



# First-Year EFL Students' Attitudes Toward Higher Education Reform in Morocco: Confidence, Concerns, and the Theory of Planned Behavior

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**Abstract**

Higher education systems globally are undergoing transformative reforms to align with evolving labor market demands and competency-based frameworks. Morocco's recent pedagogical reform, implemented in 2023, emphasizes skills development, digital literacy, and employability, yet student perspectives on these changes remain underexplored. This cross-sectional quantitative study examined first-year English as a Foreign Language students' attitudes toward the reform at the University of Al Quaraouiyine. Using a Theory of Planned Behavior framework, a 24-item Likert-scale questionnaire assessed 217 students across four dimensions: anxiety, confidence, liking, and perceived usefulness. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in SPSS. Students demonstrated generally positive attitudes ( $M = 3.97$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ), characterized by high confidence ( $M = 4.15$ ) and low anxiety ( $M = 4.12$ ). However, 73.3% expressed concern regarding the removal of the Final Year Project, fearing diminished educational quality and reduced research-career preparation. Additionally, 32.7% remained neutral about the reform's job-market value, reflecting uncertainty about tangible employability outcomes. The findings indicate early reform acceptance among first-year students, yet highlight critical concerns requiring institutional attention. The removal of capstone research experiences threatens research socialization and academic depth, while job-market uncertainty undermines perceived reform legitimacy. Institutions must balance employability objectives with research opportunities, strengthen employer partnerships, and provide transparent graduate outcome tracking to sustain student confidence and engagement throughout the reform implementation process.

## INTRODUCTION

The landscape of higher education worldwide is undergoing profound transformation as institutions strive to meet the evolving demands of knowledge economies, technological advancement, and increasingly competitive global labor markets (Marshall et al., 2024; Mirgorodskaya et al., 2023). These transformations are particularly pronounced in developing contexts, where educational systems face the dual challenge of modernizing pedagogical frameworks while simultaneously addressing structural inequities and resource constraints (Oliver, 2004; World Bank, 2023). In recent decades, policymakers across diverse regions have initiated comprehensive reform agendas aimed at enhancing educational quality, promoting innovation, and aligning academic outcomes with societal needs (OECD, 2024; Wang et al., 2024). Morocco exemplifies this trend, having embarked on an ambitious series of educational reforms designed to elevate its higher education system to international standards while fostering graduate competencies essential for economic development and social progress. Understanding how students perceive and respond to these reforms is crucial, as their attitudes significantly influence engagement, academic performance, and the ultimate success of policy implementation (Raes & Depaepe, 2019; Zepke & Leach, 2010).

Educational reform represents a complex undertaking that extends beyond curriculum revision to encompass institutional governance, pedagogical innovation, and cultural transformation within academic



communities (Fullan, 2007; Matheos & Cleveland-Innes, 2018). Research consistently demonstrates that successful reform implementation depends not only on sound policy design but also on stakeholder acceptance and active participation (Fredricks et al., 2004; Klem & Connell, 2004). Among these stakeholders, students occupy a particularly critical position, as they are the primary beneficiaries and implementers of curricular changes. Student attitudes toward reform emerge from multifaceted evaluations encompassing emotional responses such as anxiety or enthusiasm, cognitive assessments of perceived usefulness and relevance, and behavioral intentions regarding engagement and compliance (Chapman, 2003; Li & Xue, 2023). When students view reforms positively and feel confident in their ability to adapt, implementation proceeds more smoothly and yields better outcomes (Smit, 2012). Conversely, negative attitudes, heightened anxiety, or perceptions of irrelevance can trigger resistance, disengagement, and ultimately undermine reform objectives (Smale-Jacobse et al., 2019). Despite this recognized importance, empirical investigation of student perspectives on higher education reform remains limited, particularly in Middle Eastern and North African contexts where rapid policy changes often outpace systematic evaluation of stakeholder responses (UNESCO, 2024).

Morocco's higher education trajectory reflects sustained efforts to modernize and strengthen its academic infrastructure through sequential policy initiatives spanning more than two decades (Belhiah, 2022). Beginning with foundational reforms in the late twentieth century, the Moroccan system has progressively incorporated international quality standards, competency-based frameworks, and employability-oriented curricula. Most recently, the launch of the National Acceleration Plan for Transformation of the Higher Education, Scientific Research, and Innovation Ecosystem has introduced comprehensive pedagogical reengineering across universities, emphasizing holistic student development, digital literacy, language proficiency, and practical skills acquisition (MESRI, 2022). Implemented from the 2023 academic year forward, this reform has restructured undergraduate programs to include modules focused on personal development, community engagement, and transversal competencies, while simultaneously removing traditional components such as the Final Year Project in certain disciplines. These changes represent a fundamental shift in educational philosophy, moving from knowledge transmission models toward outcomes-based education centered on graduate employability and global competitiveness (Bentaleb, 2024). However, the pace and scope of these transformations raise important questions about student preparedness, perceptions of reform legitimacy, and concerns regarding potential trade-offs between practical skills development and traditional academic values such as research training and intellectual inquiry (El Aida et al., 2023).

Despite the significance of these reforms and their potential impact on thousands of students, empirical research examining student attitudes toward Morocco's ongoing higher education transformation remains notably sparse. Existing scholarship has largely concentrated on policy analysis, institutional governance, and macro-level outcomes, leaving student voices and experiences substantially underrepresented in the literature (Ayad et al., 2020; Ibourk, 2016). This gap is particularly acute regarding first-year students, who enter university at the precise moment of curricular transition and whose formative experiences may profoundly shape their academic trajectories and career aspirations (Tinto, 1987; Trautwein & Bosse, 2017). First-year students represent an especially valuable population for attitude research because they encounter the reformed curriculum without prior institutional socialization, providing authentic perspectives on its accessibility, relevance, and effectiveness (Lowe & Cook, 2003; Wilson et al., 2014). Moreover, their initial reactions may predict longer-term patterns of engagement, satisfaction, and success within the reformed system (Burnett, 2007; Cameron & Rideout, 2022). Understanding these early attitudes thus holds important implications for refining implementation strategies, identifying areas requiring

additional support, and ensuring that reform objectives align with student needs and expectations (Barros & Simão, 2018; Rankin et al., 2018).

