

Employability as Process: Early-Career Transition Among Business Graduates in Morocco

L'employabilité comme processus : la transition vers l'emploi des jeunes diplômés en gestion au Maroc

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Citer cet article	EL KHATTAB, B., & AJDOUR, S. (2026). Employability as Process: Early-Career Transition Among Business Graduates in Morocco. <i>International Journal of Accounting, Finance, Auditing, Management and Economics</i> , 7(11), 468–501. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22217078
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Received: 16/07/2026

Accepted: 10/09/2026

International Journal of Accounting, Finance, Auditing, Management and Economics - IJAFAME
ISSN: 2658-8455
Volume 7, Issue 11 (2026)

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Abstract

The transition from higher education into employment has become a contested juncture in contemporary labour markets, and acutely so in Morocco, where graduate unemployment in some settings runs well above the national average and tends to rise rather than fall with educational level. While the conceptual literature has reframed employability as a relational, context-dependent process built through capital, identity and early experience, most empirical work still measures it as a static stock of skills assessed at or before graduation, and the Moroccan graduate's own account of the transition is barely heard. This study addresses that gap and asks how early-career business graduates in Morocco understand and build their employability as they enter the labour market. The analysis is framed by Holmes's (2013) processual reading of graduate employability. Adopting an interpretivist, abductive design, it draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews with thirty early-career business graduates (one to five years' experience). Thirty-three interviews were conducted and three excluded on eligibility grounds, each lasting between forty-five and seventy-five minutes, analysed through reflexive thematic analysis. Four interrelated domains organise the findings: self-perception and early workplace feedback; skills and professional expectations; barriers and levers in transition; and responsibility and personal agency. Perceived readiness proved unstable by nature, revised through workplace contact and feedback that was interpretive before evaluative. The competencies that most shaped early performance were largely built after entry through situated and self-directed learning, inviting a reframing of the "employability gap" less as a deficiency carried out of university than as the distance any newcomer covers once employed. Graduates held structure and agency together, naming opaque recruitment, prior-experience paradoxes and network-dependent access as real constraints while still treating continuous upskilling as their own responsibility. Employability emerges as something assembled, and continually reassembled, in the early career, an account that centres the graduate's voice and carries practical implications for universities, employers and policymakers. Because the corpus is confined to thirty business graduates from six Moroccan regions, the account is offered as analytically transferable to comparable settings rather than as statistically generalisable.

Keywords: early-career transition; business graduates; perceived employability; situated learning; Morocco.

JEL Classification: I23; J24; J62; M51

Paper type: Empirical Research

Résumé

La transition de l'enseignement supérieur vers le monde du travail est devenue un moment critique sur les marchés du travail contemporains, et particulièrement au Maroc, où le chômage des diplômés dépasse nettement la moyenne nationale et tend à augmenter avec le niveau d'études plutôt qu'à diminuer. Alors que la littérature conceptuelle redéfinit l'employabilité comme un processus relationnel construit à travers le capital, l'identité et l'expérience précoce, les travaux empiriques la mesurent encore comme un stock statique de compétences ; le récit du diplômé marocain reste peu entendu. Cette étude comble ce manque en mobilisant la lecture processuelle de l'employabilité proposée par Holmes (2013). Interprétativiste et abductive, elle s'appuie sur trente entretiens semi-directifs (33 conduits, 3 écartés ; 45 à 75 minutes) auprès de diplômés en gestion ayant un à cinq ans d'expérience, analysés par analyse thématique réflexive. Quatre domaines organisent les résultats : perception de soi, compétences et attentes, obstacles et leviers, responsabilité. La préparation perçue s'est révélée instable par nature, révisée au contact du travail et par un retour d'abord interprétatif avant d'être évaluatif. Les compétences déterminantes ont été largement acquises après l'entrée, par apprentissage situé et autodirigé, invitant à reconsidérer l'« écart d'employabilité » comme la distance que tout nouvel arrivant parcourt une fois embauché. Les diplômés tiennent ensemble structure et agentivité, désignant l'opacité du recrutement, l'exigence d'expérience préalable et l'accès par les réseaux comme des contraintes réelles. L'employabilité apparaît comme un construit qui se reconstruit continuellement au début de la vie professionnelle. Circonscrits à trente diplômés de six régions marocaines, ces résultats sont proposés comme transférables à des contextes comparables plutôt que généralisables.

Mots-clés : transition vers l'emploi ; diplômés en gestion ; employabilité perçue ; apprentissage situé ; Maroc.

Classification JEL : I23 ; J24 ; J62 ; M51

Type du papier : Recherche Empirique

1. Introduction

The transition from higher education to employment has become one of the most contested junctures in contemporary labour markets, most visibly where the expansion of tertiary education has outpaced the capacity of economies to absorb its graduates. The pattern is not confined to any one country. Across developing economies, roughly two in three young workers hold qualifications that do not match their jobs, a mismatch that has widened over time and carries real costs to young people's motivation and well-being (International Labour Organization, 2024). Morocco offers a prime instance of this broad issue.

The Moroccan figures are stark. The national unemployment rate stood at 13.0% in 2025, but it reached 19.1% among graduates, and rose to 37.2% among young people aged 15 to 24 (Haut-Commissariat au Plan [High Commission for Planning], 2026). These data reveal a counterintuitive trend: unemployment tends to increase rather than decrease with educational attainment, and holding a higher degree can prolong the unemployment period (Idlhadj & Louizi, 2023). The problem is not only one of numbers but of how universities prepare graduates for work: examining what institutions can do to enhance employability, Fifani, Rabhi and Qachar (2025) find that internships, career services and university-employer partnerships close only part of the gap between curricula and the demands of the labour market. On this evidence the diploma no longer functions as a straightforward passport into work, and in Morocco its meaning is itself contested, with universities, the government, employers and graduates holding differing views of what employability even requires (El Aida & Sabil, 2022). Scholarship on employability has, meanwhile, moved away from treating it as a fixed inventory of skills acquired before graduation toward employability as a relational, context-dependent process built through capital, identity, and early experience (Holmes, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017; Clarke, 2018). This conceptual turn is only signalled here; it is set out and discussed in the literature review (Section 2). Yet a tension runs through the field. The conceptual literature has embraced this processual view, while most empirical evidence still measures employability as a static stock of competencies, assessed at or before graduation, and usually through the perceptions of employers or students rather than through what graduates actually do once in work. The tension is acute in Morocco, where the available scholarship is largely structural, macro-level, or conceptual, and where the graduate's own account of the transition is barely heard.

This study addresses that opening. It centres on how early-career business graduates in Morocco perceive their readiness for work, read and respond to the expectations they encounter, and adapt during their first years in employment, treating employability not as a property to be audited but as something graduates interpret and construct within particular organisational settings and labour-market conditions. Put simply, how do young business graduates view and develop their employability as they enter the job market in Morocco? The study makes a threefold contribution: theoretically, by putting Holmes's (2013) processual view to work in a setting where employability is still read as a stock of attributes; methodologically, by centring the graduate's own retrospective account rather than employer ratings or curriculum audits; and empirically, by documenting how business graduates in Morocco assemble their employability after entry rather than before it.

The article is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on graduate employability and sets out the processual framework adopted. Section 3 details the interpretivist and abductive methodology. Section 4 presents the findings across four analytic domains. Section 5 discusses them against the international and Moroccan literature, and Section 6 concludes with the implications for universities, employers and policymakers and with directions for further research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. From skills checklists to employability as a relational process

The conceptual centre of gravity has shifted away from supply-side, skills-centred thinking. Tomlinson (2017) proposes that employability is better understood through the various forms of capital (human, social, cultural, identity, and psychological) that graduates draw on, rather than through any inventory of competencies. Clarke (2018) reaches a compatible conclusion from a different starting point, arguing that skills-only approaches are inadequate and building a six-dimension framework in which employability depends on how individual attributes, behaviours and perceived employability interact with labour-market factors. Both insist that employability is relational and context-dependent, not a property that travels intact from classroom to workplace.

Jackson (2016) foregrounds identity rather than capital, reframing work-readiness around a pre-professional identity that develops through participation in communities of practice during university. Readiness becomes less about acquiring discrete abilities than about coming to identify as a member of an intended profession. Tomlinson's earlier review (2012) had already distinguished skills-based, positional and process-based accounts, and noted that early-career experiences shape orientations to work and that initial professional identities can harden and steer later trajectories.

If employability is a process, graduation is a waypoint rather than a finish line. Grosemans et al. (2023) give this empirical teeth, showing through longitudinal data that perceived employability shifts across the transition and varies by where graduates land afterwards. Their framing of graduation as an event rather than an endpoint sits behind the present study's interest in early-career experience as the site where employability is made or unmade.

A quieter problem runs underneath, and it bears on how this study uses its terms. The field has let related terms blur together. A recent measurement-focused review warns that conflating employability with work readiness produces ambiguity that weakens the interventions built on it, framing graduate employability as a higher-order construct and work readiness as a core capability within it (Caballero et al., 2026). Rothwell, Jewell and Hardie (2009) had earlier treated employability partly as a perceptual matter, validating a self-perceived employability scale with business postgraduates and finding that university reputation weighed heavily alongside individual proactivity and external conditions. The perceptual turn is double-edged. It captures how graduates read their own prospects, but it also means that much of what we call employability is, in the data, what graduates believe about themselves rather than what they can demonstrably do. This study reserves employability for the broader relational construct and uses preparedness or perceived readiness for graduates' situated self-assessments within it.

The field knows it is fragmented. Healy, Hammer and McIlveen (2022), mapping the citation structure, find distinct but interlinked communities, one around skills and work-integrated learning, one around career development, and one around capital and identity, and conclude that integration across them remains unfinished. Wahab et al. (2025) reach a similar verdict bibliometrically, tracing how the debate widened from skills lists toward capital, identity and process approaches while a gap between demanded and possessed competencies persisted.

Two classical economic accounts sit behind much of this debate and are worth naming here, given the JEL fields under which this study is filed. Human capital theory reads education as an investment whose return accrues through the productive capacity it builds (Becker, 1964); this is the logic underpinning the skills-checklist tradition and the supply-side reflex of prescribing more training whenever a gap is reported. Signalling theory reads the same diploma differently, as information conveyed to employers about an applicant's underlying ability rather than as a direct measure of productivity (Spence, 1973); on that reading the Moroccan pattern in which unemployment rises with educational attainment is less paradoxical than it first

appears, since the informational value of a credential falls as it becomes more widely held. Autor (2014) situates such mismatches within a broader account of how the returns to skill are distributed across an economy. The processual view adopted here does not displace these accounts so much as change the level of analysis: where human capital and signalling theories treat the graduate's endowment as given at the point of entry and ask what the market does with it, the present study asks how that endowment is read, revised and rebuilt once entry has occurred.

