What influences students in their development of socio-emotional intelligence whilst at university?

Camila Devis-Rozental & Lois Farquharson

Published online: 17 Sep 2020.

Submit your article to this journal ⏍

View related articles ⏍

View Crossmark data ⏍

Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

ARTICLE

What influences students in their development of socio-emotional intelligence whilst at university?

Camila Devis-Rozental 🄳 and Lois Farquharson

Bournemouth University, Poole, UK

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study undertaken at a University in England investigates what influences the development of undergraduate students' socio-emotional intelligence (SEI). Through a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with students and lecturers, the study highlights various approaches that the learning environment, both physical and cultural influenced their development of SEI. Learning in small groups where students felt safe and supported impacted on their sense of self, and helped develop their confidence. Reflecting on their own experience without constraints or assessed outcomes was also beneficial to these students. The lecturer's knowledge and expertise, and how they modelled SEI were seen as imperative and meaningful to the development of students' SEI. This paper concludes that students must be supported to develop holistically, integrating cognition and emotion, making practical suggestions as to how this may be achieved. Given the paucity of research in this area, opportunities for further research are highlighted.

Introduction

Students involved in a qualitative study to explore their experiences of developing their socio-emotional intelligence (SEI) while completing an undergraduate teacher training programme in a UK institution stated that any type of new gave them confidence. It may be that certain areas of socio-emotional intelligence develop unexpectedly or without purposefully being an outcome of a given curriculum. This would concur with one of the lecturers who felt that by the time their programme finished students flourished due to their new-found knowledge. Nevertheless, confidence is just one small part of socio-emotional intelligence, and there may be other areas that develop in Higher Education programmes.

In order to research this subject, the experiences of ten students and four academics involved in an undergraduate programme in a UK institution were explored through semi-structured interviews and analysed through thematic analysis (see Table 1) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, Guest et at., 2012). Influencers, gaps and opportunities to develop SEI while at university were highlighted and the themes identified are presented within this paper.

CONTACT Camila Devis-Rozental ✉ cdevisrozental@bournemouth.ac.uk ⬤ Bournemouth University, Poole, UK

Table 1. Interview design.

Participants	Sample	Characteristics	Method	Analysis
Students	10	Studying or have completed a foundation degree programme delivered in the institution	Face to face Individual semi-structured interviews in the participant's preferred place	Qualitative Thematic analysis
Lecturers	4	Are or have been lecturers for a foundation degree programme delivered in the institution	Face to face Individual semi-structured interviews in the participant's preferred place	Qualitative Thematic Analysis

Rationale

Students that are socio-emotionally intelligent deal better with transitions and are more likely to succeed in their studies (Devis-Rozental, 2018). With a growing concern for students' mental health as they transition into university (Devis-Rozental, 2017, 2018; Macaskill, 2013), it is important to investigate how to support students during their time at university to build their SEI, enhance their experience, and have a positive impact on their overall wellbeing (Devis-Rozental, 2018). Additionally, employers identify that 'soft skills' such as the ability to work in teams, presentation skills or effective communication are sometimes more essential attributes than actual knowledge (Clarke, 2016). It is not surprising then that SEI is vital in developing these soft skills.

Background

SEI is an area within positive psychology, and its definition considers theories of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1996), social intelligence (Goleman, 2007), practical wisdom (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010), positive psychology (Seligman, 2011) and humanistic concepts (Rogers, 1961), integrating them as these are intrinsically connected and interdependent (Bar-On, 2005; Devis-Rozental, 2017, 2018).

Devis-Rozental (2017, p. 166) states that 'Socio-emotional intelligence is the capacity to integrate cognition, feelings and intuition to acknowledge, understand, manage, apply and express our emotions and social interactions at the right time, for the right purpose in the right context and with the right person. Its overall aim is to have a positive impact on our environment and to engage ourselves and others to be present, authentic and open; in order to achieve a sense of wellbeing and to build effective relationships in every aspect of our lives' (p. 166). Within the context of education, this definition can be applied to the work carried out in settings where positive education principles are integrated, where students are supported to develop holistically, beyond academic skills and constrictive learning methods.

Methodology

Epistemologically we took on a subjectivist stance, as the meaning of each area explored was viewed from the participant's point of view (Crotty, 1998). This, in turn, gave us a depth of understanding of the participants' realities and lived experiences. We aimed for a more 'humanly sensitive' (Galvin & Todres, 2013, p. 147) way of understanding and interpreting throughout this project. Thus, in the analysis phase, this project was influenced by an embodied relational understanding, which involves a type of knowing:

"attentive to the rich and moving flow of individuals lives in relation to others, is attentive to very specific situations" (Galvin & Todres, 2013, p. 148).

A 'type of knowing that is aesthetically textured and sensitive to unique situations' (Galvin & Todres, 2013, p. 149). These participants' unique experiences were informed by their knowledge (head) practice (hand) and their feelings (heart) (Devis-Rozental, 2018).

In line with this approach, our qualitative study took on a relativist ontology where reality is unique to every participant at a particular time and within their own particular context. In this context, Macfarlane (2009, p. 4) asserts that:

'Real' research is about the stuff of human life: hope, and disappointment, loyalty and betrayal, triumph and tragedy."

