



Transforming Education for the 21st Century: Enhancing Graduate Employability through Curriculum Revamp

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study examining how well the curriculum of a bachelor's program at a Moroccan university equips students with 21st-century skills to enhance employability. A mixed-method approach was used, combining curriculum evaluation, questionnaires and interviews with both students and faculty. The curriculum evaluation reviewed course content for the inclusion of key skills such as creativity, problem-solving, and digital literacy. The questionnaires gauged students' perceptions of their preparedness for the job market, while semi-structured interviews explored faculty perspectives on the curriculum's effectiveness in developing employability skills. Results from the curriculum evaluation revealed that most courses lacked alignment with 21st-century skills. Questionnaire data showed that a majority of students felt unprepared for the job market. In contrast, faculty interviews indicated that instructors believed their courses offered sufficient skill development, attributing students' perceived lack of readiness to poor attendance and absenteeism. The study concludes that more interactive, engaging instruction is necessary, and students should be trained in metacognitive skills such as self-motivation and responsibility to foster lifelong learning and resilience. The findings also emphasize the urgent need for a curriculum revamp to integrate 21st-century skills, aligning with the evolving demands of the job market.

Keywords: Curriculum revamp, graduate employability, 21st century skills

1. Introduction

Given the ever-changing job market, tertiary education institutions and universities in Morocco face the daunting challenge of preparing graduates for future employment by incorporating employability skills, such as 21st-century skills (21CSs), into their educational and training programs. Against this backdrop, the present paper reports the findings of a study investigating the extent to which the Professional Bachelor in Applied Foreign Language Studies (AFLS Bachelor) program at the Multidisciplinary Faculty of Taroudant in Morocco equips graduates with 21CSs to maximize their employability.

There have been numerous reports indicating that Moroccan university graduates are not acquiring employability-compatible skills and competencies. More than 70% of Moroccans surveyed recently believe that the country's educational system does not adequately prepare young people for the job market (HCP, 2022; Aida, 2022; Mansouri, 2022). In fact, all students surveyed in this study expressed that they do not feel their studies are relevant to the job market, adding that this mismatch is largely due to weaknesses in the curricula (Mansouri, 2022). The author further argues that these curricula need to be improved to help students acquire the necessary employability skills and knowledge.

The significant changes in the 21st-century workplace compel educational institutions to either design new programs or revamp existing curricula to ensure their educational offerings align with the evolving job market's needs (INFERS, 2021). Curriculum reviews are essential for developing the desired knowledge and skills, improving student attainment, expanding learning experiences, and enhancing employability (Johnson, 2001). Several studies and research initiatives have focused on curriculum reforms that cover essential 21CSs and competencies (Santiago & Benavides, 2019; American Institutes for Research, 2019; National Education Association, 2017). The following literature review introduces key 21CSs and their inclusion in curriculum revamps.

2. Literature survey

21CSs have been identified to include critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, collaboration, creativity, innovation, digital literacy, global awareness, adaptability, and social intelligence (The Partnership for the 21st Century Skills, 2007; World Economic Forum, 2016). Given their pivotal role in securing employment, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has continuously promoted the importance of the 21CSs through initiatives such as the Education 2030 Framework for Action and the Innovative Learning Environments (ILE) framework (2017). This framework emphasizes the importance of creating learning environments that promote essential 21CSs and competencies, such as creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication.

Equally, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has developed initiatives such as the Global Education 2030 Agenda, which highlights the need for education systems to focus on developing learners' competencies, including cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioral skills, to prepare them for the changing workforce and society (2015). Efforts by these international organizations have been instrumental in promoting the need to prepare learners for the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century and in providing frameworks and resources to support curriculum revamp initiatives.

