

# Emotional intelligence and social skills as predictor variables of the competence profile of university students

## *Inteligencia emocional y habilidades sociales como variables predictoras del perfil competencial del alumnado universitario*

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## ABSTRACT

The university is a space for academic learning, as well as a key environment for developing professional, social and emotional competencies. The aim of this study is to determine the relationship between emotional intelligence and social skills as predictor variables of generic professional competencies of university students, influencing their well-being and academic performance. A non-experimental *ex post facto*, quantitative, descriptive and causal cross-sectional design was used. The sample, selected by stratified sampling, reached 423 students (78.90% female, 21.10% male). Social skills were measured with the Social Skills Scale by Gismero (2002), emotional intelligence with the TMMS-24 by Fernández-Berrocal et al. (2004), and competencies with the CECGEU by Solanes-Puchol et al. (2008). SPSS and AMOS 26.0 programs were used for data analysis, performing a descriptive analysis to analyse the relationship between variables and a structural equation model was developed to deepen the causal relationships of the variables. Significantly positive correlations were identified between social skills and generic professional competencies. Conversely, negative correlations were observed between emotional intelligence and both variables. The results indicated a negative effect of emotional intelligence on competencies, while social skills had a positive influence. A significant negative relationship was also observed between emotional intelligence and social skills. The study confirms the importance of social skills as a predictor of competence development. However, emotional intelligence showed a negative relationship with competencies, which contradicts previous studies. This suggests that greater emotional intelligence does not always translate into greater professional competencies, opening new lines of research on this interaction.

**Keywords:** emotional intelligence, social skills, competencies, university students

## RESUMEN

La universidad es un espacio de aprendizaje académico, así como un entorno clave para desarrollar competencias profesionales, sociales y emocionales. El objetivo de este estudio es determinar la relación entre la inteligencia emocional y las habilidades sociales como variables predictoras de las competencias profesionales genéricas del alumnado universitario, influyendo en su bienestar y rendimiento académico. Se utilizó un diseño no experimental *ex post facto*, cuantitativo, descriptivo y causal con corte transversal. La muestra, seleccionada mediante muestreo estratificado, alcanzó los 423 estudiantes (78.90% mujeres, 21.10% hombres). Las habilidades sociales se midieron con la Escala de Habilidades Sociales de Gismero (2002), la inteligencia emocional con el TMMS-24 de Fernández-Berrocal et al. (2004), y las competencias con el CECGEU de Solanes-Puchol et al. (2008). Se emplearon los programas SPSS y AMOS 26.0 para el análisis de datos, realizando un análisis descriptivo para analizar la relación entre variables y se elaboró un modelo de ecuaciones estructurales para profundizar en las relaciones causales de las variables. Se identificaron correlaciones significativamente positivas entre las habilidades sociales

y las competencias profesionales genéricas. Inversamente, se observaron correlaciones negativas entre la inteligencia emocional y ambas variables. Los resultados indicaron un efecto negativo de la inteligencia emocional sobre las competencias, mientras que las habilidades sociales influyeron positivamente. También se observó una relación negativa significativa entre la inteligencia emocional y las habilidades sociales. El estudio confirma la importancia de las habilidades sociales como predictor del desarrollo competencial. Sin embargo, la inteligencia emocional mostró una relación negativa con las competencias, lo que contradice estudios previos. Esto sugiere que una mayor inteligencia emocional no siempre se traduce en mayores competencias profesionales, abriendo nuevas líneas de investigación sobre esta interacción.

**Palabras clave:** inteligencia emocional, habilidades sociales, competencias, estudiantes universitarios

## INTRODUCTION

Universities provide a conducive environment for the development of diverse skills that prepare students for both professional and personal success. Therefore, the university stage is a decisive period in the student's academic and personal development, where young people specialise and face various academic challenges (Javier-Napa et al., 2019; Martínez-Rodríguez & Ferreira, 2023; Merlin & Soubramanian, 2024).

Furthermore, higher education must address the demands and needs of students, equipping them for a modern world where soft skills have become indispensable, while transversal competencies underscore their importance for employability. These skills are particularly important for young people entering the labour market. Consequently, the ability to develop professional, social, and emotional competencies becomes vital for students' successful integration into the labour market and society (Alt et al., 2023; Calero-López & Rodríguez-López, 2020; Javier-Napa et al., 2019; Kostikova et al., 2021).

Building on these considerations, it becomes essential to examine how emotional intelligence, social skills, and professional competencies interact within an increasingly complex and demanding university environment. The link between emotional well-being and academic performance helps students realise their full academic and personal potential. Emotional well-being relies on the development of emotional intelligence, which fosters interpersonal relationships and personal growth, helping students become competent and highly skilled professionals (Barrera-Gálvez et al., 2019; Perpiñà-Martí et al., 2022; Sánchez-Bolívar et al., 2023).

