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SOFT OR SPECIFIC COMPETENCIES FOR EMPLOYABILITY REFLECTIONS OF A GROUP OF CECAR GRADUATES AS A RESULT OF THEIR PARTICIPATION IN INSTITUTIONAL INTERNATIONALIZATION ACTIVITIES

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study analyzes the perceptions of five graduates of a private higher education institution in Colombia on the impact of their participation in institutional internationalization activities on the development of employability competencies. The work is part of a broader project and uses a case study design with a focus group as its main data collection method. The study evidences the formative value of internationalization beyond technical knowledge, highlighting its contribution to the development of professionals with a global vision. Although the sample is small, the disciplinary diversity of the participants enriches the results and makes it possible to see how these experiences impact different professional fields.

KEYWORDS: Soft and Specific Competencies, Internationalization, Higher Education, Employability, Colombia.

1. INTRODUCTION

In a globalized and competitive context, the employability of university graduates has become a central concern for both higher education institutions and employers. Specific competencies and soft skills emerge as crucial elements in preparing professionals to face the challenges of the contemporary labor market. Specific competencies refer to the technical knowledge and skills specific to each profession, while these skills, also known as transversal competencies, include interpersonal, communication and adaptability skills. In the current higher education landscape, institutions face the challenge of training professionals capable of responding to the demands of a constantly evolving labor market. Beyond the specific skills specific to each discipline, the so-called soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, problem solving and adaptability, have gained increasing relevance as key factors for employability (Suleman, 2018). Recent studies have shown that these transversal skills are as valued as technical skills, as they facilitate labor insertion and mobility in dynamic and globalized environments (Suleman, 2018). The distinction between Internationalization at Home (IaH) and physical mobility represents a fundamental conceptual divide in contemporary higher education discourse. While physical mobility involves students crossing borders for educational experiences, internationalization at home focuses on integrating international and intercultural dimensions into domestic learning environments (Knight, 2015; De Wit et al., 2019). This distinction becomes particularly relevant for understanding how international students both benefit from and contribute to internationalized learning environments, regardless of their physical location (Leask, 2015; Deardorff, 2006). Within this framework, institutional internationalization activities are presented as innovative educational strategies that promote the integral development of students through participation in academic exchanges, collaborative projects with foreign institutions, or international events. These experiences not only contribute to strengthening specific competencies in multicultural environments but also promote soft skills such as intercultural management and adaptability (Vázquez, 2019). However, the relationship between these experiences and the perception of employability by graduates remains a relevant research topic, especially in regions such as Latin America, where job opportunities face structural challenges. This article explores the reflections of a group of graduates of the Corporación Universitaria

Del Caribe (CECAR) in Colombia regarding the relevance and impact of these competencies on their employability, based on their experiences and participation in institutional internationalization activities as part of their undergraduate training. It analyzes how these experiences have contributed to their professional training and the acquisition of skills that allow them to adapt adequately to different work and cultural environments. This qualitative research is supported by studies conducted in the last decade both in the global context in countries such as Thailand (Tushar and Sooraksa, 2023) and Portugal (Sebastião et al., 2023) as well as in Latin American countries such as Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador and Mexico (Acuña et al., 2023; Echeverría King et al., 2020; Gutiérrez Pallares et al., 2024; Romero et al., 2021; Valenzuela Sandoval et al., 2024); which highlight the importance of soft skills in employability, as well as in the need for comprehensive training that combines both types of skills to prepare the professionals of the future (Jackson, 2014). This analysis seeks to contribute to the academic debate on the relevance of both soft and specific skills in employability, considering the demands of the current labor market and the evolution of educational policies oriented towards internationalization. By contrasting the perceptions of graduates with global trends in job training, this study provides critical elements to strengthen the relationship between higher education and labor market insertion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *Conceptualization of Soft or Specific Competencies*

