

Moroccan EFL students' attitudes toward higher education reform: A TPB-based quantitative study

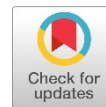
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ABSTRACT

The rapid evolution of the educational field demands continuous adaptation and reforms to meet the changing needs of students and society. Recognizing this necessity, this study investigates freshmen EFL students' attitudes towards a newly implemented higher educational reform and identifies areas of support and concern regarding the new curriculum changes. Understanding these attitudes is crucial for the successful adoption and long-term impact of this reform. This study aims to examine freshmen EFL students' attitudes toward the reform and pinpoint areas of support and concern. A comprehensive survey involving 217 students was administered, with their responses analyzed across multiple dimensions including anxiety, confidence, liking, and perceived usefulness of the reform. The findings reveal that while the overall attitude towards the reform is positive, with a mean score of 3.9370, there are significant concerns about specific aspects, such as the removal of the Final Year Project (FYP). Neutrality regarding the reform's impact on job market readiness was also noted among a notable segment of students, reflecting uncertainty. Based on these results, it is recommended to enhance practical skills integration, offer structured orientation programs, and establish continuous feedback mechanisms to ensure the reform meets students' needs effectively.



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1. Introduction

Across the globe, policymakers are actively seeking solutions to improve schools and school systems, driven by the need to enhance educational outcomes, innovate and provide evidence of higher achievements (Day & Smethem, 2009; Fullan, 2011). Morocco is among these countries, diligently working on reforms to enhance its educational infrastructure and outcomes. Since the previous decade, Morocco has pursued reforms aimed at addressing social and gender disparities, improving education quality and promoting sound governance (Hoel, 2013). The National Education and Training Charter of 1999 initiated key changes, particularly in higher education, focusing on aligning the system with job market needs, fostering research and innovation and improving governance practices. Despite these efforts, the implementation of reforms faced several challenges, prompting the launch of a three-year emergency plan in 2009, supported by substantial financial backing from various international bodies. Together, these milestones reveal implementation gaps and periodic policy recalibration.

In his August 20, 2013 speech, King Mohammed VI expressed disappointment with the slow progress and highlighted the system's declining standards. This led to the Ministry of Higher Education releasing a project portfolio as part of the 2013–2016 Education Action Plan, emphasizing

governance improvements in higher education. Despite significant efforts, the impact on school quality remained limited, prompting the development of a new strategic vision for 2015–2030. This vision aims to establish an educational framework based on equity, quality education and societal advancement. Aligning with the Plan National d'Accélération de la Transformation de l'Écosystème de l'Enseignement Supérieur, de la Recherche Scientifique et de l'Innovation (ESRI PACT) 2030, Morocco's Ministry of Higher Education introduced a new pedagogical engineering plan in universities starting from the academic year 2023–2024, focusing on holistic student development. However, empirical work centering students' perceptions of higher-education reform in Morocco, and the broader MENA region, remains limited, with first-year voices particularly underrepresented. Accordingly, this study examines Moroccan first-year EFL students' attitudes toward the 2023 reform across four dimensions: anxiety, confidence, liking and perceived usefulness. We ask: (1) what are students' overall attitudes toward the reform, and (2) how do these attitudes vary across the four dimensions?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Global Perspectives on Higher Education Reform and Student Voice

Educational reform is a multifaceted concept lacking a universally agreed-upon definition, reflecting diverse interpretations among scholars (Feldmann, 2005; Haywood, 2004). Generally, it encompasses efforts to improve various aspects of the educational system, ranging from specific improvements to comprehensive systemic changes (Asghari et al., 2011; Branyon, 2012; Cruz, 2010). The common thread in all definitions is the pursuit of change aimed at progress in education. According to Fullan (2007), educational reform involves changes at different levels, including classrooms, schools, districts and universities. Recent studies emphasize not only outcome-oriented reforms but also the centrality of student voice to design legitimacy and implementation quality in higher education. Reforms often face resistance due to incorrect perceptions of the need for change, low motivation and a lack of creative responses (Pardo & Martínez, 2003). Contemporary work recommends student and staff partnership models to mitigate resistance, improve feedback loops and surface equity concerns during rapid, system-level shifts; these insights are increasingly echoed in MENA and Moroccan discussions of reform governance. In parallel, theory-driven studies drawing on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) show that attitude and perceived behavioral control consistently predict students' intention to engage with new models or technologies, supporting the operationalization of affect, confidence and perceived usefulness as key indicators in reform contexts.

