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CORRESPONDENCE
Mohammed El Messaoudi
Email:m.elmessaoudi@edu.umi.ac.ma
Post Address: Faculty of Art and Humanities, UMI, Meknes, Morocco.

AUTHOR DETAILS
Additional information about the author is available at the end of the article.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Crafting Future Leaders: Soft Skills Development for Workforce Readiness in Moroccan Higher Education: An In-depth Exploration via Post-Intervention Qualitative Feedback

Mohammed El Messaoudi, Smail Kerouad, Mustapha Fagroud

ABSTRACT

Background/purpose – This qualitative study marks the third phase of a comprehensive multiphase, mixed-methods research endeavor consisting of three interdependent phases. Positioned within this larger framework, the current study aimed to solicit post-course qualitative feedback pertaining to a specialized soft skills development training program, delivered through a blended learning model.

Materials/methods – Specifically, this phase focuses on post-course qualitative feedback pertaining to a transformative soft skills development training, administered through a blended learning model. Employing a rigorous protocol, data were collected through focus group interviews using a Voice Tracer. The data were meticulously managed and subjected to thematic analysis using NVivo software.

Results – The participants consistently acknowledged the training compelling nature, empowering essence, and notable influence on their soft skills development. The results of this study hold significant implications for Moroccan policymakers, curriculum designers, educators, and researchers.

Conclusion – The insights gained from this research endeavor provide valuable guidance for addressing the soft skills gap, enhancing the readiness of university graduates for the contemporary workplace, and establishing a robust connection between academia and the dynamic realm of business.

Keywords – Focus group interviews, NVivo, thematic analysis, soft skills development

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1. INTRODUCTION

Recent trends in employability have led to a proliferation of studies that require universities worldwide to address the needs of today's university students, referred to as digital communities, and prepare them for future jobs and smart technologies (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Claxton et al., 2016; Heckman & Kautz, 2012). Recent developments in capacity-building have heightened the need to train university students in these soft skills, described as career traits that employees should possess, such as leadership skills, communication skills, and a positive work attitude and teamwork, rather than only teaching them technical knowledge and unrelated workplace readiness skills that they cannot use within the workplace. Extensive research has shown that graduating students may be valued for their academic knowledge and cognitive abilities, but the discourse on graduate employability skills seems to be moving away from credentials (academic performance outcomes) that are mere "tick boxes" (Balcar, 2016; Bolden-Barrett, 2018; Klaus et al., 2009). For this reason, business employers incessantly and vehemently invite universities to produce graduates equipped with appropriate soft skills.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Moroccan employers have expressed concerns about a significant soft skills gap, attributing it to universities and the inadequacy of their educational policies. Recent evidence confirms a mismatch between the skills employers seek and those taught by universities. The lack of clarity on soft skills development methods by educators and employers contributes to this gap. However, the issue has been addressed in the absence of any structured approach. The existing education system fails to equip students with the necessary workplace skills (El Messaoudi, 2021; Tejan & Sabil, 2019; United Nations Industrial Development Organization, 2019; United States Agency for International Development, 2017; Yasin et al., 2015). In order to bridge these gaps and to better connect education with job market demands, the researcher proposed using a blended learning model in higher education in the current multiphase, mixed-methods study. The ultimate goal being to narrow the soft skills gap between education and employment requirements.

1.2. The Purpose of the Study

The main objective of this study was to gather qualitative feedback from the participants through focus group interviews regarding soft skills development training delivered through a blended learning model. Furthermore, the study aimed to determine the participants' willingness to embrace this hybrid learning approach in their future educational experiences.

1.3. Research Questions

In this, the third phase of a multiphase, mixed-methods study, the primary focus was to address one central research question and five guiding research questions:

The Central Research Question

- How do undergraduate university students in an experimental group evaluate their experience with regard to soft skills training delivered via a blended learning model?

The Guiding Research Questions

a) What were the participants' post-intervention expectations from soft skills development training administered via a blended learning model?

b) What was the participants' post-course feedback about the blended learning course design?

c) What were the participants' perceived potentials and limitations of the web-based technologies deployed in the soft skills development course implementation?

d) What were the participants' views about the course impact and benefits?

e) What was the course relevancy to the participants' perceived needs?

f) What soft skills course units [weeks] did the participants appreciate the most?

g) What soft skills course units did the participants depreciate the most?

h) What was the participants' overall feedback about the soft skills development course administered via a blended learning model?

i) To what extent did the blended learning model meet the participants' pre-training expectations?

j) What recommendations did the participants suggest to improve the blended learning model for future implementation?

k) To what extent were the participants motivated to engage in further soft skills development training via blended learning in their future learning?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Industry 4.0

In recent years, the concept of "Industry 4.0" has gained significant attention from both academics and practitioners, encompassing various aspects such as production processes, data management, customer relationships, and competitiveness (Klingenberg & Antunes, 2017; Rojko, 2017). It originated as a strategic initiative introduced by the German government in 2011 known as "Industrie 4.0," and known as "Industry du Future" in France and "Industrial Internet" in the United States (Bartodziej, 2017). The transformation of industrial manufacturing through digitalization and the adoption of new technologies is at the core of this initiative (Ghobakhloo, 2020). Various studies have explored the concept, emphasizing its importance and impact on human labor and organization (Barreto et al., 2017; Bonekamp & Sure, 2015; Choi et al., 2022; Rojko, 2017; Sreedharan & Unnikrishnan, 2017).

2.2. Industry 4.0 and Human Capital Development

Industry 4.0 emphasizes a shift from manual industrial processes to a complex network of intelligent devices communicating in machine-to-machine languages (Ahmad et al., 2018). It has been reported that unskilled and semi-skilled workers could become obsolete in the new digital era, highlighting the importance of soft skills in the face of

technological advancements (Hirsch-Kreinsen, 2016). Further evidence supports the need for new and soft skills in the modern workplace, particularly for workers in routine jobs (Vu et al., 2019; Weber, 2016). Industry 4.0 is expected to bring about more complex job profiles and emphasize cross-functional collaboration and capacity building (Agolla, 2018; Ahmad et al., 2018; Bonekamp & Sure, 2015). However, current education institutions are inadequately equipped to develop these essential soft skills, necessitating collaboration between academia and businesses in order to meet industry demands. A transition towards Education 4.0 is therefore crucial to foster a workforce capable of thriving in the changing landscape of Industry 4.0 (Garcia, 2016).

2.3. Education 4.0

In the new millennium, technology has been increasingly integrated into education, leading to Education 2.0 and later Education 3.0, characterized by easy access to information and virtual learning opportunities. Now, Education 4.0 is emerging as a response to the needs of the fourth industrial revolution, aligning humans and technology to meet the changing skills requirements of today's industry (Butt et al., 2020; Chea et al., 2019; Fisk, 2017; Hariharasudan & Kot, 2018). Education 4.0 remolds the teaching-learning process, empowering learners to define their education path through personalized learning aided by advanced technologies and artificial intelligence (Fisk, 2017; de Souza Oliveira & de Souza, 2022; Salmon, 2019). This new approach accentuates interpersonal skills like autonomous learning, creative thinking, problem solving, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration (Grenčíková et al., 2021). Incorporating these non-cognitive, non-technical, people skills in curricula is essential to prepare students for the demands of Industry 4.0 and to foster globally competitive learners (Chea et al., 2019; de Souza Oliveira & de Souza, 2022; Hariharasudan & Kot, 2018). Previous reports and studies have underlined that significant measures ought to be taken in order to cultivate an organizational culture of teaching Education 4.0 skills at tertiary levels to meet the job market requirements of the 21st century (Alias et al., 2018; Butt et al., 2020) in tandem with the rise of Millennials and Centennials at the new workplace.

2.4. The Rise of Centennials

Each generation possesses distinct beliefs, values, cultures, perspectives, skills, and approaches to life and work. The literature highlights the unique characteristics, aspirations, and workplace expectations of generation cohorts. Generation Z and Centennials, as true digital natives, seamlessly integrate information and technology into their daily lives (Berkup, 2014; Gaidhani et al., 2019; Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018). They view technology as a tool for communication, education, and entertainment rather than a mere product. In essence, Centennials strongly believe in boundless learning, with unlimited access to information, anytime and anywhere (Giray, 2022). Countless studies have shown that they prioritize capacity building and soft skills development from a young age, demonstrating a practical and forward-looking mindset. They express a desire for entrepreneurship and actively pursue skills in various fields (Rue, 2018).