2.2. The skills gap and the problem of who is looking

The empirical pattern is strikingly consistent. Across very different economies, graduates fall short of what employers expect, and the shortfall concentrates in soft and transferable skills rather than technical knowledge. Daud et al. (2011) found Malaysian business graduates underperforming on every attribute that managers rated as important, with the widest gaps in extroversion, openness, and soft skills. Damoah et al. (2021) report that Ghanaian employers see only partial proficiency in the skills they value most. Pujol-Jover et al. (2023) document that Spanish employers perceive underachievement across all competencies, most notably in working under pressure and problem-solving. Abbas and Sağsan (2020), studying Chinese firms, found graduates underperforming on ten of eleven attributes, with reliability being both the most important factor and the largest gap. The spread is wide enough that the finding cannot be dismissed as a local phenomenon.

But the gap depends heavily on who is doing the perceiving, and that is the most intriguing part. Jackson (2012) found that business students overrate their employability skills, an inflation that may obscure the deficiencies employers report. The mismatch is therefore not only between graduate ability and employer need but also between graduate self-perception and external judgement. Jackson and Chapman (2012) point out that academics often fail to identify graduate weaknesses and differ significantly from employers. If students, academics and employers each see the situation differently, the gap is partly a problem of perception, not solely of competence. This triangular divergence is not confined to a single context: it recurs in India, where managers rate personal qualities highest while students undervalue emotional intelligence and responsibility (Mehroliya & Alagarsamy, 2019), and among Jordanian accounting stakeholders, who agree on a core set of needs but differ statistically on required personal skills (Abu Asabeh et al., 2023). Its recurrence across countries suggests it may be structural rather than incidental. The comparative detail of these and the other studies discussed in this section and in Section 2.4 is set out in Table 1 below.

A few studies offer a more nuanced view of the skills gap. Pujol-Jover et al. (2023) found that employers, even while perceiving gaps, still rated graduates' actual on-the-job performance positively, and that graduates undervalued their own skills more than employers did. This conflicts with Jackson's overconfidence finding. Suleman and Laranjeiro (2018) take the point further: among Portuguese employers, satisfaction depended on whether the firm adopted an anticipative or a remedial training strategy. The gap, then, is not only a matter of graduate attributes but also of how employers choose to source and develop skills. Later work extends this, showing that employers fall into distinct groups, some who make skills, some who buy them, and some who blame higher education for the shortage (Suleman & Suleman, 2024). Tran (2018) echoes the theme, describing a "game of blames" among Vietnamese stakeholders in which curricula, labour-market change and graduate passivity are all implicated, yet each group deflects responsibility onto the others.

2.3. Soft skills, critical thinking, and the work of becoming professional

Regardless of any disagreements regarding how they are assessed, soft skills sit at the centre of nearly every account, and they are the hardest to teach in a classroom. Dolce et al. (2020)

reported that Italian accounting graduates considered soft skills to be important, yet rated their teamwork, problem-solving, and communication skills well below what employers expected; teamwork was at the top of employers' priorities. Al-Shehab et al. (2021), in Bahraini Islamic banking, locate the widest gaps in decision-making, problem-solving and lifelong learning. Al-Saadi et al. (2024) indicate that, for unemployed Omani business graduates, soft skills are the most-needed competencies, with many turning to entrepreneurship as an alternative route.

The deeper claim is that soft skills cannot really be transmitted formally at all and instead accumulate through lived experience. Nusrat and Sultana (2019) state it plainly for Bangladesh: soft skills develop through real-life experience, which leads them to recommend part-time work and on-the-job training over classroom delivery alone. Cruz et al. (2020) make an equivalent argument for critical thinking, which Portuguese employers regard as necessary yet describe as consolidated over time through experience rather than finished at graduation. There is a tension between this view and the policy reflex of asking universities to teach the missing skills, and the literature does not fully resolve it.

This is where the "identity" strand reconnects. If becoming employable involves, in part, becoming a certain kind of professional, then the relevant learning is dispositional and cultural, not merely technical. Drawing on Bourdieu, Herbert et al. (2020) describe "culturing", the adoption of learned behaviours and dispositions that project immediate work-readiness, as a competitive advantage for securing graduate roles. They note, however, that offshoring and shared-service models are eroding the pathways through which such dispositions were once acquired. Jackson's (2016) pre-professional identity belongs to the same family of ideas. The soft-skill gap and the identity-formation gap may well be two descriptions of one process.

Because soft skills are precisely the competencies least amenable to direct measurement, this body of literature calls for some caution about how its conclusions, as well as those of the present study, should be read. Much of this research relies on participants' self-reports and on perceived rather than measured competencies. Studies comparing perceptions across different groups also consistently show that they diverge. One could reasonably infer that this literature is capturing something genuine about workplace readiness; one might equally suspect that much of the reported gap is an artefact of who is responding and how confident they feel. None of these sources settles the question, so this study acknowledges the uncertainty and carries it forward rather than glossing over it, a caveat that applies with equal force to the accounts examined later.

2.4. Placements, work-integrated learning, and the university–industry link

If experience is where readiness is forged, then internships, placements and work-integrated learning become the obvious lever. Inceoglu et al. (2019), reviewing the quantitative evidence, argue that supervised work experiences are central transition experiences that trigger identity development and build the career resources underpinning later employability. A placement matters not because it adds a line to a CV but because it is where professional identity begins to form.

Empirical studies on placements are promising, but candid about limitations. Griffin and Coelho (2019) worked with business students in the United Arab Emirates following their placements. They identified the skills students came to see as essential, and the gaps between academic preparation and workplace demands that the placements exposed. Al-Abri et al. (2024), studying Oman's Eidaad internship programme, note that limited industrial experience and difficulty applying theory to practice sit at the core of the university-workforce gap, and find that interns perceived their placement as strengthening their teamwork, communication and career clarity, while asking for clearer employment pathways and more on-the-job training. Placements are effective, then, but partly by revealing how unprepared the classroom has left students, which makes the endorsement more ambivalent than it initially seems.

Access remains a recurring concern. Otermans et al. (2025), relying on the reflections of British students and graduates, observe that internships and extracurricular activities are essential for developing soft skills, but that they are not equally accessible; thus, the primary mechanism for bridging this gap is itself unevenly distributed. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2023) highlights the equity dimension, noting that disadvantaged youth are less likely to acquire the skills the transition requires.

On the institutional side, collaboration between universities and employers is more fraught than the policy rhetoric admits. The barriers are mostly institutional rather than financial, including a lack of market-oriented courses and a cultural mismatch, with employers dividing into those who engage and those who blame higher education for skill shortages (Suleman & Suleman, 2024). Covrig et al. (2023) report that Romanian firms engage with students mainly through internships rather than joint research or curriculum feedback, a thin partnership. Temtime and Mmereki (2011), studying MBA programmes in Southern Africa, attribute the persistent gap partly to weak industry partnerships and faculty with limited industry experience. What many consider to be the solution is itself underdeveloped and often inconsistently applied.

Table 1: Comparative synthesis of the empirical studies of the graduate skills gap and of work-integrated learning discussed in Sections 2.2 and 2.4

Study	Context	Population whose views are reported	Method	Main result reported in this article
Temtime and Mmereki (2011)	Southern Africa	MBA participants	Mixed methods: Likert survey of 107 MBA participants and semi-structured interviews with nine graduates in managerial posts	A significant perceived gap between the skills MBA participants acquired and those employers most need, attributed partly to weak industry partnerships and to a shortage of faculty with industry experience
Daud et al. (2011)	Malaysia	Managers and business graduates	Sequential exploratory mixed methods: focus group with ten managers, then an importance-performance survey	Graduates underperform on every attribute managers rated important; widest gaps in extroversion, openness and soft skills, with intellectual ability and hard skills rated as strengths
Jackson (2012)	Australia	Business undergraduates	Cross-sectional quantitative survey: online self-assessment by 1,024 business undergraduates against a ten-skill framework	Students rate themselves strongest on working with others and professionalism and weakest on critical thinking, initiative and self-awareness; ratings are inflated relative to employer-based evidence
Jackson and Chapman (2012)	Australia	Academics and employers	Cross-sectional comparative survey: 211 employers and 156 academics rating 45 behaviours across 20 non-technical skills	Graduates rated weak on critical thinking, decision management, leadership, conflict resolution and commercial awareness; academics and employers differ significantly, and weaknesses go unnoticed by academics
Suleman and Laranjeiro (2018)	Portugal	Employers (HR managers)	Qualitative multiple case study: semi-structured interviews with HR managers in ten purposively selected firms	Almost all employers are dissatisfied with graduates' soft skills; perceptions vary with the firm's training strategy, firms dividing into those that buy experienced graduates, those that train, and mixed cases
Tran (2018)	Vietnam	Higher-education stakeholders	Mixed-methods case study: email interviews with employers, academics, graduates and students, followed by a survey	Twenty-seven causes reduced to seven factors, led by impractical curricula, labour-market change and graduate passivity; participants' account of causes diverges from their account of who is responsible
Griffin and Coelho (2019)	United Arab Emirates	Business students after placement	Qualitative study: open-ended paper-based questionnaire completed by 36 business undergraduates after a work placement	Placements expose the gaps between academic preparation and workplace demands, and shape which skills students come to regard as essential
Mehroliya and Alagarsamy (2019)	India	Managers, academics and students	Cross-sectional multi-stakeholder survey: 377 students, 278 faculty and 98 managers, Likert instruments	All three groups differ significantly on the personal qualities required; managers rate them highest and prioritise adaptability, stress tolerance and receptiveness to training

Abbas and Sağsan (2020)	China	Managers in manufacturing and service firms	Sequential exploratory mixed methods: 27 in-depth manager interviews, then a validated questionnaire (210 valid responses)	Eleven attributes grouped into four dimensions; employers rank skills highest in importance, and it is on skills that the widest importance-performance gap falls
Damoah et al. (2021)	Ghana	Employers	Cross-sectional quantitative survey: 200 managers supervising entry-level graduates, rating perceived importance against perceived evidence	Graduates show some proficiency in the skills employers value, but a significant gap separates the skills judged essential from those evident in recent graduates
Covrig et al. (2023)	Romania	Firms (Romanian employers)	Exploratory survey: online questionnaire with open- and closed-ended questions administered to Romanian employers	Engagement with students occurs mainly through internships rather than joint research or curriculum feedback
Abu Asabeh et al. (2023)	Jordan	Accounting stakeholders	Descriptive cross-sectional survey: 101 students, 75 professionals and 54 academics rating 45 soft skills	Agreement on a core set of needs, including problem-solving, ethics and decision-making, but students prioritise intellectual and functional skills where professionals and academics emphasise interpersonal ones
Pujol-Jover et al. (2023)	Spain	Employers and graduates	Cross-sectional comparative survey: 239 graduates and 183 employers, competencies grouped by the Tuning framework	All competencies underachieved, with the widest gaps in working under pressure, problem-solving and decision-making; yet firms rate on-the-job performance positively and graduates undervalue their own skills
Al-Abri et al. (2024)	Oman (Eidaad programme)	Interns (engineering students)	Quantitative cross-sectional online survey of 86 current and former Eidaad participants	Placement strengthens teamwork, communication and career clarity; participants ask for clearer employment pathways and identify limited industrial experience as central to the gap
Suleman and Suleman (2024)	Portugal	Employers	Exploratory cross-sectional survey of 162 employers, analysed through two-stage K-means cluster analysis	Three clusters: 64.8% see higher education as properly autonomous and report no barriers, 11.1% prefer to build skills in-house, and 24.1% blame higher education for skill shortages
Otermans et al. (2025)	United Kingdom	Students and graduates	Qualitative study: semi-structured interviews with ten students and seven employed graduates, analysed thematically	Internships and extracurricular activities are essential for developing soft skills but are not equally accessible, so the main bridging mechanism is itself unevenly distributed

Source: author's elaboration. Context, population and main results correspond to the studies as discussed in Sections 2.2 and 2.4; the design of each study is drawn from the systematic review underpinning this research.

