Soft skills from university to workplace: A literature review

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Abstract

Employers of the 21st century seek candidates who master both «hard» and «soft» skills abilities, because most valued and effective employees in business are frequently those who possess both technical and transversal skills.

Changes in generational structure, which lead to high demand for soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, motivation, problem-solving, and trust. The latter become highly valued in the workplace. Employability skills can be defined as the necessary abilities not just to land a job but also to grow inside a company, in order to reach one’s full potential and successfully contribute to the strategic goals of that company.

The skills that are crucial to employability are not only the hard skills, cognitive and technical, job-specific and discipline-specific abilities, but also the psychosocial and behavioral skills. These transferable skills, such as communicating, problem-solving, flexibility, persistence, resilience, and creativity, are common to almost all complex endeavors and applied across all fields.

However, to fill the needs it is essential to set some pedagogical adjustments, including the integration of soft skills development into university curricula through innovative teaching approaches, in order to integrate young graduates into a highly competitive workplace.

In this paper, we review the literature related to these two concepts first, the incorporation of soft skills development into university curricula. Second, the impact of these learnings on the young graduates’ employability and career development. Through the present article we are going to answer the main research question: Do innovative teaching soft skills approaches encourage young graduates’ employability and career development?

Keywords: Teaching Soft Skills, Psychosocial and Behavioral Competencies, Employability, Career Development, Innovative Teaching Approaches.

JEL classification: M12, M14

Paper type: Theoretical Research
1. Introduction

The integration of soft skills development into university curricula presents the first key of student’s success career, universities setting calls for the essential pedagogical modifications to both the curricular content and professional practices, to provide individuals with both the necessary talents for "being" and the skills for "doing," (Guerra-Baez, 2019). Learning these soft skills abilities can facilitate graduates’ employability and enhance their future careers, through two types of trainings. First training is the “inside training activities”, such as role-playing activities, team-building workshops, business simulation and, problem-solving strategies. Second training belongs to the “outside training activities” including the volunteering and the entrepreneurial business projects that aim to essentially build strong soft skills performances.

According to wats and wats (2009), success in the work environment depends on 85% of soft skills and only 15% on hard skills. Nevertheless, the employers of the 21st-century seek candidates who master both « hard » and « soft » skills abilities because; it has been demonstrated that employees with a mix of technical and soft competencies are often the most valuable, effective, and productive in the organization.

Wagner’s (2008) research, presented in the Global Achievement Gap, highlighted the seven « survival skills » that students need to attain in order to overcome today’s workplace challenges mainly: Critical thinking and problem solving, initiative and entrepreneurialism, collaboration across networks, agility and adaptability, accessing and analyzing information, effective oral and written communication, curiosity and imagination. This research also joins the most needed soft skills in this 21st-century presented in 2018 by the World Economic Forum and is more detailed in the following review.

Young graduates should gain the most essential skills for the 21st century in technology, industry, and business sectors, to thrive in this highly competitive global work environment. In today's business, it is necessary to have individuals who can effectively interact with others and operate within a team culture.

According to Sultana (2014), in order to enhance group performance and cooperate in the production of new ideas, employees must be adept at resolving conflicts and promoting diversity and inclusion.

In The Global Achievement Gap, Wagner (2008) was a pioneer in the promotion of behaviors and mindsets adapted for the twenty-first century. He has argued that individuals should master several survival skills as, critical thinking and problem solving, agility and adaptability, initiative and entrepreneurialism.

The development of soft skills needs to be incorporated into university courses to support recent graduates in their future professional practice. It is obvious that candidates who master marketing themselves will have a greater chance of winning in a variety of competitive situations and will consequently be more employable.

In 2015, Raciti suggested that higher education institutions should place a stronger priority on promoting the growth of students' soft skills through an approach to social and pedagogical reality. Since soft skills have a direct impact on a person's wellbeing, capacity for social adjustment, and capacity for job scenario adaptation, they must be integrated and discussed at the academic level.