2.5. The Disparity between Hard Skills and Soft Skills

Soft skills, also known as interpersonal or "people skills," are distinct from "hard skills," which are technical abilities aligned with specific tasks (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Doyle, 2020; Laker & Powell, 2011; Matteson et al., 2016). They are characterized by people management skills applicable across various sectors of industry. Soft skills are influenced more by an individual's personality than formal training, making them harder to acquire (Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Klaus et al., 2009; Laker & Powell, 2011; Setiana et al., 2019). While soft skills are abstract and vary between professions, they play a crucial role in how individuals relate to and interact with others (Balcar, 2014; Costantino & Rodzinka, 2022; Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Hirsch, 2017; Madhulika et al., 2023; Majid et al., 2012, 2019). Communication, flexibility, leadership, motivation, problem solving, teamwork, and work ethics are examples of soft skills. In brief, research indicates that technological and societal changes, such as automation and population aging, are shaping the landscape of skills and work. It is noteworthy that today's employers seek candidates with strong soft skills during the hiring process, as the job market is continually evolving with new technologies and roles that highly demand these non-cognitive abilities that are indicative of high emotional intelligence (EQ) (Majid et al., 2012, 2019; Pereira & Costa, 2017; Rani & Mangala, 2010; Schulz, 2008).

3. METHODOLOGY

To reiterate, the current study forms part of a multiphase, mixed-methods study, consisting of three interrelated phases (see Figure 1).

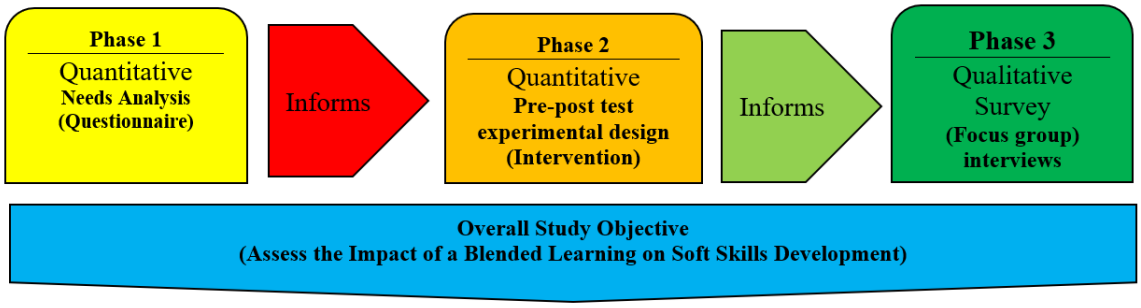

Figure 1. *Multiphase Mixed-Methods Study Design*

3.1. Research Design

Markedly, Phase 1 of the study explored the soft skills gap among Moroccan university students, examining their awareness and readiness for a soft skills training through blended learning. It identified students' familiarity with soft skills, perceived needs, preferences, future career outcomes, and opinions on blended learning efficiency.

In Phase 2, the study applied the blended learning model to assess the experimental group's soft skills development over an 8-week period, while the control group received traditional face-to-face classroom teaching. The anchored Frontal Behavioral Inventory (FBI) measured soft skills development before and after the treatment, confirming its cross-cultural

reliability. The blended learning model incorporated various platforms like Edmodo, Google Meet, and A Toolkit for Soft Skills Development for Young People (UMJ) for teaching soft skills both online and offline, complemented by face-to-face activities, collaboration, feedback, and handouts (see Figure 2).

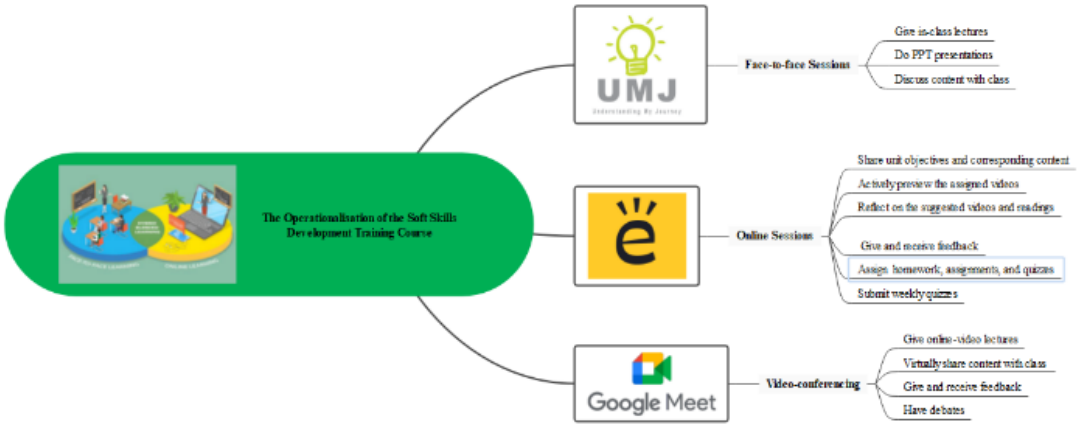

Figure 2. *Operationalization of the Soft Skills Development Training Course*

Phase 3 was directed to obtain qualitative data from the experimental group participants. Via focus group interviews, the researcher sought the participants' qualitative [evaluative] feedback about the blended learning used in soft skills development, and whether the participants would be willing to try such a model (blended learning) in their future learning experiences (see Figure 3).

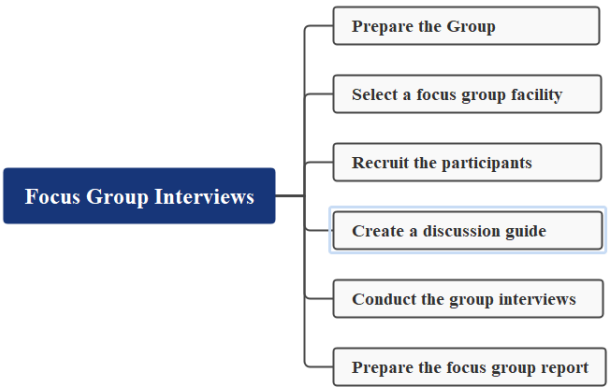

Figure 3. *Qualitative Survey (Focus Group Interviews) Flowchart*

As shown in Figure 3, after the treatment, the participant students were interviewed in focus groups in order to voice their evaluative feedback about their learning experience in developing soft skills through a blended learning model. In this phase, only the students who participated in the intervention were invited to focus group interviews to qualitatively evaluate the soft skills course units delivered via blended learning.

3.2. Data Collection

In the third phase of the study, qualitative focus group interviews were conducted with 21 students from the experimental group who participated in the soft skills training course at the faculty of letters and humanities. The interviews aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of the training course and cross-examine the results from the previous phase. The focus group participants, divided into six groups, provided evaluative feedback about their learning experience and the development of their soft skills through the blended learning model. A toolkit, including a digital recorder, participant information sheets, consent forms, and focus group checklists, was used to facilitate the interviews professionally.

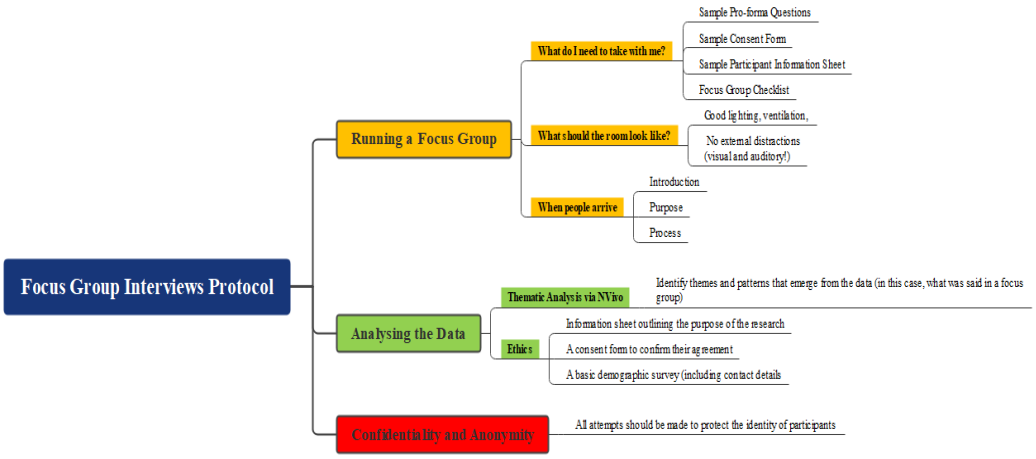

Figure 4. *Focus Group Interviews Protocol*

The focus groups consisted of six or seven participants each, lasting 1-2 hours. The researcher, acting as the moderator, facilitated the discussions, encouraging open debate and exchanging opinions by asking open-ended questions. The interviews were captured using a voice recorder for later review and lasted around 36 to 40 minutes, ensuring everyone had a chance to speak and participate fully.

