

Emotional Intelligence of Distance Learners at the School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia

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Abstract

Adult learners encounter various barriers causing them emotional challenges. Meanwhile, proponents of Emotional Intelligence (EI) suggest that individuals with higher EI cope more successfully. This article reports the findings of a study with the purpose of exploring the EI of distance learners at the School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia (SDE, USM). Two hundred and ninety four students completed a self-report questionnaire survey. The survey comprised the Schutte's Self-Report Inventory (1998) to obtain the EI scores of the students and demographic details. The results depicted that 66.3% of the sample at the SDE, USM showed MidEI scores ranging between 117 and 143 scored on the SSRI. Whereas, 17.9% of the sample scored in the HighEI range with scores above 143 on the SSRI and 15.8% of the sample obtained scores below 117 on the SSRI. It appears that most of the sample at SDE USM had EI scores which can be deemed to be above average and these scores indicate that they should be able to deal with the challenges that they will face in their academic pursuit as distance learners. The findings also showed that the students demonstrated a variety of emotionally attributes such as knowing when to speak about their personal problems to others, having control over their emotions, being able to easily recognise their emotions as they experience them as well as motivating themselves by imagining a good outcome to the tasks they take on. However, there were a few students who had low EI scores. Based on the argument that EI is important in predicting success, it is therefore suggested that EI training might help students persevere in facing the challenges they encounter as adult learners in the distance education programme. Having emotional intelligence enables an individual to identify emotional information and appreciate its value in the person's life. This allows the individual to use the information to make judgements of competing goals and choices as well as to think of alternatives to achieve long-term goals for the attainment of emotional well-being for oneself and others.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Distance Education

Abstrak

Pelajar dewasa menghadapi pelbagai halangan yang menyebabkan mereka mengalami cabaran emosi. Sementara itu, penyokong Kecerdasan Emosi (KE) mengatakan bahawa individu yang mempunyai KE yang tinggi lebih mudah berjaya. Artikel ini melaporkan penemuan kajian yang bertujuan meneroka KE pelajar jarak jauh di Pusat Pengajian Pendidikan Jarak Jauh, Universiti Sains Malaysia (PPPJJ, USM). Dua ratus sembilan puluh empat orang pelajar telah menyiapkan kajian soal-selidik yang laporannya dibuat sendiri oleh mereka. Kaji selidik terdiri daripada Inventori Laporan Sendiri Schutte (1998) bagi mendapatkan skor KE pelajar dan butir-butir demografi. Keputusan menggambarkan bahawa 66.3% daripada sampel di PPPJJ, USM menunjukkan skor MidKE antara 117 dan 143 telah diperolehi pada ILSS. Manakala 17.9% daripada sampel itu memperoleh skor dalam julat HighKE dengan skor melebihi 143 pada ILSS dan 8% daripada sampel mendapat skor bawah 117 pada ILSS. Ternyata bahawa kebanyakan sampel di PPPJJ, USM memperoleh skor KE yang boleh disifatkan sebagai melebihi purata dan skor ini menunjukkan bahawa mereka seharusnya mampu untuk menangani cabaran yang mereka hadapi dalam usaha meneruskan akademik mereka sebagai pelajar jarak jauh. Hasil kajian juga mendapati bahawa pelajar menunjukkan pelbagai atribut emosi seperti mengetahui masa yang sesuai untuk bercakap tentang masalah peribadi mereka kepada orang lain, boleh mengawal emosi mereka, mudah dapat mengenali emosi mereka kerana mereka pernah mengalaminya serta memotivasikan diri mereka dengan membayangkan hasil yang baik daripada tugas yang mereka pikul. Walau bagaimanapun, terdapat segelintir pelajar yang memperoleh skor KE yang rendah. Berdasarkan hujah bahawa KE adalah penting dalam meramal kejayaan, dengan itu, dicadangkan bahawa latihan KE mungkin membantu pelajar tabah dalam menghadapi cabaran yang mereka tempuhi sebagai pelajar dewasa dalam program pendidikan jarak jauh. Mempunyai kecerdasan emosi membolehkan seseorang individu mengenal pasti maklumat emosi dan menghargai nilainya dalam kehidupan seseorang. Hal ini membolehkan individu menggunakan maklumat tersebut untuk membuat pertimbangan terhadap matlamat dan pilihan yang bersaing serta memikirkan alternatif untuk mencapai matlamat jangka panjang bagi mencapai kesejahteraan emosi untuk diri sendiri dan orang lain.