Although the development of emotional intelligence begins in early childhood, the educational context plays a significant role in shaping this process. Therefore,

learning about emotions and their self-regulation is crucial in education. Emotional competence facilitates critical thinking, collaboration, self-regulated learning, and problem-solving, all of which contribute to the development of social skills and emotional intelligence (Grijalba-Quiroz et al., 2021; Imjai et al., 2024; Kim & Shin, 2021; Nakajima et al., 2020; Vázquez et al., 2024).

In this context, active and collaborative learning is particularly important for the development of social skills. Within the university setting, social skills contribute to well-being, enabling successful relationships among students. Their integral development depends on behavioural, personal, and situational factors, meaning that social behaviours are influenced by expected actions in diverse contexts or interpersonal demands, such as the person's gender orientation, environmental agents or cultural patterns (Cajas-Bravo et al., 2020; Gómez-Jiménez, 2022; Masadis et al., 2019; Sánchez-Bolívar et al., 2022; Virtanen & Tynjala, 2022).

Moreover, a conducive study environment enhances the development of socio-affective skills, improving interpersonal relationships. This, in turn, fosters academic performance since a better classroom environment allows teachers to meet teaching objectives, facilitates students' integral development, and promotes social and personal growth (Fernández-Leyva et al., 2021; Frogner et al., 2022; Rahman et al., 2024).

In a labour market where HR managers increasingly prioritise soft skills, a paradigm shift is underway that emphasises the importance of socio-emotional competencies for professional success (Bedoya-Guerrero et al., 2024; Kostikova et al., 2021; Santos-Rego et al., 2021).

It is within this context that the need arises to investigate in greater detail how these variables interact and predict the competence profiles of university students. By gaining a better understanding of these interrelations, more effective educational strategies can be designed to promote students' integral development and optimally prepare them for the professional challenges they will face in their careers, forming part of the so-called soft skills (Brudevold-Newman & Ubfal, 2024).

This research adopts an interpretative-causal paradigm to analyse the relationship between university students' sociodemographic profiles, psychosocial variables, social skills, and emotional intelligence as predictors of their competencies.

## **METHOD**

### **Design**

This study employs a non-experimental (*ex post facto*), quantitative, descriptive, exploratory, and causal cross-sectional design. It aims to analyse sociodemographic variables, including access routes, completion of labour formation and guidance-related subjects, and attendance at career guidance services, alongside emotional intelligence, social skills, and competencies among university students.

Another objective is to determine the relationship between emotional intelligence and social skills as predictors of generic professional competencies among university students.

## Participants

The sample, selected through stratified random sampling, consisted of 423 university students with a mean age of 22.50 years ( $\pm 5.26$ ), enrolled at the cross-border campuses of Ceuta and Melilla (Spain), with 78.90% ( $N=344$ ) being female and 21.10% ( $N=92$ ) being male. The sample selection criteria included students enrolled at the University of Granada, within the multicultural environments of Ceuta and Melilla, excluding students from other universities. Additionally, participants were required to be enrolled in undergraduate degree programmes, excluding postgraduate students (master's and doctorate). A margin of error of 4% was assumed.

Furthermore, students from diverse religious backgrounds were represented, with the majority identifying as Christian (49.10%;  $N=214$ ) and Muslim (26.60%;  $N=116$ ). Representative samples were also drawn from each degree programme offered at these campuses.

## Variables and instruments

Sociodemographic variables were assessed using an ad hoc questionnaire, capturing age, gender, religion, university degree programme, access route, completion of career guidance subjects (VECG), and attendance at career guidance services (CGS).

Social skills were measured using the Social Skills Scale (SSS) by Gismero (2002). This scale comprises 33 items measuring six dimensions: self-expression in social situations, expression of anger or disagreement, saying no and cutting off interactions, making requests, and initiating positive interactions with the opposite sex. Twenty-eight items indicate a lack of assertion or social skill deficits, while five are positively framed. Each item consists of four response options, ranging from 1 (Not at all like me) to 4 (Very much like me). The scale's overall

reliability index, measured by Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega, was  $\alpha=0.910$  and  $\Omega=0.916$ .

Emotional intelligence was measured and assessed using the Spanish version of the Trait Meta-Mood Scale (TMMS-24; Fernández-Berrocal et al., 2004). This version contains 24 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (measuring three dimensions: emotional awareness -items 1 to 7-, emotional clarity -items 9 to 16- and emotional repair -items 17 to 24-), which provides a self-assessment of the individual's ability to manage emotions and feelings. The overall reliability index was  $\alpha=0.871$  and  $\Omega=0.863$ , measured by Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's Omega.

