

Soft Skills in Moroccan Higher Education: Students' Perceptions and Integration Challenges

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Abstract

Fostering holistic learning and preparing graduates for a successful workplace requires not only technical competencies but also well-developed soft skills. This study investigates students' perceptions of soft skills, as well as their integration and development at the Faculty of Sciences, Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Morocco. A structured, closed-ended questionnaire was administered to 250 undergraduate students as part of a quantitative, descriptive research design. The findings indicate that students report high agreement on the importance of soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability for professional success. However, the results also reveal that university curricula do not adequately integrate these skills, as most courses continue to rely on traditional, lecture-based approaches. Students identified several barriers to soft skills development, including limited resources, insufficient faculty training, and a strong emphasis on theoretical knowledge. Despite these challenges, participants expressed clear preferences for interactive and experiential learning approaches, particularly workshops, internships, and project-based learning. The study highlights the need for curriculum reform, targeted faculty development, and stronger collaboration between universities and industry to better align higher education with labour market demands in Morocco.

Keywords: soft skills, higher education, student perceptions, instructional approaches, challenges

1. Introduction

Higher education in Morocco is of paramount importance for educating students about workforce requirements and their social obligations. Although Moroccan higher educational institutions advocate the priority of technical and theoretical knowledge, still there is a noticeable gap in equipping learners with the necessary soft skills to navigate real-world challenges with the aim of being successful in the competitive and globalized labor market of today. Communication, adaptability, teamwork, and problem-solving skills are instances of soft skills that are frequently neglected in favor of traditional academic training, which focuses on rote memorization and knowledge transmission over the implementation of real-life skills.

Given Morocco's socioeconomic challenges and aspirations for better integration into the global economy, this gap becomes particularly troublesome. Employers' concerns about graduates' readiness for the job market and the high rate of youth unemployment have made the inadequate provision of soft skills training in higher education a significant problem. Despite excelling in theoretical areas, Moroccan students are often struggling with the interpersonal and practical qualities required in dynamic job contexts. This deficiency may be partly due to major structural problems in the education system, like the emphasis on rote learning, the lack of modern pedagogical methods, and the lack of resources for creative teaching methods.

To date, research on higher education reform in Morocco has largely focused on structural and institutional challenges. For instance, El Amrani (2019) highlights the impact of limited funding and outdated infrastructure on teaching quality, while Mazawi (2013) emphasizes the lack of pedagogical innovation and staff development. Similarly, Ennaji (2005) demonstrates how the historical reliance on memorization has negatively affected students' engagement and creativity. Sadiqi (2016) further notes that resistance to non-traditional pedagogies persists in contexts where theoretical knowledge is prioritized over practical competencies.

However, despite these contributions, limited attention has been given to how soft skills can be effectively integrated into Moroccan university curricula in ways that address both systemic constraints and cultural specificities. While global research strongly supports the importance of soft skills for employability (Robles, 2012; Heckman & Kautz, 2012), there remains a lack of context-specific studies that examine how such skills can be operationalized within Moroccan

higher education. This gap highlights the need for empirical research that connects student perceptions with practical strategies for integration.

Recognizing this gap, the present study seeks to explore strategies for addressing the challenges associated with soft skills education in Moroccan universities. Specifically, it aims to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the primary barriers to implementing soft skills training in Moroccan universities?
- 2) What pedagogical strategies can be employed to enhance soft skills education in Moroccan universities?

By focusing on these questions, this research aims to provide actionable insights for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders, contributing to the ongoing efforts to reform higher education in Morocco and better align it with the needs of the modern workforce.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Perceptions of Soft Skills in Higher Education

Soft skills are increasingly recognized as critical components of higher education worldwide, facilitating students' transition from academia to the workforce. The World Economic Forum (2020) stresses how skills like problem-solving, adaptability and teamwork have become vital for addressing the changing demands of the worldwide job market. However, in Morocco, studies show a noticeable variation between employers' demands and graduates' skills. In his interviews with employers across various industries, Jabri (2023) discovered that, despite their solid theoretical knowledge, Moroccan graduates usually lack communication skills, teamwork capacities, and initiatives. This is in line with Aziz's (2021) study on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, which found that students have difficulty with transferable skills due to restricted experiential learning opportunities.

