

The Soft Skills Paradox at the Multidisciplinary Faculty of Nador: Student Confidence and Curricular Realities

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Biography:

Younes ABAJTIT is a doctorate researcher investigating digitalization as a new learning environment in higher education, specifically within The Higher School of Technology in Oujda and the Multidisciplinary Faculty of Nador. He currently serves as an Adjunct Professor at the Higher School of Technology alongside high school English language teaching. Research interests explore the digital transformation of higher education.

Abstract

In the 21st-century labor market, employers are placing a greater emphasis on soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and critical thinking – resulting in a large employability gap for students who might not have them. This article examines the way in which higher education is responding to this challenge by presenting a case study of the Multidisciplinary Faculty of Nador. Adopting a mixed methods design, the study investigates the multi-layered issue of soft skill inclusion, analysing survey data of 163 students and conducting 12 in-depth interviews with Professors. There is a key irony to be drawn from the findings: students are highly confident in their own soft skills, but nearly all believe their programs do not teach those very skills. There is a good bit of irony in the mismatch between how students discussed themselves and how they viewed the curriculum. The paradox is further explained in part through qualitative data collected from faculty interviews, which unveil the pedagogical and institutional barriers that push the instruction of crucial rehumanizing competencies toward the periphery of the curriculum and realms of crick, stories, and myths. This study and ensuing argument is that in order for the skills gap to close, higher education has to put aside its passive hope that students are going to ‘pick these skills up’ and move towards intentional pedagogy that embeds soft skill development as a learning outcome.

Keywords: Soft Skills; higher education; pedagogy; Curriculum.

1. Introduction

There is an increasing agreement in business and research communities that the most valuable asset of the workforce today is not technical knowledge alone but the ability to master soft skills. These fundamental skills—among them “interpersonal” and “cognitive” skills, such as communicating, collaborating, and problem solving—are now viewed as being the primary engines of innovation and strong leadership. These attributes are consistently reported among the most rewarding soft skills by employers in multiple studies and business reports (Robles, 2012). Such overwhelming demand has resulted in an ‘employability gap’, where many graduates are work ready in terms of technical skills, but are lacking in social competence. Hence, this gap presents a direct challenge to

the traditional view of HE, calling into question the suitability of conventional academic models that have long served to foreground knowledge over skills and competencies. Higher education institutions are at a tipping point and the challenge before them is to either close the skills gap or see it widened. Hence, the main question that guides this study is as follows: To what extent are soft skills accepted, taught and developed in the academic context of the Multidisciplinary Faculty of Nador, and what constrains their full infusion into the students learning process?

2. Literature Review

The need to include soft skills in HE is corroborated by traditional educational theory and emerging research. Constructivist Theory, from a theoretical perspective, offers a solid foundation as it posits that individuals actively construct knowledge and skills through social interaction and experience (Vygotsky, 1978). This model highlights the need for active / collaborative learning (as pace-based learning), as the leading expressions of developing interpersonal skills such as teamwork or communication through practice. This strategy goes beyond passive knowledge consumption and calls on students to interact with each other to address challenging issues, while developing their competencies in a “hands-on” situation.

The empirical literature makes even more clear how important this educational aim is. It has been found that there is a positive relationship between social and emotional learning and academic performance, indicating that the attainment of these skills could have positive impact on educational outcomes (Hattie, 2009). In fact, studies of work readiness have shown time and again that employers value soft skills more highly than technical skills when hiring—e.g., as referenced in a popular LinkedIn survey (2019). Emotional intelligence as a significant aspect of soft skills is also recognized as an important factor of good leadership, which implies that those with high interpersonal skills possess higher chances of career success (Goleman, 2000). These literatures together suggest that embedding soft skills is not merely an additional task for universities but the central element of a contemporary meaningful and effective university education.

3. Methodology

The study utilized a mixed-methods design to provide a more complete and balanced understanding of the inclusion of soft skills at the Faculty of Nador. This method was selected in order to complement quantitative data on student perceptions with rich, contextual qualitative data from faculty, thus enhancing the trustworthiness of the findings. Data were collected with two main tools: for students a structured survey, for Professors semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was developed to assess students' perception of their proficiency in four critical soft skills—communication, teamwork, problem solving, and critical thinking on a five-point Likert scale. There were also a few questions to assess how often and how well students perceived these traits were taught in their academic disciplines. The semi-structured interviews with Professors aimed to identify the teaching, institutional and personal issues associated with teaching these non-technical skills in their courses.