2.5. Context conditions the transition: Morocco, MENA and the comparative evidence

Structural and cultural context shapes the individual transition in ways the conceptual models can underplay. The Moroccan evidence is sobering. The Hassan II University case study reports graduate unemployment near twenty-six per cent in 2023, roughly double the national average (Fifani, Rabhi & Qachar, 2025). This counterintuitive rise of unemployment with educational level has structural roots. Idlhadj and Louizi (2023) explain the prolonged unemployment among higher degree holders through the reservation wage and the supply-demand mismatch effects. Both Pereira da Silva (2017) and Adraoui (2025) link persistent skilled unemployment to a rapid expansion of tertiary education, particularly in non-technical fields, that outpaces labour demand, compounded by structural rigidities such as favouritism, prior-experience requirements and high salary expectations. The diploma has in some respects become a liability in the queue rather than a passport out of it. The supply-side instinct to train more faces blunt pushback in the policy literature. The Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis (2022) notes that despite rising enrolment, learning outcomes remain weak, job creation lags behind the influx of working-age people, and informality prevails, which shows that expanding vocational training alone cannot resolve the issue; demand-side job creation is the crucial missing element. Mourshed, Farrell and Barton (2013), in the McKinsey study that includes Morocco among nine countries, describe how employers, providers and youth live in “parallel universes”, and how the journey from education to employment breaks down at enrolment, skill-building and job-finding alike.

These Moroccan studies do not, however, carry the same evidentiary weight, and the difference matters for the design adopted here. Idlhadj and Louizi (2023) and Pereira da Silva (2017) reason from aggregate labour-market data, which establishes the scale and the persistence of the problem but cannot show how graduates themselves experience it; Adraoui's (2025) exploratory account of urban trends operates at the same structural level. El Aida and Sabil (2022) shift the focus to how universities, government, employers and graduates each define employability, but this remains a stakeholder-level mapping of positions rather than a situated account of entering work. The gap in this literature is therefore not one of evidence in general but of a particular kind of evidence, which is what justifies the qualitative, graduate-centred design adopted below.

The regional and comparative work generalises the lesson. The World Economic Forum (2017) and the World Bank (2022) both stress that MENA youth labour-force participation is among the lowest globally, and that large skills gaps, gendered ones included, shadow the region's green and digital transitions. The OECD's transition indicators (2025) underline that the years between roughly eighteen and twenty-four are decisive for career trajectories, and that prolonged unemployment without further study damages earnings, well-being and motivation. Context can be more important than sector. Chiru et al. (2012) found that competency levels and employer satisfaction differed more by country than by industry across Romania and the UK. Jonbekova et al. (2023) show that even graduates of a flagship Kazakhstani university faced a complex and gendered transition, driven mainly by labour market factors, opaque hiring practices, unrealistic employer expectations, low pay and field mismatch, rather than by any deficit on the part of the graduates themselves. Hossain et al. (2020) add a wrinkle that resonates with the Moroccan rigidities, finding that social-mobility factors such as nepotism, political connections and social status play a significant role in Bangladeshi graduate employability.

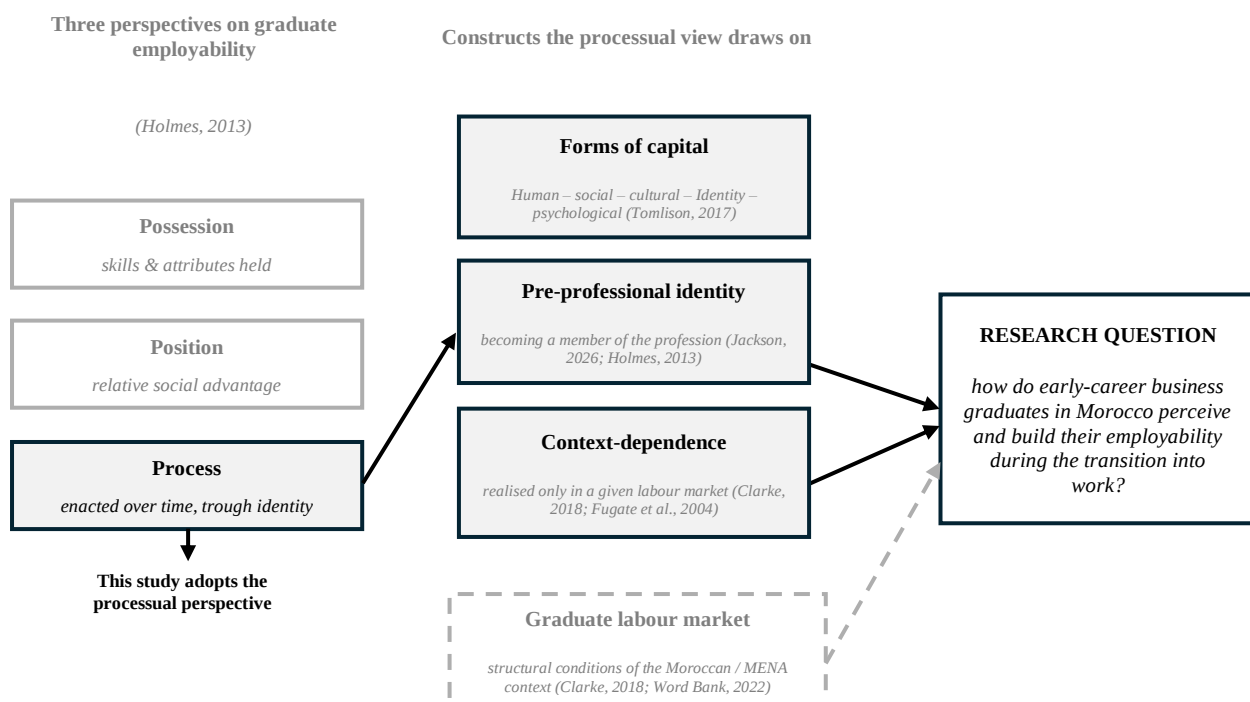
Set side by side, these literatures pull in a productive tension, one already sketched in the introduction: the conceptual work has settled on employability as a relational process built through capital, identity and early experience, yet most empirical evidence still measures it as a static stock of skills assessed at or before graduation, usually by asking employers or students what they think rather than observing what graduates do once in work. The studies that follow graduates across the transition (Grosemans et al., 2023; Jonbekova et al., 2023) find that labour-

market context and the unfolding of early experience matter more than pre-graduation skill audits would predict. Such studies remain rare, and rarer still in Morocco, where the available work is largely structural or conceptual and the graduate's perspective is barely heard.

2.6. A processual framework for reading the transition

The organising distinction comes from Holmes (2013), who set three readings of graduate employability against one another: a possession view, in which employability is a stock of skills and attributes a graduate holds; a position view, in which it is a matter of social positioning and relative advantage; and a processual view, in which it is worked out over time through the graduate's emerging identity and interaction with others. The third frames this study, and the constructs assembled above fill it in. Jackson (2016), close to Holmes's emphasis on graduate identity, treats readiness as the formation of a pre-professional identity rather than the acquisition of discrete abilities. Tomlinson (2017) specifies what the graduate brings, the human, social, cultural, identity and psychological capital they rely on in finding and keeping a job. Clarke (2018) insists that none of this converts into employability in the abstract; it does so only in relation to a particular labour market, through the interaction of individual attributes with conditions the individual does not control. A parallel strand in vocational psychology casts employability as a psycho-social construct of career identity, adaptability and capital rather than a fixed endowment (Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth, 2004), and work on employability across transitions treats it as something that shifts as graduates move between states rather than a property settled at graduation (Grosemans et al., 2023). What these accounts share, and what the possession view lacks, is the sense that employability is enacted in context and over time.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework, locating the study within a processual view of graduate employability



Source: author's elaboration, based on Holmes (2013), Tomlinson (2017), Jackson (2016), Clarke (2018) and World Bank (2022)

Figure 1 sets these elements out as a conceptual framework, showing how the resources a graduate brings meet the structural conditions of the Moroccan and wider MENA labour market, where employability is realised or withheld. How these elements combine across the

early-career transition is what this study puts to its data rather than an answer read off in advance. Read across, the figure first sets Holmes's (2013) three competing readings of graduate employability (possession, position and process) against one another and retains the third as the vantage point of this study. From that vantage point three constructs are drawn together: the forms of capital a graduate carries into the market, human, social, cultural, identity and psychological (Tomlinson, 2017); the pre-professional identity through which a graduate comes to be recognised as a member of a profession (Jackson, 2016; Holmes, 2013); and the context-dependence that makes employability realisable only within a given labour market (Clarke, 2018; Fugate et al., 2004). The arrows joining these components are not causal paths but conditioning relations: capital and identity are enacted, and may equally be blocked, within the structural conditions of the Moroccan and wider MENA graduate labour market (World Bank, 2022), and it is at that meeting point, rather than within any single component, that the research question is posed.

3. Methodology

This study examines how early-career business graduates in Morocco experience the transition from higher education into work: how they judge their preparedness, read the expectations they encounter, and make sense of their first years in employment. Because these concerns centre on lived experience and meaning-making rather than on measurable attributes, the study adopts an interpretivist epistemology, treating employability not as an object to be gauged against predefined indicators but as something graduates interpret and construct within particular organisational settings and labour-market conditions. A qualitative design follows from this stance.

Consistent with the dialogue between prior theory and empirical material described below, the study's reasoning is abductive: rather than testing hypotheses deductively or building theory purely from the ground up, it moves iteratively between participants' accounts and the sensitising concepts carried over from the literature, allowing the most plausible interpretation of the data to be developed through that exchange.

