

Enhancing Employability through Curriculum Reform: A Mixed-Methods Study of Learning Gaps in the Schools of Letters and Humanities at Moroccan Universities

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Abstract

The present study investigated the responsiveness of education programs in the schools of letters and humanities at Moroccan universities to students' employability needs. We made use of a mixed-methods, two-phase case study design. In the initial quantitative phase, a Likert scale questionnaire was administered to 622 students to investigate the extent to which education programs develop in them the competencies required for employability. Further, in the follow-up qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 doctoral students to extend and explain the quantitative results. Findings indicate that the sampled institutions inadequately address three fundamental employability needs: proficiency in foreign languages, development of soft skills, and competency in information and communication technologies. Based on these findings, the study recommends substantial curricular adjustments, including integrating foreign language education, soft skills training, and ICT instruction in higher education in order to align educational outcomes with the evolving demands of the labour market.

INTRODUCTION

Graduates' employability has long been a reliable benchmark used in product-oriented studies seeking to evaluate the quality of education systems (Husain, 1987; Harvey, 2000; Madoui, 2015; Redpath, 1994; Gamage & Henegedara, 2019). In Morocco, this indicator is considered a significant manifestation of the degradation of the higher education system, as unemployment rates among university graduates are alarming, i.e., 19.6% according to labour market data

provided by the High Commission for Planning (HCP) for the year 2024. The failure of the system of education in helping graduates to be fit for the world of work has also been proved by several practical and theoretical studies (e.g., Ouakrime, 2003; El Masrar, 2015; El-Kaidi, 2018).

Accordingly, the primary objective of this paper is to investigate the extent to which higher education programs respond to students' employability needs, with a focus on schools of letters and humanities at Moroccan universities. The study is structured into six interrelated sections. Section one presents a general description of the schools of letters and humanities and provides an overview of prior theoretical and practical studies relevant to the topic of the paper in order to acquaint the reader with the context of the study. Section two details the methodology used to address the objectives and research questions of the study. Section three presents the quantitative results, followed by the qualitative findings explaining and extending students' perceptions. Section four discusses the findings in relation to previous research. Section five suggests implications to bridge the gap between higher education programs and students' employability needs. Finally, section six outlines the limitations of the study and provides recommendations for future research.

1. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

1.1.Fields of Study in Moroccan Schools of Letters and Humanities

Schools and Faculties of Letters and Humanities in Moroccan universities offer a wide range of programs in languages, literature, humanities, social sciences, and communication. Major fields include Arabic Studies, French Studies, English Studies, Spanish Studies, linguistics, literature, translation, cultural studies, communication, history, geography, philosophy, sociology, and psychology. English Studies, for example, generally cover language, linguistics, literature, cultural studies, communication, applied linguistics, and language teaching, while French and Arabic programs combine language studies with literature, linguistics, and cultural analysis. Other fields, such as History, Geography, Philosophy, Sociology, and Psychology, provide students with knowledge and analytical skills related to society, culture, human behaviour, historical development, and social change. Increasingly, Moroccan universities are also developing programs in translation, media and communication, digital humanities, intercultural studies, and professional communication, reflecting changing social and labour-market needs. At postgraduate level, students can pursue specialized master's and doctoral programs in areas such as applied linguistics, literature, translation, communication, cultural studies, education, and social sciences.

1.2.The Responsiveness of Higher Education to Employability Needs

The responsiveness of higher education to employability needs has become an important concern as universities are increasingly expected to prepare graduates not only with disciplinary knowledge but also with the skills and competencies required in changing labour markets. According to Tomlinson (2017) graduate employability encompasses not only theoretical knowledge, but also transferable skills, personal attributes, practical experience, and the ability to adapt to changing professional contexts. This entails that higher education institutions can enhance employability when their curricula are aligned with labour-market requirements which include communication, teamwork, critical thinking, problem-solving, digital literacy, creativity, leadership, and entrepreneurial skills, among other competencies. In this regard, the European Commission (2016) emphasizes the importance of strengthening the

relationship between education and employment by ensuring that graduates acquire relevant and future-oriented skills. Similarly, graduate-tracking systems can help universities evaluate employment outcomes, identify skills mismatches, and use feedback from graduates and employers to improve curricula (Ubachs and Henderikx, 2022). However, responsiveness should not mean simply adapting university programs to immediate labour-market demands; it should also entail developing graduates' capacity for lifelong learning, flexibility, and adaptation, particularly in the context of technological and economic change. Thus, a responsive higher education system should combine strong disciplinary foundations with practical experience and transferable competencies, enabling graduates to make smooth transitions into employment and remain adaptable throughout their professional careers.

