



*Soft Skills: Basic Skills
For better employment Tunisia case*

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Abstract

Soft skills have a fundamental position in a world undergoing economic crisis where innovation and digital are at the core of business strategies. It is in this context that this article, which aims to improve employability through the acquisition and development of soft skills, is written. The aim of this study is to show how do soft skills represent a stake to a successful professional integration? What are the primary means of action to develop soft skills among young people?

To answer the problem, we have adopted an approach that sequentially deals with the expectations and requirements of recruiters in terms of soft skills, then the role of training in soft skills development and finally the impact of soft skills on youth employability.

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1. *Introduction*

Today we are witnessing a shift in the demands of the labor market that calls for new skills of a relational nature that differ from “hard skills” or the so-called “technical skills”. In fact, soft skills, which are intangible human skills, constantly occupy space and destabilize the hard skills associated with the level of education of the student and his/her previous work experience that is generally measurable and quantifiable.

This article provides feedback on the 4C (Career and Skills Certification Center) accreditation of higher education institutions for a series of soft skills training courses for third-year students from different disciplines and from different higher education institutions.

The study shows that if hard skills make it possible to get a job interview, soft skills make success possible. Therefore, the soft skills training into the 4C framework are supposed to strengthen the professional integration of young graduate and to improve their employability.

An evaluation of such an experiment was carried out in the framework of a reverse fair organized by the HEM (Higher Education Ministry) in collaboration with 4C of HEI (Higher Education Institution) and SPARK organization. This experience allowed the students to live through this project a real situation close to the professional world. To underline the impact of transversal skills on employability, we used two studies: one qualitative, based on a semi-structured interview with

corporate human resource (HRD) managers in order to gauge their soft skills training needs and to understand the importance of these new skills in the hiring process.

The other survey is quantitative and seeks to assess the ability of students who have just received soft skills training from the 4C of institutions of higher education to be adapted to the labor market.

Firstly, our study suggests understanding the concept of soft skills, and reviewing previous studies on the importance of this new concept and its positive impact on candidate excellence, performance and employability. Then, in a second step, we attempt to introduce the methodology and our field of research. Finally, we present the results of studies conducted to show that soft skills are increasingly viewed by recruiters as criteria for employment with distinction.

2. *Theoretical framework*

2.1 *Familiarity with the concept of soft skills*

2.1.1 *Definitions*

2.1.1.1 *Soft skills appellations*

We note that there are many definitions and nomenclatures of the concept of soft skills. The different names reflect a semantic evolution that leads to multiple interpretations. As an indicator, Katz (1974) characterized soft skills as essential human skills for management (Katz, 1974, quoted from Brassor and Magnen, 2009, p. 329).

Courpasson and Livian (1991), among others, indicated that they fell under general skills, which were related to all possible disciplines and professional

activities. (Corbasson and Levian, 1991, quoted from Pelletier, 1998, p. 77). Aubrun and Orofiamma (1990) introduced soft skills as third dimension skills (Aubrun & Orofiamma, 1990; Liétard, 1996).

Bélisle (1995) used the term generic skills, which could be developed in a living or work environment, and which could generally be transferred from one context to another. As for Bellier (1998), he defined soft skills as the knowledge inherited in an individual's personality. (Bellier, 1998, p. 93).

In contemporary literature, other terms appeared, Coulet (2016) defined soft skills as essential skills. Thiberge (2007) talked about social and relational skills, adding that the term transversal skill was synonymous with them (Thiberge, 2007, p. 10).

Citing Mintzberg (1973), Paltrinieri (2013) gave the name of non-technical transverse skills (Mintzberg, 1072, citing Paltrinieri, 2013, p. 217; Cristol, 2018, p. 58). Bégin and Véniard (2013) referred instead to behavioral and relational skills. A literal translation of the term soft skills has led to the designation of soft skills (Theurelle-Stein, Barth, 2016, p.11; Chafiq & Talbi, 2017, p.1, Harvey cited by Secrétan-Klaye, 2009).

For his part, Duru-Bellat (2015) used the term non-academic skills. In 2016, the term socio-emotional skills took off (OECD, 2016). Moreover, in an article from the World Economic Forum, Morrow (2018) soft skills were internalized into core skills due to their necessity in personal and professional life.