According to Guerra-Baez (2019), college students need to obtain a strong education that incorporates both academic knowledge and practical skills in their chosen field of study.

Project activities offer a significant potential for the development of "soft skills," according to Tokaruk et al. (2021). Entrepreneurial company projects offer huge opportunities for the development of "soft skills" because they address not only social and administrative issues but also educational ones.

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In the Moroccan context, studies show that curricula and university training systems give a marginal place to soft skills, which constitute the weakest pillar of the Moroccan education system. Through an exploratory study that used the roles of soft skills in career development, competitiveness, and employability as research axes, Mouheti (2021) presents how Moroccan managers in the tertiary sector view soft skills. The findings demonstrate the significance of soft skills in Moroccan businesses, especially in the private sector, and reveal that 80% of Moroccan managers fully support the inclusion of soft skills in university curricula. According to them, cooperation, interpersonal communication, active listening, and creativity are the most needed soft skills.

The present article is a theoretical review that aims to provide a brief description of the “Soft Skills” needed for the 21st-Century in the first section, and to analyze the reasons to incorporate soft skills development into university curricula in the second section, it also aims to explore some innovative teaching soft skills approaches that are essential for both academic and professional success, regarding the fourth section, it emphasizes the impact of these learning on students’ employability and career development, then, the final section presents a small literature presenting the different studies and research carried out in the Moroccan context.

2. Soft Skills Needed for the 21st-Century

To succeed in this highly competitive global work environment, young graduates should learn the most needed skills for this 21st-century, in the fields of technology, industry and business. People who can work in a team environment and interact effectively with others are recommended for today's workplace.

21st-century learning should be focused on four fundamental types of learning: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together, and learning to be (Delors, 1996). The World Economic Forum predicted which soft skills would be most in demand in 2020. They predicted that learning new technology will continue to be crucial, but an increased importance will be given to the value of soft skills.

The World Economic Forum defined the top 10 skills needed in 2020 as following: Complex Problem Solving, Critical Thinking, Creativity, People Management, Cognitive Flexibility, Emotional Intelligence, Coordinating With Others, Judgment and Decision Making, Service Orientation, Negotiation.

According to Nealy (2005), to equip students with abilities that satisfy business and industry objectives. Faculty members who are training future business leaders must undergo a significant transformation, because the workforce and classroom demographics have changed in the twenty-first century.

Referring to the Australian students' view of the necessary soft skills for career success, two-thirds of world jobs are expected to be focus on soft skills by 2030; in the same context, they found that 88% of Australian students believe soft skills are important for their future career. According to the latter study, the top three soft skills that Australian students consider essential for professional success are Critical thinking 14%, Creativity 12% and Complex problem solving 23% (World Economic Forum, 2016).

Brungardt (2011) noted that nowadays, due to the fluidity of the organizational structure, employees require more autonomy, developed emotional skills, and less repetitive job tasks. From another perspective, Sultana (2014) noted that employees must be skilled at conflict resolution and inclusion in order to improve group performance and collaborate in the generation of creative ideas.

Davis and Muir (2004) reveal that employees with the ability to negotiate solutions or reformulate work processes using a systems approach are more effective contributors. Additionally, they find that all employees must be skilled at team collaboration and affirming...
others. In the same context, they show that a college diploma does not guarantee that a person has the required qualifications to succeed in the workplace. Consequently, in this 21st century, employers are looking for people who can flexibly combine between hard and soft skills. Furthermore, Soft skills have become more valuable in the workplace as a result of new technology and organizational changes (Borghans, Weel, & Weinberg, 2014). Wagner (2008), in The Global Achievement Gap, was an early leader in the promotion of dispositions and attitudes for the 21st century. He has advocated seven survival skills that students need to attain presented in the following list:

- Critical thinking and problem solving
- Collaboration across networks and learning by influence
- Agility and adaptability
- Initiative and entrepreneurialism
- Effective oral and written communication
- Accessing and analyzing information
- Curiosity and imagination.