In order to explore the students' individual perceptions and experiences, we carried out exploratory semi-structured interviews. The students were known to the researcher carrying out the interviews. Therefore, we explored issues related to power relationships as, even though these students were no longer being taught or assessed by the researcher, role identities may have stayed the same based on our previous experience (Chong, Ling, & Chuan, 2011).

However, we would argue that although lecturers assess students' work and this could be seen as a power relationship, in current practice students can assess lecturers, courses and universities through NSS (National Student Survey) (Office for Students, 2020), and other measures that may differ between universities. Additionally, there has, in the UK, been a shift in the dynamics between university staff and students. Due to the rise in students' fees and governmental changes in higher education policy, students may see themselves as customers paying for a service (Bunce, Baird, & Jones, 2016). This will result in 're-modelling their sense of themselves and their expectations of each other' (Chalcraft, Hilton, & Huges, 2015, p. 1). Consequently, it could be that the traditional power relationship is shifting. Nevertheless, with a robust recruitment and ethical process, we attempted to minimise any tensions, and we encouraged participants to speak freely about whatever they felt was important and aimed to make them feel comfortable and safe, explaining that all their contributions were valid and there were no right or wrong answers.

The overall design of the interviews is presented below:

Please note that the gender of the participants is not shared in this instance due to ethical considerations.

Participant recruitment

Students

Following ethical approval, an email was sent to all current students in the programme with information about the project to invite them to participate. Students who had completed the programme were contacted via social media through a notice placed about the project and contact details. Students were made aware that places were limited, and they could participate on a first-come, first-served basis. Ten students responded, and they were all interviewed.

Lecturers

Following ethical approval, an email was sent to four lecturers who were or had been involved with the programme inviting them to participate in the project. The lecturers contacted were those whose details were readily available. All the contacted lecturers agreed to participate. Byrne et al. (2015, p. 7) assert that peer interviewing is beneficial to reduce, although not eradicate, 'power differentials.' Having had the same types of work experiences made it easier to explore and gain a depth of understanding around lived experiences in the interview process (Byrne et al., 2015).

As part of our ethical protocol, a commitment was made to maintain confidentiality, privacy and anonymity (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Holloway & Brown, 2012). Additionally, participants were not offered a reward and no coercion was practiced. These interviews were carried out following ethical clearance from a UK institution. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, all participant names were changed. In this paper, no specific attributions to specific students are used as there is the intention to give an overall perspective on key themes rather than the individual stories of specific participants.

In the need to be ethical, it is essential to account for the 'character or virtues, of the researcher' (Macfarlane, 2009, p. 4). To us, this was an opportunity to assert ourselves as honest, transparent and respectful researchers serving as a conduit to represent a reality at a specific moment and developing a new form of truth, relevant to that moment, but relevant, nonetheless. As education researchers, we are aware of the BERA (British Educational Research Association, 2011) guidelines for carrying out research and apply them in our research approach and data collection and analysis methods.

The semi-structured interviews for the students were carried out in the participants' preferred place and took between 20 and 70 minutes. Each lecturer's interview was carried out in the participants' preferred place and took between 30 and 90 minutes. All the interviews were recorded on an iPhone with the participants' permission and then encrypted for security.

Following this, the interviews were transcribed and analysed, applying a thematic analysis by finding research-derived codes (Braun & Clarke, 2013). NVIVO was used as a tool to support the researchers in meaningful data analysis and generation of codes. Twenty-four researcher-derived codes were identified from the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2013) (see appendix 1) based on the literature review, our conceptual understanding of the subject and in line with the aims of the research project. We decided to take this holistic approach, as sometimes the meaning of the information requested was there, but the labelling of it was not explicitly present.

These twenty-four codes were grouped into emerging key themes (Figure 1). This was achieved by immersing ourselves in the raw data, reading transcripts or listening to the recordings many times to be able to put the participant at the centre of our research. This approach resulted in an 'embodied interpretation' (Galvin & Todres, 2013, p. 166) which involved 'back and forth engagement with the text' (Galvin & Todres, 2013, p. 166), thinking deeply about how to best represent the participants' lived experience. It was a process of discovery within a holistic, reflexive approach, attempting to be as open as possible. It was crucial to find the words which would 'carry forward the textural dimensions of experience' (Todres & Galvin, 2008, p. 568).

