

Students' Perceptions: The Impact of Soft Skills on Bridging Education to Career Success

Hayat Naciri

Higher School of Technology, Sultan Moulay Slimane University, Khénifra, Morocco
Email: Hayat.naciri@usms.ma

Abstract—In an era of rapid technological advancements and shifting employment landscapes, soft skills have become increasingly prominent. This article explores undergraduate students' perceptions of these vital soft skills that are critical components to their preparedness for the workforce and ongoing personal growth. Drawing from a case study conducted at Al Akhawayne University in Morocco, a quantitative survey was administered among 200 students across diverse disciplines. The aim was to investigate students' self-assessed proficiency in critical soft skills such as communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, and leadership. The analysis revealed insights into a broad awareness among students of the significance of soft skills for their prospective careers. Students have underscored the role of engaging in extracurricular activities, like clubs and volunteer work, as critical platforms for practicing and boosting these skills. While most students perceived themselves to have acquired adequate soft skills, areas for improvement were identified, particularly within the scope of problem-solving and lifelong learning skills.

Keywords—soft skills, undergraduate students, perceptions, preparedness, Al Akhawayne University, Morocco

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the changing dynamics of work, characterized by technological progress and automation, have underscored the need for soft skills. Globalization further accentuates the importance of these skills in navigating diverse cultural contexts and building productive relationships. Industries now prioritize teamwork and collaboration to drive innovation, necessitating soft skills such as communication and leadership. Moreover, sectors like customer service and management rely heavily on skills like active listening, empathy, and problem-solving for success. Recognized as crucial for career advancement, soft skills are valued by employers for their role in driving organizational success and adaptability in an ever-changing world.

Many scholars believe that soft skills, which include non-technical and personal traits, are crucial for leadership, communication, and negotiation [1]. Developing these skills equips students to adjust to novel work environments and to proactively share their ideas [2]. Moreover, Szul [3] defines soft skills as the non-

technical abilities crucial for success within a specific job context, encompassing various key areas. Firstly, problem-solving and cognitive skills, involve identifying, evaluating, and addressing challenges by considering risks and benefits. Secondly, effective oral communication skills are crucial, including proficient speaking and attentive listening. Thirdly, personal attributes such as self-esteem, self-management, accountability, and drive are vital for job performance. Lastly, interpersonal and teamwork skills including the ability to negotiate, collaborate, ensure client satisfaction, and resolve conflicts, play a pivotal role in job effectiveness [3].

Research into undergraduates' perceptions of the importance of soft skills in the context of work has been a subject of interest for several studies. Surveys, interviews, or focus groups with undergraduate students have been used to explore their attitudes, beliefs, and understanding of soft skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and leadership [4]. By examining undergraduates' perceptions, researchers aim to uncover emerging trends, preferences, and gaps in soft skills development among young professionals entering the workforce [5]. Understanding these perceptions can inform educational programs, career counseling, and workplace training initiatives tailored to enhance students' soft skills proficiencies to better equip them for the challenges of the job market [6].

The significance of this study lies in addressing the potential awareness among undergraduates regarding the importance of soft skills in achieving their academic and career objectives. By examining how undergraduates perceive the significance of soft skills and their current proficiency in these areas, the research aims to shed light on crucial aspects of skills development. Furthermore, the findings will help students identify the soft skills essential for success at the university and future careers, while also guiding policymakers in education institutions to enhance opportunities for soft skills acquisition.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the World Economic Forum 2016, the ten most essential skills for 2020 are complex problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, people management, cognitive flexibility, emotional intelligence, coordination with others, judgment and decision-making, service orientation, and negotiation [7].

In this regard, Guerra-Baez [8] stresses that it is essential for college students to receive an education that effectively combines theoretical knowledge and practical skills relevant to their field. Tokaruk *et al.* [9] further emphasize that project activities are particularly valuable for cultivating “soft skills”. They highlight that entrepreneurial projects within companies are especially beneficial as they facilitate the development of these skills through addressing social, administrative, and educational challenges.

