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GROWING IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND ITS CURRENT CHALLENGES

Abstract. The article examines the role of social and emotional intelligence in the educational process and analyses the main challenges affecting its integration into higher education.

Social intelligence is understood as the ability to accurately perceive and interpret one's own and others' behaviour, and to regulate actions appropriately in various social contexts.

It is closely linked to emotional intelligence, which refers to the capacity to recognize, understand, regulate, and effectively use both personal and interpersonal emotions to guide thinking, behaviour, and social interactions. Through the analysis of international research, the article highlights global perspectives on the development of social and emotional intelligence among university students. Despite the evident worldwide acknowledgment of the importance of social and emotional intelligence and the efforts of leading international organizations to promote it, higher education institutions continue to face considerable difficulties in integrating social and emotional learning into their educational systems.

The findings reveal a gap between the recognized value of social and emotional learning and its practical implementation in universities, caused by curriculum constraints, limited assessment tools, insufficient educator preparation, cultural and conceptual misunderstandings, and challenges associated with online education. The article proposes recommendations for embedding social and emotional competencies into academic curricula, improving assessment practices, strengthening institutional and teacher support, adopting culturally responsive approaches, and designing interactive digital learning environments.

The study suggests that a systematic and context-sensitive integration of social and emotional learning is essential for enhancing students' academic success, well-being, and readiness for professional and social life.

Keywords: educational process; emotional intelligence; higher education; social and emotional learning; social intelligence.





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ЗРОСТАЮЧЕ ЗНАЧЕННЯ СОЦІАЛЬНОГО ТА ЕМОЦІЙНОГО ІНТЕЛЕКТУ У ВИЩІЙ ОСВІТІ ТА ЙОГО СУЧАСНІ ВИКЛИКИ

Анотація. У статті розглядається роль соціального та емоційного інтелекту в освітньому процесі та аналізуються основні проблеми, що впливають на його інтеграцію у вищу освіту. Соціальний інтелект розуміється як здатність правильно сприймати та інтерпретувати свою та чужу поведінку, а також належним чином регулювати дії в різних соціальних контекстах. Він тісно пов'язаний з емоційним інтелектом, який тлумачиться як здатність розпізнавати, розуміти, регулювати та ефективно використовувати як особисті, так і міжособистісні емоції для контролю мислення, поведінки та соціальної взаємодії. Завдяки аналізу міжнародних досліджень у статті висвітлюються глобальні підходи до розвитку соціального та емоційного інтелекту серед студентів університетів. Попри очевидне світове визнання значущості соціального та емоційного інтелекту та зусилля провідних міжнародних організацій щодо його популяризації, заклади вищої освіти й надалі стикаються зі значними труднощами в інтеграції соціально-емоційного навчання в освітні системи.

Результати дослідження виявляють прогалину між визнаною цінністю соціального та емоційного навчання та його практичним впровадженням в університетах, спричинену обмеженнями навчальної програми, нестачею ефективних інструментів оцінювання, недостатньою підготовкою викладачів, культурними та концептуальними непорозуміннями, а також проблемами, пов'язаними з онлайн-освітою. У статті запропоновано рекомендації щодо інтеграції соціальних і емоційних компетентностей у навчальні програми, удосконалення практик оцінювання, посилення інституційної та викладацької підтримки, впровадження культурно чутливих підходів і розроблення інтерактивних цифрових освітніх середовищ. Дослідження доводить, що системна та контекстно обґрунтована інтеграція соціально-емоційного навчання є необхідною умовою для підвищення академічної успішності студентів, їхнього добробуту, а також готовності до професійного та соціального життя.

Ключові слова: вища освіта; емоційний інтелект; освітній процес; соціально-емоційне навчання; соціальний інтелект.

Formulation of the problem and analysis of recent research and publications.

The study of university students' social and emotional intelligence is becoming increasingly important due to the growing complexity of the modern educational





environment and the shifting expectations placed on graduates. Contemporary higher education is no longer limited to the acquisition of academic knowledge, as it requires students to navigate diverse social interactions, collaborate effectively, adapt to stress, and regulate their own emotions. Thus, the investigation of the role of social and emotional intelligence is a prerequisite for improving educational outcomes and preparing students for successful social and professional integration.