This study addresses the identified knowledge gap by systematically investigating first-year English as a Foreign Language students' attitudes toward the recent higher education reform at the University of Al Quaraouiyine. Grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), the research examines attitudes across four theoretically relevant dimensions: anxiety, confidence, liking, and perceived usefulness. These dimensions capture both affective and cognitive components of student responses, providing a comprehensive picture of how the reform is received by its intended beneficiaries (Koohang, 1989; Steinmetz et al., 2016). The Theory of Planned Behavior has demonstrated robust predictive validity in educational contexts, consistently showing that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control shape behavioral intentions, which in turn influence actual behavior (Broadbent et al., 2025; Huang et al., 2024). Specifically, the study seeks to answer two primary research questions: first, what are students' overall attitudes toward the reform; and second, how do these attitudes vary across the four identified dimensions. By addressing these questions, this research contributes empirical evidence to inform ongoing policy implementation, identifies specific aspects of the reform that generate support or concern, and provides a foundation for future longitudinal and comparative investigations. The findings hold significance not only for Moroccan higher education but also for broader international discussions regarding student-centered reform design and the critical role of stakeholder attitudes in educational transformation.

## METHODS

This study employed a cross-sectional quantitative survey design to investigate first-year English as a Foreign Language students' attitudes toward the recent higher education reform at the University of Al Quaraouiyine (Maier et al., 2023; Wang & Cheng, 2020). Cross-sectional designs are particularly appropriate for capturing attitudes, perceptions, and behavioral patterns at a specific point in time, making them well-suited for assessing stakeholder responses during active policy implementation (Setia, 2016; Wang & Cheng, 2020). This design enabled the collection of comprehensive attitudinal data from a large sample while maintaining cost-effectiveness and feasibility within the constraints of academic research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The target population comprised all first-year students enrolled in the Department of English Studies at the University of Al Quaraouiyine during the 2023–2024 academic year. Given that these students were the first cohort to experience the reformed curriculum without prior exposure to the previous system, they represented an ideal population for examining initial perceptions and identifying potential implementation challenges. A convenience sampling approach was employed, wherein participants were recruited through online student groups on Facebook and WhatsApp platforms frequented by first-year English majors (Etikan et al., 2016). While convenience sampling offers advantages in terms of accessibility, cost-efficiency, and rapid data collection (Andrade, 2021), the researchers acknowledge its inherent limitations, particularly the increased risk of sampling bias and reduced generalizability beyond the accessible population (Jager et al., 2017; Sharma, 2017). To mitigate potential bias, the survey was distributed across multiple online platforms with a combined membership exceeding 25,000 individuals, allowing for a broader reach within the target population. A total of 217 students voluntarily completed the survey over a two-month data collection period, yielding a sample size that substantially exceeds minimum recommendations for cross-sectional survey research (Faber & Fonseca, 2014).

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire specifically designed to assess student attitudes toward the pedagogical reform across four theoretically grounded dimensions derived from the Theory of Planned Behavior: anxiety, confidence, liking, and perceived usefulness (Ajzen, 1991; Koohang, 1989). The instrument consisted of 24 items measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly

Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), with an additional demographic section capturing participant age and gender (Croasmun & Ostrom, 2011; Joshi et al., 2015). Five-point Likert scales are widely employed in attitude research due to their ability to capture sufficient response variability while maintaining respondent comprehension and reducing cognitive burden (Wu & Leung, 2017). Prior to full-scale deployment, the questionnaire underwent rigorous validation through expert review by professionals in educational research and English language teaching, ensuring content validity and alignment with the study's theoretical framework (DeVellis, 2017). Pilot testing with a small sample of students further refined item wording and identified potential ambiguities. Reliability of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, a standard measure of internal consistency for multi-item scales (Cronbach, 1951; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). The overall reliability coefficient was  $\alpha = 0.789$  for the complete 24-item scale, indicating good internal consistency and supporting the instrument's reliability for measuring student attitudes (George & Mallery, 2003; Taber, 2018). This value exceeds the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70 for research instruments in social sciences (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), confirming that the items consistently measured the underlying constructs of interest.

The survey was administered electronically via Google Forms, with links distributed through Facebook groups dedicated to University of Al Quaraouiyine's English Department and four WhatsApp groups specifically created for second-semester first-year students (Wright, 2017). An initial screening question verified that respondents were currently enrolled as first-year EFL students, ensuring sample homogeneity and relevance. Participation was entirely voluntary, with no incentives offered, and informed consent was obtained through a mandatory agreement checkbox presented before participants could access the survey items (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The consent statement clearly outlined the study's purpose, assured confidentiality and anonymity of responses, explained data handling procedures, and emphasized participants' right to withdraw at any time without consequence. The two-month collection window allowed students to respond at their convenience, thereby reducing time pressure and potentially increasing response quality (Evans & Mathur, 2005). Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process, with all procedures designed to minimize participant burden, protect privacy, and uphold principles of beneficence and respect for persons (Resnik, 2020).

Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27), a widely recognized software package for quantitative data analysis in social science research (Pallant, 2020). Following data collection, responses were exported from Google Forms into Microsoft Excel for initial coding and cleaning procedures, including verification of completeness and identification of any inconsistencies (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Seven items (items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 20) that were negatively worded were reverse-coded to ensure consistent directionality across all scale items and to minimize response bias associated with acquiescence (DeVellis, 2017). The cleaned dataset was subsequently imported into SPSS for statistical analysis. Given the ordinal nature of Likert scale data, descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum values were computed for each item and for composite scores representing the four attitudinal dimensions (anxiety, confidence, liking, perceived usefulness) as well as overall attitude (Carifio & Perla, 2008; Jamieson, 2004). Descriptive analysis provides essential insights into central tendency, dispersion, and distribution characteristics of attitudinal variables, enabling researchers to summarize complex data patterns and identify areas of consensus or divergence within the sample (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008). Results were interpreted in the context of the study's research questions, with particular attention to patterns indicating strong support or concern regarding specific reform elements.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

The study investigated first-year English as a Foreign Language students' attitudes toward the recent higher education reform at the University of Al Quaraouiyyine across four theoretically grounded dimensions: anxiety, confidence, liking, and perceived usefulness. A total of 217 students participated in the online survey, providing insights into their perceptions of the curricular changes implemented during the 2023–2024 academic year. The results are organized according to demographic characteristics, the four attitudinal dimensions, and an overall attitude composite, addressing the two primary research questions posed at the outset of this study.

### *Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

The demographic profile of the sample revealed a gender distribution comprising 63.14% female students and 36.86% male students, reflecting the typical gender composition observed in humanities departments across Moroccan universities. Regarding age distribution, 71.43% of participants were between 17 and 20 years old, representing the conventional age range for first-year university students in Morocco. An additional 22.58% were aged 21 to 24 years, while 6.00% were 25 years or older. This age distribution indicates that the majority of participants transitioned directly from secondary education to university, though a notable minority entered higher education after a delay or pursued re-enrollment. The homogeneity of the sample in terms of academic level—all participants were first-semester or second-semester first-year students—ensured that responses reflected the perspectives of those experiencing the reformed curriculum without prior exposure to the previous system.

### *Reform-Related Anxiety*

Table 1 presents the distribution of student responses regarding anxiety associated with the higher education reform. The overall anxiety dimension yielded a mean score of 4.12 out of 5, indicating that students generally reported low levels of anxiety when considering the reverse-coded nature of most items in this dimension. Examination of individual items revealed nuanced patterns. For Item 1, which assessed general feelings of anxiety about the reform, 41.5% of participants strongly disagreed and 43.3% disagreed that they felt anxious, while 3.7% were neutral and 10.6% expressed some level of agreement. This distribution suggests that approximately 85% of students did not experience general anxiety about the curricular changes, though a small subset did report concerns. Item 2, addressing feelings of being overwhelmed by language proficiency and digital skills requirements, elicited disagreement from 62.7% of respondents (17.1% strongly disagreed, 45.6% disagreed), with 19.8% expressing agreement and 2.8% remaining neutral. This pattern indicates that the majority perceived the new competency thresholds as manageable, though nearly one-fifth felt challenged by these expectations.

For Item 3, which probed concerns about meeting required proficiency levels, a strong majority (67.7%) disagreed (13.8% strongly disagreed, 53.9% disagreed), while 9.2% were neutral and 9.2% agreed. Notably, Items 4 and 5, which addressed anxieties specifically related to the removal of the Final Year Project (FYP), revealed contrasting patterns. For Item 4, 73.3% of students agreed or strongly agreed (55.8% agreed, 17.5% strongly agreed) that they worried the removal of the FYP might negatively affect educational quality, with only 11.1% disagreeing. Similarly, Item 5 showed that 74.7% agreed or strongly agreed (18.9% agreed, 55.8% strongly agreed) that canceling the FYP might discourage them from pursuing research-based careers. Item 6, concerning whether the skills emphasis might overshadow overall learning, elicited disagreement from 82.5% of respondents (40.1% strongly disagreed, 42.4% disagreed), with only 10.6% expressing agreement. These results reveal a paradoxical pattern: while students reported low anxiety about most aspects of the reform—including language requirements, digital skills expectations, and general curricular changes—they expressed pronounced concern specifically regarding the elimination of the FYP.

This finding suggests that the FYP holds particular symbolic and practical significance for students' conception of quality undergraduate education and research socialization, a theme that will be explored further in the Discussion section.

**Table 1.** *Distribution of Responses for Reform-Related Anxiety (N = 217)*

Item	SD	D	N	A	SA
1. I feel anxious about the changes introduced by the reform.	41.5%	43.3%	3.7%	10.6%	0.9%
2. Language and digital skills requirements make me overwhelmed.	17.1%	62.7%	2.8%	15.7%	1.8%
3. I am concerned about meeting required proficiency levels.	67.7%	13.8%	9.2%	7.4%	1.8%
4. Removal of FYP might affect education quality.	8.3%	2.8%	4.6%	55.8%	17.5%
5. Canceling FYP might discourage research-based careers.	5.5%	2.8%	10.1%	18.9%	55.8%
6. Skills emphasis might overshadow overall learning.	40.1%	42.4%	3.2%	9.7%	4.6%

*Note.* SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Neutral; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree. Items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 were reverse-coded for analysis; percentages shown reflect original response distribution.

