

The Role of Emotional Intelligence in Enhancing Employability Skills among HEIs' Graduates: A Pathway to Workplace Success

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ABSTRACT

In today's highly competitive and rapidly evolving job market, Emotional Intelligence (EI) has emerged as a critical factor influencing graduate employability. As the demand for soft skills such as communication, adaptability, and leadership intensifies, employers increasingly seek candidates who can navigate complex interpersonal dynamics and respond effectively to unforeseen challenges. While technical expertise remains essential, the ability to harness EI is becoming a key differentiator for employability. This article explores the relationship between EI and employability skills among students in Higher Education Institutes (HEIs), emphasizing how integrating EI into academic curricula can better prepare graduates for the demands of the modern professional environment.

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Introduction

Despite the increasing need for EI, many entry-level college graduates are often unprepared for the workforce, lacking essential soft skills that employers value. According to Robinson (2000), transferable employability skills are fundamental and universally applicable, aiding all individuals as they enter the workforce. However, numerous studies indicate that graduates frequently struggle with these essential



abilities. Candy and Crebert (1991) found that graduates often lack proficiency in “problem-solving, decision-making, working in a team, or learning for themselves” (p. 572). Similarly, Morley (2001) noted that “graduates are hardly thought to require emotional intelligence, political skills, or self-care in the face of occupational stress” (p. 135). These findings underscore the growing concern that technical knowledge alone is insufficient in preparing students for professional success.

Employers today seek individuals who can think critically, collaborate effectively, and adapt to new challenges. Billing (2003) highlighted that the most desirable employability skills were those transferable to a variety of professional situations, particularly “problem-solving, communication, teamwork, and critical thinking” (p. 335). Schmidt (1999) further reinforced this perspective, asserting that graduates must “solve complex, multidisciplinary problems, work successfully in teams, exhibit effective oral and written communication skills, and practice good interpersonal skills” (p. 31). These competencies align closely with the five components of EI outlined by Goleman (1995): self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills, all of which contribute to a graduate’s overall workplace success.

Given this reality, there is an urgent need for HEIs to incorporate EI training into their academic programs. Evers et al. (1998) argued that “there is a need for a fundamental shift toward an emphasis on general skills in education” (p. 12), as the skills most in demand are often the least developed. HEIs can help in closing the gap between industry demands and academic preparation by promoting EI in addition to technical skills. This will provide graduates the skills they need to succeed in a variety of professional environments. EI is an important aspect of employability in today’s time and age since it enables graduates to join the workforce with the interpersonal skills and emotional resilience that ensure long-term success in their respective fields.

Theoretical Foundations of Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is the capacity to tune into one’s feelings, understand what they mean, and then manage them effectively, while also being sensitive to and handling the emotions of those around oneself. It has been widely discussed in both academic and popular circles, yet its conceptual clarity and empirical grounding remain subjects of ongoing debate. Gohm (2004) highlights this by acknowledging that while the popular press and management training programs have amplified discussions on EI, substantial empirical research has now accumulated to allow for a more rigorous assessment of the construct. She notes that “for the years 2001 and 2002, for example, there were 56 dissertation abstracts



listed in a search of the PsychInfo database using the keywords emotional intelligence” (Gohm, 2004, p. 222), signalling an increasing scholarly engagement with the topic.

EI is distinguished from traditional cognitive intelligence, focusing instead on self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation—traits crucial for teamwork, conflict resolution, and sustained productivity in high-pressure situations (Goleman, 1995). Goleman’s EI model, which outlines five key components—self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills—serves as a foundation for understanding how EI influences workplace success. In the context of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), fostering EI is essential for equipping graduates with competencies beyond technical expertise, preparing them for dynamic work environments. As Teichler (2013, p. 422) highlights, graduates must be prepared to handle “unexpected tasks” and demonstrate transversal skills such as problem-solving, teamwork, and collaboration, all of which are central to EI. Unlike technical skills, which can often be taught through traditional educational methods, EI is more nuanced and can be cultivated through intentional, experiential learning processes within HEIs.

Among the main difficulties regarding HEIs is finding the middle ground between theoretical learning and the demands persisting in professional settings. As Rossano et al. (2016) has observed, HEIs must provide students with the skills that would make them competent to match the expectations of their employers. He goes on to assert that this goal makes soft skills a central aspect, including EI. The importance of emotional and interpersonal skills and competencies is now gaining more recognition alongside the discipline-specific knowledge of the traditional curricula.

