

Soft skills for employment in Morocco: A value over or equal to the technical know-how?

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Article information	Abstract
DOI : 10.25077/jds.1.1.12-23.2024 Correspondence : ezzaidiprof@gmail.com	Soft skills comprise a blend of social abilities, interpersonal communication, knowledge, and character traits that enhance individuals’ social and professional lives. Beyond technical expertise, soft skills are widely recognized for significantly improving employability prospects and aiding job candidates in enhancing their competitiveness during job hunting and career development. While some research projects suggest that technical knowledge is less crucial than soft skills in job interviews, other scholars argue for an equal emphasis on both to craft a comprehensive job applicant profile. This paper investigates this topic from a three-pronged perspective. First, it explores the extent to which soft skills overshadow technical knowledge in the eyes of employers in the Moroccan job market. Second, it assesses the level of engagement of Moroccan university students in learning and acquiring soft skills. Finally, it underscores the role of higher education teachers in cultivating soft skills through their instruction. This study is an exploratory endeavor that utilizes secondary data sources from scientific journals and administers questionnaires to teachers, enterprise managers, and students to unveil their attitudes in the Moroccan context. The results reveal some disparities between the existing literature and the situation in Morocco. It appears that the interest in soft skills in Morocco is still influenced more by personal and functional variables than institutional recommendations.
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INTRODUCTION

According to employment experts, soft skills provide a significant advantage for job seekers in today’s highly competitive labor market. It is widely known that if an applicant lacks both knowledge and experience in soft skills, their prospects of securing a job are considerably diminished, regardless of how well-informed the candidate may be about their area of expertise (Meeks, 2017; Garrido, Sullivan, & Gordon, 2010; Clarke & Patrickson, 2008). While possessing technical skills can enhance competitiveness in job applications, recent studies have shown that employers place a high emphasis on the potential of newly hired employees to understand and utilize soft skills. The level of knowledge and proficiency in life skills greatly impacts productivity.

Despite their distinct meanings, the terms ‘soft skills’ and ‘21st-century skills’ are sometimes used interchangeably in research to refer to the same concept. Additionally, the term ‘21st-century talents’ often refers to three core competencies that are widely recognized as crucial in developing an effective job candidate profile: critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication. The literature’s definition of soft skills describes a concept that is broad and fragmented, encompassing specific traits such as public speaking, professional writing, teamwork, digital literacy, leadership, professional attitude, work ethic, career management, and intercultural fluency.

Bishnoi (2020) and Asri (2019) argue that the term ‘21st-century skills’ primarily encompasses ‘deeper learning’ skills, whereas the term ‘soft skills’ encompasses a broader range of abilities. On the other hand, ‘hard skills’ are limited to the technical aspects of one’s major specialization within a specific

field of study. In this paper, we adopt the term ‘21st-century skills’ to refer to the three aforementioned competencies, better encapsulating the concept of ‘soft skills’ and their application in higher education. This approach simplifies the discussion and implementation, providing practical concepts that university educators can integrate into their curriculum and implement during class instruction. Hence, we will use the terms ‘21st-century skills’ and ‘soft skills’ interchangeably throughout this paper, encompassing the three key components: critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication. This choice aims to enhance writing fluency and avoid repetitive terminology.

Soft VS. hard skills in employability

The discourse surrounding the influence of soft and hard skills on employability is a multifaceted area of research, marked by an evolving understanding of their significance in the contemporary workforce. Notably, there is a growing acknowledgment of the pivotal role soft skills play in shaping an individual’s employability, emphasizing the need for job candidates to distinguish themselves beyond mere technical competence (Koprowska, 2020; Ghaith, 2010).

Schulz (2008) defines hard skills as technically oriented competencies acquired through formal education and experience. While some contend that hard skills are paramount in recruitment (Schulz, 2008), the prevailing view highlights the increasing emphasis on soft skills in the selection process (Lavy & Yadin, 2013). Laker and Powell (2011) draw a crucial distinction between hard skills, acquired through formal education or training, and soft skills, often considered personality traits that develop over time and find application in various contexts such as communication and time management.

The debate intensifies as to whether an overemphasis on soft skills, at the expense of hard skills, could lead to an incomplete professional profile. Goleman (2021) and Sujová et al. (2021) observe a paradigm shift in educational environments, with a heightened recognition of soft skills or “power skills” compensating for deficiencies in hard skills. However, caution is warranted, as Sharma (2021) and Jackson (2009) highlight the enduring importance of technical skills during job interviews.