Since the publication of Carnegie's "How to Win Friends and Influence People" [5] and Covey's "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" [7], the importance of cultivating social and emotional intelligence has become increasingly recognised across education, business, and personal development.

A number of studies have recently been carried out to examine the role of social and emotional intelligence in the educational process.

In their article Starynska, O. and Melnyk, Zh. investigated the relationship between social intelligence and empathy among 240 students at Ukrainian universities during the period of martial law. The study emphasizes that social intelligence is multidimensional and under stress, such as war, the relationship between its components and empathy can become complex. This suggests that supporting students' social-emotional development in crisis contexts may require targeted interventions. In particular, fostering the ability to predict behaviour and accurately interpret non-verbal emotional cues could be especially valuable. At the same time, the authors warn that excessive sensitivity to others' life circumstances could hinder empathic understanding [21].

In the course of their study Iqbal, M. N. et al. discovered a positive correlation between social intelligence and academic performance, which remained consistent across gender, locality (urban/rural), and discipline (science/arts), though the authors point out some variation by type of institution (public/private). The scientists suggest that social intelligence may enhance students' ability to collaborate, cope with academic pressures and engage effectively in learning environments. They recommend educational institutions to promote the development of social skills through training programmes, workshops, and supportive learning environments [16].

Hashem, E. S. A. discovered a strong positive correlation between self-regulation (ability to manage one's own behaviour, thoughts, emotions) and social intelligence (the ability to understand and manage social relationships effectively). The author argues that self-regulation significantly predicted social intelligence. The study recommends integrating self-regulation and social intelligence training in curricula via workshops, courses, or formal programmes [13].

Quanouki, A. and Mzara, A. believe that social intelligence is a developable skill rather than a fixed trait, which should be cultivated deliberately in students as it contributes to better social integration and greater psychological resilience [18].

In their study Valverde-Janer, M. et al. examined the factors associated with the development of emotional intelligence and resilience among university students. Their findings suggest that emotional intelligence and resilience are not evenly distributed



across student populations and may be influenced by academic context, demographic factors, and personal characteristics. The researchers emphasized the need to integrate structured opportunities for emotional intelligence and resilience development within university curricula [26].

Studying the impact of emotional intelligence on students' academic performance, Caballero-García, P. Á. and Sánchez Ruiz, S. argue that emotional intelligence is linked to greater life satisfaction and better academic outcomes, underlining the importance of integrating emotional competence into university curricula [4].

Amores, A. C. (2025) concluded that emotional intelligence interacts with other non-cognitive skills (e.g., creativity) and contributes to academic outcomes, supporting a holistic competency-based education model [1].

Usakli, H. found out that emotional intelligence levels vary significantly with respect to gender, across academic disciplines and year levels, which suggests that both personal characteristics and educational environments influence the level of emotional intelligence development [25]. In their article Garner, D. et al. highlight the benefits of integrating social-emotional learning into university policies, curricula, and student support systems, providing recommendations for incorporating social and emotional competencies into institutional operations [11].

Wang, D. and Ishak, Z. also examined the implementation of social-emotional learning programmes among college students, highlighting their benefits for students and the lack of systematic planning, institutional commitment, and culturally sensitive approaches among universities [28].

Thus, integrating social and emotional learning into academic programmes is now widely embraced by higher education professionals, who increasingly recognize its value for preparing students for university education and future careers. Educators now widely acknowledge that academic success and workplace performance rely both on mastery of subject-specific knowledge and non-cognitive competencies.

There are strong reasons to believe that university education can play a significant role in cultivating students' social and emotional intelligence. However, there are a number of contradictions between theory and practice, which substantiates the necessity of this research, including the following:

1. Despite growing global acknowledgment of the significance of social and emotional intelligence and the increasing availability of related training, most of universities still lack assessment standards that explicitly incorporate social and emotional intelligence as a central component of higher education planning and institutional evaluation.

2. In educational systems that prioritize standardized testing, social and emotional intelligence is framed as a component of quality education. There is a lack of recognition of its significance throughout the student's educational process.