The discussion on soft and specific competencies in the context of graduate employability is a topic of growing relevance in higher education. Within this conceptual framework, the definitions of hard and soft competencies, the internationalization of higher education, the various options for implementing such internationalization and the importance of the student's integral development will be addressed. The term competencies refers to the integrated set of knowledge, skills and attitudes that an individual uses to perform in specific contexts efficiently (Sánchez et al., 2019). From this perspective, they have been classified into hard skills and soft skills. According to De Grip and Sauermaann (2018), hard skills are measurable, specific and related to technical or academic tasks, such as programming or data analysis, while soft skills are transversal and are related to interpersonal aspects, leadership, teamwork and conflict resolution. In the current

work context, soft skills have become more prominent due to the increasing automation and digitization of technical tasks (Deming, 2017). These skills, such as effective communication and critical thinking, are considered essential to interact in multicultural and collaborative environments. Suleman (2018) points out that the balance between both types of competencies is crucial for university graduates to effectively insert and progress in the labor market. For example, technical mastery (hard competency) may facilitate initial entry into a position, but soft skills are determinant for career advancement. Thus, hard competencies are those technical knowledge and specific skills needed to perform specific tasks in an occupational field. These skills are easily measurable and assessable through examinations, certifications and practical tests (Robles, 2012). Examples of hard competencies include mastery of computer programs, mathematical skills, clinical, laboratory, medical terminology, data management, public health techniques, research methods, policy analysis, behavioral, program design and evaluation, and technological knowledge in each of the disciplinary areas (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, Health Sciences, Social Sciences, Humanities, Biological). Specific or hard competencies are essential for student development, as they constitute the set of technical knowledge and practical skills needed to perform in their professional field. These competencies enable students to face complex tasks, solve specific problems and contribute effectively to organizational goals (De Grip & Sauermann, 2018). In addition, their mastery ensures a solid foundation for employability, facilitating access to the labor market. According to Sánchez-Ruiz *et al.* (2019), these technical skills are fundamental to excel in specialized roles and adapt to rapid technological and sectoral advances. Soft skills, on the other hand, are interpersonal skills and personal attributes that are more difficult to measure, but are crucial for success in the work environment and in everyday life. They include skills such as effective communication, teamwork, problem solving, adaptability, empathy and creativity. These skills are critical for integration and success in the work and social environment (Jackson, 2014).

Among these key skills are project management, leadership, time management, networking, intercultural competencies, and critical thinking and language skills, essential components for personal and professional development in a globalized world. These key areas are explored below, supported by

studies from relevant authors or organizations. Project management is defined as the set of processes and methodologies required to plan, execute and monitor activities aimed at achieving specific objectives within a given time and resources. According to ISO 21500 (2012), project management focuses on coordinating tasks to achieve a single result, taking into account time, cost and scope constraints. This framework emphasizes detailed planning, continuous control and adaptation to changes during the project life cycle (ISO, 2012). Leadership, meanwhile, relates to the ability to guide and influence a group to achieve shared goals. Northouse (2018) describes leadership as a dynamic process that requires communication skills, motivation and interpersonal relationship management. This approach highlights the importance of building trust and fostering collaboration, essential to inspire and lead teams effectively in any organizational context. Time management involves organizing and prioritizing tasks to maximize productivity and minimize stress. According to Macan (2022), efficient time management includes detailed planning, goal setting, and the ability to handle interruptions. These elements are crucial to meeting deadlines and improving performance in demanding work environments. Networking refers to the ability to build and maintain strategic relationships to exchange resources, information, and opportunities. Park and Kwon (2019) argue that networking strengthens collaboration and facilitates innovation, particularly in organizations seeking to remain competitive in globalized markets. These networks also broaden perspective and generate opportunities for professional growth. Cross-cultural competence and a global outlook are essential for working in multicultural environments. According to Dearthoff (2015), these skills include empathy, curiosity, appreciation and respect for diversity, as well as the ability to adapt to different cultural contexts. These competencies promote effective collaboration and mutual understanding, key factors in an interconnected world. Critical thinking, defined by Facione (2020), is the ability to analyze and evaluate information in order to make informed decisions. This reflective process involves questioning assumptions, identifying problems and proposing innovative solutions. The development of critical thinking is critical in an environment where complex problem solving and data analysis are essential. Finally, language skills encompass the ability to understand and produce language effectively in a variety of contexts. According to the Common

European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020), these skills include reading, writing, listening and speaking. Mastering multiple languages has become a competitive advantage in a globalized labor market, promoting communication and understanding across cultures. Together, these skills form a comprehensive framework for personal and professional development. Integrating technical competencies, such as project management and time management, with interpersonal and cultural skills, such as leadership and openness to diversity, enables individuals to adapt and thrive in complex and constantly changing environments. This multidimensional approach not only fosters personal growth, but also drives organizational success and social progress in an interconnected world.

