Enhancing social-emotional learning at HEIs: Building skills ready to meet future job market needs

Dr Anna Serdinova, Department of the Economic Theory and International Economic Relations, Dnipro University of Technology

DOI: https://doi.org/10.71957/3s9rfk05

Introduction

In today's rapidly advancing digital society, driven by continuous technological progress, the job market increasingly demands individuals who are not only highly knowledgeable but also empathic, creative, and innovative Longmore et al. (2018). To respond these challenge Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) should do their best to prepare students (future employees) to new job standards. And those soft skills could be developed only with the help of social and emotional learning (SEL) tools.

SEL helps students develop emotional intelligence, resilience, teamwork, and communication skills, which are essential for success in a workforce that values collaboration, empathy and problem-solving. By embedding SEL into education curricular and courses, we are shaping future employees who are not just technically proficient, but also well-rounded and prepared to meet the challenges of a constantly evolving workplace.

SEL is not just another educational strategy; it is a transformative approach that empowers students to take control of their own personal and academic growth. Instead of being passive receivers of information, students become active participants in their learning journey, cultivating essential life skills that extend far beyond the classroom.

Literature Review

In today's professional world, the ability to work in multidisciplinary teams and environments is paramount. Muduli (2018) and Zhu et al. (2019) highlight that the capacity to learn from a broad and integrative perspective is becoming more important than possessing deep

expertise in a single area. This shift reflects the need for individuals who can cross disciplinary boundaries, bringing together diverse insights and skills to solve complex problems.

When students are empowered to take control of their learning, something remarkable happens. Their creativity flourishes, and they develop a wide range of essential skills that are crucial for future jobs and personal growth. Research by Daellenbach (2018), Hayter and Parker (2019), and Pang et al. (2019) underscores the importance of these skills in the modern world. Critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, and emotional intelligence are just a few of the capabilities that students can build through SEL.

International frameworks like the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA; Zahavi and Friedman, 2019), and the Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills (ATC21S; Care et al., 2018) also emphasize the importance of and emotional learning in acquiring the skills and knowledge needed for success in today's rapidly changing digital world.

As Bonwell and Eison noted back in 1991, in this model, the teacher shifts from being just a source of information to acting as a guide. Their framework has significantly influenced modern pedagogical strategies, encouraging the use of interactive learning techniques that position students as active participants in their own learning journeys.

Main Contribution

The aim of this research is to show that the implementation of satisfactory SEL setups in higher education could be feasible without any loss of student's academic achievement, and allow to develop a set of skills especially relevant for future XXI century professionals and will be positively valued by any employer:

- work in groups
- listen to other's opinions
- self-learning
- apply knowledge in practice
- analyze and synthesize information

To do so, we focus on two research questions. The first asks whether the use of a SEL learning setup impacts students' academic performance (RQ 1). The second examines whether this setup influences students' emotional intelligence (EQ) (RQ 2).

The Microeconomics course was chosen for this experiment due to the researcher's direct involvement in both teaching and curriculum development of this subject. This is not only ensured a consistent teaching approach across both the control and experimental groups but also enabled a more nuanced implementation of SEL (Social-Emotional Learning) methods in the experimental group.

The focus of our teaching and learning experience was a Microeconomics module, comprising 60 teaching hours spread over 15 weeks, with 30 sessions of 2 hours each.

The syllabus included eight main topics, plus an introductory workshop.

This i-workshop was designed to familiarize students with the SEL methods and the necessary information and communication technologies (ICTs) required for the course.

The study was conducted at the Faculty of Management at the Dnipro University of Technology in Ukraine. It involved 48 first-year students enrolled in a Microeconomics module, divided into two groups: Group 1 (control group with traditional learning) had 22 students, and Group 2 (experimental group with SEL activities) had 26 students. The average age in Group 1 was 17.17 years, and in Group 2, it was 17.97 years.

The group sizes were based on the university's registration process. Among the students, 55.04% were female, and 44.96% were male. Most students (94.69%) were between 17 and 19 years old, with a few older. The study was conducted over one academic year.

The same experienced instructor, with over 10 years of teaching and recognized for teaching excellence, taught both groups to ensure consistency.

The integration of SEL into education, particularly through the development of soft skills, presents a dynamic and effective approach to student engagement. This method combines problem-solving, creativity, and collaboration to create enriching learning experiences that equip students with the skills necessary for both academic and personal growth.

By blending SEL theory with these practical elements the wheel of SEL skills were developed (see Figure 1).