### **Reform-Related Confidence**

Student confidence in their ability to navigate and benefit from the reform was assessed through six items, and the results are summarized in Table 2. The confidence dimension yielded a mean score of 4.15 out of 5, indicating generally high levels of self-efficacy regarding adaptation to the new requirements. For Item 7, which assessed confidence that the skills focus would prepare students for social and professional life, 82.9% agreed or strongly agreed (68.7% agreed, 14.3% strongly agreed), while only 2.8% disagreed and 14.3% remained neutral. This high level of agreement suggests that students perceive practical relevance in the reform's competency-based orientation. Item 8, addressing confidence about the inclusion of personal and digital skills modules, revealed more heterogeneity: 57.1% agreed or strongly agreed (52.5% agreed, 4.6% strongly agreed), while 35.0% disagreed and 7.8% were neutral. This split indicates that while a majority view these modules favorably, a substantial minority harbors doubts about their value or implementation.

**Table 2.** *Distribution of Responses for Reform-Related Confidence (N = 217)*

Item	SD	D	N	A	SA
7. Skills focus will prepare me for social and professional life.	1.4%	1.4%	14.3%	68.7%	14.3%
8. Personal and digital skills modules boost future prospects.	8.3%	26.7%	7.8%	52.5%	4.6%
9. Reform will positively impact education quality in Morocco.	3.7%	3.2%	32.3%	9.2%	51.6%
10. I am confident in my ability to adapt to new requirements.	4.6%	10.6%	5.1%	69.6%	10.1%
11. Reform will adequately prepare me for future challenges.	3.7%	4.6%	21.2%	7.4%	63.1%
12. Authorities have considered students' needs in reform.	5.1%	6.4%	12.9%	3.7%	71.9%

For Item 9, which probed beliefs about the reform's positive impact on education quality, 60.8% agreed or strongly agreed (9.2% agreed, 51.6% strongly agreed), while 32.3% remained neutral and only 6.9% disagreed. The high neutral response rate suggests lingering uncertainty about systemic outcomes despite individual confidence. Item 10 assessed students' confidence in their personal ability to adapt to new requirements, with 79.7% expressing agreement (69.6% agreed, 10.1% strongly agreed), 15.2% disagreeing, and 5.1% neutral. This robust self-efficacy aligns with theoretical predictions from social cognitive theory that first-year students entering a reformed system may possess higher perceived behavioral control due to the absence of comparative reference points. Item 11, concerning whether the reform would adequately prepare students for future challenges, yielded 70.5% agreement (7.4% agreed, 63.1% strongly agreed), 21.2% neutral responses, and 8.3% disagreement. Finally, Item 12 indicated that

75.6% of students felt assured that educational authorities had considered students' needs during implementation (3.7% agreed, 71.9% strongly agreed), though 11.5% disagreed and 12.9% remained neutral. These confidence findings reveal a generally positive self-assessment of adaptability and institutional support, tempered by notable uncertainty regarding the long-term quality implications of the reform and some skepticism about the utility of newly introduced modules.

**Reform-Related Liking**

The liking dimension, which captured affective responses to specific reform elements, yielded a mean score of 3.98 out of 5, indicating positive but somewhat tempered enthusiasm. Table 3 displays the distribution of responses for this dimension. For Item 13, assessing liking of modules focused on personal development and community engagement, 83.9% expressed agreement (69.1% agreed, 14.7% strongly agreed), while 8.8% disagreed and 7.4% were neutral. This strong endorsement suggests that students value the reform's emphasis on holistic development beyond disciplinary knowledge. Item 14, which addressed cultural and artistic skills, revealed considerably more ambivalence: 64.5% remained neutral, while 13.4% disagreed and 22.1% agreed. This high neutrality rate may reflect uncertainty about how these competencies relate to EFL studies or employability, or alternatively, limited exposure to these curricular elements at the time of survey administration.

For Item 15, focusing on active citizenship and community engagement, 78.3% expressed positive attitudes (68.2% agreed, 10.1% strongly agreed), with 13.8% disagreeing and 7.8% neutral. Item 16, concerning the integration of practical skills alongside theoretical knowledge, garnered strong support from 81.6% of participants (29.5% agreed, 52.1% strongly agreed), though 15.2% disagreed and 3.2% were neutral. This finding aligns with broader trends in higher education emphasizing applied learning and skills development. Item 17, addressing the value of contributing to community development through academic study, received endorsement from 82.9% of students (18.4% agreed, 64.5% strongly agreed), with 6.9% disagreeing and 10.1% neutral. Finally, Item 18, which assessed resonance with the reform's focus on fostering belonging and responsibility, yielded 77.4% agreement (66.4% agreed, 11.1% strongly agreed), though 16.6% disagreed and 6.0% remained neutral. Taken together, these liking patterns indicate strong affective support for community-oriented, practical, and holistic educational elements, with the notable exception of cultural and artistic skills, which generated substantial uncertainty.

**Table 3.** *Distribution of Responses for Reform-Related Liking (N = 217)*

Item	SD	D	N	A	SA
13. I like modules on personal development and community engagement.	5.5%	3.2%	7.4%	69.1%	14.7%
14. Cultural and artistic skills add value to my education.	2.3%	11.1%	64.5%	19.4%	2.8%
15. Active citizenship and community engagement appeal to me.	6.0%	7.8%	7.8%	68.2%	10.1%
16. I appreciate practical skills integrated with theoretical knowledge.	1.4%	13.8%	3.2%	29.5%	52.1%
17. Contributing to community development is valuable to me.	2.8%	4.1%	10.1%	18.4%	64.5%
18. Fostering belonging and responsibility resonates with me.	3.7%	12.9%	6.0%	66.4%	11.1%

**Perceived Usefulness of the Reform**

The perceived usefulness dimension, which assessed students' beliefs about the reform's instrumental value for their future endeavors, yielded a mean score of 3.74 out of 5—the lowest among the four dimensions yet still indicating positive perceptions overall. Table 4 presents the response distributions. For Item 19, concerning the benefit of acquiring language proficiency and digital skills, 78.3% agreed or strongly agreed (9.7% agreed, 68.7% strongly agreed), with 10.1% disagreeing and 11.5% neutral. This strong endorsement reflects recognition of the labor market relevance of these competencies. Item 20, which suggested that removing the FYP would allow greater focus on essential skills, revealed substantial

disagreement: 69.1% disagreed (23.5% strongly disagreed, 45.6% disagreed), while 19.4% agreed and 11.5% remained neutral. This reinforces the finding from the anxiety dimension that students perceive the FYP as valuable rather than as a distraction from skills acquisition.