3.3. Data Analysis

The QSR International company's NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) software package offers many advantages and is suggested to enhance research quality significantly, making qualitative data analysis much more accessible and professional. The software reduces the number of manual tasks necessary, thereby allowing researchers to discover trends, recognize themes, and draw conclusions more quickly (Mortelmans, 2019; Wong, 2008). In procedural terms, Jackson and Bazeley (2019) mentioned five important tasks in which NVivo can ease the process of analyzing qualitative data. These procedures are illustrated in Figure 44, and include:

- **Manage data** by organizing a number of different data document types (e.g., interview transcripts, surveys, observation notes, and published documents).

- **Manage ideas** in order to understand the conceptual and theoretical issues generated in the course of a study.
- **Query data** by posing several questions of the data and utilizing NVivo in answering these queries. "Results of queries are saved to allow further interrogation and so querying or searching becomes part of an ongoing enquiry process" (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019, p. xx).
- **Modeling visually** by creating graphs to demonstrate relationships between the conceptual and theoretical data.
- **Reporting** by utilizing the data collected and the result found to formulate transcript reports about the study conducted.

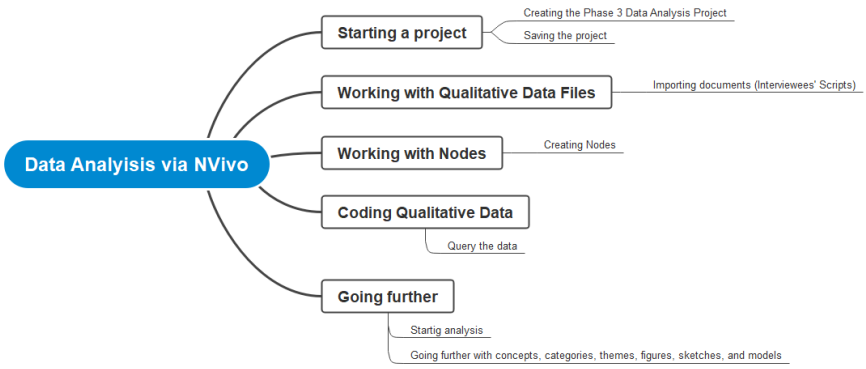

Figure 5. *Procedure Followed in Applying NVivo Software*

For qualitative data analysis, the audio-recorded interview sessions were transcribed and analyzed using the procedure followed in applying NVivo Software, adopted from Jackson and Bazeley (2019). The purpose of this phase of the study was to see how the participating students evaluated their experience in the soft skills development course that had been administered via a blended learning model. The already grouped chunks or units of analysis and their sub-categories were examined in order to derive meanings, make interpretations, and draw conclusions, which all contributed to answering the study's qualitative research questions. For further details, see Figures 6, 7, and 8.

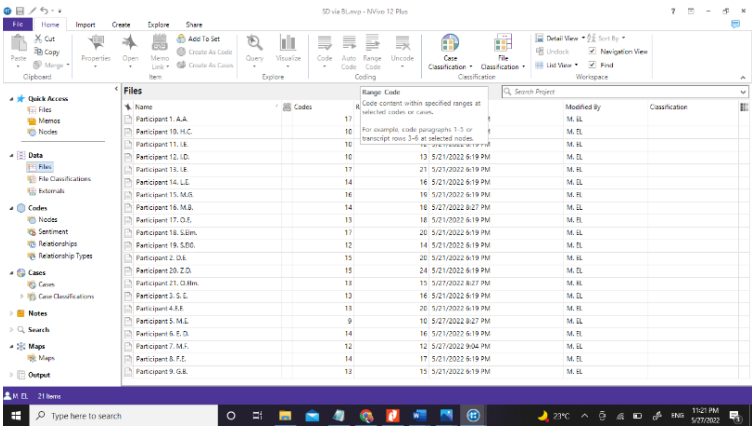

Figure 6. *Interview Transcripts in NVivo*

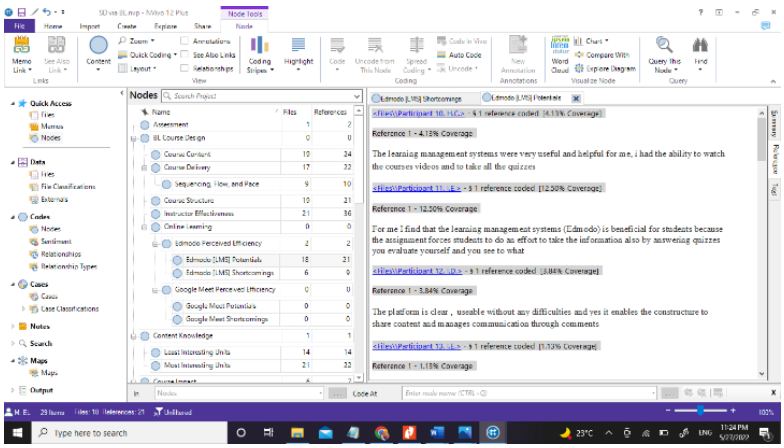

Figure 7. *Coding Process*

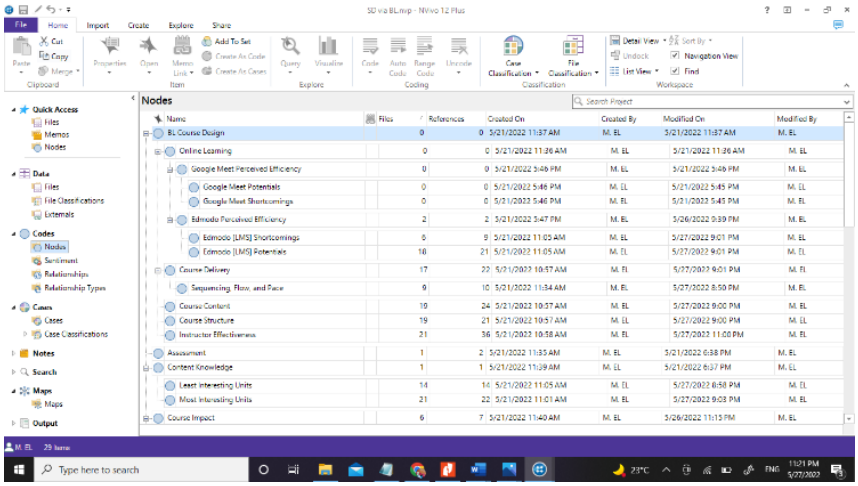

Figure 8. *Emerged Themes*

4. RESULTS

The third phase of the study aimed to provide a qualitative evaluation of the experimental phase, which took the form of an 8-week blended learning training program. Data collected from focus group interviews conducted with participant students were studied and analyzed. The results are presented in seven subsections.

4.1. Participants' Expectations from Soft Skills Development Training via Blended Learning

Thematic analysis of the interviewees' transcripts concerning their expectations from the course allowed the researcher to derive three interconnected subthemes: developing soft skills, fostering personal growth, and joining a new learning experience. Figure 9 provides a visual representation of the emerging themes.

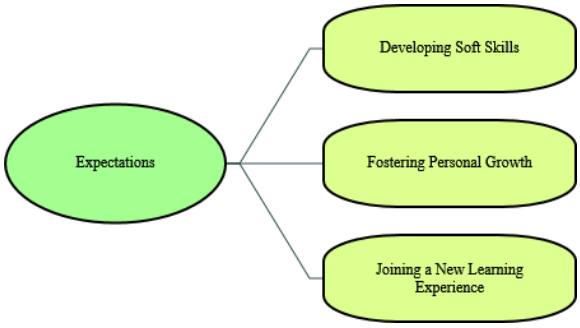

Figure 9. *Participants' Expectations*

4.1.1. Developing Soft Skills

The participants had clear expectations about the whys and wherefores of joining the soft skills development training via blended learning. The students were clear and consistent about what they expected from the course. They stated: *"I expected to develop my social and communication strategies, to take a closer look at the most practical sides of soft skills"* (Participant 1), *"I was very excited to learn and to know more skills"* (Participant 10), *"I expected to learn more about the soft skills and their impact on our lives"* (Participant 15), *"I was expecting training that gave us a roadmap about how to master soft skills and which puts us in real-life situations where our level of soft skills will be evaluated and tested"* (Participant 16), *"I was expecting less than what I've learned during the training. I thought we would cover some soft skills and make things clearer; but surprisingly, we were practicing soft skills, commenting on scenarios and discussing"* (Participant 20), and *"Before joining the soft skills development course, I was expecting to learn about soft skills, why they are important and how to adopt them"* (Participant 9). The participants further noted that the course met and exceeded their expectations: *"Fortunately, the training content has met almost 90% of my expectations, and I'm satisfied with this result"* (Participant 7), *"Yes, the training content absolutely met my expectations and introduced me to new content"* (Participant 9), *"I expected to discover some new information on soft skills, but what I learned exceeded my expectations"* (Participant 3), and *"I am sure that the training successfully met a huge part of my expectations"* (Participant 21).