2.1.1.2 Definitional consensus

In their (joint) book, Mauléon, Bouret & Hoarau (2014) usually described soft skills as “a transversal skill (useful in several different situations), which every one possesses and which helps the sustainable development of the individual in the environment” (Muléon, Bouret and Hoarau, 2014, p. 10).

The Oxford Dictionary finds that interpersonal skills correspond to “personal characteristics that allow everyone to interact effectively and harmoniously with others” (ibid.).

Coulet (2016) defined these skills as “very general (sometimes expressed in terms of transversal skills), certainly to be constructed, but their presence can be identified in both skills mobilized in professional and personal life” (Coulet, 2016, p. 12).

2.1.2 Soft skills categorizations

Jérôme Hoarau and Julian Buret found that it is impossible to define a rank for such skills in the strict sense of the word. On the other hand, we can retain the World Economic Forum classification of soft skills to have in 2020 as: problem solving, confidence, emotional intelligence, empathy, communication, time management, time management Stress, creativity, entrepreneurship, daring, motivation, visualization, presence, team spirit and curiosity.

2.2 Soft skills are attracting an increasing interest from companies

2.2.1 Adapting to changes in the environment

Referring to the research done on the concept of soft skills, we have found that they are in high demand compared to hard skills in the workplace, which are characterized by the strong digitalization. Indeed, hard skills are associated with the increasing trend in robotics. “Unlike technical skills, behavioral skills cannot be delegated to robots.”

Jerome Hoarau, co-author with Fabrice Mollion and Julien Bure of Réflexe Soft Skills (Dunod 2014), defined: “The evolution of the world of work, particularly with robotics, automation and artificial intelligence, is pushing us to focus on human capital, which are soft skills.”

Therefore, in the face of the robotization, hiring managers tend to develop behavioral skills within their organizations and base their hiring process on human and social skills.

2.2.2 Tendency to think positive

Julian Buret, co-author of the Soft Skills Reflexology and Professional well-being coach, added that behavioral skills are acquired throughout life according to a process that promotes positive thinking “I use meditation techniques, visualization and positive thoughts to manage stress and develop focus.”

2.3 Reviewing previous studies on soft skills

Previous studies that prove the

importance of soft skills and their positive impact on the candidate's distinction, performance and employability:

An internal study conducted by Google in 2017 with multidisciplinary teams where employees implemented their “transversal skills” during the collaborative process whose results demonstrate the increased importance being given to “know-how”, rather than “know-what”

The World Economic Forum or WEF (English: World Economic Forum, abbreviated WEF) has published a report, The Future of Jobs, highlighting the 10 skills that will be considered essential to success in 2020 and that are part of human resources and specifically recruitment services. The combination of soft skills and hard skills will be a lever to better integrate into tomorrow's world of work.

LinkedIn's Global Hiring Trends research on the recruitment revolution among 9,000 human resources professionals shows the emergence of interview methods and new technology tools in hiring candidates. These new practices more effectively assess candidates' profiles, personalities, and soft skills

2.3 New Employment Trends

Attention to soft skills modifies the selection criteria when recruiting candidates.

For Harvey (2009), "it is the 'soft skills' or 'competitive skills' that are increasingly valued in the job selection process, and those oriented towards

human interactions that require emotional intelligence while so far they have been 'hard skills' or 'technical skills'." which were needed in the first place" (Harvey, quoted by Secrétan-Klaye, 2009, p. 18).

2.5 Soft skills and professional integration in Tunisia

Even if there are job opportunities in high-demand sectors despite the crisis, they often end in failure due to a mismatch between the job requirements in terms of behavioral skills and the characteristics of candidates who lack certain prerequisites to be able to enter the professional life.

This is where some programs such as the EFE-Tunisie (Education for Employment) program come in, by equipping young people with the skills for their personal and professional development. This matching of supply and demand allows recruiters to hire well-trained soft skills profiles adapted to their needs.

These programs aim to enhance employment through short-term training and a work-study program in

cooperation with companies located in all regions of Tunisia. The aim of this program is to improve employment opportunities as well as retain the talents of professionals.

To demonstrate the impact of soft skills on professional integration, we present a video commentary (<https://fb.watch/dZn3nA8Bci/>)

summarizing the course and key achievements of the program "Supporting Job Creation for Tunisian Youth from Marginalized Societies".

