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PACTE ESRI 2030: What Solutions to Address the Employability Issues of Higher Education Graduates?

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Abstract: *This article delves into the strategic initiatives outlined in the PACTE ESRI 2030 framework in Morocco, which aims to bridge the gap between higher education and the job market by enhancing the employability of university graduates. It highlights the critical role of aligning academic curricula with industry demands to equip students with the relevant knowledge and skills required for modern workplaces. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the need to develop students' soft skills—such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability—which are increasingly recognized as essential attributes by employers. The article provides an in-depth analysis of the key proposals within the PACTE ESRI 2030, including fostering stronger collaborations between universities and businesses to create practical training opportunities, encouraging entrepreneurship among students to nurture innovation and self-reliance, and strengthening career-counseling services to assist students in navigating their professional paths. By implementing these initiatives, the framework seeks to prepare graduates not only to secure employment but to excel in a competitive and rapidly evolving global job market. The article concludes by discussing the potential impact of these strategies on transforming Morocco's higher education system into a dynamic engine for economic growth and societal progress.*

Keywords: *PACTE ESRI, employability, Education reform, soft-skills, higher education graduates.*

1. Introduction

The ESRI 2030 PACTE, or Pact for the Transformation and Improvement of Economic Competitiveness, is an initiative aimed at strengthening the employability of graduates of higher education, (Ejbari & Lassili, 2022). Especially in Morocco, there is a serious problem of access to the labor market by young graduates of higher education¹, and the current trend of the Moroccan job market, at the level of the job offer, aims to promote candidates who not only have good technical skills, but also those with personal and relational skills, soft-skills, very developed, depending to The Public Policy Dialogue series 2021/2022 organized by the Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis (MIPA). This employability issue is not an easy thing to resolve. Because it forces the Ministry of Employment and the Ministry of Higher Education to deploy large efforts to combat unemployment and develop the employability of young graduates. However, there is no miracle solution to this problem, and the Ministry of Higher Education of Research Science and Innovation proposed many solutions, such as:

- The creation of training courses more adapted to job offers, in all Moroccan universities, to have a workforce adequate to what businesses are asking for.
- The program to retrain the 25,000 graduates.
- The creation of university ANAPEC agencies.

And a lot of other programs, including the PACTE ESRI 2030, which aims to propel the quality of the system to train future executives who can participate in the development of our country. This article aims to study the different proposals put forward by this plan, which will help to develop the employability of young academics, from a theoretical point of view. For this, we will try to answer the following question: How can the ESRI 2030 PACT effectively improve the employability of higher education graduates in Morocco?

For that, we will make a theoretical study, and a detailed analysis, from a documentary study to collect the different information necessary for us to give a clear point of view on this program, and to give the recommendations that we consider necessary.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks on Employability

The concept of employability is very old, and it became common towards the end of the 1990s, as a way to address employment and training issues from the perspective of public authorities and businesses (Dietrich, 2010). The notion of employability is not easy to define, it refers more to an orientation program than to a concept within a theoretical framework (Othmane, 2011). Bharga & Shrama (2018) consider that the notion of employability has evolved significantly over time, and now encompasses two concepts:

- The individual's ability to perform a role and accomplish a job that could be attained through education (Knight & Yorke, 2002).
- The individual's ability to obtain and retain a job based on their capabilities (Harvey, 2001).

Through employability, the employee becomes the primary controller, actor, and even "entrepreneur" (Pihel, 2010) of their professional life and career. So, employability is a multifaceted concept that has been examined through various theoretical lenses. Understanding these frameworks helps to identify the key

¹ « *Activité, emploi et chômage, premiers résultats (annuel), 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023* », in www.hcp.ma, consulted on 14 June 2024

factors that influence graduates' ability to secure and retain employment. This section explores major theoretical frameworks relevant to employability.

2.1.1 Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory, introduced by Gary Becker in 1964, posits that investments in education and training significantly enhance individuals' productivity and employability. This theory treats education as an investment that equips individuals with the skills and knowledge required to increase their value in the labor market. Graduates who acquire specialized knowledge and advanced skills are expected to secure better employment opportunities, earn higher wages, and face lower unemployment risks. Furthermore, the theory emphasizes the positive correlation between educational investment and economic returns, such as career advancement and income growth. However, it has been critiqued for oversimplifying the education-employment link by overlooking variables like labor market demand, quality of education, and social inequalities. In Morocco, applying this theory necessitates examining how educational reforms and investments can better align academic programs with the job market's requirements, thereby enhancing employability.

