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Design of a Research Study to Evaluate Professional Competencies Through Innovative Pedagogical Approaches in the University Context

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Abstract

Context: Training ethically committed, reflective, and socially responsible professionals remains a core challenge for higher education, particularly in light of the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015). In the field of Lifelong Guidance and Counselling (LGC), competency-based training has gained importance; however, the assessment of students' progressive development of professional competencies is often poorly systematized. This gap is especially critical in Latin America, where contextually appropriate and validated assessment tools are scarce. As an educational institution, the university has the responsibility of ensuring that students construct both general and specific knowledge for professional practice, playing a central role in the training of competent professionals committed to social development (UNESCO, 1998).

Approach: This study proposes the design and validation of an assessment battery composed of a rubric and an inventory to evaluate the development of professional competencies in LGC undergraduate training. The research is grounded in an integrative theoretical framework that combines socio-constructivist, experiential, transformative, and deep learning theories, with a focus on ethical formation and the development of a situated professional identity.

Findings: It is expected that the proposed instruments will provide valuable feedback for both teaching and learning processes. By enabling the identification of strengths and areas for improvement in students' competency development, these tools aim to support formative assessment practices and inform curriculum design in university settings.

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Conclusions: The validated instruments will contribute to advancing Competency-Based Education in university contexts by offering reliable and context-sensitive assessment strategies. This work reinforces the value of formative, holistic, and reflective evaluation approaches that align with the complexity of professional practice in the field of LGC.

Keywords

lifelong guidance and counselling, higher education, professional competencies

1 Introduction: Professional Training and Inclusion in Higher Education

Training ethically committed, reflective, and socially responsible professionals has become one of the main challenges of higher education (UNESCO, 1998). There is broad consensus that education should be oriented toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, prioritizing the well-being of individuals and their environments (United Nations, 2015). In this context, Competency-Based Education (CBE) has gained relevance as a pedagogical approach that seeks to integrate knowledge, skills, and attitudes into contextualized and ethically responsible performance (Galdeano Bienzobas & Valiente Barderas, 2010). Although many educational programs promote the integration of theory, practice, and critical reflection, the assessment of students' progressive development of competencies remains poorly systematized. This limits the provision of adequate formative feedback and hinders informed curricular decision-making.

In the Psychology degree program at the University of Buenos Aires, the undergraduate course in Lifelong Guidance and Counselling (LGC) has implemented a theoretical-practical approach that connects academic knowledge with real-world experiences in the professional field. The interventions carried out by students in various contexts, under the supervision of faculty tutors, promote the critical appropriation of conceptual tools and the progressive construction of their professional role. This institutional experience aligns with international debates on the need to train professionals capable of acting with ethical responsibility and social commitment in diverse contexts. In particular, the field of LGC presents specific challenges related to educational, occupational, and social inclusion, requiring complex and integrated competencies. The International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG, 2001) has defined key competencies for professional practice in guidance. The Tuning Project (Beneitone et al., 2007), although not focused specifically on guidance, provides relevant conceptual frameworks by identifying both generic competencies for higher education and subject-specific competencies, including those in Psychology. However, the empirical implementation of these frameworks remains limited, especially in Latin America, where there is a lack of valid, reliable, and context-sensitive instruments. Although tools such as the Career Counselling Self-Efficacy Scale (Larson et al., 1992) exist, instruments that combine a competency-based approach with ecological validity remain scarce.

In this context, the research project underlying this article aims to design and validate a set of assessment tools a rubric and an inventory applicable to real training contexts in university-level guidance education. It is important to note that this article presents the methodological and conceptual design for a future empirical study, and does not report data or results from a study already conducted. This contribution is expected to strengthen both pedagogical processes and professional training policies by providing empirical evidence and contextualized resources for a more just, relevant, and transformative education.