3. Given that historical and regional differences shape distinct social norms, university students' social and emotional intelligence should be context-sensitive, yet conventional standardized assessments fail to account for such heterogeneity.



Therefore, the relevance of the given issue is stipulated by the insufficiency of the current level of theoretical and practical development of educational science and the imperative to address the identified contradictions.

The aim of the research. This paper aims to examine the role and significance of social and emotional intelligence in the educational process of university students and to identify the key challenges affecting its integration in higher education.

The aim of the research is achieved through the following objectives:

- to study the shifts in educational practices influenced by the growing emphasis on social and emotional intelligence;
- to determine the relationship between social and emotional intelligence;
- to examine how the development of university students' social and emotional intelligence is perceived worldwide, based on the analysis of scientific literature;
- to discover challenges of enhancing social and emotional learning;
- to provide recommendations for integrating social and emotional competencies in the educational process.

Presentation of the main material.

Nowadays there is a rising understanding that academic knowledge by itself is insufficient and that social and emotional skills play a crucial role in human well-being and success. Social-emotional skills enable individuals to enjoy life, relate well to others in a rapidly changing world and develop strong social capacities.

However, this transformation in the educational field, and in broader social sense, has unfolded through roughly three major shifts.

The first shift involved moving from a purely cognitive focus to an affective one. In other words, researchers began to look beyond intelligence alone, turning their attention to non-cognitive factors and increasingly emphasizing social and emotional forms of intelligence.

The American psychologist Edward L. Thorndike's theory of "connectionism" and his study of learning had a significant impact on the formation of early theories of intelligence. He emphasized the importance of learning and experience for intelligence, and designed numerous tests and measurement instruments to evaluate intellectual ability and aptitude [23].

As the concept of intelligence has evolved, the idea that intelligence is not a single, but multiple, has become increasingly accepted. In 1963, American psychologist Raymond Cattell introduced the distinction between fluid intelligence and crystallized intelligence [6]. Later, in 1983, Harvard psychologist Gardner Howard presented the theory of multiple intelligences, suggesting that humans possess different kinds of relatively independent intelligences, including personal intelligence, divided into intrapersonal (self-awareness, self-reflection) and interpersonal (ability to understand and relate to others) ones [10]. In 1985, Yale University psychologist Robert Sternberg put forward the Triarchic Theory of Intelligence, suggesting that there are three distinct types of intelligence: analytical, involving problem-solving and critical thinking abilities often measured by standardized tests; creative, encompassing



the ability to generate new ideas and solutions; practical intelligence, referring to the capacity of effectively applying knowledge and abilities in real-life contexts [22].

Multiple intelligence theory laid the foundation for the concept of emotional intelligence and in 1990 psychologists Peter Salovey (Yale University) and John D. Mayer (University of New Hampshire) formally introduced the term “emotional intelligence”, interpreting it as “the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate about them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” [20, p. 189]. The researchers considered emotional intelligence as a subset of social intelligence, originally defined as “the ability to understand and manage people” [24, p. 275]. This marked the first shift in the definition of “intelligence” from cognitive intelligence to emotional intelligence.

The second shift involved moving from psychological research to educational application, turning it from a theoretical idea into a practical notion of time.

Salovey, P. and Mayer, J.D. spent several years, refining the concept of “emotional intelligence” and provided a more comprehensive elaboration of its meaning as the ability to perceive emotions, access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions in order to promote emotional and intellectual growth [17]. Thus, the second shift is marked by the focus change from “intelligence” to “ability”. This is evident in the move from intelligence testing toward educational practice, from emphasizing the individual to giving greater attention to groups, and from a therapeutic psychological approach to an educational model centred on prevention and development.

As educational theory and practice have placed greater emphasis on cultivating social-emotional intelligence, and as the importance of social and emotional skills for overall educational success, civic behaviour, physical and mental well-being has become more widely recognized, the field has undergone a significant paradigm shift.

