
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

University Students' Attitudes towards the Relevance of Soft Skills for Education and Career Achievement: Moulay Ismail University as a Study Case

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| ABSTRACT

Proper soft skills occupy a key role in realizing a prosperous career as well as during social collaborations in society. These skills are also extremely required by employers hiring new alumni. The central target of this survey is to explore students' insights on the importance of soft skills for their education and employment. A questionnaire will be designed as the major data collection procedure and will be administered to university students at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences as well as the faculty of Sciences at Moulay Ismail University in order to elicit as much feedback as possible. Besides, the major hypothesis of this study is to find out whether soft skills are useful for social integration and career advancement and whether they contribute considerably to students' academic performance. In addition to this, this paper will be suggesting certain measures for improving the soft skills of students, which may also help improve their employment perspectives.

| KEYWORDS

Soft skills, higher education, and career success.

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1. Introduction

With the changing educational tendencies, dexterity in educational courses, achievability of multitudes of competent work, the competition for job attainment and job sustainability is becoming extremely challenging. In order to seize the opportunity over the competitors, applicants are left with no choice but to include some qualities to their hard skills to increase their potential, which is called soft skills. As Klaus P. declares, the lack of soft skills can drop the bright career of someone who has professional proficiency but no relational qualities Klaus, P. (2010:1).

Managers usually favour seeing an adequate combination of skills in their personnel and, along with discipline-based knowledge and competencies, satisfactory soft skills are necessary for career advancement (Mitchell, 2010:1). They suspect professional and technical skills cannot help accomplish organizational objectives. Employees also need to communicate efficiently within the company, with their clients and other investors.

Soft skills refer fundamentally to individuals' personalities, qualities, and personal performance. Soft skills include certain capacities, such as communication, problem-solving, self-motivation, decision-making, and time management skills (Gupta, 2009: 2). A survey by Hodges and Burchell [4] investigated the attitudes of business employers of the significance of various skills. It was conveyed that eight out of the top ten skills were soft skills, which included the ability and willingness to learn, teamwork and cooperation, interpersonal communication, energy and passion, and problem-solving skills.

The actuality of the study is based on the fact that today, the government of Morocco is paying special attention to reorganizing the educational system radically with an aim to raise it to the level of modern standards, which is the bachelor degree that stresses the importance of the inclusion of soft skills in higher education in Morocco. Hence, this paper aims to discuss the significance of

soft skills development in Higher Education and propose some measures for improving students' soft skills, which may help enhance their employment perspectives.

2. Methodology

2.1 Subjects

My respondents are Moroccan university students affiliated with Moulay Ismail University, more particularly, the faculty of Letters and Human Sciences and the faculty of Sciences in Meknes. The number of respondents who responded to my google form questionnaire and sixty-seven individuals. They are working towards achieving their B.A, MA and PhD degrees. As for their gender, 60% are male university students while 40% are females. Besides, as far as my respondents' age is concerned, 53,8% of them are more than 26 years old, 23,1% are between 22 to 26 years old, and the same percentage of respondents are aged between 17 to 22 years old.

2.2. Instrument

The data collection instrument that is designed to carry out this investigation is mainly the questionnaire. The latter is chosen as the major instrument because of the previous lockdown during the pandemic of Covid 19. Thus, it was impossible to focus on interviews or participant observation as all my respondents were locked in their houses.

2.3. Data Collection Procedure

As far as the data collection procedure is concerned, a google form questionnaire is implemented to be capable of reaching all respondents either through their academic emails or through the use of social media platforms, such as messenger, WhatsApp, and Facebook as well. They were truly supportive and helpful, and they contributed hugely to the accomplishment of this study. One hundred copies were sent to my respondents, and the return rate was sixty-seven percent.

2.4. Data Analysis Procedure

Concerning the data analysis procedure, the purpose of this study is to try to figure out whether soft skills are useful for social integration and career advancement and whether they contribute considerably to students' academic performance. Therefore, the questions tackled in the google form questionnaire are divided into a number of categories, namely, respondents' background information, their academic path, their awareness of soft skills, the perceived importance of soft skills, the significance of soft skills in relation to employability, the characteristics of soft skills for employability, the desire for soft skills improvement, the barriers that prevent students from developing and practising soft skills, and lastly, tentative suggestions for soft skills enhancement. Each category will be analyzed in detail in the section of results.

3. Results

As far as the findings are concerned, the first section has dealt with respondents' background information, followed by the second section, which has argued respondents' academic path; both sections are centred on providing information on Moroccan university students who accepted to take part in this investigation. The questions that have been dealt with are mainly about their age, gender, educational level, and the institution section. The third section, it has discussed respondents' awareness of soft skills. The fourth one has examined the perceived importance of soft skills. The fifth one has focused on the significance of soft skills in relation to employability; As for the sixth one it has tackled the characteristics of soft skills for employability. As far as the seventh section is concerned, it has tackled the desire for improving soft skills. The eighth one has focused on the barriers that prevent students from developing and practising soft skills. Lastly, the final one has concentrated on suggestions to improve soft skills.

