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ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Bridging the Soft Skills Gap in Moroccan Higher Education: Insights for Policy, Curriculum, and Workforce Preparation

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This quantitative descriptive study amounts to a needs analysis, the first component of a multi-phase mixed methods research endeavour aimed at exploring the rampant soft skills gap between academia and business in Morocco. Employing a convenience sampling methodology, a survey was administered to 170 undergraduate university students and analysed using SPSS descriptive statistics, revealing a significant deficiency in key soft skills within the participants' skillsets. Nevertheless, these respondents manifested a robust willingness to address this skills gap, notably favouring the adoption of a Blended Learning Model for soft skills development. The meticulous analysis of the survey data stresses the imperative need to seamlessly integrate soft skills development initiatives into the existing curricular framework. Such integration holds the promise of catalysing substantial development in the personal, academic, and professional orbits of the study participants. Thus, the results of this study underscore the critical significance of addressing the soft skills gap (mismatch) for Moroccan policymakers, curriculum designers, educators, and researchers, and emphasize the inevitability of equipping university graduates with the essential soft skills required to thrive in the contemporary workplace.

Keywords: Industry 4.0, Education 4.0, Centennials, Disruptive Technologies, Hard Skills, Soft Skills, Blended Learning.

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Introduction

The world is witnessing rapid changes brought about by disruptive technologies like AI, leading to a re-evaluation of old procedures and the introduction of new ideas in all spheres of life. Digital natives, today's university students, are particularly impacted by these technological advancements, as the corporate world seeks employees equipped to handle innovative technologies. The modern workplace demands a shift from traditional technical skills to soft skills such as communication, leadership, creativity, adaptability, and problem-solving, which cannot be easily automated by machines. As a result, universities are urged to focus on capacity-building, training students in soft skills to prepare them for future jobs and smart technologies.

The background of the study emphasizes the increasing importance of soft skills in academia and business. Moroccan employers and employees alike prioritize soft skills over technical credentials, recognizing their value in sustaining current and future jobs, especially in an evolving job market shaped by technology. The demand for employees with the right soft skills has led to unfilled job positions in both global and local economies. Today's companies seek individuals who can collaborate effectively, manage projects, and influence decision-makers, but the current workforce is often unprepared for this shift, leading to a soft skills gap that hinders competitiveness, performance, and productivity. Bridging this gap becomes crucial for the personal, social, and professional growth of digital natives, enabling them to seize present and future employment opportunities.

The Problem of the Study

It is against this background that today’s entry-level workers are blamed for their lack of soft skills in different parts of the world. Several studies and reports show that they are often criticised for their inability to learn, think, and communicate without checking their devices. Poor work habits, poor people skills, and lack of professionalism are among the allegations levelled against them. In addition, they are blamed for being incapable of thinking critically, solving problems, making decisions or planning, and deferring to authority (Lee-Kelley, 2010; Singh Dubey et al., 2022; Tsirkas et al., 2020; Tulgan, 2016).

Locally, Moroccan employers nowadays complain about a broad, soft skills gap, blaming it all on Moroccan universities and their ill-suited educational policies. Recent evidence suggests a mismatch between the skills required by employers and those being developed by universities (El Hamdi et al., 2020; Karimi & Pina, 2021; USAID, 2017). The soft skills gap is great attendance in the Moroccan context (See Figure 1). It exists because of a need for more clarity regarding the existing content, definition, interpretations and approaches to soft skills development used by educators and employers (Chbani & Jaouane, 2017; El Hamdi et al., 2020; Llorent Bedmar, 2014; UNIDO, 2019; USAID, 2017). Both the Moroccan industry and academia are aware of the magnitude and nature of the soft skills gap. It is alleged that the soft skills gap is not currently addressed in a structured manner. The existing education system cannot provide students with the soft skills they need to succeed in the workplace. It is an accepted fact that it takes time for curriculum updates to catch

up with industry changes (Council, 2016; Jacob, 2021; Zuabi, 2012). Figure 1 graphically illustrates the dimensions of the research problem.

Figure 1. The Research Problem

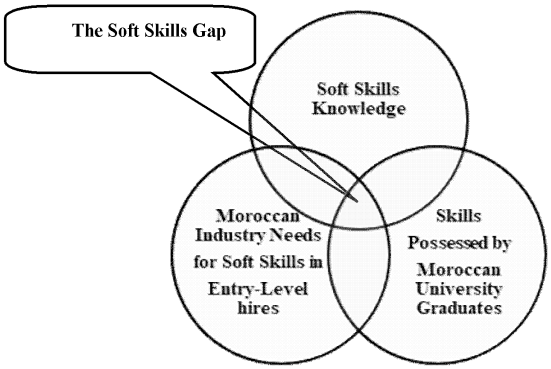


Figure 1 illustrates the need for higher education institutions to understand what employers expect from their graduates. It delineates the genesis of the soft skills gap and offers insight into how it can be closed. The figure synthesises recommendations and implications for future Moroccan research and practice. An employability survey conducted by Bayt.com in February 2015 found that Moroccan employers cannot track motivated, agreeable employees with leadership potential. Further, the British Council in Morocco found that universities are under-supplied with general employment skills, including CV writing, interview preparation, and general business knowledge (Council, 2016). Though necessary for professional success, most universities in Morocco do not incorporate soft skills into their curricula (USAID, 2017). In consilience, industry and academia face significant challenges due to the gap between Moroccan university graduates' soft skills and those required by employers. In a word, there is a dire need to consider the impact of the soft skills gap, the complex nature of soft skills development, the contextual factors that influence soft skills development, and the possibility of developing undergraduate university students' soft skills. There is a gap in perspectives. Previous studies attempted to investigate soft skills from the perspectives of employers (Tejan & Sabil, 2019; USAID, 2017; Yasin et al., 2015). This study will address this research gap by investigating the problem from the end-users' perspective, Moroccan undergraduate university students.

The Purpose and Significance of the Study

This study investigates the development of soft skills in the Moroccan context through the examination of five factors: Knowledge, The Impact, Agenda, Readiness, and Preferences. It aims to assess Moroccan undergraduate university students' awareness of the soft skills gap, its effects, and potential solutions to address it, along with their willingness to participate in soft skills training programs. In addition, the research seeks to identify the needs and preferences of Moroccan

students regarding soft skills development, their perceived future career outcomes, and their views on the effectiveness of Small Private Online Courses (SPOCs). The study significance lies in bridging the understanding gap between the educational sector and the business world, with a focus on aligning the skills of university graduates with employers' demands. By addressing research gaps related to soft skills' characteristics and impact, the findings aim to enhance soft skills training initiatives in Morocco, benefiting both students and the job market.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive design to achieve its objectives. Five factors were explored: the Knowledge Factor, the Impact Factor, the Agenda Factor, the Readiness Factor, and the Preferences Factor. The aim was to investigate whether Moroccan undergraduate university students understand the soft skills gap, are aware of its effects, know what should be done to address the mismatch, and are prepared to take part in a soft skills development program. This phase sought to determine students' familiarity, needs and wants regarding soft skills, their perceived future career outcomes, and SPOCs perceived use and efficiency.