Similarly, there is a growing body of literature related to the instruction methods, employability skills and competencies that curriculum design as well as revamp should include. Brown and Lee (2020) identified factors such as employability skills and effective pedagogical practices as being conducive to training job-ready graduates. By the same token, a study conducted by the University of Melbourne found that successful curriculum revamps require a focus on student-centered learning, integrated and trans-disciplinary learning, as well as technology integration (Santiago & Benavides, 2019). Equally, the American Institutes for Research found in a study that successful curriculum revamps require a focus on project-based learning, performance assessments, and student voice and choice (2019).

Correspondingly, Rodriguez and Kim (2019) examined how multicultural education contributes to intercultural competencies, communication skills, global awareness, and adaptability in diverse work settings to prepare students for employment in multicultural and global contexts. To that end, (Johnson, 2017) examined how project-based learning

approaches can enhance students' critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, teamwork skills, and real-world application of knowledge that would contribute to fostering work-ready competencies and align educational experiences with the demands of the labor market. In a related study, Jones and Williams (2018) explored the relationship between interdisciplinary learning and employability in higher education to conclude that the inclusion of interdisciplinary learning experiences contribute to the development of students' transferable skills that enhance employability; such as adaptability, creativity, and problem-solving abilities. Other relevant studies emphasized the significance of lifelong learning in enhancing graduates' employability in an evolving labor market and suggest implications for educational practice and policy development (Smith & Johnson, 2019; Thompson and Anderson, 2021).

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Undeniably, the involvement of all stakeholders in the curriculum review process is essential for its success. According to Pegg (2014), the key ingredients for any curriculum review include a clear vision shared by all staff involved in the initiative. This ensures full engagement and guarantees the success of the curriculum review. In addition, curriculum revamps, as well as designs, should focus on both internal and external interventions to future-proof graduates' employability by integrating 21CSs and competencies. Collaboration with industry can enrich curriculum content through input from industry professionals, guest lecturers, internships, and collaborative projects.

Furthermore, curriculum review efforts should examine the outcomes and impact of industry collaboration on graduates' employability and career success to bridge the gap between academia and real-world job market demands (Adams & Johnson, 2017; Davis & Thomas, 2022). Studies confirm that internships and cooperative education programs contribute to the development of practical skills, industry knowledge, and professional networks, ultimately improving graduates' employability prospects.

It is worth noting that, despite their numerous benefits, curriculum revamps can face challenges. Research has found that challenges to implementing curriculum revamps include resistance to change, lack of resources, and insufficient teacher training (National Education Association, 2017). The study recommends strategies such as providing professional development for teachers, involving stakeholders in the process, and allocating adequate resources to overcome these challenges. It also highlights that a curriculum revamp should foster instructional innovations such as project-based and interdisciplinary learning, industry input, and internships.

Although there are a few reports on curriculum review efforts in Morocco at the primary school level (CCA, 2021), there doesn't seem to be much focus on curriculum reviews for university programs to ensure graduate employability. The present study seeks to draw attention to this topic and attempts, at the same time, to fill the existing gap in the literature.

3. Research methods and data analysis

As stated in the Introduction, this research was undertaken to establish the extent to which the AFLS Bachelor curriculum was designed to equip its graduates with 21CSs and therefore prepare them for employment. To collect data about this subject, the study undertook a comprehensive curriculum evaluation and used questionnaires and interviews to gauge related students' and teachers' perceptions. These research instruments were used to complement each other, allowing the author to form a clear picture about the topic. Collected data was part quantitative and part qualitative. However, all collected data was analyzed thematically in relation to the 21CSs listed below. These skills (illustrated by Graph 1) have been suggested by the Partnership for the 21st Century Skills (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). In the final analysis, the findings were triangulated to draw conclusions and suggest recommendations for an academic change.

Nine faculty members of the AFLS Bachelor and 89 of their students participated in this study. They were all informed about the nature and purpose of the research, and their participation testifies to their consent for their contributions to be used for academic research purposes. The research started towards the end of 2021 and was undertaken over four full academic semesters to allow for a maximum number of students to participate. The study was completed by the end of 2023.