The empirical focus falls on business graduates with between one and five years of professional experience. This window was chosen to capture a transition still unfolding, and therefore observable. A five-year ceiling is consistent with how qualitative transition research has operationalised the “recent graduate” cohort: studies of graduates' early experiences in the workforce have similarly bounded eligibility to those within five years of graduation and restricted samples to those active in the field (Leach et al., 2021). The one-year minimum requirement ensured that participants had moved beyond the immediate post-graduation period and had accumulated sufficient exposure to workplace processes to reflect on them, while still being close enough to graduation for the transition into work to remain vivid. All participants had a qualification in a business-related field and were either currently employed or had been recently. Because that window spans cohorts graduating between 2020 and 2024, participants did not enter the labour market under identical conjunctures, and the interval separating graduation from interview varies across the sample. This variability was treated as part of the maximum-variation logic rather than controlled for; it does mean, however, that the accounts are not strictly comparable in timing, and no claim is made that a 2020 entrant and a 2024 entrant faced the same market.

Sampling followed a purposive strategy aimed at identifying information-rich cases aligned with the research questions (Palinkas et al., 2015), complemented by snowball recruitment (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Noy, 2008) to reach participants across organisations, sectors, and regions. Thirty-three interviews were conducted; three were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria, leaving a final analytical sample of thirty graduates (see Appendix A). The sample brought together a range of institutional affiliations, fields of specialisation, and

employment settings, spanning accounting and finance, logistics, marketing, human resource management, and related areas, with women and men represented across cohorts who graduated between 2020 and 2024. This breadth allowed for variation in experience while preserving the shared position in the early-career transition that linked participants.

The final sample comprised seventeen women (56.7%) and thirteen men (43.3%). This female majority was anticipated rather than incidental: it is consistent with tertiary participation in Morocco, where the gender parity index for gross tertiary enrolment rose above unity, reaching 1.15 by 2023 (World Bank, n.d.), and where women made up 53.6% of enrolment in public universities in 2023 and 62% in commerce and management programmes (MESRSI, cited in TelQuel, 2023). The composition therefore reflects participation patterns in the population from which the sample was drawn rather than a sampling imbalance, although the study was not designed to treat gender as an explanatory variable and no comparative claim by gender is made below. Institutionally it was concentrated in the two principal routes into business study in Morocco: fifteen participants had graduated from faculties of law, economic and social sciences (FSJES) and twelve from national schools of business and management (ENCG), alongside two from a private university (UIR) and one from ISCAE. Geographically it covered six of the twelve regions, Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima and Souss-Massa being the most represented. This composition sustains variation across fields, sectors and employment settings, but it also bounds it: graduates of engineering-led or otherwise specialised tracks, and graduates from regions not represented here, may meet different entry conditions, and the transferability of the account offered below should be judged with that in mind.

Data were generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews of roughly forty-five to seventy-five minutes. The format let participants describe their experiences in their own terms while ensuring that the dimensions central to the research were addressed (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The interview guide was built to draw out transition experiences in an open, flexible way; rather than imposing predefined categories, it was organised around the sensitising concepts noted above, which worked as prompts rather than as a fixed analytic frame. This let participants foreground the aspects of their experience that mattered most to them while the conversation stayed within the study's concerns.

The interviews were held in person or online according to participants' availability, and in their preferred language (French, English, or Moroccan Arabic) so that they could express themselves with nuance. Accounts given in French or Moroccan Arabic were translated into English during transcription, with care taken to preserve intended meaning rather than render literal wording. Translation was carried out by the researcher, who conducted the interviews and is fluent in all three languages. Three safeguards were applied. Coding was conducted with reference to the original-language transcripts alongside the English versions, so that interpretive decisions remained anchored in participants' own formulations rather than in translated approximations. Where a term or expression carried connotations that did not transfer cleanly into English, particularly Darija formulations concerning deference, obligation, patience or divine reliance, the original wording was retained beside the translation in the analytic record and the interpretive choice documented in a memo. Quotations selected for presentation were re-checked against the source transcripts before inclusion. Translation was not, however, verified through back-translation or by an independent bilingual coder, so the English corpus reflects a single interpretive perspective at both the translation and the analysis stage; within the constructivist framework adopted here that situatedness is treated as a condition of interpretation rather than as a defect, but it does mean the renderings presented are one defensible reading among possible alternatives. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' written consent (see Appendix B) and transcribed verbatim. Identifying information was removed prior to export, participants were assigned anonymised identifiers, and analysis proceeded on a pseudonymised dataset. Ethical conduct was governed throughout

by the written informed-consent procedure reproduced in Appendix B, which set out the purpose of the study, the voluntary character of participation, the right to withdraw at any point and the confidentiality and anonymisation measures applied, and which recorded participants' separate agreement to audio-recording and to the use of anonymised quotations. Under the institutional requirements applicable to social science research at Université Abdelmalek Essaadi at the time of fieldwork, no formal ethics committee approval was required for a non-interventional interview study of this kind, and no institutional approval number is therefore available. In the absence of a mandatory review procedure, the research protocol was reviewed by the thesis supervisor before data collection began, and the study was designed and conducted in accordance with recognised ethical standards for qualitative social research (British Educational Research Association, 2018). Audio recordings, transcripts and analytic files were stored on password-protected devices and restricted-access storage accessible only to the researcher, and all data were used exclusively for academic research purposes.

The researcher's own position bears on this account. Formed within the same Moroccan higher-education system the participants describe, the researcher approached the interviews as an insider, familiar with the institutions and the unspoken hierarchies that distinguish them, from ENCG and the faculties to the public and private sectors. That familiarity was an asset and a liability at once. It eased rapport and interpretation, but it may also have shaped what participants assumed was already understood and so left unsaid, and it raised the possibility that graduates, addressing a researcher they see as an academic insider, inclined toward more respectable answers. Rather than treating this as a bias to be eliminated, the analysis followed Braun and Clarke (2019, 2021) in regarding situated subjectivity as a resource for reflexive interpretation, made visible rather than concealed.

Analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as set out by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021), chosen for its capacity to identify patterns of meaning across qualitative data while keeping interpretation at the centre. In RTA, themes do not lie ready in the data to be extracted; they are interpretive constructions developed through active engagement with participants' accounts. Analysis was therefore iterative and reflexive, moving back and forth between data, codes, and developing meanings, the same abductive movement between empirical material and prior concepts described above.

Initial coding stayed open and responsive to what participants said, the meanings they attached to events, and the experiences they described. As work progressed and cases were compared, codes were revised, clustered, and reorganised. The sensitising concepts drawn from the literature informed interpretation without being imposed as a coding framework; they supported a dialogue between prior knowledge and empirical material that left room for new insights while keeping the study's conceptual grounding in view. Through this iterative work, four broad domains were developed to organise patterns across the accounts: self-perception and early workplace feedback; skills and professional expectations; barriers and levers in transition; and responsibility and personal agency. These domains were not fixed in advance but took shape through prolonged engagement with the data. The resulting structure (see Appendix C) seeks to hold together both the coherence and the complexity of graduates' transitions.

NVivo was used to manage the data, supporting the organisation, retrieval, and comparison of coded material; it did not drive coding or analytic decisions, which remained researcher-led throughout. Reflexive memo-writing accompanied the analysis, providing a means to document emerging interpretations, interrogate assumptions, and refine conceptual connections as the work developed.

Analytic sufficiency was judged by conceptual depth and coherence rather than by numerical saturation. Data collection and analysis ran in parallel, making it possible to track whether later interviews were reshaping the developing thematic structure. Subsequent interviews enriched and nuanced existing categories without altering the overall configuration, indicating that the

dataset held enough depth to support a coherent interpretation (Saunders et al., 2018). Credibility rested on prolonged engagement with the data, careful documentation of analytic decisions, and reflexive awareness of the researcher's part in producing knowledge (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The contextual detail provided is meant to aid interpretation and to let readers judge whether the results carry over to comparable settings.

The analysis was conducted by a single researcher, without independent second coding, calculation of inter-rater reliability, or member-checking of the developed themes, and this reflects a considered methodological position rather than a procedural omission. Reflexive thematic analysis treats the researcher's subjectivity as the primary analytic instrument, and Braun and Clarke (2019, 2021) argue that consensus coding and reliability coefficients are conceptually misaligned with it: where themes are understood as interpretive constructions rather than as objects awaiting discovery, agreement between coders demonstrates the successful transmission of a coding frame rather than the validity of an interpretation. Member-checking was set aside for related reasons, the analysis operating at a level of abstraction across thirty accounts that individual participants were not positioned to verify. Analytic quality was pursued instead through criteria appropriate to the approach: sustained reflexive engagement documented in memos, systematic retrieval and re-examination of coded extracts to confirm that every interpretive claim was grounded across multiple accounts, the deliberate retention of discrepant cases rather than their smoothing away, transparent documentation of coding decisions and their revision over time, and supervisory review of the developing analysis.

4. Findings

The transition from higher education to work emerges from these accounts not as a single step from preparation to employment but as an iterative process, in which graduates repeatedly reassess their readiness, take the measure of workplace expectations, and adjust to organisational demands and labour-market conditions. Employability, on this evidence, is not a fixed outcome secured at graduation; it is made and remade through early workplace encounters, feedback, situated learning, and structural constraint. Four interrelated domains organise the process: self-perception and workplace feedback; skills and professional expectations; barriers and levers in transition; and responsibility and personal agency.

Table 2: Distribution of participants across the sub-categories of the four analytic domains (n = 30)

Analytic domain	Core category	Sub-category	n	% of sample
Self-Perception & Workplace Feedback	Initial self-perception	Perceived readiness vs. unreadiness	23	76.7
		Confidence, doubt and self-evaluation	14	46.7
	Transition shock and early adaptation	Adjustment period	15	50.0
		Emotional reactions	11	36.7
		Work intensity and task demands	7	23.3
		Workplace culture and environment	13	43.3
	Early workplace feedback	Accuracy of feedback	18	60.0
		Content of feedback or advice	22	73.3
		Expectations revealed through feedback	20	66.7
		Impact of feedback on confidence and motivation	16	53.3
		Behavioural and identity adjustments	15	50.0
		Field-specific requirements and languages	14	46.7
Skills & Professional Expectations	Technical skills in early career	IT, software, and digital skills	11	36.7
		Communication, confidence, and relational skills	23	76.7
	Soft skills central to early career	Self-management and work attitude	18	60.0
		Skill acquisition pathways	16	53.3
	Skill acquisition pathways	Academic training and background	16	53.3
		Experience or OJT	20	66.7
		Extracurricular and social experiences	9	30.0
		Self-training and autonomous learning	14	46.7
		Support from managers and colleagues	15	50.0
	Employers' expectations communication	Formal or explicit communication	13	43.3
		Informal or implicit communication	8	26.7
		Learned through observation and trial	7	23.3
	Theory-practice gap	Predominance of theory and limited practical	8	26.7
		Misalignment with professional and sectoral realities	9	30.0
		Lack of operational, digital, and contextual skills	7	23.3
		Bridging the gap through experience, learning, and adaptation	11	36.7
Barriers & Levers in Transition	Barriers in the transition process	Access barriers and systemic gatekeeping	12	40.0
		Experience-related barriers	9	30.0
		Recruitment process and informational barriers	16	53.3