3.1. Students' Background Information

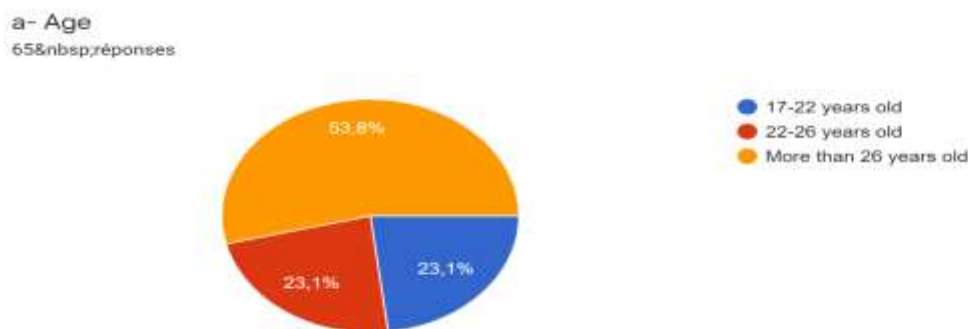


Figure1: Age

As far as my respondents' age is concerned, 53,8% of them are more than 26 years old, 23,1% are between 22 to 26 years old, and the same percentage of respondents are aged between 17 to 22 years old.

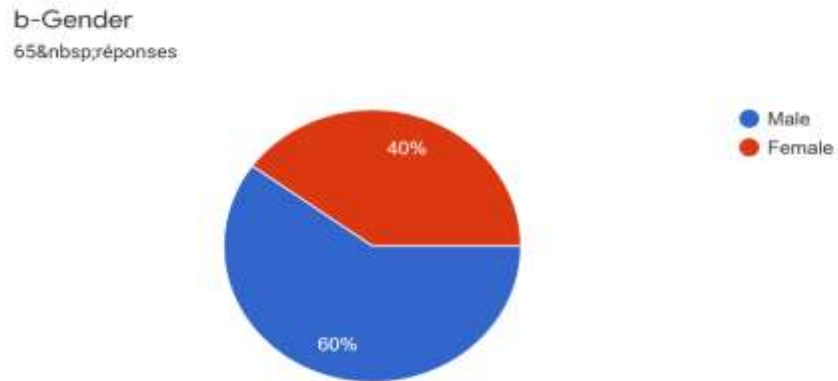


Figure2: Gender

Concerning my respondents' gender, 60% are male students, and 40% are females.

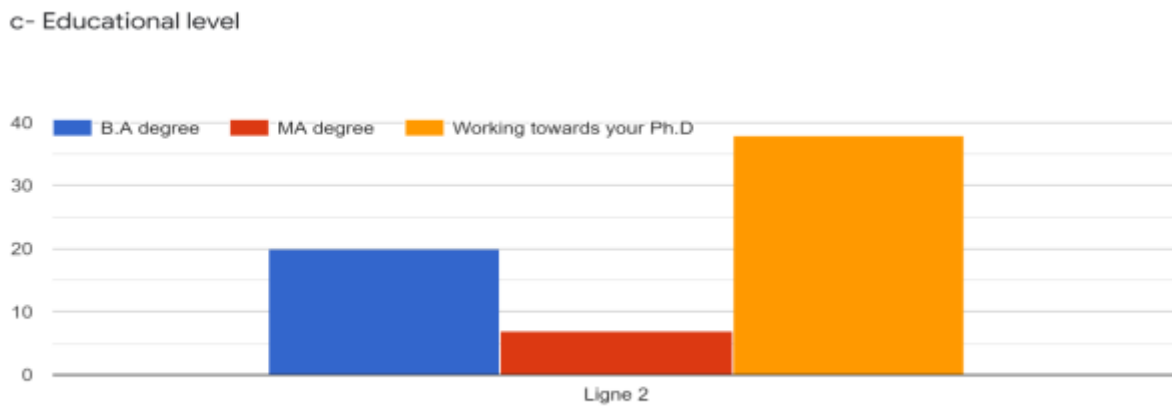


Figure3: Educational Level

For the educational level, 38% are Ph. D students working towards their doctorate degree, 20% are B.A students and 8% are MA students.

3.2. Information on the Academic Path

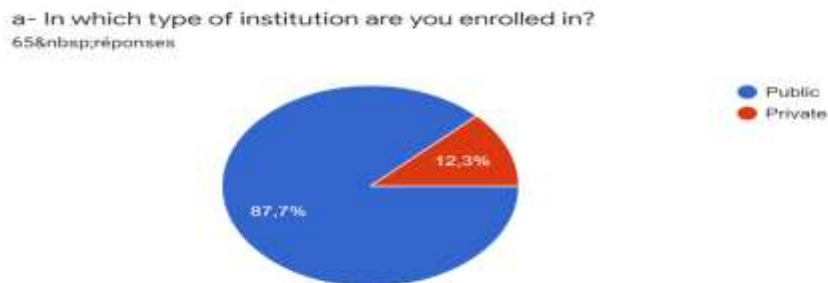


Figure 4: Institution Sector

87.7% of my respondents are enrolled in public institutions, while 12.3% have joined private ones.

