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Soft Skills and Artificial Intelligence: An essential duo for the future of higher education-Literature review.

– **AUTHOR 1 :** KARIM Atika,

(1) : P.H.D-Laboratory of Economics and Management- Polydisciplinary Faculty of KHOURIBGA - Sultan Moulay Slimane University, Morocco.

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Abstract

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into higher education is not limited to technological evolution; it redefines the place of humans in learning. This article analyzes the necessary synergy between artificial intelligence and soft skills through a literature review structured around three themes: the growing importance of soft skills, artificial intelligence as a driver of educational innovation, and perceptions of their mutual interaction. This research demonstrates that artificial intelligence, far from replacing the role of the teacher or student, acts as a catalyst for the need to cultivate purely human skills such as critical thinking and emotional intelligence. This theoretical framework serves as the basis for future exploratory qualitative research that will be published shortly. This research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with university professors and students, particularly those in bachelor's and master's programs, using thematic analysis to understand how university stakeholders view the integration of soft skills in the age of automation. The ultimate goal is to propose a hybrid educational model in which technology and behavioral skills form an inseparable duo.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence- Soft Skills- Higher Education- Educational Innovation- Emotional Intelligence.

1 INTRODUCTION

We are in the midst of a veritable technological revolution, where artificial intelligence occupies a privileged, almost omnipresent position. It is not just another technological advance; it is gradually transforming our daily lives, reshaping our professions, and changing the way we communicate. It is like a powerful catalyst, stimulating social and economic changes on an unprecedented scale. This technology is having an impact in all sectors, transforming not only the way we work by automating repetitive tasks with disconcerting ease, optimizing complex processes, and extracting valuable information from vast data sets, but also reshaping the very nature of professions. While some professions are disappearing, others are undergoing radical transformation, and new roles are emerging, often hybrid and requiring harmonious synergy between humans and machines. In short, artificial intelligence is establishing itself as an essential driver of change in every sector, including higher education. This revolution is bringing about profound changes in the skills expected of individuals, placing soft skills such as communication, emotional intelligence, critical thinking, collaboration, stress management, and adaptability at the heart of educational and professional concerns.

A crucial and pressing question arises: how should higher education institutions revise their curricula and teaching methods to effectively equip future generations to evolve and thrive in this constantly changing world? In this context of unprecedented transformation, where technical skills can quickly become irrelevant in the face of advances in AI, the importance of interpersonal skills (also known as soft skills or behavioral skills) is not only obvious, but truly essential. Their value is increasingly recognized, not only in universities as tools for learning and personal growth, but mainly in the professional world, where they are now seen as crucial assets for employability, individual and team performance, and the ability to innovate in the face of the challenges of the digital age.

The need to develop human skills is more pressing than ever. Even though artificial intelligence is very effective at automating routine tasks and handling large amounts of data, it cannot replace human skills such as critical thinking, creativity, emotional intelligence, collaboration, and adaptability. This is precisely why they are so important: soft skills remain crucial, even essential, advantages in the age of AI, as they empower individuals to adapt, innovate, and work cooperatively with these emerging technologies rather than risk being replaced by them

The central issue revolves around the following question: **How does artificial intelligence influence expectations and perceptions of soft skills in academia**? More specifically, we

examine how higher education teachers and students perceive the impact of artificial intelligence on the soft skills needed for both learning and professional integration. This investigation is of definite scientific interest in contributing to the theoretical understanding of the evolution of skills, and of major practical interest in offering avenues for adapting curricula and teaching practices.

In this article, we will draw on a theoretical study to provide an understanding of soft skills and AI. First, we present the conceptual framework relating to soft skills, the definitions and importance of these skills, then we discuss the conceptual and theoretical framework of artificial intelligence, in close connection with the challenges and opportunities for higher education. Next, we propose a cross-reading of these two concepts, namely artificial intelligence and soft skills, in order to pave the way for future research, in particular a qualitative empirical study, and we conclude our work with a theoretical discussion.