Kata kunci: Kecerdasan Emosi, Pendidikan Jarak Jauh

Introduction

Non-traditional adults returning to formal education face various barriers (Cross, 1981) causing them to experience considerable pressure and emotional challenges which might undermine their success. The School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia (SDE, USM) provides a second opportunity for many adults to realise their dream to pursue a degree. The SDE USM has been offering distance education since 1971 when it began as a unit under the Centre of Education Services.

Keegan (1996) characterised distance education as:

1. The quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process (this distinguishes it from conventional face-to-face education);
2. The influence of an educational organisation both in the planning and preparing of learning materials, and in the provision of student support services (this distinguishes it from private study and teach-yourself programmes);
3. The use of technical media – print, audio, video or computer – to unite teacher and learner, and carry the content of the course;
4. The provision of a two-way communication so that students may benefit from or even initiate dialogue (this distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education); and
5. The quasi-permanent absence of the learning group throughout the length of the learning process so that people are usually taught as individuals rather than in groups with the possibility of occasional meetings either face-to face or by electronic means for both didactic and socialisation purposes.

Meanwhile, Md. Nor (1999) a former Dean of the SDE, USM, defined distance learning as the acquisition of knowledge through mediated information and instruction, encompassing all technological and other forms of learning at a distance. Md. Nor explained that in the SDE, USM distance education programme, students are supplied with self-instructional materials in the form of modules that are supported by other multimedia modes such as audio-video tapes and slides. Students are also

required to use the internet, listen to radio broadcasts and attend teleconferencing sessions at the various Regional Centres spread throughout Malaysia. Students are also required to participate in face-to-face sessions.

Hillesheim (1998) stated that students operating in the distance education mode “encounter various barriers to their success that do not exist in the traditional face-to-face classroom.” Upon enrolment, adult distance students usually experience a transition from a non-student role to a student role that affects himself/herself and his/her family. The process may continue throughout the course of the students’ undergraduate studies as they learn to balance the complexity of roles in which they live (Rice, 1982; Lauzon, 1989 cited in Saw et al., 1999).

Sutherland (1998), writing about the implications of research on adult learning, highlighted the need to recognise the emotional dimension of learning. Many other scholars have also emphasised that emotions are intricately bound up in the ways people think, behave and make decisions (Lewis and Haviland-Jones, 2000; Oatley and Jenkins, 1996).

Theoretical Framework

Due to the influence of emotions on human behaviour, it is not surprising that there is a great interest in the construct of Emotional Intelligence (EI). Mayer and Salovey (1997) defined EI as

the ability to perceive, appraise, and express emotions accurately; the ability to access and generate feelings when they facilitate cognition; the ability to understand affect-laden information and make use of emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth and well-being (p. 10).

Eminent EI scholars encouraged the proliferation of more empirical research to explore and consolidate the role of EI in accounting for important outcomes in education, workplace and family settings (Goleman, 1995; Schutte et al., 1998; Bocchino, 1999). It is argued that EI plays a very significant part in the cognitive control of emotions of distance learners.

Schutte et al. (1998) conceptualised and developed the Schutte's Self-Report Inventory (SSRI) based on Salovey and Mayer's (1990) theory of EI. The SSRI assesses overall EI. According to Schutte et al. (2002), the SSRI EI scale score predicted cooperation in a Prisoner's Dilemma situation. The SSRI has been shown to be able to predict school success, in that incoming college students' EI scores predicted their end-of-year grade point average (Schutte, et al., 1998). The developers believed that the SSRI is of value for people who (a) wish to understand their own characteristics so that they can better set their goals and work toward them; (b) experience problems in area related to EI or (c) are considering entering settings or careers in which EI is important. The scale might be useful to help individuals who are at risk for performing at tasks that require EI, as in establishing themselves in a new setting such as college so that they may benefit from special guidance, training or support (Schutte, et al., 1998).