2.2. Moroccan Higher Education Policy Evolution (brief timeline)

Morocco's trajectory reflects iterative recalibration rather than linear continuity. The National Education and Training Charter (1999–2009) initiated system-wide change but encountered bureaucratic and capacity constraints, motivating the Emergency Program (2009–2012). The Education Action Plan (2013–2016) and the Strategic Vision 2015–2030 sought to restore quality, strengthen governance and align skills with labor-market needs. Moroccan scholars have emphasized the governance dimension of these shifts, showing how university decision-making blends academic, political and bureaucratic logics and why durable improvement requires coherent governance reform alongside curricular redesign (Ayad et al., 2020; Ayad, 2021). The Strategic Vision subsequently anchored the PACTE-ESRI 2030, which frames transformation across programs, research/innovation and institutional leadership. Since 2023, and continuing at present, universities have been rolling out updated “pedagogical engineering” centered on competency benchmarks (notably language and digital skills) and employability-oriented curricula. Public communications specify B1 in English and B2 in the language of instruction as reference thresholds for degree completion, and several programs have substituted the Final Year Project (FYP) with practice-oriented modules to emphasize applied learning; these measures mark a system-level pivot toward outcomes-based education and student readiness. Complementary analyses, ranging from national media and university briefs to ministerial statements, underscore that the ESRI 2030 agenda seeks a “new model of the Moroccan university” oriented to innovation and human capital. Recent Moroccan scholarship and partner reports provide a nuanced picture of progress and constraints: evaluations highlight uneven translation of policy into improved teaching quality and equity, persistent regional disparities and the need to strengthen research capacity (Ibourk, 2016; World Bank, 2023; OECD, 2024). New studies also document

student-experience angles, such as stress/quality-of-life trade-offs and soft-skills integration offering evidence on how learners perceive the current wave of changes (Elmouhib, 2024).

2.3. Attitudes Toward Reform: TPB and Related Studies

Despite the shared goal of positive change, reforms encounter cultural and organizational barriers (Fullan, 2007; Polyzoi & Dneprov, 2010). To examine student attitudes in reform contexts, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) provides a robust lens linking beliefs to intentions via attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control. In line with TPB's core proposition that beliefs shape intentions and, in turn, behavior, recent higher-education studies continue to deploy TPB to predict engagement with new pedagogical models and policies. For example, Al-Adwan et al. (2024) reported that attitude and perceived control significantly predicted students' intention to adopt "meta-education," while social influences also mattered; similarly, Gold et al. (2024) found that attitude and control beliefs underpinned intentions to engage with AI-supported academic practices; and Broadbent et al. (2025) showed that, post-pandemic, academics' intentions to sustain new teaching practices were strongly related to attitudes and perceived control. Recent higher-education studies (2020–2024) show that attitude and perceived control are consistent predictors of intention to engage with new models or practices, whereas subjective norms vary by context.

In language-learning and EFL settings specifically, TPB-informed research connects perceived usefulness and attitude to effort and persistence, but highlights boundary conditions. For instance, Wang et al. (2022) showed in mobile English learning that attitude, subjective norms and perceived control all predicted intention; however, compatibility was the strongest predictor and weakened the effect of subjective norms, while technostress was non-significant, suggesting that fit with learners' routines can outweigh social pressure when formats change. Complementarily, Alhamami (2022) argued that modality and contextual affordances shape learners' evaluations and participation patterns, reinforcing the need to measure affective and utilitarian beliefs carefully when reforms alter delivery modes or assessment regimes. Furthermore, in the MENA region, TPB-based and attitude-focused studies further underscore contextual nuance. Moroccan higher-education research points to the salience of perceived usefulness, self-efficacy and attitudes in explaining intentions and uptake: for example, Oulhou et al. (2023) documented how students' orientations and perceived benefits relate to engagement under shifting institutional requirements, while Chenfouh et al. (2024), in a Moroccan medical-education context, linked attitudes and self-efficacy to intention to adopt new learning approaches. Accordingly, the present study's four indicators; anxiety, confidence, liking and perceived usefulness, map onto TPB constructs and are appropriate for capturing first-year responses to Morocco's ongoing 2023 present reform.

3. Theoretical Framework

Kurt Lewin's assertion that "there is nothing more practical than a good theory" (1952, p. 169) highlights the value of robust theoretical frameworks. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), developed by Ajzen (1991), is widely recognized for its efficacy in designing behavior-change interventions (Steinmetz et al., 2016). TPB focuses on determinants of behavior, supported by methodological tools for measuring its constructs, a well-defined structural model for understanding behavior determinants and significant empirical validation (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). TPB includes constructs such as attitude toward the behavior, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control. If individuals have a positive attitude towards a behavior, perceive supportive social norms and have high perceived behavioral control, they are more likely to intend and perform the behavior. TPB has been foundational for models like the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) by Davis (1989), which adapts TPB constructs to understand technology use. While TAM is specific to technology, TPB's generality allows its application to any behavior.