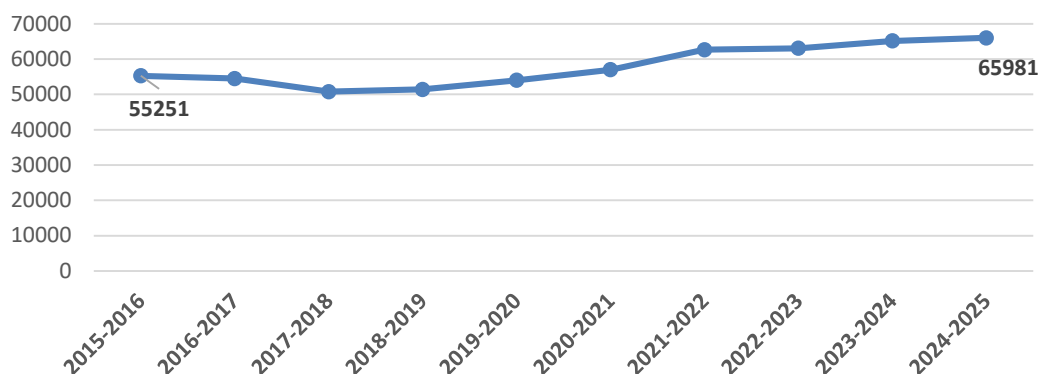
1.3.Previous Research

A growing body of literature has investigated the employability of Moroccan higher education graduates (e.g., Bougroum & Ibourk, 2002; El Aynaoui, 2005; Rachik, 2016; National Council for Education, Training, and Scientific Research, NCETSR, 2021; Messouab et al., 2025). On the practical side, most previous works came up with the conclusion that a significant number of graduates find it difficult to secure a job. For example, NCETSR (2021) examined the professional careers of 9899 Moroccan university graduates four years after graduation. The results showed that more than 69.4% are employed, while 13.3% are actively seeking employment. The study also found that 14.2% of graduates from open-access institutions face constant unemployment. In line with these findings, the High Commission for Planning (HCP) reported in 2021 that the total unemployment rate among Moroccans aged 15 and above has reached 12.8%, and that 26.8% of them hold higher education diplomas. This situation, according to the World Bank (2007) and Llorent-Bedmar (2014), cannot be explained solely by the inability of the national economy to create sufficient job positions, but also by the fact that the Moroccan education system does not produce graduates with the skills needed in an increasingly competitive world.

On the theoretical side, research works have highlighted that the quality of the training that higher education institutions offer plays a decisive role in graduates' employability. In this respect, El-Kaidi (2018, p. 1) argues that "university education [in Morocco] annually sends thousands of graduates into the clutches of unemployment because of the wide gap between what students were learning and what the job market required." El Masrar (2015, p. 147) elaborated on this issue, through asserting that the learning skills and knowledge in Moroccan universities "are mostly theoretical while the economic world requires practical knowledge." According to Ouakrime (2003), the situation is even worse in open-access institutions, such as Faculties of Arts, Law, and Sciences, which receive thousands of students annually to prepare them for second-rate employment at best and unemployment at worst.

As for the schools of letters and humanities, the context of the present study, they have substantially attained the objectives of expanding access to higher education and increasing enrollment rates, thanks to their free and open-access education policies. The data in Figure 1 support this claim, showing the evolution of enrollment rates in these institutions from 2015 to 2025:

Figure 1 Evolution of the Number of Students enrolled in the schools of letters and humanities



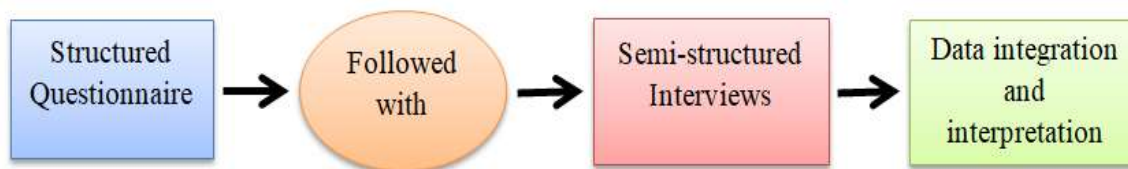
Source: Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation. (2026, January 27).

As shown in Figure 1, the number of students who joined the schools of letters and humanities increased significantly in the last ten years. It has gone from 55251 in 2015 to 65981 in 2025. However, the responsiveness of their education programs to students' employability needs, which is another significant standard for evaluating their performance, remains unexplored. In fact, assessing the quality of education programs encompasses a broad scope, including, among other factors, learning outcomes, the effectiveness of teaching and assessment, and the overall learning environment. Such an all-inclusive conceptualization of evaluation is not possible due to time and resource constraints. The objective of the present study is, therefore, confined to investigating whether education programs in the schools of letters and humanities develop in students the knowledge, skills, and competencies required for a successful transition of students into employment.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to investigate the extent to which education programs at the schools of letters and humanities in Moroccan universities respond to students' employability needs. To achieve this objective, as illustrated in Figure 2, a sequential explanatory research design was employed. The initial quantitative phase aimed to measure students' perceptions of how well education programs respond to their employability needs. The results obtained from the questionnaire were complemented and explained by the follow-up qualitative insights emerging from semi-structured interviews.