The purpose of this study is to determine the EI level of the students at the SDE, USM using SSRI.

Method

Participants

The total population of this study consisted of the 651 students in the English II course (651 Distance Learners) at the SDE, USM. Fifty percent of the students (327 students) were selected using random proportionate sampling according to degree programme (rounded to the next full person per programme). Ten percent of these students (33 students) were selected for the pilot study using random proportionate sampling. The remaining 90% of the students (294 students) were selected for the main study using random proportionate sampling (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). A total of 238 (80.95%) out of the 294 distance learners responded in the questionnaire survey. The 238 participants of the study consisted of 118 males (49.6%) and 120 (50.4%) females.

Instrument

This study utilised a self-report questionnaire entitled Emotional Intelligence Cambridge (EICAM). The questionnaire sought to elicit demographic information of the participants such as age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, income and Regional Centres of the students. It also included the abovementioned SSRI (Schutte et al., 1998) which is a self-report EI scale to obtain the participants' EI scores. A factor analysis showed that the SSRI is uni-factorial; "representing the following categories: appraisal and expression of emotion in the self and others, regulation of emotion in the self and others, and utilisation of emotions in solving problems."

The SSRI appears to produce reliable perception and managing emotion EI scores for adolescents and adults. The SSRI developed through factorial analysis showed good internal reliability with two different samples. Schutte et al. (1998) reported internal consistency of .87 to .90. A two-week test-retest also indicated a reliability of .78. The scale also indicated evidence of discriminant validity. It proved to be different from cognitive ability, as measured by SAT. In terms of its distinctiveness, it was found that people who score highly on the general SSRI scale tend to score low on measures of negative affectivity and high on measures of positive affectivity, openness to feelings and empathy. However, it was not overly high as to be redundant on the basis of the description of a typical high scorer on the openness subscale as someone for whom "emotional reactions are varied and important" (Costa and Mcrae, 1992, cited in Schutte et al., 1998).

Procedure

Each of the 294 students was requested to complete a self-report questionnaire pack entitled EICAM survey that had earlier been piloted and duly revised. As a survey gives a snapshot of the particular time it was administered, the survey was planned to be administered when the time measurement effect was deemed minimal (Denscombe, 2000). The survey was conducted when the students came in to the main campus for their intensive course. The cross-sectional one-point in time questionnaire survey was personally administered on the 294 students by the researchers

who took ten minutes to brief the students about the study and their rights, and to assure them that their rights would be upheld. The students completed the EICAM survey between 50 and 65 minutes. Each participant signed an informed consent to participate in the study and was debriefed upon the completion of the study (Bryman, A., 2004).

Results

This section presents a description of the 238 distance learners who completed the EICAM survey.

Gender

A total of 238 (80.95%) out of the 294 distance learners responded in the questionnaire survey. The 238 participants of the study consisted of 118 males (49.6%) and 120 (50.4%) females.

Age

Table 1 presents a description of the sample based on age and gender. The mean age of the participants was 34 years. The youngest was a 21 year-old male and the oldest was a 52 year-old male.

Table 1 Description of the sample by age and gender

Age in years	Gender		Total
	Female	Male	
20–29	28	10	38
30–39	77	86	163
40–49	15	21	36
More than 50	0	1	1
Total	120	118	238

Ethnicity

There were 154 (64.7%) Malays, 45 (18.9%) Chinese, 18 (7.6%) Indians and 21 (8.8%) participants were of other ethnic origins such as indigenous and Eurasians. The large number of Malay students was mainly due to the

quota that was allocated for the Malays to pursue their further education in the local government sponsored universities. The small number of Indian students reflected the small number of Indians in the SDE, USM population, in comparison to the Malay and Chinese students. The ethnic group membership of the sample is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Description of the sample based on ethnic group membership

Ethnicity	Frequency	Percent
Malay	154	64.7
Chinese	45	18.9
Indian	18	7.6
Others	21	8.8
Total	238	100.0

Marital Status

The marital status of the participants is depicted in Table 3. The 195 participants (81.9%) were married, 41 (17.2%) of them were single and 2 (0.8%) were divorced.