We have focused on the influencer themes within this paper (See Figure 1) These themes have been developed from the emerging key themes above which are much
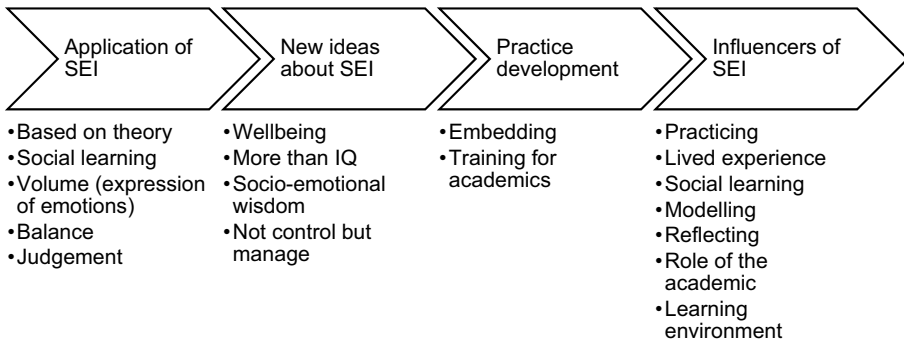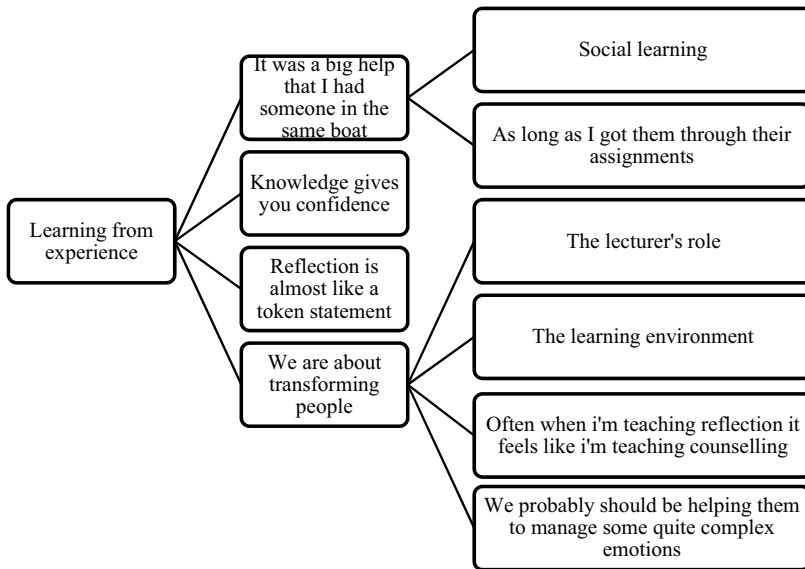
Figure 1. Emerging key themes.

Figure 2. Main focused themes addressing the influencers on the development of SEI at university.

broader (for a full exploration of all themes and the interviews, including the schedule see Devis-Rozental, 2017 (See Figure 2).

Themes and discussion

Learning together

Learning SEI from others was important to all the students in this study. One student stated that it had been of great value to learn with people in a similar situation. Within the context of their university experience, modelling would happen while attending the lessons with a group, but also by observing lecturers and other professionals in practice. Students acknowledged that getting to know their peers and sharing their learning journey together was important for developing their SEI as they felt that they belonged.

For instance, one student reflected, 'we built up like a mini community within the students within the room, so that was really good because you didn't feel on your own ... sort of trying to swim against the current.'

One student asserted that social learning was meaningful as part of learning SEI. During activities such as group work, students practiced active learning, negotiation, effective communication and other 'soft skills' that are related to SEI.

This is important as loneliness and isolation can affect learning and various areas of SEI such as self-awareness and confidence. Further, this student added:

> "being part of a small group is nice as well, and although the fact that uni is so big and it's so much going on I did like the fact that we had a very close class I think that was really good"

Learning SEI from others was important to all the students in this study. One student stated that 'It was a big help that I had other people that were in a similar boat' Within the context of this student's university experience, modelling would happen while attending the lessons with a group, but also by observing lecturers and others in practice.

Students acknowledged that getting to know their peers and sharing their learning journey together was an essential component for developing their SEI as they felt that they belonged and were provided with a safe space for them to share their ideas. As greater social connectedness has an impact on students sense of belonging and engagement, this is an important aspect.

Therefore, the importance of learning together in small groups is reinforced. This was also prevalent during plenaries where the lecturer was facilitating rather than teaching, and therefore students could learn from each other. Within this context, the lecturer was modelling and demonstrating SEI traits that they could follow. For example, setting the tone of the situation or using what they saw as positive strategies to engage students. An example of this was given by a student who, when referring to socio-emotional intelligence, saw it as some type of knowledge and behaviours already present that were 'pulled out' and identified with the support from others within the class.

To these participants, learning of SEI occurred naturally and was not forced. An example of this was given by a student who stated:

> "The knowledge is there; it's just pulling it out and having the strength from each other to use each other effectively [to] bounce off each other."

This idea of something already present could link to character strengths and how, through these social bonds, students can further develop them. The programme studied had small cohorts of a maximum of 20 students and this, according to students, was advantageous in developing areas of their SEI. In these small groups, students were able to get to know their peers and learning occurred in a more targeted small environment where they could build effective relationships with others as well as with the lecturer. One of the students asserted that they picked up some of their social skills from those around them.

To these students, this was a significant advantage in developing their SEI as they were able to express themselves in an environment where they were aware that they were safe and would not be judged. This may be challenging to replicate in all teaching situations within universities, especially in very large cohorts. However, it does present the possibility of perhaps developing a cohort community that students can go to, as there is

a need for students to develop social bonds and to feel that they belong so that they can thrive as they develop this cohort identity.

