

# ***A Qualitative Exploration of Postgraduate Students' Understanding of Emotional Intelligence and its Potential Impact on their Future Career Development.***

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## **Abstract.**

The purpose of this article is twofold: firstly, it will explore the degree of understanding post graduate business school students have of the topic of emotional intelligence (EI); and secondly, it will consider the extent to which they believe EI will impact their future career progression. The study was conducted at a leading Irish university. Five students were selected to take part in interviews utilising an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The findings indicated the following: 1) respondents had some degree of understanding of EI but they felt a need to learn more, and 2) the participants saw EI as important for their future careers. This study contributes to the academic discourse as there is no qualitative research on EI at third level in Irish institutions.

**Keywords:** Career Development; Emotional Intelligence; Postgraduate Studies; Third-level Education

## **1. Introduction.**

There is increasing interest in understanding how EI can impact the development of college students (Moeller et al., 2020). Research indicates that training college students in emotional intelligence (EI) can have a significant impact on their general well-being and career progression (MacCann et al., 2020). Morales-Rodríguez & Pérez-Mármol (2019, p.7) also support this view: *“training programs of emotional intelligence may help university students to cope with part of the challenges they encounter in health science disciplines as well as increasing general self-efficacy in coping with stress”*. Furthermore, Plaude & Raščevska (2011) argue those with higher EI are better equipped at managing themselves when unemployed, which is precisely the

position students are in when they graduate. The purpose of this paper is to attempt to advance this process by examining EI with regard to post-graduate level business students at a leading Irish university who are soon to begin their career journey. The research involved interviewing 5 students who were selected to take part in this study after attending a one-hour presentation delivered by the author on the topic of EI. An analysis of the interviews was done via an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) which recommends examining a small number of participants (1-15). The results of the interviews identified 2 core themes as follows: 1) respondents had some degree of understanding of EI but they felt a need to learn more, and 2) the participants see EI as important for their future careers. This study contributes to the academic discourse as there is currently limited research (Guiry & Carthy, 2018; Lawless, McGuinness, Carthy & McSweeney, 2018) on EI at third level Irish institutions.

The participants interviewed for this paper are studying at post graduate level and within the discipline of business. A master's programme is typically one year in duration with students expecting to secure employment offers either prior to, or immediately after graduation. Research indicates that EI is linked to career progression, Rode et al., (2017) conducted a 12 year time lag study of graduates as they progressed through the early phases of their career. Their research showed that EI was an indicator of career success which puts an onus on third level institutions in Ireland to consider introducing training modules that extend beyond purely academic subject area content (Rode et al., 2017). Employers hiring graduates with little to no experience must feel confident the candidate they select will have the ability to learn quickly in a pressurised environment: "*when trainees manage their own emotions at work they stay more energetic, which ultimately helps them to become better active learners.*" (Pekaar et al., 2018, p.149). Employers are putting significant emphasis on EI during the interview stage, which reflects research demonstrating its relevance for organisational performance (Cartwright & Pappas, 2008; Wong & Law, 2002; Shil & Susanto, 2010). This in turn indicates that educational institutions should consider methods for coaching students on EI to better prepare them for the demands of the workplace.

## **2. Defining, Measuring and Critiquing EI.**

EI is defined as the ability to understand and empathise with the thoughts and feelings of others (Salovey & Mayer, 1990), or: "*the appraisal and expression of emotions, assimilation of emotions in thoughts, understanding emotion, and the regulation and management of emotions*"