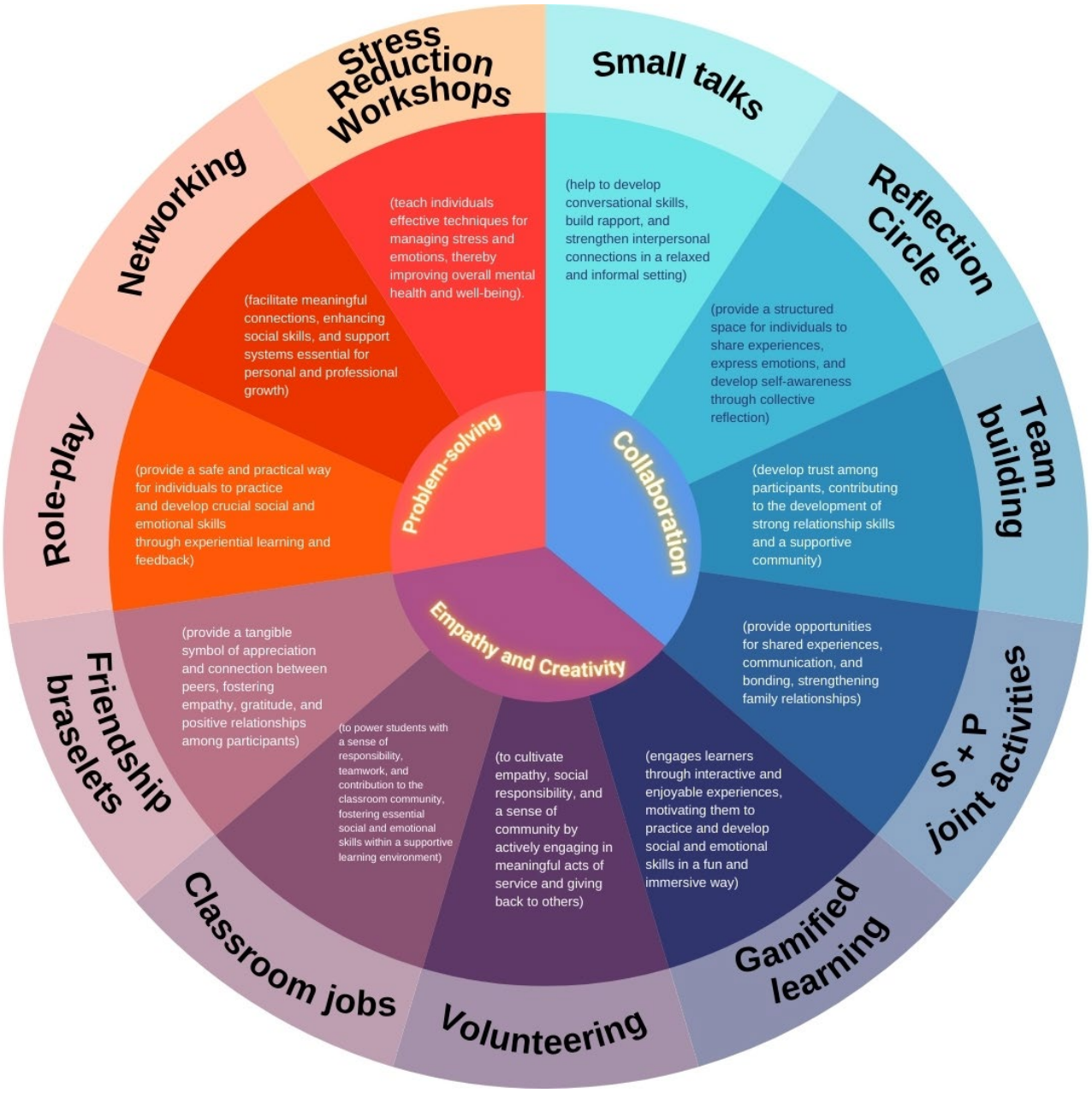

Figure 1: The wheeel of Social and Emotional Skills

A key framework of SEL is development of social and emotional skills (SES), which integrates problem-solving, empathy and creativity, and collaboration—four fundamental elements that drive both personal and societal growth.

In table 1 you can see the specific examples of how each of these activities can be incorporated into a microeconomics course to practice SES.

Table 1. Developed by the author.