This video traces EFE's achievements from 2017 to the present day. In fact, this organization trained 485 young people in transversal skills, among whom it was able to integrate 433 into 35 companies in different sectors of the labor market.

This program, implemented by EFE-Tunisia, is funded by the United States Embassy in Tunis. The positive impact

of the training provided is measured in terms of transversal skills as shown in the following figure:

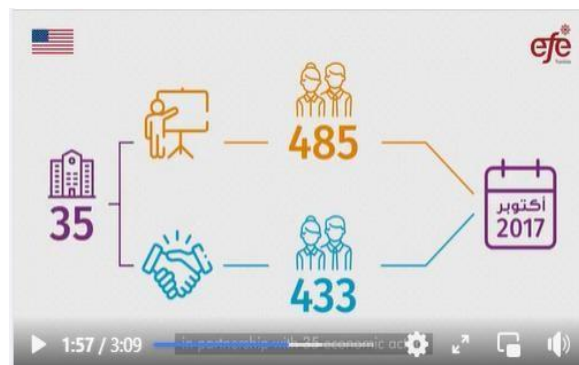


Fig. 1. The professional integration of young people trained in soft skills (Year 2017)

We also show that the 2020/2021 EFE experience has paid off in terms of professional integration. The program showed that out of 343 young people who

received soft skills training, 297 were able to find a job in partnership with 29 companies in sectors: technology, auto industry, health, food industry and retail trade



Fig. 2. The professional integration of trained young people in soft skills (Year 2020)



Fig. 3 : The integration rate according to the activity sector.

The integration of youth into the labor market through transversal competences training concerns 46% of the

beneficiaries residing in the north and 54% in the south of Tunisia, 69% of whom are female and 31% are male.

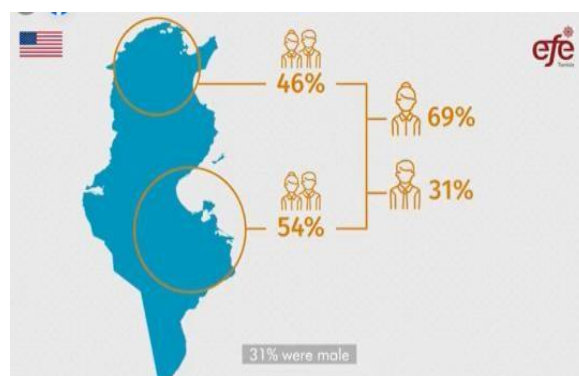


Fig.4 The integration rate by region

3. Practical case:

3.1 The survey description and the population selection

In order to develop this study, we understood the social reality through the words of the people concerned with the problem of underemployment. To do this, we chose two different methods:

Semi-structured interviews with Human the hiring process

- Closed digital questionnaire with 205 students at the end of their course and young graduates looking for work, having received a series of training courses on soft skills under 4C from institutions of higher education in different regions of Tunisia. The composition of the Student panel includes candidates from different disciplines and academic orientations according to Table No. 2 presented below. The invited companies will allow us to test their skills needed in relation to the

Resources Managers (HRD) in 29 companies in order to measure soft skills training needs. These interviews allowed us to learn more about this topic and understand the importance of soft skills in

recruitment of candidates for employment and learn about their training needs for future employees.

Other sources of information that were used in the study include:

- Interviews with key informants such as SPARK program mentors and EFE staff with a focus on soft skills program implementation its management and outcomes.

- Assessment of the current situation of 36 male and female students benefiting from a series of soft skills training as part of 4C

Zaghouan.

- Comments from students who have benefited from the EFE program, including testimonials about the success and relevance of training programs highlighting transversal skills.
- Video review of testimonials of beneficiaries who participated in the soft skills training program and companies that have cooperated with EFE-Tunisia in order to be accompanied in the process of employment and youth integration

3.2 Analysis of the results

. Table 1. Sample characteristics of interviewees

Criteria	characteristics of the sample (29 companies)
Detailing (reverse fair / other)	-companies from the reverse fair: 13 -Other companies: 16
Segmentation by sector of activity	- industry (automotive industry, detergents, health, agri-food, import and export, etc.: 16 (55%) - Services (ICT): 13 (45%) Including bank insurance: 3 (10%)
Number of Employees	[1 100[: 13 (45%) more than 100 : 16 (55%)

Qualitative data analysis is based on content analysis to study interviews with professionals. This includes transcribing qualitative data, providing an analytical data encoding the information collected and processing them.

