CHAPTER 11

Life Gain: Using a Co-creation Approach to Developing the Socio-emotional Intelligence of a Foundation Year Student Cohort

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Introduction

The transition from school to university can be a difficult time for students. It is a time when students need to be supported to develop a sense of belonging so that they feel comfortable to stay in their chosen programme of study. It is therefore important to support and engage these students effectively so that they can succeed educationally. This chapter uses a co-creation approach to explore the 'life gain' of a small pilot cohort of students in the Foundation Year of a university business school in the South of England. A similar whole-class approach has also been applied by Teh and Chong in Chap. 8.

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M. G. Jamil et al. (eds.), *Co-Creation for Academic Enhancement in Higher Education*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-66316-1_11

Life gain in this context is a term which refers to how each student has personally developed. Specifically, the chapter explores the development of their socio-emotional intelligence following a programme of study which explicitly explored this subject, and the inherent themes, within an academic and professional practice module. The academic team worked with the students in a co-creation manner to enable them to develop their socio-emotional intelligence.

In Chap. 1, Jamil and Howard-Matthews provide a comprehensive definition of co-creation. For the purposes of this study, co-creation is about staff and students working together in a collaborative manner to discover and implement effective educational approaches (Bovill, 2019, 2020). To this end, and specifically to evaluate their life gain, students were asked to complete a socio-emotional intelligence self-assessment questionnaire during the first week of their programme, and again at the end of their year, so that a comparison could be undertaken to reveal any changes in the development that had occurred during the academic year. We wanted to know how effective the activities that we were undertaking to advance their socio-emotional intelligence actually were in practice. The socio-emotional intelligence questionnaire used for this study was previously devised by Devis-Rozental (2020). An alternative example of using a questionnaire approach to stimulate co-creation has been explored by Polkinghorne et al. in Chap. 4.

Enhancing the Preparedness of Students

Previous studies have demonstrated that many UK students feel ill-prepared for undergraduate study at university (Lowe & Cook, 2003), and as a result, many of these students leave university prematurely before completing their degree, often during their first year of study (Lee et al., 2019). For these students, the transition between school and university is simply too great, with many feeling overwhelmed and under-prepared for undergraduate study (Devis-Rozental & Barron, 2020). These students are known to experience pedagogical shock because of the change (Zhu & O'Sullivan, 2020).

According to both Prensky (2001), and Seemiller and Grace (2018), individuals born after 1980 learn and think differently from previous generations because they have been immersed in digital technology whilst their brains are still developing. Today's students within higher education in England are typically born after the year 2000 and are often referred to

as Generation Z (Singh, 2014). In fact, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2022) reports that 60% of the current UK student body falls into the Generation Z age group, and this percentage is set to increase further over the next few years. In addition, the student body is now far more diverse than was the case for previous cohorts. This diversity may be represented by gender, ethnicity and/or socio-economic backgrounds. In approximately two-thirds of cases, these students are actually the first members of their family (excluding siblings) who have been exposed to a university education (Coombs, 2021, p. 9). Since they started to enter higher education, it has become increasingly clear that this unique generation of students requires, and expects, a different approach to their learning (Phillips & Trainor, 2014) and we, as educators, may need to adapt and evolve our approaches to teaching to accommodate this change.

Across the higher education sector in England, university retention rates have not improved, and according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2023), consistently over 7% of students do not continue their studies after their first year at university. In the case of 20 specific higher education providers (HEPs) targeted for a research study, data indicates that one in ten students have not continued their studies after their first year of degree-level education, and that whilst no significant progress may have been made in improving retention rates, those HEPs that are making a success of delivering a high-quality student experience, are likely to have higher rates of completion for their degree courses as a result (Mian & Richards, 2016). There is therefore thought to be a correlation between student contentment with their course of study, and student completion. How to increase levels of student contentment, and how to smooth the transition for students entering the higher education system for the first time, have now become important issues for discussion and consideration across the sector.