Research Questions

This phase was geared toward generating answers to the following set of central and guiding research questions:

The Central Research Question

1) **What are Moroccan undergraduate university students' perceptions of soft skills as a component of their future workplace success?**

The Guiding Research Questions

a) To what extent are they familiar with the phrase 'soft skills?
b) What are their perceptions of the importance of soft skills?
c) Which soft skills do they deem as endemic to the graduate labour market?
d) To what extent are they ready to bridge the soft skills gap?
e) To what extent are they familiar with the concept SPOCs?
f) How can SPOCs contribute to developing their soft skills?
g) To what degree are they ready to participate in soft skills development initiatives?
h) How would they like to develop their soft skills?
i) What are the respondents' views about the best soft skills assessment practices?

Participants and Setting

Social scientists still aspire to survey the entire target population, however, due to the large number of participants involved, it is impossible to sample the entire population in social sciences studies (Schreier, 2018). As an alternative, sampling is essential (Acharya et al., 2013; Alvi, 2016; Singh & Mangat, 2013; Snedecor, 1939). In accordance with the exploratory nature of Phase 1, convenience sampling was employed. Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which people are chosen simply because they are "convenient" data sources for researchers (Etikan et al., 2016; Sedgwick, 2013). This sampling method is advantageous when

used to generate a potential hypothesis or a study objective. It is often used to select cases or participants that are easily accessible in a certain area. Social sciences researchers prefer this sampling technique as it is less time-consuming, less laborious, less costly, and more comprehensive (Alvi, 2016; Emerson, 2021; Etikan et al., 2016; Farrokhi & Mahmoudi-Hamidabad, 2012; Sedgwick, 2013; Singh & Mangat, 2013). This phase of the study was conducted with a sample of 170 third-semester undergraduates from the Department of English Studies at the Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Moulay Ismail University, Meknes, Kingdom of Morocco. The participants were chosen conveniently from two groups of 400 students, who were enrolled in the 2021-2022 academic year.

Data Collection Tools

The Research Instrument

Concerning *Phase 1*, the researcher deployed a questionnaire to gather data. Needless to say, a questionnaire is a self-report instrument used to gather information about variables of interest in an investigation (Cohen & Tate, 1989; Dalati & Marx Gómez, 2018; Goddard & Villanova, 2006; Mathers et al., 1998; Slattery et al., 2011). In the same vein, being versatile, this instrument can be administered to stakeholders of all ages, and can be replicated from one study to another, offering the potential to answer many questions quickly (Charlton, 2000). It is a means to collect a considerable amount of data with a minimum effort (Dalati & Marx Gómez, 2018; Navarro-Rivera & Kosmin, 2013; Owens, 2002; Slattery et al., 2011). In the current study, technically speaking, the researcher opted for a semi-structured questionnaire, requiring quantitative and qualitative data. The semi-structured questionnaire capitalised on "**Yes/No Answers**", "**Three to Five Scale Statements**" and sparingly asked respondents to make comments and suggestions under the rubric "**Other**". It was used as a method of enquiry to investigate five standpoints (**Factors**):

1) **The Knowledge Factor**: The extent to which Moroccan undergraduate university students are familiar with the soft skills gap.
2) **The Impact Factor:** The extent to which Moroccan undergraduate university students are aware of the impact of the soft skills gap,
3) **The Agenda Factor:** The extent to which Moroccan undergraduate university students are knowledgeable about what should be done regarding the soft skills gap.
4) **The Readiness Factor**: The extent to which Moroccan undergraduate university students are ready to join a soft skills training via a Blended Learning model.
5) **The Preference Factor**: The extent to which they prioritise certain (offline and online) learning features in the upcoming soft skills development training.

It is worthing noting that the current study, closed-ended questions were designed to call for responses, narrowing the field of enquiry since the respondents were required to choose from fixed responses (Leung, 2001). This type of questions helped the researcher in the analysis of data since the responses were directly compared efficiently and easily aggravated (Dalati & Marx Gómez, 2018; Leung,

2001; Navarro-Rivera & Kosmin, 2013). In brief, being a time-saving tool, the questionnaire enabled the researcher to collect data from a large number of respondents in a short period of time.

This research project is designed to explore the participants' understanding of "soft skills", their ability to differentiate between hard and soft skills, their opinion on the importance of soft skills for Moroccan university graduates, the extent to which they think soft skills are missing in their profiles, who should be responsible for promoting the development of soft skills, the perceived benefits of acquiring soft skills, their familiarity with SPOCs, and their readiness to participate in a soft skills development program. Section 1 focuses on retrieving contact details and demographics. Section 2 investigates the participants' familiarity with the concept of soft skills, their ability to provide examples and recognise the various labels used to portray them, and the ability to differentiate between hard and soft skills. Section 3 uses a Five-Likert scale to get the participants to rate how much they agree or disagree with statements about the importance of soft skills and how important they consider these skills for Moroccan university graduates in order to find and secure a future job. Section 4 investigates the soft skills gap, the extent to which the participants think soft skills are missing in their profiles as university students, who should assume responsibility, and what can be done to promote the development of soft skills in university students, as well as the perceived benefits of acquiring soft skills academically, personally, and socially. Section 5 examines the participants' familiarity with the concept of SPOCs, mainstream definitions, and features of the same. Finally, Section 6 probes into the participants' readiness to participate in a soft skills development program, their preferred modes of development (face to face or online), and the soft skills assessment methods they consider the most effective.

Reliability and Validity

Regarding the reliability of the instrument, the questionnaire scales exhibited a high level of internal consistency, as demonstrated in Table 1, thus allowing us to assert that the questionnaire is scientifically reliable.

Table 1. The Questionnaire Scales

Scale: The_Knowledge_Factor

Case Processing Summary

		N	%
Cases	Valid	40	76.9
	Excluded[a]	12	23.1
	Total	52	100.0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.959	21

Scale: The_Impact_Factor

Case Processing Summary

		N	%
Cases	Valid	40	76.9
	Excluded[a]	12	23.1
	Total	52	100.0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.986	15

Scale: The_Agenda_Factor

Case Processing Summary

		N	%
Cases	Valid	40	76.9
	Excluded[a]	12	23.1
	Total	52	100.0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.745	14

Scale: The_Readiness_Factor

Case Processing Summary

		N	%
Cases	Valid	40	76.9
	Excluded[a]	12	23.1
	Total	52	100.0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.765	10

Scale: The_Preference_Factor

Case Processing Summary

		N	%
Cases	Valid	40	76.9
	Excluded[a]	12	23.1
	Total	52	100.0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.869	17

In a word, the Knowledge and Impact Factors demonstrate high internal consistency, while the Agenda, Readiness, and Preference Factors show moderate to good levels of internal consistency. This implies that the items within each scale are measuring their respective constructs to varying degrees of reliability.

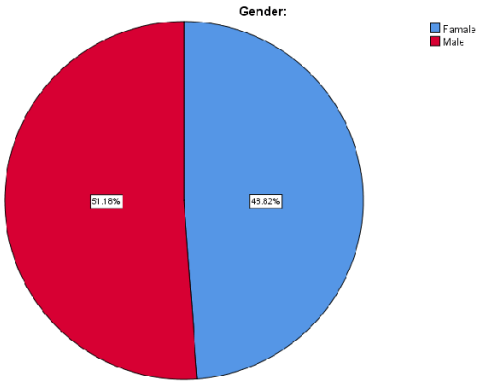
Results

In line with the nature of the research (central and guiding) questions addressed in this descriptive study, data analysis included *descriptive statistics* only.