		Structural and labour-market barriers	17	56.7
	Levers and enablers of transition	Professional experience and early exposure	24	80.0
		Institutional and platform-based support	15	50.0
		Learning, training and self-development	13	43.3
		Extracurricular and associative engagement	12	40.0
		Social capital and networks	9	30.0
Responsibility & Personal Agency	Perceptions of responsibility for employability	Shared or systemic responsibility	14	46.7
		Graduate or student responsibility	17	56.7
		Policymakers or government responsibility	12	40.0
		Universities or education system responsibility	12	40.0
		Employers' responsibility	7	23.3
	Personal strategies for navigating the transition	Continuous up-skilling and self-learning	22	73.3
		Labour market monitoring	12	40.0
		Accumulating experience	9	30.0
		Networking and social capital	11	36.7
		Psychological and faith-based coping	6	20.0
	Career direction and aspirations	Entrepreneurship aspirations	11	36.7
		Freelancing experience or interest	8	26.7
		Further specialisation and training	3	10.0
	Advice to future graduates	Preparation and early exposure	16	53.3
		Skill development beyond curriculum	21	70.0
		Networking and visibility	10	33.3
		Managing expectations and uncertainty	11	36.7
		Staying updated with industry	12	40.0
	Practical suggestions	Practical suggestions	8	26.7

Source: author's elaboration from the NVivo project. Domains, core categories and sub-categories follow the coding structure reported in Appendix C; figures are counts of distinct participants coded at each sub-category, not counts of coded references. Participant codes cited in the text of Section 4 are illustrative extracts and do not exhaust the participants coded at the corresponding sub-category.

4.1. Self-perception and early workplace feedback

The first domain concerns how unstable graduates' initial self-perceptions proved to be, and how those perceptions were revised through early experience. Graduates entered their first jobs with varying degrees of confidence, shaped by their academic backgrounds, prior professional exposure, and personal dispositions. Several described feeling relatively prepared, particularly where they had accumulated internships or work experience (P01, P11, P15, P16, P28, P29, P30); this prior exposure seemed to ease the transition, reducing uncertainty and familiarising them with workplace norms, hierarchies, and expectations:

« Before that, I was an intern for two months, and to apply for the job, I insisted on extending my internship. So, I was familiar with the work environment! I loved the environment! There was no surprise when I started, it wasn't new to me. What was new was how to work, I mean technically. » (P01–M–LOG–21)

Extracurricular and volunteer activities played a comparable role, building confidence, sharpening interpersonal skills, and preparing graduates for interviews and professional interaction (P06, P12, P17, P28). Yet even among those who felt ready, that sense of readiness was often partial and liable to be reconsidered once the realities of the workplace set in.

For others, entering employment directly exposed the limits of their preparation. Participants reported feeling underprepared, attributing this largely to the theoretical cast of their education and the scarcity of practical application in their programmes (P04, P07, P09, P18, P25). The difficulty tended to surface in the first weeks, as academic knowledge had to be put to work in a professional setting:

« I think it was 'why don't you understand?' because at first, normally, the transition from studying to working is difficult, because it's the real world; how can I use the knowledge I accumulated during my studies in the real world? So that's how it was. » (P07–M–ACC–22)

This sense of unreadiness was sharpened by an abrupt encounter with practical demands, work intensity, and the expectation of immediate effectiveness. Across several accounts (P13, P18, P19, P23), graduates described a gap between theoretical knowledge and workplace reality, felt most acutely in fast-paced environments, around operational tools, and in the face of decision-making responsibility:

« My entry into the world of work was gradual and very formative. I was surprised by the fast pace and the need to be operational right from the start. The differences between theory and practice sometimes unsettled me, but they also motivated me to learn quickly and adapt. » (P13–M–MKT–20)

Perceived readiness, then, was not a fixed or inherent quality but a contextual judgement, continually re-evaluated against specific workplace demands. Graduates were frequently expected to take on responsibility early and with minimal guidance (P12, P13, P21, P28), which in many cases accelerated their learning even as it generated pressure:

« They show you once or twice, then they leave you to figure it out on your own. Especially when the workload is heavy. » (P12–M–LOG–23)

The emotional dimension of this process was pronounced. Stress, doubt, pressure, and a sense of inadequacy recurred throughout the accounts, particularly where expectations stayed implicit or support was thin (P01, P02, P07, P18, P24). Some participants described questioning their own ability and worth:

« It was a good job with an average salary, but the heavy workload made me question myself... even though I gave 100% to this job, I was never good enough. I never even heard a simple 'good job' from a manager. » (P02–M–LOG–21)

In this setting, workplace feedback did more than evaluate performance; it helped graduates interpret what was expected of them in the first place. Recognition, trust, and support from supervisors or colleagues reinforced confidence and eased adaptation (P06, P25, P27, P29), and

through such encounters some graduates took on more responsibility and revised their self-perception upward:

« I've been told that I give confidence to my peers or managers enough for them to trust me to give me more work to do. For me that was so helpful because that opened the room for me to face more challenges. » (P06-F-ACC-23)

Self-perception, in short, was continually reshaped through interaction with organisational environments. Initial confidence or doubt was neither stable nor final but evolved through exposure, emotional experience, and feedback, allowing graduates to reconstruct their sense of competence and professional identity. Feedback thus operates as a key mechanism, linking graduates' own interpretations to external evaluation and supporting the reconfiguration of self-confidence.

4.2. Skills and professional expectations

If the first domain showed readiness being revised, the second concerns what graduates were being made ready for: the skills that mattered in early employment and the way these were negotiated through experience. Participants acknowledged the importance of disciplinary knowledge but stressed repeatedly that effective performance drew on a wider range of competencies than higher education alone supplied. Across disciplines, technical competence was treated as foundational, especially in relation to digital tools, reporting systems, software, and field-specific knowledge (P01, P02, P09, P12, P19, P21, P23, P27, P28), and, just as often, graduates pointed to gaps in these areas at the outset, noting that many practical skills had been insufficiently addressed in their studies:

« Among the things that I was lacking at the beginning, and what I learned later, especially, for example, the skills that would have given me an advantage, such as advanced Excel skills and some presentation software, like Power BI, etc. Something like that would have been a plus. Oh, and another thing is languages. Of course, when I started, we didn't use French but English, and I was fine with that, but it was obvious that the more business English you knew, not just basic English, the better. Because that's what a career would require. » (P01-M-LOG-21)

Alongside technical skills, behavioural and interpersonal competencies were consistently considered integral to workplace effectiveness. Communication, teamwork, adaptability, stress management, initiative, and self-confidence recurred throughout the accounts (P02, P03, P05, P06, P08, P11, P13, P14, P15, P17, P22, P23, P29, P30), and were frequently judged as important as technical knowledge, if not more so, for integration and performance:

« The skills that really mattered at the beginning were mainly interpersonal skills. Networking, communication, and team spirit allowed me to quickly integrate and progress. I realized that in the professional world, being open, sociable, and collaborative is often more valuable than technical expertise alone, whereas remaining isolated or overly introverted limits opportunities and learning. » (P13-M-MKT-20)

These competencies were rarely in place before entry; they developed and consolidated through immersion, repeated interaction, and hands-on practice. Several graduates explained that they had learned to communicate, decide, and adapt mainly by trial and error rather than through formal preparation (P06, P11, P15, P19, P22, P25, P28, P30):

« For the technical stuff, I can say things like computing, Excel, PowerPoint, etc. Well, Excel in particular. And for soft skills, maybe I only learned them while I was already working. So, I didn't enter with them. I was shy, I couldn't speak in front of people I didn't know, but after I started, I learned these things. So, I see that I lacked communication skills, stress management, etc. » (P03-F-ACC-23)

Central to this acquisition was self-directed learning, especially where graduates worked to close the distance between academic preparation and workplace demands. They referred

frequently to self-training, independent research, observation, and asking questions (P01, P09, P10, P24, P25, P26, P28), and treated the effort as ongoing, a condition of sustaining employability rather than a one-off adjustment:

« Among the skills that helped me was that I was self-training, my logic, that of reflecting and not just executing like that... And that's how I learned, because so far, if you don't self-train, no one will tell you anything. » (P01–M–LOG–21)

Employability-related competencies, then, were not built through prior education alone but increasingly through situated learning that combined formal, informal, and experiential contexts. Technical knowledge remained important, yet graduates consistently emphasised the growing weight of behavioural and relational skills and of self-directed learning in meeting professional expectations and sustaining performance in early employment.

4.3. Barriers and levers in transition

The first two domains concerned what graduates brought and built; the third brings into view the structural and contextual conditions within which that effort either did or did not pay off. On their accounts, early-career experience turned not only on individual effort and qualifications but also on labour-market conditions, organisational practices, and social structures beyond their control, conditions they returned to repeatedly in describing the move into work.

The opacity of recruitment was among the most common barriers. Silence, long waits, and an absence of feedback drew frequent complaint, leaving graduates uncertain and frustrated (P04, P07, P08, P09, P11, P13, P30); poor communication made it hard to gauge the status of an application, let alone improve it:

« My search for my first job was quite frustrating. The most discouraging thing was the silence from recruiters; many companies don't even look at applications, and even after an interview, there is often no response, not even a rejection. » (P13–M–MKT–20)

Alongside this procedural opacity, the demand for prior experience stood out as a structural barrier. Many participants described the familiar paradox of employers requiring experience even for entry-level roles, which made initial entry especially difficult (P05, P10, P18, P19, P21, P22) and sometimes pushed graduates into positions below their qualifications or ambitions:

« It was long and discouraging. Many companies required experience, but no one was willing to give it. I accepted the first job that came along, without any real satisfaction. » (P18–M–ACC–21)

Access was also mediated by social networks, referrals, and informal recommendations, resources that were valuable but unevenly distributed for securing internships and jobs (P02, P06, P08, P12, P13, P22, P28). For some, this reliance on connections registered as a sign of broader inequality in how recruitment worked:

« I got my first job by contacting someone I knew directly, who recommended me to their human resources department, and that's where the difficulty of finding a job lies; in 80% of cases, to get a job, it's essential that at least one person within the company recommends you internally. » (P02–M–LOG–21)

Participants pointed, too, to wider contextual constraints: low wages, regional inequality, mobility limits, gendered expectations, disability, and labour-market competition (P01, P02, P04, P05, P07, P08, P14, P20, P22, P27, P28). Such conditions shaped not only access to employment but also the quality and desirability of the opportunities available.