One mechanism being tested by some HEPs in England is the introduction of a 'Foundation Year'. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (Nathwani, 2019, p. 1), the purpose of the Foundation Year is to 'help students who may not meet the standard requirements for entry into university to spend one year developing the academic and soft skills needed to succeed in higher education'. As such, the Foundation Year can help to address social inclusion within higher education by mitigating barriers caused by a student's social, demographic, or economic background.

This Foundation Year concept has therefore quickly been adopted across the sector as a means to create a softer entry point into higher education for students who need additional transitional support (Devis-Rozental & Clarke, 2021). By 2023, a total of 120 HEPs in England had already started to offer a Foundation Year for at least some of the undergraduate degree courses being delivered, and this number has been increasing year on year (UCAS, 2023).

For the purposes of this study, a Foundation Year is a one-year educational programme which occurs before the traditional first year of an undergraduate degree course and should not be confused with the wider-known Foundation Degree which is a stand-alone qualification that students can undertake and count towards the first two years of a full degree programme. In contrast, the Foundation Year is a precursor to the traditional undergraduate degree route. It has the advantage of enabling the students to become part of the community of students studying the discipline area, whilst still providing them with a level of developmental support not typically available on a higher education course.

Students participating in Foundation Year programmes often include those who have been unsuccessful with their attempt to gain the full entry qualifications required for acceptance onto the first year of an undergraduate degree course, and those students who recognise that they are not yet ready to deliver the level of independent learning expected on such courses. Successful completion of the Foundation Year will normally enable direct entry to the first year of the chosen undergraduate degree, and in many ways, it acts as an extended interview to help the HEP assess the suitability of the student for continued study, and for the student to acclimatise to the requirements of higher education study within a protected and supportive environment.

At the time of writing, there is insufficient data available to make a conclusive case, however, the thinking across the sector is that successful completion of a Foundation Year programme may enable a smoother transition for students from school to higher education, with the result that when entering the first year of their chosen undergraduate degree course, these students will be better prepared to maximise their learning potential, and that this will ultimately impact upon a more positive student experience for both the individual and for the wider cohort.

By ensuring that students develop key skills that they will need to succeed in higher education during their Foundation Year, their transition to becoming independent and self-directed learners is expected to be

smoother and quicker. There can also be benefits to a student's sense of self, which gives them the confidence and resilience to continue their studies, especially if these programmes include opportunities to develop the soft skills they will need to succeed in their future academic journeys (Devis-Rozental, 2018; Devis-Rozental & Farquharson, 2020).

The benefit of this for an individual HEP is that it will reduce the need for academic staff to devote valuable time and resources to helping students develop these essential building blocks during their main degree programme, enabling them to concentrate instead on delivering subject-specific learning from the outset. There are therefore compelling financial reasons for HEPs to invest in offering a Foundation Year for key undergraduate degree courses, especially given the current turbulent and competitive marketplace (Chapleo & O'Sullivan, 2017; Polkinghorne et al., 2017).

The ultimate measure of any Foundation Year's success is the identification of a quantifiable reduction in attrition rates, both for the Foundation Year itself and for the subsequent undergraduate degree programme. In addition, increased levels of engagement and sense of belonging amongst those students who move from the Foundation Year, and onto a subsequent undergraduate degree programme, are expected as they will be better prepared for their future studies compared to those students directly entering higher education straight into Level 4 (first year) education.

There are also practical implications which need to be considered, and these include calculating the achievable 'return on investment' from the Foundation Year. Such investment considerations may include an expectation that students migrating from a Foundation Year into Level 4 undergraduate degree first-year studies, will exhibit improved standards of engagement, and learning/attainment, when compared to those students who are direct entrants into Level 4 studies. Furthermore, it is anticipated that these transitional students will be better able to cope with both their educational workload, and the expectations placed upon them. As a result, levels of engagement may be higher, and achieved learning gains may be more significant.

The case study presented in this chapter considers a cohort of students on a new Foundation Year being delivered at Bournemouth University in the UK. Bournemouth University is a medium-sized university, located on the South coast of the UK, with approximately 18,000 students. The undergraduate and postgraduate cohorts include a significant proportion of international students representing 120 different countries.

