AN EXPLORATION OF MOROCCAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

The notion of employability skills has been given great importance because of the changing nature of the current job market. It is the result of globalization and the constant technological development. Employability skills are essential skills that are now highly crucial in the growth of learners in general and university students in particular. In addition to subject-bound specific skills, previous studies assert that students of the twenty first century are encouraged and expected to exhibit a number of professionally oriented skills that are in demand with respect to the outside and professional world. The 21st century job market characterized by fierce competition requires not only graduates with higher education degrees but also graduates who are well equipped with specific skills and personal attributes. In the present study, we intend to bring to light the perception of university students about employability skills in Morocco. More particularly, students in open access institutions. Data is gathered through interviews, which are the instruments used for data collection. The findings of the study present practical implications for consideration by both educationalists and policy makers. The study sheds light on the learners as a major force in the process of education, who are sometimes absent from discussions that directly influence their future.

Keywords: Employability skills/ University students/ Open-access institutions/

1. INTRODUCTION

There has been a great discussion over the last decade on employability skills integration in higher education in Morocco. The idea is to equip students with other skills that go beyond their specialty, these are in most cases referred to as transversal skills as they are common and taught to a wide range of students regardless their different disciplines. In scientific debates, attention has also been shifted to shed light on those skills and their application in Moroccan higher education. First of all, it is essential to familiarize students with those notions, and also to see how they perceive them. Understanding students' perception of employability skills would undoubtedly help in implementing the intended objectives and allow students to make the optimal use of these skills, which are often referred to as soft skills. According to Hillage and Pollard (1998), employability refers to an individual's ability to navigate the job market independently, obtain meaningful employment, and maintain it over time while achieving their full potential. Employability is not only about getting employed, but it is rather about staying in employment and adjusting to recent changes and advances in a given field. Thus, in this paper, we intend to bring to light the perception of employability skills of students, more particularly university students in open access education. Open access higher education refers to Faculties, where students have access to higher education without an entrance exam, and it is sufficient to get enrolled only with a high school degree. Since education is open, a number of challenges persist in this type of education across Morocco, that necessitate strategic reforms and well-thought of plans to enable those students to excel at their chosen academic path.

The paper will primarily explore how students view employability skills and what assumptions they hold about it; this study is exploratory in nature as we are trying to study the perception of students with respect to employability skills. The students' perception is of paramount importance as it will enable us as educators to adjust our content and take into consideration the students' needs when teaching soft skills, which are now part of higher education curricula along with foreign languages. The situation of young people in Morocco is subject to multiple problematics and overarching issues. That is why it has recently formed a public action group. Awareness has been growing over the past decade to take young people's needs and expectations into consideration when designing public policies.

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Nowadays, the notion of employability skills has been given more importance because of the changing nature of the current labour market. It is the result of globalization and the constant technological development (Henry, Hill and Leitch, 2005). According to (Henry et al. 2005), those changes sometimes represent opportunities at many levels. At the overall level, opportunities come from the reduction of trade barriers and technological advancements. Therefore, it is of paramount importance for university graduates to possess higher order skills. These skills will enable them to continuously recognize opportunities aiming at enhancing their employability prospects and integrate them into their life aspects. There is a great discrepancy between what is taught and what is needed at the job market, which widens this gap and raises a number of questions to what higher education institution should be teaching.

In the current conjuncture, employers demand workers with broader skills, who can manage labour market flexibility (Pfeifer, 2005; Brown, Green, Lauder and Sakamoto, 2001). At an individual level, individuals are confronted with a wide variety of employment opportunities in multiple contexts, including the ability to manage more than one job and take on more responsibility at work. Therefore, workers are required to be adaptable and productively integrate employment opportunities as the labour market requires and in accordance with their personal circumstances (Arnold, Silvester, Patterson, Cooper, Robertson and Burnes, 2005; Baruch, 2004).

In a study conducted by Mainga and Alamil (2022), it was revealed that employers, students, and professors alike prioritize communication, learning skills, positive attitudes, and problem-solving abilities as essential for entry-level positions. Furthermore, the study highlighted that student-centered teaching approaches are effective in fostering the development of soft skills. Employers conceive of employability as the skills sought after in new employees while universities view employability as the skills and attributes required from graduates to enable them to be more employable and enhance their ability to cope with change (Hager, 1996). Employability falls under two categories: the traditional or narrow view, which focuses on generic and discipline specific skills and the initial employment outcomes, and the broader view of employability, which focuses on a more holistic approach that acknowledges personal characteristics (Bridgstock 2009).

