

Emotional intelligence and its relationship with soft skills in nursing students

Inteligencia emocional y su relación con habilidades blandas en estudiantes de la carrera de enfermería

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Resumen:

Introducción: La inteligencia emocional es esencial para el bienestar de los estudiantes y su capacidad de adaptación. En el ámbito universitario, el desarrollo de habilidades blandas y de inteligencia emocional fortalece competencias cruciales para el desempeño académico y profesional. **Objetivo:** Analizar la relación entre inteligencia emocional y habilidades blandas en estudiantes de enfermería de la universidad pública ecuatoriana. **Metodología:** Estudio cuantitativo, correlacional y transversal, realizado en una muestra de 153 estudiantes de quinto y sexto semestre. Se usaron encuestas basadas en el inventario abreviado de inteligencia emocional BAR-ON ICE y un cuestionario de habilidades blandas, aplicados mediante Google Forms. Los datos fueron procesados en Excel y SPSS, y se evaluaron mediante correlación de Pearson. **Resultados:** Los estudiantes mostraron altos niveles de inteligencia emocional en las dimensiones intrapersonal y de adaptabilidad. En cuanto a habilidades blandas, presentaron un bajo desarrollo en las áreas social y actitudinal. **Discusión:** Los hallazgos reflejaron la importancia de la inteligencia emocional en el ámbito académico, en línea con estudios que destacan su papel en la regulación emocional y la adaptación. A pesar de las competencias emocionales favorables, la baja habilidad blanda sugiere una necesidad de intervención en estas áreas. **Conclusiones:** Existe una correlación significativa de 0.98 entre inteligencia emocional y habilidades blandas en los estudiantes de enfermería, especialmente en el manejo del estado de ánimo y el estrés. Se recomienda implementar programas para fortalecer estas competencias y mejorar el desempeño en contextos de alta demanda emocional.

Palabras clave: inteligencia emocional; habilidades blandas; estudiantes de enfermería; estrés; relaciones interpersonales

Abstract:

Introduction: Emotional intelligence is essential for students' well-being and their ability to adapt. At the university, the development of soft skills and emotional intelligence strengthens crucial competencies for academic and professional performance. **Objective:** To analyze the relationship between emotional intelligence and soft skills in nursing students at an Ecuadorian public university. **Methodology:** A quantitative, correlational and cross-sectional study was conducted on a sample of 153 from fifth and sixth semester students. Surveys based on the BAR-ON ICE short emotional intelligence inventory and a soft skills questionnaire were used. They were applied through Google Forms. The data were processed in Excel and SPSS, and evaluated through Pearson correlation. **Results:** The students showed high levels of emotional intelligence in the intrapersonal and adaptability dimensions. Regarding soft skills, they showed low development in the social and attitudinal areas. **Discussion:** The findings reflect the importance of emotional intelligence in the academic setting, in line with studies that highlight its role in emotional regulation and adaptation. Despite favorable emotional competencies, low soft skills suggest a need for intervention in these areas. **Conclusions:** There is a significant correlation of 0.98 between emotional intelligence and soft skills in nursing students, especially in mood and stress management. It is recommended to implement programs to strengthen these competencies and improve performance in contexts of high emotional demand.

Keywords: emotional intelligence; soft skills; nursing students; stress; interpersonal relationships

Introduction

Emotional intelligence was identified as a key factor that influenced the social and mental well-being of students, facilitating their understanding of their environment and making the right decisions when facing various conflict situations that arise daily. In addition, it is a relevant aspect in the educational field acting as a means to improve the psychological well-being of students (Pantoja, 2018)

Ortega (2016) defined soft skills as practices, attitudes and abilities that a person uses to relate and interact with the world. These allowed for the understanding of emotions, the achievement of objectives, decision-making and the ability to face adverse situations.