Castellano (2013) advocates for the transformative potential of soft skills in expanding opportunities and personal development. In alignment with this, Hwang (2022) and Wheeler (2016) argue that 21st-century skills are indispensable for career advancement, supported by research attributing 75% of long-term job performance to soft skills (Stanford Institute and Carnegie Mellon Foundation). This underscores the imperative for higher education institutions to integrate soft skills into curricula for the holistic development of graduates (Dimmock & Walker, 2000).

Gabriel-Petit’s (2017) distinction between mindset and skillset adds another layer to the discussion, emphasizing attitude over skills for success. The preference for the right mindset over the right skill set, as observed in technology executive surveys, further underscores the evolving dynamics of employability (Gabriel-Petit, 2017).

In conclusion, while the majority of research advocates for the inclusion of soft skills in a candidate’s profile (Sharma, 2021), a balanced representation of both soft and hard skills is crucial for marketability (Kassim & Ali, 2010). However, the extent to which these findings apply to the Moroccan context remains the primary focus of this investigation.

Softskills in the graduate’s profile

The insufficiency of soft skills among tertiary graduates has long been a concern raised by employers and educators (van Laar et al., 2020). Cimatti (2016) underscores the absence of critical soft skills, such as critical thinking and communication, in science and technology majors. This issue is not new, as Grugulis and Vincent (2009) point out the historical lack of soft skills among Britain’s university graduates, contributing to productivity challenges and an economic downturn before 2009. Emphasizing the importance of soft skills, Grugulis and Vincent advocated for their prioritized teaching in tertiary

classrooms.

While the argument for soft skills is compelling, Crosbie (2005) counters that technical skill mastery, while admirable, cannot fully compensate for the absence of soft skill development. A historical perspective from the German Engineering Association (VDI) over 40 years ago, as cited by Schwanitz (1999) and Shults (2008), recommended allocating a portion of engineering courses to developing 21st-century skills. Schwanitz vividly characterizes science graduates lacking soft skills as possessing a ‘resume of a caveman,’ noting the tendency of science departments to prioritize material knowledge over life skills.

The dichotomy between humanities and science graduates in effectively presenting themselves during job interviews is highlighted by Snow (1968) in his speech titled ‘The Two Cultures.’ He criticizes the division of liberal education into philosophical-humanistic studies and purely technical-scientific syllabi, noting the superiority of the former in fostering human qualities necessary for critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication.

In the Moroccan context, a growing interest in soft skills is evident within the academic community (Riahi, 2022). Soft skills discussions gained momentum with academic reforms in 2003 (Chaibat et al., 2020). Several studies underscore the importance of fostering soft skills in local academic contexts, revealing a deficiency in 21st-century skills among Moroccan graduate students, especially those in science and engineering majors (Chaibat et al., 2020). Efforts to examine and enhance educational strategies for cultivating these skills in structured academic institutions are imperative.

Soft skills in Moroccan higher education

According to Aziz and Zaidoun (2022), Moroccan educators recognize the essential role of soft skills in graduates’ employability, but there exists a predominant focus on cultivating technical knowledge, especially within science majors. The emphasis on savoir-faire is pronounced, overshadowing the incorporation of life skills in the curriculum. Despite the acknowledged importance of 21st-century knowledge, there is a discernible gap between teachers’ beliefs and their actual teaching practices.

Rogers (2016), as cited in Elbakkali (2020), highlights the U.S. Agency for International Development’s adoption of soft skills integration through problem-based learning (PBL) in Morocco’s largest project program. This approach aims to equip students with vital skills and foster connections with the private sector. Rogers further notes that Moroccan companies express interest in providing soft skills training due to the current workforce’s deficiencies in interpersonal and communication skills.

Chouari and Nachit (2016) propose crucial reforms for higher education in Morocco, advocating for the inclusion of mandatory sections on soft skills at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Despite positive student feedback on critical thinking pedagogies, the need for practical application strategies is emphasized, suggesting a potential area for improvement in teaching methodologies.

The Teachability of Soft Skills

The question of whether soft skills can be taught has spurred various research studies, with scholars like Ravitz et al. (2012) and Rotherham & Willingham (2010) delving into this inquiry. Two primary methods for acquiring or improving soft skills emerge: formal training and self-training.

