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## The Emergence of Life Skills in Moroccan Higher Education: A Qualitative Study on Stakeholders' Attitudes, Views and Expectations

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### A B S T R A C T

This paper provides an exploration of a range of perspectives and attitudes towards the emergence of Life Skills in the Moroccan Higher Education curricula. We briefly introduce the national context of the Bachelor's Degree Reform (BDR) of 2019 introducing these skills as well as the international proactive measures to create a new space for well-being policies and assessments. The focus of the present article is to explore the students and professors' views on officially integrating such innovative modules within the academic program for the first time. In order to obtain relevant data, a qualitative approach was adopted. The findings suggest that the majority of interviewed university professors were supportive of the aforementioned reform (BDR). The reluctant minority voiced out their concerns over the lack of clarity regarding the teaching and evaluation methodologies for skills in which there has been no proper teacher training yet. On the other hand, the students' narratives after a six-week experimental Life Skills-based course suggest that the intervention was very successful, and seems to enhance emotional, and psychological health, therefore cultivating their overall well-being and resilience. In other words, their attitudes were unanimously positive and their perceived impact of the course deeply transformational.

## INTRODUCTION

The gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country, it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile. (Kennedy, 1968, cited in Gable & Haidt, 2005)

For a very long time, economic prosperity was viewed as the primary indicator of a country's welfare and development, in addition to being the ultimate goal to be pursued (Shrotryia & Singh, 2020). In his presidential campaign speech of 1968, Robert Kennedy eloquently expressed the shortcomings of the Gross National Product (GDP). Granted that the latter is a very effective measure of economic growth, it nonetheless falls short in adequately providing information on key aspects such as well-being and quality of life, or what Robert Kennedy describes as "everything that makes life worthwhile" (cited in Gable & Haidt, 2005; Shrotryia & Singh, 2020).

In their book *'The eudaimonic turn: Well-being in literary studies'*, Pawelski & Moores (2012) discuss the new trajectories policy makers have taken in the past two decades in order to fill in the observed gap. For instance, we can mention the creation of "the commission on measurement of economic performance and social progress" in 2008 by former French President Nicholas Sarkozy. Led by economists, this commission issued a set of recommendations such as tracking and measuring quality of live aspects left out of the GDP, including subjective well-being and capabilities (Afsa *et al.*, 2008). Two years later, the United Kingdom decided to start measuring and considering national well-being in their policies. In fact, in 2010, their prime minister at the time, Cameron as cited in (Pawelski & Moores, 2012) stated the following: "we will start measuring our progress as a country, not just by how our economy is growing, but by how our lives are improving; not just by our standard of living, but by our quality of life". The initiatives and actions to begin encompassing well-being have not been limited to western societies. Indeed, the realization that economic activity growth is insufficient and incomplete (Van Den Bergh, 2009) is also present in the developing world. For example, in countries such as Bolivia and Ecuador where their constitutions have started including notions of well-being- 'living well'- rooted in indigenous culture (Gerlach, 2017; Bedriñana, Umaña & Martín, 2020). By and large, numerous international organizations such as OECD and many governments have updated their assessments, and begun introducing well-being and life satisfaction in their agenda (OECD, 2011; Cavalletti & Corsi, 2018; Fleischer, Frieling & Exton, 2020).

In the Moroccan context, the publication of the New Model of Development in 2019 included the notion of the citizens' well-being, and emphasized the importance of investing in the immaterial human resource, developing and unleashing its full potential (Institut Royal des Etudes Stratégiques, 2019). In order to do so, actions in the education sector have been taken including the new policy integrating Soft Skills in the university curricula through the BDR of 2019 (El Bakkali, 2020). These new courses are structured as follow:

- Year 1= Two modules of Study Skills;
- Year 2= Two modules of Life Skills;
- Year 3= Two modules of Civic Skills; and
- Year 4= Two modules of Professional Skills.

Among the eight new modules Moroccan universities are supposed to transversally include in their undergraduate curricula, the Life Skills component seems to be the one straightforwardly addressing well-being and the concept of "living well".