Demographics

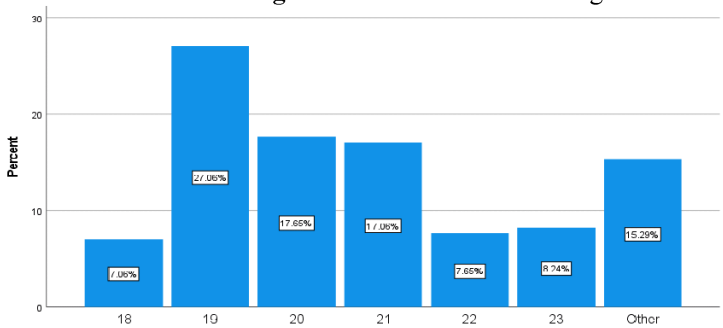
The 170 participants in the study were conveniently sampled from the study population, and their demographic characteristics were analysed to facilitate a more thorough data analysis. This information can also help identify any differences or similarities in group perspectives (Connelly, 2013). Figure 2 displays a balanced distribution of participants by gender, with 87 (51.18%) male and 83 (48.82%) female respondents.

Figure 2. *The Respondents' Gender*



As graphically delineated, this even distribution of participants across the gender variable is a positive sign that the survey captured the perspectives of both males and females (refer to Figure 2). Figure 3 highlights that the majority of respondents (27.6%) were 19 years and older, while the remaining age distribution ranged between 20 (17.65%) and 25 (2.35%) years.

Figure 3. The Distribution of Age

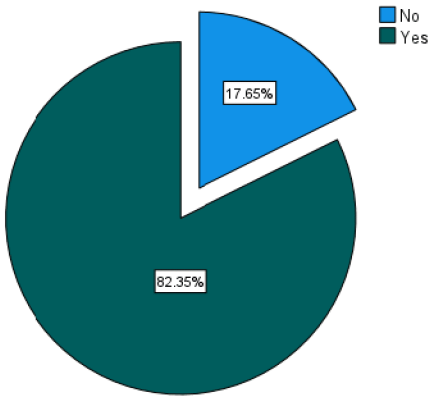


This age distribution indicates that the majority of respondents belong to Generation Z (Millennials), which Pew Research defines as anyone born after 1996. This information is interesting as it provides confidence in the representativeness of the sample.

RQ 1: To what extent are undergraduate university students familiar with the phrase "soft skills"?

The graph in Figure 4 reveals that most respondents (82.3%) were familiar with the concept of "soft skills". A total of 140 participants were able to provide a definition of the term, and even more impressively, they were able to provide relevant examples of the phrase.

Figure 4. Familiarity with the Phrase "Soft Skills"

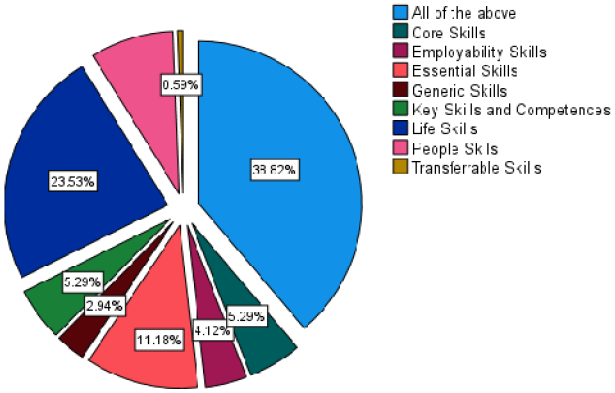


Based on the participants' responses, the most cited examples of soft skills included time management, communication skills, teamwork, creativity, critical thinking, and work ethics (as seen in Figure 5).

Figure 5. Perceptions about the Phrase "Soft Skills"

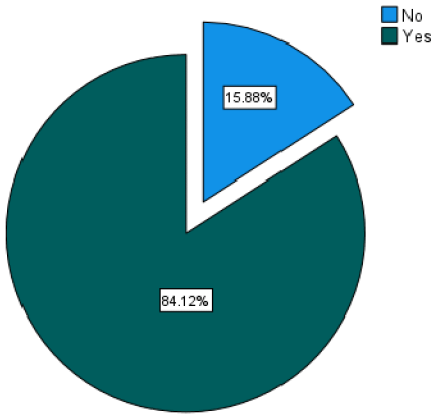
As demonstrated in Figure 5, the graph indicates that a notable portion of the participants, accounting for 23.53%, associate the term "soft skills" with life skills, which are a fundamental set of abilities required or preferred for complete engagement in daily activities.

Figure 6. The Participants' Perceptions about the Semantic Boundaries of the Phrase "Soft Skills"



The graph (Figure 6) above highlights the importance of life skills as a category of soft skills, which can help individuals navigate various life situations effectively. Examples of life skills include *problem-solving, decision-making, stress management, time management, and adaptability, which are essential for personal growth* and *development*. It is worth noting that recognising the different types of soft skills and their application in various contexts is crucial for enhancing individual and collective effectiveness in different settings, including the workplace, educational institutions, and personal relationships. The survey results revealed that a vast majority (84.1%) of the respondents were able to differentiate between "hard" and "soft" skills (Figure 7).

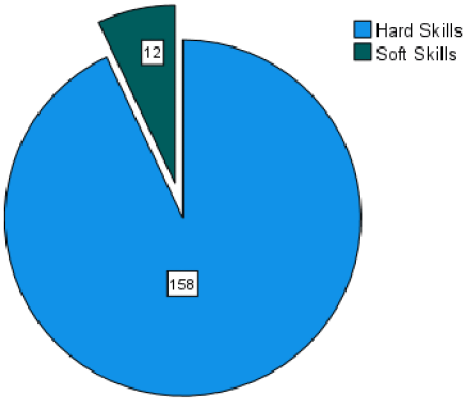
Figure 7. The Ability to Differentiate between Hard and Soft skills



The pie chart in Figure 8 demonstrated that the majority of the participants identified "hard skills" as those related to technical knowledge and training, and "soft skills" as those related to personality traits such as leadership and communication. Figure 8 shows that 158 respondents were able to recognise a range

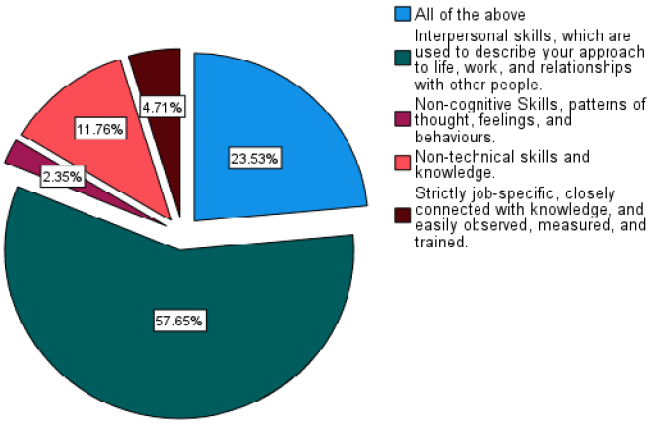
of technical abilities as "hard skills". These include a degree or other academic qualification, an industry-specific certification, coding proficiency, foreign language proficiency, typing speed, SEO marketing, bookkeeping, computer skills, and proofreading. These are job-specific skills that are acquired through formal education and training, practical learning, and other means in various disciplines.