Activity	Example
Role play	Students acted as buyers, sellers, or government officials in a simulated market. Through this exercise, they develop negotiation and communication skills by experiencing real-world market dynamics like price setting and bargaining, which helps improve their social and emotional awareness.
Networking	Set up mock networking sessions where students act as entrepreneurs, investors, or job seekers at an economic forum. By building connections and discussing topics like market competition or business expansion, students enhance their networking and interpersonal skills, which are essential in economic markets
Stress Reduction Workshops	In a microeconomics context, these workshops can teach students stress management techniques while preparing for exams or presentations.
Small Talks	Organize informal discussions where students converse in pairs or small groups about microeconomic topics, such as supply and demand or consumer behavior. This can help them engage confidently in academic discussions and debates
Reflection Circle	After completing an assignment or a project, students gather in a reflection circle to share their thoughts on what they learned about market structures or economic policies.
Teambuilding	Assign group projects where students must work together to solve economic problems, like optimizing production for a firm. This helps to build trust, teamwork, and communication skills while enhancing their ability to collaborate effectively in real-world economic settings.
S + P Joint Activities	In a collaborative activity involving students and their family members (S + P: Student + Parent), students can explain microeconomic concepts such as budgeting or pricing to their families.
Volunteering	Encourage students to volunteer in community-based economic initiatives, such as helping local comunities to serve the needs of the soldiers (food, clothes, drones, ets.) during the war time.
Classroom Jobs	Assign students classroom roles related to microeconomics, such as managing a simulated classroom market, being responsible for inventory, or tracking market trends.
Friendship Bracelets	As part of a team-building activity, students can exchange "friendship bracelets" after collaborating on a complex economic problem, symbolizing the connections they've built.
Gamified Learning	Use gamified simulations where students participate in a mock stock market, competitive firm scenarios, or trade games.

Examples

Role play

The owner of a small business—a local bakery:

Students were tasked with making crucial decisions that determined the success of their business in a competitive market environment. From setting prices and determining production levels to analyzing consumer preferences and responding to changes in demand, they were navigating the intricacies of microeconomic theory in real-time.

Stress reduction workshops

Could be incorporated into any courses:

- 5-minute guided breathing session, encouraging students to focus on their breath and clear their minds of distractions;
- mid semester workshop on time management;
- study groups for joint work and presentations;
- start by asking students about their well-being before diving into academic queries;
- 5-minute stretch break.
- incorporate current events into her lessons

Analysis of academic performance in two groups is shown on figure 2. As we see Group 1, where SEL methods were not used, displayed lower academic performance, with students often struggling to handle the pressure of exams and collaborative projects. In contrast, Group 2, where SEL methods were incorporated into the curriculum, showed notable improvements in both academic outcomes and class participation. Students in Group 2 demonstrated better time management, improved problem-solving abilities, and a stronger sense of accountability, which translated into higher grades and more consistent academic engagement. This comparison highlights the positive influence SEL can have on both cognitive and emotional aspects of student success.

In Group 1, the Hall's test on emotional intelligence, administered both before and after the course, showed little progress among the students. Their emotional intelligence scores remained relatively unchanged, indicating that the lack of SEL methods did not significantly impact their development in this area. However, in Group 2, where SEL techniques were integrated into the course, there was a marked improvement. The number of students scoring above 70 on the emotional intelligence scale doubled, rising from 5 to 10 (see Figure 3). This significant increase suggests that the inclusion of SEL positively influenced students'

emotional intelligence, helping them develop essential skills such as self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation.