### **Soft Skills**

The term 'Soft Skills' has gained a significant amount of traction in the past few years, and has become increasingly 'trendy' within professional and academic circles. Originally, it seems that the term was first coined by the US army in the early 1970s (Touloumakos, 2020), referring to the array of essential skills unrelated to machinery, yet considered prerequisites for the successful completion of the job. In order to draw the distinction between Hard and Soft Skills in the military context, one could think of using a gun as the Hard Skill, while effectively coordinating with the team, leading a unit, motivating oneself and others as the Soft Skills (Touloumakos, 2020). Hard and Soft Skills are complementary, and both equally needed; it is indeed a meaningless endeavor to look for the most valuable or worthy. One of the most pertinent parallels is from the field of Information Technology where Hard Skills can be

compared to hardware and Soft Skills to software. They are fundamentally different in nature, yet co-dependent of each other for a fully and highly functioning computer.

There has been some controversy regarding the use of the word ‘soft’ in Soft Skills, which might imply that they are easy, warm, and unnecessary, projecting a completely inaccurate understanding of the depth, complexity and challenge encompassed in such skills. For this reason, many names have been given to Soft Skills. In her study entitled ‘*definition, development, assessment of soft skills and their role for the quality of organizations and enterprises*’, Cimatti (2016) presented the variety of names used by different international organizations and researchers:

**Table 1. Definitions of Soft Skills adapted from Cinque (2015)**

<b>Transversal skills</b>	<b>ISFOL (1998)</b>
Generic competencies	Tuning project (2000)
Key competencies for a successful and a well-functioning society	OECD (2003;2012)
21 <sup>st</sup> century skills	Analiadou & Claro (2009)
Transferable skills	RPIC-VIP (2011)
Skills for Social Progress	OECD (2015)

In addition to the many names associated with Soft Skills, many definitions exist in the literature. According to Cimatti (2016), a first definition originating from the work of Daniel Goleman, a researcher in Emotional intelligence, distinguishes between intra-personal and inter-personal skills. The first category relates to the self, and the ability to know and manage oneself, while the second category is about the other (s) and the ability to build meaningful relationships and work/live well with others. A more expansive, yet not exhaustive list of skills according to a few other researchers includes the following: a good attitude; adaptability; dealing with uncertainty; willingness to keep learning; critical thinking; creativity and innovation; leadership; self-awareness; managing oneself; coping and resilience; team spiritedness; interpersonal communication, negotiation,; and emotional regulation (Crosbie, 2005; Lazarus, 2013; Cimatti, 2016; Cinque, 2017; Succi, 2019; Succi and Canovi, 2019; Touloumakos, 2020). In the Moroccan academic context, and according to the 2019 BD reform, the categorization and content of Soft Skills is as follow (Meski, 2021):

#### *Study Skills*

The first category of Soft Skills to be taught at the undergraduate level are considered essential academic competencies applied to a learning environment. They generally are critical to academic success and life-long learning. Some of these study skills are time-management, learning how to learn strategies (memory retention and retrieval), reading strategies, note-taking, and public speaking.

#### *Life Skills*

The second category refers to capabilities that allow individuals to adapt to life’s challenges. It tackles the ability to apprehend and face change by working on one’s mental and psychological health.

#### *Civic Skills*

These skills aim at building responsible citizens, with a sense of civic engagement for the greater good. Civic skills include knowledge of the citizen’s rights and duties, as well the ability to act in case of a violation using legal pathways. Moreover, these skills are about developing

a sense of balance between one's rights and duties, keeping in mind the community's well-being. It includes learning about exercising one's right to vote during elections, the ability to volunteer and be involved in community work, the ability to distinguish between the personal and professional sphere, moral integrity and the ability to honor one's engagement towards their community which includes paying taxes.

### *Professional Skills*

Professional skills focus on employability, and entail preparing students to enter, stay and thrive in the labor force. It includes networking, interviewing skills, collaborative work, etc.

### **Life Skills**

A literature review of the definitions provided for Life Skills shows a consensus amongst international organizations and researchers. The definition offered by the World Health Organization, in 1997, is still quite accurate and up-to-date in 2021. They define Life Skills as the psychosocial skills that allow an individual to develop the ability "to deal with the demands and challenges of everyday life. It is a person's ability to maintain a state of mental well-being and to demonstrate this in an adaptive and positive behavior while interacting with others in his/her culture and environment" (Oloyede & Sihlongonyane, 2017). Indeed, Life Skills focus first on the self, then on one's relationships and social interactions. They require the development of emotional and social intelligence which are needed for stress regulation, conflict management, self-management and resilience in general. In the Moroccan context of the reform, and according to Meski (2021), Life Skills include the following elements:

- Self-awareness; empathy; critical thinking; creative thinking; decision making; problem solving; effective communication; interpersonal relationships; coping with stress; and coping with emotion.

