

**Director of the National Research Centre for Psychology, Education and Emotional Intelligence outlines
a vision for creating emotionally intelligent colleges**

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Abstract

In recent decades there has been an increase in the role of formal education in empowering students' social and emotional development. A wealth of research evidence suggests that doing so can yield tangible benefits for students and educators including increased student engagement and decreased levels of drop-out. Until recently, very little research had been conducted in an Irish context in this regard. However, Dr Aiden Carthy has been working to redress this imbalance and he has been actively researching and publishing in this field for the past number of years. Dr Carthy directs the National Research Centre for Psychology, Education and Emotional Intelligence which is based at the Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown. His latest publication, 'The Emotionally Intelligent College', was released by Cambridge Scholars Publishing in 2016 and provides a synopsis of his work to date, a synthesis of current theories in the field of emotional intelligence and a tool-kit of simple exercises for use in third level educational settings, that are designed to help students develop a range of key aspects of emotional intelligence. Below is the transcript of a keynote address that Dr Carthy recently delivered at the 2016 International Conference on Engaging Pedagogy in which he discusses his research and outlines key policy changes that could help lead to the creation of emotionally intelligent colleges.

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A Vision for Creating Emotionally Intelligent Colleges

I have set myself two principal challenges today and those are, firstly, that by the end of my address you will all feel as passionately about the importance of developing emotionally intelligent colleges as I do and secondly, that I will have outlined a vision as to how, together, we might realistically achieve this goal.

Emotional intelligence (EI) is quite a well-known construct and one that I am sure you have all heard of but just so that there's absolutely no confusion, I want to start by giving you a very brief definition. There are in fact many definitions in use that are subtly different in various ways but essentially when researchers speak of emotional intelligence, they assume it to encompass three broad areas which are, the ability to accurately perceive and deal appropriately with one's own emotional responses, the ability to accurately perceive and respond appropriately to the emotions of others and the ability to effectively deal with stress. I should add at this point that it is now firmly established that just as with cognitive intelligence or IQ, emotional intelligence is in part hardwired and something that is essentially written into our genes. This means that there can be individual differences with respect to the level of EI that one can have. However, a huge breadth of research has also proven that emotional intelligence is to some extent malleable so this, vitally from our perspective as educators, means that EI relates to skills that can be improved, so it is something that we can teach!

I would hope that the benefits of helping anyone to improve their stress management and develop their social skills would be apparent but in addition to the generic benefits of doing so, many studies, in fact a wealth of research evidence, now supports the notion that there are specific advantages which accrue as a result of focusing on social skills development in third level educational settings, and I want to focus now on outlining some of these advantages.

Research has confirmed that when students are enabled to develop socially and emotionally, that this can result on average in increased GPA and decreased rates of attrition, so this gives us a pedagogical and also a financial incentive to focus on doing so. Until recently, much of the research that had been conducted with respect to third level students and EI had occurred elsewhere. However, I have been working really hard to redress that balance and for

example, I am happy to report that one of my own research studies which was conducted at the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown found that the provision of EI coaching to students, in comparison to a control group that did not receive any coaching, led to decreased levels of attrition. In fact, students who received coaching were just under one third less likely to drop out than students in a control group who did not receive coaching and there were also statistically significant increases in their levels of EI. So, as I have said, these are skills that, at least in part, can be taught and when we do, this can have a positive benefit for students and can help them to cope more ably with the stresses associated with college and become more effective learners.