2 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Integrative theoretical approach to learning

This research is grounded in a proposed integrative theoretical framework that combines a social constructivist approach with experiential and transformative learning theories, as well as the deep learning approach. This framework serves to guide the design of the planned study, rather than reporting results from an implemented study. From a social constructivist perspective, learning is conceived as an active, situated, and socially mediated process, learning is conceived as an active, situated, and socially mediated process in which knowledge is built through participation in communities of practice and the resolution of real-world problems (Coll, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). This view is complemented by Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) and Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1997), which emphasize experience and critical reflection as pillars of meaningful education. In addition, the Deep Learning Approach (Furman, 2021) highlights metacognition as a core process and transfer of learning as a key educational goal, enabling students to apply what they have learned in new and authentic contexts. This conceptual framework enables the articulation of teaching and assessment processes with a pedagogical approach that promotes meaningful, integrative, and ethically engaged learning particularly relevant in fields such as LGC.

2.2 The Concept of Professional Competence: Evolution and Foundations

The concept of professional competence has acquired multiple meanings over time. Understanding it in all its complexity requires reviewing its historical evolution, epistemological foundations, and redefinition in the field of higher education. Although today it is widely disseminated in the educational field, the notion of competence did not originate there, but rather in business management, particularly in industrial and technological sectors, with a conception focused on the effectiveness of performance in specific tasks and market demands (Iberfop-OEI, 1998). Over time, the concept was appropriated and reformulated by the educational field—first in technical and vocational training, and later in higher education, where it acquired a more complex meaning. From an integrative perspective, Tobón (2008) defined professional competence as a complex process of performing competently in specific contexts, involving the integration of knowledge (knowing how to be, do, know, and coexist) and an ethical commitment to professional challenges. In this approach, competence is not limited to the mere accumulation of knowledge but involves the mobilization of cognitive, affective, and social resources to act in real situations. Bransford et al. (1999) emphasized that domain expertise in a disciplinary field is evidenced by the ability to think effectively about problems, organize knowledge meaningfully, and apply it with flexibility and creativity in different contexts.

We understand professional competencies as dynamic configurations of knowledge, attitudes, and values, constructed in situated contexts and enacted through professional, ethical, effective, and reflective performances. This definition draws from the paradigm of meaningful and situated learning (Coll, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991), which conceives competencies not as fixed or universal traits, but as contextual constructions developed through interaction with real-world problems, professional communities, and diverse cultural settings. Competency is not something possessed but something constructed and demonstrated through action, particularly in response to concrete challenges. This view also incorporates perspectives that link knowledge, practice, subjectivity, and social commitment (Galdeano Bienzobas & Valiente Barderas, 2010; Tobón, 2008). Although originally focused on professional identity, the model

proposed by Cuadra-Martí et al. (2021) offers valuable insights for competency development, highlighting the importance of integrating theoretical, practical, and subjective knowledge; fostering creativity and problem-solving; promoting a rights-based, prosocial orientation; and incorporating ecological awareness. These perspectives inform the development of instruments and procedures planned for the future study.

2.3 The Development and Assessment of Competencies in Higher Education

The development of professional roles within higher education represents a complex task that goes beyond the mere transmission of disciplinary content. It involves the appropriation of practices, values, and ways of being specific to a professional community, as well as the development of an ethical, critical, and socially committed identity (Cortina, 1997; Freire, 1998; González Maura, 2005). This need becomes especially relevant in a global context marked by social, humanitarian, and environmental crises (Glavic, 2020; United Nations, 2020), in which future professionals are expected to act with sensitivity, critical thinking, and social responsibility in the face of changing and complex realities. In this scenario, the pedagogical approach based on the development of integrated professional competencies has become a fruitful framework for rethinking how we teach, learn, and assess in the university setting (Buxarrais, 1997; González Maura, 2003). From this perspective, developing competencies involves mobilizing knowledge, skills, and attitudes to act effectively, reflectively, and ethically in diverse contexts (Galdeano Bienzobas & Valiente Barderas, 2010). This paradigm has been driven by various pedagogical and institutional developments, as well as by international initiatives such as the Tuning Project (Beneitone et al., 2007) and the DeSeCo framework (OECD, 2005), which defined key competencies for the 21st century across three dimensions: the interactive use of tools, the ability to act autonomously, and the capacity to engage in culturally diverse contexts.