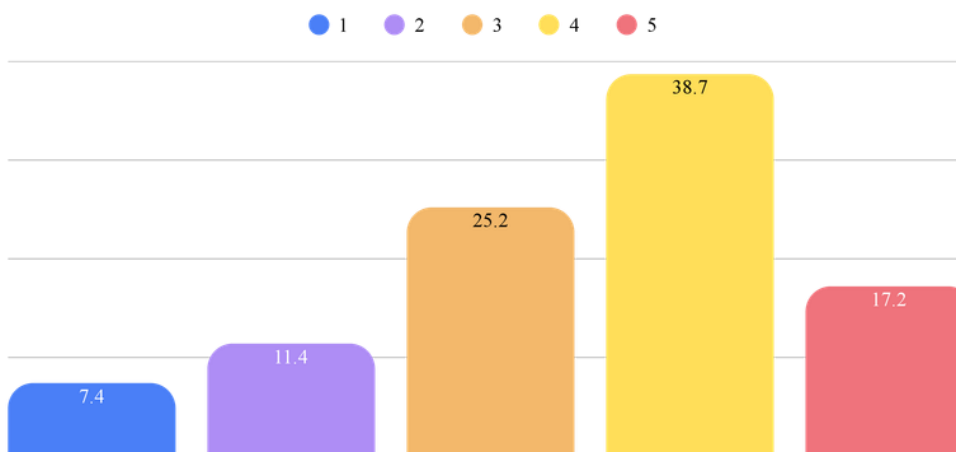
4. Results

The data collected for this study revealed a complex and often contradictory picture of the state of soft skills at the Faculty of Nador. The most significant findings emerged from the juxtaposition of students' high self-confidence and their critical view of the curriculum's role in developing these skills.

4.1 High Student Self-Perception of Soft Skills

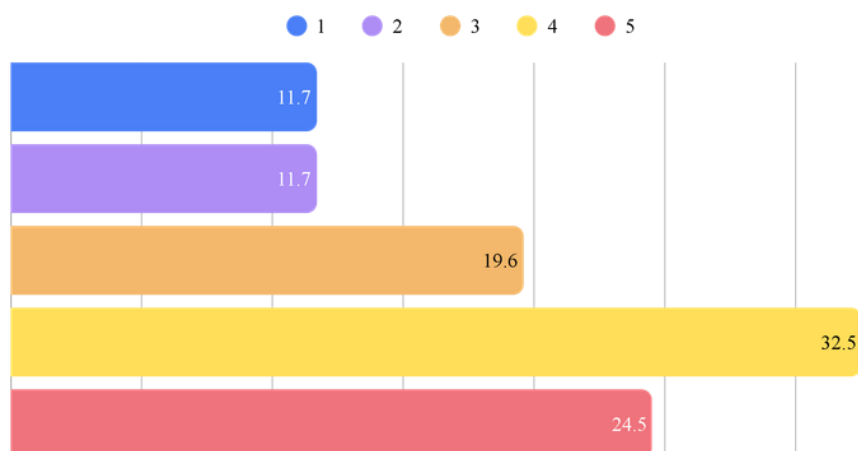
One notable pattern that appeared in the quantitative survey results was students' strong confidence in their soft skill abilities. Confidences when asked to self-evaluate At the time of survey, a noteworthy proportion of students had positive view of their skills in all broad areas when asked to self-assess. 55.9% of students considered themselves at least good (level 4 or 5) in communication.

Figure 1: Communication



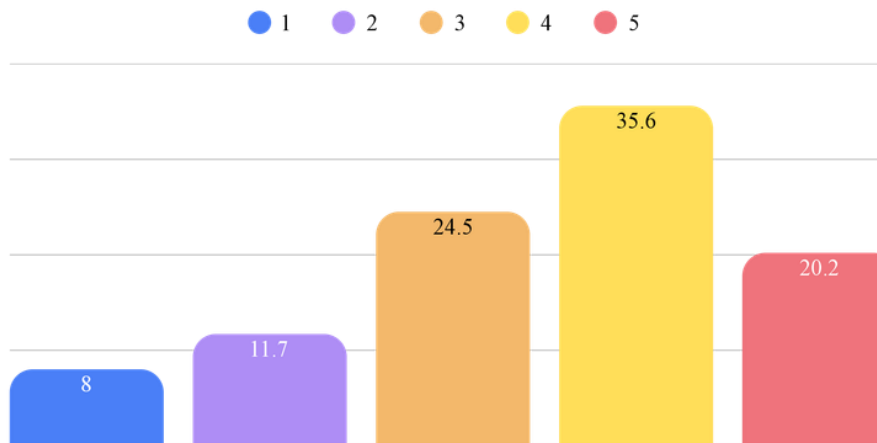
As it did for communication, a clear majority of respondents (57%) also believed it was good for teamwork.