Problem-based learning (PBL) has proven to be an effective pedagogical approach in promoting EI among students, as it brings focus to real-world problem-solving, teamwork, and communication. Rossano et al. (2016) note that PBL develops skills that are not only relevant, but also necessary for being successful in a professional ground, such as adaptability, negotiation, and conflict resolution. These skills are in line with what Goleman (1995) has laid down as EI framework, particularly in the areas of self-regulation and social skills. By indulging in learning experiences that are collaborative and problem-centred, students can develop a deeper understanding of the practicality of emotional intelligence instead of the mere theoretical construct.

Furthermore, if we look at the expectations of the employers in the ever-evolving job market, the integration of EI into HEI curricula would be the way to go. Employers today are on the lookout for graduates who are not just theoretically well versed, but have the practical capability of navigating



diverse and complex interpersonal dynamics, have the critical thinking skills to resolve conflicts, and showcase a front of resilience in high-stakes environments. As is highlighted by Rossano et al. (2016), graduates have to brace themselves for workplaces that will need continuous learning and the ability to collaborate across disciplines. This calls for a structural shift in education, moving beyond rote memorization to such a model that gives priority to experiential learning, reflective practice, and emotional intelligence development.

By incorporating EI into academic programs through experiential learning strategies such as PBL, internships, and leadership training, HEIs can bring forth graduates who are technically competent along with being emotionally adept. These graduates have better grounds to thrive in workplaces where qualities such as adaptability, communication, and emotional resilience are held valuable and deemed to be key determinants of professional success.

The Role of Emotional Intelligence in Enhancing Employability

As has been discussed earlier, employers are doing away with theoretical parrots, and are instead interested in candidates who do not only have skilled technical hand, but are also emotionally intelligent. This is due to the understanding that high-EI graduates are better equipped to tackle the interpersonal and emotional demands of a modern workplace. These graduates have an advantage of being better at managing stressful situations, their communication is more effective, and they exhibit leadership in demanding situations, which is paramount in today's business environments, where adaptability and emotional resilience are held in high regards. Graduates with high EI are more likely to flourish in work settings that are collaborative, innovative, and dynamic.

However, despite its growing importance, EI is often underexplored in the curricula of many HEIs, which are still focusing more on the academic and technical competencies, due to which graduates are left lacking the skills that are expected by the employers who value emotionally intelligent professionals that are capable of working efficiently in teams, are good at resolving conflicts, and leading projects. To fulfil this gap, HEIs must integrate EI development into their curricula, thereby building a culture of emotional and interpersonal skills that are crucial for career success.

One promising approach that could be adopted for bridging this gap is the integration of problem-based learning (PBL) within university curricula. PBL's primary focus becomes the learning which is student focused, instead of the traditional education that is more teacher driven, which in turn, enables



collaboration and real-world problem-solving, as per Crosier et al. (2007). Skills such as teamwork, communication, and leadership, are interdisciplinary in nature, and hence, an approach like that of PBL has emerged to be key in their development (Kiel, 2014). Moreover, PBL provides an experiential learning environment that reflects the the uncertainty and complexity of modern workplaces, thereby preparing students to manage challenges that are human oriented, effectively (Hamburg, 2015).

Furthermore, university-business cooperation (UBC) has been identified as a crucial mechanism for enhancing students' skills that make them desirable for employability. Studies highlight that collaboration with businesses enriches education by inculcating entrepreneurial thinking and problem-solving abilities (Baaken et al., 2015; Plewa et al., 2014). "A more entrepreneurial approach with respect to the academic education provided by universities involves the engagement of academics and students with businesses in a more enterprising and innovative manner" (Rossano et. al., 2016, p. 41; Davey, 2015, p.12). Such initiatives will encourage technical proficiency while also cultivating the emotional intelligence necessary for navigating professional environments.

Moreover, as the OECD Innovation Strategy (2010) suggests, crisscrossing skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving are somewhat foundational for innovation and career advancement. These competencies enable graduates to handle workplace uncertainties and lead projects effectively (Davidsson, 2004). The European Commission (2012) further comes to underscores the importance of integrating such skills into education and training, talking in favour of the inclusion of entrepreneurship and innovation at all levels of learning.