2.1.2 Competency-Based Model

The Competency-Based Model, developed in the early 1970s by psychologist David McClelland, highlights the importance of aligning educational outcomes with the specific skills and competencies sought by employers. This approach prioritizes the acquisition of both hard skills, such as technical expertise, and soft skills, such as communication and teamwork, which are essential across industries. Competency-based education focuses on measurable outcomes through clear assessment and certification criteria, ensuring that graduates meet industry standards. It also provides flexible learning pathways, enabling students to acquire skills at their own pace and through diverse experiences. In Morocco, implementing this model would require educational reforms that incorporate industry input to ensure curricula address labor market needs. Establishing partnerships with industries could further support the development of training programs and certifications aligned with the competencies required locally.

2.1.3 Career Development Theory

Career Development Theory, as articulated by Donald Super in 1957, explores the evolving nature of career trajectories and the critical role of self-concept in shaping career development. This theory proposes that career growth is a lifelong process, encompassing stages such as growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance, and eventual decline. It emphasizes that an individual's perception of their abilities, interests, and goals greatly influences career choices and professional development. Furthermore, the theory highlights the importance of adaptability in responding to the changing dynamics of the labor market. In the Moroccan context, this theory underscores the need for robust career counseling and guidance services to assist students and graduates in planning their career paths. Such support systems can help them navigate the complexities of professional growth and build the adaptability necessary to thrive in an evolving job market.

2.1.4 Social Capital Theory

Social Capital Theory, developed by Pierre Bourdieu and later expanded by Robert Putnam, examines the role of social networks and relationships in fostering employment opportunities. Social capital

encompasses the resources accessible through professional and personal networks, including job referrals, career guidance, and access to industry-specific knowledge. The theory highlights the importance of building professional networks to enhance employability and gain access to career advancement opportunities. These networks also facilitate the flow of valuable information about job openings and industry trends, while providing emotional and practical support during job transitions. In Morocco, fostering social capital could involve initiatives like mentorship programs, alumni networks, and partnerships between universities and industries. Such initiatives would help students and graduates establish meaningful connections that improve their chances of securing employment and advancing their careers.

2.1.5 Employability Skills Framework

The Employability Skills Framework identifies and develops the key skills and attributes that enhance an individual's employability. It categorizes skills into two main groups: core employability skills, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and adaptability, and job-specific skills tailored to particular industries or professions. The framework advocates for the integration of these skills into educational curricula and assessment practices to prepare students for the workforce. In Morocco, adopting this framework would involve mapping the essential skills demanded by various sectors and embedding them into academic programs. Training workshops, skill enhancement modules, and practical assessments could further support students in developing both general and specialized competencies. This approach would ensure that graduates are better equipped to meet the expectations of employers and navigate a competitive job market. To address the issue of employability among young university graduates, the Ministry of Higher Education has recently implemented several corrective programs, including PACTE ESRI 2030.

3. ESRI 2030 PACTE: What is it?

To support the consultative work with stakeholders, the Ministry of high education has set up a lot of collaborative platforms, like: <https://pactesri.enssup.gov.ma/>, on which we based our discussion of the following two chapters. Depending on the information included in this platform, PACTE ESRI is the National Plan for Accelerating the Transformation of the Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation Ecosystem. This PACT is based on a foundation of strong values, enabling stakeholders to mobilize and federate around a shared vision. These values enshrine transparency, ethics, excellence, resilience through capacity, equity and equality of opportunity and openness.



Figure 1: the values of the ESRI PACT

Source: Personal elaboration²

The Ministry of Higher Education has launched since 2022 several national conferences in the Moroccan universities, which aimed to collect the different views and recommendations of university stakeholders, and which can provide solutions to the problems in Moroccan university. Finally, after several listening and consultation sessions, this plan was launched at the beginning of the 2023-2024 academic year.

4. ESRI PACT strategic architecture

This plan is based on the priority choices of the New Model of Development³ and is nourished by its doctrine and its founding principles.

It aims to translate into concrete actions the priorities of the government program in terms of human capital development and integration of Morocco in the knowledge society.