The development of the students' sense of belonging is explored over the duration of this Foundation Year. This development is discussed in terms of the evolution of their socio-emotional intelligence by evaluating each student's life gain before, and after, the provision of co-creation support. Joseph-Richard and Ringrose further explore the benefits of providing a space for individual exploration, reflection, and targeted skill development within Chap. 7. The research approach undertaken for this study is explained and detailed, followed by a consideration of the data collected. Finally, the findings of the research will be presented, and conclusions drawn regarding the potential value and future implications.

Socio-Emotional Intelligence

Socio-emotional intelligence (SEI) is defined by Devis-Rozental as being the 'ability to integrate feeling, intuition and cognition to acknowledge, understand, manage, apply and express our emotions and social interactions' in a way which is congruent with both place and context (2018, p. 1). Devis-Rozental further adds that the overall aim of SEI 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'.

Since all expressions of emotions are socially constructed (Gergen & Davis, 1985), SEI is distinct from emotional intelligence as it considers the social aspects of emotions as being key to their understanding and expression (Devis-Rozental, 2018). SEI also accounts for the impact that our actions and emotions may have upon others around us, and upon the environment in which we operate. In this way, being confident and articulate, whilst being narcissistic or selfish, cannot be congruent with being socio-emotionally intelligent. This emphasis on having a positive impact, which in turn creates prosocial behaviours, makes SEI distinct from emotional intelligence (Devis-Rozental, 2018, 2020).

Developing SEI in higher education is important as it can help students to develop the self-efficacy and self-awareness (Devis-Rozental, 2023), that they will each need to succeed both on their own personal educational journey, and subsequently in their professional career and home life (Devis-Rozental, 2018). This need for personal and professional growth is explored further by Islam et al. in Chap. 5. In addition, ensuring that students have opportunities for developing their SEI can have a positive

impact upon their student experience and ultimate learning outcomes (Devis-Rozental & Barron, 2020).

With an increasing number of students arriving to university reporting mental health issues and being largely unprepared for the higher education demands (Devis-Rozental & Farquharson, 2020), HEPS must find ways to embed activities which can help students build the resilience, confidence and self-awareness needed to succeed, and become the best person that they can be. Co-creation, with a focus on SEI, is thought to be an effective way of working together with students to achieve this. Shakir and Siddiquee further discuss the need to build students' self-esteem and confidence in Chap. 9.

Research Procedure

The research described in this chapter is based upon a small-scale pilot study considering primary data collection based upon self-reflective surveys, with ranking style answer choices for each question asked using a range from 1 (this is not me at all) to 5 (this is so much like me). Mahgoub et al. present a complementary example of using a reflective approach in Chap. 10.

In this study, the data collected is based on the personal perceptions and feelings of the participants involved in the study and is therefore subjective in nature. The 30 data collection questions used for this study have been sourced from the SEI self-assessment questionnaire developed by Devis-Rozental (2020, p. 26). For the purposes of this study, these questions are detailed in Table 11.1.

Face validity (Saunders et al., 2019) and discriminant validity (Bell et al., 2018) checks were undertaken to ensure that the question constructs had clear distinctions. The time-horizon for this study is longitudinal as the original data were collected at the start of the students' Foundation Year, and for comparative purposes, the final data were collected at the end of the students' Foundation Year. The same students were used for both the initial (Stage 1) and the final (Stage 2) data collections.

Data were grouped together so that all of the responses for each of the answer categories in the range 'Not Like Me' through to 'Like Me' were collated. It should be noted that the negative responses of 'Not like ME' and 'Somewhat Not Like ME' were combined. Similarly, the positive responses of 'Like Me' and 'Somewhat Like ME' were combined.