b-You continue your studies in a system of
65 réponses

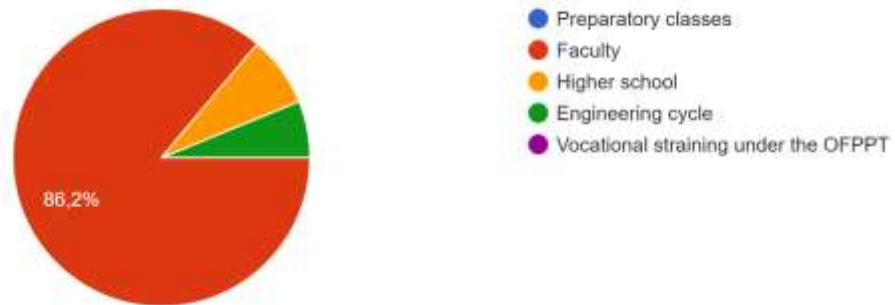


Figure5: Studies System

86.2% are continuing their studies at the faculty level, while 8% are studying in superior schools, and 5.8% are pursuing an engineering cycle.

c- In which discipline?
65 réponses

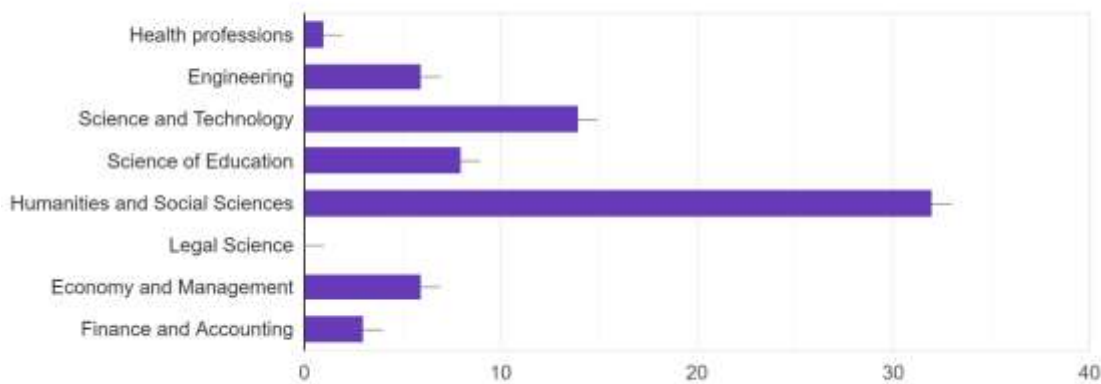


Figure6: Institution Discipline

It seems that the majority are enrolled at the level of faculty, more particularly at the faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences 34% while 15% follow the discipline of Science and Technology, 9% are in Science and Education discipline, 7% for engineering, and the same percentage goes to Economy and Management, 5% pursue their studies in Finance and Accounting, and 3% for Health professions.

3.3. Awareness of Soft Skills

1- What are the four top soft skills that you are aware of from the following list?
65 réponses

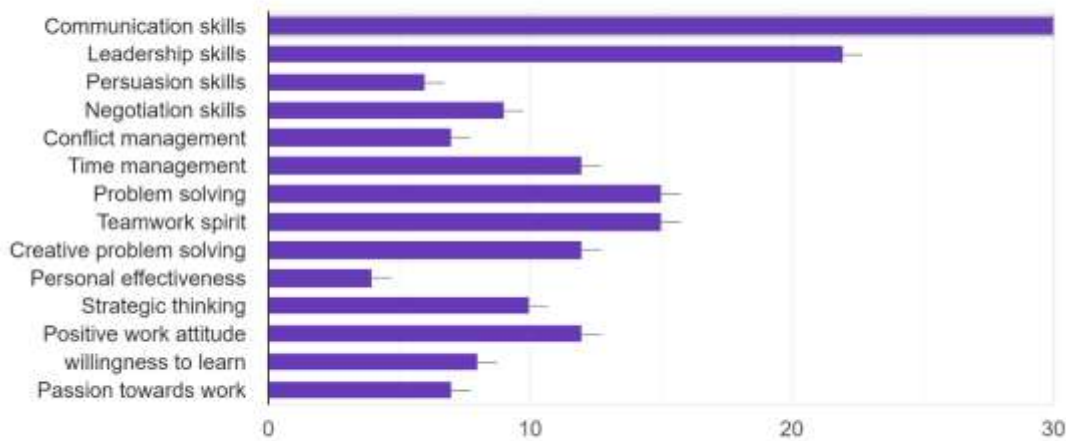


Figure7: Soft Skills Awareness

The most relevant four top skills, according to my respondents, were stated with regard to their importance as follows: communication skills 30%, leadership skills 24%, problem-solving 15%, and teamwork spirit 15%. It is also believed that the other soft skills were crucially important too. For example, respondents also opted for time management 15%, creative problem solving 15%, positive work attitude 15%, strategic thinking 10%, negotiation skills 9%. In addition to this, willingness to learn had been given 8% of importance, conflict management 6%, passion towards work 6%, persuasion skills 5%, and the last one is personal effectiveness 4%. One of them states the following citation:

"I hope soft skills will be integrated into the curriculum because students will benefit from it in their professional life."