Emotional intelligence is also the basis for a wide range of essential skills required in the workplace. Just one example is that the workplace in recent decades has increasingly become more culturally diverse and in this regard, ensuring that employees possess social and emotional competencies would enable them to create more harmonious workspaces. Therefore, in recent years higher education providers are increasingly being called upon to ensure that graduates entering the workforce are equipped not only with specialised content knowledge related to their area of study but also personal competencies that could enable them to communicate effectively and work productively as part of a team. I strongly defend the notion that the primary purpose of education should be to enlighten and that personal development and the pursuit of knowledge are in and of themselves worthwhile endeavours. Nevertheless, for many students one of the primary purposes of coming to college is to secure employment and one of the primary functions of the third level educational system is to prepare students for the workforce. In that regard, there is strong research evidence to suggest that those who are successful at managerial level and those who are more likely to be promoted within organisations typically possess highly developed social and emotional competencies. Studies have also demonstrated a link between social learning and employability, yet employers often cite key socio-emotional deficits in graduates and interestingly, results from the Irish Survey of Student Engagement also indicate that some student groups in particular feel underprepared to enter the workplace. For example, in 2014 over 25% of humanities and arts students claimed to have received little or no instruction with respect to how to apply their learning in the workplace. Although, interestingly when you drill down into these figures, students in the Institute of Technology sector on average felt more prepared to enter the workplace than those in the university sector, most likely as a result of the fact that a higher proportion will have completed a work placement. Therefore, a benefit of focusing on social skills development in preparation for entering the workforce is that it may

result in decreased levels of work related stress and as a consequence, increased productivity and job satisfaction.

A final area to consider with respect to possible advantages to focusing on the promotion of social skills development is teaching effectiveness as research evidence also suggests that teaching effectiveness is related to several dimensions of emotional intelligence. Some simple examples are that educators who possess superior interpersonal skills will be enabled to communicate more effectively with students whilst higher levels of empathy and self-awareness will encourage active listening and higher levels of overall emotional intelligence have been found to correlate with higher levels of job satisfaction and self-efficacy. Taken collectively, what these findings really demonstrate is that there are benefits for all members of academic communities in focusing on emotional and social skills development and that a holistic approach is what is needed.

So now that the scene has been set, this brings me to the principal area that I want to address, which is how we can in fact work towards creating emotionally intelligent colleges. In that regard, I want to start by sharing a phrase that really jumped out at me in a recent journal article I was reading because I think it's quite apt and that phrase was 'If you think the solution is easy, you haven't understood the problem'. I would be the first person to have to admit that enabling colleges to become more emotionally intelligent is not necessarily as simple a task as it may seem. There are cost implications, there are logistical constraints and there is at times a lack of understanding as to the tangible benefits of doing so. However, given the immense benefits that can accrue, I do strongly and passionately believe that every effort should be made and for that reason, I now want to outline some steps that we can take, both collectively and individually to move towards creating more emotionally intelligent colleges. I should state at this point that I am going to focus on just two principal areas in this address. However, there are many suggestions that I have and if you can forgive this shameless plug, if any of you are seeking more in-depth information regarding any of the topics that I am covering, you may be interested in acquiring a copy of my recently published and I hope, aptly titled text, 'The Emotionally Intelligent College'. I am also more than happy to converse with anybody at any level who is interested in any topic related to emotional intelligence and education!

The first area that I want to examine because this really is the most logical place to start, are the learning outcomes grids that we employ across the third level sector, namely the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). I think this is a good place to start as the EQF provides the basic structure from which each of the individual frameworks of qualifications within each EU country are aligned and the NFQ of course outlines the specific learning outcomes that should be achieved in order to complete a course of study at a given level of achievement in Ireland. Of course, the EQF by its very nature needs to be somewhat generic in order to accommodate comparisons between the various educational curricula that are in use across the EU. Nevertheless, it is particularly notable, in the context of the wealth of findings that have shown the varied benefits of developing students social and emotional skills, that no explicit reference is made in the EQF to the development of emotional competencies beyond what I would certainly consider the use of vague references, to concepts such as 'responsibility', 'autonomy' and 'integrity'. Similarly, the NFQ also makes very little reference to a small range of social and emotional skills. The only social and emotional competencies that are referred to in any real sense are 'self-awareness/self-understanding' and 'engagement with and solidarity with others' and there are important aspects of social and emotional development that are simply not referred to at all. One such very notable example, is that stress management is not mentioned anywhere at all on the NFQ. Other areas that are not mentioned include reality testing, empathy and impulse control and what about social responsibility, surely this should be a vital element of the curriculum for all students?