3.1 Curriculum analysis

The curriculum analysis undertaken for this research used the available course descriptions and focused on the main components of the AFLS Bachelor curriculum, i.e. its objective, content, method and evaluation. Course syllabi were useful in revealing both the nature of the content as well as the assessment methods in use. The instruction methods and the objectives of the curriculum were evaluated by the students and teachers involved in the questionnaires and interviews through the responses they provided.

The main expressed objective of the curriculum of the AFLS Bachelor was to equip students with the knowledge, skills and ability required to secure employment in the area of communication, including journalism and translation. To attain this objective, the curriculum adopted a content that was thought would equip graduates with the key sought-after skills in the field of communication in its various forms and occurrences. In addition, the program includes in its final semester a compulsory internship for each student to undertake for a minimum of a month in a business or an office work environment, public or private, and prepare a report that should be defended in front of a jury. The purpose of the internship is to

prepare students for employment through familiarizing them with real-life work environments.

3.1.1 Course content analysis

Over all, course content analysis revealed that the AFLS Bachelor curriculum is lacking in focus and requires major revisions in subject contents, forms of assessment and instruction methods. As far as learning content is concerned, it was found to be repetitive and focused mainly on communication as a major skill to the detriment of other important skills. Regarding instruction methods, the lack of guidelines for engaging class activities and practice opportunities turned the teaching materials into theoretical and knowledge-based content delivery, thus missing out on opportunities to afford students with possibilities to develop key employability skills. Finally, the assessment methods used are mainly summative for most courses as they rely on the end of semester exams to assess students learning and knowledge achievements. The findings mentioned above are summed up in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Findings of the curriculum analysis

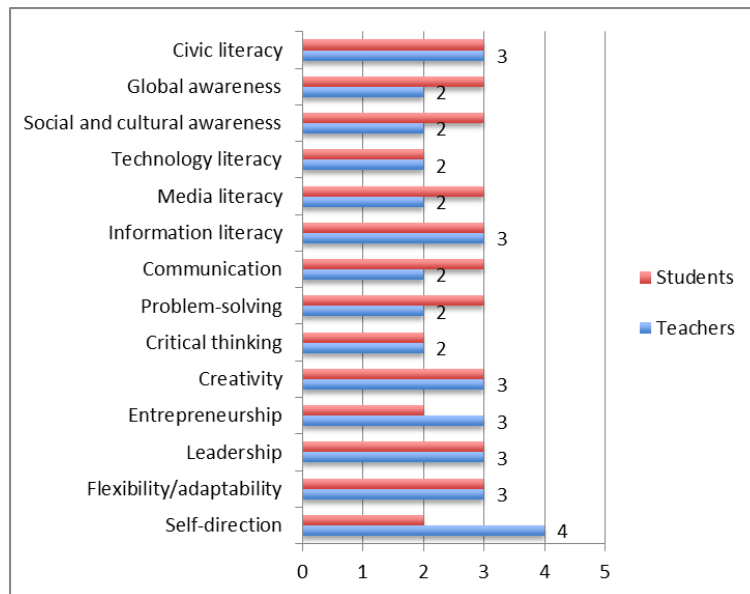
<i>Curriculum component</i>	<i>Findings of the curriculum analysis</i>
<i>Content</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The content of most courses seemed obsolete and not in line with the development of key 21CSs. For instance, the courses of foreign civilization focused mostly on providing students with loads of information without helping them to develop multicultural competencies. Equally, the final test evaluates knowledge and not skills or competencies.</i> • <i>The content seems redundant and irrelevant of 21st -century job market. For instance there are too many courses focusing on communication in its different forms while other skills were ignored. If this course were combined, they will leave room for more information technology oriented literacy courses.</i>
<i>Instruction Methods</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Lectures were long and dry and prevented instructors from making classes students-centered and students from owning their learning and develop autonomy.</i> • <i>Some courses were test oriented and provided handouts compiled to provide students with summaries of the courses in preparation for the final exam.</i>
<i>Assessment Methods</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Most assessment methods are not aligned with the professional bachelor objectives as they are summative assessments of knowledge more than skills.</i> • <i>There were no assessment rubrics which left evaluations methods open to various interpretations or simply not valid for the assessment they were used for.</i>

3.2 Questionnaires and interviews

Data collected from questionnaires and interviews offers valuable insights into the perceptions of both students and professors regarding the alignment of AFLS Bachelor curriculum with 21CSs. These insights can be utilized by educational institutions to refine their curricula and instructional methods, ultimately rising to meet the needs of their students and significantly enhance their learning outcomes and employability.

