

From Education to Employment: Developing Soft Skills and Employability Case of Cadi Ayyad University Career Center

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Abstract:

This work aims to study the role played by university career centers in strengthening the employability of young students, and more specifically the case of the career center of the Cadi Ayyad University of Marrakech. The relevance of this subject stems from the importance of improving employability, but also from the role of public institutions in supporting it in alignment with the concerns of companies. The resolution of this work involves a documentary study of the data developed by the Career Center, and more, a qualitative study of the focus group of the center's advisors.

Keywords: Career Center; Cadi Ayyad University; Innovation; Pedagogy; Employability.

Introduction

In recent years, universities and higher education institutions in Morocco have been increasingly aligning themselves with international educational trends. Moreover, there are different facets of this perspective. Among other things, the establishment of career centers is a major step towards reformulating old teaching methods and adapting them to the requirements of employers. In this regard, this policy aims to provide students with the necessary tools in parallel with the technical training delivered, in terms of transversal skills, job search methods, communicative skills, and professional situations to create, increase and consolidate the link between students and the professional world by strengthening their employability.

Moreover, the university trains students to acquire knowledge that allows them to be active in society. However, this dynamic of acquiring knowledge and skills specific to the latter is not enough to build a professional career (Vakaridis, Delaye and Mathez de Senger 2015). It is in this context that it is important to reverse the pace and start downstream to appropriate relevant information on the evolution of the job market and align its practices and skills capitalization. In this regard, the University Career Center aims to foster this approach. This Western model has been adopted in the national context to promote pedagogical innovation, diversify training tools, and improve skills according to the requirements of employers, to create a synergy between the university and the job market.

This work aims to study the role of the university career center in Morocco, in particular that of the Cadi Ayyad UCA University in Marrakech, in strengthening the employability of young students and graduates. To do this, we will first address the conceptual framework of the employability of different dimensions of researchers, then the center of employability as an entity established to support individuals in their employability and finally the case study of the career center of the Cadi Ayyad University.

1. Youth employability

Employability is a concept that is evolving. Previously, individuals worked to develop their employability, today, they must be employable to get a job opportunity. This perspective allows the individual to become the entrepreneur of his or her professional career (Pihel, 2010), given his or her ability to develop it and interact with changes in the external environment.

1.1. Genesis and definition of employability

The term employability appeared in Great Britain during the Industrial Revolution. Thus, it has made it possible to distinguish within the poor social class those who could integrate into the new society through their ability to find a job, from those who will resort to social and public charity for reasons of incompetence or inability to integrate into the active economy. But this concept emerged during the early twentieth century in the United States, with the fall of the Wall Street stock exchange in 1929 and the economic crisis engendered, such as the permanent rise in the unemployment rate, which pushed the Roosevelt administration to exercise an interventionist policy and to identify the people who could be guaranteed a stable and permanent job from those who had to apply for social assistance (Ben Hassen, Hofaidhllaoui, 2012). In this phase, we speak of a *dichotomous employability* that extends until the 1940s (Gazier, 1999). From now on, the term employability means the ability to work and refers to an individual's productive abilities and skills to work in a profession (Ben Hassen, Hofaidhllaoui, 2012).

In a second cycle, the concept underwent modifications in the United States, as well as an emergence in France, in the 60s, characterized by its heterogeneous conceptualization of its use. Later in the late 80s, employability was explored in a dynamic and interactive contemporary approach. In addition, researchers organized on debates on the description and individualization of the concept, meaning the individual's ability to extract an income from the market in each period. This perspective is called *employability initiative* and aims to materialize cumulative and evolving individual capacities and qualifications by selling them on the market (Gazier, 1999), by involving assets of creativity and individual responsibility (Hategekimana and Roger, 2002), but also the ability to build and mobilize professional social networks capable of supporting one's professional dynamism (Granovetter, 2000).

The definition of employability has evolved. According to Tremblay (1998), it is based on the creation of a relationship of maximum match between supply and demand to satisfy the requirements of a job. Whereas Gazier (1999) defines it as a dynamization and updating of skills for an individual, to manifest a behavior oriented towards the job market.