Nurturing effective relationships within a learning environment reduces stress; developing friendships can even influence students' success in achieving their goals (Hastings & Cohn, 2015). The reason for this may be that social connections can influence our sense of happiness and meaningful experiences greatly. Concurring with this, Schreiner (2015, p. 11) asserts that 'thriving in college incorporates healthy relationships and interactions with others.' It is clear that to these students developing social connectedness was an important aspect of their university experience as it helped them to succeed.

One student acknowledged this stating that

> "Having a peer, or peers to help support as well, was really good because it made you feel like you aren't the only one, and that took a lot of pressure off it."

Stretcher Sigmar et al. (2012, p. 312) discuss the importance of incorporating SEI training in the curriculum and assert that 'modelling and experiencing social behaviour are essential in learning EI.' They provide concrete examples of how to do so with activities related to experiential learning, such as role-playing and teamwork. This concurs with the students' views regarding how they felt they developed their SEI within the classroom.

'Reflection': a token word?

A further noticeable finding was participants' reference to the capacity to be 'self-reflective'. It is a recurrent theme throughout the interviews when students were describing and defining SEI, talking about its development, and improving practice.

For instance, one lecturer acknowledged that 'at deepest level it [reflection] ... should involve me reflecting on how I reacted' This would concur with the literature that sees self-reflection as a way to make sense of experiences and to develop their thinking and behaviour as well as academic engagement and success (Brackett, Rivers, & Salovey, 2011; Schutte, Malouff, & Thornsteinsson, 2013).

To these students, reflection was an integral part of being and becoming socio-emotionally intelligent. One student specifically asserted that being socio-emotionally intelligent came from being reflective, something widely discussed in the literature (Devis-Rozental, 2018; Mortiboys, 2010, 2012). However, the student cautioned:

'We should be a lot more reflective; people don't really understand why we should be reflective. [it] is almost like a token statement'.

This participant asserted that in their view, the term had become too general, was used in the wrong context or overused, and therefore lost its value. Additionally, one lecturer acknowledged that it was vital to account for our own experience when reflecting to ensure it was deep and meaningful and not just a descriptive activity.

> "it very much comes down to the interpretation of the tutor delivering it [reflective module]; the way the direction in which it is taken" (student).

To these participants, reflection within the context of SEI development was an essential factor.

Being a 'reflective practitioner' features prominently in theory, practice and policy, especially within teaching programmes where cycles and models are used to instigate

reflection on action. These participants referred to reflection as the ability to contemplate their lived experience in order to learn something from it. The need to reflect deeply and meaningfully was highlighted. However, according to them, this was not achieved within some programmes, because although students are asked to reflect, these reflections are time-sensitive and graded and therefore carry a different type of meaning. One of the lecturers acknowledged this by saying that the term was so overused that people did not understand it as it was meant to be.

Discussing the lack of opportunity to develop reflection to support students to develop their SEI one lecturer reported that:

> "Probably the way I was able to develop students social emotionally was though tutorials, but that's the nearest I got."

Student participants acknowledged a lack of time and space to think about themselves and their wellbeing while in the programme. Within this context, they stated that reflection is not given much priority. Concurring with this, one lecturer talked about the importance of giving students the time to develop their SEI as they write about their feelings, experiences and thoughts. To explore this further, she referred to a unit that she delivers on a similar programme. In this unit students needed to reflect over a period of time, and this allowed them to record their experiences and thoughts without so many constraints. She added that giving these students the time to reflect was beneficial as they were able to explore ideas in depth.

Another lecturer stated that a lack of understanding of the depth and critical thinking skills needed to engage in reflection could also play a part in the lack of reflexivity (a more holistic in-depth practice). Conversely, participants referred to the importance of reflection as a way to bring something up to the surface and to learn from it. Here there is an implication that SEI is an attribute within us that should be given the space, acknowledgement and permission to flourish within a reflective environment. The over usage of reflective models was also raised by another lecturer as this can be counterproductive as people only 'Scratch the surface' of a situation by being descriptive and 'going through the motions.' This view is shared by theorists warning that this type of learning will not be lasting or useful for self-development (Devis-Rozental, 2018; Hatton & Smith, 1995).

According to Grant and Kinman (2013), reflection is an important aspect to develop SEI. Rees (2013) found that facilitating reflective learning was useful to engage students more meaningfully with their emotions.

> "reflection helped the students to develop background resources and strategies to manage the emotional challenges inherent in caring work." Rees (2013, p. 49)

Ingram (2013) maps aspects of SEI to reflective practice explaining that these are important to practice effectively with an emphasis on the benefits for the end-users. More recent work explores this notion to engage students to reflect in order to develop SEI for their own wellbeing both personally and professionally (Devis-Rozental, 2018). This will allow them to have the emotional robustness, resilience and confidence, amongst other qualities to deal effectively with all aspects of their lives. Consequently, students should be supported to develop within a holistic context where their personal development is as important as their academic achievement and professional practice as these are interwoven (Devis-Rozental, 2018).

