

The Role of Emotional Intelligence in Enhancing Soft Skills for Adult Learners in Vocational Education and Training (VET) Programs in Europe

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the effectiveness of emotional intelligence (EI) in supporting the growth of soft skills in adult learners in vocational education and training (VET) programs in Europe. Emotional intelligence, which involves perceiving, understanding, and controlling the emotions, is quite useful in developing desired competencies in the workplace including effective communication, empathy, collaboration, and resolving conflicts. These interpersonal skills are becoming more and more desired because of the growing need to recruit people that can work in fast-paced, highly-collaborative settings. As the implementation of artificial intelligence (AI) and digital learning tools in the educational environment is rapidly growing, the possibilities to customize the development of emotional intelligence become an opportunity, and it can be made available to more adult learners. This paper will critically discuss the relationship between EI and soft skills, and specifically on the place of VET programs within the adult education system in Europe. It holds that by including emotional intelligence training in these programs not only increases the employability of the learners but also facilitates personal growth, resilience and flexibility that are essential in succeeding in the work environment of the contemporary

world. The paper identifies the opportunities of AI-based learning tools to promote customized emotional intelligence growth by analyzing the current trends in VET and prospective changes. Such tools can give individualized feedback, which allows adult learners to become emotionally regulated, socially aware, and manage relationships. The paper concludes by highlighting the relevance of integrating emotional intelligence training within VET curricula, to enhance adult learners with the competencies necessary to handle the dynamics of the sophisticated working environments and achieve professional and personal flourishing in the long term.

Keywords: *Emotional intelligence, adult learning, Vocational education and training, soft skills, artificial intelligence, Europe.*

INTRODUCTION

Vocational education and training (VET) are essential in providing adult learners with skills they need in order to compete successfully in the labor market especially in giving them discipline-specific knowledge and skills. Traditionally, the programs VET has been based on were mainly technical skills, which is knowledge of certain trade, certifications, or working experience (Sauli, Wenger, and Fiori, 2022). Nonetheless, with the changing needs of the

labor market, there is a tendency to realize the role of soft skills--the skills that supplement technical skills and are viewed as part of the personal and professional success. Emotional intelligence (EI) is one of these soft skills, and it has become one of the most influential factors to be employed and work effectively at the workplace (Tremonte-Freydefont, Wenger, and Fiori, 2024).

The concept of emotional intelligence, which is described as the capacity to identify, perceive, and regulate emotions and those of other people, has been considered as a fundamental criterion of successful interpersonal communication, teamwork, and stress management at work (Sauli, Wenger, and Fiori, 2022). This is especially relevant to adult students of VET programs, who cannot only should acquire technical skills but also, they have to learn how to interact with more complicated socio-cultural processes at work. The studies conducted by the author Tremonte-Freydefont, Wenger and Fiori (2024) assume that emotional intelligence helps adult learners to interact more efficiently in professional communication, cope with stress, and adjust to the new conditions of working in the global job market, which are essential conditions of success in the modern labor market. This paper will explore the role played by emotional intelligence in the development of soft skills in European VET programs. It contends that emotional intelligence training in VET curricula can have the capacity to influence the employability of learners, their interpersonal and professional development at a significant rate. This study is intended to investigate how digital tools and artificial intelligence (AI) can enhance emotional intelligence to provide fresh possibilities of individual learning and competency acquisition. With the further development of AI-driven educational applications, they can offer a flexible and personalized learning experience that would potentially train both technical and soft skills, especially EI (Sethi and Jain, 2024). Moreover, the paper also

addresses the issues and the prospects of integrating emotional intelligence in adult education systems throughout Europe. Although the role of EI is generally recognized, it has not been systematically incorporated into the VET programs because of the differences in the practices of education, resources available, and pedagogical skills (Boeren, 2024). This study, therefore, seeks to give insight into the ways in which European VET systems can be improved to ensure greater attention to the emotional and social dimensions of learning, both in terms of the obstacles and opportunities to further enhancing the development of soft skills of adult learners due to the training on emotional intelligence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Emotional intelligence (EI) has been a major concept that has received immense popularity in the adult education especially in the vocational education and training (VET) programs. Emotional intelligence is defined as having the capability to identify, comprehend, control and direct feelings on oneself and on others. In adult learning, EI is very fundamental in building of soft skills that are very vital in success at a workplace. Such soft skills are communication skills, empathy skills, adaptability skills, conflict management skills and teamwork- all of which are becoming increasingly demanded by employers. Sauli, Wenger, and Fiori (2022) identify emotional competencies as a core component of vocational education since they promote interpersonal skills and communication, which are essential to adult learners who interact in professional settings. Their study emphasizes the fact that emotional management skills help learners to interact with others, cooperate in teams, and overcome conflict situations, and thus EI should be an essential component of VET programs. The development of EI can take advantage of adult learners especially in areas such as healthcare, social services, and education since most of their work requires them to be highly emotionally

involved, therefore emotional control and social interaction are pivotal in job performance (Tremonte-Freydefont, Wenger, and Fiori, 2024).