Finally, generic professional competencies were assessed using the validated Generic Competencies Questionnaire for University Students (CECGEU) by Solanes-Puchol et al. (2022). This questionnaire consists of a total of 45 items rated on a 1–6 Likert scale (where 1 is always, 2 is very often, 3 is frequently, 4 is usually, 5 is occasionally and 6 is rarely), measuring six basic professional competencies, through six dimensions: job performance, management skills, leadership, work motivation, learning capacity, and interpersonal relationships and teamwork. The global reliability index was  $\alpha=0.968$  and  $\Omega=0.968$ .

## Procedure

Initially, programme coordinators and faculty members teaching mandatory or core courses were contacted to recruit participants for the study. After receiving approval, data collection sessions were scheduled to administer the instruments to participating groups.

During data collection sessions, students were informed that participation was entirely anonymous and voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any time. It was also ensured that at least one researcher was present to address any questions concerning the instruments.

Following data collection, the questionnaires were coded, and all data were entered into the SPSS database. During this process, three questionnaires were discarded because they were incomplete and contained gaps in the information relevant to the analysis of the variables under study.

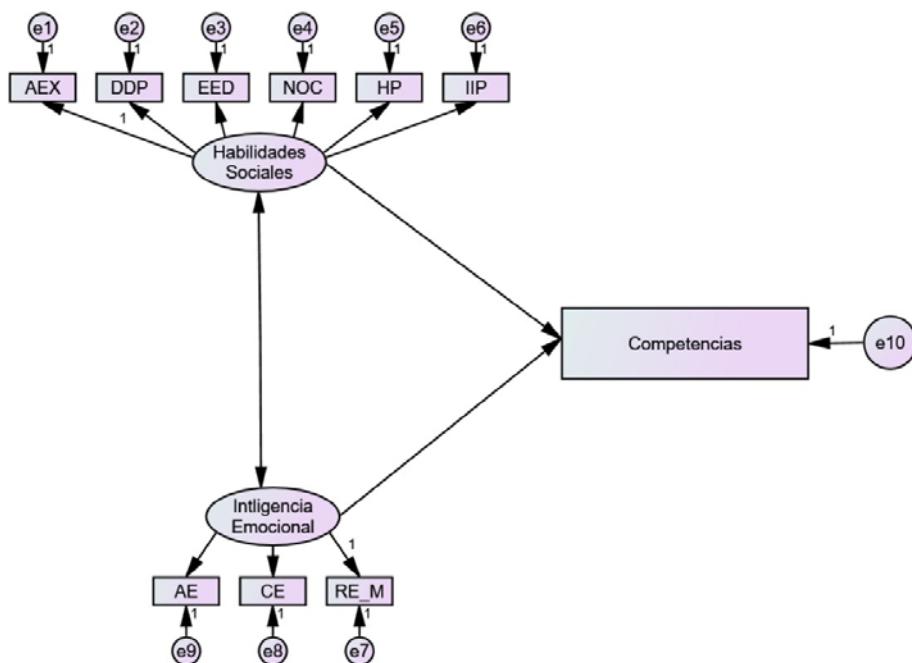
It should be noted that this research adhered to the ethical guidelines established by the Declaration of Helsinki and the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Granada (reference number: 2950/CEIH/2022).

## Data analysis

To analyse the sociodemographic profiles of university students, frequencies, means, and standard deviations were calculated using SPSS statistical software (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). To establish the relationship between variables, after checking the normality of the sample with Shapiro-Wilk test, the student's t-test was used for binomial variables and one-way ANOVA was employed for polytomous variables. Pearson's bivariate correlation analysis was conducted to explore relationships between variables.

To develop the structural equation model, IBM SPSS AMOS version 26.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA) statistical programme was used to study the effects of the variables on each other. The theoretical model (Figure 1) illustrates the hypothesised direction of effects among variables and was confirmed using path analysis of observable variables.

**Figure 1**  
*Theoretical model of the study*



*Note.* Emotional Awareness (AE); Emotional Clarity (CE); Emotional Repair (RE\_M); Emotional Intelligence (IE); Self-Expression (AEX); Making Requests (HP); Expression of Anger Or Disagreement (EED); Saying No And Cutting Off Interactions (NOC); Initiating Positive Interactions With The Opposite Sex (IIP). Social Skills (Habilidades Sociales); Emotional Intelligence (Inteligencia Emocional); Competencies (Competencias).

The proposed theoretical model consists of 15 endogenous variables and 2 exogenous variables. Causal explanations were developed for the endogenous variables based on observed associations among the indicators and the reliability of measurements, which were demonstrated and accepted.