2. Soft Skills: Concepts, Typologies, and Challenges

2.1.DEFINITION AND TYPOLOGY OF SOFT SKILLS

Soft skills, also known as human skills (Brasseur and Magnien, 2009), emotional and interpersonal skills (Thiberge, 2007; Bender et al., 2009; Brown et al., 2011; Minichiello, 2017), behavioral skills (Hoarau et al, 2014; Albandea & Giret, 2016), soft skills (Theurelle-Stein & Barth, 2017), interpersonal skills (Bellier, 2004), or cross-functional skills (Theurelle-Stein & Barth, 2016; Bouret et al., 2018; Cimatti, 2016) are now ubiquitous in training and education programs as well as within companies.

There is no single, universal definition of soft skills. However, they are clearly distinct from hard skills (know-how), which are purely technical and measurable competencies. Soft skills encompass cross-functional skills, behavioral, interpersonal, and emotional abilities that are essential in constantly changing professional environments.

According to authors such as Brown, Parente, and Stephan (2012), soft skills are a range of behavioral qualities that enhance daily and professional life. For others, soft skills are often distinguished from hard skills, which refer to technical skills, often specific to certain tasks, while soft skills encompass more general abilities related to individuals and their personalities. The latter, which are emotional, social, and behavioral, are developed in school and in the workplace (Giret, 2017). Soft skills are therefore a set of personal qualities such as communication, emotional intelligence, adaptability, team spirit, flexibility, self-confidence,

etc. It is therefore the ability to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people, to communicate non-violently, and to understand and manage one's own emotions and those of others (Faulx & Peters, 2011). This has been confirmed by Frahan (2017), who considers soft skills to be «*the art of establishing, nurturing, and developing positive, fruitful relationships with other people*. »

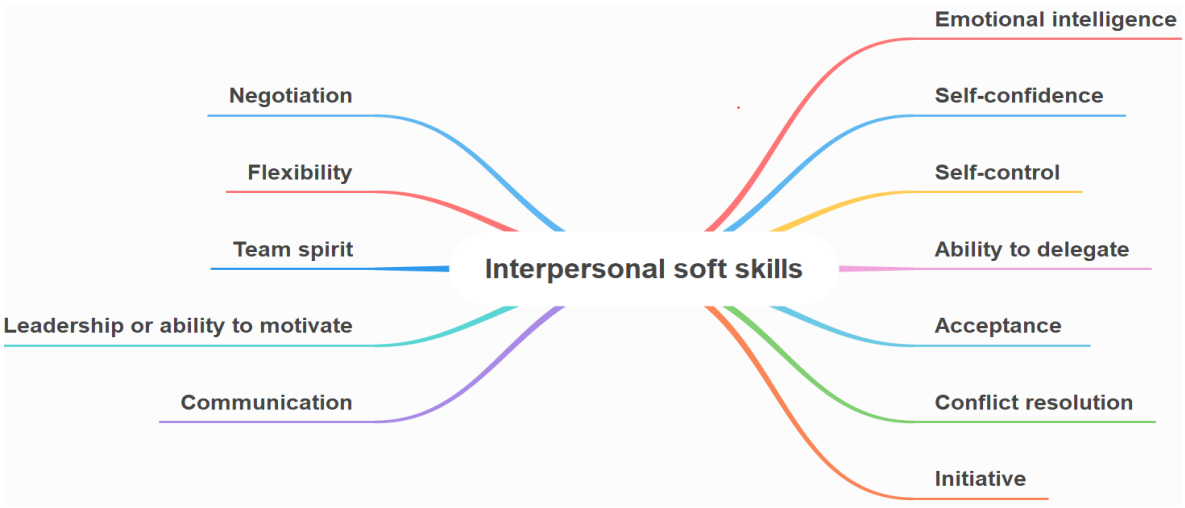
For his part, Mauleon (2014) specifies that they are «*skills that are more related to personality and depend more on the right brain, which is more intuitive, than on the left brain, which is more analytical*» [(1)].

In its program «The Future of Education and Skills 2030» the OECD emphasizes that soft skills are not simply behavioral qualities; they are essential abilities that help people adapt, innovate, and succeed in uncertain, complex, and rapidly changing contexts by adopting a proactive and responsible attitude. They are an essential complement to hard skills, which are becoming obsolete more quickly in the face of automation and artificial intelligence. Soft skills are therefore the skills of tomorrow, skills that can be used throughout life to ensure personal and professional fulfillment (Gilyazova et al., 2021). They play an essential role in differentiating university graduates in the labor market [(2)]and are therefore valuable assets for the success of university graduates (Hurtado & Castañeda, 2023), as they facilitate adaptation and effective interaction in the work environment (Cascante, 2023). In this sense, universities are obliged to provide specific and relevant training programs that enable young graduates to adapt to changing labor market conditions (Araya-Fernández & Garita-González, 2020), a necessity in a context where artificial intelligence is advancing rapidly (Durán et al., 2022).