They are considered psycho-social skills as they involve mental and emotional processes centered around awareness, acceptance and appreciation of self and others, attitudes, leadership, and emotional functioning.

The international organization UNICEF in their LSCE initiative -Life Skills and Citizenship Education in the Middle East and North Africa- (2017) reported that these skills are about "learning to be", which is a very personal dimension in education. The learning, in this case, is driven by the idea of personal fulfillment, personal growth, and includes intra and interpersonal competencies. Personal development entails both personal and social factors, and is meant to lead the student to the independent ownership of him/herself. The competencies developed under this dimension can be considered as enabling learning in other- more traditional-dimensions.

The present study will focus on the Life Skills component as it represents a significant innovation in the Moroccan educational and pedagogical culture. In fact, the primary purpose of this article is to qualitatively explore the stakeholders' attitudes, views and expectations regarding the integration of Life Skills in the curricula.

### Research Questions:

1. What are the students' attitudes towards studying a Life Skills based-course?
2. What are the university professors' attitudes and expectations towards the policy integrating Life Skills in the curricula?

## METHODS

The present study aims to explore Moroccan undergraduate students' attitudes towards studying a Life-Skill based course. In addition, it aims to examine university professors' attitudes and views regarding the recent BDR, particularly the Life Skills component, expected to start being implemented in the near future (academic year 2021-2022). To that end, the study relied on a qualitative research design approach in order to provide deeper insights, understandings and opinions on the subject matter.

### Students

To examine the students' attitudes and experience of Life Skills within their curricula, a sample of 82 undergraduate students enrolled at a University in Rabat, Morocco, took part in a larger experimental research project. It is important to note that the present study will only be reporting results from the qualitative part conducted with the experimental group (n=40). In fact, the groups were divided into a control and an experimental group and the latter was the one receiving a six-week Life Skills-based course. The students were all Moroccans, aged between 17 and 19 years old, and included 22 females and 18 males. They were asked to fill out weekly reflective feedback at the end of every session.

At the end of the six-week course, the participants were asked to write a retrospective reflection of the learning experience, their perceptions, opinions and attitudes towards it. All the collected data was then analyzed through thematic analysis.

The six-week Life Skills based course focused on the following themes:

**Table 2. The main themes of the course**

Intra-Personal Skills (The Self)	Inter-Personal Skills (Relationships)
Self-knowledge and awareness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Growth mindset &amp; self-beliefs.</li> <li>▪ Strengths &amp; talents identification.</li> <li>▪ Emotional functioning (brain, mind and body).</li> </ul> 1- Self-management and growth <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Strengths cultivation and experimentation of 'flow'.</li> <li>▪ Healthy lifestyle habits (mind-body connections).</li> <li>▪ Real time resilience: cognitive reappraisal.</li> <li>▪ Emotional self-regulation (breathwork and mindfulness).</li> </ul>	Gratitude (expression and action). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2- Empathy.</li> <li>3- ACR (active constructive responding).</li> <li>4- Strengths.</li> <li>5- Conscious compassion and altruism.</li> </ul>

### Professors

The second category of key stakeholders included in the present study are University professors. A qualitative questionnaire with open-ended questions was collected from twenty professors affiliated to public and private universities in various Moroccan cities. The convenient and snow-ball sampling methods were used in the data collection process. A collective email was sent to 45 professors affiliated to different universities in Morocco, 10 professors agreed to participate, and invited other colleagues to join the study which resulted in a total of 20 professors. The questionnaire included 10 questions overall, and included the following: 'what do you think of the idea of teaching Life Skills to undergraduate students'? 'What is the impact (if any) you think will be observed as a result of officially teaching life skills for the first time in the Moroccan university? And 'what content exactly do you think should be addressed in such courses?'. The filled-out questionnaires were sent out by email to the researchers.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Students

R.Q.1: What are the students' attitudes towards Life Skills modules?

The analysis process, revealed the recurrence of three dominant codes. Below is a summary of the codes and sub-codes that resulted from the analysis.