Employers widely recognize the crucial role of soft skills in prospective employees, valuing them nearly as much as hard skills. In this regard, Matsouka and Nihail [10] highlight that businesses are particularly keen on specific soft skills, including emotional intelligence, a propensity for learning, teamwork, and adaptability. Tang [11] stated that soft skills are personal traits that enhance interaction, job performance, and career growth. In addition, Taylor [12] underscores the significance of soft skills, stressing their importance not only in personal development but also in social engagement and professional success. As a result, incorporating soft skills into education not only enhances students’ job prospects but also provides them with better opportunities for successful careers.

In Morocco, Mouhetti [13] investigated the perception of Moroccan tertiary sector managers on soft skills. The research revealed the impact of these soft skills on career advancement, competitiveness, and employability among these professionals. Also, Moustadraf [14] in his study identified that implementing innovative learning methods, such as “problem-solving”, “teamwork”, and “design thinking” workshops, not only substantially enhance students’ creativity but also their analytical and critical thinking skills, leading to improved decision-making skills.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A cohort of final semester students from Al Akhawayne University in Morocco was selected as participants for this research. The participants represented diverse academic backgrounds, including Computer Science (CS), Business Administration (BA), School of Humanities and Social Sciences (SHSS), and Engineering School (ES). This selection was made due to the perceived importance of acquiring and mastering soft skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, lifelong learning, and information management as they prepare to enter the workforce.

A quantitative study was conducted to evaluate students’ perceptions of their proficiency in soft skills. The research was carried out between December 2023 and February 2024, involving 200 students from Al Akhawayne University in Morocco. Respondents completed a structured questionnaire distributed via Google Forms through email. The questionnaire consisted of 20 items divided into four sections, assessing communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, and leadership skills. The study used a selection of items from

Szul’s four categories of Soft Skills (2002). Participants were requested to self-evaluate their proficiency in each of the 20 identified soft skills using a 5-point Likert scale. This scale ranged from ‘1’ indicating strong disagreement with the statements to ‘5’ indicating strong agreement. This self-assessment is designed to capture the participants’ perceived competency and comfort with each skill. A total of 183 out of 200 questionnaires were returned, achieving a response rate of 90%. Data collection was conducted using Microsoft Excel and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

The analysis included frequency counts to understand the distribution of responses for each question. The rationale for using only frequency counts, and not means or standard deviations, was to highlight the general trends and perceptions of soft skills proficiency among students. Inferential statistics were not employed because the primary aim was to provide an overview of perceptions rather than to test specific hypotheses about differences between groups. However, future studies could use inferential statistics to explore the impact of participant background variables, such as gender and university major/specialization, on the results.

The internal consistency of the questionnaire’s sections was measured using Cronbach’s alpha. The overall Cronbach’s alpha for the questionnaire was found to be 0.87, indicating a high level of internal consistency.

The rationale behind the selection of these specific soft skills stemmed from their recognized importance in today’s workplaces. Moreover, these skills align with Al Akhawayne University’s mission to prepare students for successful careers by equipping them with the essential skills and competencies. By focusing on these key areas, the study aimed to provide insights into students’ self-assessed proficiency in crucial soft skills relevant to their future professional endeavors.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

TABLE I. STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

Statement	Strongly Disagree/Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)
I am confident in my ability to analyze complex problems.	9	14	77
I can evaluate different perspectives before making a decision.	6	18	76
I am effective in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of arguments.	8	20	72
I am confident in my ability to think critically and independently.	7	16	77
I am capable of using logic and reasoning to solve problems.	5	15	80

In this segment of the analysis, we explore students' self-assessments of their critical thinking skills, with responses categorized based on their level of agreement with statements assessing various aspects of critical thinking proficiency. The data presented in Table I reveal that a significant majority of the students (72–80%) possess highly favorable views of their own critical thinking skills providing favorable feedback (Agree or Strongly Agree) for most statements. This positive perception is evident as the majority of responses fall within the upper quartiles of the measurement scale, with 'Agree' and 'Strongly Agree' comprising over 65% of the total responses.

However, it is important to acknowledge a notable degree of ambivalence about decision-making among the participants. Approximately, 15% of the students indicate some level of uncertainty when making decisions. This divergence suggests that while many students exhibit confidence in their critical thinking, a substantial minority still struggles with applying these skills effectively in decision-making situations. This disparity could imply potential areas for educational interventions aimed at enhancing critical thinking and decision-making proficiency among students. Further analysis could focus on underlying factors contributing to this uncertainty to better target educational strategies.