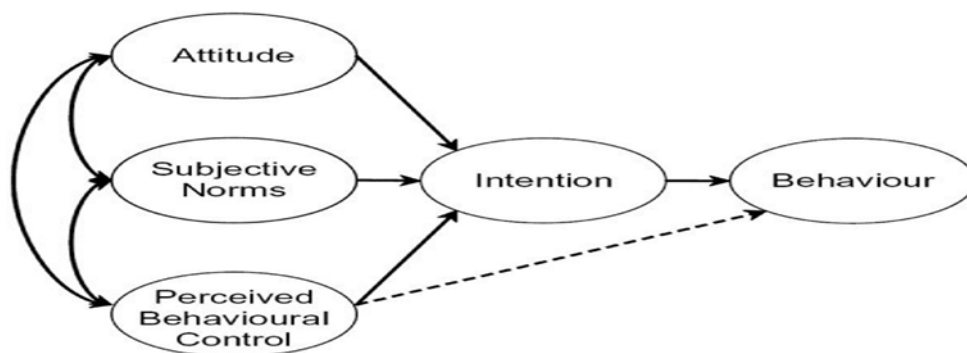


Fig. 1. Theory of Planned Behaviour

Understanding students' attitudes towards educational reforms is crucial, as attitudes significantly influence learning and engagement (Fennema & Sherman, 1976; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). Negative attitudes towards reforms can hinder success, while positive attitudes can enhance it (Hammad, 2016). Research on technology acceptance shows a correlation between attitudes and performance (Sankaran et al., 2000; Woodrow, 1991; Venkatesh, 1999). This study adopts a TPB-based model with an additional construct to examine students' attitudes towards Moroccan higher education reforms. Koohang (1989) identifies attitudes such as anxiety, confidence, liking and perception of usefulness, aligning with TPB constructs: anxiety and confidence reflect perceived behavioral control; while liking and perception of usefulness relate to attitude toward behavior. This model aims to understand how these attitudes affect students' acceptance and engagement with educational reforms.

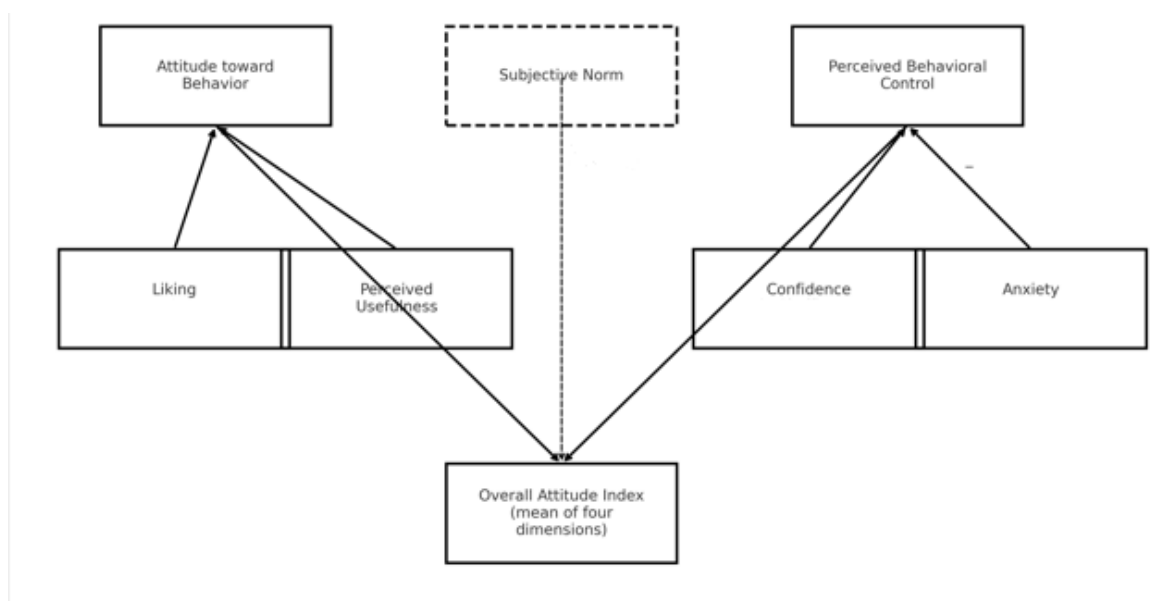


Fig. 2. TPB-based Conceptual Model Linking Constructs to Measured Dimensions

4. Method

4.1. Design

The present study adopted a cross-sectional quantitative descriptive design, chosen for its alignment with the research objective outlined at the outset. This design offers a structured framework for investigating and comprehensively understanding the attitudes of Moroccan EFL students towards the current Pedagogical Reform. Therefore, after designing the questionnaire based on the theoretical framework and other pertinent information discussed earlier, the researchers posted the questionnaire in several online groups for first-year students from the English department of Moulay Ismail

