



The role of internationalization of education in developing competencies for employability in CECAR graduates

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ABSTRACT. The internationalization of higher education is a strategy used by universities to train individuals with global skills. Therefore, the objective of this research was to analyze the role of the internationalization of education in the development of skills for employability in CECAR graduates. The study methodology was Quantitative-descriptive, the ECO Organizational Competence Assessment instrument was used and it was applied to 42 CECAR graduates. The research results show that they have high organizational metacompetences, but low emotional metacompetences. The study allowed us to conclude that the internationalization of education contributes to the acquisition of skills for the graduate's employability.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, globalization has transformed various aspects of society, and higher education has been no exception. The process of globalization, characterized by increasing interconnectedness between countries and cultures, has driven a profound change in how higher education institutions (HEIs) prepare students to face an international labor market (Harris, et al.,2019). Today, labor competition is no longer limited to local or national markets; university graduates are confronted with a global market, where technical skills must be accompanied by interpersonal, intercultural, and meta-competencies that allow adaptation to a dynamic and highly competitive environment (Baruch & Vardi, 2021).

The internationalization of higher education has become a key strategy for universities seeking to train professionals with these skills. This phenomenon manifests itself in various forms, such as the creation of student exchange programs, international alliances for research and teaching, the incorporation of foreign professors, and the implementation of curricula that include global perspectives. Universities that promote internationalization not only seek to attract international students and scholars but also to prepare their own students to compete and perform anywhere in the world (Jones & de Wit, 2019).

In this sense, the internationalization of higher education is closely linked to the development of what are known as “meta-competencies”. These skills are not specific to a discipline or profession but are essential to perform in any work environment. In a globalized context, employers especially value competencies such as adaptability, the ability to solve complex problems, intercultural communication, and the ability to work in multidisciplinary and multicultural teams. Graduates who have had the opportunity to interact with different cultures, languages, and academic environments tend to be better prepared to face the challenges of the modern labor market (Olmos-Raya & Arquero Montaña, 2020). The changes driven by globalization have also created an environment in which labor and academic mobility have intensified. Professionals from diverse fields have the opportunity to work in different countries or collaborate on international projects; further highlighting the need to develop these global competencies. In this context, universities play a fundamental role in offering opportunities that allow students to acquire these skills through international programs, stays abroad, internships in global companies, and the use of technologies that facilitate communication with people from other cultures (Succi & Canova, 2020).

The global higher education landscape is therefore constantly evolving; driven by the need to prepare students for an increasingly complex work environment. Universities are not only responsible for providing technical and subject-specific knowledge, but also for developing competencies that enable their graduates to adapt to a professional environment characterized by mobility and constant change (Succi, & Canovi,2020).

INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN COLOMBIA

In Colombia, the internationalization of higher education has gained relevance in recent years as part of a broader strategy to improve educational quality and increase the competitiveness of HEIs in the global scenario. Through government policies and institutional efforts, Colombian universities have begun to implement programs and actions aimed at integrating an international dimension into their curricula, fostering student and faculty exchange, and establishing partnerships with academic institutions in other countries (Marinoni and Pina Cardona, 2014).

The Colombian Ministry of National Education (MEN) has promoted internationalization as a key element within the education system; encouraging academic mobility and international cooperation. Programs such as Colombia Challenge Your Knowledge (CCYK) or the creation of alliances with foreign universities have facilitated access to academic exchange opportunities and collaborative projects. These initiatives allow students to acquire a broader and more globally focused education, which in turn enhances their employability in international labor markets (MEN, 2013).

Despite these advances, internationalization in Colombia faces several challenges. Socioeconomic differences, language barriers, and a lack of resources in some institutions limit access to these opportunities for all students. In addition, many universities have an initial focus on academic exchanges, but there is still work to be done in other areas such as integrating international experiences within the classroom that benefit those who cannot participate directly in mobility programs (Gacel-Ávila, 2019).

Internationalization in Colombia is not limited only to the physical mobility of students. There are strategies such as the internationalization of the curriculum, in which international content and perspectives are incorporated into study programs, even when students do not have the possibility of traveling abroad. This approach is crucial to ensure that more students benefit from training with a global perspective, preparing graduates to interact in multicultural contexts and take advantage of the opportunities provided by an interconnected labor market (Beneitone, 2022).

The internationalization of higher education in Colombia is an evolving process that seeks not only to improve the quality of academic training but also to prepare students to face the challenges of a global labor market. Colombian universities are adopting various strategies to ensure that their students acquire the necessary competencies to be internationally competitive.