**Table 3. Summary of the codes and sub-codes obtained from thematic analysis**

CODES	SUB-CODES
<b>Positive affect</b>	Enjoyment (joy); interest; inspiration; love.
<b>Relevance and concrete Impact</b>	Relationship with self <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.1- Self-knowledge and awareness</li> <li>1.2- Growth mindset</li> <li>1.3- Self-management</li> </ul> 1- Relationship with others 2- Decreased stress and anxiety
<b>Needed skills</b>	Novelty and uniqueness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1- Gap filling in academia</li> <li>2- Request for more hours</li> </ul>

The participants data entries also showed that 100% of the participants expressed positive views regarding the Life Skills based module. The dominance of the noted themes differed between the weekly data entries and the survey question at the end of the training. Indeed, there are differences between the codes that emerged from first and second parts of the qualitative data collection. The first part of the data gathered consisted of optional weekly written feedback at the end of every session. The students' written feedback in this case reflects directly on the individual session that just ended. In contrast, the elicited feedback collected at the end of the semester did not reflect the participants' views on one particular session, but on the entire Life Skills module. Therefore, the data collected at this stage reveals more reflective and introspective narratives of the learning experience.

The immediate feedback on individual sessions show an overwhelming dominance of 'positive affect' as the leading pattern in students' responses (87,57%), followed by 'relevance and impact' (33,22%), and finally 'needed skills' (13.9%). The second part, on the other hand, shows a dominance of the following codes: 'relevance and impact' (45%), 'positive affect' (30%), and 'needed skills' (25%). The data analysis process combined all the qualitative data entries in order to answer the research questions of the present study.

#### *Positive affect*

The findings showed that the participants' narratives regarding the Life Skills module were dominated by various expressions of positive affect. Four key positive emotions stood out due to the frequency of use: namely joy, interest, inspiration and love. In both the weekly reflections and the post-training entries, positive affect theme is a major theme. The excerpts below are from the students' written responses:

P1: *“All sessions of the training were extremely enjoyable, and I was coming to class feeling excited. I enjoyed and loved every session”.*

P2: *“That was the best class I ever attended in my life. I loved it”.*

P3: *“It was so interesting that it made me participate while I never do in other classes”.*

P4: *“I leave this class with a renewed energy and a strong motivation. I feel inspired and good just like after a therapy session”.*

There was frequent use of similar concise expressions among participants regarding positive affect. In a nutshell, most participants found the module very enjoyable, interesting, enriching, inspiring, and engaging.

#### *Relevance and concrete impact*

The relevance and direct impact of the module on the participants' lives was a theme that emerged from the data in a distinct manner as well. It was the most recurring theme in the end of the semester reflection (45%), and was the second most dominant theme in the first part of the data collection (22%). It was also the most extensive and detailed theme, where the participants emphasized the relevance of every session to their lives. They reported on the usefulness of the content and impact on different and significant aspects of their lives. The most dominant aspects are:

- 1- Higher self-esteem and confidence;
- 2- Lifestyle Habit Changes;
- 3- Reduced Stress and anxiety (emotional regulation); and
- 4- Enhanced relationships.

P5: *“I got to experience a lot of different things while doing the assignments. It helped me understand myself better, and how to deal with other people better as well...This class also showed me the importance of setting little challenges for myself to grow and discover more about myself. I also learned that the small or big struggles that we experience in life can help us grow. You can face a stressful situation, but it is the way you deal with stress that matters. I still have a long way to go in self-acceptance and self-love but I am confident I will succeed in improving myself and going through this process”.*

P6: *“Being introduced to meditation and mindfulness in this course has helped me calm my anxieties down. In the beginning it felt really hard because I would be overwhelmed by the amount of spiraling negative thoughts in my mind, but the more I practiced, the better it felt. The biggest take-away for me, is clearly managing my stress better and feeling more confident”.*

Furthermore, the participants reported that for the first time in their academic life, they saw a straightforward relevance and impact of the course content on themselves, their behaviors, their emotions, their relationships and their lives in general. Most students expressed their struggle with chronic stress, anxiety and excessive rumination. Interestingly, their reports reveal that these uncomfortable, and at times disabling, aspects of their lives had improved significantly. The narratives collected show the impact of the Life Skills module on students' mental and emotional health. This theme was the one with the longest reports from the participants; who

extensively wrote about the positive and significant impact it had on their lives. Some participants used powerful language in that regard:

P7: *“I think it can save lives. It has been life-changing for my mental health”.*

P8: *“This class helped me face my depression, and feel better. It felt better than taking my medicine or going to the psychiatrist. I still have a long way to go, but I am starting to see some light. This class might have saved my life, and the sessions were very inspiring”!*

P9: *“I am deeply grateful for this life-changing class. The only way to tell if a class was beneficial or not is by asking: am I the same person I used to be before taking the class? The answer is NO. I am a better version of myself, and I learned a lot of new information that helped me be more self-aware and conscious of the way I think and feel. This class has been a wonderful journey of self-discovery and I can feel the impact it has and will continue to have on me”.*

### *Needed skills*

The third theme was the need to integrate Life Skills in their academic curricula. The participants noted the innovative aspect of the skills taught, as well as the different teaching approach and the assignments. Hand in hand with the innovative aspect, the profound need for such skills was very recurrent, especially in the second part of the data collection (9% part I; 25% part II). Students reported being unfamiliar with themes regarding their own selves and their relationship with others. At the end of the course, it was clear for many participants that Life Skills ought to be introduced in their university curricula. In fact, many students mentioned their wish for more sessions and a deeper dive into the subject.

P10: *“We do not need two hours a week, we need 6 hours a week and not one semester but the entire year”!*

P11: *“I needed that, and will implement it in my life for sure. I needed to learn about techniques to down-regulate my negative emotions and up-regulate the positive. I am glad I learned about meditation, mindfulness and exercise, and I wish we could have it again next semester because it helped me feel good about myself and feel less depressed and stressed about my studies”.*

P12: *“Refreshing and new kind of class. It was like therapy and I wish we could have more classes like that. I wish that it will be a part of my education program; something amazing that I deeply needed. We need more than 2 hours a week. We should have one additional semester”.*

As previously stated, the participants reported an enhanced sense of well-being, a decrease in symptoms of stress and better self-management thanks to the module. Nevertheless, they expressed the need to learn more about the subject, and that it was not enough.

P13: *“It is the only class where we get to freely express our opinions and feelings, and discuss things that truly matter. It was also the only class that felt like a safe space, with trust like one caring family. I loved all the activities that we have done, and particularly the gratitude session. I am a young man from a very conservative family, and that session was the first time I gave myself permission to feel the rush of emotions, and I stopped resisting the tears. This class helped me express myself*



*like no other. It is the first time I get the opportunity to learn how to live a better life based on scientific research. It also helped me challenged my beliefs on masculinity and emotions. I now feel freer to process, express and deal with all the emotions I might experience”.*

P14: *“I learned so much about the science of psychological resilience, which I had no prior knowledge about at all. The assignments were very unique. I was so excited because this was the first time I had a class like that”.*

The thematic analysis revealed that 100% of the students expressed profoundly positive attitudes and views towards the Life Skills-based course. On the one hand, the self-reports collected right after the sessions reflected the present-moment experience of the participants; it was fresh feedback revealing the students’ states and affect in class without taking a reflective step back. On the other hand, the data collected at the end of the semester was retrospective in nature and based on the students’ introspective self-reflections of the module as a whole. As described in the previous chapter, the dominant pattern in the thematic analysis was positive affect and it included positive emotions such as joy, inspiration, interest and love. The participants wrote about their love of the content, the methodology and the interventions done. Moreover, they all expressed a deep interest in the strategies, the tools and the science taught, which were reinforced through various exercises and home-assignments. Conversely, the reflective reports collected post-intervention focused on the relevance and the impact the course had on their lives. The students’ mental health and overall well-being seems to be a key variable impacted by the course. In fact, the qualitative data revealed rich insight of what might be considered the first impact of the Life Skills-based course:

- Perceived decreased anxiety and depression.
- Perceived enhanced self-awareness of stress triggers.
- Perceived better emotional self-regulation.
- An enhanced sense of confidence in the face of adversity.
- Enhanced subjective well-being.