In reference to the direction of the arrows, unidirectional arrows indicate lines of influence among latent variables, interpreted through regression weights. Pearson's Chi-Square test was used to assess statistical significance, with the significance level set at  $p \leq 0.05$  and  $p \leq 0.001$ .

Model fit was assessed following the principles established by Kyriazos (2018) and Maydeu-Olivares (2017). A non-significant Chi-Square value indicated good fit (Maydeu-Olivares, 2017). Additionally, specific fit indices were required to have values above 0.900 for the Incremental Fit Index (IFI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and Normed Fit Index (NFI) (Kyriazos, 2018.) Furthermore, the fit of the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was also assessed, with values below 0.100 indicating a good fit (Bentler, 1990). Lastly, the Tucker Lewis Index (TLI) was also considered, accounting for sample size and sensitivity (Tenenbaum & Eklund, 2007).

The model fit showed a good fit for the Chi-Square test, as well as for the IFI, CFI, NFI, TLI and RMSEA indices. The Chi-Square test produced a non-significant  $p$ -value ( $\chi^2 = 97.900$ ;  $df = 33$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ). The values obtained for NFI, RMSEA, TLI, IFI and CFI were 0.933, 0.067, 0.937, 0.954 and 0.954, respectively.

## RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, the sample was predominantly female and of Christian faith. Most participants were enrolled in Nursing, representing 48.9% ( $N = 213$ ) of the sample. Regarding access pathways, 56% ( $N = 244$ ) of participants entered via the Baccalaureate, and 39.4% ( $N = 172$ ) through vocational education programmes.

**Table 1**  
*Basic description of the sample*

		n	%			n	%
<b>Genre</b>	Male	92	21.1	<b>Bachelor's Degree</b>	Nursery	61	14.0
	Female	344	78.9		Primary Education	6	1.4
<b>Religion</b>	Christian	214	49.1		Social Education	67	15.4
	Muslim	118	27.1		Computer Science	2	0.5
	Otra	16	3.7		BA	87	20.0
	Atheist	88	20.2		Nursing	213	48.9

		n	%			n	%
Access pathway	Baccalaureate	244	56.0	VECG	Yes	176	40.4
	Higher Vocational Training	172	39.4		No	260	59.6
	>25	10	2.3	CGS	Yes	80	18.3
	Any other undergraduate degree	10	2.3		No	356	81.7

Of the sample, 40.40% (N=176) had completed courses on Vocational Education and Career Guidance (VECG) and 18.30% (N=80) had attended Career Guidance Services (CGS).

In relation to the above, as shown in Table 2, statistically significant differences ( $p<0.05$ ) were identified between “Using Career Guidance Services” and “Emotional Control” ( $p=0.036$ ), where students who used these services ( $M=3.65$ ;  $SD=0.82$ ) exhibited a higher level of emotional control than those who have not used them. ( $M=3.43$ ;  $SD=0.81$ ).

**Table 2**

*Differences in score between CGS, VECG, and social skills, emotional intelligence and student competencies*

	Attending Career Guidance Services					Previously taking Guidance subjects				
	CGS	N	Mean	DT	p	VECG	N	Mean	SD	p
Self-expression	Yes	80	2.54	0.81	.826	Yes	176	2.53	0.74	.887
	No	356	2.52	0.73		No	260	2.52	0.75	
Asserting own rights	Yes	80	2.71	0.69	.231	Yes	176	2.65	0.67	.481
	No	356	2.60	0.66		No	260	2.60	0.66	
Expressing anger or disagreement	Yes	80	2.54	0.86	.597	Yes	176	2.50	0.82	.937
	No	356	2.48	0.81		No	260	2.49	0.82	
Saying no and cutting interactions	Yes	80	2.60	0.80	.205	Yes	176	2.55	0.80	.299
	No	356	2.48	0.79		No	260	2.47	0.79	
Making requests	Yes	80	2.77	0.54	.160	Yes	176	2.72	0.52	.359
	No	356	2.68	0.52		No	260	2.67	0.53	