Formal training, encompassing evening classes in languages, negotiation techniques, public speaking, and cultural management (Carnevale, 1990), offers a tested and proven approach. However, the efficacy of a specific course remains uncertain until research validates its impact. On the other hand, self-training, often centered on reading books and taking classes, gains prominence for its potential to reshape one’s personality through extensive practice (Dharmarajan, Pachigalla, & Lanka, 2012).

Horton (2007, as cited in Shults, 2008) emphasizes the value of online training for cultivating 21st-century skills, albeit with a hint of skepticism. However, an engaging approach involves regular social

engagement, deliberately honing specific soft skills during interactions, as proposed by Lieberman and Pointer Mace (2010).

To effectively teach these soft skills, there must be a shift in pedagogical attitudes, favoring a learner-centered model, as advocated by Ertmer, Ottenbreit-Leftwich, and Tondeur (2015). This shift proves particularly effective when integrating soft skills into technical subject training, with learner-centered teaching techniques demonstrating superiority, as evidenced by the studies conducted by Röggele, Rilling, Apfel, and Fuchs (2022) and Mascolo (2009).

The developmental influence of parents and teachers on soft skills begins in a child's infancy, significantly shaping their aptitude for these skills, according to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) and Eccles (1999). To assist students in acquiring 21st-century skills, fostering an understanding of their significance and encouraging tactics like reading, attending classes, and engaging in social groups is crucial, as highlighted by Binkley et al. (2012). Practical avenues for skill development, such as debating organizations and Toastmasters, further exemplify the effective application of these strategies (Chun, Kern, & Smith, 2016).

Numerous studies have been conducted to demonstrate the increased demand for 21st-century skills in the hiring process. It is widely acknowledged that workers' high productivity largely relies on their capacity for critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication. However, there is significant debate surrounding whether this reality applies universally across all societies and economic situations or if it is influenced by cultural and occupational factors (Rynes & Cable, 2003; Ployhart, 2006; Boden & Epstein, 2006).

The study aims to explore the extent to which soft skills are valued over technical knowledge by corporate managers in Morocco. Soft skills are personal attributes that enable individuals to work effectively with others, communicate clearly, manage their time and resources efficiently, and exhibit leadership qualities. Furthermore, the study intends to investigate the level of interest undergraduate university students in Morocco have in developing 21st-century skills that can enhance their employability. 21st-century skills are a set of competencies that include critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, communication, and collaboration. Finally, the study seeks to understand how Moroccan university teachers integrate soft skills into their instructional process. It aims to explore the extent to which soft skills are incorporated into the curriculum, teaching methods, and assessment techniques used by university teachers in Morocco. In undertaking this exploration, it is essential to navigate the potential influence of biases that may shape the study's outcomes. Recognizing this, we proactively address and mitigate certain inherent biases to uphold the rigor and transparency of our research.

METHODS

The research design for this study aligns with the exploratory nature of the investigation, aiming to address the research questions through qualitative exploration. This approach is chosen to delve into subjects that have not been thoroughly examined previously (Swedberg, 2020). The qualitative components, such as grounded theory or interpretative research, are selected due to their adaptability and flexibility in exploratory research contexts (Ahmadianzadeh et al., 2020).

The rationale for selecting qualitative methods lies in their ability to provide in-depth insights into subjects that may not have been extensively studied. The qualitative methods chosen include interviews, focus groups, and content analysis, selected for their compatibility with the exploratory nature of the study.

The choice of the Kenitra industrial zone as our research site stems from its economic significance in the region. Employing a simple convenient sampling method, we efficiently recruit participants from this accessible locale. While this approach expedites data collection, we acknowledge its limitations in representativeness. The study remains rigorous by establishing clear inclusion/exclusion criteria and

considering demographic diversity. Despite the methodological simplicity, our aim is to provide nuanced insights into the interplay of hard skills and 21st-century competencies in the specific context of the Kenitra industrial zone, with due consideration to the inherent limitations of the sampling method.

The Likert-mode questionnaire is thoughtfully crafted to collect a broad range of perspectives by incorporating open-ended questions. The questionnaire undergoes rigorous pre-testing and piloting to ensure its effectiveness and accuracy. These measures help to refine the questionnaire, making it a reliable tool for gathering valuable insights.