The analysis reveals a mixed level of confidence among students regarding their critical thinking skills. While nearly half of the respondents express confidence, a similar proportion exhibit uncertainty or lack confidence, particularly in distinguishing facts from opinions and using evidence to support arguments. These insights strongly advocate for the need for the institution to focus more on nurturing critical thinking skills. Enhancing these skills is not only crucial for academic achievement but also for future workplace effectiveness and daily decision-making. Therefore, tailored educational interventions aimed at strengthening these areas could be highly beneficial for student development.

TABLE II. STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS

Statement	Strongly Disagree/Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)
I am confident in my ability to identify problems.	5	15	80
I can develop effective solutions to problems.	10	20	70
I am capable of evaluating the effectiveness of different solutions.	7	18	75
I can implement solutions to problems efficiently.	9	22	69
I feel confident in my ability to adapt solutions as necessary.	8	19	73

Table II illustrates students' perceptions of their problem-solving skills, with Likert scale responses indicating participants' agreement with statements assessing different facets of problem-solving proficiency.

The responses are segmented based on the level of agreement, offering insights into students' capabilities in areas such as patience, conflict resolution, anticipation of challenges, and understanding the root causes of workplace issues. While a substantial majority (69–80%) display a positive attitude, indicating a foundational level of competence in critical decision-making, a significant number acknowledge a deficiency in these skills, indicating a gap in their ability to handle complex problems.

This variation in confidence levels underlines the importance of developing educational programs and curricula that focus more deeply on strategic problem-solving training. Students must be adequately prepared to navigate the challenges of professional environments where advanced problem-solving skills are increasingly indispensable.

TABLE III. STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Statement	Strongly Disagree/Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)
I feel confident leading a group.	10	20	70
I can effectively delegate tasks.	15	25	60
I inspire others to achieve their best.	12	18	70
I can handle conflicts within a team effectively.	20	30	50
I take responsibility for the outcomes of group	8	22	70

Students' perceptions of their leadership skills (Table III) are presented, reflecting Likert scale responses indicating participants' agreement with statements evaluating various dimensions of leadership proficiency. The responses are categorized based on the level of agreement, providing insights into students' confidence in their ability to lead teams, make decisions, communicate effectively, handle conflicts, and delegate tasks with a substantial majority (60–70%) providing favorable feedback (Agree or Strongly Agree) for most statements. This high percentage suggests a strong self-confidence among students in their ability to lead and function effectively within team settings. Furthermore, this confidence extends beyond mere participation, as a significant number of students also express a strong belief in their skills as valuable team members.

This suggests that they not only view themselves as competent in leading teams but also feel assured in their contributions to collaborative efforts, indicating a well-rounded development in both leadership and teamwork skills. These findings indicate that students understand the importance of being able to work collaboratively and communicate effectively in a team setting, skills that are highly valued in today's job market.

In the analysis of students' perceptions of their communication skills (Table IV), Likert scale responses reflect participants' agreement with statements assessing various aspects of communication proficiency. The

responses are categorized based on the level of agreement, providing insights into students' confidence in their verbal and written communication abilities, as well as their engagement in discussions and debates. An overwhelming (77–87%) of respondents expressed confidence in their communication skills. They attributed this confidence to various educational experiences, ranging from classroom discussions, to presentations, and group projects, as well as participation in exchange programs. These varied opportunities serve as invaluable platforms for students to practice and refine their communication skills.

TABLE IV. STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Statement	Strongly Disagree/Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree/Strongly Agree (%)
I am confident in my ability to effectively articulate my ideas and thoughts verbally.	3	10	87
I am confident in my ability to express myself clearly in writing.	5	12	83
I feel comfortable engaging in discussions and debates with others.	8	15	77
I am confident in my ability to actively listen and understand others' perspectives.	4	11	85
I am confident in my ability to effectively communicate information to others in a professional setting.	6	13	81

Moreover, the students indicated that they are aware of the crucial role of effective communication skills in today's competitive job market. They understand that these skills are highly valued by employers as they are essential for fostering collaborating with colleagues, articulating ideas persuasively, and building connections with clients and stakeholders. Recognizing the profound impact of proficiency in communication in their professional trajectory as indispensable tools for success in the contemporary workforce, the respondents expressed their motivation and willingness to continually refine these skills. Recognizing the profound impact of communication proficiency in shaping their personal and professional endeavors, students express their motivation and willingness to continually develop and refine these skills.