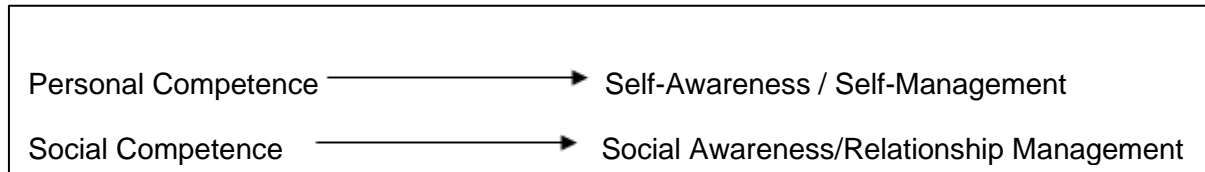
(Zeidner, Matthews & Roberts, 2004b, p. 372). The main models of EI in the existing literature include: the multifactor EI scale (MEIS) (Mayer, Caruso & Salovey, 1999); the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso EI test (MSCEIT) (Mayer, Salovey & Caruso, 2000); the emotional competency inventory (ECI) (Goleman, 1998); the emotional-quotient inventory (EQ-I) (Bar-On, 1997); the EI quotient (EIQ) (Dulewicz & Higgs, 2000); the EI test (SREIT) (Schutte et al., 1998); the Swinburne EI test (SUEIT-Genos EI Assessment) (Palmer & Stough, 2001); the trait meta mood scale (TMMS) (Salovey et al., 1995); and the workgroup EI profile (WEIP) (Jordan et al., 2002). While differences exist amongst the models, there is, however, agreement on certain key components, which is the understanding of oneself and others, and managing oneself and others (Goleman, 1998; Boyatzis, Goleman & Rhee 2000).

For the purposes of this study the model chosen was designed by Bradbury and Greaves (2009) who determined that 90% of top performers in business had high EI scores. Their model was selected on the basis of their book 'Emotional Intelligence 2.0' (2009) as it outlines numerous practical exercises for developing emotional intelligence which could be applied during the course of a third level degree programme. They group EI under 2 sections, namely, personal competence, which relates to an individual's ability to remain aware of emotions and to manage their behaviour, and the second is social competence which refers to an individual's awareness of other people, and the extent to which they can effectively manage relationships with others. Research shows that personal and social competencies can be developed and can positively impact an individual's mental and physical health (Yoder, 2015). Taylor's University (n.d.) runs a life skills module for all first-year students, the course specifically focuses on the development of personal and social competencies, it is the first university to provide such a course on emotional intelligence. Students are taught to develop self-awareness via mindfulness and journaling as well as undertaking personality assessments.

Personal competence is broken into two sub sections of self-awareness and self-management. Self-awareness relates to an individual's ability to be perceive their own emotions; it is an ability to make sense of emotions. From self-awareness stems self-management which relates to how an individual acts as a consequence of their self-awareness. The higher an individual's self-awareness the better able they are to manage their response to external stimuli. Social competence is made up of social awareness and relationship management. Social awareness refers to an individual's ability to detect the emotions of others, and relationship management

relates to how an individual uses their social awareness to act out in a suitable fashion.

**Figure 1: Bradberry and Greaves Model of Emotional Intelligence (2009)**



While research indicates that EI can be conceptualised and measured (Schutte et al., 2002; Petrides, 2011), it is not without its critics. Zeidner, Matthews & Roberts (2004a) argue that a thorough examination of existing literature suggests little in the way of clear evidence of the existence of EI. Robertson & Smith (2001) posit that there is no satisfactory proof of the existence of EI in the academic literature. EI is not an easily definable concept, there are no examples we can use to illustrate EI: *“the notion that there is some archetypal ‘emotionally intelligent’ individual who can be identified by proprietary tests and whom all leaders, managers, and employees should strive to emulate in order to succeed is, in all likelihood, a myth”* (Petrides, 2011, p. 661). Clarke (2006) argues EI training programmes offer nothing new beyond existing training programmes on the development of soft skills. Indeed, the participants of this study often seemed to conflate EI with soft skills. The author of this paper sees merit in Clarke’s (2006) argument that the demarcation between EI and soft skills is not clear.