Numerous studies have extensively researched employability skills and its development across different spheres. However, little to no research has been devoted to fully understand student's perception and their stance with respect to employability skills. The objectives of the current study is to integrate students into this global discussion and explorie their immediate concerns more particularly in this digital age. Easy access to information and the widespread of AI tools also contribute to this matter, as students now feel that there is less

need to fully explore academic knowledge that will foster their personalities and render them critical thinkers, they rather resort to ready made solutions offered by different technological tools. Hence, the current study explores what students think about employability skills, and how can they best acquire those skills. In order to have successful higher edutional system, all components must be integrated and involved in the discussions for both policy makers and educators to take into consideration the real needs of the students. Similar studies have been done in different parts of the world, but this study will explore perceptions of Moroccan student and eventually come up with some implications, which will eventually foster the teaching in employability skills. The literature review has manifested that employability skills is an intricate construct, which possesses various implications and prospects. It is viewed differently, however, similar aspects are also held by different stakeholders

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study seeks to explore the perceptions of students in Moroccan higher education, more particularly students who follow education in open access ins schools. Since we explore perceptions, our study has qualitative features since our concern is to deeply study perceptions of a given group of participants. The study seeks to explore and propose practical recommendations and draw implications from the participants' experience. To achieve the purpose of the study, a number of methodological procedures were utilized. It will pave the way for future research to compare between the views of different stakeholders about employability skills. The study is purely qualitative as our primary purpose is to uncover trends in thoughts and opinion with an inductive approach to research. Qualitative research methodology relies on an approach that is interpretive and naturalistic by default. This points out to the fact that qualitative researchers study things as they occur in a natural setting. They attempt to ascribe meanings brought by people to different phenomena through means of interpretation (Maxwell 2005).

4. DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

Data was collected based on interviews with participants. The eligible participants for the current study, who were selected based on specific criteria. After obtaining participants' permission and willingness to take part in the study, an interview was scheduled. The data collection process first involved verifying participant's eligibility to participate in the study, the use of open-ended questions yields in depth responses about experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge of people. The data collection method for this study is semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted with University students in both undergraduate and graduate programs in Cadi Ayyad University in Marrakech, more particularly the school or arts and Humanities as an open access Faculty. Participants in the study were asked to reflect upon their experiences with employability skills and provide explanations. An average of 30 to 45 minutes interview time was devoted to each participant.

The researcher also used clarifying questions to further elicit details. After the process of conducting interviews has been finalized, interviews were transcribed by the researcher and organized for analysis, the process of transcribing the interviews also necessitated some translation work on the part of the researcher as some interviews were carried out in French or Arabic depending on the familiarity and easiness felt by participants.

Data analysis is going to involve the identification of common patterns within the responses and analyzing them critically so as to achieve the objectives and aims of the present research. In the process of data analysis, the researcher identifies connections, and an attempt is made to

understand new concepts about the issue that is being investigated during the data processing or analysis phase. In qualitative research, data analysis involves understanding and attributing meaning to what participants express regarding a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2009).

Participants

In qualitative research, there is ongoing debate about the appropriate number of participants to include in a study. However, as discussed previously and supported by the literature, sampling decisions are often guided by the concept of data saturation. This occurs when the researcher determines that additional interviews no longer yield new information or insights relevant to the study. Given that the present research is a qualitative study, standard qualitative procedures, including sampling until data saturation, were employed. The researcher took into consideration certain criteria in the purposive selection process of participants for the study. In this regard, student selection criteria are cited:

- Students from University Cadi Ayyad in Marrakech, more particularly students enrolled in open access education namely the faculty of letters and humanities
- Students who have been introduced to soft skills modules in their institution

Open ended questions were utilized which yielded more clarifications on the part of the interviewees, the researcher carried out the interviews until saturation point was felt and no new information was generated. the researcher is the one who conducted the interviews and served as an interviewer, which was a major role, the researcher also was the one who transcribed the data and analyzed it. In addition, the researcher made sure that he was not biased while reporting and interpreting the data. The researcher's responsibility is to communicate what participants meant during the interviews without any bias. All participants in this research were treated with total respect and professionalism.