To ensure that the research findings are reliable and comprehensive, several measures are taken. Firstly, participants are guaranteed confidentiality or anonymity to encourage honest responses. This helps to reduce response bias and increase the accuracy of the results. In addition, demographic details such as age, gender, educational background, and professional experience are collected to provide a more in-depth understanding of the sample. This information helps to identify any patterns or trends that may exist within the data. To enhance the credibility and validity of the findings, data triangulation is employed. This involves using multiple methods and data sources to provide a more nuanced perspective. By cross-checking information obtained from different sources, the research results become more robust and reliable. Furthermore, the study adheres to ethical guidelines to ensure that participants are treated fairly and with respect. This includes obtaining informed consent from participants, protecting their privacy, and maintaining ethical standards throughout the research process.

Sampling Bias: The application of a convenient sampling method, while facilitating efficient data collection in the Kenitra industrial zone, brings with it the potential for sampling bias, limiting the generalizability of our findings. To counteract this limitation, we have diligently established clear inclusion/exclusion criteria and considered demographic diversity within the selected sample.

Response Bias: Acknowledging the potential for response bias, where participants might be influenced by social desirability or other factors, we have implemented measures to ensure confidentiality (or anonymity) in responses. This assurance is designed to foster an environment where participants feel comfortable providing honest and genuine insights, thereby bolstering the reliability of our findings.

Methodological Limitations: While qualitative methods, such as interviews, focus groups, and content analysis, offer valuable insights, they inherently carry subjectivity. To address this challenge, we have adopted a rigorous approach to data triangulation, employing multiple methods and data sources. This triangulation enhances the credibility and validity of our findings by cross-verifying information through different lenses.

Contextual Bias: The study's focal point on the Kenitra industrial zone introduces the potential for contextual bias, as the findings may be specific to this region. While this specificity enriches our understanding and provides nuanced insights, it is crucial to interpret the results within the context of this particular industrial zone, acknowledging that variations may exist in other regions.

Despite these acknowledged limitations, our overarching aim is to contribute meaningful insights into the interplay of hard skills and 21st-century competencies within the distinctive context of the Kenitra industrial zone. We emphasize transparency regarding the potential biases inherent in our research design, facilitating a nuanced and comprehensive interpretation of the study's outcomes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the Moroccan academic and business landscape, the synthesis of soft skills and technical knowledge stands as a paramount requirement for crafting compelling job applications and establishing oneself as a distinguished learner. The ensuing discussion encapsulates the research findings supporting this premise.

Teachers' Perspectives

In the educational arena, teachers exhibit a consensus favoring a balanced emphasis on both soft skills and robust technical competence. However, a nuanced divergence emerges when dissecting the perspectives of science and humanities educators. While unanimity exists on the imperative of developing students' soft skills for success in the professional realm, the prioritization of hard skills over soft skills appears more pronounced among science teachers. The reasons behind this divergence often trace back to personal variables and syllabus constraints. As one science teacher remarked, "Most of the work on soft skills should be on the learners' shoulders, with the teacher guiding and assisting positively." In contrast, a humanities teacher emphasized, "Securing a job relies heavily on how well a student can sell themselves. Only a strong hold on soft skills can aid them in achieving distinguished performance."

The influence of teachers' specialties echoes Snow's concept of "the two cultures," where technically oriented branches lean less towards powerskills compared to humanistic branches fostering critical thinking and problem-solving. Despite this, a remarkable proportion of respondents from both groups acknowledge the pivotal role of soft skills, emphasizing their value in interviews and workplace productivity. While the majority concurs on the high value of soft skills, practical considerations result in differing curriculum design approaches between science and humanities instructors. Notably, 16.9% of scientific professors allocate extra effort to enhance communication abilities, while 50.8% lean towards prioritizing test-taking efficiency over soft skills. Humanities instructors, on the other hand, integrate soft skills into a distinct curriculum, with 20.5% advocating for an equitable focus on both skills.

Enterprise Perspectives

In the dynamic landscape of the business realm, human resources practitioners consistently emphasize the inherent value of fostering a balanced skill set that encompasses both soft skills and technical knowledge. The contemporary workplace demands individuals who not only possess a solid grasp of technical expertise but also exhibit a high degree of proficiency in soft skills. This recognition stems from an understanding of the variable and evolving nature of job requirements in today's competitive market. Companies are increasingly seeking employees who can seamlessly navigate complex interpersonal relationships, communicate effectively, and adapt to diverse working environments.