Soft skills can be grouped into three main categories: interpersonal skills, behavioral skills, and cognitive skills. These categories are illustrated in the following mind map :

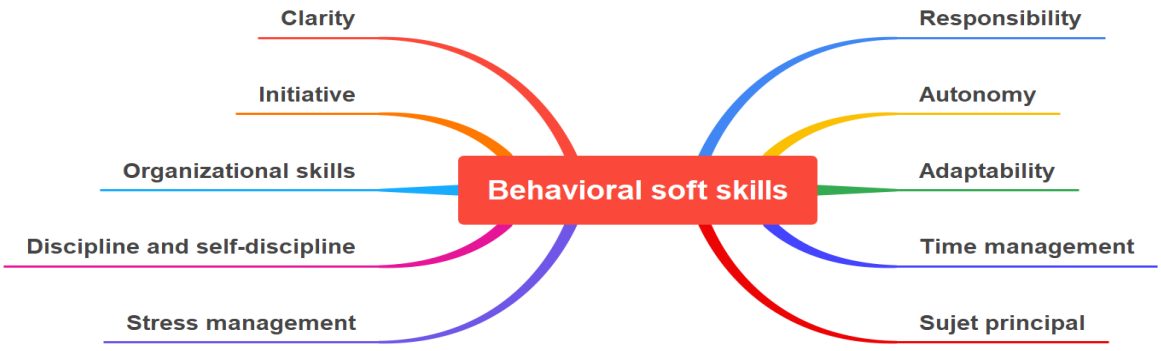
(1) Mauléon, F., Bouret, J., & Hoarau, J. (2014). *Le réflexe soft skills*. Dunod.
(2) Aquino, J. G. S., & Romero, G. H. (2022). Development of soft skills as a strategy for the job placement of university students. Revista Sinapsis, 1(21), 1-14. https://doi.org/10.37117/s.v21i1.641

Fig. 1. Interpersonal soft skills



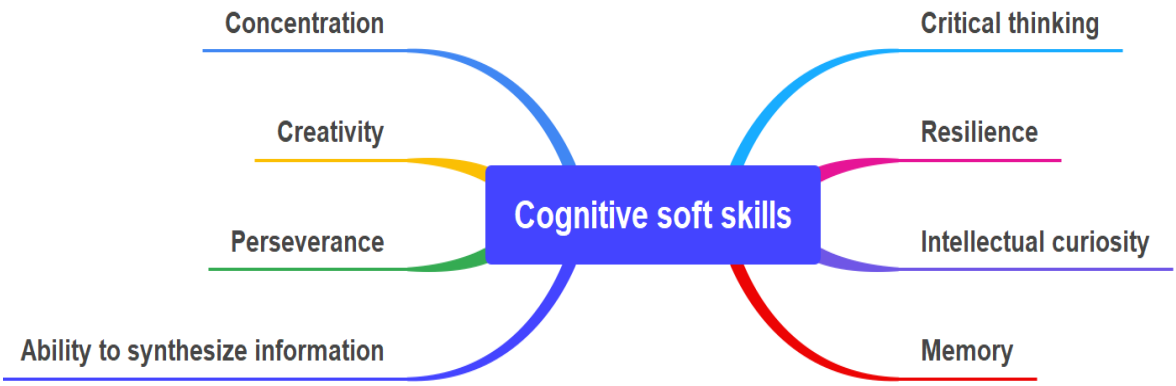
Source : Developed in EdrawMind

Fig. 2. Behavioral soft skills



Source: Developed in EdrawMind

Fig. 3. Cognitive soft skills



Source: Developed in EdrawMind

2.2.WHY SOFT SKILLS ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER IN THE UNIVERSITY CONTEXT AND THE JOB MARKET

Given the importance of soft skills, researchers are increasingly considering how they should be incorporated into higher education curricula (Fuentes et al., 2021). It is imperative that universities promote both non-technical skills, including emotional intelligence, and technical skills, encompassing specialized knowledge (Chávez & Fuentes, 2022; Rodríguez et al., 2021), as both are essential for professional training. This is why today's students must educate themselves in hybrid profiles that go beyond simple technical knowledge and also combine essential human skills such as communication and collaboration. Such an approach is based on the mastery of a variety of knowledge: conceptual (understanding), procedural (know-how), and attitudinal (interpersonal skills) (Zepeda-Hurtado et al., 2018).