Table 3 Description of the sample by marital status

Marital status	Frequency	Percent
Single	41	17.2
Married	195	81.9
Divorced	2	0.8
Total	238	100.0

Occupation

The 117 participants were teachers (49.2%), 28 (11.8%) were clerks, 26 (10.9%) held various positions in the civil service, 14 (5.9%) were from the police force and 51 (21.4%) were from various other occupations. Two (0.8%) participants were homemakers.

Total Family Income of the Participants

The total family income of the participants is depicted in Table 5. The average monthly income representing the lowest 40% of group earnings was RM840. The average monthly income representing the medium 40% of group earnings was RM2,202. The average monthly income representing the highest 20% of group earnings was RM7,006 (Hitam 1999, cited in Doraisamy, 2002). The majority of the participants, 119 (50%) had a total family income of RM1000–RM2,999 per month. Hence, it can be said that most of the students came from financially moderate background. Meanwhile, 16 participants reported good total family income of RM6,000.00–RM9,999.99 per month. Three (1.3%) participants had a very good total family income of more than RM10,000 per month. This was advantageous for a good learning environment and provided access to learning materials and provision for cost of living and child upbringing. However, eight participants had income lower than RM999.00 per month. It can be said that these students might have faced some financial difficulties as compared to the other participants.

Table 4 Description of the sample by family income

Total family income	Frequency	Percent
More than RM10,000 per month	3	1.3
RM6,000–9,999.99 per month	16	6.7
RM3,000–5,999.99 per month	92	38.7
RM1,000–2,999.99 per month	119	50.0
Less than RM999.99 per month	8	3.4
Total	238	100.0

Course of Study

The participants consisted of 100 (42.0%) students from Humanities, 4 (1.7%) students from Education, 57 (24.0%) students from Management, 21 (8.8%) students from Sciences, 54 (22.7%) students from Social Sciences and 2 (0.8%) students from Engineering.

Regional Centres of the Participants

The participants came from various Regional Centres categorised according to less urban to urban as shown in Table 5. A total of 73 (30.7%) participants came from Penang, 22 (9.2%) participants were from Alor Setar and 13 (5.5%) participants were from Ipoh. These students made up 45.4 % of the sample. These Regional Centres were the nearest to the main campus. A total of 29 (12.2%) participants were from Kuala Lumpur, 7 (2.9%) were from Johor Bahru, 11 (4.6%) were from Melaka, 31 (13.0%) were from Kota Bahru, 6 (2.5%) were from Kuantan and 10 (4.2%) were from Kuala Terengganu. A total of 36 participants came from Kota Kinabalu (15, 6.3%) and Kuching (21, 8.8%) which are Regional Centres very far from the main campus in Penang.

Table 5 Regional centres of the participants

Location of regional centres		Frequency	Percent
West Malaysia – Urban	Penang	73	30.7
	Kuala Lumpur	29	12.2
	Johor Baru	7	2.9
West Malaysia – Moderately urban	Alor Setar	22	9.3
	Ipoh	13	5.5
	Melaka	11	4.6
West Malaysia – Less urban	Kota Bahru	31	13.0
	Kuantan	6	2.5
	Kuala Terengganu	10	4.2
East Malaysia – Moderately urban	Kuching	21	8.8
	Kota Kinabalu	15	6.3
Total		238	100.0

The results of the survey showed that the mean EI score of the 238 distance learners who returned the EICAM was 130. The mode was 124. The lowest EI score was 96 and the highest was 164. (The lowest possible score was 33 and highest possible score was 165). Figure 1 shows there was equal distribution in the EI score of the 238 students. The standard deviation was 12.96. The skewness of the sample was 0.286. The kurtosis of the sample was –0.153.

