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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# From Classroom to Workplace: The Role of Soft Skills in Moroccan Higher Education

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the demand for soft skills in the Moroccan job market by analyzing interviews with 180 participants, comprising 80 prospective graduates, 80 employees, and 20 employers in Morocco, specifically in the Ain Johara and Kenitra industrial zones. The study results reveal areas of divergence and convergence. Study participants prioritize communication and problem-solving; some place a strong emphasis on time management, while others tend to favor adaptability and leadership skills. By contextualizing the findings, this article emphasizes the implementation gap between declaring the importance of soft skills and their integration into higher education curriculum design. It also recommends collaboration among Moroccan higher education institutions and labor market recruiters to match graduates' skills and job market demands. Soft skills are no longer considered an academic necessity; rather, they have become a top priority to enhance human capital competencies and competitiveness in today's interconnected economy.

## KEYWORDS

Soft skills; higher education; employability; communication; Morocco; curriculum reform; workplace adaptability; emotional intelligence

## ARTICLE INFORMATION

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## Introduction

Soft skills are becoming important pillars for career enhancement and academic development. Communication, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, time management, leadership, etc., are skills that can be applied across various disciplines and contexts. According to Wats and Wats, "Soft skills are a cluster of productive personality traits that characterize one's relationships in a milieu" (2). This article examines data collected from interviews with participants from various groups, including students, employers, and employees. It emphasizes different perspectives—convergences and divergences—to inform the reform of curriculum design and meet job market needs.

## Literature Review

Recently, soft skills have gained more prominence in professional and academic contexts. In this context, Robles further argues that while technical expertise secures employment, it is soft skills that "Differentiate one job applicant from another and determine long-term career success" (455). However, there is no agreement among specialists on what types of soft skills should be highly prioritized. For instance, Robles summarizes soft skills in ten umbrella terms, namely, integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethic (457). International reports about career development and human capital point out that education is meant to equip students, future employees, with the necessary skills to navigate contemporary employability. The UNESCO report advocates that education systems must "equip students with 'life skills and employability skills'" (12) to meet the needs of a globalized economy that calls for more than technical skills and academic knowledge. The same report further highlights that soft skills are not marginal, but they are "integral to the holistic development of learners and their ability to contribute meaningfully to society" (UNESCO 14). Higher

education institutions are the primary avenues where students can be equipped with both academic and soft skills. They can bridge the gap between the academic knowledge students obtain and the practical skills needed in real-life experiences.

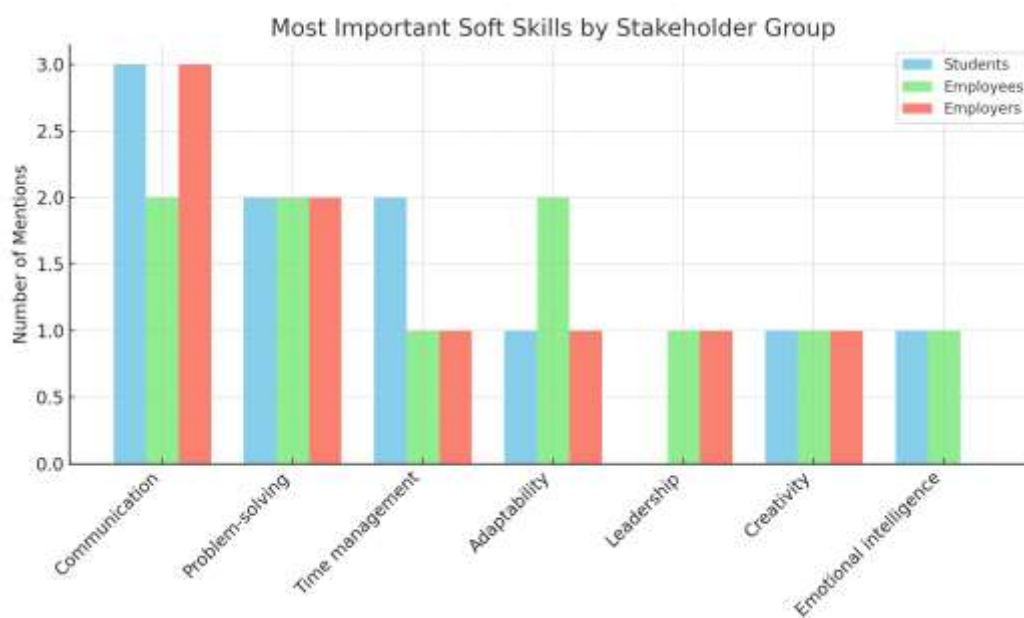
Wats and Wats argue that “Integrating soft skills into the curriculum is no longer optional but a necessity” (4). Their argument is based on an experimental study they conducted. They found out that a lot of graduates find it hard to find a job though they are highly qualified. The study demonstrates that they lack communication skills, teamwork, and critical thinking (5). Nowadays, globalization, interconnectedness, and technological advances have made it a necessity to integrate soft skills into higher education. This mismatch between the job market and current curricula should be given a top priority while reforming educational systems by ensuring a connection with employers’ expectations. In brief, while there is an increasing recognition of the central role of soft skills, there is still a remarkable gap between higher institutions and the labor market in Morocco.