Figure 8. Identification of Hard Skills



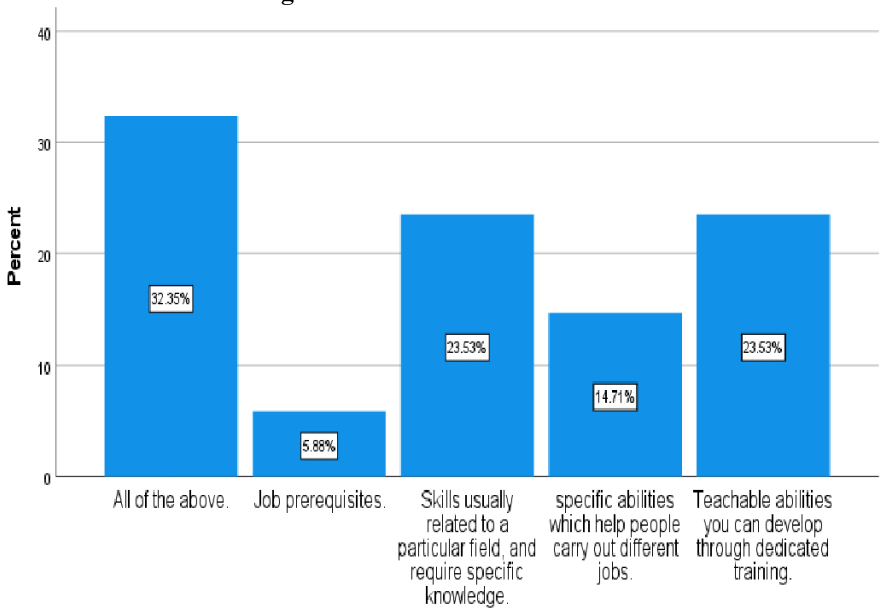
This demonstrates the participants' understanding of the definition of hard skills and their ability to apply it to a variety of specific examples. Another purpose of the survey was to determine if the students had a clear understanding of what constitutes soft skills. The results, as shown in Figure 9, indicate that 92.35% of the respondents were able to identify interpersonal skills, leadership, project management, problem-solving, work ethics, teamwork, adaptability, perseverance, and communication skills as soft skills. It is worth noting that the majority (57.6%) of the participants identified interpersonal skills as the most important soft skill, which describes one's approach to life, work, and relationships with others.

Figure 9. Definitions of Soft Skills



Interpersonal skills refer to the ability to interact effectively with others in a given social setting. These skills are considered essential in building and maintaining relationships, communicating clearly and persuasively, resolving conflicts, and exhibiting empathy and understanding. It is evident that the respondents recognise the importance of soft skills in navigating personal and professional relationships, demonstrating their awareness of the relevance of these skills in their lives. Figure 10 shows the various definitions given by the respondents for the phrase "hard skills". Out of the 170 respondents, only a small number (32.35%) selected all the definitions, indicating their limited knowledge of soft skills.

Figure 10. Definitions of Hard Skills

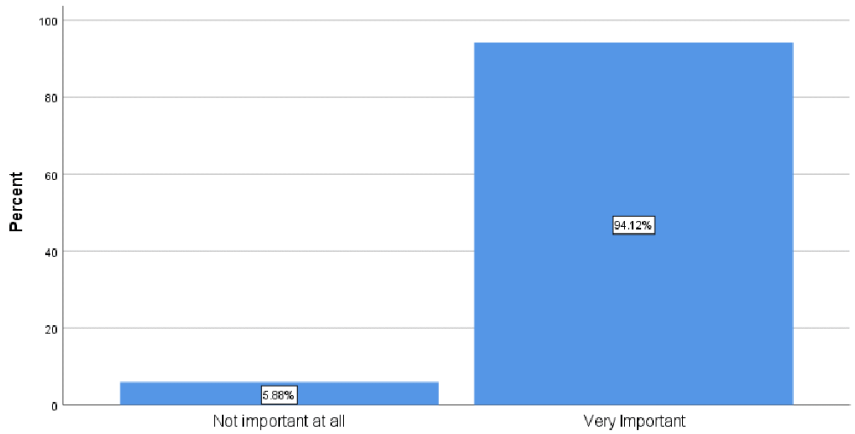


Likewise, another group of participants (23.53%) view hard skills as specific abilities that are relevant to a particular field. However, less than 40 students (32.35%) out of the 170 respondents selected all the definitions, indicating that their understanding of the nature of hard skills is limited.

RQ 2: What are the undergraduate students' perceptions about the importance of soft skills?

Most students concurred that "soft skills" were highly sought after by employers and advantageous for career progression (Figure 11). According to the same figure, the majority of respondents (94.12%) were aware that the right soft skills are essential for a successful career and social interactions. The respondents were cognizant that employers recruiting new graduates also placed great value on these skills.

Figure 11. The Importance of Soft Skills



In contrast, only a tiny fraction of respondents (5.88%) thought soft skills were insignificant. The results suggest that the students who were surveyed have a good understanding of the importance (value) of soft skills in the professional setting and recognise that these abilities are highly esteemed by prospective employers in their recruitment of recent graduates.

RQ 3: Which soft skills do they deem endemic to the graduate labour market?

The students' perceptions of the importance of soft skills were further validated by asking them to rate the relative importance of 14 skills derived from previous studies. As Table 2 shows, the top five skills were effective communication, self-management, work habits, decision-making, and being able to work under pressure & manage time. Most respondents (111) strongly asserted that effective communication skills are very important. A majority (115) of the students deemed self-management to be very important. Similarly, decision-making skills were seen as very important by 99 respondents. Most students (99) also strongly believed that positive attitude skills are very important. Lastly, Interpersonal and leadership were viewed as very important by 68 students.