Against these barriers, graduates also identified what helped them in. Internships were the most frequently cited enabler, widely seen as a bridge between education and work (P01, P02, P10, P13, P14, P18, P22, P25, P26, P28, P30); beyond early exposure to professional settings, they

opened concrete routes into employment by letting graduates apply their knowledge and secure a position:

« My first job was the result of my work during my PFE internship. This allowed me to join the company immediately after defending my master's thesis. » (P14–M–HRM–21)

Extracurricular activities, volunteering, part-time work, and freelance experience worked in a similar way, developing behavioural skills, widening professional networks, and improving prospects (P06, P08, P11, P12, P17, P22, P28, P30). Being self-selected, these activities often gave graduates room to show initiative and gain visibility beyond the formal curriculum:

« Generally speaking, at our school, certain things really helped us, not the classes themselves, but the extracurricular activities. I joined a lot of clubs... it will still help you. The transition is smoother. » (P12–M–LOG–23)

Supportive workplace environments mattered as well. Graduates who found guidance, trust, and support from colleagues, managers, or mentors described a smoother transition and greater confidence in their roles (P09, P17, P20, P30), with that support easing stress and aiding learning in the early stages of integration:

« What helped me most was meeting HR professionals who shared their failures and learnings. » (P20–F–HRM–20)

Taken together, these accounts suggest that the transition is produced by a combination of individual preparation and the opportunities context affords. Graduates invested heavily in adapting to professional expectations, but access to prior experience, supportive relationships, and workplace learning often proved decisive in whether that investment translated into a successful entry.

4.4. Responsibility and personal agency

The fourth domain concerns how graduates understood responsibility for employability and how they responded to the difficulties they met along the way. Responsibility was rarely assigned to any single actor. Employability was most often viewed as shared, distributed across graduates, universities, employers, policymakers, and the wider labour market institutions. A large group of participants (P02, P03, P05, P06, P12, P17, P20, P25, P28, P29, P30) framed it explicitly as a systemic matter rather than an individual one, stressing the interlocking roles of education, economic policy, and organisational practice:

« In my opinion, everyone has a share of responsibility in this matter. Students must be prepared and know what job they want to do. It is important for universities to study the current job market in order to know what is best to teach their students before giving them a degree. Employers must respect and understand that students are not yet professionals and provide them with quality training during their internships or first jobs in order to prepare them for the job. As for policymakers, they must give strict instructions to everyone. » (P02–M–LOG–21)

Others echoed this sense of shared responsibility, drawing out the complementary roles of each party and naming specific expectations: universities to teach with more practical and current relevance, employers to offer supportive entry opportunities, and policymakers to create the broader conditions for employment through investment and regulation (P04, P08, P09, P10, P18, P27). Graduates, that is, located employability within an institutional and structural frame rather than reading it as a matter of individual merit alone.

Some placed greater weight on particular actors. Universities drew criticism for being too theory-oriented and offering too little practical experience, while government and policymakers were held responsible for generating jobs and addressing structural constraints in the labour market:

« There needs to be a program that combines practice and theory, with internships and contact with the field... that would have been better. » (P05–M–ACC–22)

Yet for all their recognition of these systemic responsibilities, participants consistently held that graduates retained a substantial share of their own. Many underlined proactivity, self-awareness, and persistence, arguing that employability finally depends on how an individual responds to labour-market demands (P01, P07, P11, P13, P15, P16, P23, P26, P30), which meant rejecting passivity and actively working to stay competitive:

« In my opinion, the main responsibility belongs to the students themselves, as they must avoid falling into the victim syndrome. Everyone must invest in their learning, develop their skills, and adapt to the market. » (P13-M-MKT-20)

To close the gaps they perceived, graduates described a repertoire of personal strategies built around continuous self-learning, upskilling, and adaptation to the market. Many pursued online certifications, technical training, language courses, and further professional development, alongside work or during spells of unemployment (P02, P05, P07, P09, P11, P13, P17, P22, P28, P29, P30), framing these efforts as a necessary answer to the limits of formal education:

« You realize that you are not prepared... and that is when self-education begins, another journey begins. » (P05-M-ACC-22)

Networking emerged as a further strategy. Participants spoke of building professional relationships, keeping a visible presence on LinkedIn, and seeking advice from alumni or experienced professionals as ways to gather information, spot opportunities, and read labour-market expectations more accurately (P02, P06, P13, P22, P26, P27, P30). Networking served, in this sense, not only to find work but also as a continuing resource for career development. Curiosity, initiative, and willingness to learn were likewise singled out as essential dispositions, the qualities that allowed graduates to navigate uncertainty, absorb rejection, and build competence over time:

« I tried to stay as curious as possible, asking lots of questions... and not to be afraid of making mistakes, because I have always learned from the mistakes I have made in the process of doing my job. » (P12-M-LOG-23)

Across these accounts, employability was understood as a shared responsibility rather than a solitary achievement. Even so, graduates did not cast themselves as passive recipients of institutional support. They described actively investing in self-learning, networking, and adaptation, while recognising that those efforts were shaped throughout by the opportunities and constraints set by universities, employers, policymakers, and labour-market conditions. Alongside these regularities, several accounts ran against the dominant pattern and were retained rather than smoothed away. The clearest divergence concerns early responsibility, which was not experienced uniformly. Comparable levels of delegation were narrated as formative where trust and guidance accompanied them, as in P06's account of recognition extended early, and as considerably more demanding where they did not, in the accounts of graduates left to carry responsibility with minimal guidance (P12, P13, P21, P28). Two graduates carrying similar workloads could therefore describe materially different transitions, which is difficult to reconcile with any reading that locates the gap in educational preparation alone. Confidence likewise did not track prior exposure in any simple way: P13, who had completed a six-month placement, was among those most struck by the distance between theory and practice. In the fourth domain, P13's insistence that responsibility rests principally with graduates themselves cut against the systemic framing offered by the larger group, and P02's account of sustained effort that went unacknowledged stands in direct contrast to P06's account of trust extended early. These divergences mark the limits of the patterns reported above and indicate that comparable structural conditions were read differently depending on the organisational setting a graduate entered.

5. Discussion

The accounts collected here describe employability as something that keeps changing. Graduates did not simply cross a single threshold at graduation and become fully prepared for the labour market. They entered, assessed, adjusted, and assessed again, and the picture is one in which readiness is provisional and negotiated rather than possessed. This aligns with the process- and capital-based view that has reshaped the conceptual literature over the last decade (Tomlinson, 2017; Clarke, 2018), but it does more than confirm it. The empirical texture here, drawn from graduates speaking about their own first months in work rather than from employers or curricula, shows the process unfolding and exposes seams the conceptual models tend to gloss over.

The most obvious is that perceived readiness was unstable, and that its instability was not a sign of poor measurement but a feature of the thing itself. Graduates who arrived feeling prepared often found that confidence only partial once the work began, while others who felt underprepared discovered capacities they had not known they possessed. What shifted their self-assessment was contact with the workplace: the pace; the demand to be operational immediately; the implicit expectations; and above all the feedback, or its conspicuous absence. This fits the longitudinal evidence that perceived employability changes across the transition rather than holding steady from graduation onward (Grosemans et al., 2023). Where these accounts push further is in showing the affective machinery of that change. Stress, self-doubt, and the question of whether one is good enough recur throughout, tied closely to whether recognition was forthcoming; one participant gave a hundred per cent, never heard a simple acknowledgement, and began to question his worth. The literature on perceived employability has tended to treat it as a cognitive appraisal of one's prospects (Rothwell, Jewell & Hardie, 2009). The emotional weight visible here suggests that self-perception in early employment is also a matter of feeling recognised, and that supervisory feedback works less as evaluation than as a channel through which graduates learn what is even expected of them.

The feedback here was interpretive before it was evaluative. Several graduates described expectations that stayed implicit until the feedback made them legible, and the trust given by a supervisor "opened the room," as one put it, to take on more and revise their self-image upwards. Set alongside Jackson's (2016) argument that work readiness is tied to the formation of a pre-professional identity, these accounts suggest that identity reconstruction continues well beyond graduation, mediated heavily by how organisations respond to new recruits. Jackson's communities-of-practice framing draws largely on university experience. What these graduates show is that the work of becoming a member of the profession happens most consequentially in the first job, often under minimal guidance: shown a task once or twice, then left to manage. The accelerated learning this produced was real, but so was the pressure, and the two cannot be cleanly separated.

When graduates spoke about what mattered for performing well, they reproduced a hierarchy the wider literature would recognise, then complicated it. Technical competence, especially in digital tools, reporting software and language, was treated as a baseline they often felt they lacked at the outset. Behavioural and relational skills were repeatedly described as decisive, sometimes more so than technical knowledge for integrating and progressing. So far this echoes a large body of work reporting that soft-skill shortfalls dominate employer assessments across very different economies (Daud et al., 2011; Dolce et al., 2020). But the graduates here were not simply confirming a deficit. They explained where and how these competencies were acquired, and the classroom was almost never the answer. Communication, decision-making and stress management were learned in situ, through trial and error and self-training. This resonates with the claim that soft skills and critical thinking are consolidated through experience

rather than transmitted formally (Cruz et al., 2020; Nusrat & Sultana, 2019), and it lends graduate-voice support to an argument mostly made from the employer or curriculum side.

There is a conceptual implication worth drawing out. If that learning happened predominantly after entry, then the familiar framing of an employability gap as a deficiency carried over from university starts to look incomplete. On this evidence, the gap is more like the ordinary distance any newcomer covers through workplace learning than a fixed quantity the graduate fails to bring. That distinction matters, because it shifts attention from what universities failed to install toward the conditions under which graduates are able, or unable, to learn once employed. The self-directed learning these participants described, the independent research, the online certifications pursued alongside work, was not a supplement to employability so much as its ongoing substance, a point the attribution of responsibility brings to a head.

The structural account graduates gave is where the Moroccan and broader regional context asserts itself most forcefully, and where the tension between agency and conditions beyond individual control becomes hard to ignore. Three barriers recurred: recruitment processes were opaque, marked by silence, long waits, and an absence of response even after interviews, which left graduates unable to assess their standing; employers demanded prior experience for positions that were nominally entry-level, producing the paradox in which one cannot get experience without already having it, and pushing several graduates into roles below their qualifications; and access to opportunity relied heavily on personal networks and referrals, to the point that one participant estimated an internal recommendation was essential in the large majority of cases. This carries a particular charge in a developing-economy context, and it converges with evidence that social-mobility resources such as connections and informal recommendation play a significant role in graduate employability where labour markets are tight and institutionalised hiring is weak (Hossain et al., 2020). It chimes too with structural readings of skilled unemployment in Morocco, where prior-experience requirements and reliance on personal contacts compound the difficulty of entry.

