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Soft Skills for a Successful Doctoral Journey in Moroccan Tertiary Education: Awareness, Perceptions, and Readiness

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Abstract

Soft skills have become increasingly important among educational stakeholders, particularly politicians, educational psychologists, and researchers. There is solid evidence that these skills play an integral role in either the success or failure of a doctoral journey in terms of academic performance, drop-out rates, and career readiness. Using a web-based survey, this exploratory study aimed at comparing the doctoral journeys of 35 students enrolled in two Moroccan higher education institutions. Results revealed that though the majority of doctoral students were familiar with the concept of soft skills, deemed soft skills as synonymous with life skills, and could distinguish between hard skills and soft skills, they had different perceptions about the concept of soft skills with regards to the phrase meaning,

agency, culpability, and perceived importance. As a major result, the participants asserted that written/oral communication, academic research, and management skills were of paramount importance, accentuating the urgent need to possess them to lead a successful doctoral journey. A promising result was that the majority of respondents showed much readiness to improve their soft skills, suggesting the inclusion of soft skills as a stand-alone subject during the doctoral journey, and proclaiming that equipping themselves with such skills would help them achieve academic excellence in the doctoral journey. Collectively, these results are a contribution to the body of knowledge on the ties between soft skills development and the success of the doctoral journey in Moroccan Tertiary Education.

Keywords: soft skills, skill development, hard skills, doctoral journey

1. Introduction

This study reports back on the results of an exploratory study conducted to obtain a deeper insight into the set of skills needed to lead a successful doctoral journey. It is an exploratory piece of research which was conducted to investigate the drivers that impact the doctoral journey. There is relatively little literature regarding skill development among doctoral students in the context of Moroccan higher education institutions. To bridge this research gap, this study attempted to further investigate the correlation between postgraduate skill development and career readiness among Moroccan doctoral students.

1.1. Background of the Study

Recent evidence suggests that perceptions of the importance and development of soft skills are consistent across a wide range of non-academic attributes. Soft skills are of the essence in both academia and business. Personal commitment, support and progress in doctoral studies are highly influenced by soft skills development. The literature review shows that there is an urgent need for soft skills to address high levels of emotional exhaustion, high attrition rates, and low completion rates (Manuel, 1966; Rudd, 1986; Shaienks et al., 2008; Spady, 1970). The doctoral journey involves numerous practical, emotional, ethical and institutional struggles and challenges to academic work (Bitusikova, 2009; Boud & Tennant, 2006; Ketefian et al., 2005; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009). There is solid evidence that soft skills play an important role in the success or failure of a doctoral journey in terms of academic performance, completion rates, and drop-out rates(Pereira & Costa, 2017; Schulz, 2008; Wellington, 2005).

1.2. Problem Statement

The non-completion of doctoral degree is an expensive proposition not only for the Moroccan society and corresponding institutions but also for individuals [Moroccan doctoral students]. Globally, there is increasing concern that soft skills can either make or break the future of a doctoral candidate. Locally, researchers have not treated the soft skills gap in doctoral education in much detail. The controversy about the prominence of soft skills has raged unabated in doctoral research

dissertation viva, doctoral students' progress reports, and academic performance in various study days, seminars, and conferences. It has been observed that soft skills are in direct correlation with improved academic achievement. Lack of soft skills pushes many doctoral students to suspend their studies. At its core, the current skills gap [crisis] is a clear articulation of tension between doctoral students and academic institutions. The *skills gap* is increasingly being debated today in Moroccan tertiary education. However, little is known about Moroccan doctoral students' perceptions about, awareness of, and readiness for soft skills development. This indicates a need to understand the various aspects related to the soft skills deemed necessary to lead a successful doctoral journey.

1.3. The Purpose, Significance, and Scope of the Study

The study at hand aims at informing future research about the soft skills gap in the doctoral journey in Morocco. The study attempted to identify doctoral students' common needs, preferences and rank priorities for the soft skill needed in a doctoral journey. The results of this study would help fill in a gap by providing a great deal of data about doctoral students' awareness of, perceptions about, and readiness for learning soft skills.

1.4. The Research Questions

The research questions are derived from the purpose, significance, and scope of the study. In accordance, the researchers raised three qualitative questions.

1) To what extent are the participants aware of the importance of soft skills in the success of the doctoral journey?
2) What are the participants' perceptions about the role of soft skills in the success of the doctoral journey?
3) Are the participants ready enough to equip themselves with soft skills to lead a successful doctoral journey?

In line with the purpose of the study, this piece of research was conducted to generate new insights or hypotheses. In this respect, the most important proposition is that the theory and methodology should remain flexible so that all the aspects of the problem can be studied irrespective of the method adopted (Reiter, 2017; Stebbins, 2001; Žukauskas et al., 2018).