Table 2. Response Categories for the Most Important Soft Skills

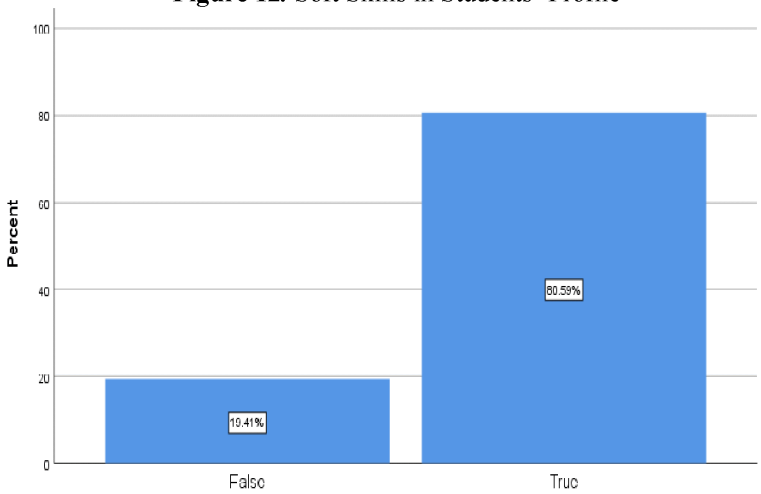
Items	Not at all important	Somewhat unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very important
Effective Communication Skills		3	6	50	111
Strong Work Ethics		5	19	76	70
Negotiation Skills	1	8	27	67	67
Analysis & Problem-Solving Skills		3	4	70	93
Interpersonal & Leadership Skills	2	4	31	65	68
Self-management & Work Habits		4	15	36	115
Flexibility & Adaptability	1	7	18	50	94
Teamwork & Collaboration		12	27	54	77
Decision Making		6	11	54	99
Conflict Resolution	1	3	30	72	64
Creativity Skills		10	25	69	66
Ability to Work under Pressure & Time Management		5	14	52	99
Positive Attitude		9	8	54	99
Emotional Intelligence	1	13	30	47	79

Through the utilisation of these measures, the researcher was able to obtain a more extensive comprehension of how the participants perceive the significance (importance and value) of soft skills. The results underscore the crucial role that these skills play in securing employment opportunities in the Moroccan job market. Therefore, it is essential for educators and policymakers to prioritize the development and cultivation of these skills among university graduates to enhance their prospects for future success.

RQ 4: To what extent are they ready to bridge the soft skills gap?

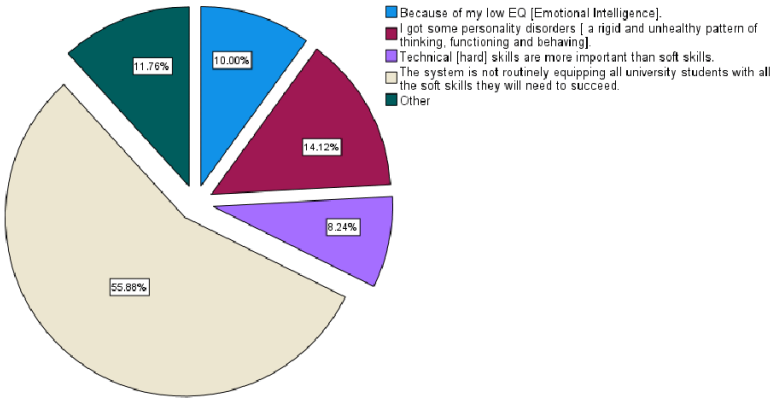
As illustrated in Figure 12, the majority of the respondents, specifically 137 individuals (80.59%), acknowledged the absence of soft skills in their profiles as university students. The respondents were asked to single out the reasons behind the lack of soft skills and the soft skills gap.

Figure 12. Soft Skills in Students' Profile



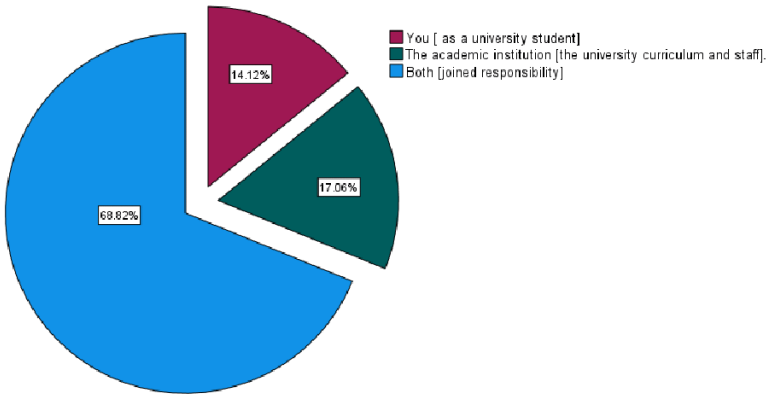
As shown above, the majority of respondents (55.88%) hold the view that the system is not routinely equipping all students with all the soft skills they need to succeed along the road from education to employment, (Figure 11). However, 14.12 % of the respondents confess that they have some personality disorders (rigid and unhealthy patterns of thinking and behaving). Further, the survey participants were asked to explain the cause of the disparity in soft skills. Most of them (55.88%) believed that the educational system was not providing students with the necessary soft skills to be successful in the workplace (Figure 13). On the other hand, 14.12% of the respondents admitted to having personality disorders, which are characterised by an inflexible and unhealthy way of thinking and behaving.

Figure 13. The Reasons behind the Soft Skills Gap



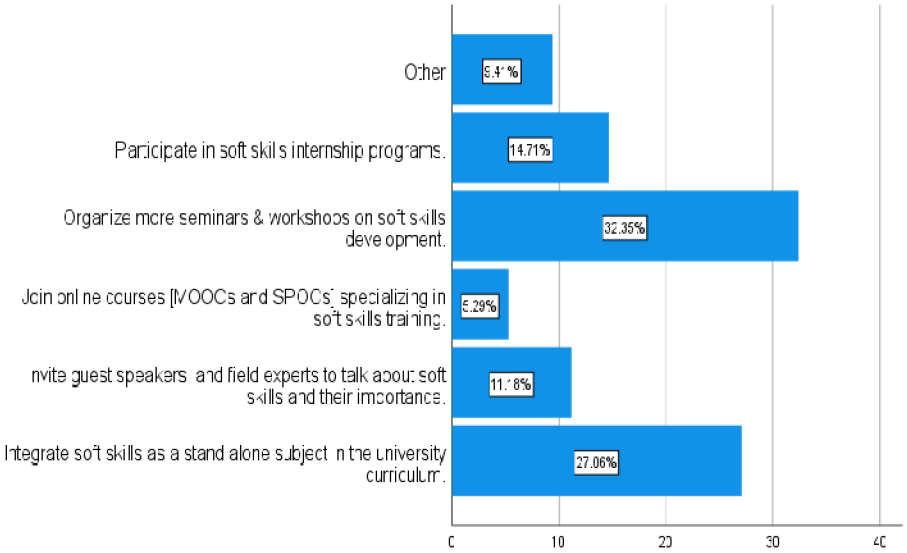
In line, most of them (68.82%) believed that the lack of soft skills is a shared responsibility between the university and the student. They indicated that both parties should be held accountable for the gap (Figure 14).

Figure 14. Who is to blame?



Most respondents (32.35%) suggested that organising more seminars and workshops on soft skills development could help bridge the soft skills gap (Figure 15).