## Methodology

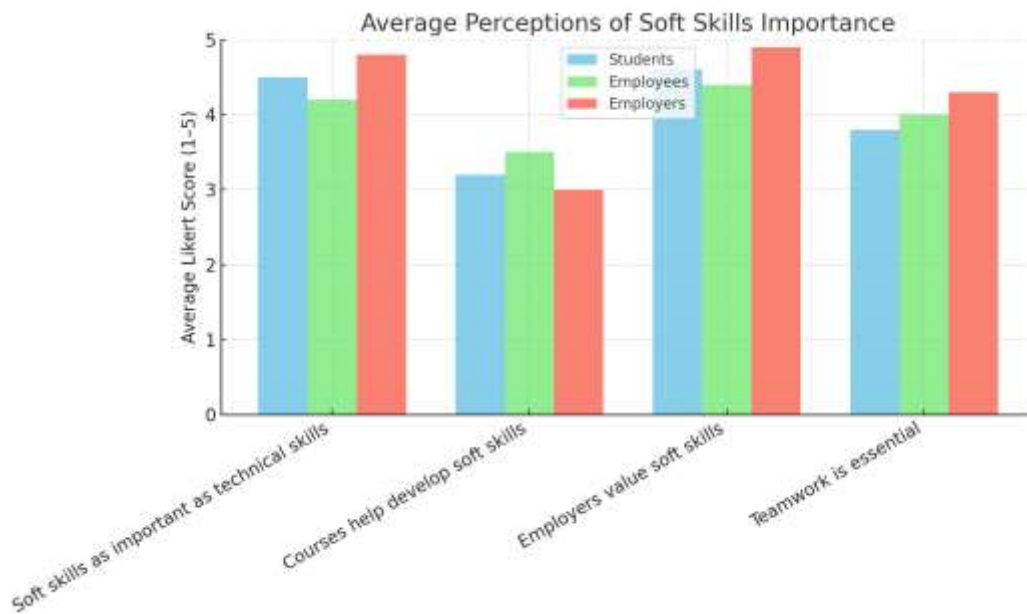
This study uses a mixed-methods questionnaire design to investigate how different stakeholders perceive soft skills and their implementation in current higher education curricula to prepare students for the job market. The study sampling is divided as follows: 80 students from universities and technical schools, 80 employees, and 20 employers in the Ain Johara and Kenitra industrialized zones. The choice was made purposefully; to explain, including different categories of interviewees allows the study to capture the issue from a complementary perspective. Students are at the core of curriculum design, for their perceptions reflect academic needs and future expectations in the job market. Employers represent a crucial side of the study, which is the demand side of the labor market, because they know the skills and competencies required to fill the gaps they encounter in their daily search for workers. Employees’ perceptions are important to investigate this issue as they are the bridge between academic knowledge and professional settings. Bringing these groups together provides more room for an insightful analysis of the findings. This method paves the ground for a clear understanding of the way soft skills are valued and practiced across educational and professional contexts.