### 3. EI and Career Theory.

There is a lack of research examining the relationship between emotional intelligence (EI) and career theory (Rode et al., 2017, p.77). As discussed, scholars argue EI has an important role to play in improved career decision making, *“EI positively relates to less dysfunctional career thinking, greater career decision-making, self-efficacy, a higher level of willingness to explore a variety of career preferences”* (Puffer, 2011, p.132). As EI refers to personal and social competence (Bradbury and Greaves, 2019) we can assess the relevance of EI to workplace settings and to theories based on career management. Krumboltz (1996) proposed that we arrive at self-observed generalisations about ourselves; an accurate self-appraisal will depend on the emotional stability of the individual. Savickas (2013) described a constructionist approach that examines how individuals bring meaning to their life choices via the use of narratives (the use of personal stories can be positive or negative). A capacity to manage one’s own emotions will in turn impact the content of the stories we tell ourselves. Cochran (1992) hypothesised that

a career is a vehicle through which an individual expresses a view of themselves as if playing a character in a play. An individual with positive self-regard is more likely to pursue ambitious goals. Higher levels of EI should feed into a desire to achieve challenging goals thereby creating the perception of a 'successful character'. Robertson (2013) contends that effective third level career counselling can provide general emotional support in addition to assisting clients in challenging negative thought processes. A client's perception of their educational and career progression can contribute to a healthy emotional state and an improved self-concept.

## **4. Research Methodology.**

In order to investigate EI, students across all post-graduate studies within a leading Irish business school were invited to attend a one-hour presentation by the author on EI. The reason for this initial step was to identify potential participants for the study and to provide some context to the topic. A total of 19 students attended the presentation. There was a brief introduction of the two competencies of EI (Bradbury & Greaves, 2009) namely, personal and social competence. A full description of the intended research process was presented, and an explanation as to why the study was being undertaken. The author acknowledges that presenting to potential participants on the topic of EI could create conditions whereby the participants bring certain bias to the interviews that follow. It should be stated that the presentation itself was purely a high-level view of emotional intelligence to provide a degree of context to participants. EI is a much newer term than IQ and is harder to define, and hence the author determined an initial introduction to the topic had merit.

### **4.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.**

As a result of the presentation, 5 students volunteered to take part in the study. The five selected post-graduate business students commenced their studies in September 2019. An in-depth interview lasting 45 minutes to one hour was conducted utilising an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) which would facilitate the exploration of the 'lived' experiences of the students (Smith, Flower & Larkin, 2009). A qualitative approach was selected owing to the fact that existing studies exploring EI are predominantly quantitative (Mansel & Einion, 2019). The interviews were unstructured to facilitate the open flow of conversation. IPA also complements a purposive sampling approach as the selected participants for this study shared similar backgrounds.

The typical questions asked were as follows:-

- Can you describe/define EI?
- How relevant do you think EI is to your career development?
- Were you given enough training on EI during your under-graduate studies?
- Are you aware of the demand by employers for EI?
- Will you continue to develop your EI skills post-graduation?

IPA originates from the work of philosopher Edmund Husserl and provides a platform to facilitate a deep understanding of an individual's perception of an experience and what meaning they ascribe to that experience (Mansel & Einion, 2019). It is utilised to explore information as it arises without application of preconceived theories and encourages open dialogue, which might lead to new insights or data which can be applied retrospectively to existing theories. IPA proposes a small sample size typically ranging from 1 to 15 with the interpretation of data conducted by one researcher only (Mansel & Einion, 2019). The author acknowledges that data analysis via the IPA framework will result in outcomes that will be co-constructed between interviewer and interviewee as the IPA framework is a subjective process (Audet & Everall, 2010). To try to moderate the impact of co-construction, it is important to use as little prompting as possible: "*you are attempting to get as close as possible to what your respondent thinks about the topic, without being led too much by your questions.*" (Smith & Osborn, 2008: p.61).

#### **4.2 Ethical Considerations.**

From an ethical standpoint, the purpose of the research was made clear to each participant, and access to recordings and notes taken by the researcher was also provided. Each participant was fully briefed on the nature and purpose of the research to align with ethical guidelines (Greenwood, 2016). The confidentiality of each participant was assured and is reflected in the paper accordingly.

#### **4.3 Participant Backgrounds.**

The students are of mixed nationalities. The age bracket for all 5 students ranged from 20 – 29, 3 of the students were female and 2 were male.