These worries are backed up by a World Bank assessment (2023), which claims that Morocco's educational system has historically placed more emphasis on content delivery than skill development, leaving graduates ill-prepared for dynamic job settings. According to Zerouali (2023), this problem is made worse by the focus on rote memorization, which hinders critical thinking and innovation. International research, on the other hand, like Kolb's (2015) experiential learning model highlights how practical involvement improves students' skills and competencies (Boushaba & Ait Kadi, 2022).

2.2. Barriers to soft skills inclusion into Curricula

Incorporating soft skills into Moroccan higher education faces systemic challenges. According to UNESCO (2021), among the remarkable obstacles are the heavy dependence on antiquated teaching approaches, low investment in the training of the faculty members and poor infrastructure. In his attempt to provide a comprehensive evaluation of Moroccan universities, El Messaoudi et al. (2022) discovered that the main constraints were a lack of access to technology and experiential learning resources. These barriers, combined with institutional conservatism, impede the implementation of modern teaching practices such as peer evaluation, role-play, and collaborative projects that support the development of interpersonal skills (OECD, 2020).

Additionally, the implementation of reform at the level of curriculum is made more challenging because of the institutional conservative beliefs in most of the higher educational institutions (Ministry of Higher Education, 2021). Although policymakers acknowledge the significance of transversal skills, the administrative obstacles and resource limitations often lead to postponing the structural reforms. Aziz (2021) notes that although some institutions attempt to integrate soft skills courses, their effectiveness remains limited due to the absence of clear evaluation frameworks and well-defined learning objectives.

In spite of the ongoing debate on the issue, the gap between policy intentions and practice remains a thorny issue since few universities have adopted thorough frameworks for developing competencies (World Bank, 2023). Taken together, these studies suggest that the challenge is not only the recognition of soft skills, but also the absence of coherent institutional strategies to support their effective integration.

2.3. Pedagogical Strategies for Developing Soft Skills

To tackle these challenges, a variety of teaching and learning strategies have been suggested. First, Kolb (2015) stresses the worth of learning by reflecting on experience in his experiential learning theory. His concept has been successfully used in a number of settings to improve flexibility and problem-solving abilities. Second, Aziz (2021) recommends the implementation of project-based learning which provides students with practical opportunities to engage in real-life tasks and encourages creativity, critical thinking, and teamwork. Third, the previously mentioned ideas are reinforced by research by El Aida et al. (2024) which shows how participatory methods like debates, case studies, and simulations boost students' self-esteem and communication capacities.

Digital technologies could be affordable alternatives for soft skills training. In other words, according to UNESCO (2021), virtual platforms not only facilitate collaborative learning but also help learners achieve digital literacy and interpersonal skills. However, El Messaoudi et al. (2022) warn that for successful technology integration achievement, significant funding and continuous assistance for teachers are required. Moreover, Mtafi and Tijtini (2022) suggest intercultural education as a key to fostering global awareness, empathy and teamwork. Their study of Moroccan learners taking part in exchange programs revealed notable gains in cultural awareness and flexibility which indicate that exposure to a variety of perspectives and viewpoints increases the learning results.

2.4. Policy Reforms and Institutional Support

Reforming policies is a crucial step towards introducing soft skills into higher education institutions. The ESRI (2030) PACT defines Morocco's strategic plan for matching the requirements of the job market with education (Ministry of Higher Education, 2021). It places emphasis on life-long learning and competency-based education with the aim of getting adaptable and creative graduates. Nevertheless, for successful implementation to occur, a collaboration among multiple stakeholders is required, including government organisations, educational institutions and industry partners. In order to fill in the gap between education and the workplace, Jabri (2023) emphasizes the significance of collaboration that offer internships, mentorship programs and career services.

The OECD (2020) recommends incorporating competency-based evaluation to gauge students' practical skills as opposed to conventional exams. Such strategies have been employed successfully in countries like Finland and Singapore which indicates that matching the educational curriculum to real-life requirements in general and market needs in particular may improve employability. Morocco might apply these global models to create its own locally relevant framework that takes into account the systemic and cultural specificity. Zerouali (2023) believes that since practitioners and teachers are the key factor behind advancing experiential learning and modeling soft skills, the regular investment in their professional development is urgently required.

Soft skills integration in higher education remains challenging but a necessary task. In order to prepare students for meeting the demands of the modern workforce, it is essential to implement supportive legislations, adopt creative pedagogical approaches and address systemic

difficulties. Thus, attaining the objective is dependent on the collaboration between educators, policymakers, and industry professionals to generate substantial enhancement. In order to guarantee that Morocco's educational system catches up with international trends and global standards, future studies should examine the long-term impact of skills-based education on graduate employability.