Empirical studies such as CHEERS and REFLEX (Allen & van der Velden, 2011) provided strong evidence of the importance of transversal competencies—critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, and interpersonal communication—as more effective predictors of employability and professional adaptation than purely technical knowledge. In Latin America, authors such as González Maura (2006) have emphasized the need to integrate ethical, cognitive, and affective dimensions in the development of competencies, promoting a humanistic and transformative vision of professional practice, along with active student participation in their own training process.

Various international and national frameworks have thus driven the integration of competency-based models in higher education institutions. These models emphasize the articulation of theory and practice, situated learning, and critical reflection, promoting active teaching strategies such as project-based learning, case analysis, peer collaboration, and formative assessment. In line with this, the development of competencies requires pedagogical environments that integrate meaningful knowledge, authentic experiences, and critical reflection (Martínez, 2000; Mezirow, 1997; Schön, 1983), enabling relevant and sustainable learning (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999; Zabalza, 2009). The university, as a formative institution, has the responsibility to foster such integrative learning environments—not limited to technical training but also aimed at intellectual autonomy, ethical formation, and commitment to the common good (UNESCO, 1998). In this process, educators—in their role as tutors, facilitators, and agents of change—and academic subjects that provide meaningful scenarios for professional intervention play a central role. At the same time, students must be recognized as active subjects

of their own education, whose critical and situated participation is essential for building relevant, contextualized, and transformative professional competencies.

2.4 Competency-Based Training in Psychology

In recent decades, training based on professional competencies has become a key perspective in university education in Psychology, both globally and in Latin America. Various universities have developed institutional models that define the expected competencies in their graduates, including cognitive, instrumental, interpersonal, and systemic dimensions. These models emphasize the need to integrate theoretical knowledge with practical and ethical performance in order to act in diverse and complex professional settings.

Among the institutions that have advanced in this direction are the Universidad Complutense de Madrid (Spain), Universidad de La Laguna (Spain), Universidad Nacional Hermilio Valdizán (Peru), University of Cambridge (United Kingdom), and University of Florida (United States). These universities promoted integrative models aimed at linking theory, practice, and ethical commitment in the development of the professional role. A widely recognized reference in this regard was the Tuning Latin America Project (Beneitone et al., 2007), which has been used in numerous studies to guide curriculum design in Psychology.

In Latin America, various theoretical and pedagogical contributions helped define and operationalize specific competencies for the field of Psychology. Authors such as González Maura (2005, 2006), Villa and Poblete (2007), and Tiana (2005) highlighted the need to integrate cognitive, affective, and ethical components in the development of a reflective and socially committed professional profile. These approaches emphasized active methodologies, situated learning, and critical reflection as core elements for building relevant and sustainable knowledge.

In Argentina, although a comprehensive national model was not consolidated, significant progress was made. The AUAPsi–UVAPsi document (2007) proposed a typology of seven key competencies for Psychology graduates: cognitive, linguistic, technical-instrumental, ethical-axiological-deontological, interpersonal, professional practice, and autonomy and creativity. These competencies were defined as a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for professional practice. Later, the joint report AUAPsi-UVAPsi-FEPRA (2008) reinforced this approach, highlighting the lack of practical and research training as a major weakness and proposing graduate profiles articulated in terms of competencies.

These developments were accompanied by empirical studies that examined the gap between academic training and professional practice demands. A pioneering study by Castro Solano (2004) in Buenos Aires, based on interviews with graduates and employers, revealed the difficulties graduates faced in deploying many of the required competencies in the workplace. In turn, research conducted at national universities, such as Mar del Plata (Manzo, 2010; Moya, 2008), analyzed student perceptions of the training received and provided valuable insights into the institutional conditions that facilitated or hindered the development of competencies.

Based on these developments, small academic communities emerged that promoted a critical review of Psychology education. Among their main contributions was the proposal to distinguish between general competencies common to all graduates and specific competencies related to different areas of professional intervention (e.g., clinical, educational, organisational, or forensic psychology). Although the classifications varied, there was growing consensus on the need to articulate both dimensions to construct relevant and contextualized graduate profiles.