3.4. Perceived Significance of Soft Skills

1-You believe that soft skills are:
65 réponses

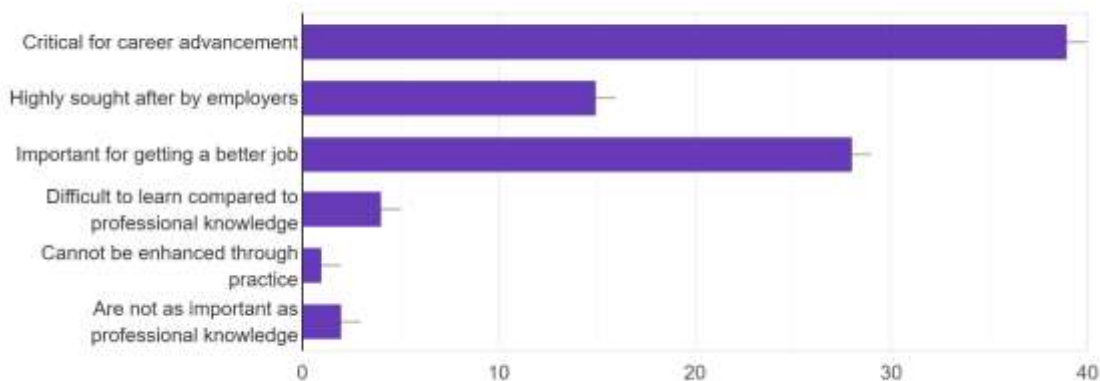


Figure8: Soft Skills Importance

The majority of my respondents believed that soft skills were critical for career advancement 38%, important for getting a better job 28%, highly sought after by employers 15%; whereas they thought that they were difficult to learn compared to professional knowledge 4%, they were not as important as professional knowledge 3%, and they can not be enhanced through practice 2%.

One of my respondents illustrated the following citation:

"Soft skills are very crucial for the personal and the professional life of students. They should be aware of them during their academic studies. I think that academic institutions should include them in the educational system; however, students should be autonomous too. They should learn those skills by themselves instead of wasting their time waiting for the institutions to include them in the syllabus problem."

2- You think that the purpose behind the importance of soft skills lies in:

65 réponses

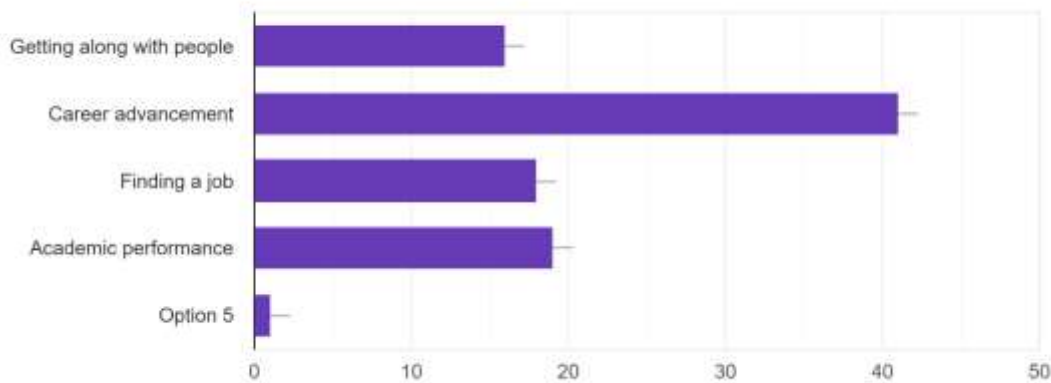


Figure9: Soft Skills Purposes

Most of my respondents assumed that the objective behind the relevance of soft skills was associated with career advancement 42%, while others have opted for academic performance 19%, finding a job 17%, and getting along with people 16%.

3.5. The Relevance of Soft Skills for Employability

1- You believe that soft skills are important for employment. 1-Strongly agree 2-Agree 3-Neutral 4-Disagree 5- Strongly disagree