Several researchers, including Finot (2000), Hategekimana, and Roger (2002), define the concept from the point of view of the employee's skills and the company's human resources policies, allowing him or her to obtain a job within or outside the company at any time and under rational deadlines and conditions. A few years later, Laizé (2007) defined employability as "all the skills, human resources management conditions, and organizational and societal arrangements that are necessary and sufficient to enable the employee to remain in employment, within reasonable time and conditions, in a dynamic and restrictive context of professional mobility". These definitions explain the notion of employability from a two-dimensional perspective, in synergy at the level of the employee and the company. Thus, the improvement of its level remains a shared responsibility and an effective social policy of the company so that the employee takes the initiative and the power to act on his professional career.

The last cycle is entitled *Interactive employability* in an explicit formulation between the individual's abilities and the external environment¹.

¹ Canadian Labor Force Development Board, 1994.

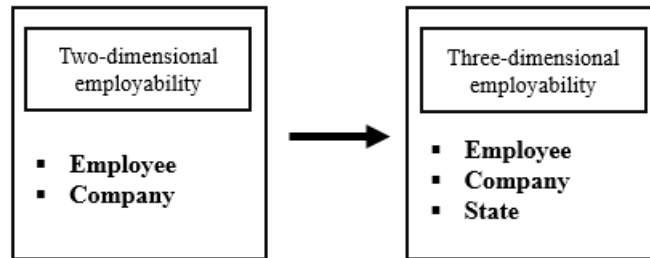


Figure 1: from two-dimensional to three-dimensional employability.

Source: Developed by us, 2022.

Today, the theme has become three-dimensional. It involves three actors, namely: the individual, the company, and the state (Ben Hassen, Hofaidhllaoui, 2012). Moreover, the individual sees himself in permanent interaction with his external environment and its evolutions. Thus, the definition of the concept is retained as its relative ability of an individual to find a job by taking into consideration his or her own characteristics and those of the professional world (Saint-Germes, 2006).

1.2. Categorization and Scope of the Employability Domain

The following table distinguishes several categories of employability:

Consists of the enhancement of skills capitalized through experience regardless of the requirements of one's job to underline one's professional ambition.

Table 1: Four types of employability

Biographical employability	Refers to the individual's historical and held skills, formulating their CV. She concretizes her capitalized portfolio and accumulates knowledge and skills throughout her professional and personal career.
Differential employability	The set of skills that allow an individual to differentiate himself and his employability from others.
Average employability	It is the individual skills mobilized during a work situation and consists of the improvement of professional abilities to meet the demands of the market. This type requires a company to study the circumstances of productivity, flexibility, efficiency, and employment policies (Finot, 2000).
Projective employability	Consists of the enhancement of skills capitalized through experience regardless of the requirements of one's job to underline one's professional ambition.

Source: Saint-Germes (2007).

The employable individual has certain discriminatory aspects and psychological characteristics that prepare him or her to adapt proactively in his or her work or career, and to seize the professional opportunities offered to him or her (Fugate et al, 2003, 2004, 2008). These characteristics are organized according to Fugate and Ashforth, (2003) into three parts:



Figure 2: Primary model illustrating the characteristics of the employable individual.

Source: adapted from Fugate and Ashforth, (2003).

- Adaptability is a person's ability to adjust and adapt to new situations, environments, or circumstances.
- Professional and career identity refers to how a person perceives themselves in the context of their work and career.
- Social and human capital is based on the set of resources and social relationships that a person has, and which can have economic or social value.

Later, these aspects are arranged in five dimensions according to Fugate and Kinicki (2008):



Figure 3: Developed model illustrating the characteristics of the employable individual.

Source: adapted from Fugate and Kinicki (2008).

