

Articles

Undergraduates' Perspectives on the Significance of Soft Skills for Employment Gender-Based Differences

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Considering current challenges such as the complexities of 21st century life and the rise of artificial intelligence, integrating soft skills into Moroccan higher education has become essential. Despite the increasing focus on this area of research, there are few studies that examine soft skills and employment in Morocco. This study therefore examines undergraduates' comprehension of soft skills and their perspectives concerning those most essential for enhancing employability. It also seeks to explore whether there are significant disparities in students' perceived significance of soft skills based on gender, as well as whether gender influences students' perspectives on the most vital soft skills for employment. Data were gathered from 111 students hailing from the Faculty of Letters and Humanities and the Faculty of Science in the Moroccan region of Casablanca-Settat, representing various academic disciplines. Utilizing an online questionnaire developed from prior literature, the study uncovered intriguing findings. The study found students

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not only recognize the significance of soft skills required for employment but also are generally aware of these skills. The five soft skills deemed essential by students for bolstering employment included communication, time management, work ethics, positive attitude, and willingness to learn. Furthermore, statistical analyses found noteworthy disparities in students' perspectives based on gender, with females showing a preference for soft skills for employment and deeming these skills as important as hard ones, in contrast to their male counterparts. Regarding the most critical skills for employment, gender-based disparities were evident. Females exhibited a heightened appreciation for skills such as time management, willingness to learn, engagement in small group discussions, and maintaining a positive attitude. In light of these findings, this study holds significant implications for the education system in Morocco, particularly in terms of integrating and prioritizing soft skills development.

Keywords: students' perceptions, soft skills, HE, employment, job market, gender disparities

The emphasis on soft skills in education is closely tied to the broader understanding of what it means to be educated. A comprehensive perspective acknowledges that education extends beyond academic proficiency, encompassing a wide range of traits essential for success in both individual and career endeavors (Khine & Areepattamannil, 2016). The concept of "life skills" complements this holistic approach to education by emphasizing the practical abilities necessary for navigating life's complexities (DeJaeghere & Murphy-Graham, 2022). Not only are soft skills integral to education, but they have also become pivotal indicators of employment and valuable assets sought alongside academic degrees. In the contemporary landscape, merely possessing a university degree no longer guarantees stable employment or career advancement, a notable departure from the past paradigm where such credentials were highly valued (Nghia, 2020). Economic restructuring, the fast-paced evolution of globalization, and advancements in technology and innovation are transforming the work landscape. Consequently, these transformations are influencing the skills required by labor markets (Chan et al., 2017). While academic knowledge is crucial, life skills encompass the practical factors needed to manage everyday responsibilities and actively engage as productive members of society. Together, these perspectives underscore the significance of integrating soft skills into education to foster well-rounded individuals capable of thriving in both personal and professional spheres.

Unemployed young graduates often lack suitable skills due to a mismatch between their specialized academic knowledge and the needs of

businesses, as well as lack soft skills, such as interpersonal abilities and effective communication (Kaburise, 2016). Acknowledging the significance of soft skills for employment, universities worldwide are shifting their emphasis toward implementing and developing these skills within their educational frameworks. The renewed emphasis on non-cognitive skills underscores the imperative of integrating them comprehensively into education policy frameworks (Khine & Areepattamannil, 2016). As such, Moroccan higher education (HE) is no exception to this trend. In response to the acknowledged significance of soft skills, there have been significant reforms in Moroccan HE to align with global changes and more effectively equip students for the workforce (Ministère de l'éducation Nationale, de l'enseignement Supérieur de la Formation des Cadres et de la Recherche Scientifique, 2019). Minister Abdellatif Miraoui has spearheaded modifications to the existing LMD ((licence (B.A), Master, Doctorate) system, emphasizing the integration of practical experiences and soft skills training (Miraoui, 2022).

The revised framework underscores the significance of soft skills, including effective communication, leadership, stress management, writing proficiency, creative thinking, collaborative learning, and critical thinking, in Bachelor's and Master's degree programs (Aziz & Zaidoune, 2022b). These initiatives aim to provide Moroccan students with the diverse skills required to excel in the current highly competitive employment landscape. It should be noted that the proliferation of research findings on soft skills in countries other than Morocco makes it challenging to apply them in the Moroccan context, given its different cultural and educational settings. Thus, before implementing the modified LMD reform, it is important to investigate the perceptions of undergraduates (from scientific and literary majors) regarding soft skills in Morocco because there is no clear consensus on which should be integrated and students' knowledge of these skills is not well understood. Also, this study aims to investigate gender-based differences in undergraduates' perceptions, addressing a gap in the literature which, to the best of our knowledge, has not been explored within the Moroccan context. To address these gaps, our study will examine the following research questions:

1. To what extent are Moroccan undergraduates aware of soft skills?
2. To what extent do Moroccan undergraduates consider soft skills important for employment?
3. What are the most crucial soft skills for employment for Moroccan undergraduates?

4. Are there any significant gender disparities in students' perceived significance of soft skills?
5. Are there any significant gender disparities of the most significant soft skills for employment?

Additionally, the study will test the following hypotheses:

H0a: The construct of gender does not affect Moroccan undergraduates' preference of soft skills.

H0b: The construct of gender does not affect Moroccan undergraduates' preference of the most significant soft skills for employment.