University. In this case, the sample was conveniently selected from the target population. The collection of quantitative data took two months to gather, allowing all interested students to respond at their own pace and convenience. Moreover, participants were assured that the information provided would be treated with utmost confidentiality. In short, a cross-sectional online survey captured a large-N snapshot ($n = 217$) of first-year EFL students' attitudes during the ongoing 2023–present reform.

4.2. Participants

The focus of this study was on first-year students enrolled in the Department of English Studies at the School of Arts and Humanities in Meknes, Morocco. This selection was motivated by several factors. First, there was a noticeable gap in existing literature regarding the influence of the new reform on tertiary-level education, particularly among first-year students. Second, the study honed in on first-year students because the reform had recently been implemented, making them the primary demographic affected by these changes. Given that many first-year students are transitioning from high school to university, where they encounter a different academic environment, the reform aimed to facilitate this transition. In this case, convenience sampling, based on accessibility, was chosen. Thus, the large sample size of 217 students was aimed at mitigating sampling error and providing a more comprehensive understanding of attitudes within the target population. As Bryman suggests that increasing the sample size results in decreased sampling error (Bryman, 2012). Because convenience sampling and self-selection were used, results are not statistically generalizable beyond the groups accessed, and sampling bias cannot be ruled out.

Table 1. Study Sample Characteristics

Characteristic	Value
Population	First-year EFL students, Moulay Ismail University (SAH, Meknes)
Sampling	Convenience (online groups)
Mode	Online questionnaire (Facebook + WhatsApp)
Period	≈ 2 months
Final N	217

4.3. Instrument

The questionnaire utilized in this study was designed to gauge undergraduate students' attitudes towards the recent Moroccan pedagogical reform. It consisted of five sections, each comprising 5-point Likert-type items (24 items in total) aimed at capturing various dimensions of students' perceptions and attitudes regarding the reform. The initial section of the questionnaire was dedicated to collecting demographic data from the participants. While in the second section, students were prompted to express their feelings of anxiety towards the changes introduced by the reform. The third section focused on students' confidence levels in adapting to the new requirements and their belief in the reform's positive or negative impact on education quality and future prospects. The fourth section delved into students' liking of specific aspects of the reform, such as modules focused on personal development, cultural skills, and community engagement. Meanwhile, the fifth section aimed to assess students' perception of the reform's usefulness in enhancing language proficiency, developing essential skills, and aligning education with global standards.

4.4. Procedures

The data collection process for this study involved administering a structured survey questionnaire which was selected as a data collection instrument because it is time-saving: a large number can respond to it in a relatively short time (Bryman, 2012). The questionnaire was administered to first-year students enrolled in the English department at Moulay Ismail University, Morocco. Participation was voluntary, and participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses (Creswell, 2009). The questionnaire was distributed electronically through a Facebook group specifically designated for members of the English Department at Moulay Ismail University, which boasts a membership exceeding 25,000 individuals as well as 4 other Semester 2 (S2) WhatsApp groups with more than 150 members each, allowing participants to respond at their convenience. This strategy was used to ensure access to a large pool of potential participants. Moreover, to ensure the relevance of responses, a mandatory initial question was included inquiring whether participants were currently enrolled as first-year EFL students. This step was taken to filter out individuals who did not meet the criteria of the target population.

4.5. Validity and Reliability

Validity was assessed through a pilot study involving experts in the field of research and education. This process involved having the experts review and evaluate the research instrument and methodology to ensure they accurately measured the intended constructs. The feedback from the experts was instrumental in refining the survey questions and data collection methods, enhancing the overall validity of the study. Regarding the study's reliability, the researchers utilized Cronbach's Alpha test on the designed instrument. This statistical test helped assess the internal consistency of the research tool, indicating its reliability level. Therefore, for the evaluation of overall students' attitudes, Cronbach's Alpha value was calculated at 0.789 for 24 items (see the [Table 2](#) below). This result indicates a good internal consistency; therefore, the instrument used is quite reliable.