- Openness to change in the workplace refers to a person's ability to accept and adapt to new ideas, methods, processes, or organizational structures within their work environment.
- Resilience at work and in the career is based on a person's ability to cope with difficulties, setbacks, and professional challenges while being able to bounce back and adapt to continue to progress in their career.
- Proactivity in work and career is the attitude of a person who anticipates events, takes initiative, and acts proactively to improve their professional situation.
- Career motivation is based on a person's energy, enthusiasm, and determination to pursue their professional goals, develop their skills, progress in their career, and achieve a high level of job satisfaction.
- Work identity is how a person perceives themselves in the context of their professional activity. This encompasses the beliefs, values, skills, experiences, and professional goals that define the individual in their career path.

Employability poses several problems. Among other things, its evaluation is a subject of debate and raises difficulties in identifying its content (Kraus, 2007). In this respect, the question is formulated on its measure (Finot, 2000; Gazier, 2003). The duality of the concept is one of the causes of this difficulty, which distinguishes between *relative employability*, which is the elements that impact the productivity of the individual, and *absolute employability*, which means the set of conditions, circumstances, and laws of supply and demand on the market, and manifests its strict dependence on economic fluctuations (Ben Hassen, Hofaidhllaoui, 2012). As a result, employability is not stable, it is derived from a professional situation that is visible and tangible to an individual, but more so, from probabilities, beliefs, and anticipations about professional possibilities (Saint-Germes, 2004).

To remedy this, Finot (2000) proposes an assessment at two levels: *the individual level*, which refers to the individual's qualification, professional qualification, acquired skills, and performance in the professional environment, and *the collective level*, which concerns the profession, the collective skills of the workgroup within an organization and its collective professional performance. However, it is difficult to determine an ideal model with the components that define employability, but efforts in this regard will not be devalued to bring it closer to its evaluation. To do this, the scope of employability covers four dimensions as follows: getting a job, keeping it, moving up in that job (Hillage and Pollard, 1998), and finding a new job opportunity after leaving the old one (Amundson, 2004).

1.3. Career centers and strengthening the employability of young people.

The first professional centers appeared in the United States at the beginning of this century (Herr, Rayman, & Garis, 1993). Frank Parsons is credited with being the first to conduct research on careers and professional integration. In 1901, he founded the *Civic Service House* for immigrants and young people looking for work. He was then appointed director of the Breadwinner Institute, which became the Vocation Bureau in Boston in January 1908 (Zunker, 1998). Later, colleges and universities adopted Parsons' work on professional career management (Kretovics, Honaker, & Kraning, 1999).

A career center is a physical facility equipped with equipment, resources, and career counselors offering a wide range of career services to individuals and groups. A career center is usually located in a separate office, or a guidance center, library, human resources office, or training and development unit of an organization. It is an administrative unit of an organization, such as a university, business, or agency that employs staff to provide a variety of career programs and services (Vinson et al. 2011).

The mission of career centers at universities and vocational institutions is to help and support students in making the transition from their studies to the job market (Vinson, Reardon and Bertoch, 2014). This transition is based on improving their employability through awareness-raising, training, professional situations and the sharing of concrete data from the reality of the market.

The dimensions of employability as articulated by Fugate, Kinicki, and Ashforth (2003) framed the analysis of the data and the exploration of counselors' description of student interactions and desired outcomes in career centers. The advisors' discussion on preparing students to take responsibility for managing their careers was framed as an encouragement to the development of strong professional identities, personal adaptability, and human and social capital (Fugate et al. 2003). This consists of preparing their profiles to adopt the best professional practices and develop their technical and transversal skills. Higher education institutions are increasingly interested in improving the employability of their graduates in alignment with the requirements and concerns of companies and stakeholders (Paterson, 2017). An employability approach, in career guidance services, can be seen as a response to calls for greater accountability of vocational training institutions and universities for the employment of graduates.

Employability emphasizes students' self-management of their careers and promotes their career awareness and education, in particular on the career planning and job search processes generally emphasized in higher education, while recognizing a culture of employment (Hallier, 2009), in addition to the phases and methods of seeking information on the labor market, the concerns of industrialists, the most promising opportunities and the assets required. This approach encourages students to accept responsibility for using extracurricular

and voluntary services and activities while emphasizing the integration of career and employability elements into the curriculum (Helens-Hart, R. 2019).