Figure 2 The Study's Research Design



2.1. Participants

The study gathered data from 622 postgraduate students who completed the questionnaire and 20 doctoral students who took part in semi-structured interviews. The respondents to the questionnaire were selected based on accessibility, allowing for an inclusive representation of students from various schools, namely the School of Letters and Humanities in Meknes (FLSHM), the School of Letters and Humanities of Ain Chock in Casablanca (FLSH Ain Chock), the School of Letters and Humanities in Rabat (FLSHR), and the School of Letters

and Humanities Dhar El Mahraz in Fes (FLDM). While interviewees were purposively selected, only students enrolled in different doctoral programs at the sampled schools were interviewed. The focus on this category of students is based on their academic experiences and maturity, with a minimum of five years, making them a more reliable source of information than master's or undergraduate students. The participants are categorized by gender, education cycle, and schools, as illustrated in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1 *Distribution of Participants who filled the Questionnaire by Gender, School, and Education Cycle*

Institution	Gender		Education cycle	
	Male	Female	Doctoral Students	Master's Students
FLSH Ain Chock	98	109	76	131
FLDM	64	67	39	92
FLSHM	81	77	51	107
FLSHR	71	55	25	101
Total			N = 622	

Table 2 *Demographics of the Interviewed Participants*

		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Institution	FLSH Ain Chock	3	2	5
	FLDM	4	1	5
	FLSHM	3	2	5
	FLSHR	2	3	5
Total			N = 20	

2.2. Research questions

The present study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent do students of the schools of letters and humanities at Moroccan universities perceive their education programs as responsive to their employability needs?

RQ2: What gaps do students perceive between what they study in the schools of letters and humanities at Moroccan universities and their employability needs?

2.3. Instruments

Two main instruments were employed to approach the research problem of this study: a Likert scale questionnaire and a semi-structured interview.

2.3.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire items are clustered into two sections. The first one covers the demographics of the sampled students, particularly their age, gender, institution, cycle of education, and type of studies. The second section, on the other hand, contains six items addressing students' perceptions regarding the responsiveness of educational programs to their employability needs. A five-point Likert scale of strongly agree, agree, cannot decide, disagree, and strongly disagree is used for respondents to choose according to their levels of agreement or disagreement with the statements. According to Brown and Rogers (2002, p. 120), this kind of Likert scale is "useful for getting at respondents' views, judgments, or opinions."

After the questionnaire was designed, internal reliability checking was performed. Bryman (2012, p.168) refers to internal reliability as “the consistency of measures”. More specifically, the researcher needs to make sure that the items in the scale measure the same construct consistently and do not fluctuate. The Cronbach alpha test is the most reliable and frequently used internal reliability test in research. It is expressed as a number that ranges from 0 to 1. Zero stands for no internal reliability, whereas 1 means perfect internal reliability. The coefficient alpha of the questionnaire was calculated using SPSS. The result in Table 3 shows that the correlation between the items is good. The coefficient is 0.838, exceeding 0.70, which is considered a satisfactory test level according to Bryman (2012).

Table 3 *The alpha reliability of the questionnaire*

Scale	The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient	Number of items
Responsiveness of educational programs to students' employability needs	.838	6

2.3.2. Semi-Structured Interview

After the administration and analysis of the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of twenty doctoral students, with an average of five students from each of the sampled schools. The interviewees are limited to students enrolled in doctoral rather than undergraduate and master's programs because this category of students is presumably a more reliable source of information, considering their academic maturity and the number of years they have spent at the university, five years minimum. The interview questions seek to explain the quantitative result, notably the participants' dissatisfaction with the responsiveness of education programs to employability needs. Interviewees were chosen based on their willingness: the researcher selected from those who provided their emails in the questionnaires and agreed to be interviewed.

Data collection occurred over one semester (Spring term of 2025). The questionnaire was administered online to facilitate broad participation, while interviews were conducted in person, which allowed for more straightforward discussions.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Quantitative Results

There is a consensus among researchers that education boosts students' chances of getting hired. This implies that education programs are expected to be designed and implemented such that they are responsive to students' employability needs. On that account, education programs were evaluated in relation to their responsiveness to employability needs of students in four different schools of letters and humanities.

The quantitative results have shown that most respondents have a global negative attitude towards education programs as to their responsiveness to students' employability needs. This is indicated in the responses, which mostly split between strongly disagreeing and disagreeing with all items. Table 4 below reports on the findings concerning the degree to which education programs are attuned to the employability needs of students.

Table 4 *Students' perceptions regarding the responsiveness of education programs to their employability needs*

The responsiveness of education programs to students' employability needs	Agreement degree					Desc. statistics	
	SA %	A %	CD %	D %	SD %	M	SD
1. Education programs responded to the need to expand my disciplinary knowledge.	5.53	67.12	0.27	17.39	9.70	3.41	1.13
2. Education programs responded to my need to be skilled at using technology.	10.8	19.5	0.2	59.2	10.4	3.21	1.26
3. Education programs responded to the need to improve my foreign language skills.	7.5	18.1	1.7	55.3	17.4	2.43	1.19
4. Education programs responded to my need to learn soft skills (e.g., time management skills, organizational skills, social skills, critical thinking skills, etc.)	5.8	14.5	0.0	35.5	44.2	3.9	1.24
5. Education programs responded to my need to develop the skills required in the job market.	2.4	18.8	0.2	47.8	30.9	2.14	1.12
6. Overall, I am satisfied with education programs in relation to their responsiveness to my employability needs.	0.0	14.0	0.2	43.5	42.3	1.86	.98

The results indicate that the majority of students (85.8%) are not satisfied with the responsiveness of education programs to their employability needs. Although 72.65% of them agree or strongly agree that these programs have responded to the need to expand their disciplinary knowledge, they failed to respond to other employability needs. For example, a significant percentage of students disagree (59.2%) or strongly disagree (10.4%) with the claim that these programs responded to their need to be skilled at using technology, as opposed to an insignificant number of those who agree (19.5%) or strongly agree (10.8%) with that very claim. Equally significant, over two-thirds (72.7%) of the respondents disagree or strongly disagree with the idea that the programs responded to the need to improve their foreign language skills. Similarly, items 4 and 5 demonstrate that education programs have failed to respond to students' needs to learn soft skills and the other life skills required in the job market. This is implied in the fact that only 20.3% and 21.2% of students, respectively, consider education programs to be responsive to the need to learn those skills and other life skills.