This study's results should contribute significantly to the literature on soft skills in HE. Its significance lies in insights that will facilitate comparisons with students from other regions globally which will provide teachers an opportunity to integrate soft skills deemed important by students. Educators are both capable of and responsible for training today's and tomorrow's workforce in the soft and hard skills required by employers (Ellis et al., 2014). Furthermore, the study offers valuable guidance to education policymakers and curriculum developers to include specific soft skills into educational programs. It also highlights a pertinent yet unexplored issue of male-female disparities in Moroccan undergraduates' perspectives for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Significance of Soft Skills for Employment

The emphasis on skills development in HE is not a new concept, but there is a growing focus on students acquiring transferable skills. This shift is driven by the recognition from students, teachers, employers, universities, government, and accreditation bodies of the importance of these skills for both academic and career success (Luk et al., 2014). Nevertheless, to secure employment after university, graduates need to recognize their competencies and have confidence in their ability to succeed in their careers (Tuononen et al., 2017). Additionally, Fernandez and Liu (2019) observed that adult workers without university degrees who more frequently exercised these soft skills tended to have higher occupational status compared with peers from similar educational backgrounds. Notably, soft skills are increasingly recognized as a vital complement to the hard skills necessary for specific job tasks (Schulz, 2008; Majid et al., 2012). While hard skills are crucial for performing job duties, soft skills encompass interpersonal and behavioral qualities essential for navigating diverse professional and

personal scenarios. Tem et al. (2020) emphasized the imperative for HE institutions to actively foster these skills, underscoring their broader significance beyond the formal labor market to address youth unemployment, spur economic growth, and alleviate poverty. Moreover, Balcar's (2014) examination of psychological traits, attitudes, and soft skills revealed their substantial impact on individuals' wages and their potential to narrow the male-female wage gap. Similarly, Majid et al. (2012) further examined the perceived significance of soft skills among students, with the majority acknowledging them across various career-related domains. Furthermore, Nur et al. (2023) investigated the acquisition of vital soft skills, such as communication and teamwork, among students in a vocational school. Their findings underscored the significance of these skills for post-school employment, particularly in entrepreneurship. Similarly, Fernandez and Liu (2019) found that there are positive, statistically significant relationships between the use of soft skills and improved occupational outcomes among adult workers. These studies underscore the pivotal role of soft skills in enhancing employment and addressing the evolving demands of the contemporary job market.

The Moroccan context also acknowledges the importance of soft skills thanks to two significant reforms that have advocated for their inclusion in the nation's HE curriculum. These reforms, known as the Bachelor and the modified LMD system, aim to streamline and standardize educational pathways from undergraduate to advanced degrees, equipping students with the necessary 21st century skills and preparing them for the job market, thus enhancing their employability. The integration of soft skills into the Moroccan Bachelor's system sparked a detailed examination of the different skills being emphasized, along with the necessary contexts and explicit learning strategies required to prioritize life skills within the 21st century learning framework across all educational levels (El Bakkali, 2021). However, in 2022, with the arrival of the new Minister of Higher Education, Abdellatif Miraoui, changes were proposed in the Moroccan HE system. Instead of implementing the Bachelor's system, the Minister reverted to the previous LMD (License, Master, Doctorat) system, also known as the Bachelor-Master-Doctorate system, with some notable changes (Miraoui, 2022). The previous HE system in Morocco primarily focused on providing theoretical education to students. However, the new LMD reform aims to prioritize preparing students for the job market, ensuring that graduates are job-ready and can apply their academic knowledge directly in the workplace. To achieve this, the modified LMD

includes the integration of new soft skills modules, practicum, coaching, and service learning, bridging the gap between academic learning and practical application (Miraoui, 2022).

Despite widespread acknowledgment of the significance of soft skills, there is no unanimous agreement on which are most crucial (Cinque & Kippels, 2023). In the Moroccan context, no specific skill set has been provided by the LMD reform, which poses a challenge and makes it difficult for teachers to choose the most appropriate soft skills in their classrooms. This research addresses that problem by investigating students' perceptions regarding the most important soft skills for employability.

Students' Perspectives on Significant Soft Skills for Employment

Soft skills, comprising a diverse array of attributes, are indispensable complements to technical knowledge and critical for achieving success in the workplace. Their importance in enhancing employment has garnered increasing recognition, underscoring their pivotal role in contemporary professional settings (Pereira & Costa, 2017; Ramlan & Ngah, 2017). Within the HE landscape, there is a growing emphasis on holistic competencies, driven by the imperative of human capital development and the cultivation of responsible citizenship within society. However, this shift is not without its challenges. Globalization, shifting labor market trends, and swift technological progress pose new challenges for employers, job seekers, and educational institutions (Chan & Chen, 2022). Among these challenges is the concern expressed by recruiters globally regarding the preparedness of graduates emerging from undergraduate programs, highlighting deficiencies in essential skills preparation (De La Harpe et al., 2000). Moreover, the intricate nature of defining and comprehending soft skills is mirrored within the realm of HE, particularly concerning the delineation of graduate attributes. The diversity of descriptions and instructional approaches across academic disciplines prompt inquiries into the degree to which individual academics grasp the conceptual nuances of graduate attributes (Barrie, 2006). Consequently, establishing a cohesive framework for defining graduate attributes remains arduous and reveals divergent perspectives and institutional consensus gaps (Barrie, 2004).

Research on soft skills identifies a diverse range of skills and traits that need to be exhibited (Ellis et al., 2014). This is demonstrated in students' perspectives on the significance of soft skills which vary across countries, yet the majority consider them imperative for career success and employment (Tevdovska, 2015; Miller & Carducci, 2015). For example, Tevdovska

(2015) asserted that communication skills were considered important, although improvements in co-worker relationships were desired. Similarly, psychology major students and recruiters agreed on the significance of skills like listening, teamwork, getting along with people, a desire and willingness to learn new and vital abilities, customer service skills, and that interpersonal skills are essential (Miller & Carducci, 2015).