Table 2. Reliability of the Instrument

Reliability Statistics		
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
0.789	0.836	24

4.6. Data Analysis

Following the collection of data via Google Forms, it was processed using Microsoft Excel for coding purposes, converting categorical data into numerical codes compatible with data analysis software. Later, the data were imported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Given that the questionnaire utilized a Likert scale, it's essential to clarify how the data derived from it was handled, considering the ongoing debate among statisticians. The controversy lies in whether to treat Likert scale data as ordinal or interval. While some argue for treating it as interval-level data, most researchers regard Likert-derived data as ordinal due to the absence of consistent numerical intervals between responses. For instance, Bhandari and Nikolopoulou treat Likert derived data as ordinal: assuming there is not an equal distance between responses ([Bhandari & Nikolopoulou, 2023](#)). For this study, each construct, along with its items, was examined separately using descriptive statistics to generate tables of percentages. It is important to note here that items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 20 were reversed coded to prevent bias from negatively worded items to ensure consistency in the scoring.

4.7. Ethics

There were several ethical issues, which the researchers had to take into consideration for this study project to ensure participants well-being, data integrity, and ethical standards within the research community. Avoiding harm was a primary ethical consideration in this study, guiding the researchers to design protocols and procedures that minimized any potential risks or negative consequences for participants. In addition, obtaining informed consent was another crucial aspect of ethical practice, emphasizing the importance of providing participants with clear and comprehensive information about the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. As highlighted by Neuman (2014), a researcher should "never coerce anyone into participating; participation must be voluntary". Therefore, participation in the study was entirely voluntary and autonomous, empowering individuals to make autonomous decisions regarding their involvement. However, to avoid any risk the volunteers had to first tick the agreement box to participate in the study before they can move to answer the other sections. Moreover, confidentiality was upheld by anonymizing collected data and storing it securely. Finally, eschewing deception was an essential component of ethical conduct, requiring honesty, transparency, and integrity in all aspects of the research process.

5. Findings

5.1. Demographic Information

The study surveyed 217 first-year students from the Department of English Studies at the School of Arts and Humanities in Meknes. The demographic data showed a gender distribution of 61.29% female and 38.71% male students. The age distribution indicated that 69.12% of participants are between 17 and 20 years old, reflecting the typical age range for first-year university students.

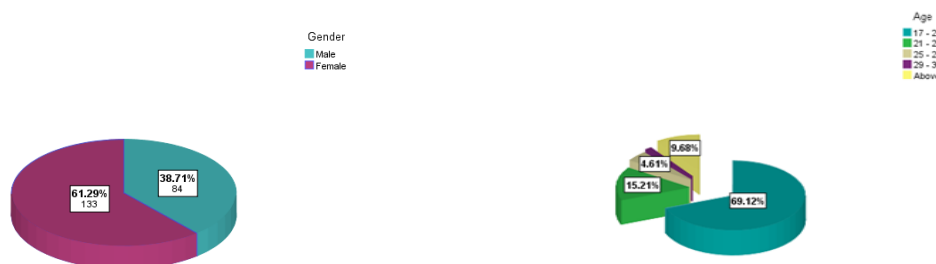


Fig. 3. The Participants' Gender and Age Categories

5.2. New Reform Anxiety

Overall anxiety was low ($M = 4.0461/5$): about 85% disagreed that they felt anxious about the reform, and roughly 80% did not feel overwhelmed by language/digital requirements or concerned about meeting proficiency thresholds. However, the removal of the Final Year Project (FYP) was a notable worry: around 77% feared it could reduce educational quality and 78% thought it might discourage research-oriented careers. By contrast, ~85% rejected the idea that the skills emphasis would overshadow broader learning. In sum, general anxiety is limited, but FYP removal remains a clear point of concern.

Table 3. Percentages of the New Reform Anxiety Dimension

Items	SD	D	N	A	SA
1. I feel anxious about the changes introduced in the undergraduate program due to the recent pedagogical reform.	38.2%	46.5%	3.2%	11.5%	0.5%
2. The new requirements for language proficiency and digital skills make me feel overwhelmed.	15.2%	64.5%	2.3%	17.1%	0.9%
3. I am concerned that I may not meet the required proficiency levels for language and digital skills.	65.3%	14.3%	10.1 %	8.7%	1.6%
4. I worry that the removal of the Final Year Project might affect the quality of my education.	9.8%	4.6%	8.3%	59.4%	17.9%
5. Canceling the Final Year Project might discourage me from pursuing research-based careers (Master,).	7.4%	3.2%	11.7 %	21.0%	56.7%
6. I fear that the emphasis on acquiring specific skills might overshadow my overall learning experience.	42.9%	41.9%	2.8%	8.2%	4.2%