3.2. Qualitative Findings

In consistency with the quantitative results, the qualitative findings revealed that almost all students reacted negatively as to the responsiveness of education programs to their employability needs. Although this system of education provided promising opportunities to learn academic knowledge in different disciplines, as indicated by most of the respondents, it either overlooked or insufficiently catered for three central employability needs, highly required in the job market, namely, the need to learn foreign languages, the need to learn soft skills, and the need to study ICT. These issues are analyzed in their respective order while providing multiple supportive extracts from students' responses in the following sub-sections.

3.2.1. The need to learn foreign languages

Concerning postgraduate students' views regarding integrating foreign languages into their training, the results indicated that the respondents from all the sampled schools see learning foreign languages as an important element in their academic training. However, the overwhelming majority (17 out of 20) consider that the need to improve their language skills has not been appropriately catered to in the educational programs. Among the arguments advanced in this regard are the insufficiency of the amount of curricular time allocated to teaching/learning foreign languages (two hours per week), and the imposition of a foreign language to teach/learn (mostly French).

In line with the quantitative findings, which revealed that 72.7% of students reported that education programs did not respond sufficiently to their need to improve foreign language skills, qualitative data analysis showed that students were not satisfied with the way educational programs catered to foreign language teaching and learning for a variety of reasons. One major issue in this regard was the insufficiency of the amount of curricular time allocated to teaching/learning foreign languages. With reference to this, a doctoral student at the FLSHM said:

A two-hour course a week is not enough for me to develop an advanced proficiency level in the foreign language being learned. I think that foreign languages should be taught/learned not only in semester 1 and semester 2 but all through the six semesters of undergraduate studies.

This was stressed in the responses of other students regarding the serious need to learn foreign languages. A doctoral student at the FLDM, for example, reported that “[he] came from secondary school with serious deficiencies in French which [he] couldn’t overcome by the limited two-semester French courses he received at [his] school.” In accordance with this view, a respondent from the FLSHR maintained that “increasing the amount of curricular time allocated to foreign language teaching and learning is a necessity to get more exposure to those languages and make them easier to learn.”

The content of language courses is another frequently cited reason for students' dissatisfaction with the quality of foreign language learning opportunities offered in their schools. In fact, most interviewees (18) revealed that the foreign language module they attended focused on communication skills at the expense of addressing the development of students' general proficiency in the foreign language being learned. For example, as was noted by a doctoral student at the FLSH of Ain Chock,

The French language courses were more communication-based. Professors put more emphasis on communication strategies and speaking skills, but they did not offer sufficient practice in other equally important language components, such as grammar, vocabulary, reading, and writing, which did not allow me to develop a deeper mastery of French.

As a consequence, and due to prioritizing communication over the other components of language, most students reported having considerable difficulties with reading comprehension and writing accuracy. For instance, a doctoral student from the FLSHM, who studied French, disclosed how lack of exposure to reading materials and writing activities affected her writing abilities in this language:

I feel ashamed to say that although I studied French in the first two semesters of my undergraduate studies, I still can't write a well-structured and coherent paragraph in French. My problem is that my productive vocabulary size is too limited, and my grammar knowledge is still basic because these two language components were overlooked by the professor of French.

An additional concern arising from the analysis of interviews is that students had no say in the selection of the foreign language they learned after high school. In fact, upon entering the university, students were allocated a specific foreign language primarily based on professor availability, with little regard for their own linguistic preferences or their previous high school language education. This phenomenon can be attributed to the limited number of foreign language professors within Moroccan universities. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that this approach, as reported by nine students, had adverse effects. For example, a doctoral student from the Department of French at the FLSHR highlighted that “[she] studied Spanish in high school and was surprised to know that [she] was allocated English as a foreign language. [She] struggled with this language because it was the first time [she] got introduced to an English course”. Another doctoral student at the FLDM, who studied Spanish as a foreign language in high school, described his experience with the foreign language module and how it affected his academic performance:

I found it difficult to keep pace with the students who had prior exposure to English in high school. My lack of familiarity with this language and my deficient understanding of its fundamental basics placed me at a disadvantage. It impeded my active participation in class discussions and my ability to grasp the course materials.

Consequently, substituting the foreign languages studied in high school with others in higher education had a detrimental impact on the academic achievements and progress of some students. This was the case, for example, of a doctoral student at the FLSH of Ain Chock who recounted struggling with the foreign language course, needing to “retake it twice before [he] could eventually validate it by compensation because [he] studied Spanish in high school and had to study English at the university.” A similar concern arose from the response of a doctoral student at the FLSTM, asserting that “despite having studied Spanish as a foreign language in high school, he was required to study English at the university, despite his lack of familiarity with this language.” The student further noted that this situation adversely affected his academic achievement in semester 1 and semester 2 because “[he] always had to validate the foreign language module by compensation, which reduced his overall grades in S1 and S2”.