65 réponses

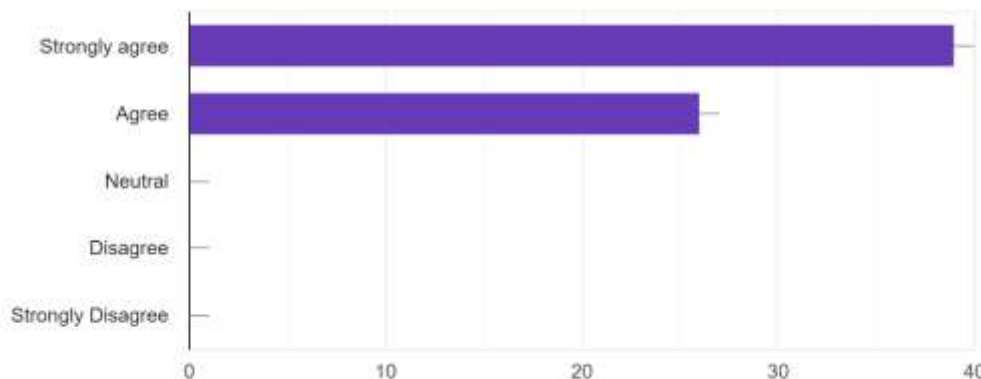


Figure10: Soft Skills and Employment

Apparently, almost all respondents believed that soft skills were important for employment as it is shown in the chart, 39% have opted for strongly agree, and 36% for agreeing.

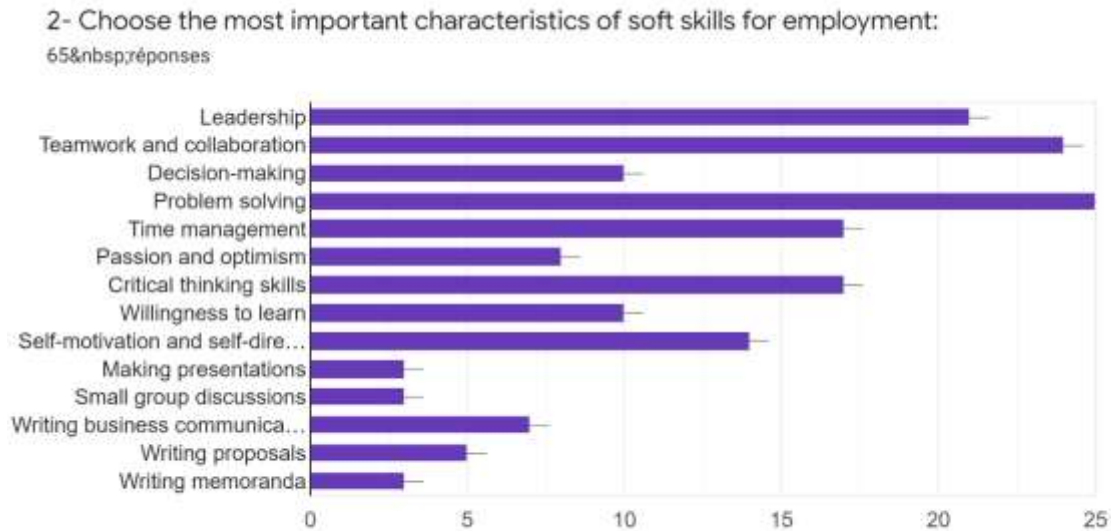


Figure11: Soft Skills Characteristics and Employment

According to my respondents, the most important characteristics of soft skills for employability in the above chart were related to problem-solving 25%, teamwork and collaboration 24%, leadership 22% followed by time management and critical thinking skills 17%, self-motivation and self-direction 14%, willingness to learn and decision-making 10%; whereas, passion and optimism have been provided with 7% of importance in addition to writing business communication 4%, writing proposals 5%, making presentations, small group discussions, and writing memoranda have been given 3% of importance.

One of them says:

"I think soft skills are very crucial for job hunting since a lot of employers look for candidates that possess them. However, a lot of students are not aware of their importance during their academic studies. Thus, I think it is important for faculties and professors to at least make their students aware of these soft skills".

3.6. Desire for Improving Soft Skills

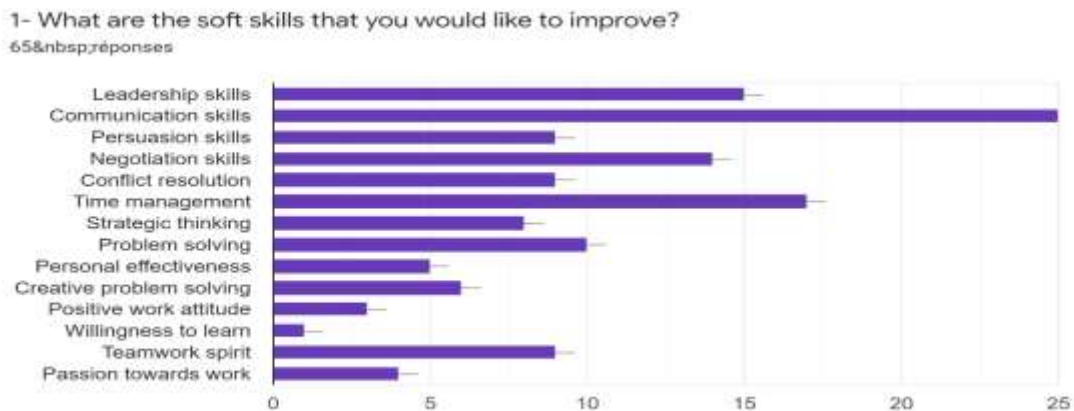


Figure12: Soft Skills Improvement

The most relevant soft skills that my respondents wanted to improve were as follows, communication skills 25%, time management 17%, leadership skills 15%, negotiation skills 14%, problem-solving 10%; whereas, a minority opted for the following soft skills, which have received low percentages, such as persuasion skills 9%, conflict resolution 9%, and teamwork spirit 9% too. In addition to this, strategic thinking has got 8%, creative problem solving 7%, personal effectiveness 5%, passion towards work 4%, positive work attitude 3%, and willingness to learn has got only 2%.