THE CONCEPT OF META-COMPETENCIES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO EMPLOYABILITY

Metacompetencies are a set of superior skills that enable people to perform effectively in complex, changing, and multidimensional environments. Unlike technical competencies, which are usually specific to a profession or area of knowledge, meta-competencies are cross-cutting skills applicable in multiple work contexts. In an increasingly competitive and globalized world of work, the development of these meta-competencies has become a crucial factor in improving the employability of university graduates (Finch, et al., 2018).

Among the most valued meta-competencies in today's labor market are critical thinking, problem-solving skills, creativity, emotional intelligence, and the ability to learn autonomously. These skills not only enable professionals to adapt to change but also facilitate continuous learning, an increasingly important skill in an environment where technologies and job demands are rapidly evolving (Clarke, 2018).

Critical thinking, for example, enables graduates to analyze situations objectively, evaluate information from various sources, and make informed decisions, while emotional intelligence facilitates the management of one's own and others' emotions, which is essential for working in teams, especially in multicultural environments. These competencies, although not always an explicit part of traditional academic programs, are increasingly required by employers (Clarke, 2018).

The internationalization of education plays a key role in the development of these meta-competencies. Students who have the opportunity to participate in exchange programs, study abroad, or interact with faculty and peers from different cultures are exposed to new ways of thinking, different problem-solving styles, and challenges that require greater adaptability. These international experiences not only broaden their academic horizons, but also allow them to develop skills such as intercultural communication, the ability to work in teams, and problem-solving in diverse contexts (Bridgstock, 2020).

The relationship between meta-competencies and internationalization is particularly relevant in the context of employability. According to several studies, graduates who have participated in international experiences tend to have better job opportunities and higher success rates in their professional careers. This is because meta-competencies acquired in international environments allow them to adapt more easily to global labor markets, where cultural diversity and the ability to work in multicultural teams are increasingly valued (Bridgstock, 2020).

The development of meta-competencies is essential to improve the employability of university graduates. The internationalization of education, through international experiences and curricula with a global focus, offers students the opportunity to acquire these key skills that prepare them to face the challenges of a constantly changing labor market.

EMPLOYABILITY OF UNIVERSITY GRADUATES: AN INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION PERSPECTIVE

Employability is a concept that has gained increasing prominence in the field of higher education; as it refers to the ability of graduates to obtain and maintain employment appropriate to their levels of training and skills. In a globalized world of work, employability is no longer defined solely by technical skills acquired at university, but by a combination of technical skills, meta-skills, and international experience (Jibeen & Khan, 2020).

International education plays a crucial role in enhancing the employability of graduates by providing students with the necessary tools to function in an increasingly diverse and competitive labor market. Skills acquired through internationalization, such as the ability to work in multicultural teams, problem-solving in global environments, and adaptability, are highly valued by employers worldwide (Jibeen & Khan, 2020).

In addition, studies have shown that graduates who have participated in exchange programs or studied abroad tend to have higher rates of job placement and better opportunities for professional development. This is because international experiences not only enrich the academic profile of students but also prepare them to face the challenges of the globalized labor world (Crossman & Clarke, 2019).

In the case of Colombia, the internationalization of higher education has been identified as a key strategy to improve the competitiveness of graduates in the labor market. Colombian universities have implemented various initiatives to integrate internationalization into their academic programs in order to prepare their students for a professional environment in which global competencies are increasingly in demand (Gacel-Ávila, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

The main objective of this study is to analyze the role of the internationalization of education in the development of employability competencies in CECAR graduates. To carry out this analysis, a quantitative approach has been used based on the application of the ECO test, an instrument designed to measure specific metacompetencies related to employability.

The ECO test (Evaluation of Organizational Competencies) is an evaluation tool that allows for measuring the degree of development of metacompetencies such as problem-solving, critical thinking, adaptability, and teamwork skills (Kaneko Aguilar, 2017). This instrument has been applied to a group of graduates (42) of the institution who have participated in internationalization experiences, such as academic exchanges or student mobility programs.

The use of the ECO test in this study is particularly relevant, as it allows us to obtain precise and quantifiable data on the impact of internationalization on the

development of these key employability competencies. The test results allow an objective assessment of how international experiences have influenced graduates' ability to adapt to complex and multicultural work environments, which in turn affects their employability in the global labor market.

This study seeks to contribute to the understanding of the role of the internationalization of education in the development of key competencies for employability, providing data that can be useful for both universities and employers in making decisions related to the training and recruitment of talent.