The advent of artificial intelligence (AI) and online platforms into adult education has transformed how emotional intelligence is acquired and delivered. The use of AI technologies to deliver adult learners with personalized and adaptive learning is becoming a significantly more common practice that enables adult learners to get better at EI in a supportive and organized setting. Audrin and Audrin (2023) comment on a new concept of the so-called digital emotional intelligence, in which AI-based tools can enable learners to train EI by simulating real-world situations. These digital technologies provide interactive spaces in which learners have the opportunity to engage with emotionally demanding scenarios, and they get instant as well as long-term feedback, and monitoring

of their emotional reactions. The advantage of these tools is that it can be increased to more people by training emotional intelligence, as the adult learner has a chance to sharpen his or her skills without fearing the emotional consequences of real-world interactions (Wisniewski & Foster, 2021). Virtual scenarios enable the learners to train their emotions management skills, empathy skills, and social awareness skills which are essential components of emotional intelligence prior to the implementation in real-life context. Sethi and Jain (2024) claim that AI platforms are especially useful in meeting various emotional needs of adult learners by offering them personalized learning opportunities depending on the emotional reactions.

Relationship Between Emotional Intelligence (EI) and Soft Skills Development in VET Programs

Emotional Intelligence Domains and Competencies

SELF-AWARENESS	SELF-MANAGEMENT	SOCIAL AWARENESS	RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT
Emotional self-awareness	Emotional self-control	Empathy	Influence
	Adaptability		Coach and mentor
	Achievement orientation		Conflict management
	Positive outlook	Organizational awareness	Teamwork
			Inspirational leadership

SOURCE MORE THAN SOUND, LLC, 2017

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Figure 1: This diagram demonstrates how emotional intelligence competencies—such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and empathy—serve as the foundation for developing key soft skills, which are essential for personal and professional success (source: Latona, 2017).

The VET systems in the European context have increasingly realized the need to incorporate emotional intelligence in their educational systems. According to Vidigal-Alfaya, et al., (2024), soft skills, such as

emotional intelligence, are emerging as significant as technical skills when it comes to ensuring that adult learners are ready to enter the labor market. With the growing interconnectedness of the global workforce,

employers are looking for models of less technical individuals who are able to handle intricate social forces and are emotionally resilient besides being technical. Vocational training programs have begun to embrace this change in Europe with some introducing emotional intelligence as part of their training programs (Keshishi & Hack, 2023).). This awareness is especially important in sectors that demand close, and in most cases emotionally demanding, interactions between the professionals and their clients, including in the field of healthcare, customer service, and education. Indicatively, healthcare professionals have to resolve emotional issues on a daily basis, addressing the fears and anxieties of patients, and coping with the stressful circumstances. Therefore, to be successful in these areas, it is necessary to be able to control oneself and establish excellent interpersonal relationships. Incorporation of EI in VET programs is therefore not only responsive in terms of fulfilling the emotional needs of learners but also in terms of providing learners with the competencies they need to succeed in challenging workplace settings.

In addition, a combination of EI with VET curricula offers a number of opportunities and challenges to both teachers and students. On the one hand, emotional intelligence can be incorporated into vocational education, and the employability of adult learners is likely to increase dramatically. Sauli et al. (2022) state that emotional intelligence can help in enhancing job performance through enhancing communication, teamwork, and leadership abilities. These are the qualities that come in handy especially in careers where teamwork and collaboration is a must. Conversely, EI as a part of VET education also comes with its troubles. According to Boeren (2024), there is a difference in the European VET systems in regard to the inclusion of emotional intelligence, where certain nations focus on EI more than others. Such inconsistency may cause differences in the quality of EI

training that adult learners receive. Moreover, as much as digital tools and AI platforms can be used to develop EI, qualified educators are still necessary since they can properly implement these technologies in the teaching process. With the increased sophistication of digital learning tools, educators need to be adequately trained on the application of the tools to enhance the development of emotional intelligence. The challenge is thus, to make sure that VET systems in Europe are provided with the resources and expertise in order to incorporate EI in their programs in a standard and effective solution.