What gives these findings their analytical interest is the way graduates held the structural and the personal together without collapsing one into the other. They named the barriers clearly, yet most refused a posture of pure victimhood; one participant explicitly warned against falling into "victim syndrome" and insisted that everyone must invest in their own learning and adapt. This is not false consciousness, and it would be condescending to read it that way. It is closer to a worked-out understanding that the transition is jointly produced. The enablers they identified point the same way: internships were by far the most cited bridge into employment, often converting directly into a first job, while extracurricular activities, volunteering and part-time work built networks and behavioural skills outside the formal curriculum, and supportive managers smoothed the early months. The placement literature treats supervised work experience as a central transition mechanism that triggers identity development and builds career resources (Inceoglu et al., 2019), and these accounts bear that out almost too neatly. Yet they also flag the catch this literature notes: access to placements and supportive environments is uneven (OECD, 2023), so the principal mechanism for smoothing the transition is itself distributed by the same social structures that make it hard. A graduate who secures a formative internship, or who knows someone inside a firm, is advantaged before any question of skill arises. Agency operated inside a frame it did not set.

How graduates apportioned responsibility for employability is where their reading of workplace expectations becomes most explicit, and where the findings are most distinctive. Responsibility was almost never assigned to a single actor. Graduates framed employability as a shared and systemic matter spanning universities, employers, policymakers and the labour market: universities to teach with more practical and current relevance; employers to offer genuine entry opportunities and proper induction rather than demanding finished professionals; and policymakers to create the broader conditions for employment. This distributed attribution

recalls the stakeholder dynamics documented elsewhere, though with a different tone. In Tran's (2018) study of Vietnamese stakeholders it took the form of mutual blame, each party deflecting onto the others. The graduates here did something subtler. They distributed responsibility without using it to absolve themselves, holding that universities, employers and the government each owed something while insisting that the graduate retained a substantial share. They criticised the theory-heavy character of their education in much the same terms employers and academics use in the gap literature, yet they did not stop at criticism; they described what they were doing about it.

Those personal strategies, continuous upskilling, online certification, language courses, deliberate networking, and the cultivation of curiosity, are the practical face of employability understood as a process. They were framed as necessary responses to the limits of formal education and to a labour market that offered little feedback and demanded constant adaptation. It is tempting to read this as a straightforward endorsement of graduates' proactivity, and on one level it is. A more cautious reading is that they had internalised the terms of the labour market with some clarity: they recognised that employability is now something one must continually cultivate, and adjusted their behaviour accordingly. Whether this represents empowerment or a quiet transfer of liability from institutions to individuals is genuinely ambiguous in this material, and the graduates seemed to hold both readings at once. That coexistence, rather than any tidy resolution, may be the most honest description of how employability is experienced in this setting.

Read against the economic literature the article's JEL classification invokes, these findings carry implications the sociological register alone does not capture. If the competencies that determine early performance are largely acquired after entry, then a substantial part of the return on educational investment is realised inside firms rather than inside universities, which complicates the human capital account of the diploma as a completed stock (Becker, 1964) and shifts part of the cost of skill formation onto employers who, on these accounts, are often reluctant to bear it. The prior-experience paradox and the opacity of recruitment described by participants are, in economic terms, frictions: they lengthen search, and prolonged unemployment at this stage carries documented costs to earnings, motivation and well-being (International Labour Organization, 2024; OECD, 2025). Signalling theory helps explain why that friction is not resolved by more education, since the informational value of a credential erodes as it becomes more widely held (Spence, 1973), a mechanism consistent with the Moroccan pattern in which unemployment rises rather than falls with educational attainment, and Autor (2014) offers a comparative frame for situating such mismatches. The continuous upskilling these graduates described is, on this reading, private investment in further human capital undertaken to restore a signal the diploma no longer carries on its own.

Some caution is in order regarding how far these readings travel. They rest on graduates' retrospective self-reports, and the discussion has at several points leaned on what participants said they felt or learned, which is evidence of perception rather than of demonstrated competence; the wider literature's difficulty in separating perceived from actual employability applies here too, and nothing in this study resolves it. There is also little prior work foregrounding the Moroccan business graduate's own account, so some interpretations offered here extend the literature into terrain it has not closely mapped and should be held with corresponding tentativeness. The convergences with international evidence are reassuring, but the specific weave of opaque recruitment, prior-experience paradoxes and network-dependent access described by these participants gives the Moroccan case a particular shape that comparative work can frame but not fully capture. Gender sits awkwardly here and needs a candid note. The sample included women and men, and some of what surfaced, particularly expectations around mobility and the gendered reading of certain roles, plainly carries a gendered dimension; yet the study was not designed to analyse gender as a variable, and the

data have not been pressed to yield a finding they were not built to support. This is a limitation and an obvious direction for further work. Jonbekova et al.'s (2023) account of a gendered graduate transition in Kazakhstan shows how much can be found when the analysis is set up for it from the outset.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to understand how early-career business graduates in Morocco perceive their readiness for work, read the expectations they encounter, and adapt during their first years in employment. Its central contribution is to give the graduate's own account of that passage, largely absent from the Moroccan literature, and to show what that account changes. Readiness, on this evidence, is not a property to be audited at graduation but a judgement graduates keep revising under conditions their employers largely set. The competencies that mattered most were acquired once graduates were already in post, which shifts the question from what universities failed to install toward whether workplaces let newcomers learn. And responsibility, as graduates themselves apportioned it, fell to no single actor: they named real constraints on entry while still holding themselves to account for keeping their skills current. Returning explicitly to the question with which the article opened (how do young business graduates view and develop their employability as they enter the job market in Morocco?), the answer these accounts support is that they view it as provisional and relational rather than as a stock secured at graduation, and that they develop it chiefly after entry, through situated and self-directed learning conducted within conditions of access they name clearly but do not control.

These contributions carry tentative implications. If much of the relevant learning happens after entry and under uneven conditions of access, then interventions framed solely as installing missing skills before graduation address only part of the problem; the conditions under which graduates learn once employed and the equity of access to internships, supervision and informal networks matter at least as much. The recurring tension between graduate proactivity and structural constraint suggests that demand-side conditions and hiring transparency deserve as much attention as curriculum reform.

Pushed toward the actors who could act on them, these implications become more useful. For the institutions that train these graduates, the ENCG and the FSJES above all, the case is for treating the transition itself as something to be taught, with work-readiness components built in from the final year and internships integrated as more than just a box to tick. For employers, the finding that feedback did its real work interpretively, telling graduates what was expected before it told them how they were doing, argues for onboarding and early feedback that are deliberate rather than left to chance; the cost of the silence several participants described is not only bruised morale but also a slower read on the job. For policymakers, the opacity of recruitment is the most actionable target: transparent timelines and criteria would remove a source of frustration these graduates returned to repeatedly, though none of this substitutes for the demand-side job creation the structural literature keeps insisting on. Of the three, the most actionable in the short term is the second. Structured onboarding and explicit early feedback cost employers comparatively little, lie within the control of a single organisation, and act directly on the mechanism these accounts identify as decisive, whereas curriculum reform and hiring-transparency policy operate over longer horizons and require coordination across institutions.

The study's limits mark the direction for further work. The evidence is perceptual and retrospective, and therefore cannot separate what graduates believe about themselves from what could be objectively measured. Longitudinal research following Moroccan graduates through this transition, and studies setting their accounts beside those of employers and educators, would test how far the negotiated picture presented here holds, and whether the ambiguity these

graduates described resolves in one direction or remains, as it appears here, unresolved. Concretely, a multi-wave panel following a single graduating cohort from the final year of study through the first three to five years of employment, with an initial sample large enough to absorb attrition and two or three interview waves spaced roughly eighteen months apart, would allow readiness to be observed as it is revised rather than reconstructed retrospectively. Conducted in partnership with ENCG and FSJES career services and with employer federations, and paired with the parallel accounts of employers and educators, such a design would put the negotiated picture presented here to a stronger test.

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Declaration on the use of artificial intelligence

The authors used a generative AI tool to help with the English of this article, checking grammar, spelling and phrasing. It was not used for the research itself. The research question, the theoretical framing, the design, the fieldwork and its analysis, and the interpretation of the findings are the authors' own work, and the authors take full responsibility for the published text.

Appendix A. Participant profiles

Participants are identified by an anonymised code recording sequence, gender, field of specialisation, and graduation cohort (e.g., P13–M–MKT–20). FSJES = Faculté des Sciences Juridiques, Économiques et Sociales ; ENCG = École Nationale de Commerce et de Gestion ; UIR = Université Internationale de Rabat ; ISCAE = Institut Supérieur de Commerce et d'Administration des Entreprises ; UIZ = Université Ibn Zohr ; SME = small or medium-sized enterprise.

Table 3: Participant profiles (n = 30)

Code	Gender	Age	Region	University / Field	Grad.	Position / Contract	Organization / Sector	Internship / Work exp.
P01–M–LOG–21	M	26	Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima	UIR / Logistics – Int'l Trade	2021	Terminal Cooperation Planner / Perm.	Large co. / Transport – Logistics – Supply Chain	Intern 6 mo / Work 3 yr
P02–M–LOG–21	M	28	Fez-Meknes	UIR / Logistics – Int'l Trade	2021	Material Planner / Perm.	Large co. / Industry – Production – Energy	Intern 6 mo / Work 3 yr
P03–F–ACC–23	F	25	Souss-Massa	FSJES UIZ / Accounting – Finance – Audit	2023	Administrator / Perm.	Semi-public / Public sector – Government	Intern 5 mo / Work 1 yr 6 mo
P04–F–MKT–20	F	28	Souss-Massa	FSJES / Marketing – Communication	2020	Community Manager / Freelance	SME / Other (Vocational education)	Intern 5 mo / Work 2 yr 10 mo
P05–M–ACC–22	M	25	Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima	FSJES / Accounting – Finance – Audit	2022	Administrator / Perm.	Public administration / Public sector	Intern 4 mo / Work 3 yr
P06–F–ACC–23	F	26	Casablanca-Settat	ENCG / Accounting – Finance – Audit	2023	Accounting Senior / Perm.	SME / Banking – Finance – Insurance	Intern 7 mo / Work 3 yr 2 mo
P07–M–ACC–22	M	26	Fez-Meknes	ENCG / Accounting – Finance – Audit	2022	Accountant / Perm.	SME / Banking – Finance – Insurance	Extra 5 mo / Work 3 yr
P08–F–ACC–22	F	26	Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima	FSJES / Accounting – Finance – Audit	2022	Accountant / Perm.	SME / Banking – Finance – Insurance	Intern 1 mo / Work 2 yr
P09–F–LOG–22	F	25	Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima	FSJES / Logistics – Int'l Trade	2022	Logistics Coordinator / Fixed term	SME / Industry – Production – Energy	Intern 4 mo / Work 2 yr 6 mo
P10–F–ACC–23	F	25	Marrakesh-Safi	ENCG / Accounting – Finance – Audit	2023	Management Controller / Perm.	Large co. / Trade – Retail – Sales	Intern 6 mo / Work 1 yr 10 mo
P11–F–OTH–23	F	25	Souss-Massa	FSJES / Other (Strategic Management)	2023	Customer Service / Perm.	Large co. / Banking – Finance – Insurance	Intern 5 mo / Work 1 yr 2 mo
P12–M–LOG–23	M	26	Souss-Massa	ENCG / Logistics – Int'l Trade	2023	Buyer / Perm.	Large co. / Agriculture – Agri-food	Intern 4 mo / Work 4 yr
P13–M–MKT–20	M	27	Rabat-Salé-Kenitra	ENCG / Marketing – Communication	2020	IT Product Manager / Freelance	SME / Consulting – Audit – Expertise	Intern 6 mo / Work 4 yr
P14–M–HRM–21	M	27	Rabat-Salé-Kenitra	ENCG / Human Resources	2021	HR Business Partner / Perm.	Large co. / Industry – Production – Energy	Intern 6 mo / Work 5 yr