Models such as Driscoll (2007), Gibbs (1988) or Kolb's (1984) are useful to internalise the steps to deeper learning such as when reflecting on a social situation to develop better alternatives related to behaviour or response. However, these should not be imposed since a personal narrative or mindful activity can be as effective (Devis-Rozental, 2018).

Reflection is often seen as a cognitive process. For example, Dewey (1933) saw it as a form of thinking; Kolb (1984) refers to it as experiential learning and Schon (1987) linked it to knowledge. It is important to note that Gibbs (1988) mentions the role of emotions when reflecting, 'there is an over-reliance on the thinking about the emotion and not the emotion itself, to explore how it made us feel' (Devis-Rozental, 2018, p. 134). Therefore, traditional models are not accounting for intuition which is another important aspect of our SEI.

Consequently, a review of reflection as a way of gaining insight allowing for tacit knowledge to surface should be explored further. This is especially valid since the literature asserts that the essence of SEI is within us (Devis-Rozental, 2018).

What should be sought is a type of reflection where thoughts are allowed to develop, and emotions felt to help us flourish and self-actualise; space, where time is given until individuals, make sense as a way of developing a deeper understanding of themselves. This linkage between cognition and feeling could be paralleled to an embodied relational understanding (Galvin & Todres, 2013), which is a way of practicing with our head (knowledge), our hand (practice) and our heart (emotions) (Devis-Rozental, 2018). Within the context of education, reflexivity could be used to support students through the rapid changes, risks and uncertainties as a way to encourage them to develop a new perspective and to engage with their social environment properly. This could be particularly useful to support students during difficult situations, such as the current COVID 19 pandemic.

Humanising the learning environment

While it is evident that students develop some areas of their SEI while completing a higher education programme, there is growing evidence that a positive classroom environment influences learning (Mortiboys, 2012). Consequently, it is important to continue developing spaces and opportunities to do so. It is also vital to ensure that university staff know and understand why this is vital. Goleman (1996) argues that strong emotions disable the ability to maintain a working memory and a level head, both important to students and how they behave. Additionally, Wright (2005) states that behaviour and learning are linked; therefore, developing a positive university environment where students can develop their SEI is essential. Doing so could be done by considering practical things such as preparing the environment beforehand, considering learner's preferences and knowing students by their preferred name. Humanising within the context of higher education is an area that has not been explored until recently (Devis-Rozental, 2018), yet it is increasingly clear that it needs to be considered when developing programmes to fully support and engage students holistically.

Developing a humanised approach where the culture of the university centres around having a positive environment that fosters holistic learning is necessary. This is not something impossible as some universities and other educational institutions are already changing their culture in order to provide a much more meaningful experience for their

students. Examples of this are the Tecmilenio University in Mexico and the University of Buckingham in the UK, which are recognised as positive education universities (Devis-Rozental, 2018). They have used positive psychology strategies based on Seligman's (2011) work to impact on every aspect of their delivery to engage and support students holistically. Their results are already evident with students repeatedly putting the University of Buckingham at the top for student satisfaction in the annual national student survey.

By being able to experience their university journey together, students were able to practice SEI skills such as empathy, rapport, and engagement while developing and handling relationships. Participants said that they enjoyed sharing knowledge and experience with others and that this gave them confidence in their abilities.

Learning by observing was also explored. Consequently, the learning environment where others are the tools from which to learn should be considered. Opportunities and spaces to develop friendships and bonds are important to support students in developing their SEI but also to feel that they have a community of peers in the same situation as them reinforcing a sense of belonging (Mortiboys, 2012; Parkes, 2014). Having an organised programme of study with all the relevant tools they need to learn supports SEI attributes as students can feel comfortable and secure, developing a sense of belonging. For example, some students referred to negative experiences at the beginning of their course due to the lack of organisation and communication and this, according to them, affected their confidence, self-esteem and resilience. In that year, they recount a high dropout rate and the students who stayed in the programme did not feel valued or supported. One of the students stated that it was only when a supportive and caring programme leader took over the programme and took immediate action to resolve the issues and listen to the students, that these students felt able to learn effectively. Therefore, accountability and a whole university approach are important to support students effectively (Devis-Rozental, 2018).

Ensuring that practicalities such as the right paperwork, the administration and organisation of the programme were in place, as well as ensuring that facilities were appropriate, impacted on these students. For instance, some stated that they felt unsettled due to not having the right information or ability to access their online tools and that this made it difficult for them to feel confident or that they belonged to the university community. This again can be achieved by taking on a whole university approach to wellbeing, for example, through positive education strategies (Devis-Rozental, 2018).

Aloni (2011, p. 45) states that there needs to be 'respect for humanistic and environmental values' so that students feel safe. Not many authors have identified this, especially when referring to how these practical issues can support the development of SEI (Devis-Rozental, 2017, 2018). However, considering humanistic concepts such as Maslow's (2014) hierarchy of needs, for people to be able to self-actualise, those basic needs related to safety and security must be in place. There seems to be a correlation to someone's experience of practical issues and their ability to develop their SEI (Devis-Rozental, 2018).