Table 11.1 Data collection questions (adapted from Devis-Rozental, 2020, p. 26)

1.	I know when I am happy.
2.	I like listening to what others have to say.
3.	I can always get motivated even when I have to do difficult tasks.
4.	I know when I am stressed.
5.	I never interrupt people when they are talking.
6.	I always meet my deadlines.
7.	I make friends easily.
8.	I usually like the way I look.
9.	I don't worry too much about things.
10.	I always know how someone is feeling.
11.	I always feel good about myself.
12.	I never leave things until the last minute.
13.	I know when I get angry.
14.	I can change my mood easily.
15.	When others are sad, I feel sad too.
16.	I know when I feel emotional.
17.	I know when someone isn't happy.
18.	I can put bad situations into perspective quite easily.
19.	I get along with most people.
20.	It doesn't bother me when someone criticises me.
21.	I don't like wasting time.
22.	I don't usually lose my temper.
23.	I don't procrastinate.
24.	I like spending time with people.
25.	I often make my own decisions.
26.	I can see things from another person's point of view.
27.	I can list my strengths quite easily.
28.	I know what makes me happy.
29.	I enjoy working in teams.
30.	I don't get annoyed by difficult people.

Codes were applied to the response data collected to identify the Stage 1 and Stage 2 responses for each individual student, whilst simultaneously protecting their anonymity. This enabled anonymous data collected in Stage 2 of the data collection to be linked to the same student's data submitted in Stage 1, so that any changes in a student's perceptions could be monitored and evaluated. The coding of student responses was undertaken by a member of the research team who was not involved in the subsequent data analysis.

Data analysis was based upon a frequency method which considered the number of respondents answering negatively (code 1 or 2), neutral (code

3) or positively (code 4 or 5) to each question. There were 11 participants in this small-scale pilot study, of which 9 were male and 2 (participants A and B) were female. Due to the lack of female responses, no evaluation based on gender has been undertaken. Whilst not statistically significant, this data nevertheless helps us to understand both student perceptions and experiences.

Jamil and Howard-Matthews reflect upon the role of feedback in co-creation in Chap. 1. McIntosh and May (Chap. 2), and Torn (Chap. 6), also describe the importance of considering the student voice within successful co-creation, and so additionally, informal feedback from the students has also been included as part of the evidence presented in this chapter to account for the students' own voices. Furthermore, we have included data gathered to evidence the impact of the unit on completion and continuation.

This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of Bournemouth University B (Date: 03/03/2021, Reference 36559).

Findings

Although there were a few exceptions, from the Stage 1 data collected, it was clear that the students were largely comfortable that many of the questions represented their own personal self-reflection, with the number of students reporting a positive response far outnumbering those reporting a negative response for most questions. It was apparent that from the start, some students were aware of their emotions and could potentially demonstrate empathy and social awareness. The Stage 2 data collected represented a different picture, with some demonstrable student growth in several areas. Overall, almost a third of questions (30%) reported a reduction in negative responses, a sixth (17%) of questions reported an increase in negative responses, and just over half (53%) of questions reported no change in negative response responses.

Although interesting to see the results for the individual questions asked, the real value that can be derived from using this set of socio-emotional intelligence questions is to group the questions asked, and the responses received, into categories that represent self-awareness, motivation, emotion, self-esteem, social awareness and empathy (Table 11.2).

In this context, self-awareness is defined as being a student's understanding of how to feel and behave in different situations, motivation

Table 11.2 Socio-emotional intelligence groupings (author's own work)

Self-Awareness	Q1	I know when I am happy.
	Q4	I know when I am stressed
	Q13	I know when I get angry.
	Q16	I know when I feel emotional.
	Q28	I know what makes me happy.
Motivation	Q3	I can always get motivated even when I have to do difficult tasks.
	Q6	I always meet my deadlines.
	Q12	I never leave things until the last minute.
	Q21	I don't like wasting time.
	Q23	I don't procrastinate.
Emotion	Q9	I don't worry too much about things.
	Q14	I can change my mood easily.
	Q18	I can put bad situations into perspective quite easily.
	Q22	I don't usually lose my temper.
	Q30	I don't get annoyed by difficult people.
Self-Esteem	Q8	I usually like the way I look.
	Q11	I always feel good about myself.
	Q20	It doesn't bother me when someone criticises me.
	Q25	I often make my own decisions
	Q27	I can list my strengths quite easily.
Social Awareness	Q5	I never interrupt people when they are talking.
	Q7	I make friends easily.
	Q19	I get along with most people.
	Q24	I like spending time with people.
	Q29	I enjoy working in teams.
Empathy	Q2	I like listening to what others have to say.
	Q10	I always know how someone is feeling.
	Q15	When others are sad, I feel sad too.
	Q17	I know when someone isn't happy.
	Q26	I can see things from another person's point of view.

relates to a student's ability to use feelings and emotions to achieve goals, emotion relates to a student's ability to manage their feelings, emotions and their reactions in different situations, self-esteem is about how a student sees and values themself, social awareness is about how a student manages relationships and responds to external stimuli, and empathy is defined as being a student's ability to sense, understand and react to the feelings of another person.