2. Literature review

2.1. Doctoral Education

The doctorate is the highest academic degree that universities can award to postgraduate students (Goldberger et al., 1995; Halse & Mowbray, 2011; Trafford & Leshem, 2009). Several attempts have been made to conceptualise the phrase 'a doctorate'. In this regard, Trafford and Leshem (2009) note that there are two conflicting views on the concept. They articulate that these two views stand poles apart. On the one hand, the traditional view states that a doctorate stands for the ability to carry out academic research and to produce new knowledge, and the [completion of the] thesis is the evidence (Trafford & Leshem, 2009). To expound, a student is typically required to make a substantial original contribution to knowledge,

evidenced through a thesis that is examined by academic peers to gain the award. On the other hand, the modernist view insists that a doctorate should lay focus on the researcher, not the thesis (Trafford & Leshem, 2009). In other words, an investment in human capital is central to the entire doctoral journey and climacteric to the dissertation process output. Addressing the curriculum problem in doctoral education, the [post] modernist literature on doctoral education (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006; Bennett, 2010; Green, 2012; McAlpine, 2012; McAlpine et al., 2009) raises two questions: 1) Is the completion of the thesis enough? 2) Should a doctoral student acquire a certain wider range of competencies?

2.2. Soft Skills in Doctoral Education

The doctoral journey is a relatively arduous task. During this long research journey, students are not just learning about their research topic. They are also learning core, key, transferrable skills that apply to jobs both in and out of academia. Most institutions, however, seem unprepared to teach postgraduate students to articulate these soft skills. Traditionally, politicians, educational researchers and practitioners alike have emphasised the importance of fostering a set of non-academic attributes, such as the ability to cooperate, communicate and solve problems, often referred to as generic or soft skills in higher education (Bennett, 2010; Bennett et al., 1999; Stephenson, 1998; Stephenson & Yorke, 2013). Previous research showed that these skills remarkably increases the academic performance of doctoral students, eases up the doctoral journey, and helps overcome many stumbling blocks that stand in the way

(Gazizulina, 2020; Jain, 2009; Jerome & Antony, 2018; Sekhar, 2019; Shakir, 2009; Tulgan, 2015).

2.3. Soft Skills: Definitional Issues

Soft skills, in contrast to academic or disciplinary knowledge, which is subject-based, content-specific, and formally tested, are a set of competencies that are independent of formal curricula, albeit frequently developed by them, and rarely assessed directly. Soft skills are often defined in terms of 'those skills, abilities, and personal attributes that can be used within the wide range of working environments that graduates operate in throughout their lives' (Fraser, 2001, p. 1). Soft skills refer to those personal attributes that indicate a high level of emotional intelligence as opposed to hard skills, which describe a person's technical skill set and ability to perform specific tasks (Matteson et al., 2016). Recent developments in the field have stressed that soft skills are broadly applicable in academia and business, across job titles and industries (Majid et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2013; Pereira & Costa, 2017; Rani & Mangala, 2010). Several researchers have reported that hard skills [the degree] will get graduates and postgraduates an interview, but they need soft skills to get and keep – a prospective job or position in academia and business (Briggs, 2015; Council, 2016; Davidson, 2016; Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Laker & Powell, 2011; Robles, 2012).

To emphasize the disparity between soft skills and hard skills, it is noteworthy to consider the illustration provided by Doyle (2020). The author holds the view that hard skills for a carpenter stand for the

ability to use different tools such as the plane, the mallet, the handsaw, and the chisel to make different wooden objects. However, a carpenter with an array of soft skills like communication skills, punctuality, honesty, and work ethics, to seal different deals, transactions, convince and persuade customers. In brief, the term 'soft skills is a synonym for people skills (Cimatti, 2016; Cinque, 2016; Doyle, 2020).

Soft skills development is currently viewed as a key component of doctoral studies worldwide. There is an increasing awareness of the relevance of the acquisition of soft and transferable skills by doctoral students. Research to date has tended to focus on soft skills rather than hard skills. The issue has grown in importance because such skills will empower future doctors for the multiple roles and responsibilities they will have in their professional life (Batchelor & Di Napoli, 2006; Bennett, 2010; Bitusikova, 2009; Camarinha-Matos et al., 2020; Green, 2012; Ketefian et al., 2005; McAlpine, 2012; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009; McAlpine et al., 2009). Several researchers found that soft skills are missing in today's doctoral students and candidates. In this connection, (Camarinha-Matos et al., 2020, p. 1) put forward:

> Doctoral students and candidates lack "writing and communication, teamwork, time management, leadership, resource management, negotiation, problem-solving, listening, planning, entrepreneurial spirit, mastering ethics awareness, and the list goes on. The need for such skills is due to the leading role that doctoral students are expected to play in academia and later on in society. As such,

various stakeholders have issued recommendations for doctoral programs to include a formal component of soft skills training.