In the same vein, Williams (2015) explored employers' and students' perspectives on soft skills, revealing that communication, interpersonal skills, and teamwork were deemed most crucial by students for employment success. Similarly, Valenzuela (2020) underscored the significance of communication skills for students transitioning to the workforce. Majid et al. (2012) found that students considered positive attitude, oral communication, and self-motivation essential for job hunting, highlighting the parity between soft and technical skills in career success. Sarker et al. (2021) identified communication, critical thinking, and teamwork as pivotal for recent graduates' employment, emphasizing the role of soft skills in career enhancement. Dissanayake (2016) uncovered significant relationships between interpersonal and verbal communication skills and graduates' job prospects in Sri Lanka. Pereira and Costa (2017) underscored the high value students placed on autonomy and social-emotional competencies within their academic curriculum. Additionally, Ping Yong and Ling (2023) uncovered disparities in the prioritization of soft skills between graduates and employers, highlighting varying perspectives on skill significance. Finally, Jiang and Alexakis (2017) highlighted the universal recognition of oral communication skills as critical in the hospitality sector. These studies emphasize the integral role soft skills play in facilitating career success and enhancing employment across diverse contexts.

Reflecting previous literature in the international arena, several Moroccan studies underscore the significant emphasis placed by students on the significance of soft skills. Chadil et al. (2022) conducted a study at the Ben M'Sick Faculty of Science and the Faculty of Science, Ain Chok, revealing that Moroccan students perceived teamwork, communication, time management, work ethic, self-confidence, collaboration, and stress management as critical soft skills. Conversely, skills such as customer/user orientation, cultural adaptation, social skills, and analytical skills were considered less significant by these students. Similarly, Moustadraf (2021) found that engineering students prioritized soft skills like teamwork, communication, self-awareness, stress tolerance, and creativity/innovation as essential for engineering graduates. Conversely, life balance skills,

customer/user orientation, cultural adaptability, and conflict management and negotiation were rated as less relevant. Additionally, Birrou et al. (2021) discovered that Moroccan undergraduates exhibited highly favorable attitudes toward life skills-based courses, emphasizing positive affect and endorsing the significance of such courses for their personal and professional development. Furthermore, Azmi (2018) highlighted the role of an ICT-enabled English language environment in fostering soft skills among Moroccan students, particularly in communication, social interaction, cooperation, and conflict resolution. Similarly, Aziz et al. (2023) utilized interviews to determine the key soft skills that should be incorporated into English as a foreign language (EFL) classes according to undergraduates. Communication emerged as the most crucial soft skill because of its significant impact on improving language fluency and enhancing employability. Problem-solving and time management were also highlighted as essential skills for effectively addressing challenges and completing tasks efficiently. The study further underscored the significance of teamwork, critical thinking, creativity, flexibility, and adaptability, citing their importance in fostering collaboration, analytical thinking, innovation, and adaptability to various contexts. These studies demonstrate the strong emphasis Moroccan students place on soft skills and their recognition of their significance for personal growth and professional success.

Perspectives on Soft Skills and Gender

Research on the correlation between male-female perspectives on soft skills is relatively limited, particularly within the Moroccan context. The association between gender and soft skills which can be characterized by binary opposites is not yet explored in the Moroccan context. The male/female binary is created by pairing contrasting concepts, such as aggressive/passive, rational/emotional, and objective/subjective, where the first trait in each pair is linked to males and the second to females (Hong, 2016). Soft skills, which often involve emotional intelligence and interpersonal abilities, are more frequently linked to women, while hard skills, which tend to be technical and task-oriented, are typically associated with men. This binary opposition can be due to societal norms which have associated women with “soft” skills, highlighting interpersonal abilities, while “hard” skills, such as programming and statistical analysis, have been stereotypically linked to men (Boyd & Crawford, 2012). This perception often portrayed men as possessing economically valuable “hard” skills, while women were commonly associated with inherently biological “soft” skills

(Hong, 2016). Papyrina et al. (2021) found that female students reported higher self-efficacy in interpersonal skills, having a friendly/outgoing personality, and organizational ability. In contrast, male students reported higher confidence in problem-solving, analytical/quantitative skills, and technical/computer skills. In contrast, findings regarding male-female disparities in core competencies among students have been inconsistent. Some studies have indicated moderate disparities between male and female students, with males generally demonstrating higher levels of core competencies, particularly in socioemotional skills (Dominic & Fulgence, 2019), other studies have found more nuanced patterns. Segbenya et al. (2023) observed significant male-female disparities in employment skills, with male graduates showing a stronger preference for mathematical and ICT-related skills, while female graduates demonstrated greater proficiency in emotional intelligence and written and verbal communication. Additionally, women were found to excel in time management skills in various studies (Aeon et al., 2021; Chanpisut, 2018), and Bidjerano (2005) noted a tendency for female students to overstate their usage of study-related skills, including time management.

However, the literature also presents conflicting findings regarding time management skills. While some studies report superior self-reported time management skills among males (Sultana & Shakur, 2022), others, such as Agormedah et al. (2021), found no significant male-female disparities in time management practices among students at the College of Education. These inconsistencies suggest the need for research to better understand the complex correlation between male-female students' perspectives and proficiency in soft skills within diverse educational contexts. It is important to note that differences in soft skill perceptions can be attributed to classifications such as collectivist and individualistic cultures, alongside ingrained male-female roles (Hofstede, 2010). The delineation of behaviors as masculine or feminine varies not only across traditional but also modern societies. Men are expected to embody traits of assertiveness, competitiveness, and a focus on material success, while women are often assigned roles centered around caretaking, domestic responsibilities, and an emphasis on quality of life (Hofstede, 2010). This dynamic interplay between cultural classifications and gender roles can significantly shape how soft skills are perceived. The expectation of assertiveness and toughness for men contrasts with the nurturing and empathetic roles typically associated with women. These societal expectations, deeply entrenched in cultural and gender norms, can influence the prioritization and development of soft skills within different contexts.

