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Designing and psychometric evaluation of the guidance and counseling competency scale for Vietnamese students majoring in primary education

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ABSTRACT

Designing a scale to evaluate students' guidance and counseling (GAC) competence is crucial to ensuring that the quality of the university's output meets the practical standards required. This paper illustrates the design and psychometric properties of a GAC competency scale for Vietnamese students majoring in Primary Education. The scale consists of four subscales: general understanding of teaching and educational activities for primary school students; general understanding of primary student GAC activities; GAC skills in a hypothetical environment; and skills for applying GAC in a practical context. The scale was tested according to a standard procedure, including four stages: (1) drafting a scale; (2) formal validity testing; (3) semantic testing; and (4) statistical testing. The participants were 251 fourth-year primary education students in Vietnam. The sample was selected from universities that train primary school teachers in representative regions of Vietnam. Measurement and structural model evaluation techniques were employed. The findings showed that the scale has good reliability, with both Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability greater than 0.7; all four components contributed to the overall GAC competence. The R-square adjusted value was 0.646, accounting for 64.6% of the variation in this variable. Therefore, the scale demonstrated strong value and reliability as an instrument for assessing the GAC competence of students majoring in Primary Education.

Contribution/Originality: The study develops a competency framework based on scientific and legal foundations, meeting the training requirements for students majoring in Primary Education in Vietnam. It also designs and validates a scale based on the proposed competency framework for fourth-year students at universities in Vietnam.

1. INTRODUCTION

Primary school age is a developmental stage during which students experience significant growth in their cognitive, emotional, and social abilities, playing a key role in the formation of their personalities. This developmental stage requires GAC from various educational influences, particularly teachers, to help students navigate challenges in both learning and life, direct their self-development, and determine appropriate behavior in relation to key relationships, such as those with parents, teachers, and peers. GAC is an activity that helps all students in the school and supports all students in maintaining stable physical and mental health, creating optimal conditions for their participation in learning, training, and personal development (Dhami & Sharma, 2020; Malikiosi-Loizou, 2001). In the GAC literature, these two words generally have different meanings. The first refers to supporting students' whole-person development, while the other is often aimed at helping students with problems (Amat, 2019; Lai-Yeung, 2014; Mogbana, Ekwenze, & Rev, 2022). Student GAC is a professional and pedagogical activity for primary school

teachers. In addition to teaching, teachers nowadays are assigned many responsibilities (Ianni, 2003). GAC is one of their major duties (Ahmad & Peer Zadha, 2022; Lai-Yeung, 2014). Therefore, to effectively perform their pedagogical and professional duties, primary school teachers must possess the competence to guide and counsel students. In other words, GAC competence is an essential skill for primary school teachers (Sutirna & Musa, 2023). Teachers' counseling skills are essential because these skills can foster students' success not only in education but also in their lives. Teachers' recommendations could help students cope with difficulties and issues during their educational processes (Hornby, Hall, & Hall, 2003; Katsatasri, 2022).

In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on GAC in Vietnam. This emphasis is clearly reflected in the legal documents issued by the education authority the Ministry of Education and Training. GAC competence is one of the key standards for teachers, as outlined in the circular promulgating the professional standards for teachers in general education institutions by the Ministry of Education and Training. The development of this competence in teachers to effectively implement the general education curriculum is also included as one of the components in the regular training program for teachers in general education institutions.

To meet the demands of pedagogical activities for primary school teachers and the needs of educational practice, many teacher training universities in Vietnam have recognized the importance of equipping students, including those majoring in primary education, with GAC competence. This is clearly demonstrated in the program learning outcomes for primary teacher training majors at several universities in Vietnam. Specifically, for example: PLO3: Collaborating cooperatively and ethically with students, their families, colleagues, and stakeholders both within and outside the institution – Hanoi National University of Education (https://hnue.edu.vn/); PLO4: Creating a positive educational environment – Da Nang University of Education (https://ued.udn.vn/); PLO8: Providing counseling and guidance for learners, as well as their parents or guardians; PLO9: Establishing a democratic, safe, friendly, healthy, and motivating educational environment for learners – Ho Chi Minh City University of Education (https://hcmue.edu.vn/).