2. The Career Center of Cadi Ayyad University

The UCA Career Center is a center designed and opened by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID Morocco) in close collaboration with the Ministry of National Education, Vocational Training, Higher Education and Scientific Research, as part of the USAID Career Center program (2015-2020).

The Career Center is a space created to promote exchange between key players in the world of work to strengthen the employability of young Moroccans. The UCA Career Center is one of the six pilot centers created in vocational training institutions and university campuses in the three Moroccan cities of Marrakech, Casablanca and Tangier, and offers a set of free and diversified services designed to strengthen the employability of young students and graduates such as personalized orientation assessments, job preparation workshops, training in transversal skills, information on jobs and sectors that generate jobs and opportunities to connect with employers through internship and professional integration programs, interventions, professionals, company visits and job fairs.

2.1. Methodology

Strengthening the employability of young people represents a shared responsibility which, moreover, includes the company in terms of sharing data on its skills requirements, the training required and the evolution of the activity, and the State in terms of the creation of training entities, support and accompaniment to the appropriation of professional capacities and their promotion. However, the creation of the UCA Career Center is an integral part of this synergy that places the student at the center of its concerns. In order to solve the problem: How does the Career Center of Cadi Ayyad University strengthen the employability of young people? a documentary study is essential to determine the contribution of the Career Center to enhance the employability of young people, but also a qualitative study among the center's advisors will be carried out, to identify their vision and strategy in this regard.

2.2. Analysis of the results

The UCA Career Center welcomes a dozen students and graduates of the university from all disciplines every week in order to benefit from its various services delivered by its staff, or external speakers solicited to train, advise and share with them their academic and professional experiences, as a means of bringing these students closer to the reality of the market and positioning it as a source of information and guidance of best practices towards the future. better employability.

2.2.1. The documentary study

The information provided in this article represents the period from the launch in June 2016 to the end of March 2022, and comes from internal documents, including the UCA Career Center's activity reports.

The services delivered are as follows:

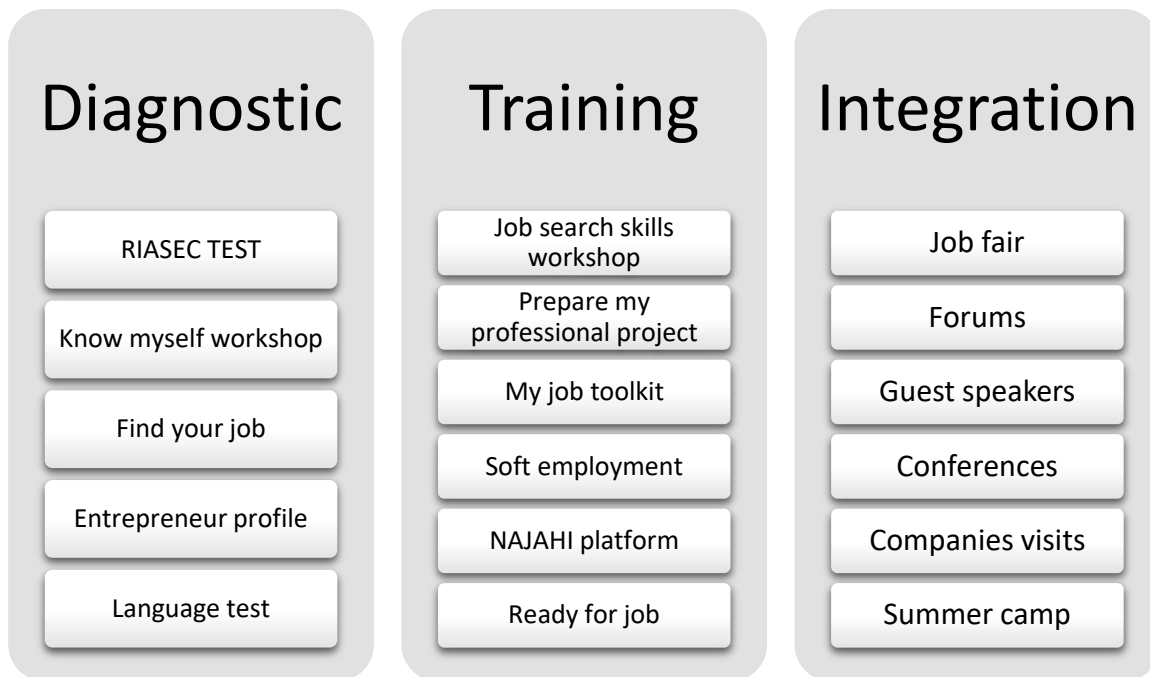


Figure 4: The services of the Cadi Ayyad University Career Center

Source: carried out by us, 2022.

▪ **Group workshops**

The workshops represent the main activity of the center, through which the advisors organize interactive thematic meetings with students, to train them in the best practices and tools of job search, soft skills, trends in the job market, the construction of the professional project and the managerial, organizational and communicative skills required by recruiters.

This table presents all the themes of the workshops:

Table 2: Workshops delivered by the Career Center of Cadi Ayyad University.

Job Search Techniques	
Boost my resume	Preparing for a job interview
Write my cover letter	Landing an internship or a job
Communication skills	
Succeed in my oral presentation	Elevator pitch
How to succeed in a debate	Public speaking
Improve my English skills	Improve my French skills
Assertive communication	
Organizational and managerial skills	
Develop my team spirit	Manage my time well
Managing my stress	
Exploring the professional world	
Build my professional project	Know Myself
Explore the job market	If I became an entrepreneur
employment trends and prospects	Create my professional network online
Manage my virtual professional image	Getting the most out of my internship

Source: carried out by us, 2022.

This graph illustrates the evolution of the number of workshop beneficiaries in two periods.

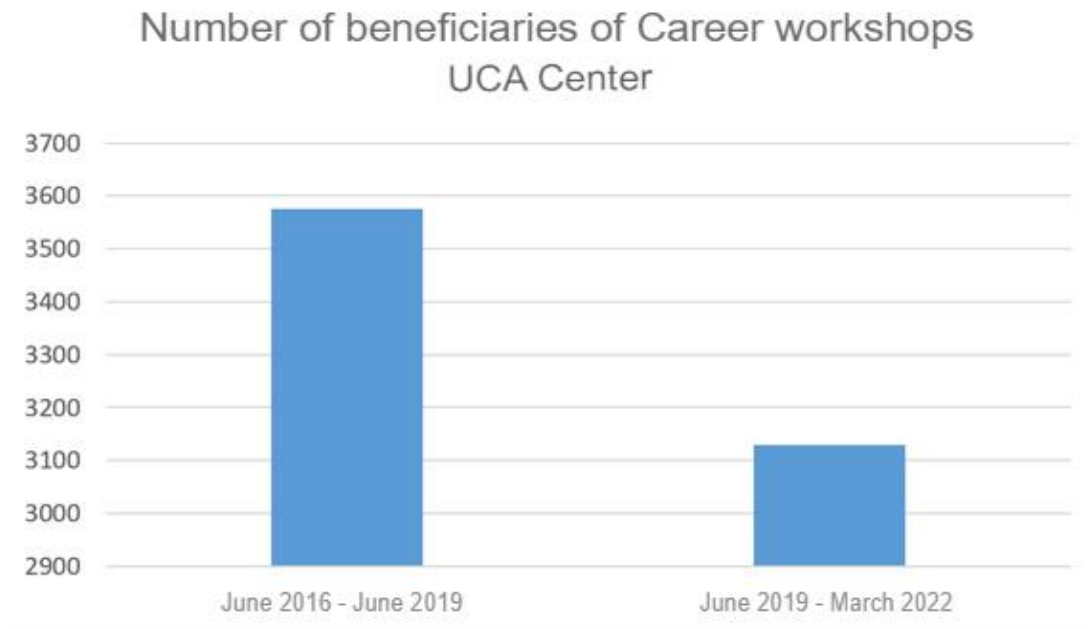


Figure 5: Number of beneficiaries of the UCA Career Center workshops.