In summary, the literature review finds limited research on students' perspectives on soft skills, with a greater focus on North America, Europe, and certain Asian countries compared with Morocco. Despite the considerable attention given to integrating soft skills in Moroccan HE, interdisciplinary studies on the significance and prioritization of soft skills for employment in this context remain scarce. In Morocco, previous research conducted by Moustadraf (2021), Birrou et al. (2021), Chadil et al. (2022), Aziz et al. (2023), and Azmi (2018) has contributed significantly to our understanding of soft skills among students, but these studies are relatively narrow in their scope. Moustadraf (2021) focuses on engineering students, Birrou et al. (2021) delve into students' perspectives on a specific life skills module, Azmi (2018) and Aziz et al. (2023) are primarily limited to the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, and Chadil et al (2022) concentrate solely on students majoring in scientific fields. The existing research therefore does not comprehensively explore the perspectives of students from diverse academic majors, a gap this research attempts to fill. The study will also examine the significance of soft skills, students' awareness of these skills, and whether significant disparities exist between male and female Moroccan undergraduates regarding the perceived significance of soft skills.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Employing a quantitative methodology, the study investigated how undergraduates perceived important soft skills for employment. A quantitative researcher should strive to "quantify participant responses and then evaluate them in order to make sound conclusions" (Arghode, 2012). To do so, a survey in the form of a quantitative design is used in this study. This approach allows researchers to draw conclusions and test hypotheses based on the collected data. According to Cohen et al. (2018), surveys collect data at a specific point in time to describe the current conditions, establish benchmarks for comparison, or determine the relationships between specific events. Therefore, a survey was suitable because it enabled a systematic and objective examination of undergraduates' perspectives regarding soft skills for employment. By employing a quantitative methodology, this study gathered data from a representative sample of Moroccan undergraduates and drew broader conclusions about their insights on soft skills for employment.

Research Instrument

To this end, a questionnaire was meticulously developed based on insights gleaned from the previous literature to assess Moroccan undergraduates' perspectives on the most critical soft skills for employment. The themes used were developed based on a comprehensive review of existing literature. Key sources that informed the development of these themes included Aziz et al. (2023), Chadil et al. (2022), Majid et al. (2012), and Aziz and Zaidoune (2022a). These studies highlighted several recurrent themes relevant to students' awareness of soft skills, their perceived importance of these skills, and the most important soft skills for employability. Conducted in various contexts, Aziz et al. (2023) focused on EFL education in Morocco, Chadil et al. (2022) examined scientific majors in Morocco, and Aziz and Zaidoune (2022a) explored teachers' perceptions of soft skills integration in both literary and scientific majors in Morocco. In contrast, Majid et al. (2012) conducted their research in Singapore with business management students. The inclusion of different majors is justified as our study investigates the perceptions of students in both science and literary faculties.

Our questionnaire utilized various types of questions and response modes, including dichotomous questions, multiple-choice questions, and rating scales (Cohen et al., 2018). The first section of the questionnaire, comprising personal information, included inquiries about students' age, level, gender, and faculty affiliation using dichotomous questions (gender and faculty) and multiple-choice questions (age and level). The second section consisted of a single "yes/no" question concerning undergraduates' awareness of soft skills. Students were asked to choose "yes" if they considered each of the fourteen given skills a soft skill and "no" if they did not. The third section focused on the perceived significance of soft skills for employment, utilizing a five-point Likert scale which ranged from "extremely important" to "not important" for six statements about the significance of soft skills, as highlighted in prior studies. Similarly, the last section utilized the same Likert scale requiring students to rate their perceived level of importance of each of the fifteen soft skills for future employment.

Reliability of the Scales

Since the research instrument was developed from the previous literature, the consistency of a scale was crucial and its reliability affected how the scale's elements corresponded with one another and whether the scale consistently produced the same results across different situations.

Cronbach’s alpha, commonly referred to as the alpha coefficient of reliability, provided an alternative method for calculating the reliability as internal consistency, that is, the correlation between each item and the sum of all other relevant items. This was useful for multi-item scales and measured the items’ internal consistency. Cronbach’s alpha yielded an inter-item correlation coefficient by computing the mean of all potential split-half reliability coefficients (Cohen et al., 2018).

For each construct, reliability analysis was conducted individually to evaluate the reliability of the items included in the questionnaire. A construct was deemed reliable if its alpha value exceeded 0.70. Results showed that the perceived significance of the soft skills scale with six items ($\alpha = 0.78$) and the most significant soft skills for employment scale with fifteen items ($\alpha = 0.87$) were found reliable. Reliability results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Reliability Results

Constructs	Items	Cronbach Alpha
Perceived Significance of Soft Skills	6	0.78
Most Important Soft Skills for Employment	15	0.87

Research Population

In the Casablanca-Settat region, 111 undergraduates from the Ben M’Sik faculties of letters, humanities, and science participated in the study. These faculties represent diverse academic fields, each contributing unique perspectives to this research. The survey participants were selected using the techniques of convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Convenience sampling refers to selecting participants based on their willingness and availability to be studied, while snowball sampling involves participants recommending others to become members of the sample (Creswell, 2012). The students were selected as participants based on their availability during the data collection period, which coincided with their holidays. Students who participated in the survey helped the researchers by identifying other students who met the selection criteria and were willing to participate. Using these sampling techniques was practical and efficient in this context because it gave the researcher the chance to collect data from students who were present and willing to participate during their summer break. The confidentiality procedure at Ben Msik Faculty

of Letters and Humanities and Ben Msik Faculty of Sciences involved several key steps to guarantee the participants' privacy and protection of data. Before summer break, the researcher obtained consent from the deans of both faculties to contact students and share the questionnaires with them in the faculties' official WhatsApp groups. Students were informed about the nature of the study and were given the opportunity to provide their consent to participate. Also, they were assured of their rights to withdraw from the study at any stage or to decline to complete specific items in the questionnaire. Furthermore, measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process to protect the participants' privacy (Cohen et al., 2018). The selection criteria for participants included willingness to learn about soft skills and a commitment to actively engage in the study. This ensured that participants were genuinely interested in the research topic and were likely to provide valuable insights.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