In this context, how do universities train primary teachers to develop their GAC competence? The particular methods of training proposed by Rosenfield, Levinsohn-Klyap, and Cramper (2010) align with the "I do," "we do," "you do" didactic framework proposed by Archer and Hughes (2011). "I do" — didactic instruction of theory and concepts (e.g., lectures, readings), modeling and demonstration (e.g., live, videos); "we do" — practice in simulated situations with feedback (e.g., role plays, written exercises); "you do" — the "you do" stage or unprompted practice, is when you perform a skill without any physical, verbal, or visual prompts (Newman & Rosenfield, 2019). This model of training and developing the competence to guide and counsel students is highly suitable for primary teacher training programs at universities in Vietnam. In the curriculum, students are provided with opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills for guiding and counseling primary school students. This includes a broad understanding of age-appropriate psychology, educational theories, programs, and teaching methodologies, as well as insights into the purpose, content, and methods of supporting students (Setiyowati, Pali, Wiyono, & Triyono, 2019). Subsequently, students have the opportunity to practice guiding and counseling skills in a hypothetical environment during the practical components of courses in psychology, educational theories, and teaching methodology for primary school subjects (We do) (Defriyanto, Dermawan, Busmayaril, & Khairun, 2022; ErlinaYaumas et al., 2018). Finally, students apply these skills in a real-world setting through internships and fieldwork at primary schools (You do) (Borbély-Pecze, Hloušková, & Šprlák, 2022; Lang, 2013).

Thus, the competence to guide and advise students majoring in primary education in Vietnam is reflected in four key elements:

- General understanding of teaching and educational activities for primary school students.
- General understanding of primary students' GAC activities.
- GAC skills in a hypothetical environment.
- Skills for applying GAC in a practical context.

The competency framework encompassing these four elements also serves as a scale to assess the current situation, with the goal of further developing the GAC competence of students majoring in primary education in Vietnam.

1.1. Participants and Procedure

Participants consisted of 251 fourth-year students at primary teacher training universities. They were recruited for this study from five universities: Hanoi National University of Education, Hai Phong University, Vinh University, Tay Nguyen University, and Thu Dau Mot University. These universities are located in key regions of Vietnam, including the North, Central, South, Delta, and mountainous areas.

The process of designing and testing the scale was conducted in four stages.

Stage 1: Drafting a scale

Step 1: Define the concept of the instrument and the components of the student GAC competence model. The student GAC is searched using keywords such as "counseling skills," "GAC skills," and "model of counseling skills" for English-language materials, and "GAC," "professional standards of teachers at educational institutions," "learning outcomes," "capacity development path," etc., for Vietnamese materials on PubMed, Google Scholar, Publish-or-Perish, and university libraries. The result of this process was the development of a conceptual framework for the instrument, along with the identification of key components and variables to be included in the draft scale.

Step 2: Conduct group discussions to supplement and adjust the components and observed variables in alignment with the research context at selected primary teacher training universities.

Stage 2: Formal Validity Testing

The research team consulted with experts experienced in scale design. Questions for the experts included: (1) Does the wording of the observed variable align with the research subjects? (2) Does the observed variable correspond to the concept of the instrument? Experts evaluated the observation method using a three-level Likert scale: level 1 - Not necessary, level 2 - Useful but not necessary, and level 3 - Necessary. The observed variable was retained when the content validity ratio = $(n_e - n)/(n/2) > 0.49$, where n_e is the number of experts choosing level 3, and n is the total number of experts.

Stage 3: Semantic testing

At this stage, the scale was assessed by a group of students through interviews (n = 15) and a pilot study (n = 50). The interview required students to describe the content of the observed variables based on their level of understanding, underline and adjust difficult words. The pilot study will then be conducted. The pilot study used Cronbach's alpha coefficient to evaluate the reliability of the scale before proceeding with the formal study.

Through the first three stages, the scale consisted of four components with 38 variables: (1) general understanding of teaching and educational activities for primary school students; (2) general understanding of primary student GAC activities; (3) GAC skills in a hypothetical environment; and (4) skills for applying GAC in a practical context. The variables were rated by students using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 – Strongly Disagree to 5 – Strongly Agree.