Emotional intelligence and its development under the influence of digital platforms are very crucial in the modern educational environment. The emergence of digital learning has revolutionized the manner in which emotional intelligence is instructed and nurtured during VET programs. According to Audrin and Audrin (2023), the digital platforms may create an engaging and safe experience where adult learners can exercise and hone their emotional intelligence. These platforms give real life situations that involve the learner to control their feelings and act empathetically towards other people. The feedback that these digital tools give to the learner is personalized and will assist them in realizing where to improve and come up with ways of improving their emotional skills. Also, AI technologies provide opportunities to personalize the learning process to make sure every learner is given feedback on the level of his/her emotional reactions. According to Sethi and Jain (2024), AI application in adult learning provides the opportunity to scale emotional intelligence instruction and therefore become more available to a wider audience. The AI-based platforms assist adult learners in becoming emotionally competent to manage the complexities of the modern work environment by offering tailored learning channels and real-time feedback.

MATERIALS & METHODS

The research method applied in this study is a qualitative one, as a systematic review of the latest scholarly articles, reports, and case studies were conducted to understand the relevance of emotional intelligence (EI) in vocational education and training (VET) in Europe. The research considers the studies published in 2020-25, which makes the analysis reflect the latest research in the given field. Twelve peer-reviewed articles were chosen using the criteria of their relevance to the topic of emotional intelligence implementation in adult education, specifically VET. The articles chosen discuss different dimensions of EI, such as its contribution to the development of soft skills, its effect on the improvement of employability, and its integration into digital and AI-based learning programs. Such articles offer various insights into the role of EI in the success of adult learners in the workplace, which will be the basis of this study.

The themes, challenges, and results of the inclusion of EI in VET curricula were analyzed, with the aim of detection. The review explored the application of digital tools and artificial intelligence (AI) in developing EI among adult learners based on the effectiveness and limitations of the tools and technologies. The articles were reviewed on the best practices in EI integration into vocational programs, and the challenges, including technological hindrances, lack of resources and differences in approaches to education in different European locations. The results of this systematic review can be used to understand how digital technologies and AI can facilitate the improvement of emotional intelligence and soft skills in VET, and give specific suggestions to educators and policymakers. These understandings also give some areas on which future studies can explore to implement the integration of EI in vocational training programs further.