For Item 21, assessing whether the reform represents a necessary step toward modernizing Moroccan education, 79.3% expressed agreement (68.7% agreed, 10.6% strongly agreed), though 18.4% disagreed and 2.3% were neutral. This suggests broad acceptance of the reform rationale even among students who harbor specific concerns. Item 22, addressing the value of developing linguistic and cultural awareness, garnered 80.6% agreement (66.4% agreed, 14.3% strongly agreed), with 11.5% disagreeing and 7.8% neutral. Item 23, which probed whether acquired skills would be valuable in the evolving job market, revealed notable uncertainty: 55.3% agreed (44.2% agreed, 11.1% strongly agreed), yet 32.7% remained neutral and 12.0% disagreed. This substantial neutral response—the highest across all items—indicates that many students adopt a "wait-and-see" stance regarding the reform's actual employability benefits, possibly reflecting awareness of persistent skills-mismatch challenges in Moroccan labor markets. Finally, Item 24, concerning alignment with global standards and increased competitiveness, received 76.5% agreement (61.3% agreed, 15.2% strongly agreed), with 11.5% disagreeing and 12.0% neutral. Overall, the perceived usefulness dimension reveals students' recognition of the reform's strategic objectives and skills relevance, yet also highlights skepticism about FYP removal and uncertainty about tangible employment outcomes—a finding with important implications for reform communication and graduate outcome tracking.

**Table 4.** *Distribution of Responses for Perceived Usefulness (N = 217)*

Item	SD	D	N	A	SA
19. Language proficiency and digital skills are beneficial.	4.6%	5.5%	11.5%	9.7%	68.7%
20. Removing FYP allows focus on essential skills (reversed).	23.5%	45.6%	11.5%	14.7%	4.6%
21. Reform is necessary for modernizing education.	9.2%	9.2%	2.3%	68.7%	10.6%
22. Linguistic and cultural awareness will broaden understanding.	3.7%	7.8%	7.8%	66.4%	14.3%
23. Skills will be valuable in the evolving job market.	5.1%	6.9%	32.7%	44.2%	11.1%
24. Reform aligns Moroccan education with global standards.	4.1%	7.4%	12.0%	61.3%	15.2%

*Note.* Item 20 was reverse-coded for analysis; percentages shown reflect original response distribution.

### **Overall Attitude Toward the Reform**

Table 5 summarizes the descriptive statistics for the four attitudinal dimensions and the composite overall attitude score. The overall attitude mean was 3.97 (SD = 0.58), indicating that students' aggregate stance toward the reform was favorable, corresponding approximately to "agree" on the five-point scale. Scores ranged from 2.29 to 4.96, demonstrating variability in individual attitudes but with the minimum value well above the scale midpoint. Among the four dimensions, confidence yielded the highest mean (M = 4.15, SD = 0.75), followed closely by anxiety (reverse-coded; M = 4.12, SD = 0.81), then liking (M = 3.98, SD = 0.56), and finally perceived usefulness (M = 3.74, SD = 0.43). The relatively small standard deviation for perceived usefulness suggests greater consensus in this domain, though the lower mean indicates more tempered assessments compared to confidence and anxiety. The higher variability in the anxiety dimension (SD = 0.81) reflects the aforementioned bifurcation: broad consensus on low general anxiety coupled with concentrated concern about FYP removal. These composite results directly answer the study's first research question—students' overall attitudes are positive—while the dimensional breakdown addresses the second question by revealing that confidence and low anxiety dominate, with liking and perceived usefulness trailing slightly, particularly due to FYP-related reservations and job-market uncertainty.

**Table 5.** *Descriptive Statistics for Attitudinal Dimensions and Overall Attitude (N = 217)*

Dimension	M	SD	Min	Max
Anxiety (reverse-coded)	4.12	0.81	2.17	5.00
Confidence	4.15	0.75	2.17	5.00
Liking	3.98	0.56	2.00	5.00
Perceived Usefulness	3.74	0.43	2.33	4.83
Overall Attitude	3.97	0.58	2.29	4.96

An unexpected finding emerged when comparing responses across gender: although not the primary focus of this study, exploratory analysis suggested that female students reported slightly higher anxiety specifically concerning FYP removal (Items 4 and 5), while male students expressed marginally greater confidence in job-market readiness (Item 23). This pattern, though modest, warrants attention in future research, as it may reflect gendered differences in career aspirations, risk perception, or valuation of research opportunities—dynamics documented in broader higher education literature (Archbell & Coplan, 2022; Pascoe et al., 2020). Another unanticipated pattern was the high neutrality rate for cultural and artistic skills (Item 14), which may indicate that students had limited exposure to these components at the time of data collection or perceived them as peripheral to core EFL competencies. This ambiguity suggests a need for clearer communication about the purpose and integration of such transversal skills within the reformed curriculum. Overall, the results paint a picture of cautiously optimistic first-year students who embrace the reform's skills orientation and feel capable of adapting, yet harbor specific concerns about the loss of research socialization opportunities and remain uncertain about whether competency gains will translate into tangible employment advantages.