Furthermore, many students criticized the foreign language teaching policy in higher education, stating that the teaching of French is useless and that it would be preferable to replace it with English, which provides better opportunities for students to grow academically and personally. With reference to this, a doctoral student at the FLSHR, for example, asserted that:

English is the lingua franca of research in the world. Therefore, if researchers want their academic reputation to transcend national boundaries and open the doors for collaboration with international research organizations, they need to publish in this language to increase and broaden the access scope and visibility of their works.

A somewhat similar argument was presented by three other doctoral students, stating that the mastery of English would facilitate their academic international mobility and allow them to take part in international conferences that take place in different countries. In this regard, one of the respondents from the FLSTM explained: “English is omnipresent as a language for

presenting at the most reputable international conferences. Therefore, mastering this language can significantly enhance one's chances of participating in such conferences worldwide, not only in the Francophone world." A colleague of his from the FLSH of Ain Chock further emphasized the important role that English plays in advancing one's academic career, by stating that it offers more chances for feedback and exchange of knowledge: "When researchers from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds gather in a conference, the common means of communication and interaction between them is English." For all these reasons, another respondent from the FLDM maintained that English courses, in the short term, should be provided not only during master's studies but throughout the different phases of higher education. This respondent further stated that it would be preferable to substitute English for French in a bid to align the training offered in the Moroccan university with the standards of the international research community.

Based on the aforementioned findings, it becomes evident that education programs have not adequately addressed the learning requirements of students in the context of foreign language education. This deficiency is apparent through the expressed discontent of students. The dissatisfaction stems from two primary factors: firstly, the limited amount of curriculum dedicated to teaching and learning foreign languages in higher education, and secondly, the failure to consider students' prior language education in high school when determining what foreign language to teach in higher education. Consequently, students have advocated for an increase in the allocation of curriculum time for foreign language education, an alignment of the choice of the foreign language taught or learned in higher education with students' preferences and prior high school language education, and a replacement of French with English in Moroccan higher education.

3.2.2. The need to learn soft skills

Data analysis of items (4) and (5) in the student questionnaire revealed interesting results, in that only 20.3% and 21.2% of students agreed or strongly agreed that education programs have responded, respectively, to their need to learn soft skills (e.g., time management skills, organizational skills, social skills, critical thinking skills, etc.) and to the need to learn the other life skills required in the job market. These results were further investigated and confirmed when analyzing data from interviews. In fact, it has been found that although higher education allowed students to develop academic skills that include research, teaching and scientific writing, it failed to develop their soft and other life skills.

Almost all students demonstrated increased awareness of the necessity to learn soft skills and other life skills to equip themselves with the abilities required in the job market, especially in the context of globalization. Yet, they all reported that these skills were not incorporated into higher education curricula, which negatively affected the quality of their training and minimized their chances of getting a job after graduation. This was clearly stated by a doctoral student at the FLSHM as follows:

After graduation, I realized that all the content knowledge I acquired during my university studies fell short of securing me a job. I failed many job interviews due to my insufficient communication and negotiation skills. Unfortunately, these skills, among other soft and life skills, were not accounted for in the curricula, which focused more on hard skills and rote learning.

Another critical response was given by a doctoral student at the FLSHR, who advanced that “the knowledge [she] learned at the university was theoretical and useless in [her] everyday life.” This response gives a sad picture of post-university life in Morocco. After graduation, students face a huge skill mismatch between what they have learned and what employers need. The result, as maintained by a respondent from the FLSHM, is “very high unemployment rates among university graduates who are not prepared for the transition from university to the job market.” In the same line of thought, other students explained how their lack of essential soft and life skills affected their social lives. In this regard, a doctoral student at the FLDM, for example, stated that “after five years of unemployment, along with the accompanying depression, [he] decided to start [his] own project, which ultimately ended up in failure because [he] lacked the required entrepreneurial and leadership skills.”

This disconnection between higher education curricula and what graduates need in non-academic contexts was emphasized by other respondents who criticized education programs for focusing predominantly on theoretical courses without providing students with opportunities to apply what they learn at the university in real-life situations. In this regard, a doctoral student at the FLSH of Ain Chock maintained that “university graduates’ minds are stuffed with theoretical information that remains useless beyond the academic realm.” Similarly, a doctoral student at the FLSHR put forward that “soft skills such as teamwork, leadership, communication skills, time management skills, and entrepreneurial skills are the most needed skills after graduation. However, the higher education system neglects the development of these essential skills”. These responses, among others, show that the soft skills that are deemed necessary for students to lead successful academic and professional careers are neglected in higher education curricula.

In response to the excessive focus of the curricula on academic training and theoretical instruction at the expense of developing students’ soft skills, the respondents suggested some ideas for making education programs responsive to their need for broader training. For example, as was noted by a doctoral student at the FLSHM: “Soft skills should be incorporated in higher education curricula as a stand-alone module in the three training cycles: Licence (BA), Master, and Doctorate.” Another doctoral student at the FLSHR pointed out the role of professors, arguing that “those soft skills can best be developed through encouraging the practical application of theoretical knowledge and fostering problem-based and experiential learning that relate what students learn in class to the problems and challenges they face in real-world settings.” Likewise, a doctoral student at the FLDM noted that “Professors should set their courses according to students’ real-world needs beyond the academic setting.”