3. **Method**

3.1. Sample / Participants

The population of the study included 35 doctoral students, belonging to two doctoral programs. [Applied Linguistics, Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Meknes; Space and Culture Studies, Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Oujda]. Participants were recruited via purposeful sampling, also known as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling. It is a type of non-probability sampling in which researchers choose people of the population to participate in their study based on their assessment or judgement (Bloor & Wood, 2016; Campbell et al., 2020; Etikan et al., 2016; Suen et al., 2014; Tongco, 2007). For surveys done utilizing online survey platforms like Microsoft Forms, this survey sampling strategy necessitates a previous understanding of the study's aim so that researchers may appropriately choose and approach eligible participants. The researchers used purposive sampling as they wanted to access a particular subset of people, as all participants of the survey were selected because they fit a particular profile. Purposive sampling is a popular method. It was used by researchers since it is extremely time and cost-effective when compared to other sampling methods (Etikan et al., 2016). In stark contrast with convenience sampling, in purposive sampling, researchers carefully consider how they will create a sample population, even if it is not statistically representative of the larger

population. Although purposive sample findings are not always statistically representative of the larger population of interest, they are [at least] qualitatively generalizable (Bloor & Wood, 2016; Tongco, 2007).

3.1.1. Demographics

While demographic information provides valuable information about the population of interest, the researchers only asked participants two demographic questions that were relevant to the study (Gender and Age]. The first question asks the respondents to indicate their gender. There are 21 male and 11 female respondents, representing (60%) and (40%) respectively. It should be noted that there are more male respondents than their female counterparts. The researchers cannot control such variation due to the nature of the non-probability sampling method used. The second question asks the respondents to impart information about their age. The figure indicates that the respondents' ages range from 24 to 58. However, most of the respondents are aged between 26 (11.43%) and 28 (11.43). Figure 3 illustrates that 24 respondents belong to the Applied Linguistics Doctoral Program, hosted by the faculty of Arts and Humanities, UMI, Meknes, and 11 respondents belong to the Space and Culture Studies Doctoral program, offered by the faculty of arts and humanities, Mohammed 1st University, Oujda. Figure 4 shows that 22.86% are pursuing their third doctoral year, 20 % second doctoral year, and another 20% fourth doctoral year.

Figure 2

Respondents' Age

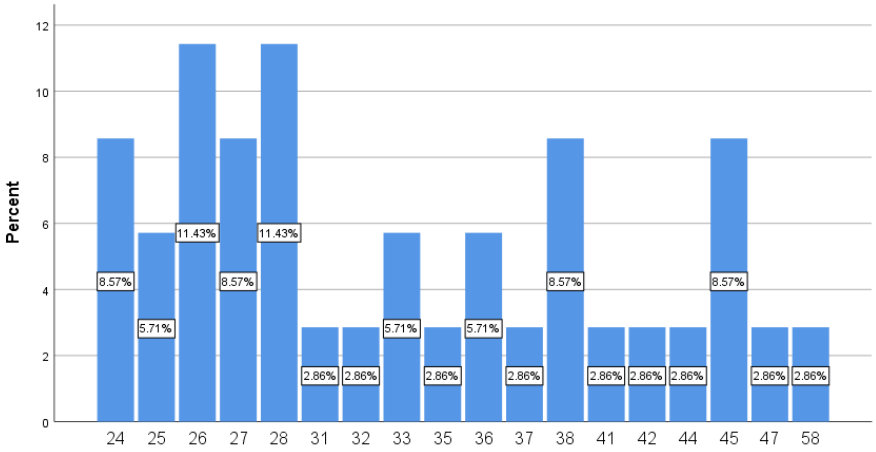


Figure 3

The Respondents' Doctoral Program Affiliation

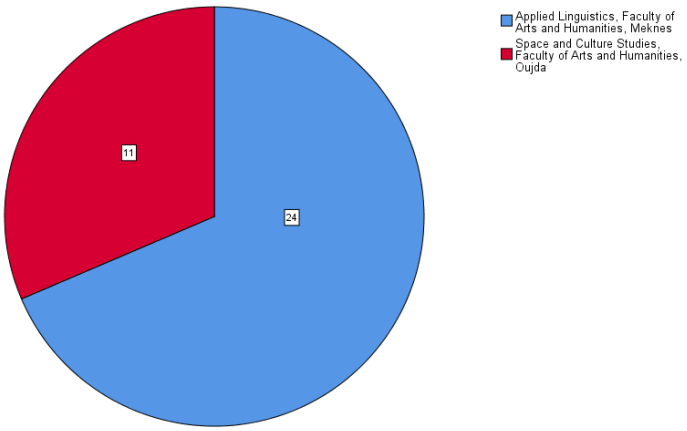
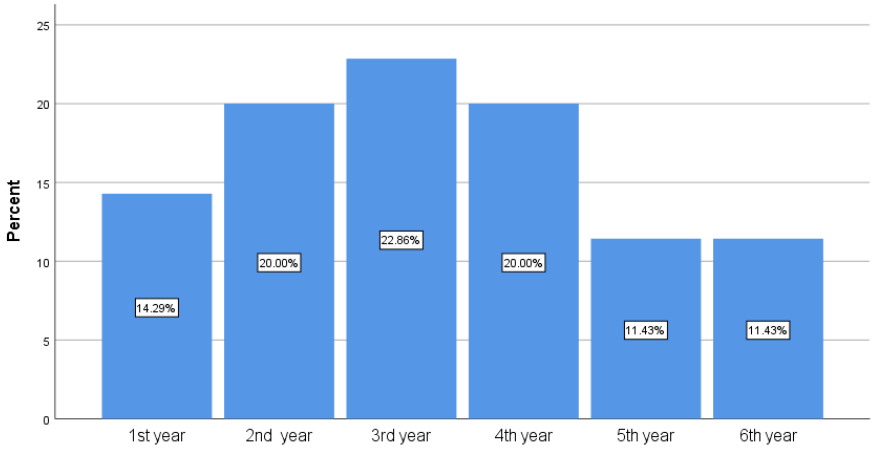