The questionnaire was developed following a pilot study to obtain valuable and pertinent feedback regarding the items' applicability and intelligibility. Ten undergraduate students from each faculty participated in the process, completing the questionnaire and providing input on its content, design, and the time needed to complete it. Their comments were then integrated into the updated version of the questionnaire before proceeding to gather actual data. Participants were contacted through social networks (Faculties' WhatsApp groups) and supplied web-based links to the questionnaires. They were also provided with a letter detailing the study's objectives and assuring the anonymity and confidentiality of the data. To ensure understanding by students from diverse departments in both the faculties of letters and sciences, the questionnaire was translated into Arabic and French. The survey lasted for five days during the 2022 summer break and resulted in 111 complete questionnaires. For questionnaire analysis, IBM SPSS version 22 was employed. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the sections of the questionnaire pertaining to the students' demographic data, their awareness of soft skills, perceived importance of soft skills for employment and identification of the most significant soft skills for employment. In contrast, inferential statistics, specifically the Mann-Whitney U test for two independent variables, were utilized to examine disparities between students' perspectives on

the significance of soft skills for employment based on gender, as well as disparities in perspectives on the most significant soft skills for employment based on gender.

RESULTS

Demographic Data

The results of the analysis indicate that the majority of study participants fell within the age range of seventeen to twenty-seven, accounting for 82.88% of the sample. A smaller percentage of participants (11.71%) were between the ages of 28 and 38. The third age group (39–49) represented 4.50% of the population, and there was only one participant in the final age group (61 plus). Interestingly, no respondents fell within the age category of 50–60.

In terms of the participants' distribution across faculties, 47.74% belonged to the Faculty of Science, while 52.25% belonged to the Faculty of Letters and Humanities. The highest representation was from S6 students, accounting for 37.83% of the sample, followed by S3 students at 35.13%. Regarding gender, the majority of participants in the study were female, comprising 72.97% of the sample, while males accounted for 27.02%.

Students' Awareness of Soft Skills

Participants were asked to identify which skills they considered as soft skills to assess their understanding of this concept. A list of 14 soft skills was provided based on the literature review. The findings reveal that none of the 111 respondents selected "yes" for all listed soft skills, reflecting their limited awareness. However, a majority of participants recognized and selected "yes" for several soft skills, suggesting they could differentiate between soft and technical skills. The top five soft skills identified by the students were willingness to learn (98%), a positive work attitude (98%), communication (96%), problem-solving (96%), and persuasion (96%). These skills were highly rated by the participants, indicating their recognition of them.

On the other hand, some soft skills were not widely regarded by the students. Conflict management was selected by 72 participants (64.9%), critical thinking by 73 participants (65.8%), negotiation skill by 83 participants (74.8%), and leadership by 83 participants (74.8%). These percentages indicate a significant proportion of participants did not classify these as soft skills, suggesting a potential gap in their specific understanding or

recognition of these within the soft skills domain. (see Table 2). Overall, the results indicate that while the majority of students were able to identify and differentiate some soft skills, they had limited understanding and recognition of the full range.

Table 2. Skills Considered as Soft Skills by Respondents (Multiple Choice)

Answers	Number	Percent	Percent of Cases
1 Communication	96	7.7%	86.5%
2 Negotiation skills	83	6.7%	74.8%
3 Self-management	87	7.0%	78.4%
4 Conflict management	72	5.8%	64.9%
5 Time management	95	7.6%	85.6%
6 Problem-solving	96	7.7%	86.5%
7 Positive work attitude	98	7.9%	88.3%
8 Teamwork spirit	86	6.9%	77.5%
9 Decision-making skills	95	7.6%	85.6%
10 Critical-thinking	73	5.9%	65.8%
11 Leadership skills	83	6.7%	74.8%
12 Persuasion skills	96	7.7%	86.5%
13 Flexibility	88	7.1%	79.3%
14 Willingness to learn	98	7.9%	88.3%
Total	1,246	100.0%	1,122.5%

Perceived Significance of Soft Skills

Students' perspectives on the significance of soft skills were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "extremely important" to "not important" for a set of statements in the questionnaire. The results, presented in Table 7, indicate the perceived significance of soft skills for various purposes. The findings revealed that students considered soft skills essential for employment, as demonstrated by the high mean scores for statements 1, 3, and 5 (Mean 4.64, Mean 4.48, Mean 4.53). Statement 6, which pertains to the significance of practice in acquiring soft skills, received the highest mean score of 4.75. Statements

regarding the relevance of soft skills for interpersonal relationships and the equal value of both hard and soft skills were also highly ranked, with mean scores of 4.41 and 4.20, respectively. The results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Perceived Significance of Soft Skills

Significance	Valid	Missing	Mean	Std. Deviation
1 Soft skills are important to find a job	111	0	4.64	0.84
2 Soft skills are important to get along with people	111	0	4.41	0.99
3 Soft skills are highly sought after by employers	111	0	4.48	0.85
4 Soft skills are as important as hard skills	111	0	4.20	1.09
5 Possessing soft skills helps you find a job	111	0	4.53	0.94
6 Soft skills can be enhanced through practice	111	0	4.75	0.71

Important Soft Skills for Employment

The participants’ perspectives on the important soft skills for employment were assessed using a “5-point” Likert scale, ranging from “extremely important” to “not important.” They were asked to rank the relative significance of 15 soft skills identified from prior studies. The results highlight the rankings and perceived significance of these soft skills.