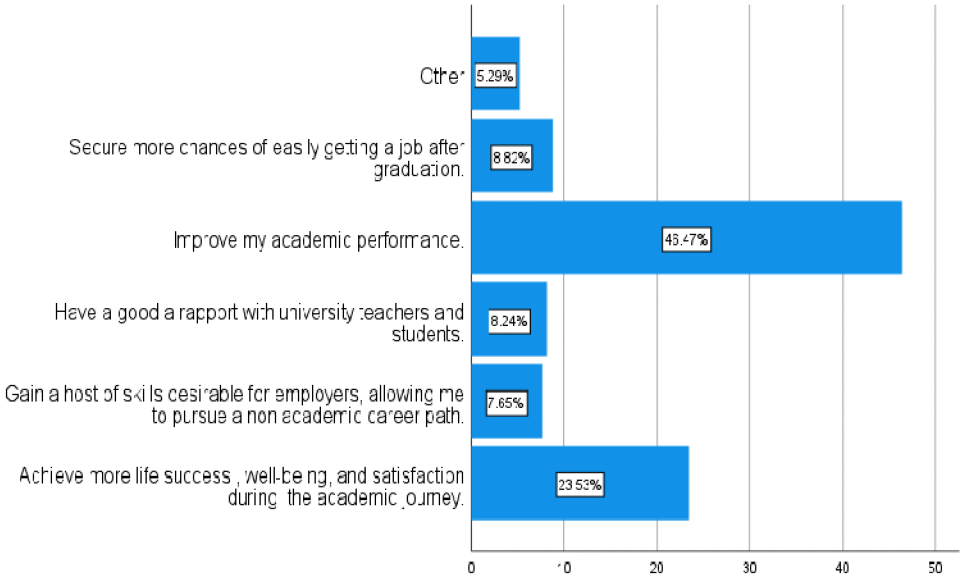
Figure 15. Ways to Bridge the Soft Skills Gap



As mentioned above, 46 respondents (27.6%) proposed integrating soft skills as a stand-alone subject in the university curriculum. A small number of respondents (11.18%) suggested inviting guest speakers and field experts to discuss soft skills and their importance. Survey participants were asked to rate the significance of soft skills from various points of view. As displayed in Figure 16, 46% of the

respondents said that they would see an improvement in their academic performance if they had soft skills. 23.53% of the participants reported that having soft skills would lead to greater success, contentment, and fulfilment during their academic career. 8.82% of the respondents stated that having soft skills would give them more opportunities to land a job after graduation.

Figure 16. Soft Skills Perceived Benefits

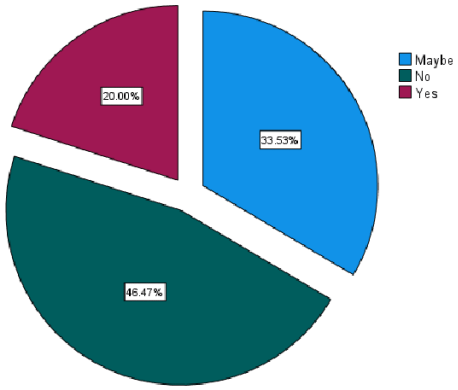


In brief, the responses suggest that students view soft skills as valuable competencies that can have a positive impact on various aspects of their lives, including academic performance, personal well-being, and career prospects. By recognizing the importance of soft skills and prioritizing their development, students can better equip themselves with the competencies needed to succeed both in and beyond the classroom.

RQ 5: To what extent are they familiar with the concept "SPOCs"?

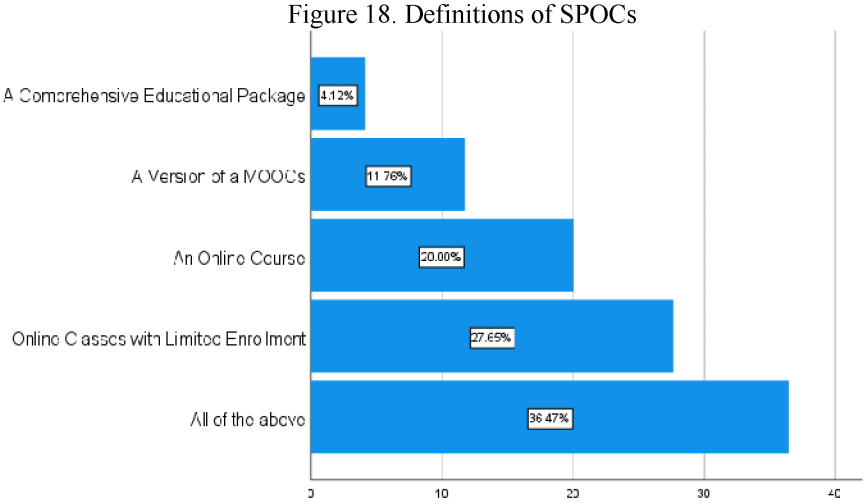
A majority of the respondents, 46.47%, had not heard of the term "SPOCs" as displayed in Figure 17. However, a significant portion, 33.53%, required further explanation of the term. On the other hand, 20% of the respondents were already familiar with the concept.

Figure 17. Familiarity with SPOCs



Regarding the familiarity of participants with SPOCs, Figure 17 shows that around 36.47% of the respondents recognise SPOCs as online courses with restricted enrolment offered by universities to individual learners or employees within organizations, often utilising an online version of an on-campus MOOC. With reference to Figure 18, they describe SPOCs as a complete educational package for a limited number of participants (4.12%), and an online course derived from a MOOC but customized for a restricted group of students, such as those from the same company or university course (27.65%).

Figure 18. Definitions of SPOCs



Based on the information provided, it can be concluded that SPOCs (Small Private Online Courses) are described as two distinct types of educational packages. This highlights the versatility and adaptability of SPOCs in providing targeted learning experiences while accommodating different contexts and requirements.

RQ 6: How can SPOCs contribute to developing their soft skills?

As demonstrated in table 3, many respondents (103, 60.6%) had no opinion on the potential of Small Private Open Courses (SPOCs) to help undergraduate students develop their soft skills. Similarly, when asked about the fact that SPOCs support Blended Learning and Flipped Classrooms, the majority of respondents (99, 58.2%) were neutral. However, a large number of students (91, 53.5%) strongly agreed that SPOCs combine online resources and technology with personal engagement between educators and learners.

Table 3. Response Categories and Percentages for the Focus of SPOCs

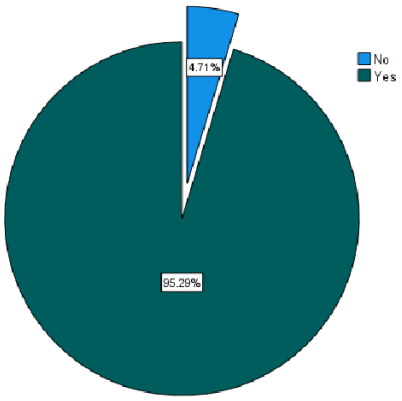
Focus	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
SPOCs target smaller, local groups	2 (1.2%)	13 (7.6%)	103 (60.6%)		52 (30.6%)
SPOCs support Blended Learning & flipped classroom.	5 (2.9%)	10 (5.9%)	99 (58.2%)		56 (32.9%)
SPOCs promote teacher-student interaction, online as well as offline	6 (3.5%)	21 (12.4%)	57 (33.5%)		86 (50.6%)
SPOCs combine online resources and technology with personal engagement between educators and learners	4 (2.4%)	3 (1.8%)	72 (42.4%)		91 (53.5%)
SPOCs allow students to practice, train, or take exams anywhere	2 (1.2%)	3 (1.8%)	78 (45.9%)		87 (51.2%)

Furthermore, many respondents (86, 50.6%) stated that SPOCs promote teacher-student interaction, both online and offline. Furthermore, a great number of students (87, 51.2%) articulated that SPOCs allow students to practice, train, or take exams anywhere. When asked which resources in SPOCs may help the respondents the most in their online learning, the majority of respondents attested that video lectures (71, 41.8%) and high-quality online resources (90, 52.9%) are extremely beneficial. Moreover, respondents argued that discussion forums (80, 47.1%), smart assessment (77, 45.3%), Blended Learning (70, 41.2%), human feedback (63, 37.1%), and smaller local groups (61, 35.9%) are also helpful.