5.3. New Reform Confidence

Overall confidence is high ($M = 4.0783/5$). For Item 7, 84.8% agree that the skills focus will prepare them for social and professional life (2.4% disagree). For Item 8, confidence is split: 59.4% agree that personal/digital-skill units boost future prospects, while 37.8% disagree. For Item 9, 62.6% expect a positive impact on education quality, though 34.0% are neutral (3.4% disagree). Item 10 shows strong self-efficacy: 81.9% feel able to adapt, with 15.9% disagreeing. For Item 11, 72.6%

believe the reform prepares them for future challenges, but 23.0% are neutral (4.5% disagree). Finally, Item 12 indicates trust in authorities' responsiveness (78.2% agree; 13.0% disagree). In sum, students report robust confidence and adaptability, tempered by uncertainty about the added personal/digital-skill modules and some neutrality regarding long-term system quality.

Table 4. Percentages of the New Reform Confidence Dimension

Items	SD	D	N	A	SA
7. I feel confident that the undergraduate program's focus on developing various skills will prepare me for success in both social and professional life.	1.5%	0.9%	12.8%	69.1%	15.7%
8. The inclusion of modules aimed at enhancing personal and digital skills makes me more confident about my future prospects.	6.9%	30.9%	2.8%	4.1%	55.3%
9. I believe the changes introduced will positively impact the quality of education in Morocco.	2.1%	1.3%	34.0%	10.1%	52.5%
10. I am confident in my ability to adapt to the new requirements set by the pedagogical reform.	3.5%	12.4%	2.3%	71.4%	10.5%
11. I feel confident that the pedagogical reform will adequately prepare me for future challenges.	2.6%	1.9%	23.0%	8.3%	64.3%
12. I feel assured that the educational authorities have considered students' needs and concerns while implementing the reform.	3.9%	9.1%	8.7%	4.1%	74.1%

5.4. New Reform Liking

Overall liking is positive ($M = 3.9316/5$). Item 13: 85.9% favor personal-development and community-engagement modules (7.4% oppose). Item 14: 67.9% are neutral about cultural/artistic skills; 10.8% disagree (some uncertainty). Item 15: 80.6% like the active-citizenship focus (12.6% oppose). Item 16: 83.4% support integrating practical with theoretical work (14.3% disagree). Item 17: 85.4% value contributing to community (5.5% disagree). Item 18: 79.9% respond positively to belonging/responsibility (15.1% express doubts). Overall, students broadly endorse personal development, community engagement, and practical-skills integration, with residual uncertainty around cultural/artistic skills and the "belonging/responsibility" emphasis.

Table 5. Percentages of the New Reform Liking Dimension

Items	SD	D	N	A	SA
13. I like the idea of studying modules focused on personal development and community engagement (e.g. MTU) during my undergraduate program.	4.9%	2.5%	6.8%	70.9%	15.0%
14. The emphasis on cultural and artistic skills will add value to my educational experience.	1.6%	10.8%	63.4%	20.7%	3.5%
15. The emphasis on active citizenship and community engagement is appealing to me.	5.3%	7.3%	6.8%	70.9%	9.7%
16. I appreciate the efforts made to incorporate practical skills (e.g. IT..., etc.) alongside theoretical knowledge in the curriculum.	0.9%	13.4%	2.3%	31.8%	51.6%
17. The prospect of contributing to community development through my academic journey is something I value.	2.0%	3.5%	9.1%	20.1%	65.3%
18. The reform's focus on fostering a sense of belonging and responsibility among students resonates with me positively.	3.1%	12.0%	5.0%	68.6%	11.3%

5.6. New Reform Perception of Usefulness

Overall perceived usefulness is positive ($M = 3.6920/5$). Item 19: 80.2% view language/digital-skill acquisition as beneficial (8.8% oppose). Item 20: 72.3% disagree that removing the FYP frees focus for essential skills; signaling concern. Item 21: 81.8% deem the reform necessary for modernizing Moroccan HE (15.9% disagree). Item 22: 82.9% believe linguistic/cultural development

will broaden intercultural understanding (10.4% oppose). Item 23: 58.7% anticipate job-market value, though 31.6% are neutral. Item 24: 79.0% expect better alignment with global standards (9.9% disagree). In sum, students endorse the reform's utility, especially skills and global alignment, while remaining wary of FYP removal and somewhat uncertain about immediate employability gains.