Traditional teaching methods still favor the top-down transmission of theoretical knowledge. While these concepts are essential for developing the reflexivity and creativity of future executives, their practical implementation in group projects reveals a major gap. Students struggle to apply their knowledge and skills, not because of ignorance, but because of a lack of behavioral maturity. Therefore, the structured integration of soft skills into higher education curricula is a crucial step. Today, it is an essential lever enabling young graduates to transform their academic background into operational added value, thus ensuring their integration and sustainability in a constantly changing job market. Therefore, the dynamics of the labor market, strongly influenced by accelerating technological advances, require a continuous and in-depth

review of higher education programs to ensure that the skills acquired are in line with the emerging demands of the professional world. educational institutions must prepare students to develop the human skills (Montes, 2019) necessary to meet academic challenges (López & Lozano, 2021) and the increasingly demanding job market.

Behavioral skills such as emotional intelligence, autonomy, adaptability, communication skills, motivation, resilience, critical thinking, and team spirit—the list goes on and on of soft skills that make students strong, powerful, and resilient. These skills transcend the simple framework of technical expertise. Unlike hard skills, which are often limited to specific fields and are not always sufficient to meet the demands of the job market, soft skills form a cross-disciplinary foundation that individuals can draw on in both their professional and personal lives. It is therefore these types of skills that we must focus on and promote in higher education. Towards more open, flexible, and creative skills that do not become obsolete and are a real factor in well-being at work.

This holistic approach requires a break with traditional methods: these skills cannot be acquired through a lecture-based teaching method, where students remain passive recipients of knowledge. It requires an active teaching approach, focused on experience and action. This transition from knowledge to interpersonal skills is achieved through workshops and role-playing exercises in small groups. This format ensures constant interaction and allows the teacher to provide personalized support, which is essential for guiding the concrete progress and behavioral development of each student.

3. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: FROM TECHNOLOGICAL EVOLUTION TO EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION

Artificial intelligence is defined as a set of technological capabilities that simulate human cognitive processes. Although it is currently in the spotlight, it is not a recent innovation, as it has been integrated into information and communication technologies (ICT) for several decades. However, recent years have marked a historic turning point: research has transcended traditional structures to design algorithms capable of solving problems of unprecedented complexity (Villarroel, J. J. G., 2021). Work is mainly focused on three areas: first, machine learning, which enables systems to learn from data; second, neural networks, which structure these learning models; and finally, deep learning, whose successive layer calculation methods

enable an increasingly refined representation of knowledge. This technical progress now allows AI to extend to all fields, radically transforming working and learning methods.

Building on these areas, artificial intelligence deploys algorithms capable of learning autonomously. This computing power not only enables it to process and organize massive volumes of data, but also to automate complex processes in order to perform specific actions and achieve specific results.

Since 2010, there has been an unprecedented expansion in the practical applications of artificial intelligence. This acceleration is based on algorithms capable of detecting complex patterns and generating predictions from massive volumes of data (Villarroel, J. J. G., 2021). These technologies multiply its effectiveness and now extend to fields as varied as basic science, language learning, and multimedia analysis. This versatility allows AI to transform tasks that were once manual into automated and intelligent processes, offering major innovation opportunities across the academic and professional landscape.

Today, this momentum has led to the ubiquity of AI in all sectors of activity, without exception. It has established itself as an essential component in high technology, through precision medical robotics and industrial automation, as well as in the service sector and the digital economy. This systemic integration demonstrates that AI is no longer a peripheral tool, but the driving force behind a global transformation that is redefining standards of performance and interaction throughout society (see Pombo, Gupta, & Stankovic, 2018; see Tuomi, 2018).