4.1.2. Fostering Personal Growth

Interestingly, after analyzing the transcripts a second important expectation emerged. The participants talked about how the training helped them improve their personal growth, i.e., habits, behaviors, actions, and reactions. Participant 1 proclaimed that, *"I expected to develop my social and communication strategies, to take a closer look at the more practical side of soft skills."* Participant 12 revealed that, *"I was expecting that the training would increase my self-confidence and productivity, and yes, it did fulfill my expectations."* As equivocally put by Participant 17, *"Actually, I was expecting from this training to witness the butterfly effect bring my passion back towards learning, developing my personality, and my skills at the academic level rather than in general life, by upgrading those soft skills that I was bad at."* On a different note, Participant 20 asserted that, *"I was expecting less than I learned during the training. I thought we would cover some soft skills and make things clearer; but*

surprisingly, we were practicing soft skills, commenting on scenarios and discussing." Participant 21 affirmed that, *"I expected to learn how to improve my abilities in working with others, understanding their perspectives, and to analyze situations to find the best solutions."* The same thought was echoed by Participant 6, who stated that,

> *To be honest, when I first heard about the training, I didn't expect much from it and thought it would be an additional burden for the whole semester. But, after the training I realized I was totally wrong. The training introduced me to various notions and new techniques that will positively affect my career. My favorite part is that I had the chance to express myself and to develop my public performance; I also made a lot of new friendships so it was both fun and educational at the same time.*

4.1.3. Joining a New Learning Experience

Under the theme of students' expectations, the third subtheme concerns the student's readiness to try a new way of learning, the blended learning model. To many participants, it was a remarkable opportunity to learn through a combination of online and offline sessions. As a result, they had anticipated learning more about the features of blended learning. In this regard, Participant 11 stated,

> *Before joining the soft skills development course, I had low expectations. I thought that it would be traditional face-to-face sessions and the professor would be the center of the class and a 'Mr. Know-all,' but on the contrary, I was really shocked by how the sessions were delivered and the way the professor dealt with us.*

On a similar note, Participant 6 pointed out,

> *To be honest, when I first heard about the training, I didn't expect much from it and thought it would be an additional burden for the whole semester. But, after the training I realized I was totally wrong. The training introduced me to various notions and new techniques that will positively affect my career. My favorite part is that I had the chance to express myself and to develop my public performance; I also made a lot of new friendships, so it was both fun and educational at the same time.*

The students were eager to pick up new skills and keep up with what was going on in the academic world. Many of the students indicated that blended learning courses satisfied their basic requirements for making their educational journey both simple and flexible.

4.2. Participants' Post-Course Feedback about the Blended Learning Course Design

Most of the students were satisfied with how the soft skills development training was delivered via a blended learning model, based on their feedback about the course content, delivery, and structure (see Figure 10).

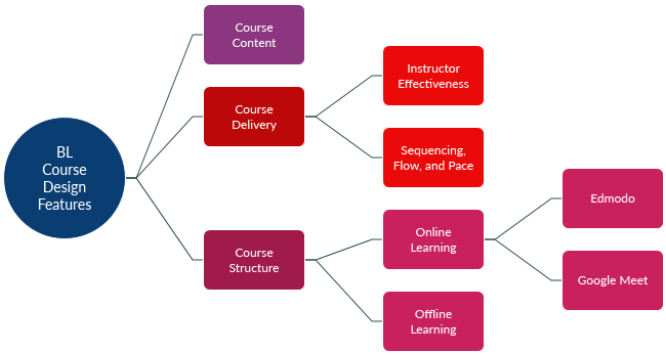

Figure 10. *Features of the Blended Learning Course Design*

4.2.1. Course Content

Concerning the course content, the participants had positive views about the informational material required for participation or understanding content, such as assigned reading, video recordings, exams, and any other material needed for learning. Participant 13 divulged that, *"The content of soft skills development course was excellent and beneficial,"* while Participant 1 disclosed that, *"The video recordings were very accessible, especially because I have good access to the network."* Similarly, Participant 12 averred that, "*The informational material that were provided to us through the Edmodo platform, especially the quizzes, were so helpful and useful to fix the previous information that we had learned during the sessions before."*

4.2.2. Course Delivery

Concerning the participants' post-course feedback about the blended learning course delivery, they positively viewed the process of receiving educational content from the course facilitator. In terms of instructor effectiveness, the students' feedback overwhelmingly indicated that they enjoyed the professional way the course was delivered both offline and online. They thought it was delivered in a well-planned and well laid out way that was easy to follow. They also highlighted being able to get everything done (homework and tests), with sufficient time to learn about the topics without feeling overburdened or unnecessarily rushed. This was clearly expressed in slightly different terms by 11 of the participants, with Participant 10 having stated that *"The instructor really knows how to teach us in a productive way. The instructor's level of content knowledge was amazing."*

Course sequencing, flow, and pacing can significantly impact upon the success or failure of delivering a blended learning course. In retrospect, all of the study's participants seemed delighted with the rhythm and timing of both the online and offline activities or units, including how the instructor allotted time to each part and how they decided when to switch between an activity and a sub-activity. This was widely reflected in the students' transcripts, for example, Participant 10 stated that, *"The speed of delivery was very good,"* whilst Participant 11 mentioned that, *"To be honest, during the training I didn't feel that there was a professor and a class [in the traditional sense]. We were like a group of students negotiating together and that was what I liked the most."*

4.2.3. Course Structure

The participants were asked to give their perspective on the course structure and how the material was chosen and organized. They were also asked about the learning objectives and how they supported each other. Based on the topics chosen and the structure of the course content, the training met the expectations of several participants. In the feedback received from the students, most seemed delighted with the suggested structure of the blended learning course. The following additional insights were mentioned by the participants regarding this concept: *"The structure of the course was very good and organized"* (Participant 12), *"The structure of the soft skills development course was excellent and well organized"* (Participant 13), and Participant 14 said that,

> *It was excellent. During this training, each unit was based on the unit that came before , with the training units completing and complementing each other, it was as if we were building something, which made it easy for us to enjoy learning and gaining knowledge.*

4.3. Participants' Perceived Potentials and Limitations of Web-Based Technologies Deployed in a Soft Skills Development Course Implementation

4.3.1. Edmodo Learning Management System

The participant students widely favored the Edmodo learning management system (LMS) as a platform for the development of soft skills. Based on the participants' narratives, they appeared mostly positive about being able to improve their soft skills using Edmodo. First and foremost, its ease of access played a prominent role. The platform made accessing the course very easy and uncomplicated for the participants. As soon as the instructor provided them each with their respective personal access code, all of the platform's features were made instantly available (viewing content, liking and disliking content, commenting on suggested content, watching videos, reading the materials [in Microsoft or Adobe PDF format], taking quizzes and tests, and so on). Analysis of the students' transcripts describing the positive aspects of the Edmodo online platform for the soft skills development identified two key themes: LMS potentials and LMS limitations.

4.3.1.1. Edmodo LMS: Potentials

The participants' feedback about Edmodo following their training was very positive in nature. They asserted that the LMS was useful, helpful, very practical, and exceeded their prior expectations. In illustrating this, Participant 10 argued that, "*The learning management system was very useful and helpful for me. I had the ability to watch the course videos and to take all the quizzes,*" whilst Participant 11 remarked that, "*For me I found the Edmodo LMS to be beneficial because the assignment forces students to make an effort to receive the information being taught through answering quizzes to self-evaluate and to see the results."* Participant 12 articulated that, "*The platform is clear, useable without any difficulties and yes, it enables the constructure to share content and to manage communication through comments."* Participant 15 quoted that, "*Of course, 'Edmodo' was very helpful, as it enabled us to watch the course videos smoothly without problems, as well as distribute quizzes and assignments,*" whilst Participant 17 stated that, "*Personally, I found Edmodo much more*

useful than many other applications we see people or students use during the operation of learning."