In a order to be certain that the students are out and about adequately prepared to meeting the ever-evolving demands of the labour market, HEIs should incorporate PBL and UBC-based initiatives. What this would do, then, alongside the technical skills, also, enhance their emotional intelligence as well. As a matter of fact then through these approaches, our students develop the much needed ability to cope with indeterminate work tasks, collaborate effectively, and contribute to innovation; all of which Teichler (2013) has deemed as essential attributes for long-term career success

Integrating Emotional Intelligence into Higher Education Curricula

Now, let us come to how Emotional Intelligence can be brought into the Higher Education Curricula. To even more better prepare our students for the challenges that they will come to face definitely in their respective modern professional environments, HEIs must and they should, somehow or the other, create



opportunities for EI development. This they should be treating as a must-do, as a matter of fact, even as non-negotiable. Come to think of it, it can be achieved through a variety of pedagogical strategies, to list a few examples we have group projects, leadership programs, mentorship initiatives, and not to forget, even experiential learning activities. These opportunities allow students to practice emotional self-regulation, build empathy, and enhance their interpersonal communication skills. By incorporating EI-focused activities into academic curricula, HEIs can nurture the essential attributes that enable students to succeed in the workplace.

One promising pedagogical approach to become fostering EI is Problem-Based Learning (PBL). PBL is defined as: “the learning that results from the process of working towards the understanding of a resolution of a problem” (Barrows & Tamblyn, 1989, p. 1), encouraging students to tackle real-world problems within collaborative settings. This student-centered, inquiry-based approach has been shown to develop crucial competencies such as teamwork, communication, and emotional resilience: skills that are indispensable in today’s entrepreneurial, problem-solving oriented workforce.

Let us give a few real world examples: institutions like Maastricht University and Radboud University have successfully implemented PBL as a means of promoting not only problem-solving capabilities but also collaboration and leadership (Rossano et al., 2016). By working in teams to solve complex, multifaceted problems, our talented and job seeking students are able to develop both their cognitive and emotional skills, somehow preparing them for the challenges that they are bound to face to face in the workforce.

Real-World Examples of EI-Focused Initiatives

Several, and by several I mean considerable, not just one or two, let me make it clear, several HEIs, not just in one place but worldwide, yes, meaning across the globe, have implemented EI-centric initiatives. What has this done? It has yielded positive outcomes for students. How? Let me give an example, programs that focus on emotional resilience, stress management, and interpersonal communication have come to be shown to significantly enhance students’ ability to do what? To navigate complex workplace challenges. Not only that, now let me tell you, but as a matter of fact, even case studies from universities in Europe and North America have to demonstrate that EI-focused curricula foster graduates who are coming to excel not only in technical proficiency but also in essential interpersonal competencies.



These initiatives did not come into thin air, they are very much grounded in strong theoretical principles. As Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) explain: communication performance is defined by two key outcome properties: effectiveness and appropriateness. Now what does this duality imply, you might ask. It means that when we talk of communication that is effective, meaning effective communication, it must not and should not achieve only the objectives that it tends to achieve, right: but it should and it must also, pay attention here, it should also conform to norms that are situational in nature, and not just but relational too, meaning, situational and relational norms. What will happen then, you may ask? Let me answer that as well. By developing EI, our very beloved but unfortunately unemployed students learn to balance these dimensions, ensuring that their interactions in professional environments are both impactful and contextually appropriate. Troth et al. (2012) further note that individuals who are skilled at recognizing and managing their own and others' emotions have the tendency to make better decisions and resolve conflicts in an effective manner. Such abilities are indispensable, meaning necessary, of utmost importance, one can go as far as saying non-negotiable even, in team settings where success hinges, meaning depends on communication that is empathetic, and not only that but clear as well, yes.

Now, HEIs have done what, you may ask: let me tell you. They have capitalized on these insights, meaning they have taken advantage of all these information I have given you above, a smart move if you ask me. Now how have they done it? They have done it by embedding experiential learning strategies within their curricula. Let me explain and elaborate on what I mean by it: Initiatives such as leadership training, mentorship programs, and group-based projects create authentic, meaning original scenarios in which students can practice regulating their emotions and refining their communication skills. In these environments, students are encouraged to engage in continuous dialogue, and solve problems collaboratively, which mirrors the "succession of exchanges" (Troth et al. 2012, p. 705) described by relational communications theory (Millar & Rogers, 1976; Parks, 1977).