Social skills are a fundamental part of soft skills, so it is necessary to teach, develop and strengthen them from the early stages of training. These skills improve interpersonal interaction, favor professional performance and enhance the ability to solve problems. Therefore, it is essential that academic institutions integrate both the development of soft skills and the teaching of specific knowledge. As Guerra (2019) points out, soft skills are crucial for good performance in the professional field, since they allow future professionals to face and solve problems more effectively. At an international level, employers showed interest in selecting people with leadership qualities, emotional intelligence, communication skills, ethical values, knowledge and the ability to work in a team (Fuentes et al., 2021). These soft skills required by the business field should be developed from childhood, however, it constitutes a great challenge. Gómez (2019) highlighted the educational challenge represented by the underdevelopment of soft skills in higher education, underlining that 51% of the skills required to enter the labor market were soft, followed by 9% in advanced cognitive skills, 16% in technical skills, and 4% in basic cognitive skills.

Soft skills are a topic that is rarely addressed in the curricula of the courses. For example, in Colombia, health courses did not include topics related to the development of emotional intelligence and soft skills, despite the educational crisis that affected human and social aspects. For this reason, the restructuring and updating of the curricula in university dentistry became increasingly necessary (Aguinaga Vásquez & Sánchez Tarrillo, 2020).



In Ecuador, a study was conducted on a population of 100 students, finding that 15% had high levels of emotional intelligence, 84% had normal levels, and 1% had low levels (Fuentes et al., 2021). In Guayaquil, a study on 60 students on soft skills showed that 63.3% had a regular level, 21.7% had a low level, and 15% had a good level (Cueva Flores de Mosquera, 2022; Figueroa, 2023).

Emotional intelligence and soft skills provided benefits such as improved academic performance, the creation of a harmonious environment, greater productivity, and affective communication. In the academic and professional sphere, this translated into a greater ability to collaborate, resolve conflicts, and build positive and effective relationships, essential for success and personal satisfaction. (Petrides & Siegling, 2020)

This study aimed to analyze the relationship between emotional intelligence and soft skills in nursing students.

Methodology

This work had a quantitative, correlational approach, a non-experimental design and a cross-sectional cohort; that is, it focused on the relationship between two variables within a defined time period in which the entire population was worked with, thus allowing the problem to be analyzed based on statistical tables.

The research was carried out in the province of Tungurahua, in the city of Ambato, and was aimed at nursing students at a public Ecuadorian university, during the period from September 2024 to August 2025. The population consisted of 153 nursing students who were in their fifth and sixth semesters at the aforementioned university, and the study included the entire population.

The following inclusion and exclusion criteria were established:

Inclusion criteria

- Students who were legally enrolled in the fifth and sixth semesters.
- Students who agreed to take the survey through informed consent.

Exclusion criteria

- Students who were not present at the time of the survey.
- Students who had failed a class.

The data collection technique was through a survey, which comprised three phases:



In the first, the BAR-ON ICE abbreviated emotional intelligence inventory was applied, with the aim of identifying emotional intelligence in nursing students. This inventory was created by Reuven Bar-On and adapted by Ugarriza and Pajares (2005) in Peru, distributing 60 items and validated with a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.802. The items were categorized into various dimensions, such as self-realization, happiness, stress tolerance, among others, each with specific items assigned.

The total emotional quotient was interpreted according to the score obtained, classifying the emotional capacities into levels such as “very high”, “high”, “average”, “low” and “very low”, with different ranges suggesting the degree of development of the emotional ability.

In the second phase, an instrument was applied to assess soft skills, designed by Prada and Raucci (2016) and adapted in Peru by Saldaña (2018), with 37 items and a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.90. Soft skills were categorized into dimensions such as adaptation to change, teamwork, ability to lead, among others.

The interpretation of soft skills levels was distributed into “very high”, “high”, “intermediate”, “low” and “very low” levels based on the score obtained.

Fifth and sixth semester students were invited for the presentation of the topic and objectives of the research, and to understand the content of the instrument and how to fill it out voluntarily after signing an informed consent form. The questionnaires were administered through Google Forms within a time limit of 45 minutes, using a Likert scale with four possible responses.

The collected data were analyzed using Excel and the SPSS platform, version 26, to generate frequency tables and descriptive graphs.