One of my respondents illustrates the following:

"We need courses about soft skills in universities and faculties to help students reach their full potential when doing presentations or when working in companies. Soft skills definitely help students to get the best out of them and advance in their lives, personally and professionally".

3.7. Barriers to Developing and Practicing Communication Skills

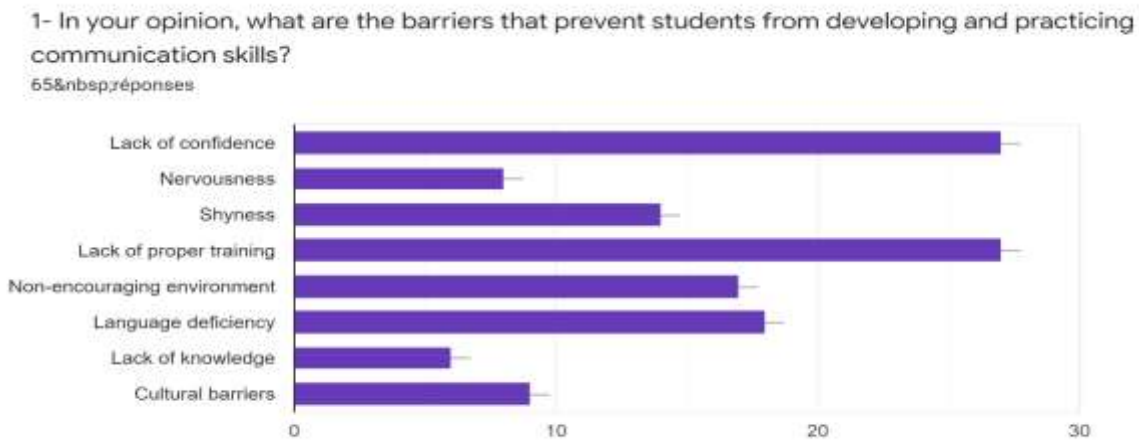


Figure13: Barriers for Communication Skills

Most of my respondents believed that the major barriers that prevent students from developing and practising communication skills were mainly lack of confidence as well as the lack of proper training 27%; besides, language deficiency 17%, non-encouraging environment 16%, were also among the obstacles that blocked students from improving and practising communication skills. In addition to this, a minority has opted for shyness 15%, nervousness 8%, and 6% for lack of knowledge.

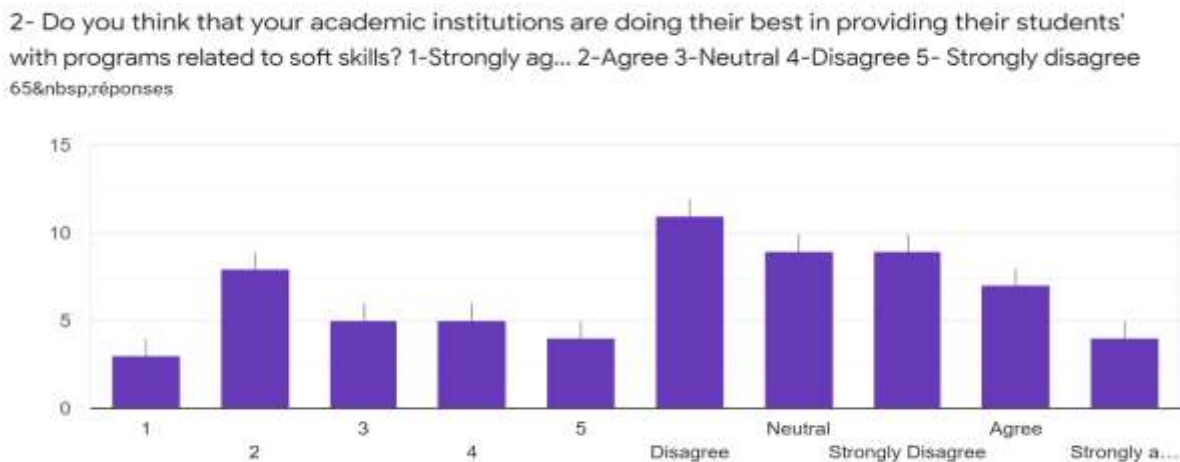


Figure14: Academic Institutions and Soft Skills Provision

Apparently, it seemed that the majority disagreed on the fact that academic institutions were doing their best in providing their students with programs related to soft skills while 9% of the respondents have selected neutral, and 7% have agreed that their institutions are supporting them with programs related to soft skills.

One of them states:

"Soft skills are basically ignored in our educational programs."