In recent years, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), who have responsibility for producing and updating the NFQ, have produced a number of specific qualifications frameworks that pertain to specific disciplines and in fairness, in some instances, a limited range of social and emotional skills are included. Examples include 'identifying and managing involvement of self in the counselling/psychotherapeutic process' which is included on the learning outcomes grid for master's level counselling and psychotherapy awards, and that master's level computing graduates should be able to 'describe and adapt interpersonal interactions based on knowledge of the cultures and customs of other countries'. So there has been some move towards more inclusion of learning outcomes related to social and emotional development and I really applaud such developments. However, the range of social and emotional competencies that are referred to, even within these specifically tailored learning outcomes grids, is still extremely limited. For example, many important aspects of emotional development such as stress management and social responsibility are simply not referred to.

Also for many disciplines for which specific learning outcomes grids have not been developed, the standard version of the NFQ will apply by default, which as I have already outlined, really makes scant reference to social and emotional skills development. This issue absolutely needs to be addressed. It's also noteworthy that although the importance of preparing students for life beyond the classroom is recognised in the National Strategy for Education to 2030, which states, and I quote 'Undergraduate and postgraduate education should explicitly address the generic skills required for effective engagement in society and in the workplace' (Higher Education Authority, 2011: 20), which sounds really positive, does it not, yet again, this strategy makes no real reference to the development of emotional competencies and focuses only on the development of academic and cognitive skills. We all know that the Irish educational system is renowned for producing graduates who are academically competent but just imagine the advantages that might accrue if we could build a reputation for producing graduates who are emotionally competent! Particularly with the looming threat that Brexit poses, think about the possible benefits in terms of graduate employability, with respect to attracting business to our shores and to the Irish economy in general.

At present, although reference to emotional skills development is not included in educational frameworks or our national strategy for education, this does not mean that the promotion of students' emotional competencies is completely ignored. We all know that there are many ways in which we as educators routinely promote emotional and social development, for example through induction programs or personal development modules. However, what is lacking is a unified and universal approach and until we have this, there is no specific onus on educators *systematically* to encourage EI skills development for all students.

Based on all of the aforementioned, I have proposed reformulated versions of both the EQF and NFQ that make explicit reference to these areas. So the first necessary step that I think we need to take at a macro level to promote the creation of emotionally intelligent colleges would of course be to employ these reformulated learning grids, or at least to open a discussion as to their potential merits. I believe that were we to do so, this would naturally mean that such skills would then need to be formally assessed and benchmarked and students would have to be provided with academic modules or academic supports to enable them to meet those learning outcomes. In turn, this would hopefully benefit students at an individual level by enabling them to develop holistically and be of benefit in a wider social and economic context by better preparing graduates to enter the workforce.

Naturally, the more rounded and holistic the approach that is taken, the better, so as well as incorporating social and emotional skills development into learning outcomes grids and formal curricula, I believe also that we need to work towards creating college environments that encourage the development of healthy and mature social interactions and I would now like to focus a little on this area. Two related steps that could be taken at a macro level are firstly that students at induction have their emotional competencies profiled. In an ideal scenario, students would be provided with individualised feedback based on their profile geared towards enabling them to use emotional strengths and make improvements where necessary to enable them to achieve their maximum academic potential. However, at the very least, averaged profiles for given student cohorts could be generated and circulated to key support staff. Related to this, all staff that are frequently in contact with students could be provided with emotional competency awareness training. Here also it would be ideal if staff could be offered individualised EI coaching, but at the very least, raising awareness for staff as to some of the benefits of helping students to develop socially and emotionally would be of immense benefit.