Finally, in the third phase, the soft skills (SS) and emotional intelligence (EI) variables were correlated using the Spearman coefficient, which is suitable for measuring relationships between ordinal variables. The soft skills variables "Social" and "Attitudinal", and the emotional intelligence variables "Mood", "Stress management", "Adaptability", "Intrapersonal" and "Interpersonal" were selected. The data were prepared by transforming frequencies into numerical values, eliminating text labels. Subsequently, the ranks and Spearman coefficient were calculated for each pair of variables, which allowed identifying significant relationships and evaluating the relationship between both constructs.

Ethical considerations

The research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (CEISH) of the Technical University of Ambato on September 19, 2024, CODE 170, complying with the ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, justice, and nonmaleficence. The data collection process guaranteed the protection of the confidentiality and privacy of the participants, who gave their informed consent before participating. The students participated voluntarily and had the right to leave at any time without repercussions. In addition, measures were implemented to ensure that there were no conflicts of interest, and the data were handled in an ethical and responsible manner.

Results

Table 1 presents an analysis of the different dimensions of emotional intelligence based on their frequency of occurrence. Regarding mood, 45% of participants (69) reported that they regulated it "many times," while only 24% (37) said they did so "very often or always." This suggests that a significant proportion of respondents have good control over their mood. However, 28% (43) experienced it infrequently. Regarding stress management, 46% (71) of the participants indicated that they "rarely" managed it effectively, suggesting a general difficulty in dealing with stressful situations. Only 9% (14) reported that they did so "very often or always."

In the adaptability aspect, 51% (78) reported adapting "often" to new circumstances, this being the most highly valued dimension, while only 2% (2) reported adapting "rarely or never". Regarding the intrapersonal dimension, 44% (67) of the participants indicated feeling competent in this area "often", while 29% (45) experienced it "very frequently or always". On the other hand, the interpersonal category showed the lowest results, with 57% (87) reporting that they "rarely" had adequate interpersonal skills, which revealed a weakness in this dimension of emotional intelligence. These results suggested that, although the participants showed moderate levels in adaptability and mood, they faced greater challenges in stress management and interpersonal skills.

Table 1.

BAR-ON ICE Abbreviated Emotional Intelligence Inventory

		Mood	Stress management	Adaptability	Intrapersonal	Interpersonal
Very often or always	No.	37	14	30	45	13
	%	24	9	20	29	8
Many times	No.	69	64	78	67	40
	%	45	42	51	44	27
Sometimes	No.	0	0	0	0	0
	%	0	0	0	0	0
Rarely	No.	43	71	43	40	87
	%	28	46	28	26	57
Rarely or never	No.	4	4	2	1	13
	%	3	3	1	1	8
Total	No.	153	153	153	153	153
	%	100	100	100	100	100

Elaborated by: Researchers

In Table 2, in the Mood category, an emotional coefficient of 149 was recorded, which is interpreted as "markedly high", indicating an outstanding ability to manage mood. The Stress Management category also presents a coefficient of 149, which suggests an outstanding ability in emotional regulation in stressful situations. In Adaptability, a slightly higher coefficient of 151 is observed, which is also "markedly high", reflecting great flexibility to adapt to changes or new environments. The Intrapersonal dimension reaches a coefficient of 152, the highest value among the categories, which shows a notable capacity for self-knowledge and personal management. Finally, in the Interpersonal dimension, the coefficient is 140, maintaining the same interpretation of "markedly high", although slightly lower compared to the other dimensions, which could reflect an area with less mastery in interaction skills with others. These results suggest that participants have strong emotional skills in all the categories evaluated, especially standing out in the intrapersonal and adaptability areas.



Table 2.

Emotional quotient by category

Category	Emotional Quotient	Interpretation
Mood state	149	Markedly high. Outstanding emotional capacity.
Stress Management	149	Markedly high. Outstanding emotional capacity.
Adaptability	151	Markedly high. Outstanding emotional capacity.
Intrapersonal	152	Markedly high. Outstanding emotional capacity.
Interpersonal	140	Markedly high. Outstanding emotional capacity.
Elaborated by: Researchers		

Table 3 presents the data related to the participants' soft skills in the social and attitudinal dimensions. Regarding the social dimension, 39% of respondents (59) reported that they demonstrate social skills "often", while 18% (27) indicated that they do so "always", 24% (37) of the participants stated that they use these skills "from time to time", and 16% (25) reported doing so "seldom". On the other hand, in the attitudinal dimension, 49% (75) of the respondents mentioned that they demonstrate positive attitudes "often", and 22% (33) reported that they do so "always". However, 25% (39) indicated that they exhibit positive attitudes "seldom", and no participant reported doing so "from time to time". These results indicate that, 39% of the respondents demonstrate social skills and positive attitudes frequently, there is a majority group that faces difficulties in maintaining these skills consistently, especially in the attitudinal dimension.