In brief, education programs have faced substantial criticism from the majority of students due to their predominant emphasis on theoretical knowledge and academic training, neglecting the essential development of students’ soft skills. This mistake has rendered higher education training less effective and weakened graduates’ employability. Consequently, it becomes imperative to review the curriculum and integrate soft skills into the training in order to address this deficiency within higher education programs.

3.2.3. *The need for training in ICT*

In alignment with the quantitative results, which revealed that 69.6% of students either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that education programs adequately

responded to their need to acquire and use the requisite Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), the insights gathered from interviews confirmed this quantitative finding, indicating that the amount of exposure to ICTs is not sufficient, and that, by consequence, there is a serious need for the integration of ICTs in higher education, not only as instruction facilitating tools but also as independent modules in the curricula.

Almost all interviewees (19) have noted that learning and using ICTs have become a sine qua non of having a successful and fruitful academic journey, especially in carrying out research. However, most of them reported suffering from weaknesses in this training area. For instance, when asked whether their schools provided any modules in ICT, all the students replied negatively and argued that they were exposed to formal ICT courses only in their pre-university education, where ICT courses were rudimentary and, therefore, not sufficient nor adequate enough to satisfy their actual advanced ICT needs in higher education. Strikingly enough, the respondents stressed that their exposure to ICTs was limited to the computers, interactive whiteboards, and overhead projectors used to project PowerPoint presentations, while their ICT needs go beyond the mere use of hardware to include the ability to use research software packages that are likely to facilitate the task of conducting scientific research.

The responses from students' interviews indicated that the lack of ICT courses in higher education, especially training on utilizing research software programs, has negatively affected their performance and effectiveness in research. Among the issues that were stressed in this regard are the challenges that researchers face in the data collection and analysis stages. In this connection, a doctoral student at the FLSHR, for example, put forward:

Today, research software has become essential for researchers. It eases, accelerates, and ensures quality data collection and analysis. However, I have never been taught how to use research software for these purposes during my entire university studies. This, among other reasons, impeded my research and retarded the completion of my thesis in due time.

Equally significant, some interviewees justified their inability to use research software by blaming professors of research methodologies and study skills for not incorporating this aspect of research training in their courses. For example, a doctoral student at the FLSH of Ain Chock wondered, "What will be the utility of theoretical teaching in study skills and research methodology modules if professors fail to introduce various research software packages that can facilitate the practical application of research?" Similarly, other students expressed concerns about the fact that professors themselves may lack the necessary technical expertise in research software packages. Consequently, as a doctoral student at the FLSHM maintained, "Professors overlook introducing research software to students, relying solely on their theoretical understanding, which can hinder students from utilizing software in research." This theoretical-oriented method of teaching brings to the fore professors' need for continuous professional development.

Some students at the FLSHM acknowledged having received initial training on using SPSS software for data analysis during their master's studies. However, as maintained by the same students, this training was not sufficient nor adequate enough. It primarily focused on the elementary statistical analysis of quantitative data, and it did not cover the research software necessary for analyzing qualitative data or organizing the references.

Due to the lack of training in research software in the curriculum, many students reported relying on self-learning to compensate for this gap. However, many challenges still hinder their efforts in this regard. Chief among these is their inability to afford the payment of the cost of software packages. As a result, they either have recourse to free trials of software packages, which they are unable to use to their full potential, or use pirated applications, which run counter to the ethics of research.

Based on the above findings, it is clear that education programs in the sampled schools have failed to respond to students' need for training in research software packages. As highlighted in the aforementioned quotes by doctoral students, this shortcoming has negatively affected students' performance and effectiveness in research. It is, thus, necessary to review the curricula and integrate ICT as an independent module, with special emphasis laid on training students to use different research software packages that can facilitate their task of conducting high quality research.

4. DISCUSSION

Fine-tuning educational programs to students' employability needs is of paramount importance for any education system to provide quality education. Regarding this issue, Stufflebeam (2003; 2007; 2014) argues that looking into the responsiveness of education programs to what is required in the job market is the first step in the process of evaluating the effectiveness of those programs. Accordingly, this study aimed to assess the extent to which education programs at the Moroccan schools of letters and humanities are responsive to students' employability needs. The results, both quantitative and qualitative, generally indicated that students' opinions converged significantly on the failure of the schools of letters and humanities in this area.

As reviewed earlier, preparing students for employment should be at the heart of education policy and planning. This implies that education programs should be designed and implemented such that they are responsive to students' employability needs. On that account, education programs of the schools of letters and humanities at Moroccan universities were evaluated as to their responsiveness to the students' employability needs. The results, both quantitative and qualitative, have generally indicated that education programs at these schools have either overlooked or catered insufficiently to some central employability needs, precisely the need to learn foreign languages, the need to learn soft skills, and the need to study ICTs.