Table 6. Percentages of the New Reform Perception of Usefulness Dimension

Items	SD	D	N	A	SA
19. I believe that acquiring language proficiency and digital skills as part of the undergraduate program is beneficial for my future endeavors.	3.7%	5.1%	11.0%	10.8%	69.4%
20. The removal of the Final Year Project will allow me to focus more on mastering essential skills relevant to my field of study.	25.8%	46.5%	2.8%	16.1%	8.8%
21. I perceive the recent pedagogical reform as a necessary step towards modernizing education in Morocco.	7.4%	8.5%	2.3%	70.4%	11.4%
22. Developing linguistic skills and cultural awareness through the reform will broaden my understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures.	3.1%	7.3%	6.7%	68.6%	14.3%
23. I foresee that the skills acquired through the reform will be valuable in meeting the demands of the evolving job market.	4.2%	5.5%	31.6%	46.4%	12.3%
24. I believe the reform will better align Moroccan education with global standards, increasing its relevance and competitiveness.	3.2%	6.7%	11.1%	63.8%	15.2%

5.7. The Overall Level of Students' Attitude

The overall mean score for attitude toward the higher education reform is 3.9370 on a 1–5 scale, where higher values indicate more positive attitudes; this points to a generally favorable stance among students. The standard deviation is 0.60885, indicating moderate variability, and scores range from 2.21 to 4.83, suggesting that while some students are less favorable, strong negativity is limited (minimum > 2). Contextualizing the composite with its subscales shows why the overall mean is positive: confidence is high ($M = 4.0783$) and anxiety is low (reverse-coded; $M = 4.0461$), while liking is clearly positive ($M = 3.9316$) and perceived usefulness, though positive, is comparatively lower ($M = 3.6920$). This pattern aligns with earlier item-level findings; especially reservations about Final Year Project (FYP) removal and some neutrality around immediate employability, which temper, but do not overturn, the broadly supportive view of the reform. In short, the central tendency is clearly positive, with heterogeneous perceptions indicating the value of targeted communication and support for students who report lower perceived usefulness or lingering concerns.

Table 7. The Overall Mean Score of Students' Attitude

Dimensions	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
New Reform Anxiety	217	2.00	5.00	4.0461	.84097
New Reform Confidence	217	2.00	5.00	4.0783	.78813
New Reform Liking	217	1.83	5.00	3.9316	.59322
New Reform Perception of Usefulness	217	2.17	4.83	3.6920	.45133
Overall Attitude	217	2.21	4.83	3.9370	.60885

6. Discussion

6.2. Students' Attitudes Toward the Higher Education Reform

1) *Low Anxiety and High Confidence as Indicators of Reform Acceptance*

The results show that Moroccan students report low levels of anxiety ($M = 4.0461$) and high levels of confidence ($M = 4.0783$) regarding the recent higher education reform. These findings suggest an early acceptance of the reform, with most participants (84.7%–79.7%) strongly disagreeing or disagreeing with feelings of anxiety or being overwhelmed by the changes. Such responses demonstrate a strong sense of perceived behavioral control in line with the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 2020), indicating that students feel capable of adapting to new requirements and therefore are more inclined to support reform initiatives. This outcome aligns with recent studies in MENA and international contexts which argue that reforms communicated clearly and supported by sufficient resources tend to reduce student anxiety and reinforce confidence (Alamri, 2023; Belhiah, 2022). Likewise, Tran and Marginson (2022) emphasize that when students perceive reforms as relevant and well-integrated into the academic structure, their anxiety diminishes while their motivation increases. Ahmed and Ward (2021) also found that supportive teaching environments, frequent feedback, and transparent policy guidelines are crucial in alleviating uncertainty during educational transitions. In the Moroccan context, these findings indicate that the reform is being implemented in an environment that nurtures confidence and readiness among students, thus mitigating the potential risks of resistance or disengagement. The combination of low anxiety and high confidence therefore provides a strong foundation for reform acceptance and reflects positively on the institutional strategies adopted to accompany students through this transition.

2) *Concerns over Final Year Project (FYP) Removal and Implications for Research Culture*