Stage 4: Statistical testing

The study was conducted formally, and the data were processed using SmartPLS software, with details as follows:

+) Evaluate the measurement model, focusing on the key issues: quality of observed variables of factors (outer loading ≥ 0.7); scale reliability (Cronbach's alpha ≥ 0.7, composite reliability ≥ 0.7); convergence and differentiation (AVE ≥ 0.7, HTMT ≤ 0.9).

+) Evaluate the PLS-SEM structural model, focusing on the following factors: The collinearity of the inner variance inflation factor (inner VIF); the significance of impact relationships in the model (normalization coefficient and p-value); evaluate the coefficient of determination (R-squared) and assess the impact coefficient (f-squared).

2. RESULTS

2.1. Formal Evaluation and Semantic Testing

In stage 1, an overview of issues related to instruction, student counseling, and group discussions took place to develop a draft scale comprising four components: general understanding of teaching and educational activities for primary school students; general understanding of primary student GAC activities; GAC skills in a hypothetical environment; and skills for applying GAC in a practical context, with a total of 69 variables. In stage 2, formal evaluation testing was conducted through consultations with eight experts. The Content Validity Ratio was used to eliminate or merge variables. As a result, after stage 2, the scale remained with five components and 41 variables. In stage 3, interviews with 15 students revealed that the variables were generally easy to evaluate. Subsequently, a pilot study was conducted with 50 students. Cronbach's alpha for the four-component total scale was 0.859, indicating good reliability. Therefore, the development of the scale through the first three stages consisted of four components with 38 variables: general understanding of teaching and educational activities for primary school students (10 items); general understanding of primary student GAC activities (8 items); GAC skills in a hypothetical environment (10 items); and skills for applying GAC in a practical context (10 items).

2.2. Evaluation of the Measurement Model

2.2.1. Quality of Observed Variables (Indicator Reliability)

The observed variables with an outer loading factor of ≥ 0.7 are considered high-quality variables and are retained. Therefore, from a scale of 4 components with 38 variables, after performing the quality assessment of the observed variables, the scale had 4 components with 34 variables. These components are named and denoted in Table 1.

Table 1. Outer loadings (N = 251).

	HBCGD	HBTVHT	KNTVHT	NLTVHT	VDKN
HBCGD1	0.741				
HBCGD10	0.704				
HBCGD2	0.738				
HBCGD3	0.760				
HBCGD4	0.730				
HBCGD5	0.756				
HBCGD6	0.735				
HBCGD8	0.766				
HBCGD9	0.722				
HBTVHT1		0.802			
HBTVHT2		0.752			
HBTVHT3		0.818			
HBTVHT5		0.793			
HBTVHT6		0.748			
HBTVHT7		0.795			
HBTVHT8		0.767			
KNTVHT1			0.792		
KNTVHT2			0.770		
KNTVHT3			0.733		
KNTVHT4			0.718		
KNTVHT5			0.775		
KNTVHT6			0.730		
KNTVHT7			0.795		
KNTVHT8			0.715		
KNTVHT9			0.770		
NLTVHT1				0.894	
NLTVHT2				0.899	
NLTVHT3				0.877	
VDKN1					0.761

	HBCGD	HBTVHT	KNTVHT	NLTVHT	VDKN
VDKN10					0.728
VDKN3					0.757
VDKN4					0.741
VDKN5					0.753
VDKN6					0.717
VDKN7					0.764
VDKN8					0.733
VDKN9					0.788

The results of the second run, after removing variables with outer loadings less than 0.7, show that the remaining observed variables are significant in the model, as their outer loadings are now greater than 0.7.

2.2.2. Scale Reliability

The reliability of the scale was assessed in SmartPLS using two main indicators: Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability. The results are as follows:

Table 2. Results of the reliability test.

Subscale/ Scale	Cronbach's alpha	rho_A	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted (AVE)
HBCGD	0.897	0.899	0.916	0.547
HBTVHT	0.894	0.897	0.917	0.612
KNTVHT	0.906	0.912	0.923	0.571
NLTVHT	0.869	0.869	0.920	0.792
VDKN	0.902	0.905	0.920	0.562

The findings showed that both the Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability of the scales were greater than 0.7, indicating that the scales exhibited good reliability.

2.2.3. Convergent Validity

To evaluate convergence, we relied on the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Looking at Table 2, the AVE values were all greater than 0.5, indicating that the scales demonstrated good convergent validity.