Artificial intelligence is gradually establishing itself as a major technological infrastructure. Within the educational sphere, it is already asserting its influence across four distinct dimensions: as a field of study in its own right, an operational tool, a catalyst for innovative teaching strategies, and a driver of scientific research. This convergence requires in-depth analysis to bridge the gap between the rapid rise of technological power and evolving educational needs. The aim is therefore to explore the opportunities offered by AI while fostering the emergence of new educational paradigms. These must be developed through a constant and balanced collaboration between artificial intelligence and human intelligence, ensuring that technological progress remains at the service of human development (Moreno, 2019, p. 262). This synergy effectively marks the transition from a classical, purely technical education to an innovative model where emotional intelligence and AI are intrinsically intertwined.

With this in mind, AI now acts as the driving force behind these new learning environments, making possible what was once complex: instant access to unlimited resources and fully personalized online training courses. Where distance learning once faced technical and pedagogical barriers, AI now facilitates self-directed learning through intelligent and relevant applications. However, to ensure that this transition is not purely technical, it must be accompanied by active awareness-raising among teachers and students. It is through this constant dialogue and exchange that we will transform these tools into concrete educational success, placing technological innovation at the heart of truly meaningful learning (Peña & Gardié, 2011, p. 121). It is precisely in this sense that the integration of artificial intelligence goes beyond a simple technical debate to become a real lever for educational transformation. By becoming central to the relationship between teacher and student, AI offers the possibility of personalizing support. It allows teachers to offer adaptive learning experiences and authentic resources, while promoting enriched opportunities for collaboration. More than just a tool, AI becomes a valuable support that frees up time for human interaction, ensuring that each student receives constructive feedback and a tailored learning path (Vera, F., 2023).

Beyond these innovations, AI is now establishing itself as a pillar of higher education, driven by its ability to automate complex tasks, individualize learning paths, and offer immediate interactivity. This dynamic has significantly enhanced the efficiency and accessibility of university courses, providing access to high-quality knowledge without time or location constraints. However, this technological power presents universities with new and essential challenges (González Sánchez, J. L., Villota Garcia, F. R., Moscoso Parra, A. E., Garces Calva, S. W., & Bazurto Arévalo, B. M., 2023). One of the major challenges lies in preserving critical thinking among students and maintaining rigorous professional ethics, particularly when AI is used to solve academic problems (Porcelli, 2020; González and Martínez, 2020). Thus, higher education must not only adopt AI, but learn to integrate it judiciously so that it remains a true lever for intellectual development. This vigilance leads us to explore a more subjective dimension of this revolution: How do higher education stakeholders perceive the relationship between artificial intelligence and behavioral and emotional skills (soft skills)?

4. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND SOFT SKILLS: WHAT ARE THE PERCEPTIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

Today, new information and communication technologies are becoming increasingly fundamental in education (García, 2021). It is in this context that AI is emerging in various

sectors, including higher education (Vera, 2023), which is fertile ground for its application. The main advantage of AI lies in the individualization of educational pathways, tailored to each student's profile (Cárdenas et al., 2023). By leveraging machine learning, these systems assess student behavioral dynamics and aptitudes, facilitating the provision of personalized feedback (Delgado et al., 2024; García-Peñalvo et al., 2023).

However, AI does not replace the role of the teacher, but rather complements it. Indeed, if AI takes care of the personalization of technical knowledge (hard skills), teachers can then devote more time to active teaching and the development of soft skills such as empathy, leadership, and critical thinking, which artificial intelligence cannot yet fully simulate (Salmerón et al., 2023; González-Sánchez et al., 2023). Thus, the integration of AI presents both challenges and opportunities for institutions, teachers, and students (Parra-Sánchez, J. S., 2022) ; Litardo et al., 2023), offering a promising future for higher education (Cotrina-Aliaga et al., 2021).

According to Durán et al., (2024), the contribution of AI is evident in its ability to individualize learning and offer innovative educational experiences, thereby meeting the demands of an environment marked by rapid technological and social change. As a result, AI is profoundly influencing the higher education sector by offering tools capable of generating collaborative spaces that foster leadership and teamwork (Hurtado et al., 2019).

Although artificial intelligence is a powerful tool for forging and deepening hard skills, its effectiveness depends on controlled and thoughtful use. Far from passive consumption of sometimes biased information, its use must be accompanied by critical thinking and constant vigilance to ensure its relevance and reliability.