4.3.1.2. Edmodo LMS: Limitations

The Edmodo LMS platform was also blamed for having significant shortcomings. Four of the participant students conceded that the problem was attributed to the process of submitting quizzes and assignments. They elucidated that, "*I only faced problems during quizzes. I sometimes submitted a quiz and ended up with different answers than those I'd selected*" (Participant 1) and "*There were some disruption with regard to the quizzes. Some of the answers changed, which negatively affected the result of the quizzes*" (Participant 13). Similarly, Participant 18 mentioned that,

> *The only problem was with the quizzes. I had a problem with the answers. I had some that were correct, but the wrong answer was then shown as correct. I only had a small problem with the online courses because I have a poor Internet connection, so most of the time I couldn't engage with the rest of the participants or hear or even connect with the class.*

4.3.2. Google Meet

4.3.2.1. Google Meet Strengths

The subjects described Google Meet in their interviews as a valuable videoconferencing tool. They revealed the program to be a viable technological tool that enabled them to interact directly with their instructor in a virtual room, which was considered an aid to the teaching-learning process, that improved their speaking skills, and also helped foster their soft skills. The three patterns of course interaction, lecturer-student, student-lecturer, and student-student, created a remarkable course atmosphere, striking a great balance between the talking time of both the students and their instructor. The participants were involved in the teaching-learning process as active agents as they would be in a physical classroom in each pre-activity, main activity, and also in each post-activity. In retrospect, the participant students felt happy, secure, confident, and brave in taking part in the online sessions where Google Meet was used as a virtual classroom.

With reference to the participants' narratives, Google Meet was described as having a number of advantages and disadvantages. In terms of its advantages, Participant 15 opined that, "*I thought the idea of online classes* [via Google Meet] *wasn't going to be successful, but it was; it was really helpful due to the lack of time. The delivery was excellent."* Students who were previously less involved in asking and responding to questions during their classes improved in terms of their in-class involvement. This was due to the students feeling more at ease discussing their ideas and concerns through online learning. When the students took their classes from home, they were perhaps less likely to have been subjected to peer pressure. The participants remarked that Google Meet expanded the teaching-learning modality and the number of learning experiences available to students through the use of text, audio, video, and animation to deliver knowledge. They reiterated that Google Meet was considered a good tool for online teaching and learning activities, and that it can be effectively utilized for student training thanks to its high definition video resolution. additionally, it was mentioned that Google Meet also supported other resolution settings so

that the video display becomes clearer, and more simple and easy to use and access during meetings. The participants' transcripts included the following excerpts: "*I think it's very effective compared to the other available platforms. For example, Zoom is very poor for voice and picture clarity, making Google Meet a good choice for teachers*" (Participant 7); "*Yes, absolutely, it's easy and manageable to use. There's no excretion and hard time for accessibility*" (Participant 19); and "*It's actually very effective when compared with other platforms*" (Participant 1).

4.3.2.2. Google Meet Limitations

With regards to the disadvantages associated with Google Meet, the participants attested it did have certain shortcomings. They confirmed that constant Internet access, reliable network conditions, and the availability of equipment such as a personal or laptop computer were essential to making online learning successful. Excerpts from the participants' interview transcripts included the following: *"If you are willing to pay for the job to be well done, then Zoom may be your best choice, since the paid version offers extremely high-quality videoconferencing"* (Participant 3); *"It* [Google Meet] *needs a strong Internet connection to enable access and to view presentations or a shared screen"* (Participant 9); and *"While sharing the screen, the browser certainly stops working, forcing the user to restart, which can be quite time-consuming"* (Participant 11).

4.4. Participants' Views About the Impact and Benefits of a Soft Skills Development Course

In the qualitative post-course evaluation of the soft skills development training, it was revealed that the training had a substantially positive impact on the students taking the course. The interviewer asked the students about how their experiences of the training had impacted their lives and how they foresaw its impact in the future. The interview transcripts mostly revealed three themes related to academic, personal, and workplace outcomes (see Figure 11).

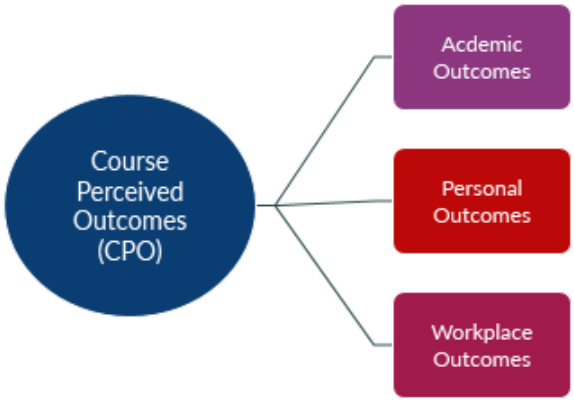

Figure 11. *Course Perceived Benefits*

4.4.1. Academic Outcomes

Examining how the soft skills development course impacted academic performance, the participant students reacted positively about the course when interviewed, and mentioned several positive changes mostly associated with developing a new skillset and

enriching their background knowledge about the soft skills concept. The following transcription excerpts exemplify how the training course positively impacted their academic performance: Participant 1 stated that, "*I have learned important skills from our instructor that will help me academically. Thanks to the training, I have learned to be more prepared and organized*," whilst Participant 7 noted that, "*I gained so many skills concerning how to deal with an audience during a presentation such as how to maintain eye contact and how to use body language appropriately*." Concerning the impact of the training on the participants' background knowledge, Participant 21 mentioned that, "*Of course, I moved from just knowing a skill's name to knowing how it actually works*." Similarly, Participant 5 recognized that,

> *It would be such a shame to not say. Yes, I did learn a lot. I learned what and how, and how to engage in effective communication...the importance of time management, and about stress…and the emphasis on critical thinking and how I will need it as a human being and also as an academic student.*

4.4.2. Personal Outcomes

The students' statements overwhelmingly noted the positive impact of the soft skill development course on their personalities. They confirmed that the training had a significant impact on their personal lives and daily encounters. The participants argued that the training helped them address issues related to public speaking, speech anxiety, stress management, decision making, self-esteem, and maintaining a positive attitude. In this respect, Participant 12 posited that, "*The course helped me to improve my decision making and start thinking outside of the box after learning the skills of critical thinking,"* whilst Participant 21 speculated that,

> *This training has helped me massively since I did not know anything about soft skills at first. It was blurry and shady, and I'd barely heard of it in my daily life, even when I was unconsciously using them. However, now, I acknowledge the importance of it, and have even improved a little since 2 months ago.*

4.4.3. Workplace-Related Outcomes

Most of the students who participated in the soft skills development course were undergraduates, and reported in their post-course feedback interviews that the training had been of great significance in professional terms. Based on their comments, it was noted that they were convinced enough that the course had helped them develop certain basic soft skills that would surely add value once they applied to join the business world or were actually employed. Soft skills encompass a wide array of skills that students, as future employees or even employers, need in the workplace. Participant 1 maintained that, "*This training not only helped to improve personal aspects like communication with my family members and friends, but also helped me apply what I have learned to my professional life."* Participant 12 conjectured that, *"This training helped me develop important skills such as communication, teamwork that would help me to build stronger and more effective workplace relationships in the future, and how to tackle problems more confidently."* Participant 7 upheld that, *"I discovered new strategies to use in situations where I may encounter conflict with a co-worker or colleague; so, then I can healthily manage any such conflict."*

The training was conducted through webinars or videos, and the trainees practiced their new skills via an LMS through exercises directed according to their instructor's supervision.