2.2. Soft and Specific Competencies in the Internationalization of Higher Education

Internationalization is a strategic process that integrates an international, intercultural and global dimension into higher education programs in order to enhance the academic quality and professional relevance of graduates (Knight, 2015). In this sense, programs such as academic exchanges, dual degrees and international partnerships have allowed the development of competencies that transcend local borders. De Wit et al. (2019) argue that internationalization contributes significantly to the strengthening of soft skills such as intercultural management, global problem solving and empathy. On the other hand, Egron-Polak and Hudson (2017) emphasize that universities should adopt more inclusive approaches, such as internationalization at home and collaborative virtual experiences, to democratize access to these benefits for the vast bulk of learners who might not have the opportunity to engage in physical mobility abroad. In addition, Beelen and Jones (2015) note that exposure to international contexts increases students' self-confidence and fosters their adaptability. These experiences, whether through stays abroad or local activities with international scope, are aspired to prepare students for work challenges in an interconnected world. In the same vein, the research conducted by Herazo et al. (2024) also states that mobility enables the formation of individuals capable of facing the challenges, obstacles, and changes experienced today. Effective implementation of internationalization requires a multifaceted approach. Knight (2015) identifies three main levels: physical mobility, curricular integration, and inter-institutional cooperation. For example, mobility

programs, such as those promoted by Erasmus+ in Europe, facilitate learning in multicultural contexts, while internationalization at home seeks to incorporate global perspectives into curricula (Leask, 2015). On the other hand, collaborative online education, known as COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning), allows students from different countries to work together on academic projects without the need for physical mobility (O'Dowd, 2020). This model, in addition to being accessible, fosters team problem solving, intercultural communication and critical thinking, crucial skills in modern employability (IDB, 2022). Similarly, another strategy is internships and practical training, which provide a real-world setting that allows students to strengthen the competencies related to their professional profile, as well as essential transversal skills to apply in the workplace (Alvarez-Ruiz et al., 2023).

2.3. The Role of Soft and Specific Competencies for Comprehensive Education

Comprehensive development encompasses the academic, personal and social formation of students, preparing individuals to perform not only as competent professionals, but also as global citizens (Hernández-López et al., 2024). According to Mabuto and Mphahlele (2021), this approach requires institutions to adopt student-centered methodologies that include stages such as self-reflection and personal planning. A study by Torres Millones (2022) proposes that integral development should prioritize both technical competencies and socioemotional skills. Through practical activities, such as collaborative projects and problem-based learning, students not only acquire technical knowledge, but also strengthen their ability to work in teams and make ethical decisions (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). Finally, studies by Suleman (2018) and Deming (2017) confirm that integral development directly impacts the perception of employability, as employers seek profiles that combine outstanding technical competencies with interpersonal skills that promote productive work environments. Reflection on competency-based training in higher education has led to a deeper analysis of how these competencies can be effectively assessed and developed (Burgos & Castillo, 2022). The implementation of teaching methods that integrate both hard and soft competencies is essential to prepare students for the future (Barrena, 2015). For example, the use of collaborative projects and case studies can help students develop teamwork and problem-solving skills, which are highly valued in the workplace