However, a persistent challenge was the development of appropriate assessment tools for this perspective. In many cases, competency assessment was reduced to knowledge tests, without considering the complexity of professional performance in real world settings. This limitation was highlighted by several studies that underscored the need for valid, contextualized, and formative instruments capable of capturing the reflective integration of knowledge, attitudes, and practices. The design of evaluation tools that are sensitive to context and learning processes is thus a key task for advancing toward a professional education in Psychology consistent with the contemporary challenges of professional practice.

In this article, these conceptual insights provide the basis for designing the assessment instruments and methodology proposed for the LGC course, without reporting actual data.

2.5 Competency Development in Lifelong Guidance and Counselling

The field of vocational and career guidance has undergone significant transformations in recent decades, shifting from approaches focused on psychometric assessment and individual choice toward more comprehensive, contextual, and psychosocial perspectives. This evolution has expanded the scope of professional roles, which are now conceived as critical, situated practices committed to supporting diverse life paths in contexts marked by social, educational, and labour inequalities (Aisenson, 2007; Guichard, 1995; Savickas et al., 2009).

This paradigmatic shift requires a complex set of professional competencies that integrate theoretical knowledge, technical skills, ethical attitudes, and social sensitivity. The International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG, 2001) defined a framework of core competencies for professional practice in lifelong guidance. These include ethical commitment, professional self-reflection, leadership and support skills, effective communication, intercultural awareness, theory-practice integration, networking, and up-to-date knowledge of educational and labour contexts.

Recent research has expanded this perspective. Cuadra-Martí et al. (2021), for example, proposed a conception of professional identity in guidance based on four interrelated dimensions: integration of theoretical, practical, and subjective knowledge; creativity to address current and emerging problems; a prosocial orientation grounded in rights-based approaches; and ecological sensitivity. This model underscores the need to train professionals with competencies to critically intervene in changing contexts, promoting sustainable, just, and meaningful life projects.

In Latin America, these discussions have gained particular relevance in settings characterized by inequality. Aisenson (2007) and Valenzuela and Aisenson (2022) developed a preventive, educational, and community-based approach to guidance, positioning the professional as an agent who supports life trajectories and strengthens individual agency. This model requires a broad range of competencies, including both technical skills (such as designing and implementing intervention programs, report writing, critical context analysis) and transversal competencies (teamwork, self-regulation, empathy, professional communication), as well as an ethical and contextualized disposition. Despite the growing recognition of these competencies, there remains a gap in tools that allow for systematic and situated assessment of their development during undergraduate education. Most evaluations remain focused on theoretical content or isolated products, failing to capture the complexity of professional performance in real-life situations. This shortcoming hampers the provision of meaningful formative feedback and the improvement of pedagogical proposals.

This article addresses that challenge. Drawing on sustained experience in the undergraduate course LGC within the Psychology program at the University of Buenos Aires, it proposes the design and validation of tools to comprehensively assess the development of professional competencies in guidance. These instruments aim to strengthen both situated training and institutional policies for educational improvement, providing empirical evidence and resources that are sensitive to the specificities of the field.

The article proposes instruments and procedures informed by these frameworks, emphasizing that they are planned for future application in real training contexts, rather than reporting results already obtained.

3 Objectives

Based on the theoretical framework the following objectives were formulated to guide the design and validation of the proposed assessment instruments:

The main objective of this study is to develop and validate an assessment tool that systematizes the competencies progressively developed by undergraduate students throughout the LGC course. This instrument aims to facilitate the adjustment of pedagogical devices to better align with the development of competencies required for the expected professional role. To achieve this, the study also pursues the following specific objectives:

- Identify the generic and professional competencies that should be prioritized in LGC undergraduate training.
- Determine the key dimensions to be included in a valid and reliable rubric and inventory for competency assessment.
- Collect evidence of content, structural, and ecological validity of the instruments through their application in real university training contexts.
- Develop a teacher evaluation rubric to monitor students' competency development processes.
- Implement the pedagogical device in authentic educational settings.
- Conduct in-depth interviews to gather qualitative insights about the applicability and effectiveness of the assessment instruments.
- Analyse the information generated by the instruments to support formative feedback in teaching, learning, and assessment practices.