Source : Documentation Career Center UCA.

The first period saw the supervision of 3576 students from the university via the workshops. The second period saw the supervision of 3130, a reduction of 12.47%. This decrease is due to several factors, including the cessation of activity for a year and a half due to the spread of Covid-19 and the reduction in the number of human resources at the center by half.

▪ **Individual sessions**

Individual sessions are sessions aimed at students who want a personalized service for CV correction, cover letter writing, career guidance, skills assessment, job interview preparation and career counseling.

The following graph shows the evolution of the number of individual sessions in two periods.

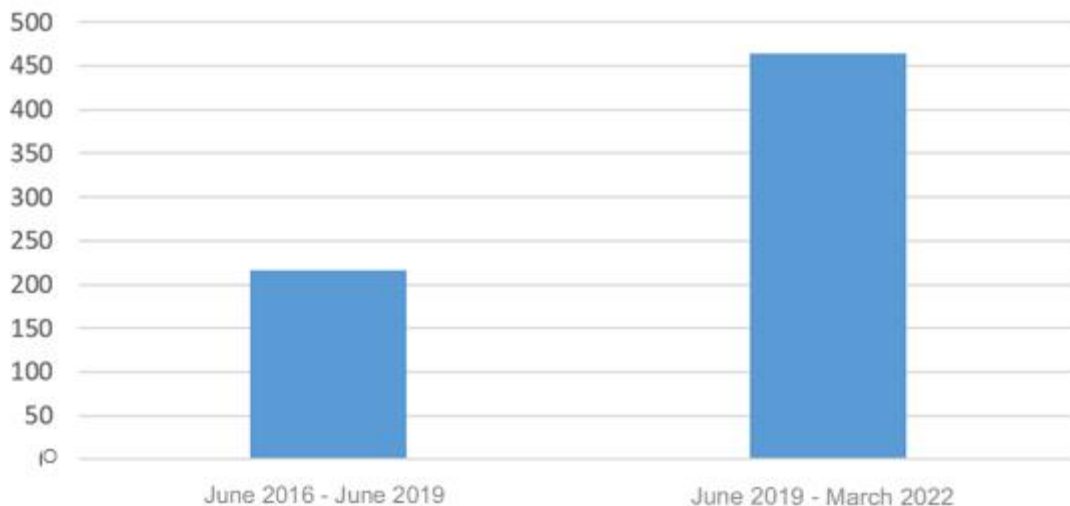


Figure 6: Number of beneficiaries of the UCA Career Center's individual sessions.

Source: Documentation Career Center UCA.

The number of individual sessions increased from 216 in the first period to 464 individual sessions in the second, a remarkable increase of 114.81%.

▪ **Training**

From its start in June 2016 to the end of March 2022, the UCA Career Center has been able to provide 5620 hours of training for 4527 beneficiaries. These trainings concern the preparation of the latter to the conquest of best practices in the search for employment and the improvement of skills in alignment with the trends of the professional market.

- **Guest speakers**

The Career Center was able to hold a multitude of guest speaker sessions in the fields of IT, finance and banking, biology, environment, marketing, Web, public policy, etc.

Through these sessions, the Career Center welcomes professionals to share their professional experiences with students in the field, as a method to connect them to the concerns of companies in terms of skills, assets and professional training. In addition, these activities strengthen students' advice and motivation to develop a good attitude toward the professional market and strengthen their chances of finding a job.

- **Job fairs**

The UCA Career Center has carried out and participated in 3 job fairs, with the number of beneficiaries exceeding 430 students and graduates. These events were a tool to meet companies, learn about their fields of activity, and get job and internship opportunities.

- **Summer Camps**

The Summer Camp is an event that lasts several weeks in July each year, to allow participants to benefit from workshops and activities on soft skills, employability, and culture.

The Career Center has carried out three Summer Camps, with 993 beneficiaries.