4.4.4. Course Relevancy to the Participants' Perceived Needs

The participants were asked how the training was deemed to be relevant to their needs; e.g., writing résumés, job interviews, job performance, and finding success in communicating with others at work and in other areas of life. Based on their narratives, the participants pointed out that the training was relevant to their needs and requirements. They further stated that the soft skills training met their personal needs, as well as goals at the academic, personal, and professional levels. The students revealed why the content of the course mattered to them, affirming that the course positively affected their motivation in order to keep learning more about these new skills. This indicates that the course significantly related to their desired knowledge and skills. Excerpts from the participants' interview transcripts included that, "*The training was highly relevant to my needs*" (Participant 1), whilst Participant 11 stated that,

> *Frankly speaking, there was no session that I did not benefit from. I learned how to improve my communication skills, how to be efficient with my speaking, the secret of successful teamwork, and how to think positively and adopt a more positive attitude.*

4.4.4.1. Most Appealing Soft Skills Course Units

Many of the interviewees showed more interest in certain units of the soft skills development course over others. Thus, based on their feedback, some units were judged to be more informative and interesting than others. This is graphically illustrated in Figure 12.

Figure 12. *Most Interesting Course Units*

The **communication skills** unit was ranked first, as seen in Figure 12. Whilst the participants viewed all of the course units as relevant, communication skills was perceived to be of the greatest significance for a variety of reasons. For example, Participant 20 stated

that, "*For me, the most interesting unit was about communication skills since we need communication in daily life; moreover, communication is indirectly related to most of the soft skills we covered during the training*." The same view was held by other participants, including Participant 5, who opined that,

> *For me, communication skill is what I mostly needed to acquire, and I'm working on it now to progress myself. I don't have a least important skill: I can't think of anything as they are all important and special in their own way.*

On a similar note, Participant 6 posited that, "*For me, the most interesting was communication skills. Nowadays, communicating properly is a real challenge for students, so exploring this skill was really interesting*."

Participants rated **teamwork skills** as the second most interesting course unit from the soft skills training for a host of reasons. In this regard, Participant 11 voiced that, "*For me, the most interesting unit was about teamwork because I always find difficulties working within a team*." Similarly, Participant 15 surmised that, "*The most important unit for me was the one on teamwork; I was struggling to work in groups. It promoted a positive workplace environment where more opportunities could be realized, and more obstacles overcome."*

Working in teams was not undervalued by the participants. As they pointed out, they performed their best when surrounded by friends and peers. It was noted that teamwork skills could help the more shy and reserved students to become more open and forthcoming during lessons.

Third on the list of most highly-rated course units was **critical-thinking skills**. The participants stated that critical thinking can help them better understand themselves and, in turn, help them avoid negative or limiting beliefs and thereby focus more on their strengths. Participant 7 asserted that, "*This unit clarified ways in which I should see things and facts by using logic, reasoning, and creativity in order to draw the best conclusions and have wider vision*." By the same token, Participant 17 declared that, "*Critical thinking was very helpful for me to see new ways of reasoning and to analyze the data I receive from media and other sources*." Some of the participants did not provide reasons as to why they listed critical-thinking skills as the most interesting unit of the course.

Positive attitude skills ranked fourth on the list of most highly-rated course units. The participants stated that positive attitude skills could help them cope better with everyday life, instill more optimism in their lives, and help them to avoid worrying and from experiencing negative thoughts. It was stated that adopting positive attitude skills would bring about positive changes to their lives, making them happier, brighter, and generally more successful. Correspondingly, Participant 13 noted that, "*The most interesting unit in this soft skills development blended learning training program, in my opinion, must be positive attitude skills. This unit taught me how to manage my anger issues and to not lose my temper with others*." Participant 3 speculated that *"positive attitude skills increase positivity and emotional intelligence."*

Stress management skills was placed fifth on the list of units that were most appreciated by the students. Stress management was said to offer a number of tools for

students to reset and recalibrate their personal alarm system, and helping them to adapt better to stress (resilience). They argued that these skills would help them manage stress in a host of different areas in their life, including work, relationships, as well as health and body functioning. Related statements include this from Participant 14:

> *For me, the most interesting unit was the one that related to stress management. I'm quite a stressful person, and so this unit helped me a lot to know more about how to manage my stress and turn it into something more positive.*

4.4.4.2. Least Appealing Soft Skills Course Units

Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that some course units were judged to be less interesting and less appealing to the students than others. This is graphically represented as shown in Figure 13.

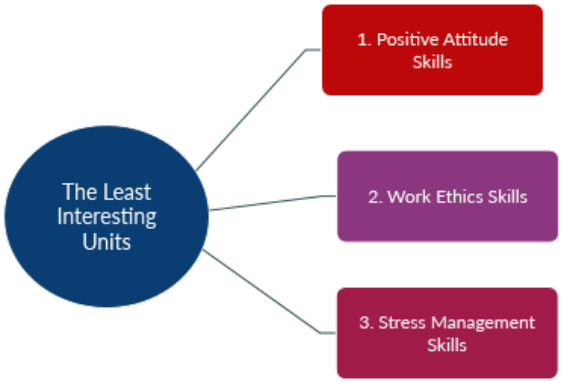

Figure 13. *Least Interesting Course Units*

However, most of the participants stated that all of the course units were interesting to varying degrees, and most asserted that there were no particularly uninteresting units. It is worth noting, however, that many of the participant students found it challenging to choose a less interesting unit. They insisted on the idea that all of the course units harmoniously interacted and supplemented each other in order to create an integrated and comprehensive course. The following statements evidenced this: *"It would be an injustice to say that a certain unit was the least interesting"* (Participant 1); *"All of the units were interesting. There were none that were any less interesting!"* (Participant ?); and *"...for the least interesting, I do not think there was one. All of the units were interesting!"* (Participant 15).

Regarding the least interesting units, paradoxically, **positive attitude** came at the top of the list. This course unit perhaps did not attract adequate attention from some of the participants for various reasons. Participant 6 conjectured that, *"The least interesting unit was the one on positive attitude. I think that always looking on the bright side is quite ridiculous. Instead, people should be more realistic and consider the worst case every time so that nothing can surprise them."* Both Participant 8 and Participant 9 emphasized that, *"The least interesting* [course unit] *was on having a positive attitude."*

Another unit that failed to receive significant attention from the participant students was **work ethics**. Participant 18 revealed that, *"There was no least interesting* [course unit],

but if I had to choose one, it would be work ethics." Participant 2 unveiled that, *"The least interesting unit was on work ethics."*

Stress management was one of the units that also did not find its way to the participants' hearts. One of the participants mentioned that, *"The least interesting* [course unit] *was stress management, because most of the time stress plays the role of a motivating factor."*

In light of the participants' statements, it may be said that the content shared during each of the eight units of the soft skills development course were generally viewed positively by the interviewees.

4.5. Participants' Overall Feedback About the Soft Skills Development Course Administered via a Blended Learning Model

The evaluation of the soft skills development course included another dimension: evaluation of the students' overall feedback. The participant students were each asked how the training had already influenced their lives at that point, and the extent to which they perceived it would be beneficial for them in the future. Based on the interview transcripts, three themes emerged that related mainly to the content, form, as well as the students' expectations and satisfactions (see Figure 14).

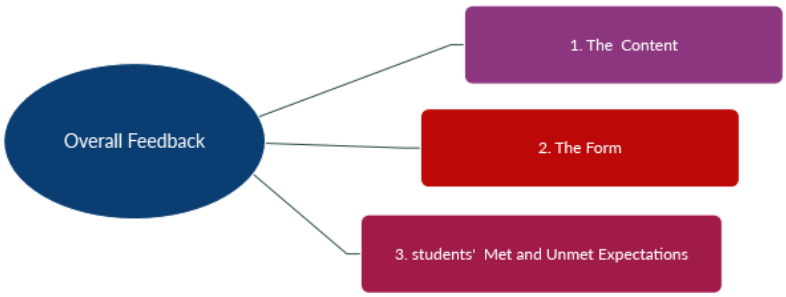

Figure 14. *Participants' Overall Feedback*

4.5.1. The Content

The interviews revealed considerable information related to the positive aspects of the course content. The participants voiced that the course content was remarkably rich, engaging, and impactful. Participant 10 pointed out that, "*This training will help us to solve our problems and to make good decisions, and also how to communicate with others and give them good vibes when talking to them*." Participant 14 had the same perspective, saying that, "*The course was good and rich in information, examples, and suitable situations to be analyzed in each unit*." Participant 15 opined that, "*I think I said this before, but the course was not only successful but also rich in useful information*." Participant 17 commented that, "*I don't know if I am going to sound greedy here in saying that I would happily receive this training every semester because I got so much more information and direction than from many other courses*." Participant 20 declared that, "*The course was informative, beneficial, and rich, and I enjoyed the course from the beginning of the training until the final session.*

Participant 4 stated that, "*The course was rich with knowledge. It was really clear and concise*." Participant 10 indicated that, "*The soft skills development course was beneficial and really amazing as well. It was informative, clear, and concise*." Participant 6 affirmed that,

> *The course introduced us to several soft skills needed in the work field. We were given enough time to fully understand each skill, and the presentations made the learning process so much easier. Personally, I gained new knowledge from this course to practice in my life.*

4.5.2. The Form

As previously stated, the interviewees provided clear evidence of their satisfaction with the course format. Nevertheless, five of the 21 participant students stated that the course was not that appealing to them. Excerpts from their interview transcripts included the following: *"What I liked the most was that the course was brief but great. More importantly, the mix of presentations and activities was so entertaining and interesting*" (Participant 20); *"Thank you for a great course. It had a great presentation style with lots of opportunities to ask questions and talk about real-life examples, which made it a really enjoyable and informative course"* (Participant 9); *"The instructor professionally presented the course. There was a good mixture of offers and appropriate activities, although I had expected more activities"* (Participant 8); and *"The course was highly informative and delivered in a way that it contained organized pieces of information written in simple language, which facilitated the learning process"* (Participant ?).