Despite, and I am very sad, ashamed even, to say this, but anyway, someone has to say it: despite these promising developments, despite these amazing and such good developments, implementing EI-centric programs is not without challenges. One significant obstacle that I have at least come to recognise among others is this: the limited resource allocation that many institutions face, which can hindering the development and sustainability of comprehensive EI programs. To add on, how unfortunate, a lack of specialized training for educators in emotional intelligence remains a critical barrier. Troth et al. (2012) suggest, and we must listen to what they say, that the measurement of emotional competencies in a reliable and consistent manner is complex, often compounded by reliance on self-report instruments that



may not fully capture the dynamic nature of EI. This measurement challenge underscores the need for innovative, context-sensitive assessment tools.

I think so far I have made things pretty clear, so let us move further, the theoretical literature indicates that the benefits of EI are most pronounced when integrated with practical, real-world tasks. Let me also break this down. For instance, effective emotional management allows individuals to “detect counterproductive emotions within the team” (Troth et al., 2012, p. 705), and to deescalate conflicts, thereby promoting better communication performance (Jordan & Troth, 2004). By overcoming these challenges through targeted faculty development and strategic resource investment, HEIs can better prepare students with the emotional and interpersonal skills required to thrive in today’s dynamic work environments.

The integration of EI-focused initiatives, grounded in theories that emphasize both the effectiveness and appropriateness of communication (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984) and the critical role of emotional regulation (Troth et al., 2012), not only contributes to personal growth but also significantly enhances graduates’ employability. As institutions continue to refine these programs, the resulting synergy between emotional skills and practical performance holds great promise for the future of professional education.

Conclusion

In an increasingly competitive and rapidly evolving global job market, emotional intelligence (EI) has emerged as a critical determinant of professional success. The evidence that I have worked hard to collect and present to you in this paper has underscores that technical expertise, while essential, is insufficient on its own. The study also brought in arguments by Goleman (1995), the five central aspects of EI—self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills—are indispensable for navigating modern workplace challenges. By integrating EI into academic curricula, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can bridge the gap between traditional academic training and the dynamic interpersonal demands of today’s professional environments.

The above discussion has demonstrated that graduates who possess strong emotional competencies are better prepared to handle unexpected tasks and adapt to rapidly changing work contexts. Teichler (2013, p. 422) emphasizes that modern graduates must be equipped with transversal skills such as problem-solving, teamwork, and collaboration—capabilities that are deeply intertwined with EI. The study shows



that experiential learning strategies, including problem-based learning (PBL) and university-business cooperation (UBC), have proven effective in developing these critical skills. Rossano et al. (2016) note that such approaches foster adaptability, negotiation, and conflict resolution, thereby enhancing both individual and team performance.

Although, many HEIs face constraints in resources and faculty training, which can limit the effective implementation of EI-focused programs. Moreover, as Troth et al. (2012) highlight, the reliable measurement of emotional competencies is complex, often due to the inherent subjectivity and dynamic nature of EI. This underscoring the need for innovative, context-sensitive assessment tools and sustained institutional investment in professional development for educators.

Addressing these challenges is imperative. HEIs must adopt a more holistic educational model—one that not only imparts disciplinary knowledge but also cultivates the emotional and interpersonal skills essential for long-term career success. By embedding EI development into the curriculum through initiatives like PBL, internships, and leadership training, institutions can produce graduates who are not only technically proficient but also emotionally adept. Such graduates are more likely to thrive in collaborative, innovative, and high-stakes professional environments, thereby enhancing their overall employability.

Ultimately, the integration of EI into higher education is a strategic imperative. As organizations have been increasingly recognize that emotional intelligence is not merely an optional skill but a vital contributor to workplace performance, HEIs must evolve to meet these expectations. By prioritizing EI alongside technical expertise, institutions can empower graduates to navigate the complexities of the modern professional world with confidence, creativity, and resilience. In doing so, what will happen, you may ask. Let me tell you: in doing so, HEIs will not only enhance individual career prospects but also contribute to the development of dynamic, emotionally intelligent leaders who can drive sustainable success in a global marketplace.

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