- **Conferences**

Until March 2022, the center organized 33 conferences for the university's students, led by national and international speakers, on themes of employability, entrepreneurship, international student mobility and study abroad, etc. To broaden the scope of beneficiaries and open to practitioners, more, to allow students to have the answers to their questions about employment and professional careers.

- **The Virtual Career Center**

A digital tool called Virtual Career Center is available to students to benefit from free certified training in different fields, job capsules, a search engine for professional opportunities, etc. Through this website, visitors and registrants can benefit from its service offerings easily. The Virtual Career Center has more than 274334 visitors and 15592 registered since its creation.

- **Interactivity on social networks**

Social networks are the channels of communication with students and the center's targets. They allow you to react with your needs, communicate past and scheduled events.

The Career Center is present in several social networks as follows:

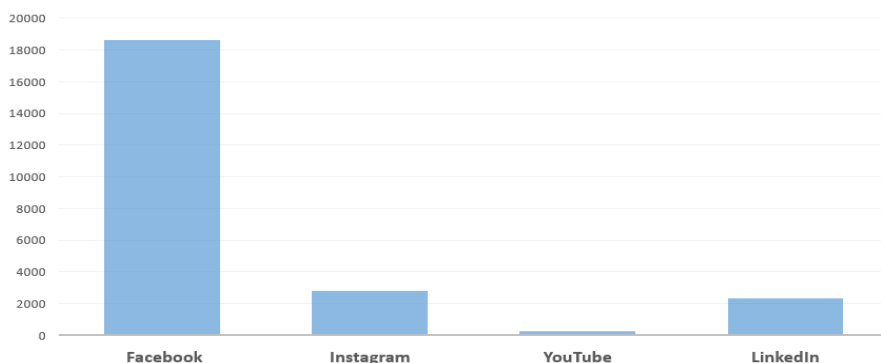


Figure 7: Number of subscribers to the UCA Career Center's social networks.

Source: *Documentation Career Center UCA.*

Facebook has the highest number of subscribers, namely 18639, followed by Instagram with 2788, LinkedIn with 2318, and YouTube with 289.

These data reflect a colossal work carried out by the Career Center of Cadi Ayyad University, and a student-oriented will, coming from its human resources, to provide students with the right tools to improve their employability, and to be up to the demands of the market and its evolutions.

2.2.2. Analysis of the results of the qualitative study

The qualitative study is carried out with the two advisors of the UCA Career Center. This study aims to generate information from them in terms of the pace of work, performance achieved and contribution to strengthening the employability of young people, values that govern work, the obstacles encountered, and the challenges that must be overcome to succeed in the mission of the center as a bridge between university training and the world of work.

▪ *The importance and pace of the UCA Career Center's work*

The work of the UCA Career Center is important in the perspective of preparing the student to enter the professional world, through awareness, training, guidance, and rapprochement with the sectors of activity and the different organizations that employ (public administrations, companies, NGOs, associations, etc.) in terms of their requirements in terms of skills, assets and knowledge, more, the evolution of their characteristics, the opportunities offered, the ways to multiply the chances of obtaining them. These activities strengthen the employability of young students who, beyond theoretical and technical mastery, improve their skills in alignment with the downstream market. In addition, the real-life situation is useful for carrying out the work and becoming familiar with the work organization. In this regard, students benefiting from the Career Center's services are more practice-oriented, internships, and market data mining.

▪ *The support of the Career Center's activity*

The center's activity is based on several fundamental, basic, and support elements. The basic elements include interactive group workshops, which are the main activity. Through this tool, young people can share their experiences and knowledge from heterogeneous specialties. In addition, it represents a source of motivation for some thanks to the performance of others in terms of public speaking during exchanges and participation, as well as the optimal structuring of their speeches, the improvement of their skills, and the multiplication of their professional experiences via internships and jobs, which is a source of inspiration to want to improve their profiles. In addition, individual sessions, through which students who express a need can benefit from individualized support in job search or internship techniques, advice to improve the technical skills required and transversal skills, and academic and professional guidance. The other basic activities delivered are thematic training and guest speakers. The support activities promote the activity of the center and are multiple, namely: conferences, organization or participation in job fairs, the Summer Camp, and the Virtual Career Center.