Table 11.3 details the changes in these socio-emotional intelligence groupings for each participating student comparing the positive (like me/

Table 11.3 Comparison of the change in responses for socio-emotional intelligence groupings (author's own work)

		Participants										
		A (%)	*B (%)*	*C (%)*	*D (%)*	*E (%)*	*F (%)*	*G (%)*	*H (%)*	*I (%)*	*J (%)*	*K (%)*
Self-awareness	Stage 1	100	100	100	20	80	80	40	100	100	100	40
	Stage 2	100	80	60	20	40	80	100	100	100	100	40
	Δ	*0*	*−20*	*−40*	*0*	*−40*	*0*	*60*	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*
Motivation	Stage 1	80	20	40	40	40	0	20	0	20	20	20
	Stage 2	80	20	60	40	20	20	40	40	0	20	20
	Δ	*0*	*0*	*20*	*0*	*−20*	*20*	*20*	*40*	*−20*	*0*	*0*
Emotions	Stage 1	40	20	100	40	40	40	20	20	60	0	20
	Stage 2	60	60	60	40	20	60	0	40	40	20	20
	Δ	*20*	*40*	*−40*	*0*	*−20*	*20*	*−20*	*20*	*−20*	*20*	*0*
Self-esteem	Stage 1	20	0	60	80	20	40	0	80	40	0	40
	Stage 2	80	20	80	80	20	60	0	100	80	20	40
	Δ	*60*	*20*	*20*	*0*	*0*	*20*	*0*	*20*	*40*	*20*	*0*
Social awareness	Stage 1	100	60	40	40	80	0	60	80	80	0	60
	Stage 2	100	40	60	40	60	20	80	60	60	20	60
	Δ	*0*	*−20*	*20*	*0*	*−20*	*20*	*20*	*−20*	*−20*	*20*	*0*
Empathy	Stage 1	100	60	100	60	60	20	20	40	60	40	20
	Stage 2	100	100	80	60	60	40	20	20	60	40	20
	Δ	*0*	*40*	*−20*	*0*	*0*	*20*	*0*	*−20*	*0*	*0*	*0*

Note: Δ = Difference between Stage 1 and Stage 2 data

somewhat like me) data collected in Stage 1 to the positive (like me/somewhat like me) data collected at the Stage 2 point. There are a total of five questions in each socio-emotional intelligence group and 100% indicates that all five questions in that particular socio-emotional intelligence group have received a positive response from the student.

In terms of self-awareness, seven students didn't change their position, whereas three students reported a drop. For motivation, four students reported an increase, and two students reported a drop. Considering managing emotions, five students reported an increase, and four students reported a drop. In the case of self-esteem, seven students reported an increase. Concerning social awareness, four students reported an increase and also four students reported a drop. The results for empathy revealed that seven students reported no change.

Discussion

By taking a co-creation approach, this study has compared the self-reported changes in socio-emotional intelligence of the Foundation Year students across the entirety of the academic year. The results for self-awareness started very positively for eight students and so there is little surprise that this category, alongside the category of empathy, reported the least improvements. Nevertheless, Participant G did report a 60% increase in their perceived self-awareness which is a significant development.

It should be noted that three students reported a drop in perception of their own self-awareness. Perhaps this is because they did not have a sound understanding of self-awareness at the beginning and as a result over-reported in the first instance. As their socio-emotional intelligence has developed during the Foundation Year, conceivably they now have a better understanding of what self-awareness means, and so are more likely to make sensible and realistic judgements. There are similar reductions for motivation, emotion regulation, social awareness, and empathy.