Figure 4

Doctoral Students' Current Stage



3.2. Instrument(s)

The survey consists of five sections. Section 1 solicits demographics. Section 2 gauges the respondents' familiarity with soft skills. Section 3 investigates the most important soft skills for a successful doctoral journey. Section 4 delves into the soft skills gap in the doctoral journey. Last but not least, section 5 examines the soft skills gap: diagnosis, treatment, and effect. 16.05 minutes was the average time to fill out the survey. The new instrument was piloted with a sample of 10 doctoral students. In terms of content and faced validity, field experts were consulted to ensure that it has all of the necessary items while excluding those that are unwanted within a certain construct domain and to ascertain whether the items appear to be relevant, rational, unambiguous, and clear. In terms of design selection criteria,

the researchers opted for exploratory research for the following set of reasons:

1) The objective is to discover new ideas.
2) The overall design is flexible.
3) The research process is not rigid.
4) Sampling: Non-probability sampling
5) Statistical analysis: No pre-planned design for analysis.

The researchers used exploratory research to gain familiarity with an existing phenomenon [the soft skills gap in doctoral education] and acquire new insight into it to form a more precise problem. The outcomes of the research will be used to find out related issues to the topic under study.

3.2.1. Data collection procedures

An online survey made available on Microsoft Forms [https://forms.office.com/r/jKy7i3s3g1] was used to collect data. Microsoft Forms is a powerful business tool that allows you to easily create forms and collect real-time responses from collaborators and colleagues. Using Microsoft Forms, researchers can easily visualize data through the automatic charting function (Rhodes, 2019). This ingenious technology may be used for a variety of purposes, including assessing customer happiness, receiving feedback, and making better decisions based on actual data (Mansouri & Moumine, 2017; Tran, 2020). The link was distributed via social media networking sites

(Twitter and Facebook). There were no incentives to take part in the study.

3.3. Data analysis

The data were quantitatively analysed and interpreted using different statistical tools by the IBM statistics program, SPSS (version 26). The statistical analysis package was used to generate descriptive statistics and describe the characteristics of the sample in terms of percentages and frequencies.

4. Results

Familiarity with Soft Skills: To what extent are the participants aware of the importance of soft skills in the success of the doctoral journey?