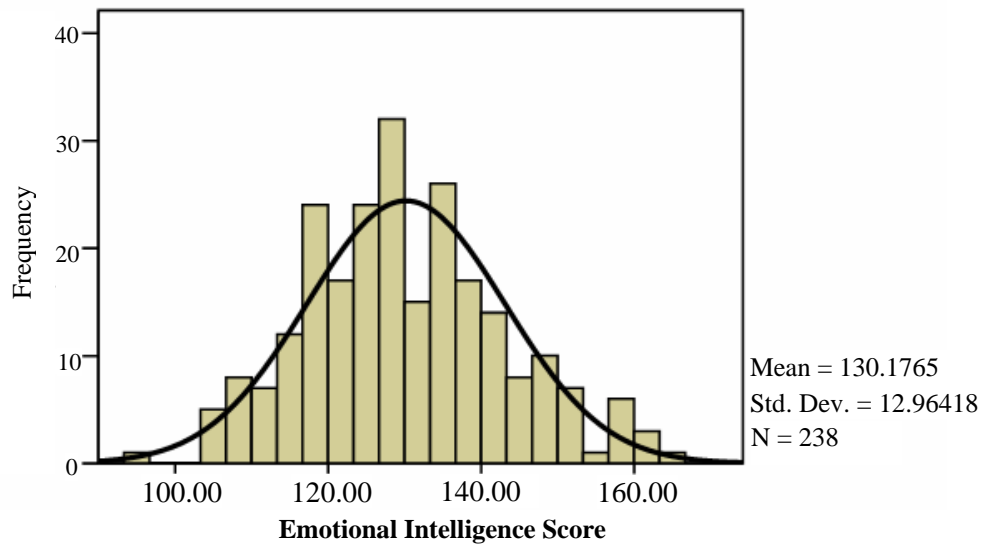


Figure 1 Distribution of EI scores of the sample

Table 6 shows the EI scores of the sample categorised as

1. HighEI: EI scores of 143 and above, i.e., one Standard Deviation (SD, 13.0) above the mean EI score of the sample;
2. MidEI: EI scores below 143 and above 117;
3. LowEI: EI scores of 117 and below, i.e., one Standard Deviation (SD, 13.0) below the mean EI score of the sample.

Table 6 EI scores of the distance learners

	EI scores of the students	Frequency	Percent
HighEI	143 and above	43	17.9
MidEI	Below 143–above 117	157	66.3
LowEI	117 and below	38	15.8
	Total	238	100.0

Discussion

As our emotions are related to how we think, behave and make decisions (Lewis and Haviland-Jones, 2000; Oatley and Jenkins, 1996), researchers are interested in the study of EI because they desire to know how EI can influence an individual's thoughts and actions in life. Do distance learners who happen to be returning adult learners have an adequate or high level of EI in order to succeed in their academic endeavour at the SDE, USM? This matter is important as prominent EI scholars such as Goleman (1995), Mayer and Salovey (1997) and Schutte et al. (1998) have often posited that EI accounts for significant outcomes in education, workplace and family settings.

This article presents the results of a study which explored the EI scores of the distance learners at the SDE, USM. The lowest EI score of the sample at the SDE, USM was 96 and the highest EI score was 164. The results also depicted that 66.3% of the sample at the SDE, USM showed MidEI scores ranging between 117 and 143 scored on the SSRI. Whereas 17.9% of the sample at the SDE, USM scored in the HighEI range with scores above 143 on the SSRI and 15.8% of the sample at the SDE, USM obtained scores below 117 on the SSRI. It appears that most of the sample at the SDE, USM had EI scores which can be deemed to be above average and these scores indicate that they should be able to deal with the challenges that they will face in their academic pursuit as distance learners. Schutte et al. (1998) maintained that the SSRI can predict school success in that incoming college students' EI scores predicted their end-of-year grade point average. Similarly, it is conjectured that most of the sample at the SDE, USM would be able to achieve success in their studies at the SDE, USM.