In the following section we are going to analyze the literature related to the integration of soft skills development into university curricula, in order to produce "work-ready" graduates who are more employable and with a diverse portfolio of soft skills. Then, we are going to identify the difference between “technical” and “transversal” skills, and which one are more valuable and usually in demand in the highly competitive workplace environment.

3. The Need to Incorporate Soft Skills Development in University Curricula

Integrating soft skills development into university curricula would help new graduates in their professional careers. It is evident that candidates who can market themselves well, would have more chances to succeed in different competitive situations, and will therefore become more employable.

In 2015, Raciti noted in recent years through an approach to social and pedagogical reality, that higher education institutions should prioritize encouraging the development of students' soft skills. Soft skills need to be integrated and discussed at the academic level because they are directly linked to an individual's well-being, social adjustment, and workplace situation adaption.

Guerra-Baez (2019) states that university students must receive a solid education that includes both academic and practical abilities in their chosen field of study. Nevertheless, methodologies aimed at encouraging creativity for problem-solving, self-learning, critical thinking, and societal commitment. In the same context, Ruiz (2007) mentioned that in order to learn to exercise initiative, full training is required, including training for doing and training for being.

According to Harvard University Associate Professor David Deming (2017) universities have to complement technical skill training with soft skill training in order to produce "work-ready" graduates who can proudly apply themselves in a challenging job market. It is also critical that educators incorporate the teaching of soft skills into their curriculum because the majority of employers are looking for graduates with a diverse portfolio of soft skills.

Cornalli (2018) identified the educational system’s persistent misalignment along with the labor market’s needs, and consequently, raises doubts about the role of the university in forming the skills needed to lead a successful and responsible life and for society to face present and future challenges. Dean and East (2019) explain in their study that the earlier people are trained in soft skills, the better they will be, because people may be more resistant to change in the coming years.
Soft skills training needs to be incorporated into university curriculum to cover the “How” the “Why” as well as the “What.” As a result, this incorporation could be strategically beneficial for professional world success. In the same context, Anthony and Garner (2016) agreed that educators should increase opportunities for teaching soft skills in all courses to prepare college students for employment. Moreover, students respond positively to interactive workshops for learning, particularly when there is active participation, such as the inclusion of guest speakers, or public speaking workshops in the classroom.

In the following section, we are going to analyze the literature related to the different innovative teaching soft skills approaches and their impact on the graduates’ behavior and performance.

On the other hand, we are going to identify the project activities that are essential to incorporate soft skills development into university curricula, and which learning approaches could help students become more qualified for professional contexts.

4. Innovative teaching soft skills approach

Tokaruk et al (2021) identified that project activities have great potential for the development of «soft skills» entrepreneurial business projects, they solve not only educational but also social, and administrative tasks, accumulating enormous possibilities for the development of «soft skills». He added that similar initiatives for students are one of the best forms of investments in one’s own future. In the same study, he emphasized that students’ social activities outside the classroom and out-of-class activities related to the practice of volunteering and local government programs, within higher and secondary education, are becoming a powerful resource for the development of social skills.

Although project activities, entrepreneurial business projects, and volunteering are essential to incorporate soft skills development into university curricula as stated in the previous study, they are not sufficient according to other authors. According to some academics, role play, reflective practice, and teaching students variety of problem-solving strategies, can be used to help students become more qualified for professional situations.

The World Economic Forum (2016) pointed out that a university’s primary role in society is to generate and spread new knowledge, but it also has an obligation to produce graduates who are “work-ready”. Students have the opportunity to create and trust the learning behaviors expected for creativity through educational experiences that pose open-ended challenges or invite solutions to real-world problems.

The importance of role-playing cannot be overstated. Individuals who may be confronted with emotionally charged individuals must be prepared to respond, role-playing is a valuable preparation tool. Training programs must include real-world scenarios so that trainees can refer to the theory and techniques being presented (Dean and East, 2019).

In the same context, Guerra-Baez (2019) identified that the development of soft skills calls for interaction with communities since it enables students to establish a strong sense of identity, and to highlight the need of working as a team to achieve better outcomes in their daily job and personal activities. Furthermore, it must be emphasized that the suggestion to include additional actors in the teaching curriculum for soft skill training requires a shift in the pedagogical paradigm.