(Recio-Muñoz & Santoveña-Casal, 2022). In addition, research has shown that graduates who participate in internationalization activities tend to have a higher perception of their employability and better preparation for the labor market (Peiró & Sierra, 2013). This is because these experiences allow them to develop a network of contacts and acquire intercultural skills that are crucial in an increasingly globalized world (Vázquez-Guzmán, 2018). Therefore, it is essential that higher education institutions implement strategies that foster internationalization and the development of soft skills in their students (González & Marín, 2017). In conclusion, the discussion on specific and soft competencies in the context of graduate employability is complex and multifaceted. Higher education institutions should recognize the importance of both competencies and work to integrate them into their academic programs. The internationalization of higher education offers a valuable opportunity to enrich students' education, preparing them to meet the challenges of today's labor market. Doing so not only improves the employability of graduates, but also contributes to their holistic development, ensuring that they are well equipped to contribute to society as a whole.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study is framed within a qualitative case study approach, which allows in-depth exploration of complex phenomena in specific contexts (Creswell, 2013). The research is part of a broader project that investigates the impact of participation in institutional internationalization activities on the development of professional competencies, both soft and specific, with possible implications for the employability of graduates. The study site is a private higher education institution located in the region of Sucre, Colombia. For this qualitative phase, we resorted to convenience sampling (Punch, 2014), inviting all students who had previously completed a quantitative survey to participate. Five graduates expressed their interest in continuing to collaborate. The focus group technique was chosen because of its potential to generate dynamic interaction among participants, which allows the co-construction of meanings and favors the deepening of lived experiences (Bryman, 2016). Regarding data analysis, a thematic approach was used, combining inductive coding -which allowed themes to emerge from the data themselves- with deductive coding based on previously defined conceptual categories related to professional competencies (Creswell, 2013; Saldaña, 2016). The thematic analysis followed a systematic

three-level coding process to ensure analytical rigor and transparency. At the descriptive level, initial raw codes such as "collaborative leadership", "autonomous learning", "cultural confrontation", "emphaty development", "questioning assumptions", and "methodology adoption" were extracted directly from participants' narratives. These descriptive codes were then conceptually grouped into second-level themes leadership development and self-management skills converged into broader leadership competencies; cultural awareness and intercultural engagement formed cultural competency development; assumption challenging and analytical reasoning consolidated into reflective thinking processes; and technical skill acquisition and applied learning merged into professional skill development.

Finally, these second-level conceptual themes were synthesized into the four comprehensive final themes (1) project management in multicultural contexts, (2) openness to cultural diversity, (3) development of critical thinking, and (4) strengthening of specific or hard skills. From the ethical point of view, informed consent was requested from each participant, both for their participation and for the recording of the session, following the principles of respect, confidentiality and voluntariness suggested by Flick (2007). Likewise, pseudonyms were assigned to safeguard their identity in the presentation of results.

The participants were the following

- Sergio, a systems engineer, participated in an international internship in Mexico, which allowed him to put his technical knowledge into practice in a cultural environment different from his own.
- Marcos, an industrial engineer, participated in an academic exchange program in Mexico and Madrid, an experience that combined elements of disciplinary training with an extended multicultural experience.
- Daniel, a public accountant, also participated in an academic exchange, in his case in Argentina, which represented an opportunity to compare curricular approaches and professional challenges in another Latin American context.
- Andrés, an architect, carried out an academic exchange in Mexico, where he was able to interact with different methodologies and architectural references.
- Camila, a business administrator, participated in a national volunteer activity organized by the institution, which, although not

international, was considered part of the internationalization process at home due to its intercultural and collaborative approach.

4. RESULTS

Once the data collection through the focus group with the five participating graduates was completed, we proceeded to the thematic analysis of the narratives obtained. This analysis made it possible to identify four main themes that synthesize the experiences and perceptions shared by the participants in relation to the impact of their participation in institutional internationalization activities. The emerging themes were (1) project management in multicultural contexts, (2) openness to cultural diversity, (3) development of critical thinking and (4) strengthening of specific or hard competencies. The findings are presented below, organized according to these themes, illustrated with significant excerpts from the testimonies, which give an account of the formative, professional and personal processes experienced by the graduates within the framework of these experiences.

4.1. *Project Management in Multicultural Contexts*

One of the most consistent findings in the participants' narratives was the strengthening of skills associated with project management, particularly in multicultural environments. The internationalization experiences, in addition to learning technical tools, encouraged forms of adaptive leadership, time management and effective collaboration, aspects pointed out by the participants as fundamental for their professional development. Andrés, an architect who did an academic exchange in Mexico, emphasized on several occasions how his international experience allowed him to work in agility and collaborative leadership schemes. For him, managing projects not only implied leading teams, but also adopting an active role as a committed member. So I worked a lot on the whole issue of agility also [the] part of project management, of leadership, understanding not only as leadership, how to take the reins of a team, but also as the role of team member, the role of also moving other people who were like on a par with me. In a similar vein, Camila, a business administrator and AIESEC volunteer, said that her time in this organization allowed her to become familiar with real work dynamics early on, especially in terms of project planning and execution. In the working world, as in our case we had already done before in AIESEC, such as project management. To this ability to manage

initiatives, Camila added the development of key skills related to time management and personal productivity, highlighting autonomous learning as a central aspect

I learned about time management and productivity. Well, in a very autonomous way, because either I did it or I went crazy doing both.