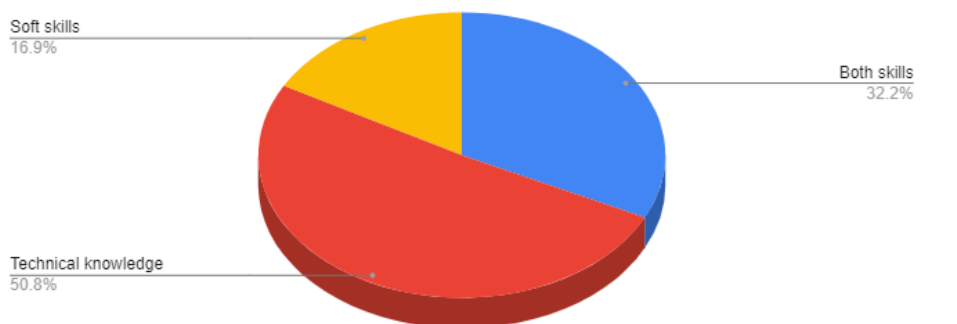


Figure 1. Soft Skills in the View of Teachers (Science Department)

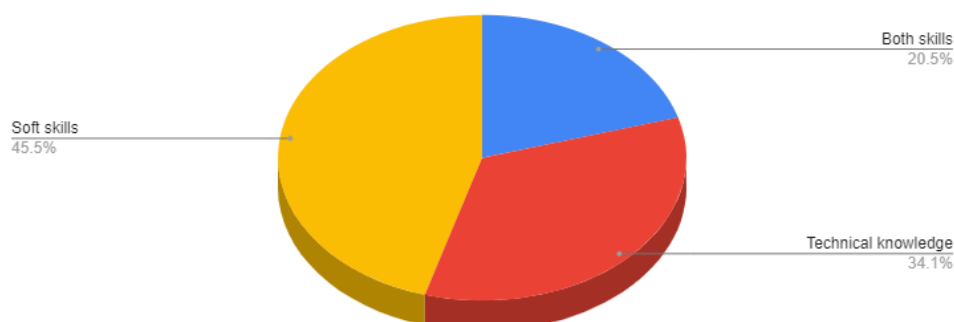


Figure 2. Soft Skills in the View of Teachers (Arts and Humanities Departments)

Within this context, insights from an experienced enterprise manager shed light on the nuanced approach that job seekers should adopt. According to the manager, graduates should strategically position themselves as adept users of successful soft skills while simultaneously acknowledging and showcasing the inherent value of their hard knowledge. This perspective underscores the importance of striking a harmonious balance between the ability to collaborate, communicate, and lead with the proficiency in specialized technical domains. In essence, graduates are encouraged not only to possess technical prowess but also to market themselves as holistic professionals who can contribute meaningfully to the collaborative and ever-evolving dynamics of the modern workplace. This synthesis of soft skills and technical knowledge becomes a potent asset, enabling individuals to navigate the multifaceted demands of the business landscape.

In summary, the enterprise perspective emphasizes the dual significance of soft skills and technical knowledge, highlighting the need for individuals to effectively integrate and showcase both aspects in order to thrive in today’s competitive professional arena.

Soft Skills in Job Interviews

While soft skills are generally deemed crucial for effective job market presentation, business leaders caution against overlooking technical skills. In job interviews, 65.4% of respondents use questions measuring both soft and technical capabilities, while 11.5% prioritize technical competence. The interplay of both skill sets is deemed essential for high productivity. The rest (23.1%) highlight the importance of softskills.