It also covers four strategic directions related to:

- Academic excellence
- Scientific research
- Operational excellence and governance 4.0
- Innovation territories.

It is based on three accelerators of change namely:

- Digital transformation.
- System performance.
- Structuring, organization and regulation.

² Based on ESRI PACT strategic architecture, in <https://www.uae.ac.ma/sites/default/files/2023-03/architecture-strategique-pacte-.pdf>, consulted on 24 June 2024

³ proposed by the Special Commission on the Development Model CSMD and allows to project into the future based on the history of Morocco, to be able to put in place the appropriate corrective actions.

4.1 The strategic directions

4.1.1 Academic excellence

« *Academic excellence means establishing healthy teaching and learning environment and maintaining it on sustained basis for the betterment of students and fundamental contributions to the society* », (Alhosani et al, 2023). In our case is a matter of educational reform global and integrated all the years of higher education, from the first year to the doctoral studies.

For this, content and methods responding to priorities of the country and aligned with international standards will be set up, as well as support mechanisms promoting equal opportunities and consecrating the system performance and performance in its entirety.

«*Academic excellence involves providing an environment for developing critical thinking, innovative skills, intellectual growth, and high academic standards*» (Alhosani et al, 2023).

4.1.2 Scientific research

Daoud et al. (2023), mentioned about various ranking systems of universities across the globe, among which we find: the quality of research. In this context, the main measure that has been taken is to lay the foundations of scientific research to the international standards of new generation doctoral students, so that they are valued and recruited in better conditions, adding to this:

- Adoption of a research linked to national priorities.
- Structuring scientific research around integrated clusters (pooling of resources and mobilization of synergies).

4.1.3 Operational excellence and governance 4.0

The aim is to substantially boost the governance of higher education institutions, by adopting autonomy in an empowering framework and mobilizing. As well as an increased contracting State-Higher Education Institutions, focused on performance and results. And finally, the strengthened regulatory function of the Ministry will cover the entire ecosystem, especially operational excellence initiatives are becoming the model of choice by organizations that are targeting long-term and ongoing improvements (Asif et al., 2010).

4.1.4 Innovation territories

University of oxford, Stanford university, and Harvard university give a particular interest to promoting innovations, it's why they have strong tie up with industry leaders and investor networks, which helps to succeed in commercializing innovations and research ideas for spearheading economic growth and thus helping the society (Fricke, 2022). In this context, the ESRI PACTE aims to foster a successful innovation ecosystem through:

- Skills development leading to the creativity and innovation.
- Strengthening territorial anchoring and synergies with the socio-economic world.
- Alignment with global innovation cycles: Morocco's transition from an execution platform to active R&D player status.

4.2 The accelerators of change

4.2.1 Digital transformation

This advantage is based on the establishment of:

- Digital administration.
- Online services dedicated to students, teacher-researchers, innovation actors and the human resources management.
- Online learning platforms.

All of this through:

- Advanced digitalization of information and management systems of university to lead to a separate e-administration.
- Implementation of a Data Governance strategy with definition of standards and processes for collection, storage and data sharing between different actors in the ecosystem.
- Modernization and reinforcement of equipment and infrastructure to reduce the digital gap between establishments.
- Inter connectivity of information systems and reinforcement of cyber security.
- Development of a dedicated information system to the student/ Mobile first.
- Development of the National Recruiting.
- Digital platform dedicated to innovation.
- Integrated digital management platform of human resources.
- The Digital University.
- Digitization of content / E-learning platform by university Soft, Power and Digital Skills Platform
- Language training.
- Hybrid Training Program.

4.2.2 System performance

This lever is interested in transversal synergies within the ecosystem and with stakeholders at territorial and national level, through:

- The co-development of training offers, and scientific research projects based on sectors that meet the current and future needs of socio-economic actors, and the harmonization of university action agendas, scientific and administrative, through an integrated management system.
- Development of the quality of teaching and administrative support, through the strengthening of the continuing training capacities of administrative and technical managers.
- Development of national and international partnerships.

4.2.3 Structuring, organization and regulation

This involves revising Law 01.00, expediting the adoption of implementing texts, and establishing a comprehensive framework law. It defines roles and responsibilities for professors, administrative staff, and students. Key areas include governance, administrative efficiency, student engagement, and regulatory compliance. This approach ensures institutional effectiveness and academic excellence.