The results showed that most students described the impact of the training on their mental health, reporting that it helped them better accept, manage and decrease their stress and anxiety. The participants reported that it helped them to better understand and healthily accept and manage their emotions. The self-reports provided descriptions of the tools and strategies that helped them the most, which was different from one person to another. For some, discovering meditation and adopting a regular practice including deep breathing and mindful attention was the most useful and impactful change. These students wrote about the value of learning for the first time how to calm down their nervous system, sit with negative emotions, and reframe their anxiety-inducing thought patterns. Learning to observe their thoughts, their emotions, labeling the emotions and taking small steps towards feeling better proved to be very helpful. The grounding mindfulness techniques helped other participants to learn how to bring back their attention to the present, and break the cycle of unstoppable worry attached to either the past or the future. In addition to reports about mindfulness, meditation, cognitive reappraisal, some students also wrote about the strengths and talents chapter in the course intervention. In addition, the practice of gratitude was among the most favorable and most powerful tools in dealing with difficult times. Equally significant, introducing breathwork and movement in their lives, whether it was walking, dancing, jogging, or yoga, was one of the most impactful changes for the participants. In fact, some reports described an increased level of energy, better mood,

and a tremendous drop in stress. From developing an emotional jargon, to labeling emotions, learning the value of body movement in shifting one's emotional state, to the therapeutic effect of journaling and diaphragmatic breathing, the participants wrote extensively about the impact this class had on their mental health.

## Professors

R.Q.2: What are the professors' attitudes and views on introducing Life Skills in the university curricula?

This section presents the findings and interpretation of the qualitative interviews conducted with 20 university professors, currently teaching in various public and private universities in Morocco. The purpose of the interviews was to gain an understanding of the professors' attitudes and opinions regarding the Ministry's decision to officially introduce Life Skills modules in the undergraduate curricula for the first time. It is important to acknowledge that the successful implementation of any policy depends on many factors and stakeholders. Undeniably, in the educational setting, professors are the primary channel through which the learning takes place. It is safe to say that the teaching staff's attitudes and opinions on the subject is a success or failure-maker. The thematic analysis of the interviews' transcription allowed the emergence of clear themes.

### *Professors' attitudes towards the Life Skills policy*

The interviews' first question revealed that most professors hold extremely positive attitudes towards the new policy that introduces the teaching of Life Skills modules in the university curricula. In fact, 90% reported that they believe it is a very good decision.

*P1: "Life skills education offers a more holistic worldview. Developing social, emotional and critical skills accounts for the diversity of learning styles students may exhibit, beyond traditional methods that homogenize both learning and individuals".*

*P2: "I think this addition to the curriculum will be of the utmost benefit to students entering university and for students who are developing the skill needed to be excellent peers, students, and leaders. The incorporation of these classes will only benefit those who take them".*

Within the 90% who are proponents of the new policy, 60% specified that these modules should in fact be mandatory for all university students, while 30% highlighted that as beneficial as these courses can be, it should stay optional. The remaining 10% was totally against the new policy; one of the interviewees argued the following:

*P3: "These themes are already taught, they are even fully-fledged university courses in all the faculties of human sciences! I am therefore against the introduction of "life skills" in the various courses because, in the long term, this will make the courses that had made it their main teaching disappear - such as psychology or philosophy, for example-...-I believe that the study of "oneself, the world and oneself in the world" should start in elementary school and that the university should remain a place of deepening and specialization".*

Even though the attitudes were overwhelmingly positive, a few professors insisted on the importance of examining the implications of such innovative teaching content. For instance,

one of the interviewees discussed the necessity to reflect on the evaluation and assessment methodologies; she states:

*P4: “The students’ evaluation for Life Skills modules cannot be similar to traditional assessment methods”.*

The concern was shared by another interviewee, who added the pedagogical approach and teaching methodology to the list of implications as well:

*P5: “If Life Skills modules are regarded as subjects to be taught and assessed in a traditional way without the space-time and the didactic formula being established differently, the target audience risks seeing them as optional or recreational”.*

#### *Expected impact of teaching Life Skills*

When asked about their views regarding the potential impact of teaching Life Skills to Moroccan undergraduate students, the three sub-themes discussed were:

- **Student engagement and academic performance:**

90% of the interviewees shared the expectation that teaching life skills can increase student engagement in the classroom as well as their overall academic performance.

- **Employability:**

77% expect that teaching life skills will have a positive impact on the graduates’ employability.