2.2.4. Discriminant Validity

The discriminant validity value indicates the distinctiveness of one construct compared to another within the model. The traditional method for assessing discriminant validity involves using the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), as proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981). Meanwhile, Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt (2015) introduced the HTMT indicator to assess discriminant validity. SmartPLS uses both methods to assess discriminant validity. However, the focus is primarily on the HTMT indicator.

The square root of AVE (listed at the beginning of each column with corresponding values of 0.739, 0.782, 0.756, 0.890, 0.749) was larger than the correlations between the latent variables (the correlation coefficients are listed below the first value of each column). This confirms that the discriminant validity of the variables is guaranteed.

All HTMT values were less than 0.9, indicating that the distinction between the two latent variables was maintained.

2.3. Evaluation of the PLS-SEM Structural Model

The research model mentioned in the study is as follows:

Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical model of the structure of students' GAC competency.

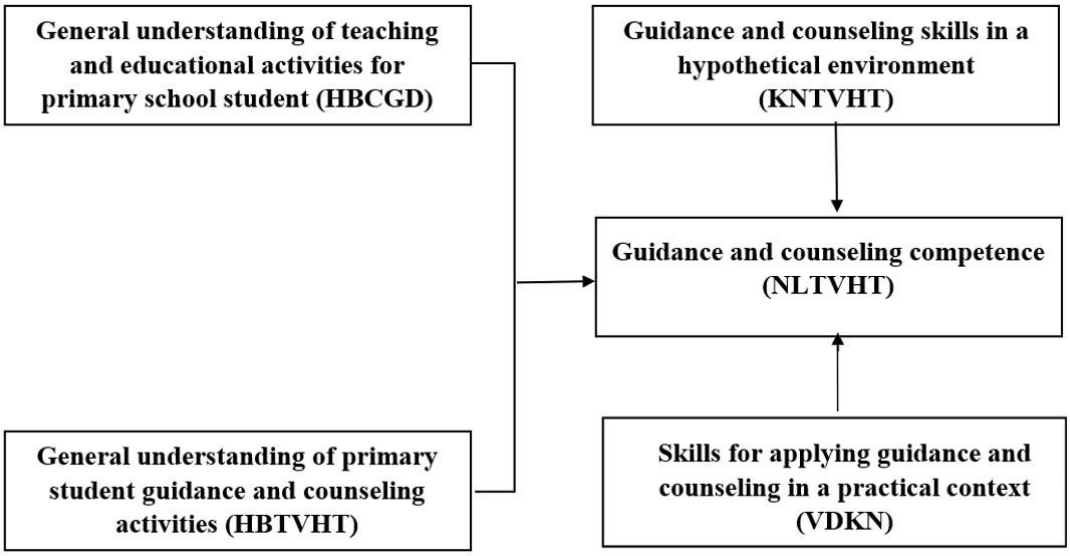

Figure 1. Theoretical model of the structure of students' GAC competency.

The theoretical research model is presented in the SmartPLS diagram as follows:

Figure 2 presents a diagram after removing the observed variable.