	Attending Career Guidance Services					Previously taking Guidance subjects				
	CGS	N	Mean	DT	p	VECG	N	Mean	SD	p
Initiating positive interactions	Yes	80	2.53	0.69	.126	Yes	176	2.42	0.70	.918
	No	356	2.40	0.68		No	260	2.42	0.68	
Job performance	Yes	80	2.69	0.96	.592	Yes	176	2.67	0.87	.163
	No	356	2.75	0.84		No	260	2.79	0.86	
Management skills	Yes	80	2.55	0.93	.901	Yes	176	2.50	0.88	.208
	No	356	2.57	0.92		No	260	2.61	0.95	
Leadership	Yes	80	2.93	1.01	.948	Yes	176	2.87	0.89	.303
	No	356	2.92	0.84		No	260	2.96	0.85	
Job motivation	Yes	80	2.57	0.97	.678	Yes	176	2.58	0.91	.488
	No	356	2.62	0.87		No	260	2.64	0.88	
Learning capacity	Yes	80	2.54	0.97	.910	Yes	176	2.52	0.92	.598
	No	356	2.55	0.95		No	260	2.57	0.97	
Interpersonal relationships and teamwork	Yes	80	2.25	1.28	.906	Yes	176	2.16	1.12	.234
	No	356	2.23	1.10		No	260	2.29	1.14	
Emotional awareness	Yes	80	3.67	0.90	.427	Yes	176	3.66	0.84	.123
	No	356	3.75	0.77		No	260	3.79	0.76	
Emotional control	Yes	80	3.65	0.82	.036	Yes	176	3.57	0.83	.040
	No	356	3.43	0.81		No	260	3.40	0.81	
Emotional repair	Yes	80	3.77	0.80	.046	Yes	176	3.64	0.77	.553
	No	356	3.57	0.77		No	260	3.59	0.79	

Likewise, statistically significant differences ( $p<0.05$ ) were found between having attended a counselling service and 'Emotional Repair' ( $p=0.046$ ), with students who had attended ( $M=3.77$ ;  $SD=0.80$ ) these services showing higher values for this dimension than students who had not ( $M=3.57$ ;  $SD=0.77$ ).

Similarly, statistically significant differences ( $p<0.05$ ) were identified between taking subjects related to vocational education and career guidance and 'Emotional Control' ( $p=0.040$ ), reflecting higher levels of emotional control in students who

have taken related subjects ( $M=3.57$ ;  $SD=0.83$ ) compared to those who have not ( $M=3.40$ ;  $SD=0.81$ ).

**Table 3**

*Differences in scores between the Access Pathway and students' Social Skills, Emotional Intelligence, and Competencies*

		M	SD	p		M	SD	p	
<b>Job Performance</b>	Baccalaureate	2.77	0.85	.015	<b>Self-expression</b>	Baccalaureate	2.48	0.72	.058
	HVE	2.71	0.84			HVE	2.60	0.75	
	>25	2.45	0.76			>25	2.45	0.93	
	AOUD	2.43	0.88			AOUD	2.44	0.83	
<b>Management Skills</b>	Baccalaureate	2.58	0.94	.072	<b>Defence of own rights</b>	Baccalaureate	2.56	0.67	.121
	HVE	2.55	0.87			HVE	2.67	0.65	
	>25	2.27	0.74			>25	2.86	0.56	
	AOUD	2.34	0.92			AOUD	2.86	0.64	
<b>Leadership</b>	Baccalaureate	2.92	0.86	.056	<b>Expressing Anger or Disagreement</b>	Baccalaureate	2.48	0.81	.155
	HVE	2.92	0.85			HVE	2.50	0.83	
	>25	2.89	0.84			>25	2.71	0.88	
	AOUD	2.69	1.08			AOUD	2.35	0.81	
<b>Job Motivation</b>	Baccalaureate	2.61	0.89	.022	<b>Saying no and cutting interactions</b>	Baccalaureate	2.43	0.76	.005
	HVE	2.61	0.85			HVE	2.60	0.81	
	>25	2.27	0.74			>25	2.48	0.85	
	AOUD	2.51	1.09			AOUD	2.30	0.88	
<b>Learning Ability</b>	Baccalaureate	2.57	0.99	.012	<b>Making requests</b>	Baccalaureate	2.67	0.51	.335
	HVE	2.50	0.86			HVE	2.72	0.55	
	>25	2.75	0.58			>25	2.71	0.30	
	AOUD	2.40	0.86			AOUD	2.62	0.55	

		M	SD	p		M	SD	p	
<b>Interpersonal Relations and Teamwork</b>	Baccalaureate	2.27	1.15	.013	<b>Initiating positive interactions</b>	Baccalaureate	2.40	0.67	.027
	HVE	2.19	1.06			HVE	2.45	0.70	
	>25	1.49	0.47			>25	2.17	0.45	
	AOUD	2.34	1.11			AOUD	2.36	0.66	
<b>Emotional Awareness</b>	Baccalaureate	3.81	0.73	.276	<b>Emotional repair</b>	Baccalaureate	3.58	0.79	.244
	HVE	3.65	0.88			HVE	3.61	0.77	
	>25	4.13	0.77			>25	3.91	0.52	
	AOUD	3.56	0.75			AOUD	3.60	0.67	
<b>Emotional Control</b>	Baccalaureate	3.43	0.80	.440					
	HVE	3.49	0.85						
	>25	3.63	0.62						
	AOUD	3.46	0.72						

*Note.* Any other undergraduate degree (AOUD).