Arjunan et al. (2016, p. 12) also argue that 'administrative matters' and support are essential for good practice so that students can see their university experience within a holistic context. Therefore, a whole university approach is needed where practical issues are accounted for, and all the things students will need are ready and easily accessible to all. For example, a student commented: 'I didn't give up because I had people that were

saying, You can do it. And keep believing in you whereas if it carried on like it did, I wouldn't have made it. And that's, you know, genuinely true. And, as soon as you know the support is out there, even if you don't access it, it's just a relief to know it's there if I need it. Which a lot of people don't know' There is also a need to ensure that students have safe spaces in which to try their new learned skills so that they can gain confidence amongst other important attributes within SEI.

Students need nurturing environments to develop their own socio-emotional intelligence:

Lecturers as SEI role models

One of the main findings from this small-scale study, and a novel premise was the notion that lecturers have an impact on the development of students SEI, but lecturers may not be aware of it. To these students, a lecturer who is knowledgeable in SEI and models it within their practice and behaviour affects their own understanding of SEI. This is something that has not been discussed within the literature until recently (Devis-Rozental, 2018). These students referred to lecturers who were in tune with their needs, nurturing, passionate, genuine and approachable; those willing to develop positive student-lecturer relationships and are encouraging and motivating. This was also found by Derounian (2017) in his study on what makes an inspirational academic, highlighting that passion was a main contributor.

A student commented,

"The fact that we actually stuck there and got there it was just another example that when you've got the right support, the right encouragement and the right people and the right things going on, you can pretty much plough through a lot of hardship."

They talked about a lecturer who functioned as a role model, able to demonstrate their SEI within the classroom and who integrated its principles within the lectures and that these would inspire students to then apply it to their own experiences. One student asserted:

"I don't think the teachers quite realise the impact they can have. I learned from passionate people who came before me. And if you have that in life, whatever it is you're doing is so important . . . if your level of passion can be cascaded to all these people and then they all go to their team and cascade. It's like a rolling effect"

Students talked candidly about times where different tutors had disregarded their own emotions homogenising them and not seeing each student as an individual within a holistic context and how this had affected their performance. For example, one student said:

"if you meet their [students] needs holistically then obviously they'll be able to get the best grade they can . . . champion them. Because, again, to be honest, as an adult, it's quite soul-destroying when you go through all of that, and then it's not, you're not really counted as anything."

Thus, if students feel valued, supported and encouraged, they will do the best they can. What is more, this student added:

"it makes a difference (to have) time for us as students, not just as a class but individually if we needed."

One lecturer agreed and further argued that 'there probably does need to be a shift in the way the teaching role is viewed.' There is a need to move to a more personalised approach in higher education where students feel valued and supported as individuals. A need to further recognise and diversity and inclusion through the way we deliver education in a more individualise way. Within this study, lecturers acknowledged that they had to help students deal with complex situations, but how they do this was not clearly explained during the interviews. What is more, there was a lack of acknowledgement of their impact on students' SEI. In fact, one lecturer stated: 'as long as I got them through their assignments, I wasn't particularly interested about their social and emotional intelligence'.

> This is concerning as it is a demonstration of the more surface level and process-led approaches still used in some educational settings today. It is also at odds with the needs of students expressed in this study. For instance:

> "It just mainly boils down to having someone who really cares. And it is passionate. And treats everyone as an individual. Every student has to be able to feel that, if they need to talk to someone, they can. Privately, confidentially, and actually be listened to and supported and understood, you know. And then helped in any way possible. I mean some students probably find that the course isn't for them, which is fine. But, what a tragedy to leave the course just because they didn't know that support was out there."

A report by Hughes, Panjwani, Tulcidas, and Byrom (2018) for Student Minds, also highlights the importance of lecturers in supporting students with their wellbeing. However, the study found that lecturers are not always well prepared to do this as they lack proper training or support. Consequently, developing an awareness of the role of the lecturer as more than a font of knowledge in order to support and engage students effectively is essential, as is to give lecturers the support and training to be able to do so.

Universities must take students' learning and development in a much more holistic way, where all areas of their life both professional and personal are developed in and outside of the classroom with the help of knowledgeable and supportive academics who are peers in the learning journey. To do so, we argue, it is crucial to support lecturers in developing their own SEI so that they can support students and role model the skills they would like their students to have, but more importantly for their wellbeing. This is an important aspect, however, not within the scope of this paper to discuss further

Conclusion

This article contributes to the field of higher education teaching and learning as it clearly identifies the areas to consider to support students in developing their SEI while at university, an area neglected until recently.

This can be tackled by developing positive education strategies in all areas of provision and can by creating an environment that allows them opportunities for social learning in small groups where they can try things within a safe environment, something which can be difficult for large cohorts. It can also be achieved by creating spaces where they can reflect meaningfully and organising their practical environment so that they can develop a sense of belonging.

The most notable finding from this research project is the role that academics unknowingly play in the development of students' SEI. It is important to therefore ensure that they understand their impact on students SEI inside and outside of the classroom. This can have implications for teaching and learning quality, attainment and success. More importantly, it seems that a whole university approach where the culture of the organisation puts the wellbeing of students at its centre, as positive education does, can have a positive impact on students SEI.