5. Analysis of the solutions proposed by the PACTE ESRI 2030, to address the employability problems of graduates of higher education

To address the employability issues of young academics, PACTE ESRI 2030 has proposed several solutions directly related to students. These solutions were outlined in PACTE's strategic framework, primarily focusing on the first axis of strategic orientations centered on “academic excellence”. Namely:

5.1 Integration innovation in education

“Innovation is associated with the formation of human capital that has the necessary skills” (Castro and al, 2019, p 3) that is meaning that innovation is an essential element in obtaining a useful workforce in the labour market, In this context, According to Penttilä, T. (2016), the training processes must bring the student closer to all what they will face in professional life, through pedagogy of innovation where elements known as meta-innovations converge.

Depending to Keinänen and Kairisto–Mertanen (2019), these elements are like:

- Multidisciplinary learning environments,
- Active teaching–learning methodologies,
- research and development (R and D),
- Integration of working life.

By integrating innovation into the curriculum, PACTE ESRI 2030 aims to equip students with not only technical skills but also ethical and innovative mindsets. This can enhance graduates' readiness for real-world challenges and align them with evolving industry demands.

5.2 Collaboration with Industry Partners

“The collaboration between universities and the industry is increasingly perceived as a vehicle to enhance innovation through knowledge exchange”, (Ankrah and Al-tabbaa, 2015, p 87). Especially since innovation is at the heart of the development of the countries' economies, the mutual assistance between the academic world and the economic and professional world will undoubtedly be fruitful for both parties. In the same context, and according to Rossoni and al (2023), partnerships between highly qualified academics and researchers and professionals in private organizations, can enhance local economies by integrating all available technical skills and expertise.

Establishing partnerships with industry leaders can provide students with practical experiences, internships, and projects aligned with current market needs. This collaboration can bridge the gap between academic learning and industry expectations, thereby boosting employability. According to recommendations given at the national foundations for the elaboration of the ESRI 2030 COMPACT⁴ this collaboration, offers several key benefits for students and the broader educational ecosystem:

- **Practical Experience:** By working closely with industry leaders, students gain hands-on experience through internships and real-world projects. This exposure helps them apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings, enhancing their understanding and skills.
- **Alignment with Market Needs:** Collaborations ensure that the projects and internships provided to students are aligned with current industry trends and market demands. This relevance ensures that students are learning skills that are directly applicable to their future careers.

⁴ <https://www.enssup.gov.ma> consulted on 07 June 2024.

- **Bridging the Gap:** These partnerships help bridge the gap between academic learning and industry expectations. Often, there is a disconnect between what is taught in classrooms and what is required in the job market. Industry collaborations help synchronize academic curricula with the evolving needs of the industry.
- **Boosting Employability:** Practical experience and up-to-date skills make students more attractive to potential employers. Students who have completed internships or projects with industry leaders are often seen as more prepared and capable, significantly boosting their employability.
- **Networking Opportunities:** Students get the chance to network with professionals and industry leaders, which can lead to job offers, mentorship, and career guidance. Building these connections can be invaluable for their professional growth.
- **Enhanced Learning Environment:** The presence of industry-relevant projects and experiences can make the learning environment more dynamic and engaging. Students are likely to be more motivated and invested in their studies when they see the direct application of their learning.

5.3 Soft Skills Development

Howard Gardner's theory (1983) suggests that human intelligence extends beyond academic abilities to include interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, Gardner identifies multiple types of intelligences, including interpersonal intelligence (the ability to understand and interact effectively with others) and intrapersonal intelligence (the ability to understand oneself). These types of intelligences are directly related to soft skills such as communication and teamwork. Emphasizing the development of soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving is crucial. These skills are often cited as lacking among graduates and are essential for success in modern workplaces.

Daniel Goleman (1995) explores the concept of emotional intelligence and its impact on professional and personal success. Goleman argues that soft skills such as communication, relationship management, and problem-solving are fundamental components of emotional intelligence, often proving more critical than technical skills for success in the professional realm.