From the same perspective, Levant, Coulmont, & Sandu, (2016) identified that individuals can practice working through their reactions to various scenarios through role-playing. Individuals with soft skills understand the significance of getting involved in business simulations.

While Levant et al. (2016) affirmed that business simulations help in active learning, Geithner and Menzel (2016) noticed that a simulation project that included role-playing enhanced group
members’ soft skills, and one of the advantages of the simulation was that participants might also make decisions without being afraid to fail.

In this respect, all of these contextual factors that contribute to this educational space are predicted to promote the development of these psychosocial and behavioral skills, because students assume their professional and personal roles in order to face new challenges, as a result of this educational process (GuerraBaez, 2019). Similarly, and according to the same author, institutions of higher education should focus their efforts on assessing the development of soft skills during pre- and post-practical vocational training. As a result, it will be possible to determine whether efforts should be concentrated on the professional internship program or whether it is education with "simulated" training that enables the acquisition of these abilities. Barron and Darling-Hammond (2010) identified that traditional education practices alone are not enough to allow students to develop an aspiration to analyze, to think critically, to write, and to speak effectively, or even to solve complex problems. To effectively learn these abilities, specific programs and approaches will be required.

In the following section we are going to analyze the literature related to the young graduates’ employability and career development, through the integration of soft skills development into their university curriculum. Then, we are going to emphasize the needs of companies in terms of psychosocial and behavioral competencies in coming years.

5. Employability and career Development

According to Wats and Wats (2009), a person’s success in the workplace is determined by 85% soft skills and 15% hard skills. For these reasons, Bolstad (2012) emphasizes that students should build their sense of identity, become self-reliant, be critical, creative thinkers, be able to use initiative, be team players, and be able to engage in ongoing learning throughout their lives. According to Dana, Hancock, & Phillips (2011) soft skills are so critical to success in today’s business. Bailly & Lene (2013) pointed out that the changes in generational structure have led to a rise in the demand for workers with soft skills, they take much importance in the workplace including communication, teamwork, motivation, problem-solving, enthusiasm, and trust (Wahl et al., 2012).

By the same token, Tokaruk et al., (2021) associated the definition of « soft skills » with the interaction of people in society. In other words, «soft skills» are necessary for everyday life and for professional development. Indeed, according to modern scientific research, professional success is formed precisely by «soft skills», therefore for career growth, we need to start using them from the lowest level.

In 2018, Cornalli also demonstrates that the skills that are crucial to employability are not only the hard skills, cognitive and technical, job-specific and discipline-specific abilities, but also the so-called « soft skills ». These transferable skills are common to almost all complex endeavors and applied across all fields, such as communicating, problem-solving, flexibility, persistence, resilience, and creativity.

Likewise, Gloria A. Meeks (2017) provided an example of the importance of collaborative spirit among workers. For example, team members who are able to work well with people of different generations and backgrounds are generally more productive and better able to focus on common priorities. The ability to learn new methods and technologies also is a desired soft skill for all workers and companies, that value learning as a soft skill, recognize various learning styles, encourage employees to use the approaches that are most effective for them.

Mina Welsh, Marie Stewart and al., (2011) suggested that employability skills are described as "skills required not just to obtain employment but also to progress within an organization in order to realize one's full potential and contribute successfully to the strategic directions of this organization." A set of elements or facets were given for each key skill, which developed them and suggested how they may be utilized in different industry scenarios. Each substantive skill
was argued to be generic, but the relative importance of the elements would differ depending on job responsibilities and degrees of employment.

Numerous studies have been conducted through this academic literature review to identify how learning these soft skills abilities can facilitate the graduates’ employability and enhance their future careers. However, some other authors emphasized that having only a set of soft skills abilities are no longer sufficient to look for the job, get the job and keep it with great performance because technical skills are also crucial to finding a job and building a strong career. Employees with a mix of hard and soft skills competencies are the most valuable in the organization (Griffith & Hoppner, 2013).