It is imperative that those working with students do not underestimate the power that their attitude, commitment, passion and example can have on students. Within the context of HE in the UK this is something which has not been fully embraced and therefore presents many interesting possibilities. For instance, there should be a focus on development and enhancement of the lecturer's own SEI to enhance the lecturer's own wellbeing during their academic career; an area identified as an issue, especially in the past few years, but neglected even though it is very important (Smith & Ulus, 2019).

Working in higher education is a privilege, with this comes great responsibility as we are culture leaders, supporting our students to be the culture leaders of the future and it is our engagement with these students that can make a great difference. In order to do so academics must continue developing their own SEI, to be able to inspire, engage and support others by fulfilling their purpose and sharing their passion. As one of the participants of this project put it: 'if your level of passion can be cascaded to all these people and then they all go to their team and cascade. It's like a rolling effect', the type of effect that can enrich society.

Limitations

This was a small-scale study looking at a homogenous group, and this presents some limitations. For instance, all participants were from the same ethnic background due to the population within the immediate area, and therefore cultural variations have not been accounted for. Additionally, all participants have a background in education practice, and this may have had an impact on the values they shared and ideas they presented. Additionally, only one participant was a male, again representative of the sample and subject study. This is one of the reasons why participants are not described in more depth to maintain confidentiality.

Recommendations

It is important to continue investigating how students can develop their SEI while at university to ensure that programmes and institutions can put the right type of support into place for students to do so. Especially in this ever-changing landscape where employers seek candidates who are rounded, resilient and motivated and those who have the necessary soft skills to thrive in working environments. More importantly, at times such as this, of uncertainty for the future, it is crucial to support students on becoming more resilient. This can be done within the context of positive education as it creates a framework from which to develop this area further. Doing so would also give SEI more rigour and creates a stronger evidence base to support evaluation of impact.

Developing a university wide culture where students and staff are supported within a holistic approach, integrating cognition and feeling, to become more socio-emotionally intelligent must be fostered. Higher education institutions must understand that by doing this they will have a positive impact on retention, success and student experience. Again, this is an area that can and should be implemented within the context of positive education as it would interrelate academic gain with wellbeing and development of invaluable personal skills.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Camila Devis-Rozental http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0694-171X

References

Aloni, N. (2011). Humanistic education: From theory to practice. In W. Veugelers (Ed.), *Education and humanism* (pp. 35–46). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Arjunan, A., Bannister, D., Brown, Z., Ellison, L., Jones, D., & Wang, W. (2016). *An investigation into 'Good Practice', students' and lecturers' perspectives on the NSS questions 1-4.* Wolverhampton: University of Wolverhampton.

Atkins, L., & Wallace, S. (2012). *Qualitative research in education.* London, UK: Sage Publications Ltd.

Bar-On, R. (2005). The Bar-On model of emotional-social intelligence. In P. Fernández-Berrocal & N. Extremera Eds.. *Special issue on emotional intelligence* (pp. 17). Psicothema.

Brackett, M.A., Rivers, S.E., & Salovey, P. (2011). Emotional intelligence: Implications for personal, social, academic and workplace success. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *5*(1), 88–103. doi:10.1111/j.1751-9004.2010.00334.x

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners.* London, UK: Sage.

British Educational Research Association (BERA). (2011). *Ethical guidelines for Educational research.* London: BERA.

Bunce, L., Baird, A., & Jones, S.E. (2016). The student-as0consumer approach in higher education and its effect on academic performance. *Studies in Higher Education*, *42*(11), 1958–1978. doi:10.1080/03075079.2015.1127908

Byrne, E., Brugha, R., Clarke, E., Lavelle, A., & McGarvey, A. (2015). Peer interviewing in medical education research: Experiences and perceptions of student interviewers and interviewees. *BMC Research Notes*, *8*(513), 1–11. doi:10.1186/s13104-015-1484-2

Chalcraft, D., Hilton, T., & Huges, T. (2015). Customer, Collaborator or Co-creator? What is the role of the student in a changing higher education servicescape. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, *25*(1), 1–4. doi:10.1080/08841241.2015.1044790

Chong, S., Ling, L.E., & Chuan, G.K. (2011). Developing student teachers' professional identities – An exploratory study. *International Education Studies*, *4*(1), 30–38. doi:10.5539/ies.v4n1p30

Clarke, M. (2016). Addressing the soft skills crisis. *Strategic HR Review*, *15*(3), 137–139. doi:10.1108/SHR-03-2016-0026

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspectives in the research process.* London, UK: Sage.

Derounian, J.G. (2017). Inspirational teaching in higher education: What does it look, sound and feel like? *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, *11*(1), 1–5. doi:10.20429/ijsotl.2017.110109

Devis-Rozental, C. (2017). Developing socio-emotional intelligence in early years scholars [PhD Thesis]. Bournemouth University, Faculty of Health and Social Sciences.

Devis-Rozental, C. (2018). *Developing socio-emotional intelligence in higher education scholars*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think*. Boston, MA: Heath and co.