Communication emerged as the most highly rated soft skill, with a mean score of 4.85. Time management closely followed, with a mean score of 4.80. Work ethics (mean score 4.78), positive attitude (mean score 4.76), and willingness to learn (mean score 4.73) also ranked among the top five important soft skills.

Other soft skills that were highly ranked included teamwork and collaboration (mean score 4.69), self-management (mean score 4.64), negotiation skills (mean score 4.63), problem-solving (mean score 4.55), and making presentations (mean score 4.51).

Conversely, small group discussion (mean score 4.4), writing CVs (mean score 4.36), critical thinking (mean score 4.31), and writing

motivation letters (mean score 4.13) were rated the least important soft skills for employment. Although these skills ranked lower, they are still considered significant by the participants, though to a lesser extent than other skills. Table 4 illustrates the participants' answers.

Table 4. The Most Significant Soft Skills for Employment

Soft Skills	Valid	Missing	Mean	Std. Deviation
1 Self-management	111	0	4.64	0.82
2 Writing CVs	111	0	4.36	1.02
3 Writing motivation letters	111	0	4.13	1.16
4 Problem-solving	111	0	4.55	0.96
5 Teamwork and collaboration	111	0	4.69	0.77
5 Time management	111	0	4.80	0.63
7 Critical-thinking	111	0	4.31	1.00
8 Willingness to learn	111	0	4.73	0.68
9 Making presentations	111	0	4.51	0.90
10 Small group discussions	111	0	4.43	0.92
11 Leadership	111	0	4.47	0.91
12 Work ethics	111	0	4.78	0.60
13 Communication	111	0	4.85	0.50
14 Positive attitude	111	0	4.76	0.66
15 Negotiation skills	111	0	4.63	0.86

Normality Distribution

Before applying a suitable statistical test for differences, it is essential to assess the normality of the data distribution. Data distribution was examined using the Shapiro-Wilk and Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests available in SPSS. The Shapiro-Wilk test is often favored for its reliability (Cohen et al., 2018). If the data are found not to follow a normal distribution, non-parametric statistical methods should be utilized (Cohen et al., 2018). The Shapiro-Wilk test was used to assess normality, yielding a p-value of 0.0 for both the constructs of perceived significance of soft skills and the most significant soft skills for employment. The p value (0.0) was found to

be statistically significant (less than 0.05). Hence, the normal distribution cannot be assumed. (See Table 5)

Table 5. Shapiro-Wilk Test

Constructs	Number of Items	P-value of Shapiro-Wilk
Perceived Significance of Soft Skills	6	0.00
Important Soft Skills for employment	15	0.00

Perceived Significance of Soft Skills and Gender

Since the data are not normally distributed, it is appropriate to use the Mann-Whitney U test which is the non-parametric equivalent of the t-test for two independent samples. It is used with at least one ordinal and one categorical variable. These allow us to determine, for instance, if there are statistically significant disparities between males and females on a rating scale (Cohen et al., 2018). Using the Mann-Whitney U test to identify a statistically significant difference in the two groups (males/females), a statistically significant difference was found between males and females in statement 1 ($p = 0.00$) and statement 4 ($p = 0.02$) less than the already set significance level 0.05. After analyzing the crosstabs results, it was evident that females consistently rated statements 1 and 4 more favourably compared with their male counterparts. (See Table 6)

Table 6. Mann-Whitney U test

Significance of Soft Skills	W	P
1 Soft skills are important to find a job	930.50	0.00
2 Soft skills are important to get along with people	1,157.50	0.65
3 Soft skills are highly sought after by employers	996.50	0.08
4 Soft skills are as important as hard skills	897.50	0.02
5 Possessing soft skills helps you find a job	1,025.00	0.10
6 Soft skills can be enhanced through practice	1,108.00	0.22

Most Significant Soft Skills for Employment and Male-Female Differences

The Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to examine potential disparities between males and females in perspectives regarding the most crucial soft skills for employment. The results of the Mann-Whitney U test indicated statistically significant disparities between males and females in their perspectives on certain soft skills for employment. Specifically, the

soft skills of time management ($p = 0.02$), willingness to learn ($p = 0.00$), small group discussion ($p = 0.01$), and positive attitude ($p = 0.04$) demonstrated statistically significant disparities. These p -values were all less than the predetermined significance level of 0.05, indicating the observed disparities were unlikely to have occurred by chance. When examining the crosstabulations, it became apparent that females exhibited higher ratings in certain soft skills compared with males. Notably, statistically significant disparities were observed in the soft skills of time management, willingness to learn, small group discussion, and positive attitude.

The null hypothesis, which posits no significant disparities in perspectives on the most significant soft skills for employment between males and females, can be rejected based on these findings. This suggests there are indeed notable disparities in how males and females perceive the significance of certain soft skills (time management, willingness to learn, small group discussion, and positive attitude) in relation to employment. (See Table 7)

Table 7. Mann-Whitney U test

Mann-Whitney U test	W	P
1 Self-management	1,142.00	0.49
2 Writing CVs	980.50	0.07
3 Writing motivation letters	1,099.00	0.40
4 Problem solving	1,165.50	0.66
5 Teamwork and collaboration	1,023.50	0.06
5 Time management	1,020.50	0.02
7 Critical thinking	1,169.50	0.73
8 Willingness to learn	896.00	0.00
9 Making presentations	1,021.50	0.11
10 Small group discussions	907.50	0.01
11 Leadership	1,243.50	0.82
12 Work ethics	1,079.00	0.15
13 Communication	1,231.50	0.84
14 Positive attitude	1,028.50	0.04
15 Negotiation skills	1,275.50	0.57

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to look into students' perspectives on the significance of soft skills for employment, their awareness of soft skills, the most essential soft skills for employment, and the male-female differences

in their perspectives on the significance of soft skills and the most significant soft skill for employment. The results of the first question indicated that while students recognized some soft skills, their overall awareness of the full range was limited. Regarding the second research question of the perceived significance of soft skills, students considered soft skills essential for employment and the need to be practiced. As for the third question, the five highly ranked soft skills identified by students as essential for employment were communication, time management, work ethics, positive attitude, and willingness to learn.