Despite overall positive attitudes, strong concerns emerged concerning the removal of the Final Year Project (FYP), which has traditionally served as a capstone of undergraduate study in Morocco. More than three-quarters of students (77.3%) expressed worry that its elimination would negatively affect the quality of their education, and a similar percentage (77.7%) feared that its removal might discourage them from pursuing research-based careers. These results reveal that the FYP is perceived not only as a graduation requirement but as a vital space for applying knowledge, developing autonomy, and consolidating a research identity. Moroccan studies, such as those of El Kadmiri (2021) and El Hajjami (2020), highlight the FYP's importance in building critical thinking skills, fostering academic independence, and introducing students to research practices. International evidence supports this view, showing that capstone projects enhance employability by bridging theoretical learning with practical and research-based applications (Alghamdi, 2022; Kivunja, 2023). In addition, the findings clearly support El Aida et al. (2023) study which shows that the majority of respondents (62%) had a favorable view of the final year project. They regarded it as a valuable opportunity to practically apply their knowledge and skills, and also a means to improve their overall grades, particularly for those with lower academic performance. The concern voiced by Moroccan students therefore underscores a broader issue of balancing skills-oriented reforms with the preservation of academic research culture. Eliminating the FYP without providing alternatives risks creating a gap in experiential learning that could weaken students' preparation for advanced study or research-intensive careers. To address these concerns, policymakers may need to reconsider the complete removal of the FYP or introduce substitute mechanisms such as applied projects, extended internships, or collaborative research modules that ensure the continuity of experiential learning while aligning with the reform's practical orientation.

3) *Mixed Perceptions of Job-Market Readiness*

Students' attitudes toward job-market readiness present a more complex picture. While a majority (62.6%) of respondents believe that the reform will enhance the overall quality of education in Morocco, a considerable share remains neutral about its immediate impact on employability, particularly in relation to developing skills directly aligned with labor market demands. This cautious stance reflects a broader trend observed across Global South contexts, where students welcome reforms emphasizing life skills, digital literacy, and employability but remain skeptical about whether these reforms will translate into real and sustainable opportunities in the labor market (Altbach & Mohamed, 2023; Chankseiani, 2022). In Morocco, recent policy frameworks such as the 2023 ESRI PACT strategy stress the importance of aligning curricula with digital and transversal competencies; however, external evaluations suggest that a mismatch persists between graduates' skills and labor

market needs (Bentaleb, 2024). This gap helps explain why many students remain hesitant to fully embrace the employability dimension of the reform. Addressing this requires universities to move beyond theoretical commitments and provide tangible pathways such as work-integrated learning (WIL), micro-credentials co-designed with employers, and systematic reporting of graduate outcomes. Studies show that these initiatives not only increase student confidence in employability but also enhance trust in the reform process (UNESCO, 2023; Ghabra, 2023). Moroccan higher education institutions can reinforce the credibility of the reform through making job-market pathways more visible, verifiable, and responsive to economic realities, thereby bridging the gap between student expectations and labor market outcomes.

4) *Overall Students' Attitude Toward the Reform*

Taken as a whole, the findings show that students' overall attitude toward the higher education reform is favorable, with a mean score of 3.9370 (SD = 0.60885). This suggests that the reform has been positively received, particularly for its focus on language proficiency, digital literacy, and global curriculum alignment, which are regarded as essential for both personal development and competitiveness in today's globalized academic and professional environments. The variability in attitudes, however, reflected in scores ranging from 2.21 to 4.83, signals that while many students strongly endorse the reform, others remain uncertain, particularly about issues of research continuity and employability. This mix of acceptance and reservation mirrors patterns documented in other MENA contexts, where Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) studies show that positive attitudes and perceived control drive engagement with reforms, while skepticism about labor market outcomes moderates perceptions of usefulness (Bencherifa & Moussadak, 2023; Al-Harhi, 2021). Importantly, Moroccan evidence shows that reforms that integrate both theoretical and practical components are more sustainable and widely accepted (Birrou et al., 2022; Belhiah, 2022). Sustaining positive student perceptions will therefore require ongoing dialogue, continuous evaluation, and the development of credible experiential learning opportunities that preserve the research culture while addressing employability gaps. Ultimately, if combined with transparent communication, targeted support, and robust labor market linkages, the reform has the potential to maintain its current momentum and contribute significantly to strengthening the quality, relevance, and global competitiveness of Moroccan higher education.

7. Conclusion

This study shows that first-year English Studies students generally support Morocco's ongoing higher-education reform, especially its emphasis on practical and digital skills and alignment with global standards, while expressing clear reservations about the removal of the Final Year Project (FYP); a signal that experiential learning remains central to students' sense of academic quality and research identity. Taken together, the pattern of low anxiety, high confidence, positive liking, and broadly positive perceived usefulness suggests early acceptance of the reform, tempered by uncertainty about research opportunities and near-term employability. For policy and practice, the implication is to retain the employability focus while safeguarding research socialization and reinforcing structured orientation and feedback loops. Future research should move beyond a single-site, cross-sectional design by adopting longitudinal, multi-institution studies across regions, pairing survey data with qualitative interviews/focus groups, and tracking objective outcomes. Comparative work within the MENA/Global South and TPB-based models that explicitly test subjective norms and control beliefs under evolving curricula would further clarify the mechanisms shaping student acceptance of reform.

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Declarations

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