Regarding the need to learn foreign languages, the majority of students (72.7%) believe that education programs do not respond sufficiently nor adequately to this learning need. They presented several arguments in the interviews to justify their stand points, the main of which is the insufficiency of the curricular time allotted to the teaching and learning of foreign languages, i.e., two hours a week. This limited time, according to the participants, does not make it possible for them to have enough exposure to the language being learned, primarily French in undergraduate studies or English in some master's programs. This outcome is consistent with a previous paper by Baggar and Eddamnati (2022), of which the main objective was to identify the factors behind students' weak performance at foreign language modules as revealed by the views of both professors and students in the School of Arts and Humanities of Marrakech.

The findings indicate that participants are agreed on the fact that two hours of instruction a week is not sufficient to enhance students' proficiency in French; they also call for increasing the amount of curricular time devoted to this module. Similar results are found in a more recent mixed methods study by Mernari (2023), in which the researcher set for himself the task to explain the effect of the French language as the medium of instruction on students' science achievement. The study revealed that students with poor science achievement usually encounter difficulties in science comprehension because of their insufficient proficiency in French. It also showed that foreign language courses focus on communication and ignore other aspects of language, such as writing, grammar, and vocabulary, a fact which does not help students to make up for their linguistic deficiencies in French.

Besides, the findings of the current study indicate that the majority of students hold unfavourable attitudes vis-à-vis teaching/learning French as a foreign language at Moroccan universities, with some expressing a preference for substituting English for French. To justify their preference for English over French, participants highlighted the various benefits English could bring to their academic training. The potential benefits brought up several times in the interviews include the fact that having a good mastery of English increases students' accessibility to scientific references relevant to their fields of interest. It also facilitates students' international mobility and enables them to pursue their studies or take part in international conferences abroad.

These findings are in line with the results of previous research having investigated Moroccan university students' preferences as to the foreign language they wish to study. For example, a study conducted by Belhiah and Abilkassem (2016) revealed that most students were in favour of substituting English for French as a foreign language at the university, citing different arguments, such as their need to read, cite or publish in English in indexed journals, or their intention to pursue their studies abroad. Furthermore, Zouhir (2013) advocates the teaching of English at the university, asserting that "it [English] is imposing itself as a strong language which is invading the space and reducing the domains of use of the French language in the education sector" (p. 271). In the same vein, El Kirat and Laaraj (2020) explored students' and professors' opinions about the adequacy of the Moroccan foreign language policy at the University of Mohammed V in Rabat. They found out that most participants were in favour of reviewing this policy and promoting English as the medium of instruction. The participants mostly viewed English as having a far-reaching effect on students' academic and professional careers more than that of French because it is more required in the job market. R'boul (2022), in a more recent study, came up with the same conclusion that Moroccan university students and professors are agreed on the fact that English should be substituted for French as a medium of instruction because French has proved to be no longer the language of science and research.

Concerning the students' evaluation of the responsiveness of education programs to the need to learn soft skills like time management skills, organizational skills, social skills, critical thinking skills, etc., the survey data revealed that 79.7% of the participants believe that this system of education is not equipping them with such skills, while 78.7% point out that it does not teach the skills needed in the job market. In the interviews, students advanced the disconnection between higher education curricula and the practical requirements of non-academic contexts as the primary reason for the failure of education programs in this respect.

The findings of the current study as to the responsiveness of education programs to students' needs to learn soft skills and the other life skills required in the job market are consistent with the findings of previous empirical studies. Most studies converge on the negligence of the teaching of soft skills in Moroccan universities and recommend that these skills be incorporated into university curricula. For example, El Messaoudi, Kerouad, and Fagroud (2022) conducted a needs analysis study to explore the soft skills gap between university studies and business in Morocco based on the views of English Department students at the School of Arts and Humanities in Meknes. The findings of their study indicate that a significant percentage of participants (55.88%) reported that the university does not equip them with the soft skills needed for employment. The participants also highlighted the inevitability of integrating soft skills in the curricula in order to (i) improve their academic performance, (ii) achieve more life success, and (iii) equip them with the skills and competencies required in the job market.

Similar findings were reported in a study by Chadil, Radid, and Sefri (2022) which examined students' perceptions of the importance of learning soft skills at Hassan II University of Casablanca, with a special emphasis on the Faculties of Sciences of Ain Chock and Ben M'Sick. Four hundred students participated in the study, the main findings of which showed that students are aware of the importance of soft skills, which they believe should go hand in glove with their academic training. The students also called for the integration of soft skills in the curricula to bridge the gap between what they study at the university and the requirements of the job market. The situation is similar in Mohammed I University in Oujda (Bouali, 2023) and Mohammed V University in Rabat (Birrou, Kich, and Larouz, 2023).

In response to the neglect of soft skills in Moroccan universities, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research introduced a reform in 2023 that integrates soft skills as an independent module in the curriculum. However, it remains too early to assess its effectiveness in equipping graduates with these skills. Nevertheless, some preliminary studies have already been conducted on this issue, and their findings have been discouraging. Birrou, Kich, and Larouz (2023), for instance, examined students' and professors' perceptions at Mohammed V University in Rabat with regard to the incorporation of soft skills into the curriculum and found that while most students were enthusiastic, professors expressed skepticism about the success of this initiative, citing their lack of training in teaching such skills as well as the lack of clarity regarding the module's content and assessment methods. Similarly, Jabri (2023) emphasized that training professors to teach soft skills is a *sine qua non* condition for their successful integration into the curriculum.