Distance learners need to transit from a non-student role to a student role which influences the student and his or her family and the student has to juggle the multiple roles which they are responsible for (Rice, 1982; Lauzon, 1989 as cited in Saw et al., 1999). Based on Schutte et al.'s (1998) research, students with middle and high EI scores would be more adept at demonstrating effective emotional control and management in their challenges to pursue a degree as a non-traditional distance learner. Overall, the findings of the study showed that the students demonstrated

having a high level of EI in that they know when to speak about their personal problems to others. Their responses in the questionnaire also depicted that when faced with problems, they recollected how they overcame similar problems in the past. The students also had control over their emotions and they can easily recognise their emotions as they experience them and are able to motivate themselves by imagining a good outcome to the tasks they take on. These characteristics resemble those mentioned by many eminent EI scholars such as Goleman (1995), Schutte et al. (1998) and Bocchino (1999) as belonging to those with high EI and who do attain success in what they do.

Mayer and Salovey (1997) said that low EI students may encounter more emotional setbacks and may not effectively implement emotional management strategies when encountering various barriers that may assail them as mentioned by Cross (1981) and Hillesheim (1998).

However it does not mean that those with low EI scores will not achieve success at all or meet failure in their study.

At the SDE USM, this study has raised other interesting questions. Does gender influence the individual's level of EI at the SDE, USM? Is the individual's level of EI a significant predictor of their academic success at the SDE, USM? More research on gender differences in overall EI and how individuals manage social and cultural expectations would also be fruitful. Future empirical research on the effectiveness of EI training for successful adaptations in various challenging situations would also be beneficial. Some of these questions have been addressed separately and the findings will be disseminated in forthcoming papers.

In many ways, distance learners are not like other university students who follow programmes in the conventional manner (Hillesheim, 1998). Some of the SDE students are bogged down with concerns at work and at home and have to then grapple with their study at USM. Some of the SDE students lack social and emotional support from various quarters making the task of studying via distance education a painful and solitary journey. These are the barriers faced by adult learners as identified by Cross (1981).

The scholarly significance of this study highlights the fact that in such emotionally challenging scenarios, lecturers and policy makers should strive to assist these SDE students to overcome the challenges arising from distance education. If students were helped to experience more positive emotions in their distance education, they could possibly be more interested and able to achieve success in their studies.

If distance learners who are low in EI could be identified, they might benefit from guidance, social support, training of EI skills in order to help them establish themselves or to persevere in the face of the challenges they encounter as adults learners in the distance education programme (Schutte et al., 1998). Thus, it would be beneficial to establish and implement a support programme that can attend to the emotional and academic needs of the learners. This could possibly improve student retention, the quality of the students' learning experience, their achievement and overall well-being while in continuing education.

Limitations

The study was limited to the selected distance learners at the SDE, USM in Malaysia and hence may not be generalisable to other distance learning programmes. Ideally, the IQ and personality types of the students could be obtained and controlled to determine the extent of the influence of EI on the participants' behaviour.

Conclusion

Emotions can influence the way individuals think, feel and act. Hence, emotional intelligence is important in the field of education. Educators and policy makers with EI will have the ability to recognise and use emotional knowledge to motivate and improve learning. They can be proactive in attending to the students' affective needs throughout the different stages of learning.

Research on EI is still expanding and there remain many issues to be explored (Mayer, Caruso and Salovey 2000). It is hoped that more empirical research on pertinent issues such as how highly does EI correlate with social intelligence or an individual's performance in other

fields should be conducted. Educators and policy makers should be sensitised towards the vital role of emotions in the learning process.

In closing, students, educators, researchers and policy makers should consider, recognise and realise the importance of the role of EI. Being emotionally intelligent facilitates the recognition of emotional information and its salience in a person's life empowering the individual to use the information to make judgements of competing goals and choices and to think of alternatives to achieve long-term goals for the attainment of emotional well-being for oneself and others.

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