RESULTS

The objective of this study was to analyze the role of the internationalization of education in the development of employability competencies in CECAR graduates. To this end, the organizational competencies of the graduates were identified, where it was found that the graduates present a low level of self-control (2.74), ability to cope with pressure (2.81), and teamwork (2.90). In this sense, a low level of self-control means that the individual finds it difficult to manage his emotions in situations that provoke stress or conflict; among the reactions that an individual may present in the face of challenging events are impulsivity, problems being calm and balance in his emotions (See Table 1). (See Table 1).

The ability to cope with pressure refers to the fact that graduates have little ability to manage situations that require high levels of pressure or high demands. Likewise, the subject may present anxious symptoms, and feelings of frustration and be ineffective in the world of work when there are small deadlines for work commitments when they receive criticism or sudden changes. The low teamwork score means that it is a challenge for graduates to work with other subjects, which is related to the possibility of presenting difficulties in communication, cooperating with responsibilities, consenting to different opinions, or helping in a positive way to achieve common objectives related to their work environment.

Table 1 Organizational Competencies

Organizational Competencies	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard dev
Self-control	42	1	5	2,74	1,127
Analytical skills	42	1	5	3,07	,947
Ability to learn	42	1	5	3,05	,795
Ability to cope with pressure	42	1	5	2,81	1,153
Ability to solve problems	42	1	5	3,02	,950
Collaboration	42	1	5	3,36	1,226
Effective communication	42	1	5	3,36	1,078
Creativity	42	1	5	3,33	,928
Entrepreneurship	42	1	5	3,07	,894
Initiative	42	1	5	3,14	1,026
Leadership	42	2	5	3,26	,857

Change orientation	42	1	5	3,50	,917
Achievement orientation	42	1	5	3,05	,909
Persuasion	42	1	5	3,55	,832
Planning and organization	42	1	5	3,05	1,058
Proactivity	42	2	5	3,14	,751
Social relations	42	1	5	3,48	,994
Responsibility	42	1	5	3,36	1,246
Teamwork	42	1	5	2,90	,983
Values	42	1	5	3,24	1,206

CECAR graduates according to the Metacompetencies established by Kanelo's ECO test (2017) present a low emotional metacompetency (2.67) (See Table 2), which is due to low values in competencies such as low self-control (2.74) and the ability to cope with pressure (2.81). This indicates that the graduates have difficulties in identifying, understanding, and effectively managing their own emotions and those of others, in the same sense they find it difficult to empathize and build solid interpersonal relationships.

Table 2 Organizational Meta competencies

Organizational Meta competencies	N	Mínimo	Máximo	Media	Desv. estándar
Administrative	42	1	5	3,02	,924
Directive	42	1	5	3,26	,989
Emotional	42	1	5	2,67	1,223
Entrepreneurial	42	1	5	3,29	,918
Ethical	42	1	5	3,12	1,087
Intellectual	42	1	5	3,14	,952
For high performance	42	1	5	3,10	,878
Social	42	1	5	3,31	1,137
Organizational	42	1	5	3,12	,772

ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONALIZATION OF EDUCATION IN DEVELOPING COMPETENCIES FOR EMPLOYABILITY

The internationalization of higher education has become an important factor in developing the competencies needed in the contemporary world of work. International experiences, as a result of academic exchanges, double degree programs, mirror classes, online learning with subjects from other cultures, or professional internships abroad, play a key role in the integral development of students. This analysis addresses how internationalization contributes to the strengthening of various competencies, including intellectual, emotional, social, ethical, entrepreneurial, managerial, administrative, and high performance skills. Exposure to international educational contexts promotes the development of intellectual competencies by challenging students to multiple perspectives and methodologies; diverse contexts foster students' capacity for analysis and critical thinking, skills that are required by the global labor market. For example, solving

problems in multicultural contexts forces the individual to consider cultural and linguistic variables, enriching his or her ability to interpret and synthesize complex information from different angles. Internationalization processes also foster the development of self-control, emotional resilience, more emotionally flexible, tolerance of uncertainty and strengthening their ability to cope with pressure, because it requires the student to adapt to unfamiliar environments, which are new to him/her and may cause stress.

When a student has an international experience interacting with people from different cultures, his or her abilities to establish social relationships, active listening, empathy and clear forms of expression are enhanced, since intercultural communication is fundamental to forge effective interpersonal relationships and successful work and academic environments. Another of the Metacompetencies that are strengthened with the experiences of Internationalization are ethics and values, since the student is exposed to a new culture and value system, which propitiate the confrontation of their prejudices and understanding of diversity. In the same vein, other consequent values are inclusion, responsibility and justice, necessary for ethical and sustainable leadership.