Andrés also delved into the difficulty of sustaining good time management, recognizing this as a skill that he continues to perfect both in his professional and personal life

I think something that I find very hard, even in my life as a professional and even personally, the issue of time management and of course, the approach. It cost me a lot and it still costs me a lot. Finally, Sergio, a systems engineer who did an internship in Mexico, complemented this thematic axis by highlighting not only the usefulness of project management, but also the value of professional networking as a critical skill acquired from his international experience

If I could elaborate on which specific professional competencies helped me, I would definitely say project management and definitely networking. Taken together, these accounts show how internationalization experiences provided a challenging and enriching environment for the development of key competencies for professional practice, especially in terms of organization, autonomy, collaboration, and the creation of strategic networks.

4.2. *Openness to Cultural Diversity*

One of the most significant findings at this stage of the study was the development of openness to cultural diversity among the participants, as evidenced through their internationalization experiences. All graduates reported, to varying degrees, a transformation in how they perceive and interact with people from different sociocultural backgrounds. Marcos highlighted interculturality as one of the most important professional skills he acquired, emphasizing how problem-solving differs depending on cultural contexts

The way one approaches a problem is not the same as how someone else might approach it, depending on their culture, context, and reality. This reflection reveals an explicit recognition of the diversity of perspectives and their value in the professional sphere. Complementarily, Andrés reflected on how his time in Mexico and Germany led him to confront and reinterpret his understanding of the world, noticing differences even in everyday aspects such as time, quality, or delivery methods. For him, living with people from at least five

different nationalities represented a meaningful learning experience in terms of cultural relativism.

For her part, Camila highlighted the transformative potential of international and intercultural experiences, noting that they allow one to understand that “there is a whole world to explore” and thousands of cultures to discover. Her testimony clearly demonstrates a willingness to embrace the unknown and value diversity.

Finally, Daniel emphasized not only his exposure to other cultures, but also his intention to be “reciprocal” and to “leave a meaningful mark” in his interactions. This suggests an active stance toward diversity not only as something to receive, but also as something to share and co-construct.

Taken together, these accounts show that internationalization experiences not only broadened the participants' cultural horizons but also fostered attitudes of empathy, respect, and intercultural sensitivity key elements of openness to diversity in globalized professional contexts.

4.3. Development of Critical Thinking

Another significant finding of the study was the strengthening of critical thinking as a result of internationalization experiences. The participants expressed that contact with diverse realities and collaborative work with people from other cultural backgrounds allowed them to question prior assumptions, enrich their perspectives, and build a more complex understanding of the world.

Andrés emphasized that these experiences enabled him to question beliefs previously assumed to be universal truths, which led him to reconsider notions he had once taken for granted

I began to question all those things I had learned and that had always been like, ‘well, that’s just the way it is.

This reflection shows a process of critical self-awareness, which is fundamental for the development of reflective thinking.

From another perspective, Marcos pointed out that teamwork with people from different cultures allowed him to realize that problem-solving can be approached in multiple ways depending on the context. This ability to understand different approaches to the same issue reinforces his capacity to analyze situations from multiple viewpoints, a key aspect of critical thinking.

Daniel highlighted the importance of making well-informed judgments and opinions

Maintaining a well-founded, non-improvised, and well-supported point of view before presenting my ideas.

He also valued the exchange of ideas as an opportunity to build his own criteria based on information and reflection, rather than merely relying on intuition or previous beliefs.

Finally, Andrés also emphasized how the diversity of perspectives within a single project pushed him to rethink his worldview, recognizing that the richness of viewpoints enhances the quality of outcomes and encourages deeper analysis

There were so many perspectives evolving in the same project... the way I saw the world there really changed, a lot, a lot.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that internationalization not only fostered greater openness to diversity but also encouraged participants to engage in an ongoing process of critical evaluation the foundation of complex thinking and of ethical, informed professional practice.