4 Methodology and Research Design

4.1 Research Approach

The study is designed as a mixed-methods longitudinal research project, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the process of competency development over time. A quantitative approach is planned to measure specific competencies through validated instruments at different stages of the training process, providing objective data on progression. Simultaneously, a qualitative approach will capture rich, contextualized information about students' experiences, perceptions, and learning dynamics through in-depth interviews, analysis of student interventions, and teacher evaluations. Combining these approaches enables triangulation of data and a deeper understanding of the complex, situated nature of professional competency development.

4.2 Study Desgin

The proposed study is quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional, correlational, and instrumental. It is intended to be conducted at a single point in time to observe relationships between variables within real educational settings (ex post facto), without deliberate manipulation. The instrumental aspect focuses on the design, piloting, and validation of instruments for measuring competencies in university students (Montero & León, 2002). The cross-sectional design allows for the collection of a comprehensive dataset to evaluate the planned instruments and identify potential refinements for future longitudinal applications.

4.3 Participants and Context

The study will use a purposive sample of at least 100 undergraduate students enrolled in the Lifelong Guidance and Counselling (LGC) course at the Faculty of Psychology, University of Buenos Aires. Participants are expected to provide informed consent. The course integrates theory, practice, and real-world interventions, with active student participation under faculty supervision and a reflective learning approach. Faculty members involved are experienced in teaching, research, and outreach in the field of LGC and actively participate in international networks, including IAEVG, the UNESCO Chair on Lifelong Guidance, and the UNITWIN Network.

4.4 Instruments

The following measurement instruments are planned to be developed**,** following the test construction guidelines proposed by Hogan (2004) and the International Test Commission (ITC):

- *E-rubric for the assessment of generic and professional competencies in vocational guidance performance.* This rubric is planned to be designed through expert consensus using the co-rubrics method.
- *Inventory of generic and professional competencies.* This self-report measure will be developed using a Likert-type scale and will address the cognitive, procedural, and attitudinal dimensions of these competencies.
- Additionally, a previously adapted measure is planned to be included to control for social will assess desirability bias.
- *Crowne and Marlowe Social Desirability Scale*, adapted by Cosentino & Castro Solano (2008).

4.5 Validation Process

The construction and validation process is planned to take place in two stages. First, an informal pilot study will be conducted**,** including cognitive interviews (15–20 participants) and expert judgment (minimum of 3 experts) with experience in psychometrics and vocational guidance. A formal pilot with at least 100 students is planned**.** Experts clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the content using rating forms and discussion sessions.

4.6 Data Analysis

All analyses are planned to be performed using R Studio and JASP statistical software. Planned procedures include:

- Descriptive statistics for scale scores and rubric ratings.
- Item discrimination and difficulty analyses to ensure the quality of assessment items.
- Reliability analyses (Cronbach's alpha, ordinal omega, KR-20) for internal consistency.
- Inter-rater agreement using Cohen's Kappa for rubric ratings.
- Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to examine structural validity of the inventory.
- Concordance analyses between rubric and inventory scores.
- Ecological validity assessment to ensure the instruments reflect real-world performance.

This expanded methodology provides a clear, detailed, and transparent overview of the planned study, emphasizing that all procedures, instruments, and analyses correspond to a proposed research design rather than actual data collection.

5 Final Thoughts

This project contributes to the field of LGC by proposing a research study that will provide valid, reliable, and context-sensitive tools to assess the development of professional competencies through an integrative and pedagogically grounded approach. The implementation of these tools is expected to enhance formative feedback processes and support informed curricular decision-making, while also reinforcing the role of higher education in preparing ethically committed, socially responsible, and professionally competent guidance practitioners. By testing and refining a conceptual model based on meaningful, situated, and reflective learning, the study provides both theoretical and methodological contributions to the field of CBE. It will offer instruments that are not only empirically validated but also adaptable to other university-level training contexts, particularly within Latin America, where such tools are still scarce. Ultimately, we believe that this research will foster the design of comprehensive, relevant, and transformative educational experiences. These experiences will enable students to engage with real-world challenges, assume an active role in their learning process, and build the necessary competencies for meaningful and socially relevant professional practice in the field of guidance and counselling.

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