Early social-emotional intelligence development focused on building competence and resilience through behaviour-based assessments and compensatory programmes, although such approaches were criticized for being too deficit-oriented and ineffective. Critics argued for addressing the broader factors behind students’ difficulties such as well-being and belonging. This led to a shift from correcting problem behaviours to promoting social-emotional skills as part of holistic development and preventive education.

In contemporary research, social intelligence is widely understood as an individual’s capacity to accurately perceive and interpret both their own behaviour and that of others, and to regulate their actions accordingly across diverse social contexts. The notion of social intelligence is strongly connected to the concept of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is commonly interpreted as the capacity to identify, understand, regulate and effectively utilize one’s own emotions and the emotions of others in guiding cognition, behaviour, and social interaction. Social and emotional competences play a vital role in shaping the individual’s character by



fostering awareness of personal and interpersonal emotions and relationships, and academic setting is the best environment for acquiring them.

University students develop social and emotional skills through a blend of structured learning approaches (such as SEL or SEE Learning), hands-on and experiential activities, self-reflection, guidance from mentors, and active engagement in both academic and social communities. Nowadays social-emotional learning (SEL) serves as a practical tool in higher education for cultivating social and emotional competencies. SEL refers to the process through which individuals acquire and use knowledge, skills and attitudes to form healthy identities, regulate emotions, pursue personal and collective goals, demonstrate empathy, build supportive relationships, and make responsible and ethical decisions [30]. Contemporary SEL has been strongly shaped by the works of psychologists such as Daniel Goleman [12] and Howard Gardner [10], as well as educational theorists like John Dewey [8], who promoted a holistic approach integrating cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions of learning.

SEL is designed specifically to develop core competencies such as self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. When integrated into education, SEL moves skill development from being incidental to being systematic and structured. Instead of relying only on informal social interactions, SEL provides such guided activities as reflection, discussion, collaborative problem-solving, role-play, and feedback that help students practice emotional regulation, empathy, communication, and cooperation in a safe learning environment. Therefore, SEL functions as a pedagogical tool that actively enables students to acquire, practice and internalize social and emotional skills throughout the educational process.

At the national level, especially in developed countries, social and emotional competence has been prioritized as a policy development area, with initiatives introduced at school, further cultivated and refined at university, and subsequently applied as a vital foundation for professional success and lifelong personal development. In the U.S. all 50 states have early childhood/pre-K social and emotional learning standards. According to CASEL's 2022 State Scan, 27 states have adopted K-12 SEL standards (i.e. social and emotional learning programmes and standards for students from Kindergarten through 12th Grade) [34].

SEAL, which is “a comprehensive, whole-school approach to promoting the social and emotional skills that underpin effective learning, positive behaviour, regular attendance, staff effectiveness and the emotional health and well-being of all who learn and work in schools” [31, p.4], was introduced by a former UK government Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in 2005. The SEAL programme is currently being implemented in around 90% of primary and 70% of secondary British schools [14 p. 5].

In China, the first major empirical assessment of social-emotional competence among Chinese adolescents was released in 2021, marking a shift in national attention toward adolescents' socio-emotional development [29].



In Ukraine, the first pilot of a formal SEL/SEE-Learning programme began in 2019, when the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine announced the introduction of SEE-Learning programme in 26 schools across 23 regions [32]. The launch of this programme represents the first official, system-level acknowledgment of SEL within Ukrainian schools, moving it beyond its earlier status as merely a subject of scholarly discussion prior to 2019 and establishing it as a component of national education policy. At present, SEE-Learning is being actively expanded throughout Ukraine, incorporating a variety of related educational programmes and initiatives.

Thus, it can be concluded that from a developmental perspective prior to 1994 social and emotional learning was largely driven by scholarly initiatives, whereas between 1994 and 2014 the field moved into a stage of professionalization and from 2014 to 2021 it progressed into a period of standardisation, during which government involvement became highly influential. After 2021, social and emotional intelligence enters the era of globalisation, a period in which international organizations play an important role. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) runs global programmes aimed at mainstreaming SEL in education systems. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has implemented SEL-type programmes in multiple countries, collaborating with national education authorities to integrate SEL in school systems. For instance, in China, UNICEF collaborated with the Ministry of Education to run a whole-school SEL project covering a number of primary schools [37].