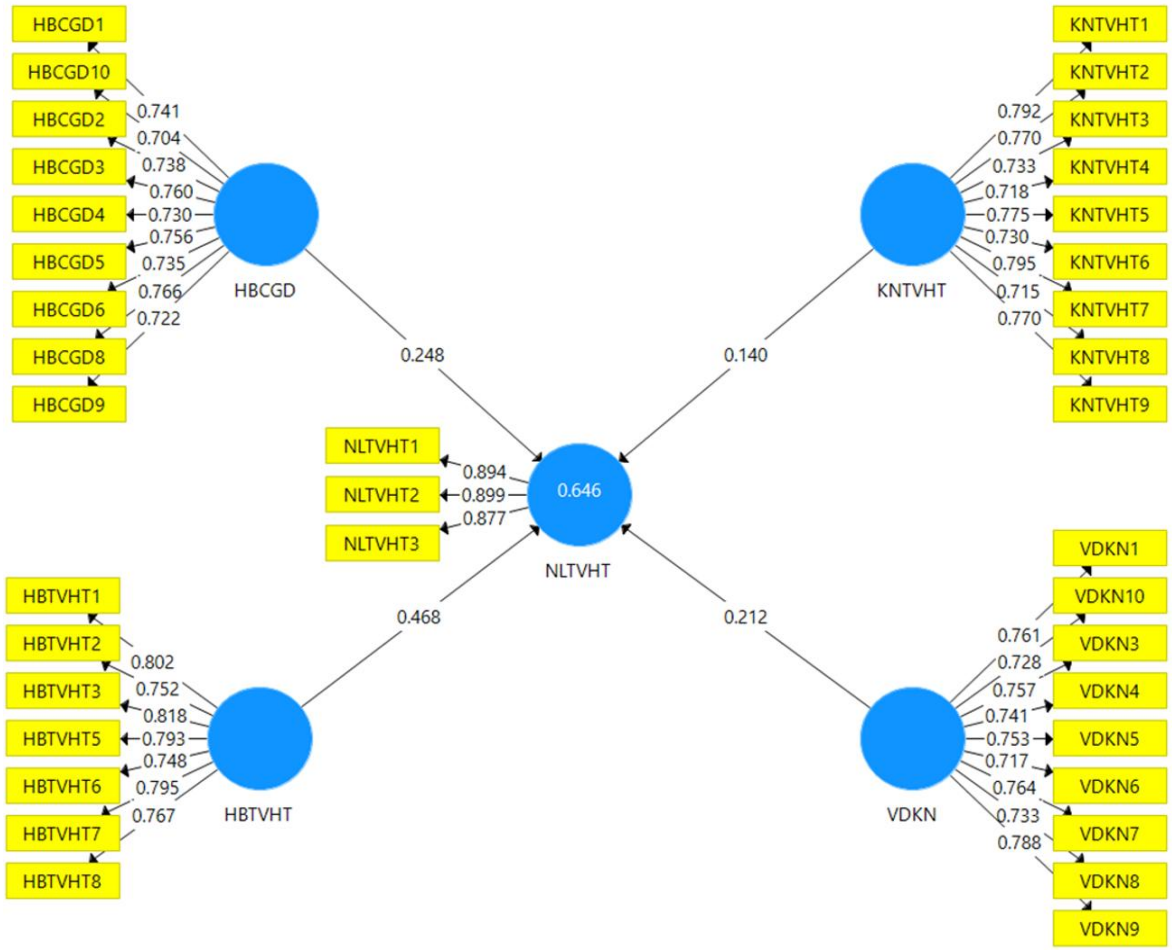

Figure 2. Diagram after removing the observed variable.

We performed a bootstrap analysis to assess the structural model. The detailed results are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Results of the direct impact evaluation (SEM) using 5,000 bootstrap samples.

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
HBCGD -> NLTVHT	0.248	0.249	0.045	5.517	0.000
HBTVHT -> NLTVHT	0.468	0.466	0.036	13.079	0.000
KNTVHT -> NLTVHT	0.140	0.143	0.048	2.952	0.003
VDKN -> NLTVHT	0.212	0.212	0.055	3.884	0.000

The results presented in Table 3 indicated that all p-values for the impact relationships were less than 0.05, demonstrating that these effects were statistically significant. All four components namely, a general understanding of teaching and educational activities for primary school students; a general understanding of primary student GAC activities; GAC skills in a hypothetical environment; and skills for applying GAC in a practical context contribute to the overall GAC competence. The standardized impact coefficients of these four variables were 0.248, 0.468, 0.140, and 0.212, respectively. Thus, the impact of these four variables on student GAC competence, ranked from strongest to weakest, was as follows: a general understanding of primary student GAC activities; a general understanding of teaching and educational activities for primary school students; skills for applying GAC in a practical context; and GAC skills in a hypothetical environment.

2.4. Collinearity/Multicollinearity Assessment

The evaluation of multicollinearity was conducted using the results obtained from the PLS algorithm analysis. The results indicate that all inner VIF values are below 5, confirming the absence of multicollinearity in the model.

2.5. Degree of Explanatory Power of the Independent Variables for the Dependent Variable (R Squared Coefficient)

The R-squared or Adjusted R-squared was used to assess the impact of an independent variable on the dependent variable within the SEM framework. The analysis results showed that the adjusted R-squared value for the consulting and guiding capacity variable was 0.646. Therefore, the four variables that influence student GAC competence accounted for 64.6% of the variation in this variable.