Figure 5

Respondents 'Familiarity with Soft Skills

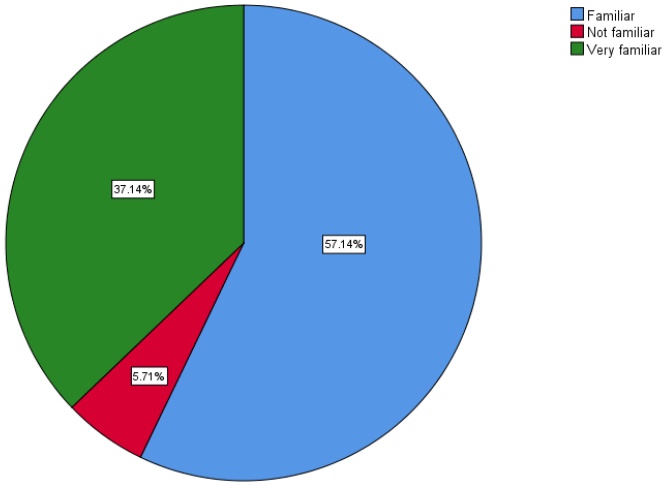


Figure 5 pinpoints that the majority of respondents (57.14%) are " familiar" with the phrase soft skills. A plurality of respondents voiced that they are “very familiar” with the phrase soft skills. A small portion of undergraduate students (5.71%) announced that they are “not familiar” with the phrase in question. According to Figure 6, a great portion of respondents (40.00%) disclose that soft skills are synonymous with “ Skills for Life”. Yet, about 17.14% believe that soft skills refer to all the above [Core Skills, Employability Skills, Essential Skills, Generic Skills, Key Skills, People Skills, And Skills for Life]. 85.71% of participants declared that they could state the disparity between hard and soft skills (Figure 8). Figure 9 shows that 40 % of respondents maintain that soft skills refer to non-technical skills and knowledge”, 22.86 % hold the view that soft skills refer to “interpersonal skills, which are used to describe your approach to life, work, and relationships with other people”, and 20.00 %. Attest that soft skills stand for “ a cluster of productive personality traits that characterize one's relationships in a social environment”. With regards to soft skills acquisition and provision, the majority of respondents (57.14%) assert that doctoral students assume the responsibility to develop their soft skills. Furthermore, a plurality (40%) articulates that soft skills acquisition is an added value. Concerning the status-quo of soft skills integration in postgraduate studies, about 40 % of the respondents “do not know". They do not know whether or not soft skills are embedded in doctoral education programs. About 30 % of them affirm them soft skills are “not “ embedded in those programs.

Figure 6 *Soft Skills Synonymy*

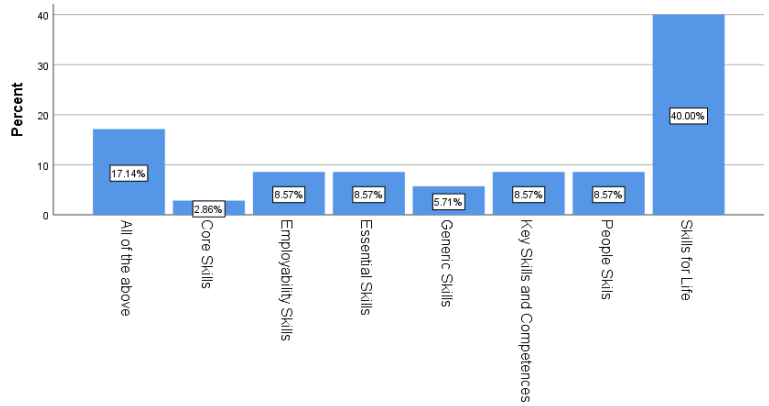


Figure 8 *Respondents' Perceptions of Soft Skills*

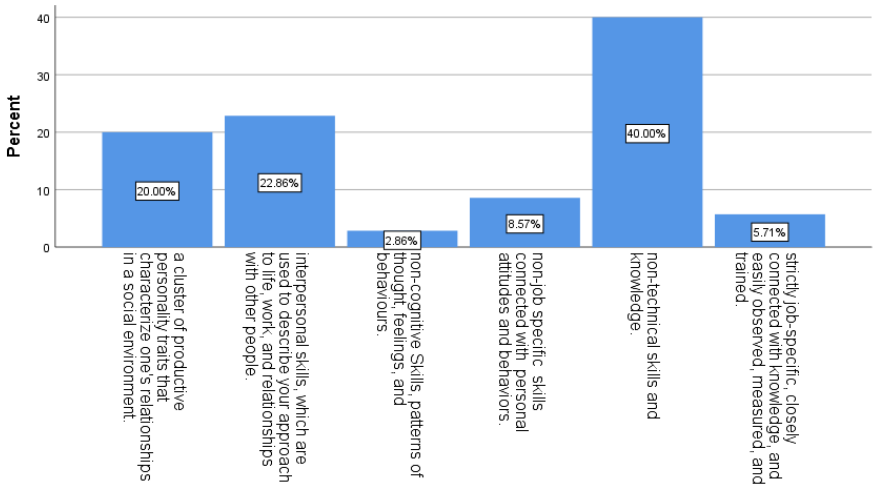


Figure 9 *Respondents' Perceptions about Soft Skills Acquisition and Provision*

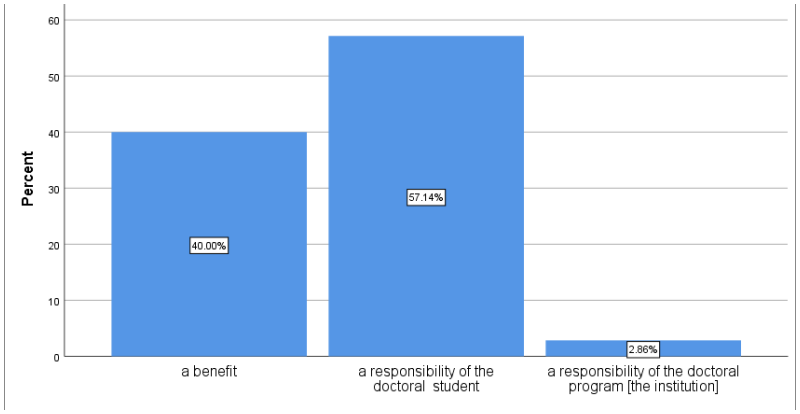
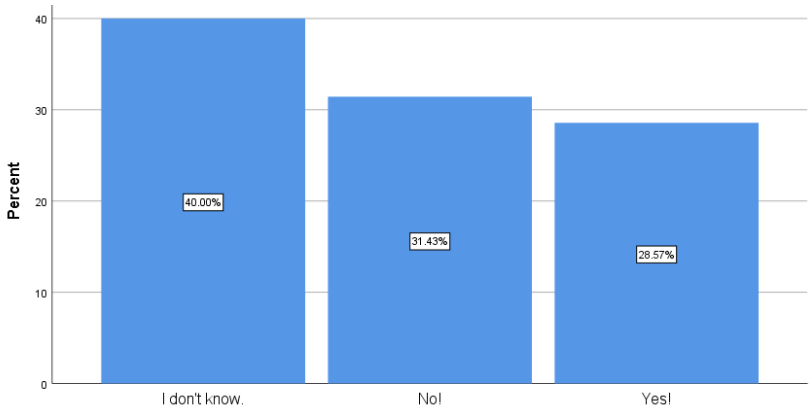