- The first stage of transcription is to take an inventory of the information collected in the most objective way and put it in writing.
- The second step concerns the

3.2.1 Analyzing the results of the qualitative study

We conducted a qualitative survey of 29 professionals (HRD, SME managers, recruiters, etc.) from companies in different sectors to determine the impact of soft skills on professional integration and to what extent they enhance students' employability.

The table below highlights the characteristics of the organizations that enabled us to conduct our research:

identification of data that makes it possible to provide answers to all the questions involved. To do this, we assign a "code" to this data by grouping all the statements and giving a common code to the data showing the same ideas, which makes it possible to understand the most important ideas

- The third step consists of processing (semantics) the qualitative data by studying the ideas of recruits (empirical analysis),

After collecting qualitative data and identifying ideas, we set out to interpret the results and create lessons that can be learned from the explanations and answers provided to the survey problem.

3.2.1.1 Reasons for unemployability:

The vast majority (90%) of human resource managers see higher education institutions as the main actor responsible for the lack of youth employment opportunities. They explain that the soft skills which are rated as most in demand by a large number of companies are considered inadequately supported by the university.

3.2.1.1.1 Poor adaptation to the labor market

Interviews with HRD show that the majority of higher education institutions do not adequately adapt the skills required in the professional environment in which companies are directly facing the 4.0 revolution.

3.2.1.1.1 Soft skills insufficiency

According to our interviews with professionals, we have found that 90% of line managers (HRD, business leaders) are willing to hire candidates who master soft skills, declaring that these are more and more in demand in a context characterized by technological transformation and advanced digitization. 50% of HRD recommend that students at the end of an undergraduate course who have soft skills have a relatively better chance of being selected at the end of their internship at the end of study than candidates who already have their diplomas but do not master the transversal competences, especially interpersonal communication.

More than half of the interviewees see that mastering soft skills is no longer an advantage but rather a necessity that higher education institutions must integrate into university programs for all disciplines and sectors.

Thus, the ideal option would be to combine technical skills, which are necessary but alone not sufficient, with soft skills to ensure better professional integration of academics.

3.2.1.2 The companies' expectations.

3.2.1.2.1 The reverse job fair's expectation

Among the 29 organizations we contacted, very few confirmed the possibility of supporting the training of new hired candidates in terms of soft skills "human and social skills", and on the other hand the majority would prefer that these be taught at their universities. All HRDs appreciated the experience of the 4C and demanded that it be repeated for all future upgrades. Thus, they confirm that soft skills are an integral part of the training offered by the university.

HRDs suggest generalizing the experience of training students with 4C in soft skills prior to their integration into the labor market. They see that soft skills are no longer limited to high potential, but relate to all levels of the hierarchy. HRDs argue that nowadays, companies are increasingly looking for responsible individuals who are able to independently manage changing situations while ensuring increased performance in an ever-changing environment.

3.2.1.2.2 The candidates' expectations for recruitments

The majority of HRD assert that in job interviews, they always include questions related to soft skills. Moreover, they always include more questions related to human and social skills than technical questions.

Along the same lines, 95% of those interviewed are of the opinion that when reading the resumes of candidates for appointment, the recruiters are interested in both the trainings undertaken and the degree of the candidate's participation in activities outside the university which has an important role in developing the

profile of the student and which provides them with an open mind and interesting training opportunities.

Most HRD assert that social skills are really a criterion for differentiating candidates with the same diploma. Moreover, with equal technical skills, the focus is mainly on human and social skills because nowadays certifications are no longer seen as adequate employment standards.

Few companies set their expectations by leaning more towards hard skills than soft skills. This remark is particularly notable when it comes to hiring higher executer such as the engineering diploma case: "For us, technology is important to ensure that expected results are achieved" "...it is also the case for highly talented candidates on a technical level..."

Other HRD express expectations based on the coexistence of soft skills and hard skills in decision-making regarding

hiring new candidates. For them, soft skills influence more than 50% of their final decision to hire candidates whose discipline is highly technical.

