

ASSESSING NON-COGNITIVE COMPETENCIES FOR STUDENT EMPLOYABILITY IN PSYCHOLOGY INTERNSHIPS¹

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Abstract

Universities are increasingly challenged to ensure that graduates develop the transversal competencies required for effective professional performance. While prior research consistently shows that non-cognitive competencies play a central role in both academic success and employability, evidence remains scarce on how these competencies are expressed and assessed in authentic internship settings. This study, embedded in a broader national project evaluating key competencies for academic and professional success, aims to advance the understanding of non-cognitive skills that contribute to employability among Psychology students. The main objective of this work is to identify which non-cognitive competencies are most closely linked to students' performance during their compulsory professional internships in the Psychology degree. To address this aim, we will implement a dual-assessment strategy involving final-year students and their internship supervisors. Both groups will complete parallel questionnaires that assess a set of non-cognitive competencies previously identified through qualitative analyses and labor market indicators. The instruments will include sociodemographic questions and a 1–10 rating scale for each competence, accompanied by standardized definitions to enhance clarity and scoring consistency. Data will be collected through a secure online platform, ensuring voluntary participation and informed consent from both students and supervisors. All responses will be anonymized, and students will additionally grant permission to link their internship evaluations with academic performance outcomes obtained during the degree. Analyses will include descriptive statistics and inter-rater agreement coefficients (e.g., Kappa statistics) to examine the convergence between students' self-assessments and supervisors' evaluations. Further studies will investigate the relationships between competence ratings and academic indicators, such as course grades. Based on prior evidence, we expect to observe moderate alignment between self- and hetero-evaluations, with competencies such as responsibility, communication, initiative, and learning autonomy emerging as particularly relevant for stronger internship performance. We also anticipate identifying meaningful patterns related to supervisors' experience and internship context. This study aims to provide an applied framework for evaluating non-cognitive competencies in higher education and to offer practical insights for strengthening internship assessment practices in Psychology. The expected findings will support the refinement of competency-based evaluation systems and contribute to ongoing efforts to enhance students' employability and professional readiness.

Keywords: *Employability, non-cognitive competencies, psychology students, internships, assessment.*

1. Introduction

The concept of employability has evolved considerably over the past decade. Traditionally defined as the ability to obtain and maintain employment, contemporary understandings encompass a broader set of capabilities that enable graduates to navigate increasingly complex and dynamic career landscapes (Habets et al., 2020). This evolution is particularly relevant in the 21st-century workplace, where rapid technological change and economic uncertainty demand adaptable, flexible professionals who can transfer skills across diverse contexts (Butum & Nicolescu, 2019).

Therefore, the contemporary labor market presents unprecedented challenges for higher education institutions worldwide. Universities are increasingly pressured to demonstrate that their graduates possess not only disciplinary expertise but also the transversal competencies required for effective professional

¹The study is currently underway; preliminary analyses and expected findings will be presented at the conference

performance (Sá & Serpa, 2018). This shift reflects a fundamental transformation in employer expectations, where technical knowledge alone is insufficient for workplace success; therefore, it is common to find that higher education graduates lack the employability skills demanded by the labor market, creating a significant gap between academic preparation and professional requirements (Okolie et al., 2019; Sá & Serpa, 2018).

In this regard, higher education institutions play a crucial role in developing employability skills. However, significant challenges remain in effectively integrating these competencies into curricula, as university-led employment programs have tended to overlook the development of transferable skills, which require further research (Scandurra et al., 2024). In this context, employability has traditionally been associated with the development of cognitive abilities and technical knowledge, which continue to serve as essential foundations for professional practice (Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Kautz et al., 2014), while non-cognitive competencies have received comparatively less attention.

Nevertheless, a growing body of evidence underscores the pivotal role of non-cognitive competencies in fostering both academic success and long-term employability (Borghans et al., 2008; Deming, 2017; Heckman et al., 2006), through variables as heterogeneous as emotional stability, conscientiousness, communication abilities, and interpersonal effectiveness, which have emerged as critical predictors of workplace performance across diverse occupational contexts (Cabus et al., 2021). These non-cognitive competencies, often referred to as soft skills or transversal competencies, are equally essential for professional success yet more challenging to develop and assess within conventional academic settings (Sá & Serpa, 2018). Employers consistently report that, while graduates may possess adequate technical knowledge, they often lack the communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills necessary for effective workplace performance (Scandurra et al., 2024).

Despite widespread recognition of the importance of non-cognitive competencies, significant gaps remain in understanding how these skills are expressed and assessed within authentic professional settings. Traditional academic assessments (i.e., examinations, essays, and standardized tests) primarily measure cognitive capabilities and often fail to capture the complex, context-dependent nature of professional practice (Hollister et al., 2017).

Therefore, studies must be developed to delve deeper into these competencies and the academic-professional link. Internship experiences serve as a crucial bridge between academic preparation and professional practice, offering unique opportunities for developing transversal competencies that cannot be replicated in classroom settings (Musa et al., 2025). This authentic workplace context provides opportunities for skill application, but realizing this potential requires intentional alignment between educational objectives and evaluation criteria (Nyanjom et al., 2023). In psychology curricula, the internship setting offers unique opportunities and challenges, requiring the application of learned skills in real-world contexts (Goodie et al., 2022).