Figure 10

Soft Skills Status-quo in Moroccan Tertiary Institutions



1) What are the participants' perceptions about the role of soft skills in the success of the doctoral journey?

Based on Table 1 categories and percentages, the majority of doctoral students attest that “written and oral communication skills” (28, 80%) , “public speaking” (23, 65.7%), “critical thinking” (28, 80%), “collaboration” (19, 54.3%), “analysis and problem solving” (24, 68.6%), “research and information management” (27, 77.1%), “self-management and work habits” (18, 51.4%) are “very important”. Yet, a plurality of respondents contends that "project management and organisation" (17, 48.6%), and "interpersonal and leadership skills” (16, 45.7%), are “very important”. With regards to the most desired list of soft skills in doctoral education, the majority of doctoral students (68.57%) would like to urgently possess “written and oral communication skills”. A minority of respondents (17.14%) wish to develop “research and information management skills”. In terms of the most missing

soft skills in doctoral students' profiles, some students (40%) allege that " the system is not routinely equipping them with the right soft skills". A considerable portion of respondents (40 %) speculates that " there are "other" reasons behind the soft skills gap in doctoral education; about 11.14 % of them accuse the system of not " focusing on generic and entrepreneurial skills tertiary education" (Figure 13). In trying to point fingers to who assumes responsibility for the soft skills gap in doctoral education, most respondents (74.29%) claim that "it is a joint responsibility", both the doctoral education program and the doctoral student bear the blame.

Table 1 *Respondents' perceptions about the Importance of Soft Skills*

Soft Skills	Not important at all	Somewhat important	Neutral	Important	Very important
Written and Oral Communication				7 (20%)	28 (80%)
Public Speaking			1 (2.9%)	11 (31.4%)	23 (65.7%)
Project Management and Organisation		1(2.9%)	3 (8.6%)	14 (40%)	17 (48.6%)
Interpersonal and Leadership Skills	1 (2.9%)	4 (11.4%)	1 (2.9%)	13 (37.1%)	16 (45.7%)
Critical Thinking		1 (2.9%)		6 (17.1%)	28 (80%)
Collaboration		2 (5.7%)	3 (8.6%)	11 (31.4%)	19 (54.3%)
Analysis and Problem Solving			3 (8.6%)	8 (22.9%)	24 (68.6%)
Research and Information Management			2 (5.7%)	6 (17.1%)	27 (77.1%)
Self-management and Work Habits		2 (5.7%)	1 (2.9%)	14 (40.0%)	18 (51.4%)
Adaptability and Flexibility	3 (1.8%)	1 (2.9%)	2 (5.7%)	15 (42.9%)	16 (45.7%)