This is the case for positions that require a very acute mastery of the specialty but also positions of team leader that require a mastery of the interpersonal and communication skills that ensure the smooth running of the service or position in question.

Some HRD suggest that hiring should be based on an assessment of human and social skills because, in fact, technical skills are learned on the job, especially when you have graduated from a state-accredited higher education institution. Skills are general skills that require the expertise of a personal development or communication coach.

3.2.1.3 The importance of soft skills for the internal performance of organizations

The majority of human resource managers attach critical importance to soft skills in both hiring new candidates and managing human resources.

As one of HRD claims that, "Incentives to work on soft skills are getting stronger given the demands of the social and economic environment. He adds: "... for the whole to work together we have to bring out these soft skills, knowing that those who are master in technical skills do not necessarily have the basic requirements in terms of soft skills, except for people who are sociable in nature endowed with emotional intelligence, which is not always the case . "

To show the importance of soft skills, some HRD working in the industrial sector explain how developing managerial and soft skills is a prerequisite and a performance accelerator for the supply chain. The latter, which orients management practices more towards the development of inter-functional collaboration.

3.2.2 Quantitative data analysis

To standardize the results of the qualitative study presented above, a questionnaire was sent to 205 students

who participated in the training experience provided by 4C from higher education institutions.

This audience was chosen from among graduates and recent graduates. Of these, only 150 responded to the questionnaire. The response rate is about 73%.

The students who answered the questionnaire belong to different academic institutions as shown in the table below.

Table 2. Distribution of the studied sample

higher education establishment	Number of inquiries	Number of respondents	Percentage of workforce / respondents
ISSET Zaghuan	35	35	24%
ISSET Mahdia	15	6	4%
ENIM Monastir	15	9	6%
ISSATM Mateur	17	15	10%
ENSTAB Borj Cedria	15	6	4%
ISSET Jendouba	12	6	4%
ISSET RADES	21	12	8%
FSEGN Nabeul	15	9	6%
ISSET Nabeul	19	15	10%
IHEC Sousse	17	12	8%
IHEC Carthage	12	12	8%
FSEG Jendouba	12	12	8%
Total	205	150	100%

The first aspect studied in this survey concerns the organization of the

“reverse job fair”. More than 50% of the students are satisfied with the

timely exhibition planning since the exhibition was organized right after a training session organized by 4C network in cooperation with SPARK in terms of soft skills.

During the event, students were accompanied, supported and motivated by a team of teachers. In fact, several 4C managers were present during the event. To fill in their interview waiting time, 56% of students received additional training from an instructor in a workshop in the "reverse job fair " Several training and orientation workshops have been set up to guide and prepare students prior to interviews.

The proposed tools for interviewing are satisfactory for 32% of the students; 50% of them are satisfied with the notifications regarding the progress of the event. In fact,

half of the students attending were advised to take part in these workshops.

In brief, the reverse fair is not only a tool for bringing the student closer to the professional world but also a place to strengthen and enhance the transversal skills sought today by the

majority of recruiters, regardless of the activity sector and the size of the company.

For time spent in the reverse fair, 46% of students felt the waiting time was too long, and 24% felt the time was not enough to make full use of the fair.

The students made recommendations for overcoming these shortcomings, including the fair duration which could be for more than a day and the rising number of companies, so that they could make better use of it and increase their chances of success in the professional environment.

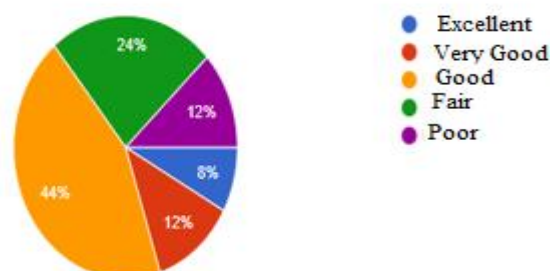
To improve the quality of the organization of the reverse fair, the students suggested recommendations, among which we quote:

- The programming of à la carte training to occupy the waiting time for interviews
- Diversify the sectors of activity of the invited companies to give more chances of interview to the students present in the fair and who are from different disciplines

Overall, 66% of the sample (survey participants) are considered good contacts interviewed at the job fair.

Fig.5: The quality of the contacts met

What is your opinion on the quality of the contacts met?