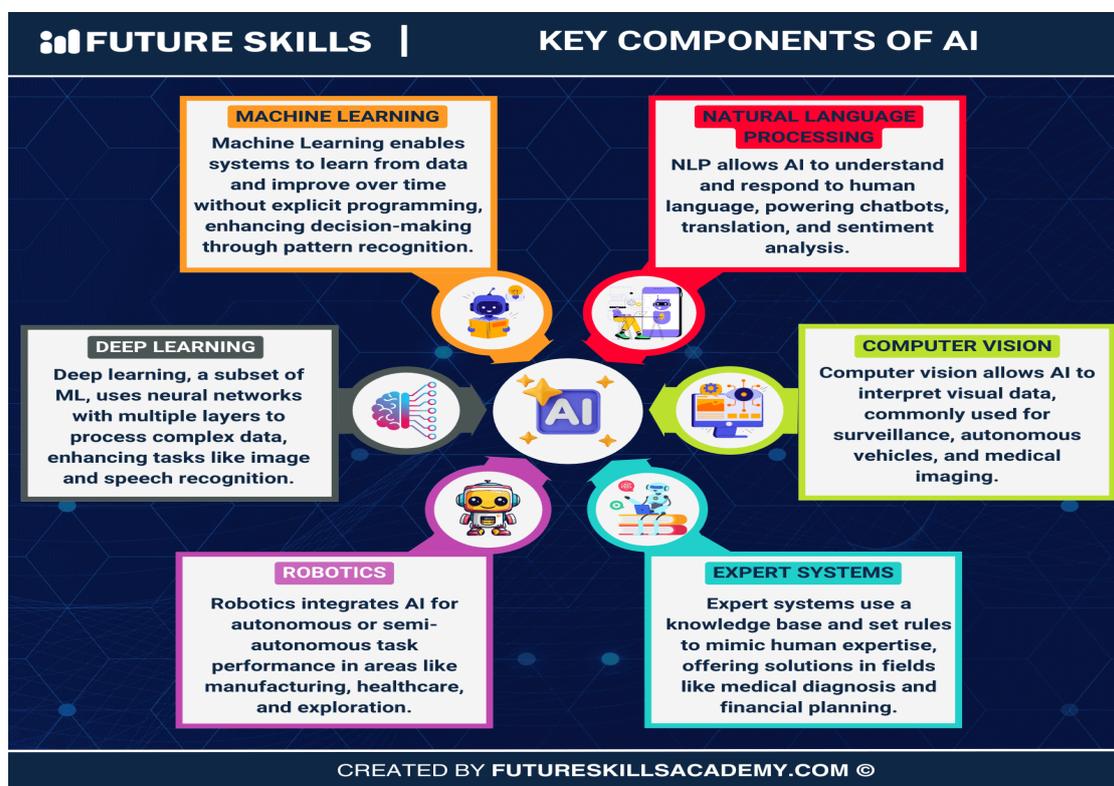


Figure 2: Use of AI in Enhancing Emotional Intelligence in VET Programs

Figure 2 highlights essential elements like machine learning, neural networks, data processing, and AI algorithms. These components enable AI to enhance personalized learning, offering adaptive feedback that fosters emotional intelligence (EI) development in vocational education and training (VET) programs (Mitchell, 2024).

RESULTS

The review established that emotional intelligence (EI) is an important factor in boosting the growth of soft skills among adult learners pursuing vocational education and training (VET) programs in Europe. Students who underwent EI training managed to make considerable progress in such areas as communication, conflict management, and emotional control, which are the key to success in the contemporary work environment. Such soft skills can help learners to cope with the complicated interpersonal interactions, stress control and reactive behavior to the workplace issues. Moreover, AI-driven platforms turned out to be the most effective in developed such competencies. Simulations of AI, which mimic workplace conditions, enable learners to train their emotional control in real-time, and the feedback obtained by participants is personalized and can assist in correcting a previously inaccurate emotional reaction. Such student-centered learning experiences play a crucial role in boosting EI and equipping learners with experiences in the field (Sethi and Jain, 2024).

Although emotional intelligence has been steadily becoming a part of VET programs, the review has shown that its application is inconsistent among countries in Europe. Certain nations have come up with effective systems of teaching EI as part of vocational training and have successfully integrated digital technology and AI systems to support the emotional skills of adult students. Nevertheless, standardization of EI practices is a problem in other countries because of insufficiency of resources, untrained trainers and disparities in education systems. Such differences in implementation imply that more attention should be paid to educating teachers and unifying the EI curricula in Europe. These issues will be critical to addressing the objectives of providing all adult learners with a full-fledged EI training that will have a considerable positive impact on their employability and workplace performance

(Heuer, Serratos-Sotelo, and Motel-Klingebiel, 2024).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study underline the importance of emotional intelligence (EI) in vocational education and training (VET) programs, in particular, the necessity to improve the key soft skills, including empathy, teamwork and communication. Employers are starting to give a lot of value to these soft skills because they are the most crucial to success in the contemporary workplaces where the employees are required to negotiate and deal with complex people environments and adapt to the ever-changing environments. According to Costa and Faria (25), emotional intelligence is essential to adult learners since it does not only enable them to effectively communicate but also enables individuals to develop a strong and cooperative relationship at the workplace. Being able to control the emotions and to empathize with others, to cooperate in a group is inalienable in both personal and professional development. Besides, EI directly correlates with job performance and job satisfaction in such industries as healthcare, education, and customer service, where emotional labor is a major factor of the workplace. With the introduction of EI in VET training, adult learners are better prepared to operate in such settings, as they are now endowed with the emotional skills needed to handle such situations so as to be more flexible and resilient to the challenges of the workplace. The introduction of digital tools and artificial intelligence (AI) in the context of VET programs has a lot of potential to expand and personalize the training in terms of EI, making it more affordable to a wider audience of adult learners. The AI-based systems that recreate real-life working conditions give learners an opportunity to train their emotional management within a low risk, controlled setting. Those tools are especially useful in offering real-time feedback involving emotional reactions of learners to facilitate personal learning

schemes. According to Audrin and Audrin (2023), these technologies allow learners to practice emotionally challenging scenarios (conflict resolution or stress management) by providing them with personalized feedback so that they can improve their emotional reactivity. Adult learners must have personalized learning experiences such as these, as they have access to building emotional intelligence at their pace and in their manner in relation to their needs. Moreover, AI can monitor the advancement of the learners and change the complexity of the situations so that the learners could be constantly challenged and assisted in their further development of emotional abilities. This flexibility and customization of digital tools and AI make them a potent resource when it comes to developing EI, especially in the framework of VET programs.