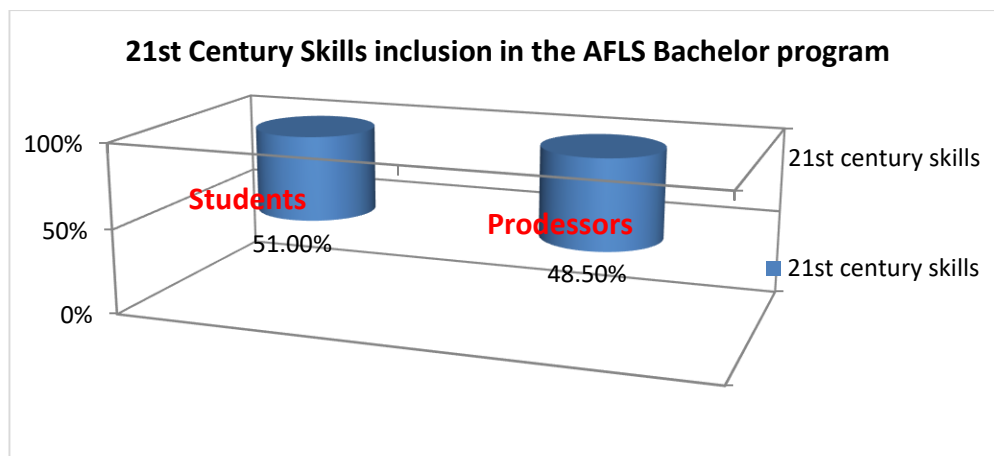
Interestingly, it appears that professors consider self-direction, inclusive of autonomy and independence, to be the skill most developed by their students, receiving a high score of 90%. However, students did not assign high scores to any of the listed skills. The next highest score of 60% was allocated by both teachers and students for skills such as civic literacy, information literacy, creativity, leadership, flexibility and adaptability. In contrast, both parties rated the inclusion of critical thinking and technology literacy quite low.

Graph 1. Students and teachers perceptions of 21st century skills presence in AFLS Bachelor curriculum



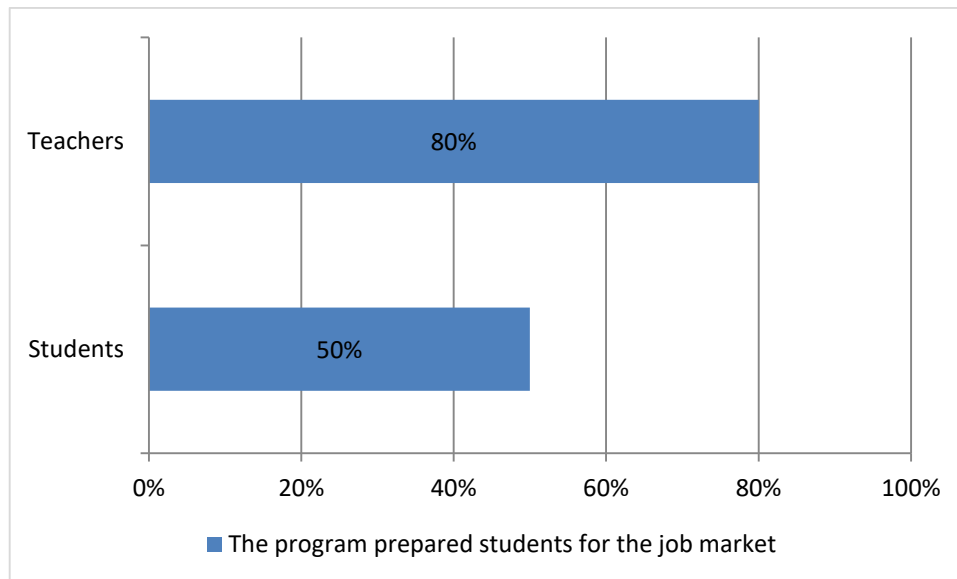
Overall, both faculty members and students believe that all the listed 21CSs are included in most of their courses, with scores ranging from 40% to 80% and an average of nearly 50% for such inclusion as shown by Graph 2 below.