Driscoll, J. (2007). Practising clinical supervision: A reflective approach for healthcare professionals. In *2nd edition*. Edinburgh: Bailliere Tindall Elsevier.

Galvin, K., & Todres, L. (2013). *Caring and wellbeing: A lifeworld approach*. Oxon: Routledge.

Gibbs, G. (1988). *Learning by doing: A guide to teaching and learning methods*. Oxford, UK: Oxford Further Education Unit.

Goleman, D. (1996). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. London, UK: Arrow books.

Goleman, D. (2007). *Social intelligence*. London, UK: Arrow books.

Grant, L., & Kinman, G. (2013). *The importance of emotional intelligence for staff and students in the 'helping' professions: Developing an emotional curriculum*. London: The Higher Education Academy.

Guest, G., MacQueen, K. M., & Namey, E.E., (2012). *Applied thematic analysis*. London: Sage Publications.

Hastings, S.L., & Cohn, T.J. (2015). Social development and relationship enhancement. In J. C. Wade, L.I. Marks, & R.D. Hetzel (Eds.), *Positive psychology on the college campus* (pp. 239–260). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Hatton, N., & Smith, D. (1995). Reflection in teacher education- towards definition and implementation. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *11*(1), 33–49. doi:10.1016/0742-051X(94)00012-U

Holloway, I., & Brown, L. (2012). *Essentials of a qualitative doctorate*. California: Left coast press Inc.

Hughes, G., Panjwani, M., Tulcidas, P., & Byrom, N. (2018). *Students mental health: The role and experiences of academics*. Oxford, UK: Student Minds.

Ingram, R. (2013). Locating emotional intelligence at the heart of social work practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, *2013*(43), 987–1004. doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcs029

Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as a source of learning and development*. New Jersey, USA: Prentice-Hall.

Macaskill, A. (2013). The mental health of university students in the United Kingdom. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, *41*(4), 426–441. doi:10.1080/03069885.2012.743110

Macfarlane, B. (2009). *Researching with integrity: The ethics of academic enquiry*. London, UK: Routledge.

Maslow, A.H. (2014). *Towards a psychology of being*. Floyd, VA: Sublime Books.

Mortiboys, A. (2010). *How to be an effective teacher in higher education*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.

Mortiboys, A. (2012). *Teaching with emotional intelligence: A step-by-step guide for higher and further education professionals* (2nd ed.). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Office for Students, (2020, May 5). National students survey. Retrieved from: https://www.office forstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/

Parkes, S. (2014). Fostering a sense of belonging: Supporting the early formation of student identity as successful learners in higher education. *Journal of Learning and Development in Higher Education*, *2014*(7), 1–22.

Rees, K.L. (2013). The role of reflective practices in enabling final year nursing students to respond to the distressing emotional challenges of nursing work. *Nurse Education in Practice*, *13*(2013), 48–52. doi:10.1016/j.nepr.2012.07.003

Rogers, C. (1961). *On Becoming a person: A therapist's view of Psychotherapy*. London, UK: Constable.

Schon, D. (1987). *Educating reflective practitioners*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Schreiner, L.A. (2015). Positive psychology in higher education: The contribution of positive psychology to student success and institutional effectiveness. In J.C. In Wade, L.I. Marks, & R.D. Hetzel (Eds.), *Positive psychology on the college campus* (pp. 1–26). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schutte, N.S., Malouff, J.M., & Thornsteinsson, E.B. (2013). Increasing emotional intelligence through training: Current status and future directions. *The International Journal of Emotional Education*, 5(1), 56–72.

Schwartz, B., & Sharpe, K. (2010). *Practical wisdom: The right way to do the right thing*. New York, NY: Riverhead Book.

Seligman, M. (2011). *Flourish: A new understanding of happiness and wellbeing and how to achieve them*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Smith, C., & Ulus, E. (2019). Who cares for academics? We need to talk about emotional well-being including what we avoid and intellectualize through macro-discourse. *Organisation*, (2019), 1–18.

Todres, L., & Galvin, K.T. (2008). Embodied interpretation: A novel way of evocatively re-presenting meanings in phenomenological research. *Qualitative research*, 8(5), 468–583 doi:10.1177/1468794108094866.

Wright. D. (2005). There is no need to shout! The secondary teacher's guide to Behaviour Management. Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes Ltd.

Appendices

CODES

(1) Confidence
(2) Current practice
(3) Definition (Students)
(4) Definitions (Lecturers)
(5) Developing socio-emotional intelligence
(6) Experience of applying socio-emotional intelligence
(7) Gaps in current practice
(8) Its ok to fail
(9) Knowledge gives confidence
(10) Lecturer
(11) Lived experience
(12) Personal fears
(13) Practice development
(14) Practice makes perfect
(15) Rationale for supporting development of socio-emotional intelligence
(16) Reflection
(17) Role modelling
(18) Self-awareness
(19) Socio-emotional intelligence is always being happy
(20) Strengths of provision
(21) Support
(22) Tacit knowledge
(23) Teamwork
(24) Time