## Findings and Analysis

The findings reveal a significant overlap among the group engaged in their prioritization of the importance of soft skills. The study suggests that there is a recognition of communication and problem-solving as key soft skills. Nonetheless, there are notable distinctions among the three groups. Students prioritize time management, employees emphasize adaptability, and employers believe that leadership is the most important skill. These perceptions indicate that while all study participants deem it right to claim that soft skills are crucial, each group’s prioritization is ascribed to the contexts where they operate. The results can be displayed in the following graphs:



**Figure 1: Comparison of the most important soft skills by students, employees, and employers.**



**Figure 2: Average Likert-scale scores on the importance of soft skills across stakeholders.**

Employees' perceptions add more depth and value to the findings as their middle-ground positioning puts them in situations where they apply the academic knowledge they have learned, and the ever-changing workplace demands. In brief, data analysis has shown that there is a gap between the academic-focused curricula of Moroccan higher education and the skill requirements of contemporary employers. The importance of this study is to show Moroccan stakeholders that the job market combines technical competencies with soft skills.

## Discussion

Although there is widespread recognition of the importance of soft skills, the results demonstrate that there is a gap between academic training/preparation and job market expectations/ demands. In this context, Wats and Wats note, "There is a growing concern among employers that graduates, despite their technical knowledge, lack the employability skills required in the workplace" (5). This applies to the Moroccan context, where students are exposed to purely academic knowledge with few exceptions. This misalignment emphasizes the urgent call for curriculum reform. As Robles claims, communication skills, professionalism, group work, and time management are not innate abilities that people are born with, but rather they are taught, practiced, and assessed within educational contexts (458). In fact, the undervaluation of soft skills suggests that higher education institutions and universities are not yet fully aware of the job market's expectations. To interpret the findings of this study, I draw on various theoretical backgrounds. They include Human Capital Theory, Signaling Theory, Institutional Theory, Cultural Capital Theory, and Labor Market Segmentation. These theoretical frameworks offer possible explanations for why soft skills are not fully developed among Moroccan graduates, particularly those preparing to enter the job market. The latter is no longer purely Moroccan.

From the perspective of Human Capital Theory, education is a primary motivator for increasing productivity, as it equips learners/ trainees with both knowledge and complementary skills. However, data has shown that higher education in Morocco still focuses on technical and theoretical instructions, without serious consideration of soft skills. This leads to what would be called suboptimal investment in human capital. Employees, those interviewed in this study, call for post-hiring training for novice and experienced employees. This is another burden that diminishes productivity and increases companies' expenses. Another significant outcome of the absence of soft skills in higher education is that graduates often have to look for training, which costs a lot of money.

Signaling Theory posits that employers feel anxious and dissatisfied with workers' skills. Accordingly, recruiters in this study rely on observable/ concrete behaviors like communication, creativity, adaptability, and teamwork as signals for possible employability. An employer claims that "While having interviews with candidates, I look for people who can communicate clearly with a sense of self-confidence, not someone with knowledge" (Participant 170). This reveals that while academic knowledge is essential, employers look for other essential skills. This situation provides clear evidence for the disappearance of traditional signaling mechanisms in Morocco's changing job market. International companies in Morocco require new signals and/ or predictors of employability. Although the job market characteristics have been subject to change, students still invest massively

in their academic pursuits because of the social value given to degrees. Briefly, owing to the evolving nature of the labor market, curriculum designers ought to look for potential directions for educational reform. However, implementing such alternatives is not an easy task that can be done suddenly; rather, it requires coordinated changes across educational institutions, employers, and social expectations about educational values.

Data has shown that Moroccan universities reproduce what I may call 'colonial academic cultural capital' that sustains Francophone educational traditions. Such academic capital has been highly valued for public sector employment, where success depends on mastering the knowledge they have been exposed to. However, this does not match with international companies that look for other skills such as outcomes orientation, cross-cultural competence, teamwork, collaborative problem-solving, and so on. Employers need "Workers to be familiar with global business cultural knowledge. I don't find these things in the people I am working with" (Participant 175). This cultural capital mismatch creates serious challenges for universities/ higher education institutions, which cannot join the job market with academic knowledge only. The workplace is not only a physical setting where employers operate. It is a meeting point for people from different cultural backgrounds.