Graph 2. 21st Century Skills inclusion in the AFLS Bachelor curriculum



These findings are supported by the fact that only 50% of the students reported that the courses they took for their bachelor's degree prepared them for the job market, as shown in Graph 3 below. This consistency in students' responses is noteworthy. However, 80% of the teachers believe that their courses prepared students for jobs, which seems to contradict their responses regarding the availability of 21CSs in the curriculum of 48,5%. This apparent contradiction was discussed during follow-up interviews with faculty members who attributed the discrepancy to students' constant absenteeism.

Graph 3. Perceptions about the extent to which AFLS Bachelor curriculum prepared students for the job market



Based on the findings of this research, the content of the AFLS Bachelor program curriculum does not seem to be conducive to future-proofing employment for college graduates as it lacked key 21CSs. The curriculum therefore requires a holistic and dynamic approach in its renovation. The ever-changing job market demands graduates who possess a diverse skill set, adaptability, and a commitment to lifelong learning (Thompson & Anderson, 2021). Some of the strategies and considerations that will help in developing this skill set may include fostering adaptability, emphasizing digital literacy and technological skills, fostering an entrepreneurial mindset and encouraging lifelong learning to stay updated with industry trends (Smith & Johnson, 2021).

In addition, students' and professors' attitudes towards curriculum revamps are crucial to the success of such academic renovation. Practice has shown that students' attitudes towards curriculum revamps could possibly be positive when the revamps were focused on practical applications of knowledge and skills, active and interactive learning, and flexibility in the learning process. Equally, professors' attitudes towards curriculum revamps would be positive when provided with training and support, involved in the decision-making process, but mainly when they could see the benefits of the revamp for themselves and their students.

4. Findings and Discussion

The chief finding of the present research points towards the need to revamp the targeted curriculum in order to align it with the needs of the job market through the inclusion of the 21CSs. The discussion of the above findings will therefore focus on comparing the conclusions reached by this research with the reported findings of related studies in relation to curriculum revamp, with a view to equip graduates with key employability skills, also referred to as future-proofing graduates for employability.

However, what emerged from the triangulation of all data collected by this research is a major contradiction between, curriculum evaluation and students' interviews and questionnaires on one side and the perceptions and opinions of faculty members on the other side. To summarize these findings, the table below highlights the main points of data collected and how they answer the main question of the extent to which the AFLS Bachelor includes 21st CSs in order to prepare graduates for employment.

Table 2. A summary of the findings

<i>Curriculum Evaluation</i>	<i>Students' perceptions</i>	<i>Faculty members' perceptions</i>
<i>-The content of most courses seemed obsolete and not in line with the development of key 21CSs.</i>	- 51% perceive that 21CSs are included in the courses delivered.	- 48.5% perceive that the listed 21st CSs are provided through the courses delivered.
<i>-The content seems redundant and irrelevant for 21st century job market.</i>	- Around 50% of students reported that the courses taken for their Bachelor prepared them for the job market.	- 80% of the faculty members perceive that the Bachelor program prepared the students for employment Contradiction attributed to students' absenteeism.

Evidence from students' questionnaires contradicts the findings of a report by the Higher Council for Education, Training and Scientific Research concluding that nearly 70% of higher education graduates are employed (CSEFRS, 2021). The conclusions reached by this governmental body also contradict unpublished feedback from past graduates of the AFLS Bachelor who struggle to secure employment. It would therefore seem that the curriculum did not reach its objective of equipping students with employability skills. This means that the curriculum in question is in need of a revamp to include 21CSs, such as creativity, problem solving and digital literacy, in order for it to become conducive to future-proofing employment for graduates.