Consequently, fresh graduates students today should be adequately prepared to lead and direct groups, to solve everyday problems, be proactive, and be capable of creating and implementing ideas for employability. People who lack interpersonal skills are more vulnerable to become involved in interpersonal conflict. For this reason, employers are looking for self-motivated, and independent workers (Wahl et al., 2012).

In the following section, we are going to analyze the literature related to the Moroccan context, especially, studies and research that have been conducted during last years. We are going to identify in the same context, the impact of soft skills learning on the Moroccan companies’ performances, then, emphasizes the most needed soft skills for the Moroccan industry.

6. Moroccan Context

Moustadraf (2020) carried out a study on 531 Moroccan university students, belonging to different fields such as business, engineering and, human sciences. The main aim of this study was to analyze the impact of different Moroccan teaching methods on the learning and acquisition of soft skills in university curricula. The results show that the most common teaching approaches in Moroccan universities are based on traditional and classical methods of transmission and teaching knowledge without any interaction with students. Additionally, the same study identified that trying new innovative learning methods, such as « design thinking », « teamwork » and « problem-solving » workshops, not only boost effectively students’ creativity but also enhance their analytic and critical thinking to make good decision-making.

Errafiq (2021) demonstrated the pedagogical contribution of integrating soft skills into university training by associating them with the concept of intercultural communication, which is a behavioral skill currently required in internationally oriented companies. He also pointed out that, Curricula and university training systems give a marginal place to soft skills, which constitute the weakest pillar of the Moroccan education system. He revealed that soft skills in Morocco are in search of identity, and the integration of these competencies in the university curriculum is conditioned by official recognition and a clear status with the ministry concerned.

Mouheti (2021) presents during her article the perception of Moroccan managers of the tertiary sector on soft skills, through an exploratory study taking as research axes, the role of soft skills in career development, competitiveness and employability.

The results obtained show the importance of soft skills in Moroccan companies, particularly in the private sector, as well as 80% of Moroccan managers are in full agreement with the integration of soft skills in the university curriculum. The most needed soft skills according to them are mainly teamwork, interpersonal communication, active listening and creativity.

EL FILALI (2021) considers that the concept of soft skills is a complex one because of the lack of an official list of these skills, the ambiguity of the names related to soft skills, the emergence of certain new skills, which makes the notion of « soft skills » a complex one.
According to this study, the complexity that surrounds soft skills could be better understood by a consensus on the definition and naming, by discernment of each soft skill, and by the adoption of an official list of these specific competencies.

7. Discussion

The review presented above unveiled two important aspects related to theoretical and practical aspects of soft skills. The first aspect identified the need to incorporate soft skills development in university curricula, through the innovative teaching of soft skills approaches. The second aspect highlighted the importance of soft skills and competencies in the workplace starting from young university graduates’ employability, and analyzing the impact on their career development.

During the analysis of our academic literature review, it has been observed that there is a wide agreement in integrating soft skills development into university curricula, as the first key for students’ success career, and integrating into a highly competitive workplace. However, several studies show that responding to the need of incorporating soft skills development in university curricula; requires replacing in the first place, the traditional education approaches by some new innovative pedagogy in order to get students involved into interactive and creative learning. The analysis of the work presented above reveals that the global economic industry will have a huge need for soft skills abilities in the next ten years. The massive use of software and machines, the new structures of work procedures, and having less repetitive job tasks in all areas of economic activity have revealed new professional requirements and new needs for productivity development. Among these requirements and needs are the high level of psychosocial and behavioral skills, the autonomy, the conflict resolution, the inclusion for improved team performance and, the collaboration in generating innovative ideas.

One of the most controversial questions pointed out by authors is that a university degree alone does not guarantee that students possess all the professional skills needed to succeed in the work environment. Employers of the 21st century seek candidates who master both «hard» and «soft» skills abilities. Consequently, university students should be taught theoretical and practical knowledge related to a profession. Employees with a mix of hard and soft competencies are often the most valuable and productive in the organization.