5.4 Career Guidance and Counseling

The OECD report "*Career Guidance for Adults*" (2004) highlights the importance of career guidance and counseling in helping individuals navigate career transitions and upskilling opportunities. Effective career guidance supports lifelong learning and adaptation to changing job market conditions. Providing robust career counseling services helps students identify their strengths, interests, and career paths early on. This guidance can include mentorship programs, alumni networks, and workshops focused on professional development.

5.5 Adaptation to Technological Advancements

Sherry Turkle (2011) examines the impact of technology on human relationships and work environments. Turkle highlights the importance of integrating technological literacy into education to prepare individuals for the evolving digital landscape and its effects on communication and interaction. Ensuring that educational programs incorporate emerging technologies and digital literacy equips graduates with relevant skills for the digital age job market. Also, the OECD report "*Skills for a Digital World*" (2018) underscores the importance of incorporating emerging technologies into educational curricula. It

emphasizes that adapting educational programs to include digital literacy and technological skills is crucial for preparing individuals for the digital economy and the future workforce.

6. Discussion and recommendations

Overall, the solutions proposed by PACTE ESRI 2030 are comprehensive and holistic, aiming not only to enhance the technical skills of graduates but also to cultivate their professional and ethical development. By focusing on innovation, social responsibility, and collaboration with industry, PACTE ESRI 2030 seeks to improve the employability and long-term success of higher education graduates in a rapidly changing world.

So, these solutions proposed by the plan to improve the employability of young higher education graduates, offer promising approaches. However, their implementation needs to be examined in detail to assess their potential effectiveness and the necessary adjustments within the Moroccan context. Also, this plan is presented like an ambitious framework designed to reform higher education and research systems to better align with industry needs and future market demands.

This initiative seeks to bridge the gap between theoretical research on employability and practical, actionable strategies. By integrating industry feedback into curriculum development, PACTE ESRI 2030 aims to ensure that graduates possess the skills and competencies that are directly applicable to the local and global job markets. The initiative advocates for establishing robust partnerships between educational institutions and industries to develop relevant training programs and certifications, thus ensuring that academic offerings are responsive to real-world needs. Moreover, PACTE ESRI 2030 emphasizes the importance of innovation and research in enhancing employability. By fostering an environment where research and development are closely linked with industry requirements, the initiative aims to cultivate a workforce that is not only skilled but also capable of driving economic growth and technological advancement, What Enhances the Employability of Young University Graduates.

The successful implementation of employability-focused initiatives in higher education faces several challenges that require careful consideration and strategic planning. These challenges include securing adequate financial and logistical resources, overcoming institutional resistance to change, and establishing effective collaboration with the private sector to align educational outcomes with market needs. Additionally, universities must address issues such as capacity building, continuous dialogue with stakeholders, and the evaluation and adaptation of programs to ensure they remain relevant. Pilot programs and regular assessments are vital to refining strategies and achieving measurable improvements in graduates' employability. Overcoming these challenges is essential for creating educational systems that effectively prepare students for dynamic job markets.

7. Conclusion

The research paper on PACTE ESRI 2030 underscores the critical importance of addressing the employability challenges faced by higher education graduates through strategic and comprehensive measures. The theoretical exploration of employability highlights the multifaceted nature of this issue, emphasizing the need for both technical competencies and essential soft skills.

The introduction of PACTE ESRI 2030 reveals a significant step by the Ministry of Higher Education to tackle these challenges. By outlining the initiative's framework, the paper demonstrates how PACTE ESRI 2030

is designed to bridge the gap between academic education and industry needs. The architecture of the program shows a well-structured approach, integrating various stakeholders and focusing on key areas such as curriculum reform and career guidance. The proposed solutions under PACTE ESRI 2030, including enhanced industry collaboration and a focus on technological advancements, offer a promising pathway to improving the employability of graduates. These measures are aimed at equipping students with the skills and competencies that align with current and future job market demands.

In conclusion, PACTE ESRI 2030 represents an ambitious and holistic effort to reform higher education and research systems. By addressing both the theoretical and practical aspects of employability, the initiative seeks to ensure that graduates are not only well-prepared for the workforce but also capable of contributing effectively to economic and technological advancements. The ongoing success of this initiative will depend on its ability to adapt to evolving industry trends and to continually integrate feedback from all relevant stakeholders. The remaining challenge is therefore to effectively implement the measures of this plan, to raise awareness among all university stakeholders about its necessity, and to successfully integrate it into the Moroccan higher education system.

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