5. Implications and recommendations

The chief implication of this research findings is the imperative need for the effective integration of the 21CSs, mainly creativity, problem solving and digital literacy, in higher education curricula through a constructive revamp of course content, assessment methods and instruction approaches in order to future-proof employment for college graduates. This important endeavor requires a forward-thinking approach to equip students with the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in the current and future job market. For that purpose, this author recommends adopting the considerations and strategies that follow for revamping the current curriculum of the AFLS Bachelor program.

There is a need to focus on developing skills that enable graduates to adapt to changing circumstances and be able to think critically. In fact, fostering adaptability and critical thinking skills is one approach that could be adopted for future-proofing employment for graduates through curriculum revamp. The focus should be put on developing skills that enable graduates' resilience towards changing circumstances and to think critically. This involves emphasizing problem-solving, creativity, and the ability to learn new things quickly through the incorporation of project-based learning, case studies, and real-world challenges to promote key employability skills in the updated curriculum. These skills will enable graduates to better navigate changing employment circumstances, as they would develop adaptive skills to succeed in a rapidly evolving job market (Smith & Johnson, 2019; Roberts and Brown, 2020).

Another important aspect is the development of technological and digital literacy, as equipping graduates with proficiency in technology, data analysis, coding, and emerging technologies like artificial intelligence can enhance their employability in the digital age. To ensure that graduates are familiar with a broad range of digital tools and platforms relevant to their field requires them to take courses on coding and others courses related to emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (Brown & Lee, 2020).

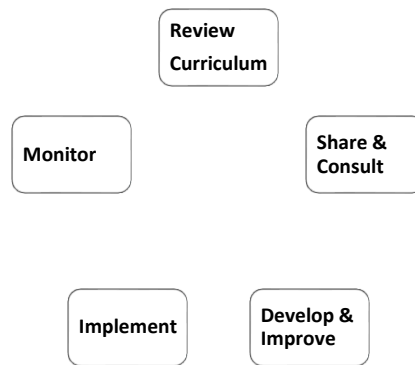
Furthermore, helping students develop a mindset of lifelong learning through the integration of opportunities for continuous skill development in the curriculum and encouraging self-directed learning can prepare graduates for the unpredictable job market (Thompson & Anderson, 2021). This entails incorporating opportunities for continuous skill development into the curriculum, such as teaching students how to access and evaluate information, encourage self-directed learning, and promote engagement with professional development resources beyond graduation. In addition, incorporating courses or modules that promote understanding of different cultures, languages, and perspectives will afford graduates opportunities to nurture cultural competence and diversity awareness, which will in turn prepare them for success in tomorrow's globalized industries (Rodriguez & Kim, 2019).

A successful curriculum revamp should also allow practical experiences for employment through internships, cooperative education programs, and hands-on learning opportunities. Such opportunities will bridge the gap between theory and practice and help graduates to gain industry-specific skills and build professional networks (Adams et al., 2018; Davis & Thomas, 2022). For instance, establishing partnerships with local industries to offer students opportunities for hands-on learning, networking, and gaining industry-specific skills will encourage even more experiential learning. Apprenticeships, capstone projects, and community engagement initiatives will also allow students to apply their skills in real-world settings and build a network of professional contacts (Adams & Johnson, 2017; Smith & Brown, 2022). To that end, the revised curriculum will should reflect awareness about frequent updates with industry trends through regular revisions to align with emerging skills and knowledge requirements so that graduates' skills remain relevant in the job market (Smith, 2018; Johnson & Roberts, 2021).