Furthermore, the scope of artificial intelligence is no longer limited exclusively to solving purely logical or technical problems (Melo et al., 2023). It is now establishing itself as a strategic lever for active teaching methods dedicated to the acquisition of soft skills. By acting as a diagnostic tool, AI enables teachers to accurately identify each student's behavioral gaps in order to prescribe targeted activities designed to optimize the development of cross-disciplinary skills in a variety of areas (Numa-Sanjuán et al., 2024).

At the heart of higher education, perceptions of AI reveal a major behavioral paradox between students and teachers. On the student side, there is a growing trend toward total cognitive delegation, with AI sometimes perceived as a substitute for personal effort, risking turning

students into passive consumers who outsource their thinking to machines. This dependence poses a significant challenge to the development of autonomy and critical thinking.

Faced with this risk of intellectual disengagement, teachers' perceptions are changing radically. Teachers are no longer seen as the holders and transmitters of information, a role now shared with AI, but are asserting themselves as facilitators, coaches, or mentors dedicated to behavioral support. In this new configuration, teachers become the guardians of soft skills: it is no longer just a matter of checking the accuracy of the data produced, but of supervising the way in which students interact, collaborate, and exercise their judgment. AI acts as a catalyst here, forcing educators to refocus on human and personalized guidance to prevent technology from supplanting the development of interpersonal skills. In this regard, higher education institutions have a responsibility to ensure that the deployment of artificial intelligence progresses in parallel with the development of students' soft skills. (Peralvo, 2023)

Beyond their apparent opposition, emotional intelligence and artificial intelligence are emerging as the two complementary pillars of modern higher education. A joint mastery of these two forms of intelligence creates a synergy where one serves the other: developed emotional intelligence becomes the essential foundation for using AI with discernment and ethics.

Emotionally intelligent students are better equipped to perceive the nuances, intentions, and biases of machines, transforming AI into a tool for understanding oneself and others. Conversely, AI can serve as an educational support for emotional intelligence by offering simulation exercises, complex case studies, and interactive workshops that shed light on relational dynamics. In this context, higher education institutions no longer simply transmit knowledge, but become laboratories for experimentation where the computing power of AI meets the depth of human empathy to train real managers.

5. CONCLUSION, CRITICAL DISCUSSION, AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This literature review has highlighted the growing interdependence between technological advancements and soft skills in higher education. Findings from research studies (Moreno, 2019; Porcelli, 2020) confirm that AI and soft skills now form an inseparable pair: while AI provides technical efficiency, soft skills ensure personal development and the depth of learning. In summary, this article has theorized the shift from a traditional, purely technical education to an innovative one, where emotional intelligence and artificial intelligence are now intrinsically intertwined, with technology amplifying human capabilities without ever replacing them.

However, this theoretical overview reveals a divergence in academic perspectives that is worth highlighting. While some schools of thought view artificial intelligence as a catalyst for cognitive empowerment, a more critical perspective warns of the risk of digital dependency. This paradox suggests that excessive reliance on algorithms could lead to the atrophy of certain soft skills, such as independent analytical rigor or deep interpersonal empathy. Consequently, the transition to an innovative educational model is not merely a technical adjustment, but a strategic imperative to preserve human agency in the face of automation.

This study also has limitations, notably its purely theoretical nature at this stage. The rapid pace of evolution in artificial intelligence can render certain technological observations quickly obsolete, underscoring the importance of focusing on behavioral competencies as a stable human anchor. It therefore becomes imperative to deepen these reflections through a field study in order to test these concepts and points of tension against the realities experienced by academic stakeholders.

It is within this framework that our research perspectives are situated. An exploratory qualitative study will soon be conducted to explore a central question: how does the integration of AI redefine the value and use of soft skills in higher education? This research will focus on two fundamental questions: how do faculty members perceive the evolution of their role in the face of the automation of knowledge, and how do students engage their emotional skills when using artificial intelligence tools?

Methodologically, this empirical phase will rely on semi-structured interviews with professors and undergraduate and graduate students, followed by a rigorous thematic analysis. The challenge for educational institutions is to rethink competency frameworks and teaching

practices, shifting toward models centered on support and the resolution of complex problems. The academic value of this future study will lie in providing decision-makers with concrete recommendations to support digital transformation through the strategic strengthening of human capital.

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