4.5.3. Meeting the Students' Expectations

Deconstruction of the interview transcripts revealed that the soft skills development course met the participants' needs beyond their stated pre-training expectations. Overall, they were delighted with the content, format, and delivery of the soft skills development course. Some of the interviewed participants mentioned that: *"The course surpassed my expectations"* (Participant 1); *"The delivery of the soft skills development course was excellent, and made everything quite memorable"* (Participant 13); *"I loved each unit* [of the course]*, and I learned from each one. I really enjoyed the soft skills development course"* (Participant 18); and *"I am sure the training successfully met a huge part of my expectations"* (Participant 21).

4.5.4. Recommendations Future Implementation

Asking the participant interviewees to share some of their suggestions on how the soft skills development training could be refined formed a central part of the focus group interviews. The students' contribution in this regard disclosed salient points to be considered should the course be reimplemented in the future. The participants' suggestions varied, with the most evocative displayed graphically in Figure 15.

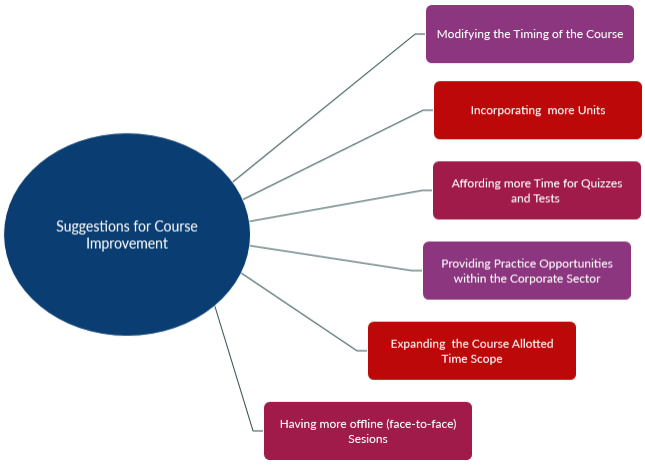

Figure 15. *Suggestions for Course Improvement*

The following are a selection of excerpts from the participant interviews regarding their key suggestions to enhance the course:

a) Modifying the Timing of the Course

I wouldn't alter anything except the timing of the course; I would love to have it during a period when we don't have college classes since I believe it would be much more effective to focus on only one thing. (Participant 13)

b) Incorporating More Units

I have one recommendation; there are several units that felt somewhat neglected in the course such as research skills, leadership skills, selling skills, and interpersonal skills. These skills are very important too. And for this, we needed more time. (Participant 15)

I would love it if there was another unit that talked about decision making. (Participant 9)

c) Affording More Time for Quizzes and Tests

I think more time should be allocated to the quizzes before being closed. (Participant 6)

d) Expanding the Course Allotted Time Scope

For me, I think the time provided for the course was a little bit short, and extending it would better suit the number of course units. In addition, participants should practice more presentations in order to best apply what they learned. (Participant 7)

e) Having More Offline (Face-to-Face) Sessions

It would be better if the face-to-face sessions were longer and included more discussion and more debates. (Participant 18)

I would suggest having more face-to-face meeting time. Also, to have more written information in the learning process. (Participant 2)

4.6. Readiness to Participate in Further Soft Skills Development Training Delivered Via Blended Learning in Future Learning Experiences

Regarding the participants' readiness, openness, and willingness to undergo further training in soft skills, the participant students unanimously agreed upon the academic,

personal, and professional benefits of soft skills development (see Figure 16). They asserted that they would engage in further soft skills development in the future for various reasons: Advanced awareness of the importance of soft skills development; appreciation of the soft skills development training impact; recognition of the exigencies of the job market; cognizance of the need to bridge the soft skills gap; and, the necessity to upgrade one's personal development plans.

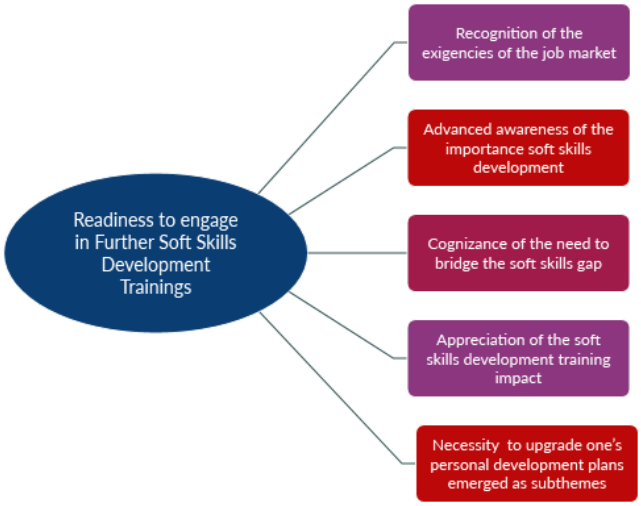

Figure 16. *Soft Skills Future Readiness*

a) Recognition of the Exigencies of the Job Market

Yes, I would [engage in further soft skills training], *because although a career and academic diplomas are important, recruiters are increasingly interested in soft skills. Candidates with fewer qualifications but with considerable soft skills may be preferred over other more qualified applicants.* (Participant 12)

In the future we are going to need these skills to work. To be employed in different occupations, you also need what are referred to as 'soft skills' (or 'life skills'). Soft skills, as opposed to hard skills (such as technical skills), greatly impact the personality development of employees. (Participant 15)

b) Advanced Awareness of the Importance of Soft Skills Development

The participants were convinced of the importance of soft skills and appeared motivated to develop them. They had an advanced awareness of the need to develop their soft skills.

Yes, I would think about further training in the area of soft skills development because I can see that it is as important as hard skills and research has shown that soft skills account for 90% of what makes people progress up the success ladder. (Participant 1)

c) Cognizance of the Need to Bridge the Soft Skills Gap

Yes, I plan to engage in further training because this training was like a door opened for us by the professor, for us to see how successful we could be if we learned how to really use our soft skills. (Participant 14)

d) Appreciation of the Soft Skills Development Training Impact

I don't know if I'm going to sound greedy here in saying that I would happily receive this training every semester because I got so much more information and direction than from many other courses. (Participant 17)

Yes, I would like to engage in another training because it is really useful, and how the program is organized makes you feel like you are studying at Harvard University. (Participant 4)

e) Necessity to Upgrade One's Personal Development Plans

I will keep studying and researching about soft skills because it's a rich field that cannot be summarized or taught in one single training. (Participant 14)

Yes. I want to reach the better version of myself. And I think it's possible with soft skills. (Participant 18)

Yes, because it will help me to improve my skills. (Participant 19)

f) Providing More Practice Opportunities

Well, I suggest including more real-life situations when teaching these skills, since this was the part I really liked in the course. It really helped me visualize how I can effectively apply soft skills in real life. (Participant 16)

5. DISCUSSION

This third phase of a multiphase, mixed-methods study described and reported the qualitative results collected via focus group interviews and analyzed via NVivo. Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed thematically, with many interesting results revealed. The primary focus of this phase was to reveal how participating students evaluated an 8-week soft skills course delivered via a blended learning model. It was deemed of critical importance to conduct post-course evaluations since these would provided a qualitative check on the second quantitative phase of the study, and also help to pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses that should be addressed when implementing such a course in the future.