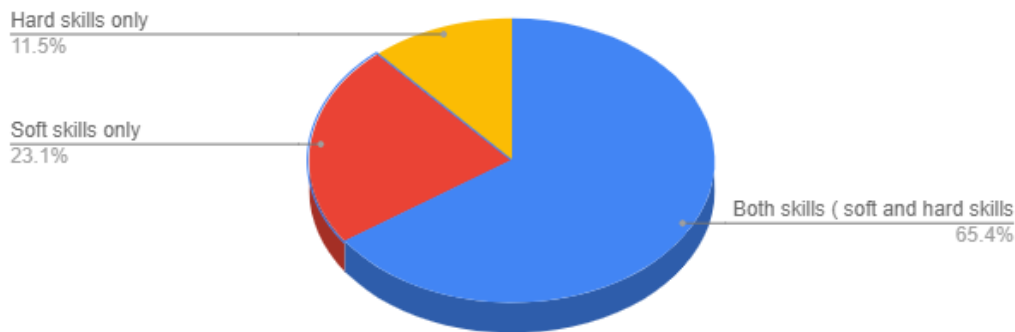


Figure 3. Soft Skills in the Job Interview

Undergraduate Students’ Attitudes

Undergraduate students in science and humanities exhibit differing attitudes toward the development of soft skills. Humanities students prioritize the cultivation of life skills, with 52.2% emphasizing the importance of teaching soft skills alongside technical knowledge. In contrast, science students prioritize hard skills, with 47.6% favoring technical proficiency over soft capabilities. 14.3% of scientific students view soft skills as important for success but lack a clear understanding of their application.

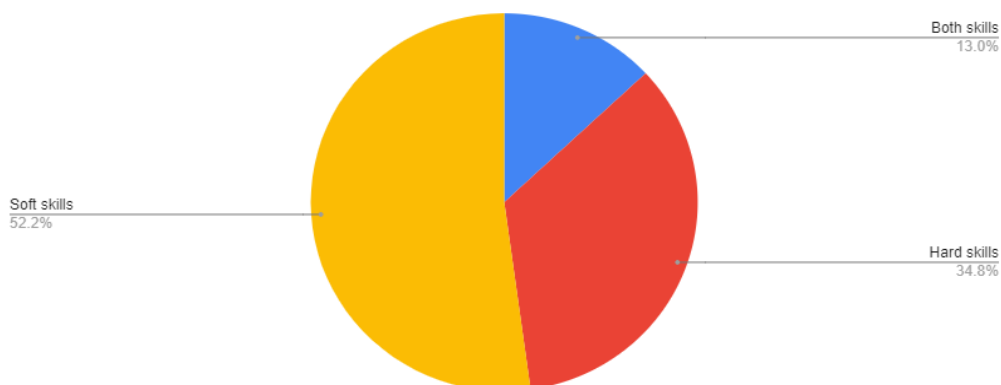


Figure 4. Undergraduate Students’ Attitudes about Soft Skills (Arts and Humanities Departments)

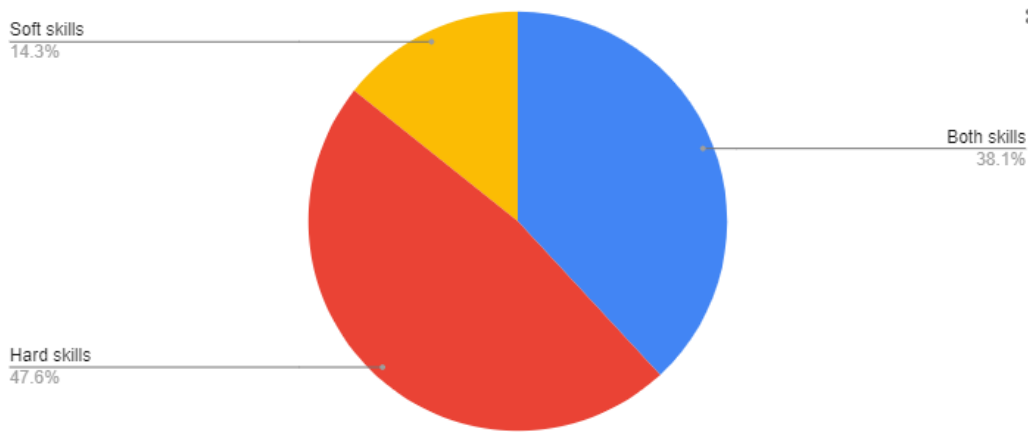


Figure 5. Attitudes of Undergraduate Students towards Learning Soft Skills for Employment (Science and Technical Departments)

Observations and Recommendations

The research illuminates a nuanced perspective on the perceptions of soft skills and technical knowledge within the Moroccan context. Contrary to widespread beliefs, the findings reveal a unique emphasis on the equality of importance attributed to soft skills and technical knowledge. This departure from conventional wisdom underscores the distinctive value placed on these skills within Moroccan education and the corporate landscape.