In 2015, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published the influential report called "*Skills for Social Progress: The Power of Social and Emotional Skills*", highlighting social and emotional competence as a key soft skill for the 21st century [33]. Following this, the OECD launched a large-scale global assessment of adolescents' social and emotional skills, releasing the first round of results in 2021, which marked the beginning of systematic assessment and practical implementation of social and emotional competence worldwide. Social and emotional competencies are now included in the curricula of most OECD countries.

This marks the start of a significant international effort to promote social and emotional intelligence on a global scale. In other words, it has evolved into a worldwide policy reform movement that seeks to move beyond traditional utilitarian and instrumentalist approaches, which overemphasize the economic function of education, toward a greater focus on fostering students' social-emotional development and overall well-being.

Although current educational trends call for enhancing university students' social and emotional intelligence, many challenges still remain, such as curriculum and institutional limitations, assessment issues, insufficient educator preparation, cultural and contextual challenges and online education. Now let us consider each of them in detail:

1. Curriculum limitations: prioritizing academic and theoretical learning over social and emotional learning.





Traditional education tends to emphasize theory over emotional and social intelligence, with educators primarily concentrating on academic instruction while largely neglecting students' social-emotional growth. For instance, a recent Ukrainian study investigating social-emotional skills among schoolchildren revealed that teachers tend to prioritize the development of social-emotional skills in 10-year-old students more than in 15-year-olds. In particular, educators focus more on developing task performance and engagement, considering these skills key to academic success, and paying less attention to emotional regulation and interpersonal skills [36]. Misconceptions about SEL such as focusing solely on academic performance while overlooking emotional and social growth can undermine teacher commitment and institutional support, limiting its successful adoption.

2. Lack of relevant assessment.

Evaluating social-emotional learning is challenging, as there is a lack of tools for directly measuring these skills, which results in inconsistent and non-standardized assessment practices. Although numerous universities run initiatives to enhance students' emotional and social intelligence, most have not established mechanisms to assess these competencies, leaving actual levels of social-emotional development unmeasured. Consequently, many SEL programmes, especially in Ukrainian schools and universities, lack reliable, validated methods to assess students' social-emotional competence [19].

3. Insufficient teacher training and lack of institutional support.

Many university instructors are not trained to teach or assess SEL-related competencies. For example, Forrester, P. M. discovered that the main obstacles to implementing SEL training for teachers include insufficient SEL-related coursework, limited institutional support, and a lack of available time [9]. Substantial resistance to change among educators hinders implementing SEL training, as teachers may be reluctant to modify their established routines, either because they are unsure that SEL methods will be effective or because they fear the added time pressures. Additionally, SEL is sometimes regarded as outside the main academic mission, which further reduces teachers' willingness to prioritise it and the lack of methodological support for integrating SEL into their courses doubles the burden. On the other hand, universities themselves often lack time, budget and human resources to implement SEL programmes effectively and without administrative backing SEL remains marginal.

4. Cultural and conceptual misunderstandings.

Cultural aspects and misunderstandings can pose significant barriers to implementing social-emotional learning effectively. In certain settings, SEL is often perceived as a "soft" or secondary aspect of education and its objectives may contradict local educational norms and priorities. The scientists assume that SEL, developed largely in Western contexts, can clash with cultural norms in diverse communities around the world [27]. SEL programmes that are not adapted to local contexts often fail to align with community norms, as cultural understandings of emotions, social interactions, and child-rearing practices may differ from the assumptions embedded in



the SEL curriculum [2]. Attempts to adopt SEL programmes cross-nationally often suffer from lack of cultural adaptation, ambiguous definitions of necessary social-emotional competencies, and difficulties in aligning SEL with local educational goals and values [3].