Nonetheless, these technologies have many challenges in adoption and integration especially in terms of fair access to resources in the European territory. Unequally distributed access to high-quality emotional intelligence training has been the result of the differences in the digital infrastructure investments in various countries (Vidigal-Alfaya et al., 2024). Although it can be observed that some European nations are leading the way in embracing digital tools and AI in their VET systems, some of them are falling behind with the lack of resources, experience, and technological infrastructure. Such a gap leaves a serious gap in the quality of the emotional intelligence training that is done to adult learners with some not having equal opportunity to develop emotionally as the rest of the community. Adult learners might fail to achieve maximum EI and soft skill development because in less developed digital infrastructures, they might not experience the personalized and adaptive learning that AI platforms provide. Consequently, it is important that the existing gaps be addressed so that every adult learner irrespective of the geographical location or available resources that his institutions have could enjoy the

benefits of a comprehensive training in emotional intelligence.

To address these difficulties, policy makers and the teaching profession need to collaborate to provide equal access to emotional intelligence education in Europe. This will entail a united push to invest in digital infrastructure, especially in those countries which have low access to these technologies. The creation of policies that would assist in the development and deployment of AI-based tools in adult learning might significantly enhance the access and quality of EI training on the continent. Moreover, teachers need to receive professional development opportunities in order to improve their skills in incorporating digital tools and AI in their education. With the constant increase in the use of technology in education, it is paramount that teachers obtain the tools to use the technology in their teaching. Offering teachers the necessary training to support the development of EI using digital means will make sure that students will get the quality of education, no matter the place of their residence. The policy makers should also make sure that they will fund the development of digital learning resources and infrastructure and work particularly on the digital divide that is present between various regions of Europe.

Lastly, the incorporation of emotional intelligence in VET programs needs to be reviewed regularly to gauge the performance of such programs. Although the employment of digital tools and AI in training emotional intelligence promises a lot to researchers, additional empirical research is required to identify the long-term effects on the emotional competencies and work success of learners. The study should also investigate how the digital platforms can be further refined in order to make them more effective in building EI. As an illustration, research could be conducted on how AI tools can be more tailored to various learning styles and how these platforms can be utilized to meet the unique emotional requirements of adult learners with diverse

backgrounds. Through the regular examination of the efficiency of such interventions and their improvement according to the evidence, educators and policymakers will be able to make sure that the emotional intelligence training could be viewed as the effective and efficient part of VET programs. Moreover, as the workplace keeps transforming, it is crucial that EI training initiatives should respond to the new challenges and opportunities, and adult learners should be provided with the skills that would enable them to achieve success in the more complex and connected world.

CONCLUSION

Emotional intelligence (EI) is important to developing soft skills in adult learners in vocational education and training (VET) programs to furnish them with the necessary interpersonal skills in a contemporary workforce. Employer-supported emotional and time management, communication and cooperation abilities are becoming a popular asset among employers in different industries, especially in those that are generally associated with emotional work, i.e. healthcare and customer service. The inclusion of EI training in VET curricula is not only beneficial to enhancing employability but also personal growth and resilience which facilitates adaptability to the changing work environment. These advantages are further reinforced by the introduction of artificial intelligence (AI) and digital solutions that offer personalized learning opportunities that are scalable and able to address the needs of individuals. Nevertheless, there still are issues with fair distribution of these resources because the differences in digital infrastructure and skills still exist in European nations. Although certain areas have been able to embrace EI into their education systems, various challenges such as inadequate resources and in-trained teachers have been presented. Such disparities should be addressed by making specific investments in technology and professional development to see how every adult learner will have access

to extensive EI training. Since the implementation of VET programs is still in progress, more studies should be conducted on the effectiveness of EI training on the professional outcomes of learners in a long perspective, and AI tools should be improved to become more personalized, so that adult learners will be ready to face the emotional challenges of future jobs.

Declaration by Authors

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Lars Arnold Ritter is a university lecturer and is currently doing his doctorate at the University of Library Studies and Information Technologies (ULSIT) in Sofia. In his dissertation, entitled *Optimising the Organisation and Management of Information Processes for Increasing Motivation and Effectiveness of Adult Education*, he is developing his own Learning Management System (LMS), which is geared towards efficiency, motivation and sustainability in adult education. He teaches academic work at several universities and combines academic expertise with practical advice, l.ritter@unibit.bg

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