In this context, there is growing recognition that non-cognitive competencies are central to both academic success and employability; however, significant gaps remain in understanding how these competencies are expressed within authentic internship settings. This study addresses this gap by identifying which non-cognitive competencies are most closely linked to Psychology students' performance during their compulsory professional internships, using a dual-assessment strategy involving final-year students and their supervisors, and examining the convergence between self-assessments and supervisor evaluations through inter-rater agreement analyses.

2. Method

The main objective of this work is to identify which non-cognitive competencies are most closely linked to students' performance during their compulsory professional internships in the Psychology degree. Participants will include final-year Psychology students completing their internships and their direct supervisors across diverse professional settings. Both groups will be recruited through purposive sampling to ensure representation from varied internship contexts, including clinical, educational, and organizational psychology placements. It was expected to receive a sample of 30 final-year students and 30 supervisors.

To address this aim, we will implement parallel questionnaires that assess a set of non-cognitive competencies previously identified through qualitative analyses and labor market indicators. The instruments will include sociodemographic questions and a 1–10 rating scale for each competence, accompanied by standardized definitions to enhance clarity and scoring consistency. Specifically, the assessment protocol detailed in Table 1 has been developed.

Table 1. Assessment Protocol Items.

Item	Common Element for Supervisors and Students	
1. Competence definition	Definition of 11 non-cognitive competencies included in the study: Norm compliance, Learning management, Critical thinking, Adaptability, Creativity, initiative and autonomy, Problem solving, Self-regulation, Communication, Empathy, Collaboration, and Leadership.	
Item	For supervisors	For students
2. Student competence rating	To what extent has the supervisor considered that the student has demonstrated each of the previously defined competencies during their professional internship, on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 10 (completely)?	To what extent do you consider that you have demonstrated these competencies during your professional internship practices, on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 10 (completely)?
3. Overall student rating	Overall rating of the student's internship practices, on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 10 (completely).	Overall self-rating, from 0 (not at all) to 10 (completely).
4. Competence ranking	Ranking of non-cognitive competencies based on the impact they have on employability, from 1 (least impact) to 11 (most impact).	Ranking of non-cognitive competencies based on the impact you believe they have on your employability, from 1 (least impact) to 11 (most impact).

In this protocol, the first item is common to both groups (supervisors and students) and uses the same definitions of the 11 listed competencies for both groups. Subsequently, the items' *student competence rating*, *overall student rating*, and *competence ranking* are presented to both groups so they can be evaluated hetero-evaluatively by the supervisors and self-evaluatively by the students.

Data will be collected through a secure online platform, ensuring voluntary participation and informed consent from both students and supervisors. All responses will be anonymized, and students will additionally grant permission to link their internship evaluations with academic performance outcomes obtained during the degree. This procedure protects participant confidentiality. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Ethics Committee of Universidad Loyola Andalucía (19/01/2026; code 251113 CE25640).

Analyses will include descriptive statistics organized by competence and rater group (supervisors vs. students) to identify patterns in rating distributions, along with a contingency table that recodes the 1-10 scale into three maximum levels (low/medium/high) to examine competence agreement across both groups. Inter-rater reliability will be assessed using weighted Kappa statistics to account for the ordinal nature of the rating scale and the magnitude of disagreement between student self-assessments and supervisor evaluations (McHugh, 2012; Sim & Wright, 2005).

Additionally, correlation analyses will examine relationships between supervisors' overall student rating scores and student competence rating scores, and t-tests will compare supervisor ratings across experience level (junior vs. senior) and student gender for both groups, supervisors and students.

3. Expected results

Given the eminently exploratory nature of this work, no initial hypotheses are established. However, we anticipate obtaining 1) No differences in rating scores in gender (in both supervisors and students) and in experience level (in the case of supervisors); 2) high correlations between total scores and individual competence ratings; and 3) moderate Kappa agreement levels between student self-assessments and supervisor evaluations.

These expected patterns would provide valuable insights into the convergence of competence evaluation and support the development of future university-level actions to enhance these professional skills.

4. Discussion

The expected findings align with contemporary employability frameworks that emphasize both cognitive and non-cognitive competencies (Habets et al., 2020; Sá & Serpa, 2018). By identifying specific competencies linked to internship performance, this research extends traditional models that prioritized technical knowledge (Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Kautz et al., 2014). The expected moderate alignment between student and supervisor ratings reflects the multidimensional nature of competence assessment identified in prior work (Borghans et al., 2008; Deming, 2017).

This study addresses the persistent skills gap between higher education and labor market demands (Butum & Nicolescu, 2019; Okolie et al., 2019). Employers consistently report that graduates lack communication and teamwork capabilities despite adequate technical knowledge (Cabus et al., 2021). The dual-assessment strategy with standardized definitions provides a replicable framework for enhancing evaluation consistency in work-integrated learning settings (Nyanjom et al., 2023).

The parallel questionnaire approach could face limitations in traditional academic assessments that fail to capture the complexity of professional practice (Heckman et al., 2006). Internship experiences serve as crucial bridges between academic preparation and professional practice (Musa et al., 2025), yet realizing this potential requires intentional alignment between educational objectives and evaluation criteria (Nyanjom et al., 2023). Besides, we expected to obtain valuable information on the competences considered most relevant to professional success, and we have the potential to develop future actions at the university level to improve them.

The cross-sectional design limits examination of competence development trajectories. Future research should incorporate longitudinal designs and post-graduation employer feedback to strengthen ecological validity. Additionally, extending this framework to other disciplines would test the generalizability of findings on the importance of non-cognitive competencies (Scandurra et al., 2024).

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