However, there is no reduction in reporting by participants for the category of self-esteem which not only did not drop, but in reality, seven students reported a positive increase, which was the greatest change of all six categories. This is encouraging since self-esteem and confidence are key components of a student's ability to thrive (Devis-Rozental, 2018; Devis-Rozental & Barron, 2020). What is more, this further supports the notion that knowledge gives students confidence (Devis-Rozental, 2018). Building confidence is a topic also explored by Arm in Chap. 3. Informal feedback provided by one of the Foundation Year students evidenced this further:

> I've recently had a little bit of trouble with organisation … and motivational issues … this would have really knocked my confidence and killed my motivation further … [but] fortunately, resilience and self-esteem are things we covered. (Anonymous Foundation Year Student)

Following on from self-esteem was emotion regulation, with five students reporting positively on their ability to manage their emotions more effectively. It could be argued that the content delivered in the academic and professional practice unit had a positive effect on these results. Formative feedback provided by one of the Foundation Year students regarding some of the content delivered stated:

> This unit has also given students the chance to learn a lot about themselves and the way their emotions have an impact on their daily lives. (Anonymous Foundation Year Student)

In terms of their socio-emotional intelligence, it is difficult to differentiate between participants who have grown, compared to those who are now reporting more accurately. However, reporting more accurately is itself an indication of an improved understanding of the constituent elements of socio-emotional intelligence, and so indirectly this is also representative of growth. Learning about the importance of diversity, kindness, teamwork, and purpose will certainly help students to develop relationships with others which are both more meaningful and more impactful.

> Learning the importance of diversity, kindness, teamwork and purpose has helped in developing meaningful relationships and encouraged students to engage and feel like part of a team. (Anonymous Foundation Year Student)

This type of development is also thought to have the potential to help students acclimatise to higher education faster, and to enable them to undertake roles, challenges and activities more effectively.

> The content being taught within this Academic and Professional Practice unit is incredibly important and is something I think that plays a part in everyone's journey through university. (Anonymous Foundation Year Student)

The co-creation approach reported in this chapter has facilitated staff and Foundation Year students working together to understand how the socio-emotional intelligence of the students themselves has evolved over time. It would not have been possible to have gained this level of understanding through conventional assessment, and it needed the students to be willing to engage in this way, and to reveal their own personal feelings, so that the data collected was both meaningful and relevant. Whilst the sample size is small, it is already possible to see the potential value in terms of developing the socio-emotional intelligence of these students, and from this understanding, the academic team will now revise and evolve their approaches to optimise future delivery and support.

Conclusion

The results of this study are based upon benchmarking students at the start of their Foundation Year using a self-reporting 30-question survey, developing their socio-emotional intelligence during the Foundation Year through the teaching of specific related topics (and carrying out co-creation based practical activities), and then measuring their socio-emotional intelligence at the end of the Foundation Year by repeating the same self-reporting 30-question survey.

Results obtained are promising and indicate that personal growth has occurred. How this growth translates to performance at Level 4 (first-year undergraduate degree) will be identified by following these students as part of a longitudinal study. This change in an individual's ability to interact more successfully with others is a skill which will last a lifetime.

It is therefore the recommendation of this study that universities across the higher education sector consider the benefits of introducing activities which will enable students to develop their understanding of socio-emotional intelligence, and other related soft skills, so that students can better manage themselves within an educational setting and thrive during their studies and beyond.

Limitations of the Research

This research has only considered one year group on a single course studying at one university. Whilst the results are interesting and informative, the population size is too small to make generalisations from, and a wider more expansive study is recommended to explore the implications and potential value across a range of discipline areas.

Potential Long-Term Impacts

When considered as a collective, these results provide evidence that the Foundation Year does have a positive impact upon retention and belonging. Continuation and success data for the students who completed the unit showed that 93% of students who completed the year were successful. Of those, 100% continued their studies at the same university. The work undertaken in this research study is therefore important when

taken in the context of the transition that students face when entering higher education for the first time. If we can smooth this transition and support students effectively, we can enable students to be more productive in a shorter period of time and so position them up for subsequent success. This has the potential to reduce stress and other mental health issues, and to decrease the attrition rates which are based upon those who leave early.

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