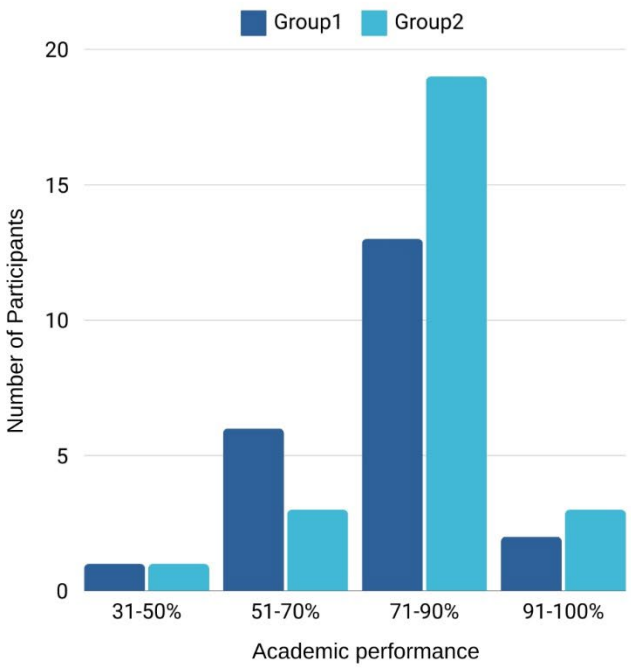

Figure 2: Academic performance analysis

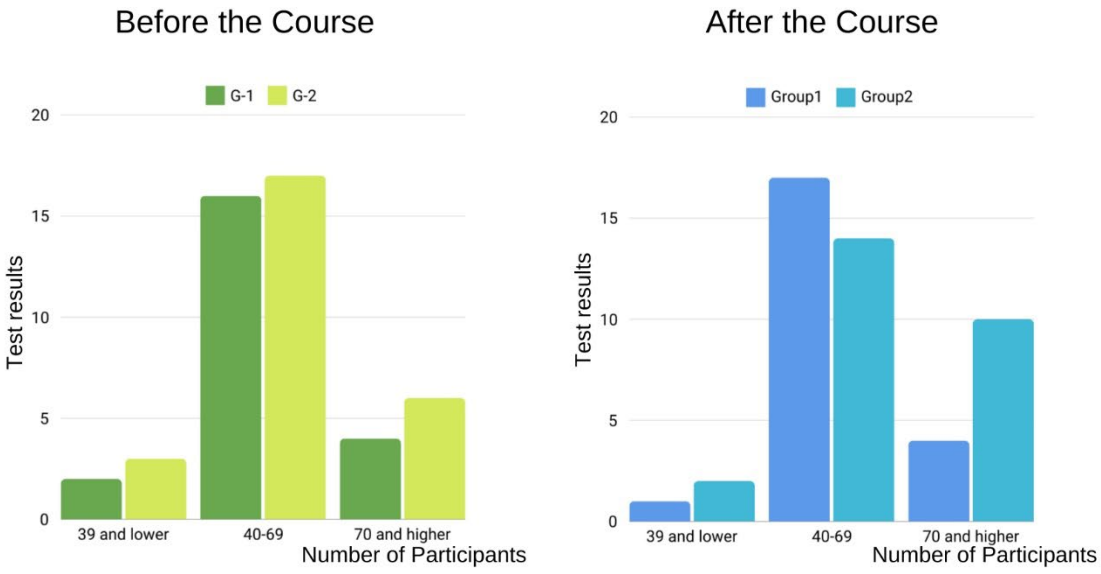

Figure 3: Emotional Intelligence Hall's test

Conclusion

The integration of SEL into higher education curriculum is increasingly essential to equip students with the skills needed for the dynamic future workforce. One of the primary goals in HEIs is to empower students with the knowledge and skills to adapt and succeed solving fast changing challenges of the digital age. Fostering an educational environment that encourages creativity, adaptability, and a lifelong love of learning is key to preparing students not only for today's job market but also to become leaders and innovators in their fields.

HEIs are making positive strides in this direction. The role of educators is to adapt their teaching methods and curricula to meet the needs of students and society. Together, we can create a brighter future for the next generation of professionals.

References

Bonwell, C. (1996). Building a supportive climate for active learning. The National Teachingand Learning Forum, 6(1), 4-7.

Bonwell, C.C., and J. A. Eison, (1991) Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom, ASHEERIC Higher Education Report No. 1. Retrieved from: http://www4.ncsu.edu/unity/lockers/users/f/ felder/public/Papers/Prince_AL.pdf

Care, E., Griffin, P., & Wilson, M. (2018). *Assessment and teaching of 21st century skills: Research and applications*. Springer.

Daellenbach, K. (2018). On carrot cake and marketing education: A perspective on balancing skills for employability. *Australasian Marketing Journal, 26*(2), 172–179.

EQ Hall's test -- https://vrkadry.rada.gov.ua/uploads/documents/31061.pdf

Hayter, C. S., & Parker, M. A. (2019). Factors that influence the transition of university postdocs to non-academic scientific careers: An exploratory study. *Research Policy, 48*(3), 556–570.

Longmore, A. L., Grant, G., & Golnaraghi, G. (2018). Closing the 21st-Century Knowledge Gap: Reconceptualizing Teaching and Learning to Transform Business Education. *Journal of Transformative Education, 16*(3), 197–219.

Muduli, A., & Pandya, G. (2018). Psychological empowerment and workforce agility. *Psychological Studies, 63*(3), 276–285.

Pang, E., Wong, M., Leung, C. H., & Coombes, J. (2019). Competencies for fresh graduates' success at work: Perspectives of employers. *Industry and Higher Education, 33*(1), 55–65.

Zahavi, H., & Friedman, Y. (2019). The Bologna Process: an international higher education regime. *European Journal of Higher Education, 9*(1), 23–39.

Zhu, G., Xing, W., & Popov, V. (2019). Uncovering the sequential patterns in transformative and non-transformative discourse during collaborative inquiry learning. *The Internet and Higher Education, 41,* 51–61.