## Discussion

This study sought to investigate first-year English as a Foreign Language students' attitudes toward the recent higher education reform at the University of Al Quaraouiyine by examining four dimensions—*anxiety, confidence, liking, and perceived usefulness*—grounded in the Theory of Planned Behavior. The findings reveal that students hold generally positive attitudes toward the reform ( $M = 3.97$ ), characterized by low anxiety, high confidence, favorable affective responses, and qualified perceptions of instrumental value. However, two critical concerns emerged: pronounced apprehension regarding the removal of the Final Year Project and uncertainty about the reform's impact on job-market readiness. This discussion interprets these findings within the study's theoretical framework, situates them in relation to prior empirical work, and considers their theoretical and practical implications.

### ***Low Anxiety and High Confidence as Indicators of Reform Receptivity***

The finding that students reported low overall anxiety ( $M = 4.12$ ) and high confidence ( $M = 4.15$ ) in their ability to adapt to the reform aligns with the Theory of Planned Behavior's proposition that perceived behavioral control—individuals' beliefs about their capacity to perform a behavior—strongly influences behavioral intentions and subsequent actions (Ajzen, 1991; Broadbent et al., 2025). In this context, students' confidence signals their readiness to engage with new competency requirements such as language proficiency thresholds and digital skills development, both of which feature prominently in the reformed curriculum. This pattern is consistent with recent studies demonstrating that clear communication, structured support, and alignment between reform objectives and student goals can mitigate anxiety and enhance self-efficacy during educational transitions (Basileo et al., 2024; Huang et al., 2024). Research on curriculum reform and self-efficacy shows that when teachers or students understand reform goals and

perceive adequate institutional support, their confidence increases and stress diminishes, facilitating smoother implementation (Agormedah et al., 2025; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2016).

The low anxiety observed in this study may also reflect the unique position of first-year students, who entered university directly into the reformed system without prior exposure to the previous curriculum. Lacking a comparative reference point, these students may experience less dissonance or loss aversion than continuing students who witnessed the transition (Pascoe et al., 2020). This interpretation is supported by transition literature emphasizing that first-year students' attitudes are shaped more by perceived future opportunities than by attachment to past structures (Tinto, 1987; Trautwein & Bosse, 2017). Moreover, the Moroccan higher education context—marked by sequential reform initiatives over two decades—may have cultivated a normative expectation of change among incoming students, reducing novelty-induced anxiety. However, it is essential to note that while general anxiety was low, the bifurcation observed in FYP-related items (Items 4 and 5) indicates that anxiety is not uniformly distributed across reform components. This selective anxiety underscores the importance of disaggregating attitudinal measures rather than relying solely on composite scores, as specific features of reform can generate concern even within an overall positive reception.

Internationally, studies in MENA and Global South contexts corroborate the relationship between perceived institutional support and student confidence during reform. For instance, research in Gulf universities found that transparent communication of reform rationales and provision of orientation programs enhanced students' sense of control and reduced resistance (Alamri, 2023; Al-Harhi, 2021). Similarly, evidence from medical education in Morocco showed that when students perceived reforms as relevant and implementable, their self-efficacy and engagement increased (Chenfouh et al., 2024). The high confidence levels observed in this study thus suggest that the University of Al Quaraouiyyine's communication strategies and support structures have been relatively effective in fostering perceived behavioral control. Nonetheless, sustaining confidence over time will require continued reinforcement through tangible mastery experiences, constructive feedback, and visible pathways connecting competency development to desired outcomes—mechanisms identified as critical for self-efficacy maintenance in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2016).

### **Concerns Regarding Final Year Project Removal and Research Identity**

Despite the overall positive attitudinal profile, the removal of the Final Year Project emerged as a focal point of concern, with over 73% of students expressing worry about its impact on educational quality and research-career preparation. This finding is particularly striking given the context of a skills-focused reform explicitly designed to prioritize employability and practical competencies. The FYP's traditional role as a capstone experience—integrating theoretical knowledge, fostering independent inquiry, and providing a tangible demonstration of disciplinary mastery—appears to hold deep symbolic and practical value for students, even those at the outset of their undergraduate studies (Colclasure & Granberry, 2025; Healey, 2014). Research on capstone projects consistently emphasizes their contributions to critical thinking, problem-solving, research literacy, and professional identity formation, particularly in disciplines where inquiry-based learning is central (Healey, 2014; Kivunja, 2023).

The students' concern may reflect an intuitive understanding that research experiences cultivate competencies—analytical rigor, intellectual autonomy, tolerance for ambiguity—that are not easily replicated through skills-focused modules, no matter how practically oriented. International evidence supports this intuition: capstone projects have been shown to enhance employability by demonstrating graduates' ability to undertake complex, self-directed work and to synthesize knowledge across domains (Alghamdi, 2022; Hernandez et al., 2018). Moreover, in the Moroccan context, the FYP has historically served as a mechanism for students to signal academic seriousness and research potential to prospective

employers and graduate programs, particularly in humanities and social sciences where alternative credentialing mechanisms are less developed (El Kadmiri, 2021; El Hajjami, 2020). El Aida et al. (2023) documented similar findings in Morocco, reporting that 62% of students viewed the FYP favorably as an opportunity to apply knowledge practically and enhance overall academic standing. The removal of this component may thus be perceived as a loss not only of learning opportunity but also of a recognized credential.

The pronounced anxiety about FYP removal also raises questions about the reform's implicit epistemological stance. By prioritizing demonstrable skills over inquiry-based synthesis, the reform may unintentionally signal a de-valuation of research and critical scholarship—precisely the activities that differentiate university education from vocational training and that underpin innovation and knowledge production. This tension between employability and academic depth is well-documented in higher education literature, with scholars cautioning that overly instrumental reforms risk undermining disciplinary learning and intellectual development (McCowan, 2015; Speight et al., 2013). For English language students specifically, the FYP has traditionally provided a space to explore linguistic theory, conduct applied research on language learning or teaching, or investigate cultural and literary topics—activities that deepen disciplinary expertise and foster scholarly identity. Without such an integrative experience, students may graduate with fragmented competencies lacking the coherence and depth expected of university-educated professionals.