With respect to the relationship between the access pathway and the constructs, Table 3 illustrates statistically significant differences ( $p<0.05$ ) found between the pathway and job performance ( $p=0.015$ ), with students coming from the Baccalaureate pathway achieving higher mean values compared to the other groups.

However, statistically significant differences ( $p<0.05$ ) were found between the access pathway and job motivation ( $p=0.022$ ), with students from the Baccalaureate pathway ( $M=2.61$ ;  $SD=0.89$ ) and those from Higher Vocational Education ( $M=2.61$ ;  $SD=0.85$ ) showing identical values, both higher than those of students from other curricular pathways (Table 3).

Notwithstanding, Table 3 illustrates statistically significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) between the pathway and learning ability ( $p = 0.012$ ), with students entering through the over 25s access test ( $M = 2.75$ ;  $SD = 0.58$ ) presenting higher mean scores compared to the other options.

In terms of social skills, statistically significant differences ( $p<0.05$ ) were observed between the access pathway and the ability to say no and cut interactions ( $p=0.005$ ) and initiate positive interactions ( $p=0.027$ ). Students from Higher Vocational Education exhibited higher mean values compared to students from other pathways (Table 3).

**Table 4**  
*Matrix of correlations of the constructs*

	DDT	HG	L	MT	CAP	RIE	AE	CE	RE_M	AEX	DDP	EED	NOC	HP	IIP
<b>DDT</b>	1	.833**	.804**	.829**	.764**	.735**	-.001	-.280**	-.243**	.203**	.153**	.178**	.165**	.035	.180**
<b>HG</b>		1	.744**	.838**	.750**	.748**	.019	-.206**	-.215**	.220**	.186**	.193**	.162**	.051	.184**
<b>L</b>			1	.728**	.669**	.698**	-.028	-.271**	-.220**	.169**	.119*	.130**	.118*	-.007	.220**
<b>MT</b>				1	.773**	.761**	-.006	-.210**	-.175**	.178**	.160**	.145**	.133**	.042	.155**
<b>CAP</b>					1	.748**	.017	-.188**	-.165**	.186**	.131**	.125**	.145**	.053	.194**
<b>RIE</b>						1	-.049	-.148**	-.122*	.228**	.169**	.167**	.137**	.046	.210**
<b>AE</b>							1	.195**	.054	-.078	-.130**	-.057	-.096*	-.016	-.066
<b>CE</b>								1	.498**	-.121*	-.029	-.134**	-.114*	.127**	-.086
<b>RE_M</b>									1	-.041	-.019	-.104*	-.054	.147**	-.020
<b>AEX</b>										1	.579**	.701**	.695**	.318**	.592**
<b>DDP</b>											1	.562**	.642**	.347**	.415**
<b>EED</b>												1	.681**	.247**	.462**
<b>NOC</b>													1	.396**	.521**
<b>HP</b>														1	.314**
<b>IIP</b>															1

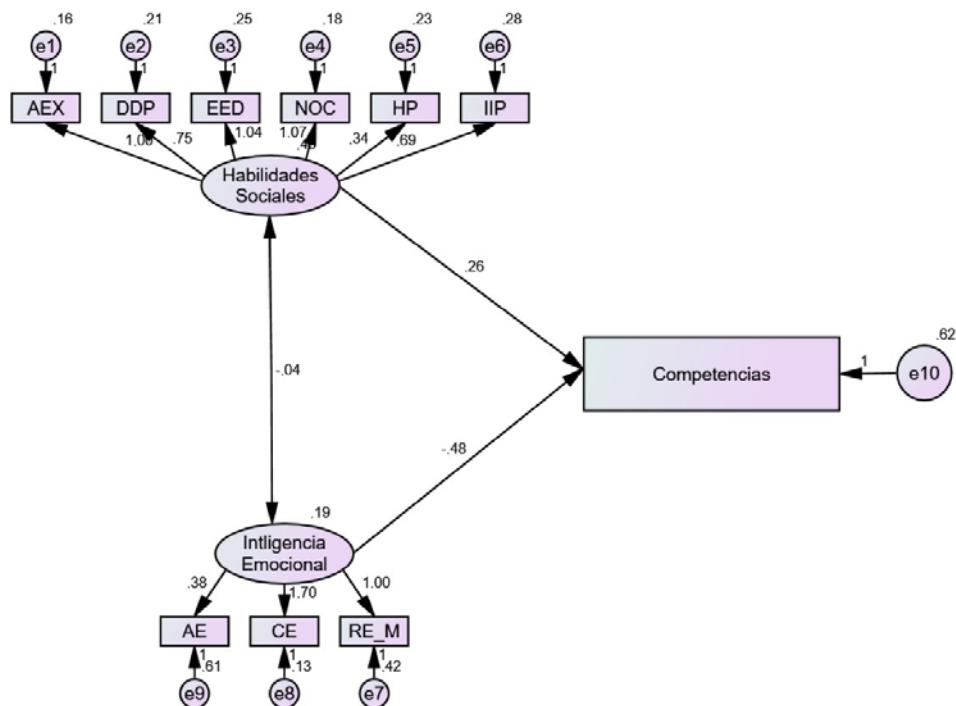
\*\*. The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-sided).