Another one illustrates:

"I hope soft skills will be integrated into the curriculum because students will benefit from them in their professional life."

3- Have you ever participated in the following soft skills programs?
65 responses

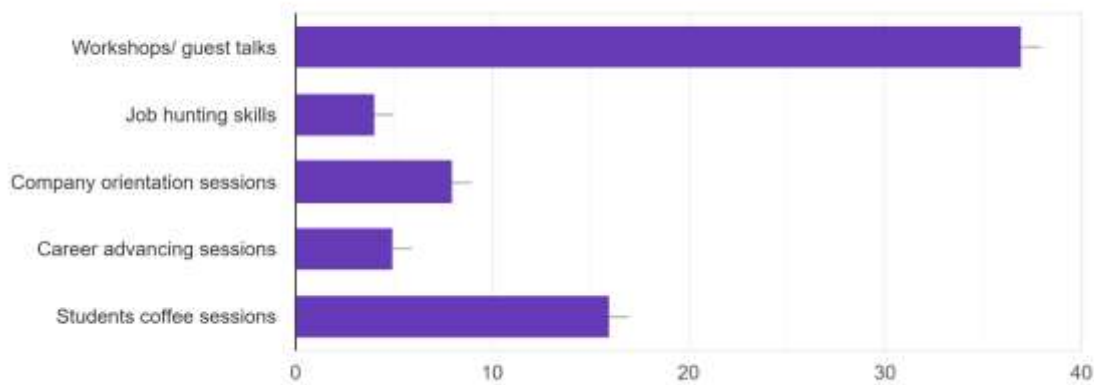


Figure15: Participation in Soft Skills Programs

It appeared that most of my respondents had taken part in soft skills programs, such as workshop and guest talks 37% as well as students' coffee sessions 16%; a minority has opted for company orientation sessions 8%, career-advancing sessions 6%, and job-hunting skills 5%.

3.8. Suggestion for Improving Students' Soft Skills

1- Do you believe that soft skills should be improved by:
65 responses

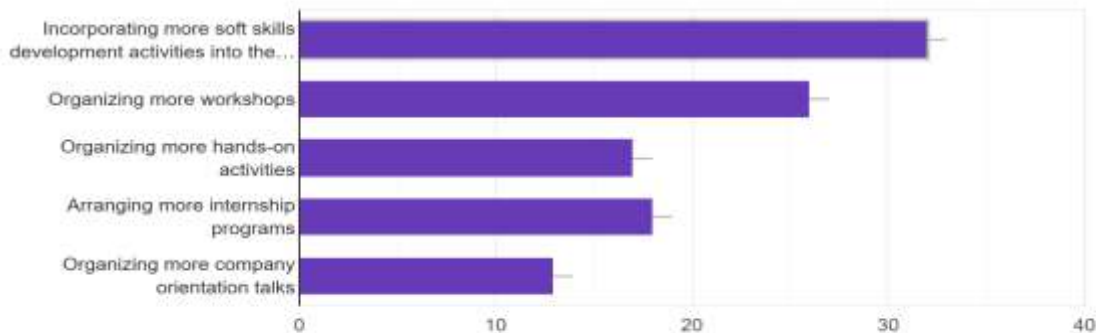


Figure16: Soft Skills Improvement

The majority of respondents believed that soft skills should be enhanced by incorporating more soft skills development activities into the curriculum 32%, organizing more workshops 26%, arranging more internships programs 18%, organizing more hands-on activities 16%, and organizing more company orientation tasks 13%.

One of my respondents says:

"The Improvement of soft skills necessitates motivation and providing opportunities from the educational institutions, and participation from the students".

Another one argues:

"Soft skills help students utilize their hard skills. They show if a person is able to adapt or evolve".

2- Do you believe that there are measures that ought to be undertaken by students for improving their soft skills? 1-Strongly agree 2-Agree 3-Neutral 4-Disagree 5- Strongly disagree
65 responses

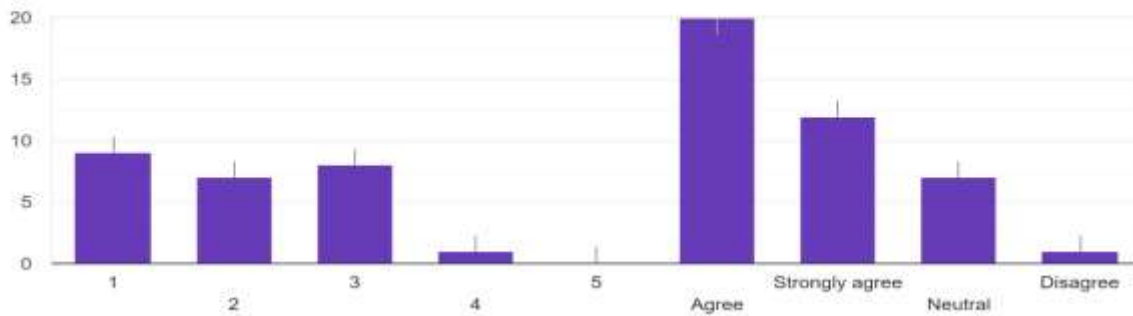


Figure17: Measures for Soft Skills Improvement

The majority believed that there were measures that ought to be undertaken by students for developing their soft skills.