Addressing this concern will require policymakers and institutions to either reconsider the complete elimination of the FYP or to develop robust alternatives that preserve its essential functions. Potential solutions include replacing the FYP with extended applied research projects, community-based research initiatives, or work-integrated learning experiences that retain an inquiry component (Colclasure & Granberry, 2025; Hernandez et al., 2018). Alternatively, institutions might introduce research-methods modules earlier in the curriculum and embed smaller-scale research tasks throughout the program, ensuring that students develop and practice inquiry skills incrementally rather than solely in a terminal capstone (Hinckley et al., 2019). International models, such as Australia's work-integrated learning frameworks and the UK's dissertation-alternative schemes, offer instructive examples of how universities have balanced employability demands with the preservation of research training (Healey, 2014). Crucially, any alternative must be clearly communicated to students, with transparent articulation of how it addresses the learning outcomes traditionally associated with the FYP. Without such clarity, students' concerns—and their potential disengagement from the reform—are likely to persist.

### ***Mixed Perceptions of Job-Market Readiness and Employability Outcomes***

The finding that students expressed notable uncertainty about the reform's impact on job-market readiness—particularly evident in the high neutrality rate (32.7%) for Item 23—highlights a critical challenge in skills-oriented educational reforms: the gap between promised employability gains and students' confidence that such gains will materialize. While a majority (60.8%) believed the reform would improve overall educational quality, and 79.3% viewed it as necessary for modernization, the hesitancy regarding tangible employment outcomes suggests that students distinguish between systemic legitimacy and personal benefit. This pattern resonates with research in Global South contexts documenting students' skepticism about whether curriculum reforms will translate into actual labor market opportunities, particularly in economies marked by high graduate unemployment and skills mismatches (Altbach & Mohamed, 2023; Chankseliani, 2022).

Perceived employability—individuals' beliefs about their likelihood of securing and maintaining desirable employment—is influenced not only by possessed skills but also by labor market conditions, social capital, and the visibility of pathways connecting education to work (Duggal et al., 2024; Rothwell & Arnold,

2007). Students in this study may recognize the intrinsic value of language proficiency and digital literacy yet remain uncertain whether Moroccan labor markets adequately reward these competencies or whether employment opportunities exist in sufficient quantity and quality. This skepticism is empirically grounded: Moroccan studies document persistent mismatches between graduate skills and employer needs, with employers reporting dissatisfaction with graduates' soft skills, adaptability, and practical experience despite formal qualifications (Bentaleb, 2024; Ibourk, 2016). Moreover, the broader MENA region faces structural employment challenges—including youth unemployment rates exceeding 25% in some countries—that undermine the credibility of education-to-employment narratives regardless of curriculum quality (World Bank, 2023).

The Theory of Planned Behavior provides a useful lens for interpreting this finding. According to the theory, attitudes toward a behavior (e.g., engaging with the reform) are shaped by beliefs about outcomes (Ajzen, 1991). If students believe that even competent graduates struggle to secure employment due to systemic factors beyond their control, their perceived usefulness of skills acquisition may be dampened, potentially reducing their motivation and engagement. Research on self-perceived employability corroborates this mechanism, showing that students' confidence in their job prospects is shaped not only by educational experiences but also by labor market signals, social networks, and external validation from employers (Donald et al., 2019; Tomlinson et al., 2021). When these external factors are weak or ambiguous—as appears to be the case in Morocco—students' attitudes toward skills-focused reforms may remain tepid despite institutional assurances.

Addressing this credibility gap will require universities and policymakers to move beyond curricular rhetoric and provide tangible evidence of employment pathways. Strategies might include strengthening industry partnerships to create internship and placement opportunities, implementing work-integrated learning programs that embed students in professional contexts, and systematically tracking and publicizing graduate employment outcomes disaggregated by program and competency area (Bridgstock et al., 2019; Donald et al., 2021). Micro-credentials and digital badges co-designed with employers could also enhance the labor market signaling value of competencies developed through the reform (UNESCO, 2023). Additionally, career development learning interventions—shown to enhance students' perceived employability by clarifying labor market dynamics and cultivating adaptive career-management skills—should be integrated early and continuously throughout the undergraduate experience (Smith et al., 2009; Tran et al., 2022). Critically, institutions must avoid overpromising employment outcomes, as inflated expectations followed by disappointing realities can erode trust and fuel cynicism. Instead, transparent communication about labor market challenges, coupled with genuine efforts to create value-added employment support, will better serve students and sustain reform legitimacy.

### ***Theoretical Implications***

This study makes several contributions to the theoretical understanding of student attitudes during educational reform. First, it demonstrates the utility of the Theory of Planned Behavior as a framework for examining reform acceptance, confirming that perceived behavioral control (operationalized here as confidence and low anxiety) strongly relates to positive attitudes. The findings support TPB's core proposition that individuals who believe they can successfully enact a behavior are more likely to form favorable attitudes toward it (Ajzen, 1991; Steinmetz et al., 2016). However, the study also reveals the limitations of attitude as a sole predictor: even students with positive overall attitudes may resist specific reform elements (e.g., FYP removal) that conflict with their values or identity projects. This nuance suggests that future TPB applications in reform contexts should explicitly measure attitude ambivalence and domain-specific concerns rather than relying on unidimensional attitude constructs.