The fourth research question investigated the male-female differences in Moroccan undergraduates' perceptions. The objective was to determine if there were any differences in the perceptions of male and female student. The Mann-Whitney U tests revealed statistically significant disparities in the perspectives on the significance of soft skills for employment between male and female undergraduates. After conducting analyses, we were able to reject the null hypothesis for two specific statements (1 and 4). This suggests that female students have higher levels of significance of soft skills for employment and hold a positive personal attitude toward soft skills for employment. As for the fifth research question which investigated the male-female differences in Moroccan undergraduates' perspectives on the most significant soft skills for employment, the Mann-Whitney U test revealed statistically significant gender-based disparities in the perspectives on the most significant soft skills for employment. The findings permitted us to reject the null hypothesis for the soft skills "time management," "willingness to learn," "small group discussions," and "positive attitude." This suggests that female students deemed highly those soft skills for employment.

After analyzing the data, the findings converge with previous studies and have contributed to the existing literature in the national and international arena. The findings, coupled with the literature, demonstrate that students across various countries recognize the significance of soft skills for achieving career success and securing employment opportunities. This built on the work of Majid et al. (2012), who found that students acknowledge the significance of soft skills across various career paths and the vast majority of students believed soft skills and technical skills were equally essential for a successful career. In the same vein, Nur et al. (2023) investigated the acquisition of vital soft skills, like communication and teamwork, among students in a vocational school. Their findings not only highlighted variations in skill mastery among students at different levels, but also underscored the significance of these skills for post-school

employment, particularly in fields like entrepreneurship. This emphasis on practical application aligns perfectly with our own study's focus on workforce readiness. Therefore, both our research and existing literature strongly suggest that soft skills are essential for students seeking successful employment after graduation. This echoes Williams' (2015) study, where students also believed that soft skills significantly impacted their ability to quickly and successfully find employment and excel in their professions.

As for the most significant soft skills for employment, our results align with the previous literature. In the same vein, Tevdovska (2015) explored the perspectives of former students and found that the majority of respondents acknowledged the significance of communicating well with co-workers. Similarly, Jiang and Alexakis (2017) discovered that oral communication skills were ranked as one of the most essential soft skills by both students and managers in the hospitality industry. Our results are consistent with Valenzuela (2020), who identified communication and collaboration as important soft skills for transitioning into the job market. Miller and Carducci (2015) found that psychology students agreed on the significance of listening skills, teamwork, getting along with people, and a desire to learn. As in most studies, when asked about important soft skills for employment, communication and teamwork are rated highly by students along with other soft skills in this research. The Moroccan context is no exception. Moustadraf (2021) investigated how students perceived the value of soft skills. Students were asked to identify the soft skills they believed engineering graduates must possess; the top five soft skills, according to students, were teamwork, communication, self-awareness, stress tolerance, and creativity/innovation. In the same vein, research by Chadil et al. (2022) conducted at Moroccan universities (Ben M'Sick Faculty of Science and Faculty of Science, Ain Chok) identified teamwork, communication, time management, work ethic, self-confidence, collaboration, and stress management as the most significant soft skills for students. Likewise, Aziz et al. (2023) identified essential soft skills for EFL classes. Communication, problem-solving, and time management were highlighted, alongside teamwork, critical thinking, creativity, flexibility, and adaptability.

As for difference tests, the results of the Mann-Whitney U test indicated that, in terms of perspectives about the significance of soft skills, female students consistently rated higher than their male counterparts on statements related to the significance of soft skills for finding a job and the equal significance of soft skills alongside hard skills. This result

shows females' preferences for soft skills. This can be explained in the context of historical male-female associations between specific skill sets. Traditionally, women have been linked to "soft" skills, emphasizing interpersonal abilities, while "hard" skills, such as programming and statistical analysis, have been associated with men (Boyd & Crawford, 2012). The societal stereotype perceived men as possessing economically valuable "hard" skills, while women were often stereotypically associated with inherently biological "soft" skills (Hong, 2016). Interestingly, in another study, female leaders were found to score higher in both social and emotional skills compared to their male counterparts (Groves, 2005).

However, in a different study, results indicated that, on average, all students exhibited moderate levels of core skills, with significant disparities observed between male and female students. Males generally demonstrated higher levels of core competencies, particularly in socioemotional skills, even when accounting for factors such as education, age, marital status, and measures related to confidence (Dominic & Fulgence, 2019). The Mann-Whitney U test results highlighted a consistent trend where female students expressed a higher regard for the significance of soft skills. In the previous literature, some studies show women's preference and proficiency in soft skills (Boyd & Crawford, 2012; Groves, 2005) while one study has opposing results (Dominic & Fulgence, 2019). Those results and ours in this study suggest mixed outcomes. In this regard, it is not definitive to conclude that gender directly influences the preference and proficiency of soft skills. While some studies may suggest male-female disparities in certain soft skills, the variability in findings across different studies indicates that other factors, such as individual differences and societal norms, may play a significant role. Therefore, it is more accurate to say that gender may not be a decisive factor in determining preference and proficiency in soft skills.