3- Choose the best measures that will improve students' soft skills
65 responses

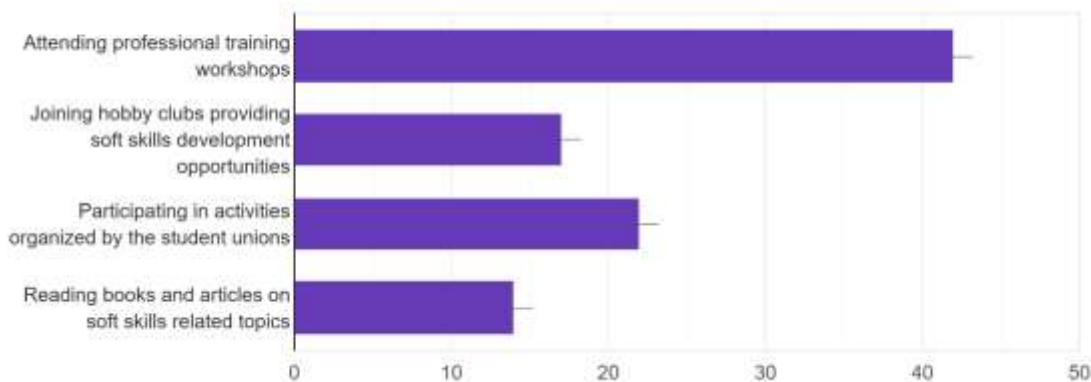


Figure18: The Best Measures for Soft Skills Improvement

According to respondents, the best measure that will help them improve their soft skills was mainly attending professional training workshops 43%, in addition to participating in activities organized by the student unions, joining hobby clubs providing soft skills development opportunities.

One of them clarifies:

"Moroccan basic education programs should provide more importance to help students Improve their needed soft skills."

Another one cites:

"Personal initiative is also important in developing soft skills. Students should have the willingness to develop the soft skills."

4. Discussion

As far as the respondents' findings are concerned, they can be classified in various categories, namely, respondents' academic path, their awareness with regard to soft skills, soft skills' significance in relation to employability, respondents' desire to improve soft skills, barriers to develop and practice communication skills, and suggestions for improving students' soft skills.

The majority of respondents believe that the most four important soft skills are communication, leadership, problem-solving, and teamwork spirit skills, while a minority has opted for other soft skills, such as time management, creative problem solving, positive work attitude, strategic thinking, negotiation, and willingness to learn. The respondents believe that soft skills should be integrated into the curriculum as they will help them a great deal with their professional lives.

For the importance of soft skills with regard to employability, respondents assume that they are essential for employability. They think that hard skills will not be effective if they are not well balanced with soft skills. They are aware of the fact that employers require applicants to have those skills in their resumes when applying for a job, while others assume that it is not that easy to acquire those skills; however, personal willingness is a must as a start.

Concerning the characteristics of soft skills for employability, most of the respondents have opted for problem solving, teamwork and collaboration, leadership, time management, and critical thinking skills; however, they provide low percentages to self-motivation, willingness to learn, decision-making, passion and optimism skills. Respondents are not aware that without self-motivation, passion and optimism skills, all these previous skills will not be acquired effectively.

As far as the desire for improving soft skills is concerned, the majority of my respondents want to improve the skill of communication. They believe that communication is the mirror to their hard skills. They think that their shyness and introversion may block their acquired skills and competencies. They also claim that the lack of self-confidence and their incapability of talking in public can be like a handicap to their personal and academic achievements, and they want to eradicate this handicap in order to excel in their job market.

For the barriers that prevent students from developing and practising communication skills, as it has been maintained in the previous section, respondents believe that the lack of self-confidence, language deficiency, non-encouraging environment as well as shyness, nervousness are among the major obstacles that block students from moving ahead.

Concerning the section of the suggestions for improving soft skills, most of my respondents claim that soft skills should be improved by integrating more soft skills development activities into the curriculum, organizing more workshops, and arranging more internships programs.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, the respondents assume that soft skills ought to be incorporated into the curriculum since they will hugely support them in their professional lives. They are certainly aware that the hard skills will not be effective if they lack soft skills. Besides, they ought to be conscious that without the existence of soft skills, such as self-motivation, passion and optimism skills, all the rest of skills will not be acquired successfully; meaning that soft skills like teamwork, communication, leadership, collaboration, and problem-solving skills cannot be learned if students lack motivation, self-confidence, and passion and enthusiasm skills.

Moreover, for the barriers that block students from developing and practising communication skills, respondents state that the lack of self-confidence, language deficiency, non-encouraging environment, in addition to shyness and nervousness, are considered as the main obstacles that prevent them from advancing in their personal and academic achievements. They also believe that soft skills can be improved by integrating more soft skills development activities into the curriculum, organizing more workshops, and arranging more internship programs.

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