5. RESULTS

The result section is reserved for presenting our data, we shall present the data and findings from the methods employed, and shed light on the results obtained. Therefore, an analysis procedure is provided and the following organization is adopted by first visualizing the students' results through graphical representation for a better understanding, which will pave the way for a great discussion of the results. Different interview questions are represented in the following figures.
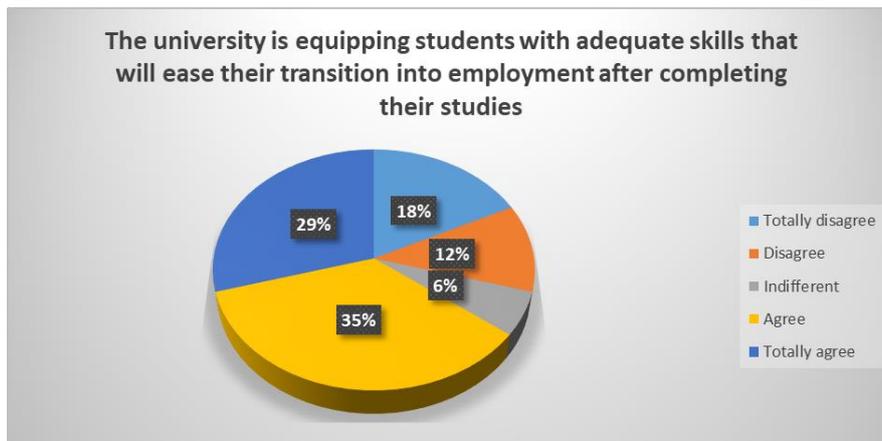
Figure 1
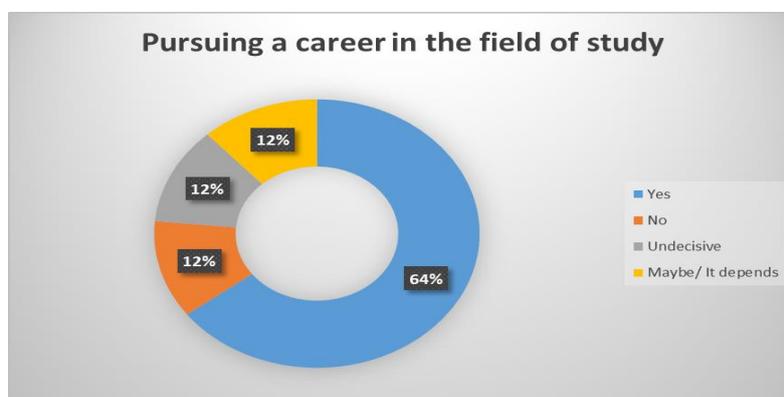
According to the graph above, most of the participants in the study choose to pursue a professional career in their field of study, with 12% uncertain about their carreer.

Figure 2

Thoughts on the current employment situation in Morocco
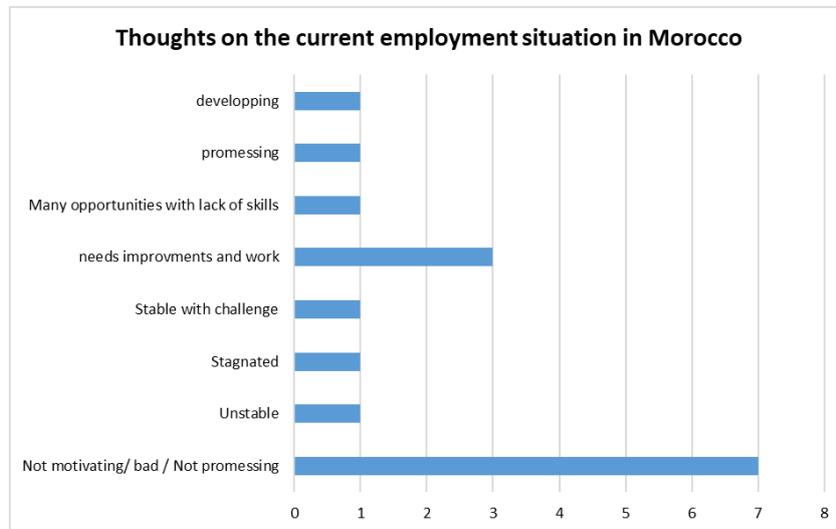
When asked to express their thoughts about the employment situation in Morocco, most of the respondents describe it as unmotivating.