5. Online education.

Although digital learning platforms enhance access and flexibility in education, they may reduce opportunities for direct interpersonal engagement and contribute to social isolation, thereby impeding the development of social and emotional competencies. Lack of interpersonal contact and social isolation can cause emotional upheaval, thereby decreasing learners' sense of belonging and engagement [15]. The COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing war in Ukraine have had a profound negative impact on Ukrainian students' social and emotional learning. During the pandemic, prolonged online distance learning reduced face-to-face interaction, weakened peer relationships, and limited opportunities to develop communication, empathy, and collaboration skills, while increased stress and anxiety further undermined emotional regulation. These challenges were intensified by limited institutional focus on social-emotional education and uneven digital access. The war has deepened these effects by exposing students to trauma, displacement, insecurity, and disrupted educational environments, all of which impair emotional well-being, trust, and a sense of belonging. Together, pandemic-related isolation and war-related psychological distress have significantly hindered Ukrainian students' ability to develop and practice social and emotional competencies, highlighting the urgent need for socially supportive educational approaches.

Based on the above-mentioned challenges encountered by universities in enhancing social and emotional competencies within the educational process, the following recommendations can be proposed to support their effective and sustainable integration:

1. Universities should intentionally integrate social and emotional competencies into core academic activities rather than treating them as separate or optional. This can be achieved by embedding SEL principles into group projects, case studies, and reflective assignments that are aligned with the disciplinary content. Such an approach ensures that students develop critical social-emotional skills in context, enhancing both academic learning and personal growth without overloading the curriculum.

2. Improving the assessment of social and emotional competencies requires shifting from traditional exams to formative, qualitative approaches such as reflection, portfolios, peer feedback and self-assessment. A clear description of specific criteria and levels of performance can enhance transparency and consistency in evaluating skills like teamwork, communication and emotional regulation. Emphasizing developmental assessment allows educators to focus on students' progress and growth rather than on summative grading of social and emotional skills.

3. To address insufficient teacher training and lack of institutional support, universities should invest in systematic professional development that equips educators





with the knowledge and practical skills to integrate social and emotional competencies into teaching. This should be reinforced by strong institutional commitment, including leadership support, clear policies, and allocation of resources for SEL initiatives. Embedding SEL into staff induction programmes, providing ongoing mentoring and recognizing educators' efforts through incentives and workload acknowledgment can further ensure sustainable and effective integration of social and emotional competencies into the educational process.

4. To overcome cultural and conceptual misunderstandings, universities should implement culturally responsive strategies for integrating social and emotional competencies that respect diverse values, communication styles, and social norms. Establishing clear conceptual frameworks and shared definitions of these competencies can promote a common understanding among educators and students. Engaging students in dialogue and co-creating learning activities, offering intercultural training for staff and adapting SEL practices to local and social contexts can help make social and emotional learning more inclusive, relevant, and effective.

5. To address the challenges of online education, universities should design digital learning environments that foster interaction, collaboration and emotional engagement. This can be achieved through structured group activities, discussion forums and peer-feedback tasks that strengthen social connection. Educators should explicitly teach digital social-emotional skills, such as effective online communication, empathy, and self-regulation, while offering regular feedback and reflection opportunities. Additionally, blended support systems, including virtual mentoring and counselling services, can help sustain students' social and emotional development in online learning contexts.

Conclusion.

The analysis of theoretical foundations and recent empirical research demonstrates that social and emotional competencies significantly influence students' academic performance, psychological well-being, social integration, and readiness for professional life.

Higher-education institutions face numerous challenges in promoting emotional and social intelligence, including curricular and institutional constraints, an overemphasis on cognitive learning, the absence of standardized assessment tools, inadequate teacher preparation, cultural and contextual barriers, and issues arising from digital and online learning environments.

To effectively integrate social and emotional competencies into the educational process, universities should adopt a systemic and flexible approach that responds to existing challenges. This includes embedding social and emotional competencies directly into core academic activities rather than treating them as optional; adopting formative and qualitative assessment methods with clear criteria to ensure transparency and emphasize student growth; strengthening educator preparation through institutional support and professional development, as well as recognition of staff efforts; ensuring cultural responsiveness and shared conceptual frameworks; designing



online learning environment that promotes interaction and emotional engagement, as well as provides continuous mentoring and counselling to sustain students' social and emotional development. Together, these measures will contribute to the meaningful development of students' social and emotional competencies, enhancing both their academic success and overall well-being.

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