4.4. Strengthening of Specific or Hard Skills

While the participants focused much of their reflections on the development of soft skills, they also identified certain learnings related to hard or specific skills within the framework of their internationalization experiences. However, these comments were generally less detailed and less in-depth than those concerning soft skills, suggesting a greater degree of reflection on attitudinal and relational aspects than on technical ones. Despite this relative emphasis, the specific competencies acquire demonstrate clear connections to enhanced employability outcomes in contemporary labor markets.

Among the specific learnings mentioned, Andrés highlighted his exposure to agile methodologies

I picked up Scrum and Agile as a methodology and applied it in many other projects.

This statement suggests a functional appropriation of project management tools that directly addresses current industry demands. The acquisition of agile methodologies represents a significant employability asset, as these frameworks are increasingly valued across sectors beyond technology, including finance, healthcare, and education (Sutherland & Schwaber, 2020).

Camila noted the immediate application of Human Resources knowledge during a diploma course she took while participating in a volunteer activity with AIESEC

It was like putting into practice what I was learning right away.

This experience reflects an early integration between theoretical training and professional

practice, which research indicates significantly improves employment readiness (Billett, 2011). The direct application of HR competencies within an international context provides Camila with both technical expertise and cross-cultural management experience a combination highly sought after in multinational organizations and companies with diverse workforces.

In the technological field, Sergio mentioned strengthening his skills in software development, systems architecture, and interface design during his international internship. His testimony provided the most detailed account of technical competencies, although it did not delve into the specific tasks performed or challenges faced. These technical skills represent core competencies in the digital economy, where software development and systems architecture expertise command premium salaries and career advancement opportunities (Mindell & Reynolds, 2023).

Additionally, some participants mentioned cognitive skills associated with goal orientation and autonomous learning. Andrés noted an improvement in his ability to focus efforts on concrete objectives, recognizing that he previously spent time on less relevant aspects of the process. For his part, Daniel emphasized the importance of ongoing training as part of a professional mindset centered on rigor and preparedness. These metacognitive competencies are increasingly recognized as crucial for career sustainability in rapidly evolving professional environments (Flavell, 1979). The capacity for self-directed learning and strategic goal-setting enables professionals to adapt to technological changes and industry transformations, thereby enhancing long-term employability prospects.

Taken together, although hard skills were acknowledged by the participants as part of the value of their experiences, their narratives were more instrumental than reflective, contrasting with the depth of the accounts related to soft skills. This finding may indicate that internationalization, beyond contributing to technical training, has a more significant impact on the personal and social development of students and graduates. However, the specific competencies identified agile methodologies, HR management, software development, and autonomous learning represent concrete employability assets that, when combined with the intercultural and interpersonal skills developed through international experiences, create a comprehensive professional profile aligned with contemporary labor market demands.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings from the focus group indicate that participation in institutional internationalization activities significantly influenced the development of various professional competencies among the participating graduates. These competencies, both soft and technical, were shaped by experiences in multicultural contexts and emerged across four thematic areas project management, openness to cultural diversity, development of critical thinking, and acquisition of technical skills. First, it was evident that international experiences supported the strengthening of soft skills, particularly project management in multicultural contexts. Participants not only reported an increase in their leadership and time management abilities but also a transformation in how they assume roles within diverse work teams. This finding aligns with research that highlights the potential of international experiences to foster adaptability and collaborative leadership (Knight & Gacel-Ávila, 2019). Furthermore, the strengthening of professional networking suggests that these activities also contributed to the creation of global networks an asset highly valued in competitive and globalized work environments.

Secondly, the graduates' narratives reflect an openness to cultural diversity, marked by empathy, flexibility, and respect for different perspectives. This aspect is particularly relevant in a region like Latin America, where structural inequalities have limited access to internationalization experiences. De Wit et al. (2021) point out that international mobility tends to benefit students from economic elites, thus restricting its democratizing potential. In this regard, the participants' experiences represent an effort to democratize these opportunities, enabling the acquisition of intercultural sensitivity that strengthens inclusion and social cohesion (Nguyen & Larson, 2021; García & Wei, 2017). The integration of values and practices from other cultures was not only understood theoretically, but also experienced as a profound transformation in the way of relating to others.