Figure 2: Teamwork



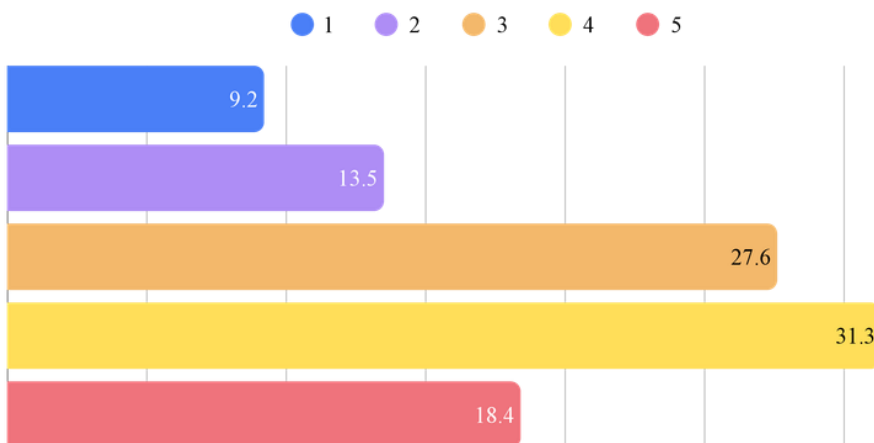
The trend was the same for cognitive skills as 55.8% of the students also rated their problem-solving ability highly,

Figure 3: Problem-Solving



In addition, almost half (49.7%) had the same confidence in their critical thinking skills.

Figure 4: Critical Thinking



4.2 The Curricular Disconnect

The findings suggest that students think they possess what is considered important interpersonal and cognitive skills. Nevertheless, a clear gap arose when students were asked how their courses help with these skills. Strongly agreeing (6.1%) that their academic work genuinely helps them develop these competences. By contrast, around 20 (70.2%) of students were neither neutral nor disagreed

Note the potential mismatch between students' self-assessment of competence and the extent to which they are learning these skills in a formal educational activity. What this all implies is that students likely think that they have acquired such soft skills, but those skill developments are happening outside a structured educational framework or pedagogy. It points to an actionable space for educational institutions to include and promote, through more overt means, effective soft skills.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study call for further interpretation and present a core 'confidence-curriculum paradox'. Students at the Faculty of Nador have met soft skill requirements and have high confidence in their soft skills. On the other, they found that the formal classes had little to do with

building such skills. This presents the university's role and value in preparing students for the workforce in a very troubling light. One interpretation is that students are really acquiring these skills, but doing so through experiences outside of their academic program — life experiences, part-time jobs, or extracurricular activities. If so, the university is letting a prime opportunity to enhance and formalize the cultivation of those very skills that employers demand most slip through its fingers.

Qualitative data from interviews with faculty offer a persuasive account for this paradox by revealing numerous pedagogical and institutional barriers. Professors universally said they appreciate the soft skills, but the environment just makes it so tough to really teach them. The biggest complaints were under-resourced classrooms and inflexible, content-laden syllabi that champion traditional lectures over the labour-intensive, interactive approaches needed to transmit skills such as teamwork and communication. Soft skills, faculty said, often take a back seat to the delivery of content and become more of an incidental side-effect to learning rather than a focused learning outcome. This systemic de-prioritization of skill-based pedagogy directly accounts for why students do not see the curriculum as a site of their own formation and is the root cause of the employability gap that this research sought to investigate.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

To sum up, the present study shows us that at the Multidisciplinary Faculty of Nador the (soft) skills gap between the idignified and expressed need on the one hand, and the actual practice on the other, is huge. This is demonstrated in a stratagem wherein learners feel assured in their skills, yet treat their course work as passive means of skill acquisition, a disposition explained largely by pedagogical constraints experienced by instructors. To close the employability gap and address this paradox, institutions must shift from a passive expectation that students will pick up skills to an active, deliberate pedagogical approach. The following actions are recommended for this purpose:

- **Integrate Collaborative, Project-Based Learning:** Course materials must be reconfigured to support collaborative, real-life projects as a core component of courses, as opposed to the periphery. This method makes students actively practice team work, communication, and problem solving in a real but structured and evaluated academic context.
- **Implement Authentic Assessment Strategies:** The dependence on traditional exams that test for knowledge regurgitation needs to be offset with authentic assessments that can assess process and skill. That means assigning a grade to group projects, presentations, peer evaluations and portfolios, signifying to students that these proficiencies are just as crucial to the course content.
- **Enable and Support Faculty:** The institution has to make the evolution of the help faculty need getting through their current barriers. These range from development opportunities to help instructors co-ordinate group work in a large class, to real flexibility in curriculum so instructors can create courses, and evaluations, that emphasize skill development as much as content knowledge.

7. References

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