\*. The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-sided).

*Note.* job performance (DDT); management skills (HG); leadership(L); work motivation (MT); learning capacity (CAP); interpersonal relationships and teamwork (RIE); Emotional Awareness (AE); Emotional Clarity (CE); Emotional Repair (RE\_M); Emotional Intelligence (IE); Self-Expression (AEX); Making Requests (HP); Expression Of Anger Or Disagreement (EED); Saying No And Cutting Off Interactions (NOC); Initiating Positive Interactions With The Opposite Sex (IIP).

Relating to the relationship between the analysed constructs, significantly positive correlations were found between the dimensions of social skills, both among themselves and with the dimensions of generic professional competencies. Conversely, significantly negative correlations were found between the dimensions of emotional intelligence and social skills and competencies (see Table 4).

**Figure 2**  
*Structural equation model*



As shown in Figure 2, the theoretical model has been confirmed by the data, which demonstrate a good fit, with the effects reflected in Table 5.

Table 4 presents the results of the effects obtained. A negative effect of emotional intelligence on competencies was found ( $\beta = -0.247$ ;  $p \leq 0.001$ ). Similarly, a positive effect of social skills on competencies was observed ( $\beta = 0.199$ ;  $p \leq 0.001$ ). Additionally, a reciprocal and significant negative effect ( $p < 0.05$ ) between emotional intelligence and social skills was identified ( $\beta = -0.136$ ).

Relating to the effect of emotional intelligence on the sub-variables, a positive effect was found on emotional Awareness, emotional control, and emotional repair ( $\beta = 0.204$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ;  $\beta = 0.898$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ;  $\beta = 0.555$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ). Focusing on social skills, a positive effect of this variable was evident on self-expression, defence of own rights, expressing anger and disagreement, saying no, making requests, and initiating positive interactions ( $\beta = 0.848$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ;  $\beta = 0.714$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ;  $\beta = 0.797$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ;  $\beta = 0.846$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ;  $\beta = 0.409$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ;  $\beta = 0.635$ ,  $p \leq 0.001$ ).

**Table 5**  
*Effects of variables*

Direction of the effect			R.W.		S.R.W.	
	Estimates	S.E.	C.R.	p	Effect	
AEX ← SS	1,000			***	.848	
DDP ← SS	.750	.046	16.195	***	.714	
EED ← SS	1.037	.053	19.416	***	.797	
NOC ← SS	1.066	.053	20.229	***	.846	
HP ← SS	.341	.041	8.386	***	.409	
IIP ← SS	.691	.048	14.338	***	.635	
RE_M ← IE	1.000				.555	
CE ← IE	1.696	.400	4.236	***	.898	
AE ← IE	.376	.107	3.533	***	.204	
Competencias ← SS	.264	.066	4.006	***	.199	
Competencias ← IE	-.479	.105	-4.542	***	-.247	
IE ← SS	-.037	.017	-2.161	.031	-.136	

Note. Social Skills (SS); job performance (DDT); Self-Expression (AEX); Expression of Anger Or Disagreement (EED); Saying No And Cutting Off Interactions (NOC); Making Requests (HP); Initiating Positive Interactions With The Opposite Sex (IIP); Emotional Intelligence (IE); Emotional Repair (RE\_M); Emotional Awareness (AE); Emotional Clarity (CE); Competencias (Competencies).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Emotional intelligence is a critical skill that evolves throughout life. As revealed by this study, students who have attended Career Guidance Services or taken a Vocational Education and Career Guidance course tend to exhibit better emotional control. As Molina-Dávila (2022) suggests, this may be because educational guidance is crucial for socio-emotional development throughout life, equipping individuals with tools to explore their skills, set goals and manage emotions effectively. Furthermore, studies by Bedoya-Guerrero et al. (2024), Peng et al. (2021), and Wang et al. (2021) highlight the importance of employability-oriented education, which fosters the development of technical and professional skills among students.