The second test used to investigate male-female disparities in students' preferences of some soft skills for employment revealed significant variations with female students consistently rating higher the soft skills of time management, willingness to learn, small group discussion, and positive attitude compared with their male counterparts. This suggests that female students consider these skills crucial for employment and value them more highly compared with their male counterparts. These preferences can be explained in light of the previous literature which showed varying results regarding certain soft skills when considering male-female disparities. Women were more proficient in time management skills compared with

men, with studies showing consistent increases in women's scores in this area over recent decades (Aeon et al., 2021). In the same vein, Chanpisut (2018) reported that female students were more proficient in time management, emphasizing their ability to plan and organize their time effectively. Additionally, Bidjerano (2005) revealed that female students tended to overstate their usage of study-related skills, including time management. However, Sultana and Shakur (2022) reported superior self-reported time management skills among males, while Agormedah et al. (2021) discovered no significant male-female disparities in time management practices among College of Education (CoE) students. The previous literature on proficiency and usage of time management skills among females and males is mixed, with some studies showing male-female disparities while others found no significant differences. This variability makes it challenging to assume that disparities in preferences between males and females in our study are solely due to their proficiency in this skill.

The results of our study's tests also found disparities between males and females with females emphasizing small group discussions, time management, and positive attitude. In Morocco, a collectivistic country (Hofstede, 2010), this inclination among women toward valuing soft skills such as "time management," "willingness to learn," "small group discussions," and "positive attitude" may be attributed to societal expectations and cultural norms. The preference for those skills can be explained by the fact that collectivistic cultures (like Morocco) encourage women to be nurturing, empathetic, and cooperative while men are supposed to be assertive and competitive (Hofstede, 2010). Previous literature however has shown that males tend to have a positive attitude, while women often prefer indirect ways of talking and are more reserved in group communication. Ariyani and Hadiani (2019) noted that female students excelled in fostering equality in communication, while male students were dominant in traits like openness, empathy, supportiveness, and a positive attitude. This aligns with the observation that men often communicate more directly and assertively in group settings, while women tend to adopt a more indirect and circum-spect approach (Kamarul Zaman, 2014).

In the context of small group interactions in education, these gender-based communication styles can influence how students engage with their peers and contribute to the learning process. For example, male students may be more inclined to assert their opinions directly and confidently within the group, while female students may adopt a more collaborative and indirect approach, seeking consensus and avoiding confrontation.

Therefore, educators need to be mindful of these gender-related communication differences when structuring small group learning activities. Encouraging diverse participation styles and providing opportunities for all students to contribute and be heard can enhance the educational experience for everyone involved. Additionally, fostering an inclusive and respectful learning environment where different communication preferences are valued can promote equitable participation and support the intellectual, personal, and professional growth of all students, as highlighted by Fry et al. (2009).

These findings underscore the significance of recognizing and addressing male-female disparities in soft skills development initiatives. This study offers initial insights into a previously overlooked area of research in Morocco, specifically, gender-based differences in students' perceptions of soft skills. These insights could be crucial for the effective implementation of soft skills in Moroccan higher education. By recognizing the varying needs and perspectives of male and female students, educators and policymakers can tailor soft skills training programs to address these differences more effectively. This targeted approach can enhance the relevance and impact of soft skills education, ensuring that all students are better equipped with the essential competencies needed for their academic and professional success. Educational institutions and teachers should tailor their programs to cultivate a diverse range of skills in all students, regardless of gender, to enhance their readiness for the workforce. Moreover, fostering an inclusive environment that values and encourages the development of various soft skills can help create more equitable opportunities for all individuals in the job market.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to contribute to research on soft skills in Morocco by examining students' awareness of soft skills, the perceived significance of those skills and the most essential soft skills for employment. Also, it sought to examine the male-female differences in Moroccan undergraduates' perceptions. Using the questionnaire developed by researchers from the previous literature, data were collected from 111 undergraduates. The results showed limited student awareness of soft skills or perception that they are important for employment and require practice. Our test results showed large disparities between male and female students in the perceived significance of soft skills for employment and in terms of the perspectives regarding those most essential for employment. Despite

its limitations, the study highlights interesting implications for teachers and soft skills implementation in HE in Morocco. In light of the results, teachers should enhance awareness and understanding of soft skills. They should educate students about the significance and relevance of soft skills in career success and job attainment as results show that not all students are capable of recognizing all soft skills. Furthermore, educators should develop specific courses dedicated to cultivating and identifying soft skills like communication, teamwork, problem-solving, self-motivation, and adaptability. Recognizing and rewarding students for soft skill development is vital. Offering credits or acknowledgment for the improvement and demonstration of such skills can motivate students to actively engage in their development. As students stressed on practice for soft skills, it is important to provide experiential learning opportunities: Encourage internships, project-based learning, simulations, and community engagement activities that foster soft skills development. Chan (2012) asserts that experiential learning involves acquiring knowledge through direct experience. Thus, engaging in real-world activities allows students to effectively internalize the information learned in classrooms and textbooks. Unlike traditional classroom learning, which can be didactic, passive, and standardized, experiential learning tends to foster profound understanding due to its active and practical approach. This lets students make informed decisions about the problems they encounter and adapt to current challenges. They are encouraged to discuss issues with colleagues, plan peer-observation sessions, and provide each other with constructive feedback.

The study's primary limitation is the small sample size. Future research could use a different sampling procedure on a larger group through probability sampling techniques. The second limitation is focusing on the perspectives of students and excluding the viewpoints of recruiters or educators in depth. Including a wider range of stakeholders would provide a more holistic understanding of the significance of soft skills in education and employment. Qualitative research methods could provide deeper insights. A third limitation is the reliance on a single data collection instrument which hinders the ability to corroborate findings or provide qualitative insights. Mixing different research methods can explain or further explore the perspectives of other stakeholders. Future studies can address these limitations by employing larger and more diverse samples, incorporating multiple data collection points, using mixed methods approaches, and considering a broader range of stakeholders.

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