Table 3.

Soft skills questionnaire adapted by Saldaña 2017

		Social	Attitudinal
Always	No.	27	33
	%	18	22
Often	No.	59	75
	%	39	49
From time to time	No.	37	0
	%	24	0
Seldom	No.	25	39
	%	16	25
Never	No.	5	6
	%	3	4
Total	No.	153	153
	%	100	100

Elaborated by: Researchers

Table 4 shows the Soft Skills Quotient in the Social and Attitudinal categories, along with their interpretation. Both categories, Social and Attitudinal, have an average of 51, which is interpreted as "very low". This indicates that the participants have a limited capacity in social skills and positive attitudes, which can be reflected in poor social interactions and a less favorable attitude towards various situations. These results suggest a marked need for intervention to strengthen these soft skills areas in the participants.

Table 4.

Soft Skills Quotient by Category

Category	Average	Interpretation
Social	51	Very low
Attitudinal	51	Very low

Elaborated by: Researchers

In Table 5, the Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated to determine the relationship between soft skills and emotional intelligence, yielding a value of 0.98 with a significance value (p) of 0.0001. This interpretation of the results gives us a clear view of the intensity and direction of the relationship between both variables.

In this case, the obtained value of $r = 0.98$ is within the range of strong correlation, which implies a very strong and significant association between soft skills and emotional intelligence. This means that, in general, individuals who report high levels of soft skills also have high levels of emotional intelligence. This association is reinforced by the value of $p = 0.0001$, which indicates an extremely low probability that this correlation is due to chance.

Table 5.

Correlation between emotional intelligence and soft skills

Variables	Correlation coefficient (R)	P Value (Significance)
Soft Skills - Emotional Intelligence	0.98	0.0001

Elaborated by: Researchers

Discussion:

The discussion on the findings related to emotional quotients in the categories of mood, stress management, adaptability, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, can be based on the existing literature. Various authors have highlighted the importance of these emotional competencies both in education and in other professional and personal contexts. Studies such as that of Puertas-Molero (Gómez, 2019) highlight that emotional intelligence is essential for psychological well-being, helping individuals understand and manage their emotions. This ability to control mood and stress, observed in study participants with a high coefficient, allows for better adaptation to conflicting and everyday situations (Ortega, 2016). Petrides (2020) argues that emotional regulation is key to preventing distress from interfering with rational abilities, highlighting the relevance of adequate stress management as a pillar of emotional intelligence.

Adaptability, assessed in the study with a coefficient of 151, is identified by various authors as a critical skill in today's world, where changes are constant. Lozano Fernández (2022) argue that this skill is indispensable in modern education, as students must be prepared to

face changing contexts. In this sense, educational programs should focus on strengthening adaptability as a transversal competence, which aligns with the findings on the flexibility of the participants in this study.

Intrapersonal ability is at the top of emotional skills, as it allows for deep self-knowledge that facilitates emotional regulation. Petrides (2020) and García-Ancira (2020) emphasize that self-knowledge and emotional self-management are essential for personal and professional development. The high coefficients in this category show that participants have a strong sense of identity and self-regulation, essential aspects for maintaining resilience in high-pressure environments.

Regarding the interpersonal dimension, the results show a coefficient that is also high, although slightly lower than the previous dimensions. This data could be interpreted in the context of research by Molina (2022), who observe that, although emotional intelligence in social interaction is crucial, its development can be limited by external factors, such as family experiences and the educational context. Abad study (2021) emphasizes the importance of strengthening these skills in the university environment, given that effective interpersonal relationships are increasingly valued in the labor market.