In the same context, numerous studies have been conducted through this review to identify how learning these soft skills abilities can facilitate the graduates’ employability and enhance their future careers. However, some other authors emphasized that having only a set of soft skills abilities are no longer sufficient to look for the job, get the job and keep it with great performance because «technical» skills are also crucial to finding a job and building a strong career.

Several studies presented in the academic literature review (Raciti 2015, Guerra-Baez 2018, Ruiz 2007) have demonstrated that integrating soft skills development into university curricula can help new graduates in their professional careers. Soft skills help learners to become more employable and give them more chances to succeed in different competitive situations. The presented studies have shown that students react positively to interactive workshops especially, when there is an active engagement to these innovative teaching approaches, and also when teaching soft skills development is extended throughout the whole academic program. Nevertheless, these studies do not show how to apply these interactive approaches in different university subjects such as mathematical studies, medical studies, psychology studies, or even information and technology studies. Teaching these transversal competencies to scientific students could definitely be different from literature or art students from this perspective, future research should identify which teaching approaches are more aligned with each study field.

During the literature review, it has been observed that there is a wide agreement in integrating INNOVATION into the whole soft skills teaching process. However, what must be innovative...
for some universities could be traditional for others, because « INNOVATION » still an abstract concept that every study defines differently, especially in the educational field.

On one hand, role-playing activities, reflective practices, team-building workshops, project activities, business simulation, and teaching a range of problem-solving strategies are definitely some « inside » training activities that are crucial to build an integral performance of soft skills. On the other hand, these activities and strategies are not sufficient according to other authors who insist that several other strategies could be implemented to assist students in their readiness for professional challenges. Most importantly, the « outside » training activities, volunteering, local government programs, and entrepreneurial business projects that are becoming a powerful resource for the development of soft skills, especially when there is a great combination between « inside » and « outside » teaching activities.

The misalignment between universities’ academic programs and the labor market’s needs has rarely been highlighted by academics, as it is a significant phenomenon facing higher education all over the world. However, this misalignment raises some doubts about universities’ ability to form « work-ready » graduates who should face future work challenges. Otherwise, this problem is still ambiguous, and which requires more studies, research, analysis in order to meet these methodological academic and economic needs.

8. Conclusions

The paper review presented is based on the analysis of 28 articles concerning soft skills from university to the workplace and published from 2004 to 2021. In general, publications within this paper are dominated by studies from Australia, the USA, and Europe.

It was also concluded from the review that candidates that have a good set of soft skills on their resume are more attractive to employers than those who only have technical skills. The presented review shows that recruiters usually look for the candidate who not only will do the job, but add a big value to the company as well. Numerous studies have been conducted through this review to determine how developing these soft skill talents might help graduates get employment and improve their future professions.

The findings present that traditional pedagogies are often so passive for university students since, they are limited to the transmission of knowledge and should be replaced by some active and innovative pedagogies. According to previous studies, soft skills development should be incorporated into university curricula, in order to promote multidisciplinary work in higher education systems and transform young graduates into highly productive professionals that are able to face the new work environment challenges with high soft skills abilities including resilience, agility, emotional intelligence, working under pressure and cognitive flexibility.

Nonetheless, the paper has some limitations, we should point out two messing concepts that should be emphasized by authors during the review. The First concept is related to soft skills « assessment process » since it has been observed that limited research deal with this assessment topic. The second one is related to soft skills « training period ». Researchers may wonder if this short period in university curricula will be enough to train and create graduates with high performances or, on the contrary, they should anticipate this teaching from earlier levels (primary school) because, during advanced levels of study, students often become more resistant to any pedagogical change.

In the same context, teaching these transversal competencies to students studying sciences may differ significantly from teaching them to students studying literature or arts. Future research should determine whether teaching strategies are more adapted to each field of study. Additionally, a quantitative study can be taken into consideration from this perspective, such as conducting interviews to get more specific data and explanations.
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