some (limited) staff training may be necessary in certain instances and, therefore, the resource implications of this would require

Notwithstanding, the infusion of emotional and social skills into academic curricula could lead to many benefits for students through the promotion of healthy social interactions and effective stress management, whilst also benefiting both students and educationalists by increasing student engagement and reducing attrition rates. Employers are also increasingly seeking graduates who possess not only academic, but also social competencies, as part of an increasing range of desirable graduate attributes. Indeed, previous research has shown that higher levels of emotional intelligence tend to convey advantages across a range of organisational settings (Cherniss, 2000; Cherniss and Goleman, 2006; Stanley, 2001). Therefore, promoting the development of students’ emotional competencies could also benefit employers by ensuring that graduates possess the kinds of diverse skills which have been linked to, amongst other things, increased productivity (Cherniss and Goleman, 2006).

Table 2: Proposed additional category for inclusion in the EQF.

	Insight
Level One	Begin to exercise emotional self-awareness of self and others.
Level Two	Demonstrate consistency of self-understanding and emotional behaviour. Assume responsibility for the exercising of impulse control.
Level Three	Demonstrate the capacity to develop and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships. Effectively communicate ones emotional state to peers or colleagues.
Level Four	Express an internalised personal worldview. Work cooperatively, considerately and constructively in social groups.
Level Five	Display the capacity to adjust emotional responses to changing situations and conditions.
Level Six	Recognise and respond appropriately to symptoms of mental stress.
Level Seven	Display emotional resiliency and the ability to take preventative measures to minimise potential future stress.
Level Eight	Lead action to promote healthy intrapersonal development in professional contexts. Scrutinise and reflect on social norms and lead action to change them.

Conclusion

Research evidence, to date, suggests that promoting effective social and emotional development in students can positively impact academic attainment. The working model proposed here is intended to stimulate debate and to provide an important first step towards identifying a robust means of promoting crucial social skills development in third level institutions across the EU. The research on which this paper is based, represents an important addition to the international literature whilst also providing a strong foundation for further more large-scale research designed to examine the practical implementation of social skills development on an international basis. Arguably, a proposed reformulated version of the EQF would be helpful in ensuring that learning outcomes pertaining to the development of social competencies are included in qualifications frameworks at national level across the EU. It is hoped that this, in turn, will positively impact learning and attrition rates for students at all levels of academic attainment.

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