Comparison of the study's results with those of previous research confirmed the paramount importance of soft skills training and the constant concerns raised by employers about the soft skills gap among graduates from today's tertiary education institutions. In Nikitina and Furuoka's (2012) qualitative study they explored Malaysian students' expectations of their university education, with a particular focus on the acquisition of soft skills, and examined their perceptions of their instructors' and the courses' effectiveness in fulfilling their educational agendas. In total, 96 students from University Malaysia Sabah (UMS) participated in the study. The findings revealed the students' educational expectations to be varied and diverse, and were classifiable under three categories: life skills, subject matter (hard skills), and soft skills. The students mostly viewed soft skills training as an essential part of their university education.

Relating to the current study, most participants stated that they perceived the training they received to be highly relevant to their needs, as well as responsive to their expectations of soft skills development from such a course. This result ties well with the findings of a

previous qualitative study by Succi and Canovi (2020). Their study aimed to demonstrate the increasing relevance of soft skills in a constantly changing environment. In that study, the researchers examined and compared students' and employers' perceptions about the importance of soft skills in different European countries. The results showed that 86% of respondents indicated that companies placed a greater emphasis on soft skills than current students and graduates during the past 5-10 years.

In terms of the current study's participants and their evaluative feedback about the intervention, it was reported that developing their soft skills through a blended learning model was considered overall to be a valuable experience. Deconstruction of the interview transcripts revealed that the soft skills development training met the participants' needs and preferences, and even exceeded their pre-training expectations. In general, it may be said that the participant students were extremely satisfied with the content, format, and delivery of the soft skills development course. This result is consistent with an earlier study by Nagura and Arakawa (2003), in which it was reported that most learners believed blended learning to be more effective when prior knowledge gained from electronic resources was combined with in-class lecturing and activities. This result may be explained by the fact that developing soft skills via blended learning can offer a unique individualized learning experience.

In the current study, and in this Phase 3 in particular which was based on participants' narratives, it was reported that blended learning simplified the soft skills development process. This whole process was facilitated in a significant part by the Edmodo learning management system. The Edmodo LMS simplified many of the arrangements and logistics, reducing the number of seminars, workshops, and materials distributed in relation to soft skills development. Owing to the use of Edmodo, the planning and implementation of the training was able to be managed very efficiently and effectively. These results reflect those reported by Ali and Juwita (2020), who examined how blended learning activities can enhance students' hard and soft skills through learning and instruction based on established research methodology. The results of their qualitative data analysis revealed that soft skills development training facilitated through a blended learning model significantly improved their participants' soft skills. The reason attributed to this was their utilization of a LMS as part of their blended learning model. This is also consistent with a previous study by Murjainah et al. (2020) that was titled "Improvement of students' soft skills using Edmodo by Blended Learning Method."

From the transcripts of the current study's focus group interviews, it was concluded that the participant students positively evaluated the eight units of the soft skills development course, albeit with varying degrees of impact on their academic, personal, and social lives. It was evident from their comments, however, that certain units received greater attention. Although the participants viewed all eight units as relevant, "communication skills" was ranked first in terms of its significance and importance for various reasons. This result corroborates the findings of a great deal of previous research in communication (Din & Jabeen, 2014).

As previously mentioned, this third phase study's key focus was to understand how students evaluated an 8-week soft skills course offered via a blended learning model. With regards their pre-training expectations, the interviewees said they had expected to develop soft skills, foster personal growth, and to participate in an enriching educational experience.

In their focus group interviews, attempts were made by the researcher to elicit the students' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the soft skills blended learning course, seeking specific and detailed feedback about the course content, as well as its delivery, structure, and content. Overall it may be said that the participants highly rated the training they received, and attested that it had an immense impact upon their lives. This substantiates the earlier quantitative findings which were based on inferential statistics, and mainly through independent and paired sample *t*-tests. The interview transcripts revealed two main themes, course perceived benefits and course relevancy to perceived needs, emphasizing the impact of the treatment. The participants cited that the training was impactful and yielded academic, personal, and work-related outcomes.

6. CONCLUSION

This third phase study involved the thematic analysis of focus group interview transcripts using NVivo software, which was used as supportive evidence of the earlier quantitative findings in a previous phase. The current study revealed that the blended learning soft skills development course was highly beneficial to the students due to its simplicity, functionality, flexibility, and tutorial control over content and features like video lectures, assessments with immediate feedback, and discussion forums. This research has indicated that embedding soft skills training via blended learning can effectively bridge the soft skills gap. Regarding this, the participants notably admired the blended learning model for promoting content connectivity and student interaction.

The study can be said to contribute to the knowledge on blended learning efficacy in soft skills development in Moroccan open-access universities, and particularly in connection with English language studies at the undergraduate level, in terms of enhancing capacity building and empowerment.

7. SUGGESTIONS

Implications

The results of the current study hold significant importance for educational policymakers as they highlight the widening soft skills gap and its impact on today's job market. The study urges policymakers to align academia to current-day business better in order to help bridge the gap by integrating soft skills into the teaching curriculum. Today's changing employment landscape necessitates a reevaluation of the current educational system to better meet industry demands and to provide graduates with that all-important competitive advantage. Moroccan students are encouraged to develop their soft skills so as to enhance their future employability and adaptability in the evolving job market. Investing in soft skills can particularly lead to better job prospects and wage returns for students at the undergraduate level.

Recommendations

The current study's key strength lies in having generated context-bound recommendations aimed at addressing the soft skills mismatch between undergraduate education and the expectations of industry. In total, 10 actionable recommendations are put

forward from this study: 1) acknowledging the gap; 2) recognizing the importance of soft skills; 3) fostering stronger links between businesses and universities; 4) integrating soft skills into curricula; 5) offering training programs for tutors and professors; 6) emphasizing the use of blended learning models; 7) establishing careers centers and training employability advisors; 8) promoting international exchange programs, and 9) enhancing access to high-quality soft skills development resources, both digital and non-digital.

Limitations

Like any academic work, the current study has certain limitations that necessitate careful interpretation of the results. The small sample size, limited measures used, and specific study context with English language students in a Moroccan university may affect the generalizability of the findings. However, the study has valuable strengths and contributes to bridging the soft skills gap and connecting education to the modern workplace. The researcher's dedication to rigor and adherence to academic standards across the three phases should be acknowledged despite these limitations.

Future Work

Even with the aforementioned limitations, the current research highlights the need for further investigation into various aspects of this phenomena. The soft skills gap and the impact of the intervention applied in the current study were examined solely from the perspective of undergraduate university students, calling for exploration through other departments and different universities. Future studies could compare the effects of developing soft skills separately through face-to-face or e-learning models. Expanding the research to different platforms and settings, such as Schoology, TalentLMS, and Zoom Video Webinar, may yield additional insights. Validation through replicated studies and exploring new research sites and instruments are considered vital for future investigations in order to build upon the findings of the current study.

DECLARATIONS

Author Contributions: First Author: Literature review, conceptualization, methodology, data analysis, original manuscript preparation. Second/Corresponding Author: review-editing and writing, journal article preparation.

Competing Interests Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Approval No ethical approval was sought since the study's data was not based on human or animal subjects.

Availability of Data and Materials Data sharing is not applicable since no new data were created or analyzed in the study.

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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Mohammed El Messaoudi is a Ph.D. Candidate and dedicated EFL educator with a continuous teaching journey since 2005. Profoundly skilled in engaging a diverse spectrum of learners. Renowned for orchestrating captivating presentations and dynamic workshops spanning EFL pedagogy, artificial intelligence integration, and the art of gamification. Boasts extensive familiarity with a wide array of software applications. Bolstered by a robust foundation in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) education. Passionately invested in the domains of academic writing, research methodology, and statistical analysis. Currently serving as a full-time EFL instructor at the Regional Directorate of Education and Training in Ifrane, Morocco, ardently shaping language proficiency and effective communication skills. In parallel, a part-time ESP educator at the Faculty of Sciences, imparting specialized English proficiency to augment students' subject-specific communicative prowess in addition to undertaking the roles of a tutor for Advanced Composition and Introduction to Research at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities in Meknes, Morocco. Distinguished by an impressive portfolio of indexed articles in esteemed journals, including Scopus and other high-impact publications. A dedicated Ph.D. candidate, navigating a research journey focused on bridging the gap between Industry 4.0 and Education 4.0. The dissertation illuminates the realm of soft skills development within Moroccan higher education, as facilitated through a pioneering blended learning model.

Email: moh.elmessaoudi@edu.umi.ac.ma

ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6236-5254

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