3. Methodology

The aim behind this quantitative, descriptive study is to investigate how students of scientific streams at the faculty of sciences at Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University perceive, integrate and develop soft skills. The target population includes undergraduate students enrolled across various scientific departments. Given the diversity of academic programs and course loads, this population offers valuable insights into current practices and unmet needs regarding soft skills education.

A convenience sampling method was employed to select participants based on accessibility and willingness to participate. The study gathered responses from 250 students, ensuring a representative sample across different fields of study. Among the total sample, 44% were males and 56% were females. 41% of the respondents are enrolled in the first year, 33% are second year students and 26% of them are third year students. The average age of the respondents was 21 years old. The vast majority of respondents (78%) reported that they have never attended soft skills workshops or training. The high proportion of students who reported never attending soft skills workshops (78%) likely reflects a combination of structural and institutional factors. From a structural perspective, limited funding and insufficient institutional prioritization may restrict the availability of such programs. At the institutional level, the persistence of lecture-based teaching and assessment practices may reduce opportunities for extracurricular or skills-oriented initiatives. This suggests that the issue is not only pedagogical but also linked to broader policy and resource allocation constraints within Moroccan higher education.

The main tool for data collection is a structured, close-ended questionnaire developed by the researchers based on an extensive review of related literature (El Aida (2024), Belkrouf and Naciri (2023) and Tailassane (2024)). The questionnaire is composed of four key sections: demographic profile, perception of soft skills, current integration and instructional preferences and perceived barriers with a total of 24 closed-ended items.

All evaluative items are measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). To make the interpretation of the data easier, the researchers divided the respondents' level of agreement with the questionnaire items into three levels: high, moderate and low (Mahandir et al., 2021). The intervals used to determine the level of the means associated with the respondents' answers are presented in Table 1.

The questionnaire was pilot-tested with a small group of students from the faculty to ensure clarity and reliability. Questionnaires were distributed both online (via institutional platforms or social media) and in person during classes, labs, and university events. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The reliability of the data collection tool was verified, showing good internal consistency, as reflected by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87 (Lintangsari et al., 2021)

The collected data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 26).

This analytical approach allows for a descriptive examination of students' perceptions and experiences regarding soft skills integration.

Table 1. The scale determining the suitability level of the mean

Scale value	Response level
1.00-2.33	Low
2.34-3.66	Moderate
3.67-5.00	High

The questionnaire was pilot-tested with a group of 20 undergraduate students to ensure clarity, relevance, and reliability. Minor revisions were made to wording and item sequencing based on participant feedback. Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Data were collected anonymously, and ethical research standards were respected throughout the study.

The questionnaire items were adapted from established instruments in previous studies (El Aida, 2024; Belkrouf & Naciri, 2023; Tailassane, 2024), with modifications to fit the Moroccan higher education context. (Note: The full questionnaire is available upon request.)

4. Results

The results related to this section of the questionnaire as shown in Table 2 reveal that students hold a highly positive perception of soft skills, with all mean scores above 4.30. The highest

agreement was observed for the statement “Employers value soft skills as much as technical knowledge” ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 0.652$). Students reported high levels of agreement that soft skills are essential for success ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 0.782$) and that training in these skills can enhance academic performance ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.716$). These results highlight students’ awareness of the importance of interpersonal and practical competencies in professional contexts.

Table 2. Perceptions of soft skills among students

Item	M	SD
1. Soft skills (e.g., communication, teamwork, adaptability) are essential for professional success.	4.55	0.782
2. Moroccan universities adequately emphasize the importance of soft skills.	4.32	0.908
3. Employers value soft skills as much as technical knowledge.	4.68	0.652
4. I am confident in my communication and teamwork skills.	4.40	0.834
5. Soft skills training can improve my academic performance.	4.58	0.716
6. I believe universities should provide mandatory courses on soft skills.	4.47	0.87

As shown in Table 3, the results reveal low levels of integration of soft skills within current university programs, as reflected by mean scores ranging from 1.86 to 2.31. For instance, students reported limited opportunities to practice leadership skills ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 1.158$) and rare feedback on communication and teamwork ($M = 1.89$, $SD = 0.756$). The lowest mean was recorded for the effectiveness of university events in improving interpersonal skills ($M = 1.86$, $SD = 0.730$). These findings suggest that soft skills are not systematically embedded in academic activities.