Both science and humanities sections, constituting a significant portion of respondents, acknowledge the value of soft skills as enhancements to student profiles. However, there is a shared caution against making soft skills the sole determinant in the hiring process. The consensus among educators is that an exclusive focus on soft skills may lead to the unjust exclusion of otherwise qualified candidates. While this caution is voiced, teachers emphasize the student's agency in taking responsibility for academic progress and concurrently fostering life skills.

According to the research, soft skills are not merely inherent traits but are teachable and can be nurtured in a regulated school environment and through internship programs. The recommendation for the business sector is clear: recruit graduates with a balanced skill set. Moreover, targeted training programs should be devised to cultivate soft skills over time, acknowledging the dynamic nature of these competencies.

Enterprise managers stress the contextual nature of the perceived weight of soft skills in comparison to technical knowledge. The research findings indicate a general consensus among recruiters that both technical and soft skills are equally important. The recognition of the synergistic role these skills play in ensuring employee productivity and overall enterprise well-being is a key highlight.

In light of these revelations, the research articulates specific recommendations that hold the potential to shape educational practices and prepare students effectively for the demands of the professional world.

1. **Early Soft Skills Instruction:** The research underscores the need to consider incorporating soft skills instruction at the high school level. This proactive approach aims to equip students with a solid foundation in essential soft skills before they enter university, ensuring a smoother transition into higher education.
2. **Pedagogical Strategies:** University instructors are urged to employ specific pedagogical strategies within their course content. These strategies should be designed to facilitate the deliberate development of problem-solving, communication, and critical thinking skills, providing students with practical and applicable experiences.
3. **Persuasive Communication:** Recognizing resistance among some students, the research suggests

the use of persuasive communication techniques. Instructors should effectively communicate the significance of soft skills, especially to those students who may be hesitant to adopt a positive attitude towards their development.

4. **Student Self-Effort:** The findings emphasize the importance of encouraging students to take initiative in improving their soft skills. Learning in a low-stress environment outside the formal curriculum is deemed more effective. Students should be motivated to engage in activities that promote the application and enhancement of soft skills.
5. **Balancing Exam Focus:** Teachers are advised to redirect students' focus from a sole emphasis on exam scores. Assignments that promote the application of soft skills outside of traditional in-class tasks are deemed beneficial. This approach encourages students to view exams as one aspect of their educational journey, with an equal emphasis on self-development.
6. **Thorough Examination of Soft Skills:** University reforms should prioritize a thorough examination of effective approaches for promoting the teaching of soft skills. This includes modifications to teaching approaches, creating ample opportunities for students to practice and apply soft skills within the tertiary classroom setting.

CONCLUSION

The exploration of whether soft skills are overestimated vis-à-vis technical skills in the college context has revealed intriguing nuances. While the argument for a civil engineer designing a durable bridge without specific soft skills training may be persuasive, it acknowledges the heightened expectations from professionals such as doctors. The multifaceted nature of employability, especially in diverse fields, implies that soft skills, while valuable, might not be universally critical for roles grounded in practical application and fieldwork.

In this context, advocating for a more balanced perspective on 21st-century skills is paramount. A successful university graduate should possess a fusion of both technical and soft skills. These elements, deemed complementary rather than competing, collectively contribute to social competency and career enhancement. Striking this equilibrium becomes crucial given the conflicting opinions on skill prioritization for employability.

However, recognizing the study's limitations is imperative. The research findings, while insightful, are context-specific and resist broad generalization. Future investigations should consider diverse contexts to draw more comprehensive conclusions. It's pivotal to caution against viewing soft skills as a wholesale substitute for technical proficiency, emphasizing the indispensability of a holistic skill set for a university graduate navigating the corporate landscape.

The study brings to light a notable gap in the understanding of soft skills among Moroccan students, particularly in science majors at the undergraduate level. Professors' perspectives in arts and humanities diverge from those in science and technology departments. The unanimous recognition of the importance of teaching soft skills in higher education seems to lack practical implementation. A strategic approach could involve incorporating soft skills courses earlier, possibly before the faculty stage, fostering a generation of learners adept not only in technical prowess but also in crucial soft skills. However, this emphasis on 21st-century knowledge should harmonize with, not eclipse, the cultivation of technical cognition. In navigating the recruitment process, the challenge becomes sculpting new workers to be adept users of soft skills while concurrently evolving as active employees, prompting a reevaluation of educational strategies.

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