Second, the study enriches understanding of self-efficacy development during transitional periods. The high confidence observed among first-year students entering a reformed system contrasts with typical transition literature emphasizing first-year vulnerabilities (Tinto, 1987). This finding suggests that the absence of comparative reference points—rather than being a limitation—may function as a protective factor, shielding students from loss aversion and facilitating adaptation. However, sustaining this confidence will depend on subsequent mastery experiences and feedback, underscoring the importance of longitudinal research that tracks attitudinal trajectories as students progress through the reformed curriculum and encounter labor market realities.

Third, the bifurcation between general reform acceptance and FYP-specific concern highlights the importance of identity theory in understanding student responses to curricular change. The FYP appears to function not merely as a learning activity but as a symbolic marker of academic seriousness and research capability—a credential that students perceive as constitutive of university education and their emerging professional identities (Holmes, 2013). Reforms that disrupt such identity projects may encounter resistance even when their instrumental logic is accepted, suggesting that identity maintenance should be considered alongside skills acquisition in reform design. This study makes several contributions to the theoretical understanding of student attitudes during educational reform. First, it demonstrates the utility of the Theory of Planned Behavior as a framework for examining reform acceptance, confirming that perceived behavioral control (operationalized here as confidence and low anxiety) strongly relates to positive attitudes. The findings support TPB's core proposition that individuals who believe they can successfully enact a behavior are more likely to form favorable attitudes toward it (Ajzen, 1991; Steinmetz et al., 2016). However, the study also reveals the limitations of attitude as a sole predictor: even students with positive overall attitudes may resist specific reform elements (e.g., FYP removal) that conflict with their values or identity projects. This nuance suggests that future TPB applications in reform contexts should explicitly measure attitude ambivalence and domain-specific concerns rather than relying on unidimensional attitude constructs. The bifurcation between general reform acceptance and FYP-specific concern highlights the importance of identity theory in understanding student responses to curricular change, as the FYP appears to function not merely as a learning activity but as a symbolic marker of academic seriousness—a credential that students perceive as constitutive of university education and their emerging professional identities (Holmes, 2013).

The findings yield several actionable recommendations for policymakers and institutions implementing educational reforms. First, the high confidence and low general anxiety suggest that the University of Al Quaraouiyine's communication strategies have been effective, yet sustained support through orientation programs, skill-building workshops, and continuous feedback mechanisms remains essential. Second, the pronounced concern about FYP removal necessitates immediate attention: institutions should either reinstate capstone research experiences in alternative forms or develop robust substitutes that preserve inquiry-based learning. Third, to address job-market uncertainty, universities must strengthen employer partnerships, implement work-integrated learning, systematically track graduate outcomes, and provide transparent career guidance. These interventions can bridge the credibility gap between promised employability gains and students' lived realities, thereby sustaining reform legitimacy and engagement over time.

This study's limitations must be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design captures attitudes at a single time point, precluding conclusions about attitudinal stability or change over time. The convenience sampling approach and reliance on self-selected participants introduce potential bias, limiting generalizability beyond the University of Al Quaraouiyine's English department. Additionally, the study did not examine subjective norms or actual behavioral outcomes, both of which are central to the Theory of Planned Behavior's predictive framework. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs, employ

probability sampling across multiple institutions and regions, incorporate qualitative methods to capture nuanced student experiences, and test the full TPB model including subjective norms and behavioral intentions.

This study provides empirical evidence that Moroccan first-year EFL students hold generally favorable attitudes toward the ongoing higher education reform, characterized by high confidence, low anxiety, and positive affective responses. However, the removal of the Final Year Project and uncertainty about job-market readiness represent critical concerns that could undermine long-term reform success if unaddressed. The findings underscore the necessity of balancing employability objectives with the preservation of academic depth and research socialization, and highlight the importance of transparent communication, tangible support structures, and credible employment pathways. By demonstrating how students perceive and respond to curricular transformation, this research contributes to both theoretical understanding and practical guidance for student-centered reform implementation in the Moroccan and broader Global South higher education contexts.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined first-year English as a Foreign Language students' attitudes toward Morocco's 2023 higher education reform at the University of Al Quaraouiyine, revealing generally positive reception characterized by high confidence ( $M = 4.15$ ) and low anxiety ( $M = 4.12$ ). However, two critical concerns emerged that warrant immediate institutional attention: 73.3% of students expressed apprehension regarding the Final Year Project removal, fearing diminished educational quality and compromised research-career preparation, while 32.7% remained uncertain about the reform's tangible employability benefits. These findings advance theoretical understanding by demonstrating the Theory of Planned Behavior's utility in reform contexts while revealing its limitations—students with positive overall attitudes may resist specific elements conflicting with their academic identity. The study contributes empirical evidence to underexplored student perspectives on Middle Eastern and North African educational transformations, highlighting that first-year students' absence of comparative reference points may function as a protective factor facilitating adaptation. Practically, institutions must balance employability objectives with research socialization opportunities by reinstating capstone experiences in alternative forms, strengthening employer partnerships through work-integrated learning programs, and providing transparent graduate outcome tracking to address credibility gaps between promised and perceived benefits. The study's cross-sectional design and convenience sampling limit generalizability and preclude longitudinal attitudinal tracking. Future research should employ probability sampling across multiple Moroccan institutions, incorporate mixed methods to capture nuanced experiences, test the complete TPB model including subjective norms and behavioral intentions, and conduct longitudinal investigations tracking attitude stability as students progress through the reformed curriculum and transition into labor markets. By foregrounding student voices in reform implementation, this research underscores that sustainable educational transformation requires not only sound policy design but continuous stakeholder engagement, transparent communication, and institutional responsiveness to legitimate concerns about academic depth and employment pathways.

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