P15-F-MKT-22	F	26	Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima	ENCG / Marketing – Communication	2022	Sales Representative / Perm.	SME / Consulting – Audit – Expertise	Intern 4 mo / Work 2 yr
P16-F-HRM-24	F	30	Casablanca-Settat	FSJES / Human Resources	2024	HR Assistant / Perm.	Large co. / Trade – Retail – Sales	Intern 3 mo / Work 5 yr
P17-F-HRM-20	F	28	Rabat-Salé-Kenitra	FSJES / Human Resources	2020	Program Manager / Perm.	NGO / Social sector	Intern 0 mo / Work 2 yr
P18-M-ACC-21	M	27	Casablanca-Settat	FSJES / Accounting – Finance – Audit	2021	Accountant / Perm.	Large co. / Industry – Production – Energy	Intern 3 mo / Work 5 yr
P19-M-LOG-21	M	28	Souss-Massa	ENCG / Logistics – Int'l Trade	2021	Logistics Coordinator / Perm.	SME / Transport – Logistics – Supply Chain	Intern 3 mo / Work 3 yr 7 mo
P20-F-HRM-20	F	30	Souss-Massa	FSJES / Human Resources	2020	Recruitment Officer / Perm.	Large co. / Industry – Production – Energy	Intern 6 mo / Work 5 yr
P21-M-LOG-21	M	28	Rabat-Salé-Kenitra	FSJES / Logistics – Int'l Trade	2021	Procurement & Internal Scheduling / Perm.	Large co. / Industry – Production – Energy	Intern 0 mo / Work 3 yr
P22-F-MKT-23	F	24	Souss-Massa	ENCG / Marketing – Communication	2023	Social Media Manager / Perm.	SME / Communication – Marketing – Media	Intern 5 mo / Work 1 yr 3 mo
P23-M-LOG-23	M	24	Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima	FSJES / Logistics – Int'l Trade	2023	Purchasing & General Resources Manager / Perm.	Semi-public / Industrial & Logistic Parks Dev.	Intern 7 mo / Work 2 yr
P24-F-OTH-21	F	27	Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima	ENCG / Other (Org. consulting & auditing)	2021	Purchasing Executive / Perm.	Semi-public / Industrial & Logistic Parks Dev.	Intern 4 mo / Work 3 yr
P25-F-LOG-23	F	24	Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima	ENCG / Logistics – Int'l Trade	2023	SAP Consultant / Perm.	SME / Consulting – Audit – Expertise	Intern 4 mo / Work 2 yr 8 mo
P26-F-LOG-22	F	27	Fez-Meknes	ENCG / Logistics – Int'l Trade	2022	Procurement Coordinator / Perm.	Large co. / Industry – Production – Energy	Intern 5 mo / Work 3 yr 6 mo
P27-M-OTH-22	M	27	Souss-Massa	FSJES / Other (Economics)	2022	Administrator / Perm.	Public administration / Public sector	Intern 3 mo / Work 1 yr 6 mo
P28-M-ACC-22	M	26	Souss-Massa	FSJES / Accounting – Finance – Audit	2022	Administrator / Perm.	Public administration / Public sector	Intern 6 mo / Work 2 yr
P29-F-ACC-24	F	24	Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima	ISCAE / Accounting – Finance – Audit	2024	SAP Consultant / Perm.	SME / Consulting – Audit – Expertise	Intern 7 mo / Work 1 yr
P30-F-OTH-22	F	28	Tangier-Tetouan-Al Hoceima	FSJES / Other (Business law)	2022	Banking Lawyer – Litigation Manager / Perm.	Large co. / Banking – Finance – Insurance	Intern 3 mo / Work 3 yr

Source: author's field data (2024-2025). The “Internship / Work exp.” column reports total professional experience, including work undertaken before or during study; it therefore does not correspond to the interval elapsed since graduation.

Appendix B. Consent Form

The form was presented bilingually, in French and English, so that participants could read it in their preferred language. It set out the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality and anonymisation measures applied, recording participants' separate agreement to audio-recording and to the use of anonymised quotations.

Table 4: Consent form presented to participants

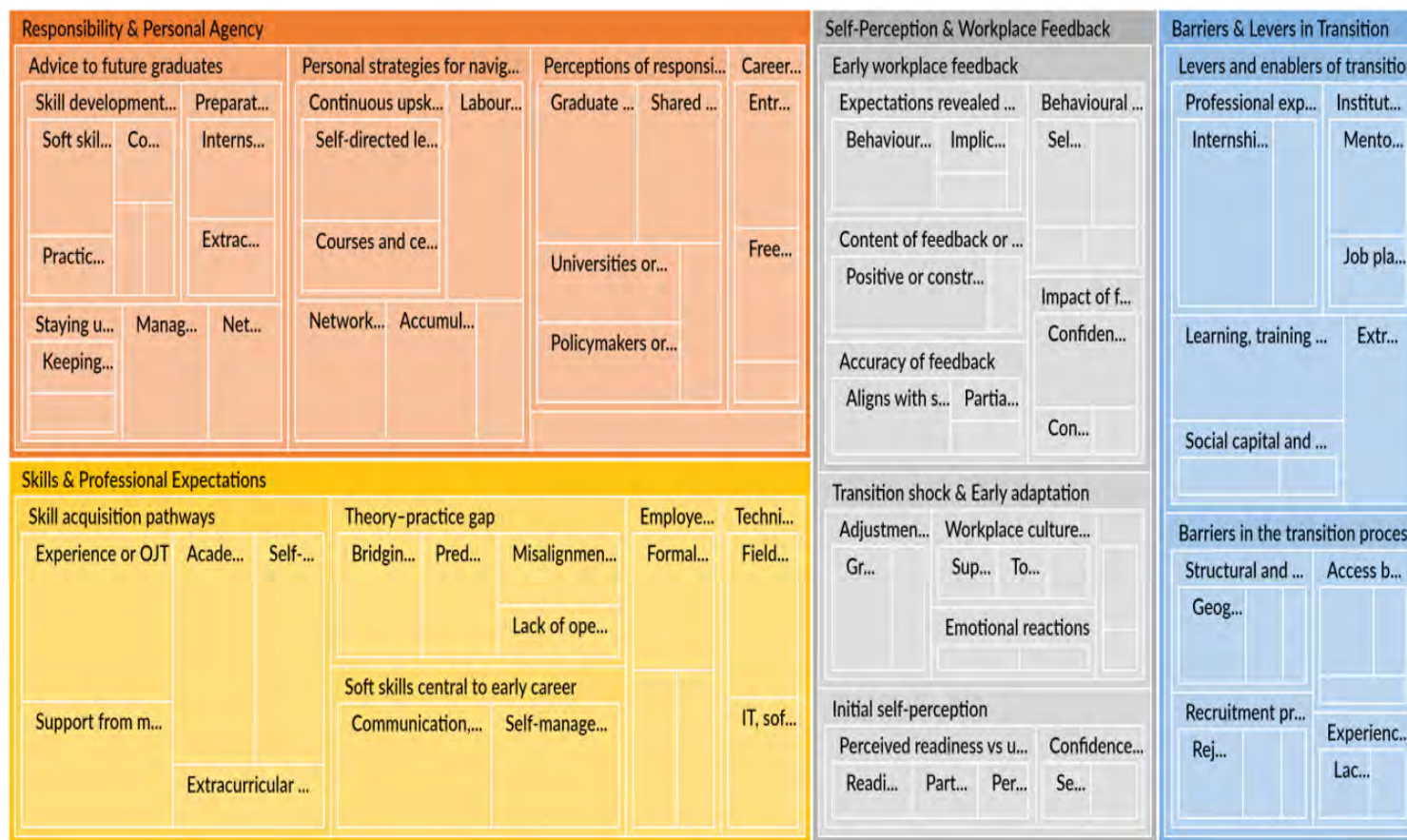
TITRE DE L'ÉTUDE / STUDY TITLE Transition vers l'emploi chez les jeunes diplômé(e)s des filières de gestion Transition to employment among recent graduates from business programs CHERCHEUSE / RESEARCHER Boutaina El Khattab, Doctorante / PhD Candidate, Université Abdelmalek Essaadi OBJECTIF / PURPOSE Cette étude vise à mieux comprendre comment les jeunes diplômé(e)s perçoivent leur employabilité et vivent leur transition vers le marché du travail. This study aims to understand how recent graduates perceive their employability and experience their transition to the labour market through their early professional experiences. PARTICIPATION VOLONTAIRE / VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION Votre participation est entièrement volontaire ; vous pouvez interrompre l'entretien à tout moment. Your participation is entirely voluntary; you may stop the interview at any time, without any consequence. CONFIDENTIALITÉ / CONFIDENTIALITY Toutes les informations seront traitées de manière confidentielle et anonymisée, à des fins de recherche académique uniquement. L'entretien peut être enregistré audio uniquement avec votre accord. All information will remain confidential and anonymized, and used solely for academic research. The interview may be audio-recorded only with your consent. UTILISATION DES DONNÉES / USE OF DATA Des citations anonymisées pourront être utilisées dans la thèse ou de futures publications. Anonymized quotations may be used in the thesis or future academic publications. CONSENTEMENT / CONSENT ☐ J'ai lu et compris les informations ci-dessus. I have read and understood the information above. ☐ Je participe volontairement à cette étude. / I voluntarily agree to take part in this study. ☐ J'accepte l'enregistrement audio de l'entretien (optionnel). / I agree to the audio recording of the interview (optional). ☐ J'autorise l'utilisation de citations anonymisées. / I agree to the use of anonymized quotations. Nom / Name : _____ Signature : _____ Date : _____

Source: author's elaboration; form administered to all participants prior to interview.

Appendix C. NVivo Coding Hierarchy and Sub-Category Structure

The figure below (Figure 2) presents the full coding hierarchy developed in NVivo, displayed as a treemap. The structure is organised under the four analytic domains reported in the Findings, each subdivided into second-level categories and their constituent codes. The relative size of each block reflects the volume of coded material assigned to it.

Figure 2: NVivo coding hierarchy (treemap) across the four analytic domains



Source: author's elaboration from the NVivo coding of the interview corpus.