Comparing these findings with the proposals of authors such as Cueva, Pantoja and Petrides, they highlight the importance of integrating emotional development programs in education and the workplace. These competencies, which were markedly high in the study, suggest that the participants have an emotionally balanced profile, which is consistent with the literature that highlights how emotional intelligence predicts successful performance in various contexts. Finally, it is recommended to promote interventions in emotional skills in higher education and in work environments. Programs that strengthen emotional intelligence can maximize individual and collective performance, optimizing the ability of students to face both professional and personal challenges.

The results show a low average in soft skills in the Social and Attitudinal categories, indicating a limited capacity in social interaction and a less favorable attitude. This finding reflects the need to intervene in these areas, as suggested by previous research. According to Petrides (2020), soft skills, including emotional intelligence, are crucial for effective interpersonal performance and emotional self-regulation, elements that are directly related to

better coexistence and performance in academic and work environments. Gómez (2019) argues that the development of these skills facilitates professional success and is essential to adapt to continuous changes in today's society, characterized by an increase in social interactions and the need to resolve conflicts.

Studies such as Lopez (2021) on university students in Ecuador highlight that moderate emotional intelligence is associated with adequate academic performance and positive personal relationships, suggesting that emotional competencies are essential for academic progress and social cohesion. For his part, Pantoja (2018) analyzes how nursing students in Peru with average levels of emotional intelligence present difficulties in conflict resolution and effective collaboration, aspects that limit the development of social skills in contexts of high emotional demand.

The research by Aldana Sánchez et al. (2021) emphasizes that strengthening soft skills through school coexistence programs, based on emotional intelligence, promotes empathy, assertiveness, and leadership skills, which are essential for a healthy and effective learning environment. In agreement, Arrese (2024) highlights that students of health specialties present a significant correlation between emotional intelligence and soft skills, which is crucial for their team performance and in managing emotions in stressful situations.

The Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.98 obtained in this study reveals an extremely strong relationship between these two variables, implying that the development of soft skills is closely linked to high levels of emotional intelligence in the individuals in the sample. This finding is consistent with studies such as those by Sánchez (2021) and Petrides (2020), who argue that emotional competencies significantly influence interpersonal skills and adaptability, which is key to success in professional and educational environments.

On the other hand, authors such as López (2021) have also highlighted the relevance of emotional intelligence for success in the workplace, emphasizing that the ability to manage emotions, both one's own and those of others, is essential for the development of soft skills such as communication, teamwork and conflict resolution. This study reinforces the idea that high emotional intelligence facilitates the development of social skills, which is essential in interpersonal interaction and the management of stressful situations.

Likewise, recent research, such as that of Figueroa Oquendo (2023), has shown that emotional intelligence correlates significantly with academic and professional performance, suggesting that people with higher levels of EI have a greater ability to adapt to complex situations and make effective decisions under pressure. The strong correlation observed in this study ($r = 0.98$) supports this relationship and highlights the importance of integrating training programs that strengthen both soft skills and emotional intelligence in educational and work contexts.

The relationship between emotional intelligence and soft skills observed in the present study, with a significance value of $p = 0.0001$, aligns with the findings of Cueva (8) in his research on collaborative learning and soft skills in nursing students. Cueva highlights that soft skills, such as effective communication, teamwork and conflict resolution, are essential competencies in the training of nursing students, and their development can benefit from educational methods such as collaborative learning. In this sense, both studies underline the importance of educational intervention to strengthen these soft skills, particularly through approaches that also promote emotional intelligence.

Conclusions

The results confirm that there is a strong relationship between emotional intelligence and soft skills in nursing students, this shows that students with high levels of emotional intelligence also tend to develop soft skills better, which is important for performance in hospital environments.

Students demonstrated high levels of emotional intelligence, particularly in managing stress and mood, managing to adapt to changes and reduce the impact of stress on their performance.

The soft skills questionnaire revealed that the students' level was low. This indicates that there are barriers to effectively managing interpersonal relationships and adapting to emotionally and socially demanding environments such as the hospital environment.

The observed correlations suggest that emotional intelligence is significantly related to interpersonal skills. This relationship shows that strengthening emotional intelligence helps nursing students develop soft skills important for their professional roles, making them more empathetic, resilient and collaborative in their professional practice.

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