So how might such training work? Frequently as educators, we are presented with reports pertaining to given student cohorts that we engage with that outline key academic variables such as the average number of points that students scored for their Leaving Certificate or their learning styles. However, just imagine how helpful it might be if at the start of an academic year, you were also presented with an emotional intelligence profile for a given class you were about to start lecturing which outlined for you the overall level of emotional intelligence for the cohort in question as well as their key strengths and areas for improvement. You could then be provided with specific advice and given specific supports to enable your student group to capitalise on emotional and social strengths and to make improvements where there are social skills deficits. Training could also be provided to help facilitate the development of more effective interventions for at-risk students and to promote greater awareness of the emotional issues which often underpin academic concerns. Another key advantage of delivering awareness sessions for staff members is that it could foster an appreciation of students' emotional competencies in context. For example, at first glance, if you were looking at an EI profile for a group of students, higher scores in any domain of EI may appear positive although, in some instances, even higher scores can be misleading and may, in fact, denote poorer as opposed to better emotional and educational outcomes. For example, one particular study of mine involved charting and comparing the EI profiles of students across various

subject areas. Engineering students in this particular study had the highest levels of stress management which, initially, may appear positive, but this cohort also possessed the lowest levels of adaptability, reality testing and problem solving. This may mean that for this group of students, at times, emotional issues may appear to be managed effectively only because they are not in fact *perceived* (i.e. in some instances, stressors or problems may simply be ignored). Creating an awareness of such issues may, in the first instance, help staff members to communicate more effectively with students and to tailor the communication and supports that are provided for them, which is the ultimate win-win situation!

I have focused for the most part in this address on relatively global initiatives that I believe are necessary to create emotionally intelligent colleges. However, as I have said earlier, it is of course also important to look at micro perspectives and the impact that we as individuals can have and ideally we should of course be attempting to take the most holistic approach possible. So, before I finish I would like to outline, in brief, what an emotionally intelligent college might actually look like and what we collectively could do that would enable that to happen.

I believe the most important thing we need to do is to decide, right here, right now, simply to commit to enabling students to develop holistically. I propose that we work towards ensuring that all academic programmes include a mandatory subject stream devoted to social and emotional skills development which will be underpinned by specific learning outcomes and offered to students in a scaffolded manner. This would enable colleges to take a processual approach and to focus on students' current identity, essentially to meet them where they are now and build from that starting point and support them as they progress and mature. Such a subject stream could for example include an introductory first year module followed by more discipline specific modules in subsequent years and a work preparation module in students' final year of study. I further propose that we consult with employers and invite them to speak to students with respect to the value they place on social and emotional competencies or have them deliver employer-led workshops on areas related to professional accountability or workplace etiquette. I also believe that we should work towards redesigning our programmes were necessary so that work placement will be offered to all students, irrespective of their area of study. Let us commit to adopting the concept of 'life-wide' learning which recognises the breadth of learning that students can engage with both formal and informal. For example, student engagement with activities related to civic engagement or charity work could be actively encouraged and we could recognise this on students' degree parchments.

An emotionally intelligent college is one that is collaborative, reflective and where appropriate, embraces change. It is a college where staff model effective social skills, particularly through the use of praise and encouragement in the classroom and overall an emotionally intelligent college is simply one that encourages and supports each educator and each student to reach their maximum potential and if we commit to doing so, I do believe that this is an achievable goal.

Unfortunately, there is so much that I could say about this topic and only a certain amount that I can cover in one address. I do hope that, at the very least, I have encouraged you all to realise the importance of helping students to develop their social and emotional competencies. Arising from today what I most wish is that you will all now return to your respective colleges and start reflecting, start asking questions and start taking action to ensure that you help to make your college a more emotionally intelligent one. So in conclusion, I would like to leave you with a quote from a very well-known educator Maria Montessori, who as early as 1949 said the following:

...if education is always to be conceived along the same antiquated lines of a mere transmission of knowledge, there is little to be hoped from it in the bettering of our future. For what is the use of transmitting knowledge, if the individual's total development lags behind?' (Maria Montessori 1949, *The Absorbent Mind*, p.4).

Thank you.