Another central employability need overlooked in education programs is the need to study how to handle Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), especially research software packages and digital tools necessary for data collection and analysis. Indeed, the quantitative results pertinent to this evaluation item indicate that 69.6% of students either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that education programs adequately responded to their need to acquire and use the requisite ICTs. The insights gathered from interviews confirmed this quantitative result, indicating that the amount of exposure to ICTs is neither sufficient nor appropriate. In fact, the participants were exposed to formal ICT courses only in their pre-university education, where those courses were rudimentary and, therefore, insufficient to satisfy their real advanced ICT needs in higher education. Strikingly enough, the respondents stressed that their exposure to ICTs at the university is limited to computers, interactive

whiteboards, and overhead projectors used to project PowerPoint presentations, while their ICT needs go beyond the mere use of hardware to encompass the ability to use research software facilitating the task of conducting scientific research. Among the tools students desire to learn are bibliographic management software and data processing software.

Relating these findings to previous research, it seems that they are in complete agreement with those of similar studies conducted in other Moroccan universities. For example, in a study conducted at Hassan II University of Casablanca, Biaz et al. (2014) assessed doctoral students' skills in using ICT for research purposes. Their findings indicate that only 36.8% of the participants declared having expertise in research software, while 47.7% did not know how to use bibliographic management software, and only 22.9% declared being skilled at using statistical processing software. Similar results are found in a study conducted by Benali and Laouni (2022) on how Moroccan university students perceive their level of digital informational, writing, and referencing skills and knowledge of plagiarism. The study, of which the sample included 204 students from different Schools of Arts and Humanities across Morocco, revealed that the majority of respondents (77%) proved to be unfamiliar with and less efficient at using research software packages in collecting and analyzing data. In addition, in a study that examined the use of ICT among students of History and Civilization at the University of Abdelmalek Esaadi in Tetuan, Oulmaati et al. (2017) found that 19% of the students do not master basic office tools, including Excel software, PowerPoint presentations software, and Word software.

In the light of the findings of the current study and those of previous research, it could be concluded that students' needs to study ICTs and research software packages are not taken into account in education programs at the schools of letters and humanities affiliated to Moroccan universities. Several studies revealed that the failure of education programs to respond to this academic training area had a discernible effect on students' readiness for transition from face-to-face to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Brigui (2020) found that 64.4% of students in the Faculties of Letters and Humanities were not ready for e-learning because of their limited digital competencies. Similarly, Kaouni et al. (2022) investigated the challenges that students faced during the pandemic and found that 19% of them did not master the pedagogical tools offered by their institutions, including Zoom, Google Meet, and Google Class. In consequence, there is a serious need for the integration of ICTs in higher education, not only as instruction-facilitating tools but also as independent modules in the curricula to enhance students' digital literacy.

5. IMPLICATIONS

The current study has revealed the prevalence of general dissatisfaction among the participants regarding the responsiveness of education programs in the schools of letters and humanities at Moroccan universities to students' employability needs and the job market's requirements. In fact, education programs at these institutions were criticized for not balancing theoretical knowledge with practical work, and for not promoting graduates' employability skills, precisely ICTs, foreign languages, and soft skills. Following these findings, some pedagogical implications can be provided to mend for the deficiencies associated with the curricula taught at the schools of letters and humanities in Morocco. These include:

- Professors are recommended to renovate their course materials regularly to make them responsive to students' employability needs;
- Course designers are highly recommended to keep the balance between theoretical knowledge and practical work in their courses;
- Course designers are also recommended to make their courses responsive to the skills and knowledge required in the job market;
- Soft skills, foreign languages and ICTs have become essential requirements in the job market. Therefore, it is imperative to embed them as separate modules in the curricula throughout all cycles of education in the schools of letters and humanities.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is limited by approaching its problem merely within four institutions, the schools of letters and humanities in Meknes, Rabat, Casablanca, and Fes, which may restrict the generalizability of its findings to other contexts. Another source of weakness lies in the fact that the study evaluated the responsiveness of education programs to employability needs solely through the lenses of postgraduate students. That is, the voices of other stakeholders have not been heard.

Accordingly, future research should expand the sample to include a broader range of institutions and actors, such as professors and employers, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mismatch between education programs and employability needs in the Moroccan higher education system. Finally, longitudinal studies tracking students' post-graduation would be beneficial in assessing the long-term impact of curricular changes on employability outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights critical gaps in the education programs of the schools of letters and humanities in Moroccan universities, particularly in the areas of foreign language teaching and learning, soft skills development, and ICT proficiency. These deficiencies suggest that the current curricula in these schools are not fully aligned with students' employability needs or with the competencies demanded in the job market. To bridge this gap, the study recommends incorporating foreign language education, soft skills training, and ICT instruction as central components of curriculum development. Addressing these areas will better equip students with essential skills and ultimately enhance their employability chances.

On the whole, although the Moroccan higher education system has succeeded in responding to the huge increase in student numbers, it has failed to meet the aspirations of graduates and the changing demands of employment. As a result, there exists a considerable discrepancy between what is taught and employability needs. This situation calls for rethinking the objectives of the national higher education system. On top of these objectives is equipping graduates with the skills needed in the workplace.

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