With respect to university access pathways, it was found that students from the Baccalaureate pathway had a better perception of their job performance. In contrast, students from both vocational education and the Baccalaureate pathway demonstrated high motivation for work. This aligns with the findings of Mareque-Álvarez-Santullano et al. (2018), who found that employers considered apprentices to be highly competent. On the other hand, students entering university via the over 25 entrance exams stood out for their higher learning capacity. This may be since their educational shortcomings require them to learn more quickly to match their knowledge with that of their peers, or because, as LeMire (2024) suggests, adult learners can better understand and retain knowledge when it is presented in a format suited to them.

In contrast, students from vocational education exhibited a greater capacity to manage the type of interactions they engage in. As Sánchez-Bolívar and Escalante González (2020) propose, students from higher vocational education cycles possess a higher level of social and labour skills compared to those accessing from other pathways. This may be related to the fact that VE students undergo a longer process, which allows them to develop the social skills necessary to work in a company and interact with colleagues and clients. This, in turn, fosters the development of professional competencies, as established by Sarceda-Gorgoso and Barreira-Cerdeiras (2021).

A relationship has been demonstrated between social skills and the level of professional competencies among university students, in line with research by Sánchez-Bolívar et al. (2019) and Sanchis-Giménez et al. (2023), who identified key social skills such as cooperation, empathy, and the ability to cope with risky situations as fundamental competencies for success in the workplace, and therefore, crucial for securing employment.

In this regard, Jitaru et al. (2023) emphasise the importance of training for the personal development of students in social and emotional competencies, highlighting their significance for effective adaptation in both work and social environments.

Additionally, it is important to note that a negative relationship was found between emotional intelligence and professional competencies, which contradicts findings by Sanchis et al. (2023), who considered emotional intelligence an integral part of professional competencies.

Conversely, contrary to Azpiazu et al. (2015), who established a positive correlation between emotional intelligence and social skills, the results of this study indicate a negative relationship between these variables. This may be due to the development of social skills being used as a protective mechanism to address various emotional regulation issues.

On this point, this study has confirmed that emotional intelligence and social skills are predictor variables of professional competencies. The results revealed a negative effect between emotional intelligence and professional competencies, which, according to Valenzuela-Aparicio et al. (2023) and Cebollero-Salinas et al. (2022), means that a high level of emotional intelligence does not necessarily translate into a high level of competencies. This is because emotional intelligence is associated with an internal and personal locus, while competencies are framed as a social manifestation with an external locus.

In line with the above, social skills have been established as a strong predictor of professional competencies. As noted by Wesley et al. (2017), social skills are indispensable for achieving successful professional performance in a dynamic business world, particularly since both variables share a significant external psychological component. While emotional intelligence requires introspective analysis, social skills, and competencies necessitate an external contextual analysis that examines socio-professional performance.

According to the results of this study, career guidance, both personal guidance and courses, is a key factor in helping university students develop greater emotional resources. Students who receive this type of support show a greater capacity to manage and control their emotions, which can have significant implications for their well-being and academic performance.

Concerning university access pathways, there is a clear difference in the perception of competencies. Students entering through Vocational Education or the Baccalaureate perceive themselves as having greater professional competencies, particularly in their preparation for the labour market. In contrast, students who access university at an older age or with previous educational gaps tend to place more value on their learning competencies, suggesting that these groups develop a stronger motivation and focus on learning.

A relevant finding is the positive correlation between social skills and perceived competencies. Social skills emerge as a reliable predictor of competency levels, highlighting the importance of fostering these abilities in training programmes to enhance students' integration and performance in both university and work environment.

Finally, a noteworthy aspect is the complex relationship between emotional intelligence and professional competencies. Although emotional intelligence is often perceived as a positive resource, this study finds a negative correlation with professional competencies. Furthermore, emotional intelligence acts as a negative predictor of these competencies, which could indicate that students with higher emotional intelligence may prioritise emotional management over skills directly related to the work environment.

This study highlights the need for further research on these relationships, including studies on mediation between variables to better understand the mechanisms underlying this correlation.

Among the limitations of the study, the use of self-reports stands out, as it may introduce bias, as participants could overreport or underreport their emotional and social skills. The use of the TMMS self-report tool only measures intrapersonal skills and does not assess the interpersonal dimension of the emotional intelligence model, which other questionnaires do. Therefore, it would be interesting to include this dimension in future research. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of this study limits the ability to establish causal relationships, so employing longitudinal or triangulated designs with observational sources could offer valuable insights for future research.

This study underscores the importance of implementing educational and career guidance programmes that promote a balanced development of social skills and emotional intelligence within the university setting.

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