In fact, this fair served as a bridge

between student life and professional life since there is little physical representation of the job market. For the job interview component, 64% of students had at least one interview during the day of the reverse fair. And there are even those who had the opportunity to conduct four interviews.

Almost half of the sample (48.9%) considered that the time allotted for the interview was sufficient. The interviews lasted an average of a quarter of an hour. Similarly, approximately 50% of those interviewed stated that the training received at the 4C centers is in the spirit of the interviews conducted under the reverse fair.

Does the job interview comply with the content of the training?

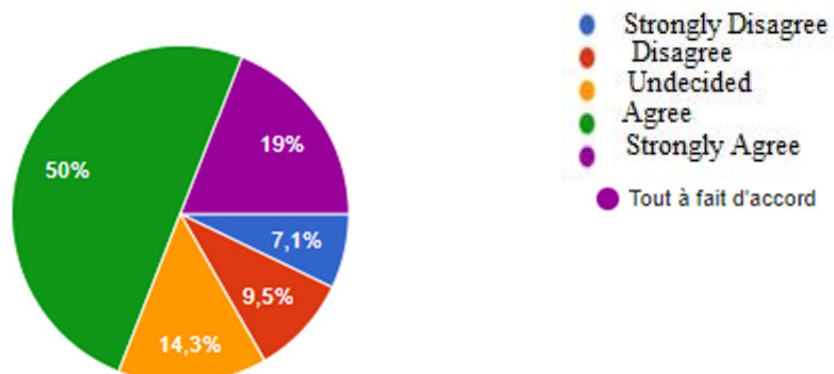


Fig.6: Training compliance with job requirements

Did you find any questions that blocked you during the interview?

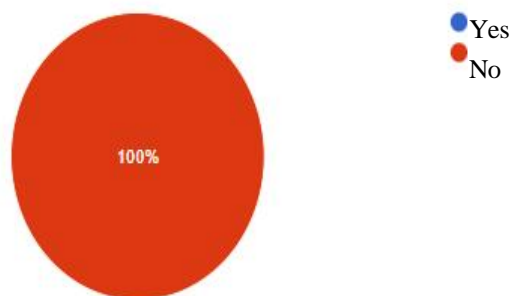


Fig.7: Interview blocking questions

This crosscheck was proved by the fact that none of them faced a blocking question during their interview. In a similar way, we can say that the 4C ensure the role of a link between the

student and the university on the one hand and the job market on the other hand through the training they provide.

The latter are diverse and include different communication techniques that

can range from first impression management in job interviews to techniques for answering questions by dividing between verbal and nonverbal language, etc.

On the interview quality side, only 9.3%

of students feel that the recruiter is not completely satisfied with the outcome of the interview, which reflects the student's self-confidence which is an essential quality for success.

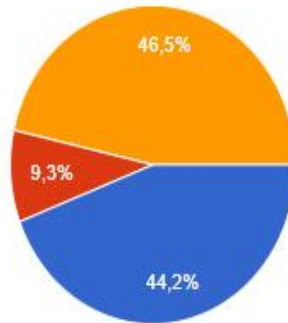


Fig 8: The Degree of appreciation of the interview

Please rate the quality of your job interview

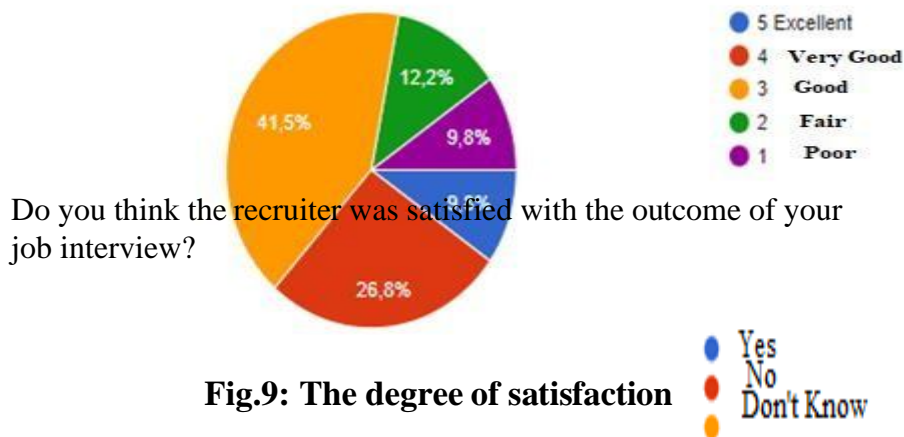


Fig.9: The degree of satisfaction

For interview self-assessment, more than two thirds of the sample (78.1%) found their interview done well. This situation was explained by the professionalism of the recruiters who appreciated the quality of the students participating in the reverse

fair and the motivation of stakeholders.