Having said the above, CECAR graduates have developed Organizational competencies that are fundamental in the working world and that internationalization processes can foster. However, it cannot be affirmed that the Metacompetencies and Organizational Competencies have been developed as a result of the internationalization experience. Creativity and entrepreneurial skills are aspects that enhance international learning, since students are forced to think outside the usual schemes; being immersed in a different context where they have the challenge of facing new projects or adapting to the labor market, they can develop characteristics such as proactivity.

Another skill that internationalization processes offer is the development of managerial and administrative competencies, such as leadership, planning and organization. Being linked to an international environment, where they are assigned work or academic tasks in which they work in a team, enables the development of leadership skills. In this sense, when the student has an international experience that involves new challenges, the subject raises performance standards, as well as the experience itself fosters competencies for high performance, achievement orientation, continuous improvement and commitment to excellence.

DISCUSSION

The internationalization of higher education is a process that enhances the development of competencies essential for graduate employability. It also enriches the academic experience and fosters skills such as self-control, the ability to cope with pressure, interpersonal skills, collaboration attitudes, effective communication, values, responsibility, adaptability, entrepreneurship, creativity,

persuasion, leadership, teamwork, planning and organization, learning ability, achievement orientation, and initiative.

Internationalization strategies, such as international mobility, foster significant competencies in the labor market by providing students with experiences that go beyond the academic sphere, immersing them in different cultural and professional environments. A study by Echeverría, Lafont, and Pineda (2020) found that Argentine and Colombian graduates who participated in an international mobility program developed competencies such as teamwork, leadership, assertive communication, problem-solving, and intercultural competence. These results align with some of the competencies observed in CECAR graduates. The competencies acquired in this context are transferable to the workplace, impacting professionals' adaptability and effectiveness in global settings.

In CECAR students undergoing professional practice—whose participation in internationalization strategies was unknown—a similar result was found regarding the professional skills that soon-to-graduate students needed to strengthen. Among these were time management skills, resilience, and stress management (Mendívil Hernández, Hernández Henríquez, González Sánchez, & Herazo Chamorro, 2023). Additionally, in a study conducted by Herazo Chamorro, Álvarez Ruiz, Mendívil Hernández, Restrepo Ruiz, and González Sánchez (2023), the evaluated subjects also considered that academic mobility contributed to strengthening their research and technological skills.

Therefore, it is significant for universities to establish international partnerships that foster academic collaboration and cultural exchange, enriching students' educational experiences (Álvarez et al., 2024). However, the internationalization of higher education must be modernized, as its digitalization will enable continuous learning and the acquisition of skills required by the labor market (Valdés, 2019). This approach will allow students who cannot afford mobility programs to gain part of the experience. Likewise, promoting internships in international contexts complements students' academic and holistic training, ultimately improving employability and fostering competencies such as planning, organization, and teamwork.

In the same vein, curriculum internationalization and the promotion of intercultural competencies in students are essential for developing creativity, adaptability, and learning capacity. Therefore, curricula should incorporate an international perspective, encourage foreign language learning, and facilitate the participation of students and faculty from different parts of the world. This approach enables students to acquire the necessary competencies for more effective workforce integration, as well as fostering knowledge exchange (MEN, 2024). At CECAR, although these strategies are implemented, it cannot be guaranteed that graduates who participated in internationalization strategies—other than mobility—acquired the same metacompetencies and organizational

skills as those who engaged in mobility programs, as achieving these competencies requires a conscious learning process.

The internationalization of education is fundamental for developing employability skills in graduates. In this regard, academic mobility, agreements and partnerships between universities, internship agreements, and curriculum internationalization are necessary to prepare students and graduates to face the challenges of an increasingly globalized and diverse labor market. For this reason, it is essential for higher education institutions (HEIs) to promote and strengthen internationalization processes and strategies, ensuring comprehensive student training and high-quality education.

CONCLUSION

Graduates who participate in academic mobilities develop organizational competencies and meta-competencies necessary for mobility. In that same sense, strengthen and promote the development of emotional skills in students and skills such as self-control, ability to face pressure, and teamwork; For the above, academic exchanges or academic mobilities must be strengthened, carrying out collaborative projects with students from other places in the world where they solve an environmental problem. Other actions that can be implemented include promoting student participation in international volunteering, continuing to incorporate an international perspective in the curricula of academic programs, as well as promoting double degree programs, and international mentoring, among others.

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