RQ 8: To what degree are they ready to participate in soft skills development initiatives?

The vast majority of those surveyed (95.29%) expressed a desire to take part in a soft skills development program as shown in the following figure:

Figure 19. Readiness to Take Part in a Soft Skills Development Training

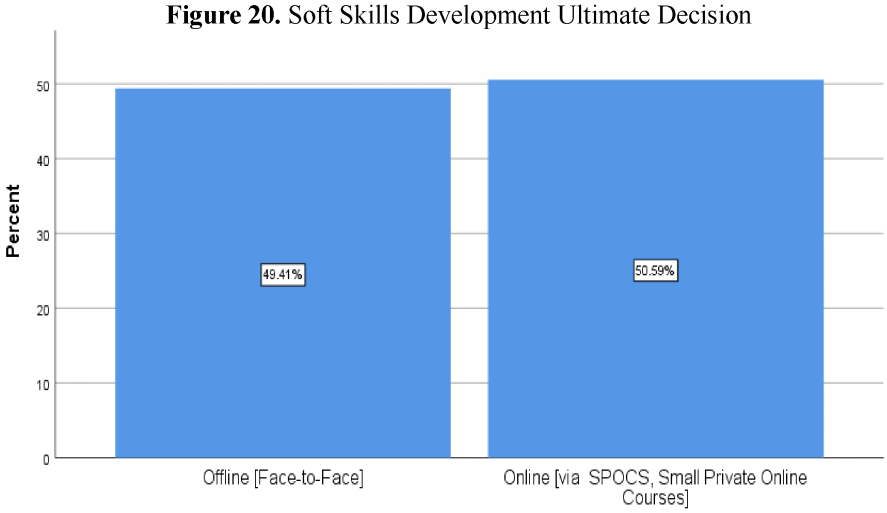


The results (95.29%) suggest that any initiatives aimed at developing soft skills may receive high levels of engagement and participation from students.

RQ 7: How would they like to develop their soft skills?

The results presented in Figure 20 reveal a divergence of opinions among the participants on the preferred method for developing their soft skills. While 50.59% of the respondents express a desire to develop their soft skills through SPOCs (Small Private Online Courses), 49.1% of the participants hold a contrasting viewpoint and prefer to pursue face-to-face, lecture-based learning.

Figure 20. Soft Skills Development Ultimate Decision



This result suggests that there is no clear consensus on the best approach for soft skills development, and that a variety of options may be necessary to cater to the diverse preferences of the surveyed students.

RQ 9: What are the respondents' views about best soft skills assessment practices?

Table 4 presents data on the effectiveness of different methods for assessing soft skills. Here is a summary of the findings: Personality Questions/Tests: This method is considered the most effective by 59 respondents (34.7%), followed by 70 respondents (41.2%) who found it effective. It is somewhat effective for 36 respondents (21.2%), while only 5 respondents (2.9%) found it ineffective. There is no data on whether it is not effective at all. Using scenario/Case Study Questions is considered most effective by 33 respondents (19.4%) and effective by 89 respondents (52.4%). It is somewhat effective for 36 respondents (21.2%) and ineffective for 9 respondents (5.3%). Moreover, 3 respondents (1.8%) found it not effective at all. 42 respondents (24.7%) find simulations most effective, while 62 respondents (36.5%) find them effective. For 45 respondents (26.5%), simulations are somewhat effective, and for 16 respondents (9.4%), they are ineffective. Only 5 respondents (2.4%) consider simulations not effective at all. 41 respondents (24.1%) find role plays most effective, while 80 respondents (47.1%) find them effective. For 41 respondents (24.1%), role plays are somewhat effective, and for 31 respondents (18.2%), they are ineffective. Only 3 respondents (1.8%) consider role plays not effective at all. 54 respondents (31.8%) find mock interviews most effective, and 59 respondents (34.7%) find them effective. For 34 respondents (20%), mock interviews are somewhat effective, while 13 respondents (7.6%) find them ineffective. Likewise, 10 respondents (5.9%) consider mock interviews not effective at all. 41 respondents (24.1%) find online assessment platforms most effective, while 76 respondents (44.7%) find them effective. For 30 respondents (17.6%), they are somewhat effective, but 66 respondents (38.8%) find them ineffective. Besides, 10 respondents (5.9%) consider online assessment platforms not effective at all.

Table 4. Response Categories and Percentages for the Most Helpful Resources in SPOCs

Soft Skills Assessment	Most effective	Effective	Somewhat effective	Ineffective	Not effective at all
Personality Questions/Tests	59 (34.7%)	70 (41.2%)	36 (21.2%)	5 (2.9%)	-
Scenario/ Case Study Questions	33 (19.4%)	89 (52.4%)	36 (21.2%)	9 (5.3%)	3 (1.8%)
Simulations	42 (24.7%)	62 (36.5%)	45 (26.5%)	16 (9.4%)	5 (2.4%)
Role Plays	41 (24.1%)	80 (47.1%)	41 (24.1%)	31(18.2%)	3 (1.8%)
Mock Interviews	54 (31.8%)	59 (34.7%)	34 (20%)	13 (7.6%)	10 (5.9%)
Online Assessment Platforms	41 (24.1%)	76 (44.7%)	30 (17.6%)	66 (38.8%)	10 (5.9%)

Discussion

This research was conducted to assess the level of knowledge that Moroccan undergraduate university students from the department of English studies have regarding soft skills. The participants indicated that the phrase "soft skills" is interchangeable with generic skills, essential skills, life skills, people skills, key skills and competencies, transferrable skills, employability skills, core skills, transferrable skills, and transversal skills. These findings are in line with the results of other studies in this field (Dube & Laari, 2017; Haddad & Marx, 2018; López-Pérez et al., 2011; Pereira & Costa, 2017; Robles, 2012).

The results of the current study are consistent with the findings of Dube and Laari (2017), whose quantitative investigation indicated that a significant majority (68.8%) of the respondents exhibited a robust grasp of the concept of soft skills. This could be attributed to the fact that motivational videos and podcasts about soft skills are widely shared on various platforms, making them more accessible to university students. Moreover, the results of the study suggest that students are aware of the importance of soft skills for career advancement and for getting a better job. This pattern of results is in line with the previous literature, such as Schulz (2008), who argued that the job market is becoming increasingly competitive and that candidates need to have a "competitive edge" to stand out from other applicants. Furthermore, Majid et al. (2012) suggested that soft skills are essential for successful career and social interactions, and that employers prioritize candidates with the most in-demand soft skills. Consequently, the findings of the study are in agreement with the ideas of the authors mentioned above.