#### 4.4 Analysis of the Interviews.

The interviews were conducted during the month of March 2020 and took place via online methods due to the limitations on movement from the Covid-19 pandemic. The objective of the interviews was to explore students' attitudes and opinions towards EI. The interviews were semi-structured and took between 45 minutes to 1 hour and were digitally recorded. The interviews were coded for themes which started with an initial review of the text with notes taken during the process. A more in-depth reading of each interview was then undertaken to further examine emerging themes. The text was then mapped to the model proposed by Bradbury and Greaves (2009) which will be discussed. As previously discussed, this process led to the identification of 2 primary themes common across all 5 interviews as follows: 1) respondents had some degree of understanding of EI but they felt a need to learn more, and 2) the participants see EI as important for their future careers. Both themes will now be explored in greater detail with reference to direct quotes from the participants. This will then be followed by a general discussion and recommendations for future research.

#### 4.5 No Previous Training on EI.

In hindsight, the participants suggested that EI skills they developed occurred via group assignments, or classes on improvisation, and nonverbal communication. However, they stated that they did not receive any direct training on EI. Examples of comments are as follows:

**Student 2:**

*"I did 2 years of my undergraduate in France and I never heard the term EI even in French and um, even though it was like a bachelor that is supposed to be kind of towards like doing something else then just hard skills so we had classes that were out there, like improv, photography and stuff like that but nothing towards like emotions, and then I did one year in Asia where I didn't have anything that was EI, it was all hard skills."*

**Student 3:**

*"Colleges need to look at this more, I actually had my undergrad module that I chose um, it was nonverbal communication and I really loved it, it was really helpful for the EI part, but then again it was something I chose so many other students didn't have this class and I feel it's something that's really needed."*

**Student 4:**

*“Absolutely nothing, and I genuinely think there is a huge gap in this in terms of the education system.... it’s an unfortunate miss.”*

**Student 5:**

*“It has always been out there but no one has considered it as something that companies should take into consideration when hiring someone and nowadays, hard skills, we can learn those everywhere at universities of course but then we have tons and tons of resources, books, online tutorials and stuff however, soft skills, no one prepares you, no one teaches you.”*

Based on the above comments by the students, they did not appear to receive direct training on EI which supports research by numerous scholars (Zeidner, Matthews & Roberts, 2004b; MacCann et al., 2020; Rode et al., 2017). Research shows it would have been helpful if participants had been actively informed and trained on the principles of EI prior to commencing their undergraduate studies: *“given that teaching, learning and leading are emotional practices, it is important to engage with the emotional arena in education”* (Hargreaves, 2000: 813). The participants suggested this would have enabled them to take a more purposeful approach to group work and presentations. As things stand there appears to be a lack of a coordinated effort to teach EI in a purposeful manner (Majeski et al., 2017): for example, it might be helpful to coach students on how best to approach developing their interpersonal skills when engaged in group work to get the most from the experience. In consideration of the model proposed by Bradberry and Greaves (2009) it is clear from the participant’s responses that both dimensions of personal and social competencies are not receiving active training. Bradberry and Greaves (2009) propose numerous exercises that can be utilised to develop emotional intelligence. A module imbedded within a degree which draws on these exercises, and similar to the process developed by Taylor’s university, might well be of benefit to students studying in Ireland.

**4.6 The Importance of EI to Career Progression.**

While the participants in this study might not have a full understanding of EI, they nonetheless were aware of the importance employers were putting on the soft skills associated with EI. They came to these conclusions as a result of attending interviews for graduate schemes, attending career fairs, and employer presentations set up by the career service within the university. Some



of the comments by the participants acknowledging the importance of EI to career progression are as follows:

**Student 1:**

*"I would say that soft skills are very important, this is something you hear everywhere, every recruiter will tell you, soft skills, and are you volunteering, but they never categorise it in terms of EI, it's all imbedded in this term soft skills."*

**Student 2:**

*"I had no idea how much of a focus they (employers) were gonna put on actually learning to get to know you and your emotional skills and stuff, um but after talking with you a bunch of times and during so much research on websites you really get a grasp of how important it is to them (employers) without it, I dunno, if I hadn't done the research I would have just thought they were gonna ask me about what I learnt in school (college)."*

**Student 3:**

*"I feel that it's (EI) really needed in the company, like just listen to others and be able to understand what they are truly like, telling you and not telling you, like, you have to know how to interact with people. I don't get that we didn't even have class on this before."*