▪ *The values of the Career Center*

To promote the employability of young people, the Career Center adopts several values that put the student at the center of its concerns. First, autonomy is essential, and the center aims, through its activities, to make students aware of the importance of adopting an attitude of autonomy in learning, seeking information, and exploring professional opportunities, and the center only plays a role of guidance and support to promote their employability. Moreover, the university is the place where the individual is supposed to demonstrate high levels of autonomy. Moreover, the second value is the responsibility, through which the student is made aware to act positively, take the initiative, and assume the consequences of his actions. By adopting this value, the student is in permanent charge of improving his actions and obviously his profile as a professional capable of adding value within a work organization. The third value required is goal-oriented planning. As a result, it is essential to set a professional project in alignment with your ambitions, skills, values, and the opportunities offered, which makes it necessary to plan your actions considering these variables to achieve your professional project.

▪ *Obstacles encountered*

The main obstacle encountered at the UCA Career Center is the lack of sufficient human resources to meet the colossal needs of the university. As a result, the center's team is composed of only two advisors and a director of the university's 14 institutions spread over 4 cities: Marrakech, Kelaa des Sraghna, Essaouira, and Safi, with a hundred thousand students. So faced with this scale, a team of 3 people is no longer able to meet this need through the services of the center. So, to reach more students, it is essential to strengthen the team.

The qualitative study conducted among the counselors of the Career Center of Cadi Ayyad University tells us valuable things about the functioning and difficulties encountered by this service. It is evident, through this analysis, the paramount importance of the Career Center in its mission to support students in their transition to professional life. Interactive workshops, thematic trainings, and individual interviews, cornerstones of the center's activity, play a key role in allowing young people to share their experiences and develop their practical and interpersonal skills. These initiatives are reinforced by simulations of real-world work environments helping students better understand the demands of the job market.

However, despite these considerable efforts, the center is facing a major challenge: a lack of staff. With only two counselors to accompany thousands of students residing in multiple cities, the center struggles to offer the personalized and sufficient support that young people need. This shortage of human resources limits the service's ability to extend its action and reach a greater number of students, which is essential for the successful professional integration of all.

Faced with these difficulties, it seems essential to strengthen the center's staff. The hiring of additional advisors would make it possible to maintain the quality of the support offered to students and to enrich the range of activities available to them. In addition, the development of digital tools such as a virtual Career Center could provide a complementary solution to reach young people more effectively in a broader and more diverse setting.

More generally, the UCA Career Center plays a key role in guiding students toward the professional world. However, to maximize its positive impact on their future, a constant strengthening of human resources and continuous improvement of training programs are necessary. These measures will enable the service to better support young people in their integration into the increasingly competitive labor market.

Conclusion

Faced with a fiercely competitive environment, the complexity of the job market, and the continuous evolution of knowledge and methods, it has become essential to boost one's employability to conquer an optimal position in the professional world. In this regard, efforts have been multiplied by the Career Center of Cadi Ayyad University as an academic actor aimed at boosting the employability of young students, especially those in the graduation phase.

The UCA Career Center seeks to involve the student in the decision-making of his or her professional future. To do this, the strengthening of the employability of the latter must be reasoned from the point of view of his or her abilities, skills developed, ambitions, values, opportunities offered, and the evolution of companies and their practices. This awareness promotes synergy between the values of autonomy, responsibility, and goal-oriented planning.

The contribution of the Career Center UCA comes from a policy initiated by USAID, as a means of applying an innovative American model that has endorsed its effectiveness concerning the transition to employment. However, the experience of the Career Center in Morocco, and more specifically in the territory of Cadi Ayyad University, is still new, and lacks support and consolidation in order to broaden the scarecrow of beneficiaries of this type of educational services and establish a new learning culture, which goes beyond the university curriculum specialized in technical and/or theoretical training depending on the requirements of employers.

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