Figure 12 *Most Desired Soft Skills Missing in Doctoral Education*

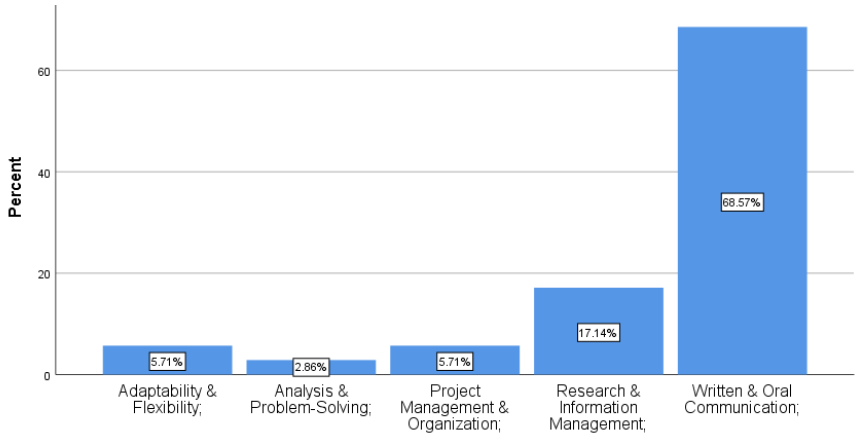


Figure 13

The Most Missing Soft Skills in Doctoral Students' Profiles

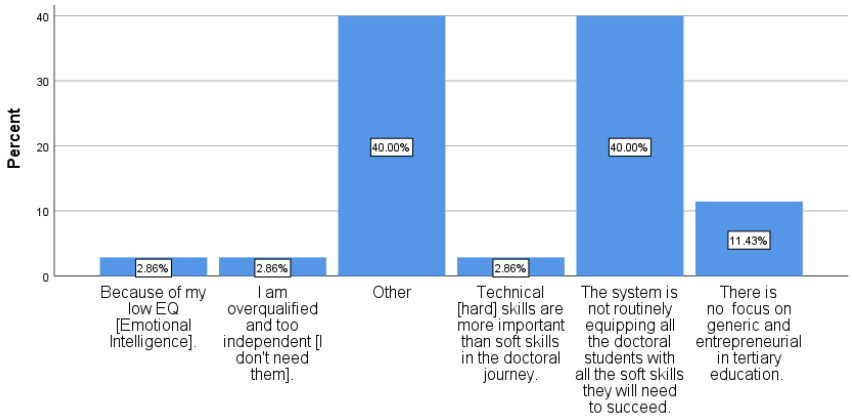
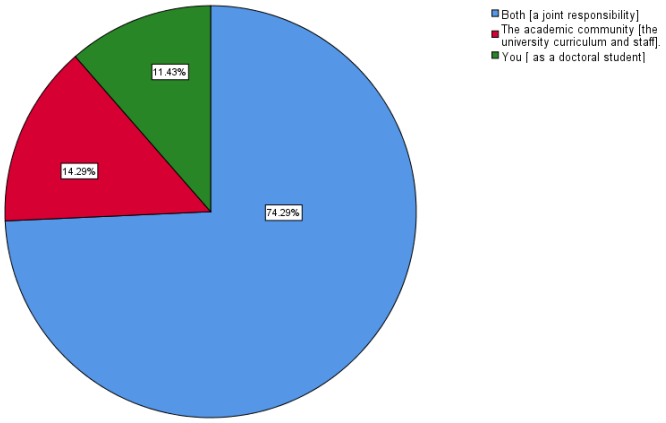


Figure 14
The Soft Skills Gap: Disclaimers



1) Are the participants ready enough to equip themselves with soft skills to lead a successful doctoral journey?

Concerning doctoral students' readiness to bridge the soft skills gap, the majority of respondents (51.43%) acknowledge that "organising

more seminars and workshops on soft skills development" can promote the development of soft skills in doctoral education. However, a plurality (40%) of the reports that " integrating soft skills as a standalone subject in doctoral education programs" can help bridge the soft skills gap (Figure 15). In so doing, the majority of doctoral students (71.43%) voice that if they equip themselves with soft skills, they will improve their academic performance during the doctoral journey (Figure 16).

Figure 15

Ways to Bridge the Soft Skills Gap

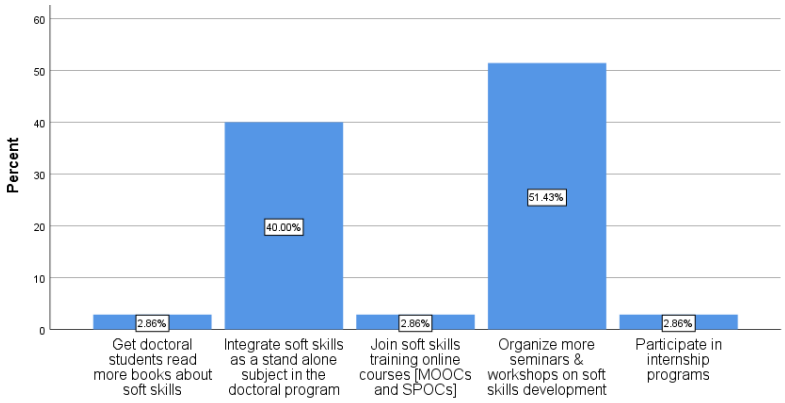
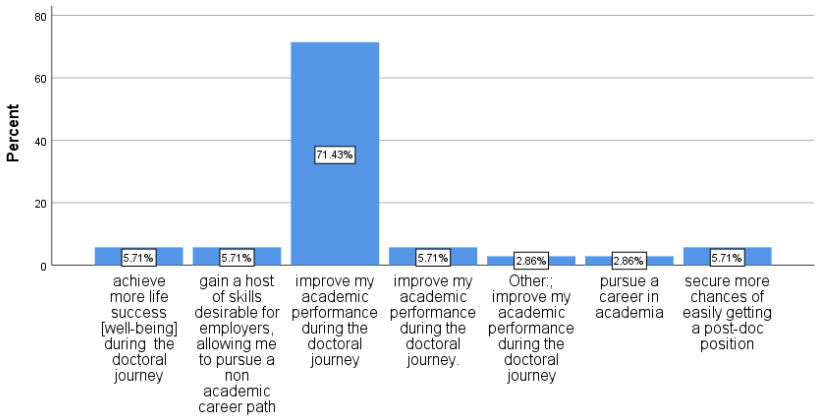