Regarding the soft skills gap, the majority (55.88%) hold that the system was not routinely equipping them with all the soft skills they needed, from education to employment. Regarding accountability behind the soft skills gap, most respondents (68.82%) agree that it is a joint responsibility, blaming the academic institution (the university) and the undergraduate students for the soft skills gap. This outcome is contrary to a previous paper by Taylor (2016). The paper aimed to identify important soft skills that students need to develop based on the views of lecturers, industry, and students. The research was done at a university in South Africa. The findings indicate that stakeholders are of the opinion that students' soft skills are not being sufficiently cultivated, there is some confusion as to who should be responsible for honing these abilities, and that the process of developing soft skills is perceived as a challenging endeavour.

Concerning the respondents' perceptions about the benefits of soft skills development**,** 46.47% of respondents point out that soft skills will help them improve their academic performance. 23.53 % of the respondents pronounce that if they equip themselves with soft skills, they will achieve more life success, well-being, and satisfaction during the academic journey. In comparison, 8.82 % testify that soft skills would help them secure more chances of quickly getting a job after graduation. These results seem consistent with previous research by Wilhelm (2002). The author found that soft skills are necessary for an individual to communicate, work as a team member, inspire confidence, and understand and adapt to the cultural norms of the workplace. These results match those observed in a

previous study (Chafiq & Talbi, 2017). Their study aimed to estimate the first edition of the Soft Skills SPOCs in the Moroccan context. The authors suggest that digital learning environments (for example, SPOCs) could favour the development of soft skills of undergraduate students. They further state that the provision of additional online resources features the introduction of soft skills via SPOCs as a supplement to a face-to-face course (hybrid learning environment) and, on the other side, by overtaking space constraints and time in the physical environment. This result ties well with another previous study, wherein (Guo, 2017) confirms that specific learning SPOCs enhance both the organisation and distribution of teaching material and the interaction between teachers and students in a more structured and effective way.

The current results demonstrate that the majority of respondents recognise the importance of soft skills in both career success and social interactions. The top five skills identified were effective communication, self-management and work habits, decision-making, the ability to work under pressure and time management, and a positive attitude. Respondents noted that they lacked these skills and attributed this to the educational system not providing them with the necessary skills to succeed. They agreed that both the university and the student should be held accountable for developing soft skills. To bridge the gap, they suggested more seminars and workshops, as well as integrating soft skills into the curriculum. Most respondents expressed an interest in participating in a soft skills development program. There was disagreement on how to develop these skills, with 50.59% preferring SPOCS and 49.1% preferring face-to-face lectures. Personality tests, scenarios, case studies, role plays, mock interviews, and learning management systems were seen as helpful for assessing soft skills development. The researcher concluded that a blended learning model would best meet the needs and wants of the participants.

Implications

This study has highlighted the importance of soft skills in the labour market and the need to bridge the gap between academia and the corporate world in order to close the soft skills gap. The evidence from this research suggests that universities, employers, and non-governmental organisations should take action to improve data collection and analysis instruments to help design capacity-building interventions to assist Moroccan university students in developing top soft skills. The results of this study are of great importance to policymakers, who should seek ways and strategies to align academia and business in order to bridge the soft skills gap. Embedding soft skills in the curriculum is a key step in this regard. The results of this study should serve as a wake-up call for policymakers to address the soft skills gap and the status quo, as the soft skills gap will continue to widen and have a negative impact on university graduates' personal, academic and professional lives. Therefore, it is essential that the Moroccan Ministry of Higher Education and Training investigate the impact of the soft skills gap on the Moroccan human capital and talent pipeline, devise context-bound interventions, and find ways to track the success rate and route of university graduates in the job market.

Recommendations

The present study has identified ten recommendations to help address the research problem and the soft skills mismatch in the Moroccan context. These recommendations are succinctly stated as one-sentence calls to action, beginning with an action verb, to encourage individuals and organisations to take action. The recommendations are as follows:

1) *Acknowledge the soft skills gap officially;*
2) *Recognise the importance of soft skills for stakeholders;*
3) *Foster stronger links between businesses and universities;*
4) *Identify key soft skills needed;*
5) *Integrate soft skills into the curriculum;*
6) *Provide soft skills training programmes for in-service tutors and university professors;*
7) *Highlight the importance of blended learning models for soft skills development;*
8) *Establish careers centres and train employability advisors;*
9) *Increase international exchange programmes;*
10) *Enhance access to high-quality soft skills development resources (digital and non-digital).*

Conclusion

This descriptive study has highlighted the need to address the soft skills gap in the Moroccan context, which is a result of disruptive technologies and globalisation drastically changing the skills employers require from university graduates. Through a rigorous investigation of undergraduate university students' perceptions of five factors, Knowledge, Impact, Agenda, Readiness, and Preferences, this study has demonstrated that recent university graduates lack the soft skills necessary for success in academia, industry, and society at large. It is therefore essential that these missing skills be more widely acknowledged, taught consistently, and prioritised in Moroccan higher education curricula in order to bridge the skills gap between employers' needs and employees' skills.

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پرکردن شکاف مهارت‌های نرم در آموزش‌عالی مراکش: بینش‌هایی برای سیاست، برنامه درسی و آمادگی نیروی کار

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این مطالعه کمی توصیفی به تجزیه و تحلیل نیازها، اولین مؤلفه از تلاش‌های تحقیقاتی چند مرحله‌ای ترکیبی با هدف بررسی شکاف گسترده مهارت‌های نرم بین دانشگاه و تجارت در مراکش می‌پردازد. با استفاده از روش نمونه‌گیری در دسترس، یک نظرسنجی بر روی ۱۷۰ دانشجوی مقطع کارشناسی اجرا شد و با استفاده از آمار توصیفی SPSS مورد تجزیه و تحلیل قرار گرفت، که نشان‌دهنده کمبود قابل‌توجهی در مهارت‌های کلیدی نرم در مجموعه مهارت‌های شرکت‌کنندگان بود. با این وجود، این پاسخ دهندگان تمایل زیادی برای رسیدگی به این شکاف مهارتی نشان دادند، به ویژه از پذیرش یک مدل یادگیری ترکیبی برای توسعه مهارت‌های نرم حمایت کردند. تجزیه‌وتحلیل دقیق داده‌های نظرسنجی بر نیاز ضروری به ادغام یکپارچه طرح‌های توسعه مهارت‌های نرم در چارچوب برنامه درسی موجود تاکید می‌کند. چنین ادغامی نوید کاتالیزور توسعه اساسی در مدارهای شخصی، تحصیلی و حرفه‌ای شرکت کنندگان در مطالعه را دارد. بنابراین، نتایج این مطالعه بر اهمیت حیاتی پرداختن به شکاف مهارت‌های نرم (عدم تطابق) برای سیاست‌گذاران، طراحان برنامه درسی، مربیان و محققان مراکشی تأکید می‌کند و بر اجتناب‌ناپذیری تجهیز فارغ‌التحصیلان دانشگاهی به مهارت‌های نرم ضروری مورد نیاز برای پیشرفت در مراکز کار حال حاضر مراکش تأکید می‌کند.

واژه‌های کلیدی: صنعت نسل چهارم، آموزش نسل چهارم، صدسالگی، فناوری‌های مخرب، مهارت‌های سخت، مهارت‌های نرم، یادگیری ترکیبی.

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