Table 3. Students’ perceptions of the current integration of soft skills

Item	M	SD
1. My courses include activities that develop soft skills (e.g., group work, presentations....).	2.25	1.119
2. Teachers often highlight the importance of collaboration and problem-solving in class.	2.28	1.202
3. University events (workshops, seminars) help me improve my interpersonal skills.	1.86	0.730
4. I regularly receive feedback on my teamwork and communication skills	1.89	0.756
5. Assignments often require practical problem-solving rather than memorization.	2.05	1.991
6. I have opportunities to practice leadership skills during university projects.	2.31	1.158

When it comes to students perceived barriers to soft skills training, the results presented in the table below (Table 4) reveal that students identified several significant barriers, with mean scores ranging from 4.10 to 4.58, all within the high level. The most critical barriers were the lack of resources ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.919$) and students' low motivation to engage in soft skills activities ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 0.879$). Other notable barriers included teachers' insufficient training ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.134$) and a curriculum overly focused on theory ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.206$).

This apparent contradiction, where students report that universities emphasize the importance of soft skills while also indicating low levels of actual integration, suggests a gap between institutional discourse and pedagogical practice. In other words, while soft skills may be recognized at a policy or rhetorical level, they are not consistently translated into concrete teaching and assessment practices. This disconnect may contribute to students' perception that soft skills are valued in principle but not effectively developed in practice.

Table 4. The respondents' perceived barriers to soft skills training

Item	M	SD
1. Rote learning methods hinder the development of soft skills.	4.45	1.203
2. Lack of resources (e.g., training materials, technology) prevents the integration of soft skills.	4.58	0.919
3. Teachers need more training to incorporate soft skills in their teaching.	4.33	1.134
4. The curriculum focuses on theoretical knowledge rather than practical skills.	4.17	1.206
5. There is not enough time allocated for soft skills development in the academic schedule.	4.10	1.062
6. Students are not motivated to engage in soft skills activities.	4.57	0.879

When it comes to the respondent perceptions of effective pedagogical strategies for soft skills development (Table 5), students expressed strong support for experiential learning approaches, particularly workshops and internships ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 0.712$) and project-based learning ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 0.734$). Interactive methods like role-playing and debates ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 0.762$) were also considered effective. The lowest agreement was for guest lectures and industry talks ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 1.083$), suggesting that students value hands-on engagement more than passive learning.

Table 5. perceptions of effective pedagogical strategies for soft skills development

Item	M	SD
1. I prefer project-based learning to develop practical and soft skills.	4.42	0.734
2. Using digital tools (e.g., online collaboration platforms) would help improve soft skills	4.31	0.805
3. Interactive methods (role-playing, debates, case studies) are effective for building communication and teamwork skills.	4.28	0.762
4. Peer evaluation and group projects enhance my soft skills.	3.68	0.981
5. Guest lectures and industry professionals can help build relevant soft skills.	3.39	1.083
6. Workshops and internships are the best way to improve soft skills.	4.48	0.712

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that students hold generally positive perceptions toward the importance of soft skills, which is in line with the growing recognition of these competencies as essential for employability and professional success (Robles, 2012; World Economic Forum, 2020). Students reported strong agreement that competencies such as communication, problem-solving, teamwork and flexibility are crucial to succeed in the modern workplace settings. This finding confirms Jabri's (2023) observation that Moroccan employers are giving more priority to graduates who have strong interpersonal and teamwork skills along with technical proficiency.

However, even while students recognize the worth of soft skills, the findings show that these skills are not incorporated in the university educational programs. This observation goes hand in hand with the view of Aziz and Zaidoune (2022) and Zerouali (2023), who both emphasize that higher education institutions in Morocco continue to prioritize theoretical knowledge and conventional standardized testing procedures over experiential or practical education. Similarly, El Amrani (2019) found that the persistent reliance on rote learning impedes the growth of creativity, the development of critical thinking, and teamwork skills which are key requirements for professional success.