- **Relationships and overall well-being:**

85% of the interviewees reported expecting an increase in the students’ overall well-being and in the quality and management of their relationships.

A few professors shed light on the novelty of the policy, and the innovative nature of these courses, which, according to them, makes it challenging to accurately discuss their potential impact. In fact, they highlighted that a clear assessment of the Life Skills impact should be possible only five or six years from the year these courses are taught.

#### *Themes to be included in the Life Skills modules*

To the question: ‘what do you think should be included/addressed in the life skills modules’, with minor exceptions centered around social interactions, the professors’ views on the content of these new courses is diverse.

*P6: “I believe the learning of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills is of great importance. These skills can help you reflect on yourself and your interactions with others. Being able to build these skills will make you more resilient and apt to overcoming adversity”.*

*P7: “The themes included in the Life Skills module should be:*

- *conflict management, negotiation, arbitration*
- *learning loyalty (respect for the rules) and fair play (respect for others)*
- *confrontation with moral dilemmas (alternatives for which no satisfactory term)*

- *elements of general culture on Morocco (history, contemporary artists and writers)*”.

P8: *“Leadership Skills; Inter-personal Development Skills; Communication Skills; Self Confidence Skills; Work-Space management Skills; Public Speaking Skills; Creative/Critical/Divergent Thinking Skills”*.

P9: *“The relationship to others, the value of ‘commitment’ and the value of ‘Knowledge’. Emphasize reflection on ‘ethics’”*.

P10: *“In my opinion, the lessons that should be highlighted in the Life Skills modules should derive from certain phenomena relating, among other fields of knowledge, to social psychology such as cognitive biases, Porter's attitudes or even the feeling of efficiency. personal derived from Albert Bandura's agency theory”*.

P11: *“- Hierarchical relations (relationship with the authorities). For students: with parents, teachers, administrative and technical staff, then employers ...*

- *Team relations: cooperation, solidarity, initiative. It's the groups that are creative. Success concerns more supportive groups than individuals in isolation*

- *Social relations: tolerance. Living with other nationals presupposes curiosity to get to know them and exchange points of view. Prerequisite: better understand your own cultural determinisms and put them into perspective”*.

P12: *“Communication-Remediation; Personal development; Self-esteem”*.

The large majority of university professors interviewed expressed positive attitudes and optimistic opinions regarding the introduction of Life Skills for the first time in Moroccan higher education. The teaching staff's readiness, adherence, understanding and belief in the pertinence of educational reforms impacting the content and pedagogical methodologies of what they teach is vital for the successful implementation of the reform (Gitlin & Margonis, 1995). Nevertheless, the positive attitude, receptivity and optimistic expectations regarding the impact of introducing life skills can only be considered as a preliminary pre-requisite towards the effective implementation of the new modules. Another essential pre-requisite, which did not emerge from the interviews, is a clear idea of what the content, the methodology and the evaluation is supposed to be. Some of the themes the interviewees mentioned as important to cover in the Life Skills modules belong to the Civic or Study Skills categories, such as ethics and morality. This shows that a clearer roadmap on how to navigate these new modules in addition to teachers' trainings might be needed for an effective implementation of the reform (De Villiers, 2010).

## CONCLUSION

The attitudes, views and expectations regarding the introduction of Life Skills curricula in Moroccan higher education are very promising. While the students responded enthusiastically to the new course in a unanimous manner, there was a minority of professors who voiced out their disagreement and reluctance to include such courses in the University curricula. Regardless of the promising attitudes of the majority, the lack of clarity regarding the content, the methodology and the evaluation of such modules in addition to the lack of teacher training observed in the present study could represent a threat to the successful implementation of the Soft Skills reform. Change is hard and is usually faced with massive resistance as the human

mind tends to resist unfamiliarity. Therefore, if the change in question is not thoroughly planned and prepared, it could result in failure. Even with the strongest rationale and evidence-based intentions, preparation and training are highly recommended. Consequently, now that the policy is officially enacted and that the new modules are supposed to start being taught to undergraduate students in the academic year 2021/2022, relevant trainings and pedagogical preparation could take place at the institutional level. Regular assessments would also be helpful in improving the content, and the delivery as well as quantitatively and qualitatively examining the impact of the Life Skills modules on crucial variables such as engagement, academic performance, employability and the students' overall well-being and resilience.

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