V. STUDY LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study's scope is limited by its small sample size compared to the entire student population, potentially compromising the representativeness of the findings. Furthermore, the study exclusively focused solely on one stakeholder group, namely students. Future investigations need to be conducted to broaden the scope and explore the perceptions of diverse stakeholders such as faculty, administration, and employers. This multifaceted

approach would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness and impact of soft skills training programs. Additionally, broadening the sample size would increase the generalizability of the findings leading to more insightful conclusions.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study's scope is limited by its small sample size compared to the entire student population, potentially compromising the representativeness of the findings. Furthermore, the study exclusively focused solely on one stakeholder group, namely students. Future investigations need to be conducted to broaden the scope and explore the perceptions of diverse stakeholders such as faculty, administration, and employers. This multifaceted approach would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness and impact of soft skills training programs. Additionally, broadening the sample size would increase the generalizability of the findings leading to more insightful conclusions.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author expresses her sincere gratitude to all the students who took part in the survey for this study. Your willingness to share your experiences and insights has been invaluable in advancing our understanding of how soft skills could bridge the gap between education and career success.

REFERENCES

- [1] R. R. Lahope, F. G. Worang, and E. Gunawan, "The importance of soft skills training on company performance at BNI Tolitoli Branch Office," *EMBA Journal: Journal of Economics, Management, Business and Accounting Research*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 469–479, 2020.
- [2] L. Harvey, "New realities: The relationship between higher education and employment," *Tertiary Education and Management*, vol. 55, no. 7, pp. 681–704, 2000.
- [3] L. F. Szul and W. A. Moore, "Preparing career-ready students: A process for curriculum revision," *Business Education Forum*, vol. 54, no. 1, pp. 42–46, 2002.
- [4] D. Jackson, "An international profile of industry-relevant competencies and skill gaps in modern graduates," *International Journal of Management Education*, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 29–58, 2010.
- [5] P. Klaus, "Communication breakdown," *California Job Journal*, vol. 28, pp. 1–9, 2010.
- [6] M. M. Robles, "Executive perceptions of the top 10 soft skills needed in today's workplace," *Business Communication Quarterly*, vol. 75, no. 4, pp. 453–465, Dec. 2012.
- [7] The World Economic Forum, "The 10 skills you need to thrive in the Fourth Industrial Revolution," 2016.
- [8] S. P. Guerra-Báez, "A panoramic review of soft skills training in university students," *School and Educational Psychology*, vol. 23, 2019.
- [9] L. Tokaruk, M. Vasylieva-Khalatnykova, and O. Muzyka. (2021). Modern conditions for soft skills formation among students of socioeconomic professions. [Online]. pp. 105–115. Available: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/65f9/f8349c6e227efb1e4c175e338ea13b3315c7.pdf>
- [10] K. Matsouka and D. Mihail, "Graduates employability: What do graduates and employers think?" *Industry and Higher Education*, vol. 30, no. 5, 2016.

- [11] K. N. Tang, "The importance of soft skills acquisition by teachers in higher education institutions," *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences*, pp. 2–7, 2018.
- [12] E. Taylor. (2016). Investigating the perception of stakeholders on soft skills development of students: Evidence from South Africa. *Interdisciplinary Journal of e-Skills and Life Long Learning*. [Online]. 12. pp. 1–18. Available: <http://www.ijello.org/Volume12/IJELLv12p001-018Taylor2494.pdf>
- [13] S. Mouhetti, "Soft skills in the tertiary sector in Morocco: What perception of leaders?" *International Journal of Accounting, Finance, Auditing, Management and Economics*, vol. 2, no. 5, pp. 482–495, 2021.
- [14] H. Moustadraf, "Educational innovation and development of soft skills among higher education students," *Moroccan Review of Evaluation and Research in Education*, no. 4, Dec. 2020.

Copyright © 2025 by the authors. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited ([CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)).