Respondents to the study also noted a number of obstacles that prevent the successful integration of soft skills training. These include a shortage of resources like technology and interactive educational tools, a lack of standardized testing frameworks for soft skills, and a dearth of staff training. These difficulties are similar to those stated by Messaoudi et al. (2022), who stressed that inadequate infrastructure and poor programs for faculty development are

major obstacles to curricular change. Similarly, UNESCO (2021), pointed out that any soft skills initiatives risk becoming ineffective or unsustainable if they do not receive the necessary systematic support from institutions.

From a pedagogical perspective, the results demonstrate that students favor interactive and fully engaging methods including discussions, project-based learning and digital collaboration platforms. These choices are backed up by Kolb's (2015) model of experiential learning which asserts that learners' reflective and adaptive talents are improved by active engagement in real-life tasks. The results of the current study are supported by El Aida et al. (2024) who discovered that Moroccan learners involved in interactive situations or activities demonstrated notable enhancement in their leadership and communication capacities.

While students express a strong preference for experiential learning approaches, this finding likely reflects a broader dissatisfaction with predominantly lecture-based teaching methods in Moroccan higher education. The emphasis on theoretical knowledge, as highlighted in previous studies, may limit students' opportunities to actively engage in learning processes that develop transferable skills. This suggests that students' preferences are not only pedagogical choices, but also responses to existing gaps in curriculum design.

Furthermore, the OECD (2020) and the World Bank (2023) recommendations which stress the need for collaboration between universities and employers to bridge the gap between academic education and the working life are reflected in students' preference for internships, workshops, and industry partnership.

In contrast to international settings, Morocco is still behind countries like Finland and Singapore that effectively used competency-based models to integrate soft skills into higher education curricula. However, participants in this study voiced favorable attitudes that demonstrate a willingness to embrace change and a clear desire for reform. These findings are consistent with the ESRI 2030 Pact (Ministry of Higher Education, 2021), which underlines the benefit of developing lifelong learning and transversal capacities to satisfy the industrial market demands.

In summary, this research's conclusions advocate the necessity and the opportunity to incorporate soft skills training in Moroccan higher institutions in a methodical manner. Bridging the current skills gap requires addressing the previously highlighted barriers through curricular reform, faculty professional development, and active collaboration with industry stakeholders. According to Boushaba and Ait Kadi (2022), such programs and courses not only

improve employability but also help produce graduates who are more creative and flexible. To gain a greater understanding of the long-term advantages of structured soft skills programs, future research should be conducted on their effects through cross-institutional comparison and longitudinal studies. It is important to note that this study is based on a convenience sample of undergraduate science students from a single faculty at one Moroccan university. As such, the findings reflect a specific academic context characterized by a strong emphasis on technical and laboratory-based learning. Caution should therefore be exercised in generalizing these results to other disciplines or to Moroccan higher education as a whole.

6. Conclusion

This study highlights the significant gap between students' recognition of the importance of soft skills and their limited integration within Moroccan higher education curricula. While students report high awareness of the role of communication, teamwork, and adaptability in professional success, current academic programs remain largely theoretical and insufficiently aligned with labor market expectations.

The findings also identify key structural barriers, including limited resources, insufficient faculty training, and the absence of standardized frameworks for soft skills development. At the same time, students show a clear preference for experiential and interactive learning approaches, indicating strong potential for pedagogical innovation.

Overall, this study contributes to ongoing discussions on higher education reform in Morocco by providing empirical evidence on student perceptions and institutional challenges. It underscores the need for more structured, context-sensitive approaches to integrating soft skills into university curricula.

Addressing these challenges requires coordinated institutional, pedagogical, and policy reforms capable of aligning Moroccan higher education with the evolving demands of the contemporary labor market.

7. Recommendations

The findings suggest that Moroccan higher education institutions should adopt a more structured approach to integrating soft skills into academic programs. Curriculum reform should prioritize the inclusion of project-based learning, group work, and classroom discussions as assessed components rather than optional activities.

Faculty development programs should be strengthened through targeted training workshops focused on active learning strategies and soft skills assessment methods. This would enable instructors to move beyond traditional lecture-based teaching.

Universities should establish formal partnerships with industry stakeholders to provide students with access to internships, mentorship programs, and real-world projects. Such collaborations would enhance the practical relevance of academic training.

In addition, institutions should invest in accessible digital tools that support collaboration and communication, particularly in blended learning environments. Finally, the development of clear competency-based evaluation frameworks is essential to systematically assess students' progress in soft skills.

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. No financial, personal, or professional relationships have influenced the research, analysis, or conclusions presented in this work.

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