Furthermore, the inclusion of courses or training on career development support that focus on employability and long-term career success will play a significant role in future-proofing employment for college graduates. In fact, providing services such as resume writing, interview preparation, and networking workshops will help graduates to navigate the job market and secure employment (Thompson et al, 2019). Equally, promoting an entrepreneurial spirit by integrating courses or modules on entrepreneurship will motivate graduates to develop innovative thinking, problem-solving skills, and a business mindset, leading to self-employment or job creation.

In addition to the above recommendations, mechanisms to evaluate and assess the impact of the newly developed curriculum need to be put in place in order to monitor and learn from the implementation phase and improve the curriculum further as illustrated by Figure1 below. Indeed, the continued monitoring and evaluation of the curriculum is a vital requirement in higher education where the focus is always shifting, and where curricula need to keep up with and reflect the changes in the job market. This academic vigilance complemented by subsequent timely and appropriate interventions can only be guaranteed if all stakeholders embrace this change process from its inception. In fact, proofing graduates for future employment is a continuous process, and the curriculum should be regularly evaluated and updated to align with evolving industry demands. As already stated, collaboration with industry partners and employers is crucial to ensure that graduates possess the skills and knowledge needed for future employment. Therefore, curriculum designers and renovators must regularly assess industry trends, conduct research, and seek feedback from stakeholders to ensure that the curriculum remains relevant and aligned with the needs of the job market (Smith & Roberts, 2023).

Figure1. Curriculum review cycle



To sum up, there are strategies that could provide a road map for higher education institutions to prepare graduates effectively for employment. Hence, the endeavor to future-proof employment opportunities for college graduates via curriculum revamp necessitates a multifaceted approach by cultivating adaptability, underscoring digital literacy and technological proficiency, promoting lifelong learning, offering practical experiences, staying attuned to industry trends, providing robust career development support, and instilling an entrepreneurial mindset. In so doing, higher education institutions can bestow upon graduates the skills and knowledge required for thriving in an ever-evolving and dynamic job market. In addition, engaging educators and policymakers, will enable institutions to develop curricula that align with the demands of the modern job market and empower graduates to succeed in a rapidly changing world.

6. Conclusion

In closing, this study seeks to illuminate the path toward preparing graduates of a Professional Bachelor program in Applied Foreign Language Studies for the unpredictable job market through a carefully planned and executed curriculum revamp to include creativity, problem solving and digital literacy as key 21CSs. It reaffirms the profound responsibility that all stakeholders in higher education share in shaping graduates' future. The study lays out a road map for institutions to design or revamp curricula that equip graduates with the skills and attributes required in the ever-shifting job market. Furthermore, it highlights the need for a collaborative approach, where educators, employers, and policy makers unite to bridge the gap between academia and industry; ensuring graduates hit the ground running with the required amounts of confidence and resilience when they embark on their professional journey.

The study highlights that it is imperative for higher education institutions to ensure that graduates are not only job-ready but equally equipped with the required resilience to fit in an increasingly complex and interconnected global economy. Proofing graduates for future employment is an ongoing journey that requires commitment, collaboration and a steadfast dedication to the holistic development of students. As the employment landscape continues its transformation, the commitment to evolving, adapting and empowering graduates should remain the chief mission of all stakeholders. Preparing job-ready graduates through curriculum design or revamp is a multifaceted endeavor that demands innovation, adaptability and foresight. Throughout this paper, I have suggested a number of strategies, informed by research and expertise, enabling higher education institutions to empower their graduates for the dynamic world of work. Key findings of this paper underscore the importance of adaptability, digital literacy, entrepreneurship and lifelong learning as essential

pillars in preparing graduates for an ever-evolving job market. The cultivation of hands-on experiences and industry relevance through curricular updates further fortifies students for success and paves their way in a shifting landscape to secure employment.

Nevertheless, the journey to proofing graduates for employment does not culminate with curriculum design or revamp. Curriculum revamp is inevitably a process that results in a cycle requiring an ongoing commitment to industry collaboration, career development support, and fostering an entrepreneurial mindset. These multifaceted strategies prepare graduates not only to secure jobs but above all to create opportunities and lead innovation in the workplace.

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