**Student 4:**

*"..... to have a level of emotional intelligence whereby you can just be like, empathetic. That's what really helps you climb the ladder into managerial roles, or supervisor roles, at least in my opinion. I think nowadays its far less likely that you will see someone climb that ladder if they are just good at those skills, and not emotionally intelligent"*

The emphasis on EI by employers is understandable given the research. McPhail (2003, p. 630) argues that emotions must be given greater emphasis in the process of making decisions: *"conventional dichotomy between reason and emotion cannot be sustained under close analysis and that contrary to the prevailing view, emotions are central in all rational decision-making processes"*. Goleman (1995, p.105) argues: *"market forces that are reshaping our work life are putting an unprecedented premium on emotional intelligence for on-the-job success"*. Returning to Bradberry & Greaves (2009) and their finding that 90% of top performers in

business had high EI scores, it is potentially a missed opportunity that students at Irish educational institutions are not receiving active training in EI to improve their career prospects.

## 5. Discussion.

The respondents appeared to appreciate the two-step process of EI requiring the development of personal and social competence (Bradbury & Greaves, 2019). In particular, the social component of EI resonated most with the participants, they appreciated that EI could be leveraged to improve relationships with others. The students wanted a better understanding of EI; they knew instinctively that EI was something they needed to improve their career prospects and they wanted practical training on the concept. It is proposed here that Irish education bodies should consider methods by which EI can be taught in a practical fashion so that students can see how it applies in real world situations, which in turn will benefit their careers (Knowles, 2012). It was apparent that each participant felt a degree of concern regarding their perceived lack of preparedness for the workplace in relation to EI. They had experienced first-hand the importance employers put on EI. The respondents indicated that their EI skills could have been developed in a more direct manner. They would have preferred proactive training in the topic prior to undertaking tasks such as group work which is designed to build soft skills. By undertaking training beforehand, the participants indicated that they could then develop their EI ability in a more conscious fashion. They also seemed to lament the 'missed opportunity' that they could have had if EI had been presented to them at an earlier stage in their studies. The students were only introduced to the topic for the first time during their postgraduate studies by this researcher in a one-hour presentation. In retrospect, the respondents would have appreciated the opportunity to have taken training in EI as early as their induction week of their undergraduate programme, coupled with regular workshops during their studies to maintain EI training momentum. This would have facilitated the participants in proactively practicing their EI skills via group assignments (Social Competency EI), and in practicing their relationship to pressures associated with numerous assignment deadlines (Personal Competency EI). As research indicates, EI is a skill that is developed via repetition, therefore it is critical students are provided with enough opportunity to take on this challenge. The finding of this study supports the observations from other scholars (Rode et al., 2017, MacCann et al., 2020, Pérez-Mármol, 2020) that EI should be introduced at third level, if not earlier.

## 6. Conclusion.

We need to investigate further the potential for implementing training programmes on EI for undergraduate and postgraduate students in an Irish educational context to assist them in making better career decisions which in turn will promote better mental health (Robertson, 2013). Research demonstrates that people with high levels of EI are better equipped to build a successful career via the fostering of strong relationships with co-workers, while also generally experiencing better health (Cooper, 1997). The emotional component involved in building a career is overlooked at secondary and tertiary level education, instead it is reduced to a cognitive process (Young et al., 1997). Researchers have called for a major overhaul of the education system in which EI is made a central focus (Goleman, 1995). EI in career decision making appears to predict motivation to achieve in life (Magnano, Craparo & Paolillo, 2016), yet the research conducted here indicates we are failing to teach the next generation effective methods to foster this motivation.

## 7. Recommendations for Future Studies.

As this study utilised an interpretative phenomenological approach, a study involving a larger data set would be welcomed to determine if the thoughts shared by the respondents for this paper are shared across a larger pool of students. It would be beneficial to engage in a longitudinal study which begins by training students on EI at the beginning of a third level programme and tracking their subsequent progression throughout the duration of their primary studies here in Ireland. Finally, it would be interesting to explore how a typical student studying in Ireland would rank EI skills with respect to their own discipline competencies.

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