### **Synthesis**

Students nowadays are fully aware of the importance of academic knowledge; however, it is not sufficient to ensure employment. According to Participant 1, "We learn theories in class, but we rarely get the chance to practice communication or teamwork, which are crucial when we enter the job market". This awareness is the outcome of students' observations and real-life experiences. Another one claims "I was not chosen because a candidate had a certificate from an international training center about time management, stress management, group, etc." (Participant 8). This reveals that skills can boost employability as they complement students' academic qualifications.

An employee further argues that "School gave me knowledge (*savoir*), but the workplace taught me how to manage conflicts and communicate effectively (*savoir être*)" (Participant 91). This creates a hierarchical distinction between schools/universities and workplaces. This binary position suggests that learning in the workplace is more valuable and authentic than learning in a classroom setting. Data analysis and interpretation have shown the emergence of new concepts in the job market, such as problem-solving, communication, and so on. Such a lexicon stems from experience- experiential acquisition. This way, the workplace takes precedence over institutions and universities. This idea creates a serious tension between formal education and experiential learning because when an employee, a previous student, claims they acquire soft skills in the workplace, it becomes the 'real' avenue where learning takes place. With this perception, society may lose trust in educational institutions and weaken their role in professional identity, creating a narrative of educational failure.

The emergence of this discourse represents a significant shift from knowledge-based conceptions toward personality-based assessments. This shift has become clear about how employers evaluate candidates. Participant 91's focus on recruiting candidates "who can communicate clearly and show confidence, not just those with high grades," devalues academic development. More importantly, this shift will extend beyond employment to completely alter the function of higher education. To explain, when soft skills become more valuable than intellectual achievement or basic subject matter, higher education institutions will change from places of learning to centers of personality development, coaching centers. From a critical point of view, such a shift suggests an urgent need for higher education institutions to integrate soft skills development into current curricula. This way, students will not be torn between academic knowledge learning and the soft skills needed in the job market. The main objective is to bridge the gap between academic knowledge/ preparation and professional demands.

### **Recommendations for the Moroccan Context**

The Moroccan higher education system faces a serious challenge in aligning its graduates' skills and competencies with the job market's needs. This study has concluded that communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and other skills are essential for employability in the Moroccan context. To address the gap between the educational system and the demands of the labor market, curriculum designers should integrate soft skills into higher education. Such an action calls for moving beyond lecturing-based learning/ teaching to experiential approaches. This aligns with UNESCO, which emphasizes that "life skills and employability skills are integral to the holistic development of learners" (14). One of the main recommendations of this study is the collaboration between higher education institutions and employers/ recruiting agencies. This article suggests a sort of joint advisory board to arrange different views and perceptions about the issue. This study focuses mainly on employees engaged in technical professions. The rationale behind this choice lies in the idea that the job market demands are technical par excellence. However, this does not mean that students of arts and humanities are excluded from soft skills integration.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Like previous academic inquiries, this study faces several limitations that have impacted the findings. First of all, the research geographical dispersion was too limited, as the study has focused on two industrialized zones: Ain Johara and Kenitra. Another

significant limitation of this inquiry is the over-reliance on qualitative data, which may be based on interviewees' personal biases. Participants' views/perceptions do not always reflect objective realities that can reveal reliable outcomes. Third, the way participants perceive soft skills differs from one social and professional context to another.

## **Conclusion**

In spite of the clear evidence of soft skills internationally, Moroccan universities show a great deal of resistance to curriculum reform. Higher education institutions work under institutional pressure to meet academic standards without taking into consideration the job market feedback. This study has shown that graduates who have such cultural capital are more likely to meet recruitment requirements. These interpretations converge to suggest that Morocco's higher education and employment misalignment reveals some curriculum deficiencies that should urge curriculum reform. The persistence of academic focus calls for the inclusion of professional employers and educators while designing curricula.

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