Figure 3

The university is equipping students with adequate skills that will ease their transition into employment after completing their studies

In response to whether the university is equipping students with the right skills to ease transition into the job market, most respondents show hopeful feelings.

6. DISCUSSION

This part discusses the results obtained in the study, it focuses on ascribing meaning to the data presented, it delves into the meaning, importance and relevance of the results. The new era of the tewenty first century requires greater flexibility on the part of recent graduates entering the job market for the first time. Given the limited long life employment opportunities to cover the vast number of graduates, who graduate every year in the world, and more particularly in Morocco where a massive number of students graduate every year. Therefore, chances of getting and having employment for life in one's own field of study remains highly competitive and only a few number of graduates who get to benefit from long life employment. In order to position themselves in today's highly competitive job market, students and particularly recent graduates should embrace new opportunities, which might require other skills than those already developed at the university during studies.

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Being open to take and embrace different opportunities and explore new fields seem tempting and highly beneficial for some students; taking new opportunities certainly have long life lasting effects on one's career. In the context of the present research project, students who participated in the study and to my surprise, the majority of them did not express their willingness to explore new career options that might not be linked directly to their field of study. The majority of those students prefer to stick and pursue a career in their own area of studies; they showed no intentions or curiosity to explore different professional careers.

This reality, which is expressed by the students themselves, can be explained and linked to the fact that those students come from open access faculties, in those faculties students can choose to take an internship or not, internships are optional most of the time and students do not take them seriously. Internships are considered as a practical tool and the very first contact of students with the professional world, they can have a great impact on the choice of students' careers as they introduce students to overlapping careers and the different pathways they are able to take.

How students conceive of the current employment situation is shaped by many factors. The media play a crucial role in shaping young people's thoughts, also students thoughts are influenced by the experience of either their family members or friends. In the context of the present research, it is noticed that most of the students' participants in the context of this research project hold negative and preconceived opinions about the employment situation in the country, this prejudice is a result of students' exposure to negative experiences in their immediate environments, which influence how they perceive the employment situation in Morocco. This group of students, which represent the majority of the participants, hold negative thoughts about the current employment situation in Morocco for many reasons. For this group of participants, the employment situation is not motivating; students are not motivated to look for the best opportunities. Lack of motivation can, in fact, hinders students to have a great start of their career.

One of the questions, which was addressed to students' participants, sought to answer the satisfaction of students about the skills, which they are acquiring at the university level and the degree to which universities equip students with adequate skills that are crucial in the school to work transition process. Interviewed students included in this research project expressed varying degrees of satisfaction based on their personal experience in this phenomenological study. Most of the participants think that their institutions equip them with only subject bound skills, whereas there is little or no focus on the inclusion of soft skills in the curriculum. They tend to have hard skills, but they lack professionally oriented skills, which are necessary to boost their future employability. Students expressed their need to include more adequate skills that align with the professional setting, in addition to the hard skills that they are developing at the university. It was also stated that there is a huge demand for soft skills nowadays. In fact, there are more resources that need to be fully explored, it is no longer about the resources or the tools, however, it is about how to explore available tools and make them accessible to students so that they can take advantage of what is available in terms of resources.

7. CONCLUSION

The results provide evidence to the importance of undertaking internships as a form of putting into practice the acquired skills and gaining new skills in return. With the introduction of new programs, students feel relatively satisfied with the way they are being trained. There seems to be a huge gap and some participants stated discrepancy between students' actual skills

and the skills needed in the job market. The findings of the present research project indicate that universities and higher education institutions provide adequate skills especially hard skills and subject bound skills, but there is insufficiency concerning soft skills. To make up for this gap, both students and faculty should collaborate to make the learning process smoother and easier.

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