In fact, for them, the fair was an opportunity to boost self-confidence through experience and the connection between career and academic life. On the

other hand, the better organization of the "reverse fair" is still recommended by 19.6% of the sample in order to effectively achieve the expected results.

When asked about their overall appreciation of the reverse fair, the students appreciated the opportunity they had. Survey results revealed that 63.6% of students place the advantage of continuity contact with the recruiter above the chance of getting PFE training (18.2%).

The quality of the student who attended the reverse fair allowed him/her to strengthen his/her chances of getting a second contact despite the fact that the latter did not have valid professional experience to be able to pursue a career.

Of the 150 students surveyed, 32.7% gave the most importance to the chance of winning a job or a job interview at a company; Thanks to the communication techniques learned during the training provided in this direction which are the advantages that a large part of the students strive for.

In the end, 57.1% of the students seemed to have benefited from the 'reverse fair' and 81.6% of them intend to participate in future 'reverse fairs'. These positive comments clearly demonstrate the student's confidence and self-esteem.

They also demonstrate the good transmission of "study and work" and the important role of this quality in professional integration especially in the context of the factory of the future. The latter will provide the jobs of the future that are far from being technical.

These professions, increasingly characterized by the transformations promised by the Fourth Industrial Revolution, seek to develop other skills such as interpersonal communication or even the use of innovation and creativity.

4. CONCLUSION

This article reports the results of evaluating programs created as part of the 4C Network mission, highlighting the positive impact of training provided in soft skills and cross-curricular topics on youth employability. The reverse fair organized by HEM (Higher Education Ministry and SPARK is a framework for evaluating the positive impact of such training on the employability of the beneficiary students. These comments are a concrete evidence of the important role of soft skills in employment.

A survey of students participating in this experiment clearly shows their degree of satisfaction with the training they have received in terms of interpersonal skills, which have been considered useful and critical in their recruitment process.

Out of a response rate of 73%, all respondents claimed that they had no withholding questions during their interviews, proving that soft skills training is an aid and motivator for job interview success. 78.1% of the sample proved successful in their job interviews thanks to the training provided by 4C in terms of transversal skills.

As for the qualitative survey, it confirms the changes in the labor market. In fact, the new demands of the labor market tend towards the presence of new skills of a relational nature that complement

technical skills or the so-called hard skills. The interest in soft skills then adjusts the selection criteria when hiring candidates for employment.

In fact, 90% of recruiters (HRD, business leaders) are willing to hire candidates who master soft skills, noting that they are in growing demand in a context marked by the technological revolution and advanced digitalization.

Therefore HRD tend to look for responsible candidates who are able to manage changing situations independently.

5. PROSPECTS:

Recruiters expressed their desire to renew and popularize the experience of training students in the transversal skills offered by the 4C network in order to facilitate their integration into the labor market.

To consolidate and develop transversal skills training, we propose to strengthen the 4C Network partnership with the non-governmental organisms such as the Education For Employment (EFE) foundation, a member of the International Network of NGOs (EFE-TUNISIE). Their main task is to improve the skills of young job seekers through additional training programs in soft skills and entrepreneurship, in order to facilitate their integration into the professional world.

4C Network in partnership with EFE Tunisia can also promote training to the trainers in Soft Skills Programs, which aim to accredit new trainers in all of EFE-Tunisia's Soft Skills Programs.

These trainings should ensure a better

regional distribution of EFE Tunisia trainers in order to cover more needs in terms of transversal skills which are capable of ensuring a better professional integration.

4C Network's future mission is no longer to succeed in getting a job, but to keep it and be able to advance in everyone's career.

Transversal skills training should target all students regardless of their specialties and students can select 'on demand' soft skills modules according to the skills targeted by employers who seek to meet the needs of the professions that will be in demand in the future factory.

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