



2nd International Conference on Higher Education Advances, HEAd'16, 21-23 June 2016,
València, Spain

Emotional intelligence and graduates – employers' perspectives

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Abstract

Research has demonstrated that employers favour graduates who possess higher levels of emotional intelligence. Many initiatives to increase students' levels of EI have involved 'whole school' approaches, whereby generic EI skills programmes are delivered to all students in a third level institute. This paper details an initial survey of employers' (n = 500) opinions on the importance and current level of graduates' social and emotional competencies. The survey was completed across five sectors: engineering, IT/computing, professional services (including accounting, business, finance, HR, law, retail), science (including pharmaceutical and life), and social science which are identified growth industries in Ireland. It sought to explore employers' perspectives to determine if there are differences in terms of social and emotional competency requirements among graduates, across different employment sectors. Preliminary survey findings demonstrated a major disparity between the degree of importance attributed by employers to emotional intelligence competencies and the current levels displayed by graduate employees. This potentially represents a significant opportunity to enable students to develop those specific skills most favoured by employers in their chosen career areas, thereby possibly increasing their employability and success at work.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of HEAd'16

Keywords: emotional intelligence; graduates; education; employability

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1. Introduction

Theorists claim that in the 20th century the “driving force of intelligence” was IQ but for the 21st century it will be emotional intelligence (Zeidner, Matthews and Roberts, 2004, p. 379). Emotional intelligence has been defined as “a set of skills that enables us to make our way in a complex world - the personal, social and survival aspects of overall intelligence, the elusive common sense and sensitivity that are essential to effective daily functioning” (Stein and Book 2011, p. 14). To date, generic EI skills programmes have been delivered to all students in a given university with no attempt being made to develop a range of programmes explicitly aimed at targeting specific populations of students, for example, final year students. This potentially represents a significant gap in skills development among graduates. The current paper summarises findings from an employer survey which forms part of phase one of a larger research project aimed at addressing this skills gap through the design and delivery of a range of discipline specific modules to final year students, aimed at increasing particular emotional and social skills associated with employability. This may offer a solution to the challenge of embedding graduate attribute development in the curricula offered to students. Preliminary findings from this survey will be presented, however, background information on emotional intelligence will also first be discussed.

2. Literature Review

2.1. What is emotional intelligence?

In recent decades, interest in examining emotional intelligence in the workplace has become more prominent. Previous research confirms that higher levels of EI are positively correlated with increased career success (Cherniss, 2000; Lopes, Kadis, Grewal, Gall and Salovey 2006) and that although employers seek graduates with higher levels of emotional intelligence, they frequently believe that students lack such abilities (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2008). EI has been found to be the basis for an extensive range of critical personal and social competencies required in the workplace, for example, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management skills, with one study finding that it accounts for 58% of job performance across all sectors of employment (Bradberry and Greaves, 2009). There are three commonly accepted models of emotional intelligence: trait, ability and mixed (Caruso, 2008 in Emmerling, Shanwal and Mandal). Trait emotional intelligence is at the lower end of personality hierarchies and according to Petrides (2010) consists of 15 facets, which are subsumed into four broad areas: well-being, self-control, emotionality and sociability. The Ability model belongs in the domain of emotion related cognitive ability (Petrides, 2011). The Bar-On mixed model of emotional intelligence - which is the focus of this research - assumes EI to consist of both trait and ability related constructs and presents five broad areas of functioning which are deemed related to life success: intrapersonal skills, interpersonal skills, adaptability skills, stress management skills and general mood. The Bar-On model has been instrumental in developing the Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQ-i) which was revised in 2011 to the EQ-i 2.0 (Multi-Health Systems Inc), and adopts a self report means of measuring social and emotional behaviour (Bar-On, 2006).

2.2. Emotional Intelligence, Graduate Attributes and Employability

Politics and diversity have led to many higher education institutions becoming more *corporate* resulting in the need for them to develop students' hard and soft skills, enhance competencies, knowledge, dispositions, attitudes and beliefs in order that graduates can participate in a “global knowledge-based economy” (Chan, Brown and Ludlow, 2014, p. 2). However, McArthur 2011 (p. 737) argues that there is now a “trend” in higher education to “re-design” and “re-brand” themselves in order to meet the demands of governments who view them as serving purely an economic role. Often, the transition phase from higher education to work life does not follow a clear and well-defined path, often resulting in it being a challenging and problematic time for graduates as they often feel ill-prepared for the challenges and reality of employment (Dahlgren, Solbrette, Karseth and Nyström 2014 in Billett, Harteis and Gruber). This has led to the concept of graduate attributes which Barrie 2009 states are: (i) the important elements that students should learn, (ii) learning outcomes of a university education, (iii) graduates as contributors to society both as citizens and as workers and, (iv) graduates who will act as agents of social change in a dynamic and

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