2.6. Effect Size f^2 Value (F Squared)

The f-squared coefficient indicates the strength of the influence of an independent variable on the dependent variable, categorizing it as small, medium, or large. The results presented in Table 4 demonstrate the impact on student GAC competence. Specifically, the variable "*A general understanding of primary student GAC activities*" had a strong impact, while the variables "*A general understanding of teaching and educational activities for primary school students*," "*GAC skills in a hypothetical environment*," and "*Skills for applying GAC in a practical context*" had a small impact.

Table 4. Results of assessing impact effectiveness effect size f^2 coefficient.

Subscale/Scale	HBCGD	HBTVHT	KNTVHT	NLTVHT	VDKN
HBCGD				0.139	
HBTVHT				**0.488**	
KNTVHT				0.035	
NLTVHT					
VDKN				0.082	

3. DISCUSSION

3.1. Scale Design and Testing

The scale was developed based on a comprehensive review of research on students' GAC competence among primary school teachers, ensuring alignment with the latest trends in research over recent years (Hunsmann et al., 2024; Larson et al., 1992; Le, Nguyen, Phan, Le, & Duong, 2023).

The scale was developed following a standardized process outlined by Hair, Black, Babin, and Anderson (2019), consisting of four stages: (i) drafting the scale, (ii) formal validity testing, (iii) semantic testing, and (iv) statistical testing. Therefore, the scale design procedure applied in this study is deemed appropriate.

Regarding the sample size, for the pilot study, a sample of 50 students was considered appropriate. For formal research, the sample size for scale analysis should be at least five times the number of observed variables in the scale. Therefore, with an initial scale consisting of 41 observed variables, the actual sample size of 251 subjects exceeds the minimum required sample size of 205 (calculated as 41 x 5). Moreover, the surveyed subjects are students majoring in primary education from different regions of Vietnam, including both favorable and less favorable areas. Thus, the sample size is appropriate and ensures reliability.

Regarding reliability, the scale measuring the GAC competency of Vietnamese students majoring in Primary Education includes four components: (1) a general understanding of teaching and educational activities for primary school students (nine items); (2) a general understanding of primary student GAC activities (seven items); (3) GAC skills in a hypothetical environment (nine items); and (4) skills for applying GAC in a practical context (nine items), all with high reliability and validity. The reliability of the scale was tested using two main coefficients: Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability.

These are the two coefficients commonly used in scale validation studies Hair, Babin, Anderson, and Black (2018). Cronbach's alpha depends on the number of observed variables; the larger the number, the higher the coefficient. In this study, the scale has a large number of observed variables (from seven to nine variables in each subscale). Therefore, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient ranged from 0.869 to 0.906, and the Composite Reliability coefficient was above 0.9. Thus, the reliability of the scale is guaranteed.

3.2. Components Affecting the Student Guidance and Counseling Competence

The research results show that the element with a strong impact on student guidance and counseling competence is *A general understanding of primary student guidance and counseling activities.* This is considered a crucial component of the GAC competence for students majoring in primary education. Having a proper understanding of student GAC, along with knowledge of the methods, approaches, and stages involved, enables students to identify challenges that students may face. This awareness facilitates the development of strategies for prevention and ensures effective support and counseling tailored to different student groups.

In addition, students' competence to guide and advise primary students is also influenced by other factors, such as a general understanding of teaching and educational activities, GAC skills in a hypothetical environment, and the ability to apply these skills in practical contexts. Therefore, to enhance students' GAC competence, lecturers and schools must focus on the aforementioned factors, provide students with essential knowledge, and create opportunities for them to practice and apply their knowledge in guiding and counseling activities within primary schools.

4. CONCLUSION

The scale for assessing the GAC competency of Vietnamese students majoring in Primary Education was designed to include four subscales: a general understanding of teaching and educational activities for primary school students; a general understanding of primary student GAC activities; GAC skills in a hypothetical environment; and skills for applying GAC in a practical context.

The scale has been tested according to standard procedures. The results showed that the scale had high validity and reliability. Additionally, the results indicated the influence of the subscales on the students' GAC competency. All these findings demonstrate that the scale is a useful and reliable tool for assessing the GAC skills of Vietnamese students majoring in Primary Education.

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Transparency: The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.
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