Figure 16

Prospects of Soft Skills Acquisition



5. Discussion

As mentioned in the literature review, it is an arduous task for doctoral students to identify the soft skills they possess on the ground that the academic experience is not necessarily focused on articulating those non-cognitive skill sets. It is noteworthy that doctoral students struggle, understandably, to present the transferability of their academic experiences to non-academic contexts. This study was set out to determine doctoral students' awareness of, perceptions about, and readiness to soft skills development during the doctoral journey.

Doctoral students highly appraise the importance of soft skills. The study results seem to be consistent with a previous study by Horta (2018). The study in question contributed to the literature by showing that doctoral students' self-perception of [soft] skills is associated with their preferences for careers in and outside of the academic sector. The results of this study indicated that doctoral students are aware of the huge potential of soft skills and the negative impact of the soft skills gap on the doctoral journey. These results corroborate the contributions of Volkova et al. (2020), which proved that postgraduate students realize the importance of mastering soft skills to make a successful career in academia and beyond. The authors emphasised that students' emotional and communicative skills determine life success no less than academic achievements.

The respondents are willing to bridge the soft skills gap. The current study found that they are keen on developing their written and oral communication skills. Doctoral students must prepare concise and

logically written materials, organize and communicate ideas effectively in oral presentations to small and large groups, write at all levels — from a brief abstract to a book-length manuscript — debate issues collegially and participate in group discussions, use logical argument to persuade others, explain complex or difficult concepts in simple terms and language, and write effective grant proposals. These results support a previous study by (Schulz, 2008) who observed:

> The minimum requirements for a graduate of a tertiary institution should be ample proficiency in spoken and written language, a certain amount of self-esteem that will be reflected in conversation skills and body language, adequate discussion skills, and of major importance, good presentation skills to be able to market oneself and one's ideas (Schulz, 2008, p. 149).

The respondents showed much readiness to develop their soft skills. They voiced held that organising more seminars and workshops and integrating soft skills as a standalone subject in the doctoral program could help promote the development of their soft skills. Concerning the previous work, the study results are again in agreement with Schulz (2008), who showed that incorporating soft skills training into hard skills courses is a very effective and efficient means of obtaining both an appealing approach to teaching a certain topic and an improvement in soft skills. The author placed much emphasis on the fact that soft skills fulfil an important role in shaping an individual's personality. They are of high importance for every [postgraduate] student to acquire adequate skills beyond academic or technical knowledge.

6. Implications, Recommendations and Conclusions

This study has shown that soft skills are today's doctoral power skills. They are a blend of interpersonal, communication and social intelligence skills that are in high demand in academia and business as well. The results of this study suggest that stakeholders ought to consider how, when, where, and how soft skills could and should be possibly developed. Regarding how, there are calls to devise soft skills training and courses as a part of a structured doctoral training programme, like the case of UK GRAD. Concerned parties need to think about when to start offering soft skills development training and courses alongside the research work. Policymakers are invited to cogitate about where to develop the skills in question (Inside and outside the laboratory). Last but not least, designers of doctoral programs need to speculate who should be involved in doctoral students' soft skills development alongside the thesis supervisors. This exploratory study offers some insight into doctoral students' awareness of, perceptions about, and readiness for soft skills development.

7. Limitations & Directions for Future Research

This exploratory study was specifically designed to form the basis for future studies on the status-quo of soft skills in doctoral education programs in Morocco. It attempted to determine the scope of further investigation into the study research problem, the soft skills gap and the different ways to bridge it in two doctoral education programs.

Several limitations to this initial [pilot] study need to be acknowledged:

1) Exploratory research brings up tentative results and so is inconclusive.
2) Respondents may not be truthful when answering survey questions or may give socially desirable responses.
3) The choice and wording of questions on a questionnaire may influence the exploratory findings.
4) Depending on the type and size of the sample (35), the results may not be generalizable or produce an accurate account of the population of interest.

This initial study has raised many questions in need of further investigation. Future research may account for the correlation between soft skills development levels and academic performance during the doctoral journey. Further experimental research is required to determine the causality between soft skills development and modes of development (face-to-face, online, or blended).

Notwithstanding these limitations, the study suggests that building a stronger doctorate requires building a more soft-skilled doctoral student. Policymakers, educators, and syllabus designers should be working together with a shared purpose to devise ways to bridge the soft skills gap in doctoral education. To conclude, the past was hard, the present is soft, and the future will be softer.

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