The third emerging category was the development of critical thinking a particularly significant finding in educational contexts marked by collectivism (Hofstede, 1986), where spaces for the confrontation of ideas have historically been limited (Niyozov & Reynolds, 2018). Participants described how international experiences pushed them to question their assumptions, broaden their frames of reference, and build stronger arguments. This suggests that international activities not only fostered diversity of thought but also encouraged a

critical stance toward prior knowledge and social norms. Studies such as that by Kim and Park (2020) indicate that collaborative and multicultural learning facilitates the development of these skills without undermining group cohesion something reflected in the graduates' accounts, as they managed to combine critical reflection with respect for cultural context.

Lastly, although participants also pointed to the development of specific skills such as management methodologies (Scrum, Agile), programming, or human talent management, these narratives were less in-depth and emotionally less elaborated than those related to soft skills. This suggests that while technical abilities are important, the transformative effects of internationalization seem to be more closely linked to the human, cultural, and social aspects of the experience. In line with Leask (2015), such experiences foster creativity and innovation by integrating multiple perspectives into problem-solving, contributing to a more holistic professional education.

In conclusion, the findings reaffirm the importance of implementing internationalization strategies that not only prioritize physical mobility but also value modalities such as internationalization at home (IaH), particularly in institutions located in regions facing economic and social challenges. As proposed by Soria and Troisi (2014), these alternatives can broaden the educational impact of internationalization, fostering global competencies even in contexts with limited mobility. However, it is important to acknowledge that IaH initiatives face inherent limitations in terms of depth and transformational potential compared to physical mobility experiences.

The periodic nature of many IaH activities and their occurrence within familiar institutional contexts may limit the intensity of intercultural encounters and reduce the sustained cultural dissonance that catalyzes profound learning. Furthermore, the mediated and often structured nature of IaH experiences may struggle to replicate the authentic complexity and unpredictability of real-world cultural navigation that characterizes transformative mobility experiences. While IaH represents a valuable and accessible alternative, these limitations underscore the need for carefully designed programs that maximize intercultural challenge and sustained engagement. The study shows that in order to achieve an inclusive and transformative approach, it is necessary to integrate intercultural, ethical, and pedagogical perspectives that respond to the local realities of Latin America while addressing these inherent constraints of home-based

internationalization.

6. CONCLUSION

The findings of this research reinforce the need to rethink internationalization from a more inclusive and contextualized perspective, especially in Latin America, where historical inequalities continue to limit access to these opportunities. The study shows that even in economically constrained contexts, universities can design effective internationalization strategies that transform the professional profiles of their students. The key lies in fostering meaningful experiences that encourage encounters with otherness, questioning of prior assumptions, and collaboration with diverse perspectives.

Furthermore, the results highlight the educational value of internationalization as a space for holistic learning, where students not only acquire functional skills but also are reshaped as social actors capable of acting with empathy, critical thinking, and a global outlook. For this reason, educational policies must commit to expanding and diversifying these international learning opportunities, aligning them with the challenges and opportunities of local contexts.

Ultimately, this research supports the premise that internationalization is not merely a means to acquire technical knowledge, but a transformative educational experience that enhances employability and promotes the development of global citizens with ethical, cultural, and social awareness. One of the main limitations of this study lies in the small sample size, consisting of only five graduates, which prevents generalization of the findings. Nonetheless, a significant strength is the disciplinary diversity of the participants, who came from fields such as engineering, accounting, architecture, and business administration. This heterogeneity enriched the analysis with multiple professional perspectives, providing valuable insights into how internationalization experiences influence the development of both transversal and specific competencies across different areas of knowledge.

These findings have important implications for policy and practice in higher education institutions. At the institutional level, universities should develop comprehensive internationalization strategies that integrate both mobility and home-based initiatives, ensuring that limited resources are strategically allocated to maximize transformational impact across diverse student populations. At the policy level, government agencies and international organizations should support funding mechanisms that prioritize equity and inclusion, ensuring that

internationalization opportunities reach students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and academic disciplines. Finally, institutional partnerships should be strengthened to create authentic, reciprocal exchanges that benefit all participating communities while addressing local

development needs. These recommendations are particularly relevant for Latin American institutions seeking to balance global engagement with contextual responsiveness in resource-constrained environments.

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