

Investigating Student Empowerment and Social Involvement: The Case of a Moroccan University

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A Research Article

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Received: 03/11/2025

Revised: 24/02/2026

Accepted: 25/02/2026

Published: 03/05/2026

Citation:

El Guermat, A.M. (2026). Investigating student empowerment and social involvement: The case of a Moroccan university. *Journal of Teaching and Education for Scholars*, 3(1), 17-30.
<https://doi.org/10.59065/jotes.v3i1.248>



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Abstract

The voices of students in Moroccan universities are often being underrepresented, that they often feel left out of decision-making processes related to their learning environment. This study attempts to highlight this problem by examining the relationship between student empowerment and social involvement among MA students at Mohammed I University in Oujda. To achieve this aim, the study adopts an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design, grounded in well-established frameworks such as Zimmerman's Psychological Empowerment Theory; this latter is of utmost importance in understanding how an individual establishes a sense of empowerment within his environment, as well as that of Astin's student involvement theory. The objective is to investigate students' institutional voices and see how far they feel able to take part in university life and decision-making. Essentially, the study seeks to uncover critical factors that influence student agency and participation, with real-world implications for promoting more student-centered and inclusive learning environments. The findings are expected to support ongoing reforms in Moroccan universities that prioritize active learning and democratic student engagement.

Keywords: *Civic Participation; Higher Education; Student Engagement; Student Empowerment*

1. Introduction

Despite recent efforts by the Moroccan Ministry of Higher Education to improve quality, many initiatives have struggled in practice. The Licence-Master-Doctorat (LMD) reform, for instance, has been unevenly implemented. Houssami (2024) maintain that the reforms in Moroccan HE “have not yet realized their objectives, partly due to the persistence of structural issues, including a lack of interdisciplinary flexibility and limited horizontal mobility for students” (p. 959). Likewise, the decision to reduce medical, pharmacy, and dentistry programs from seven to six years prompted sustained student protests over training quality and implementation (Fourtassi et al., 2020).

I argue that one driver of these shortfalls is the marginalization of students' voices in institutional decision-making. Student consultation is too often procedural rather than democratic, what Fielding (2001) calls seeking student input “primarily through insistent imperatives of accountability rather than enduring commitments to democratic agency” (p. 123). In this study, I take empowerment seriously as a contextual construct; following Zimmerman (2000), “empowerment is context and population specific” and “takes on different forms for different people in different contexts” (p. 45). Put simply, if reforms are meant to serve learners, their perspectives need to inform how universities set priorities, design policies, and evaluate change. When students are heard, and empowered to act, their engagement and agency in academic life are more likely to flourish.

There does exist a gap between the intended goals of HE objectives and the actual experiences of students in Moroccan universities, whose perspectives and participation are often marginalized. This limits their engagement and sense of empowerment, and, to this point, we still do not fully understand the factors that affect how students get involved in academic and social life. The study aims to investigate the relationship between student empowerment and social involvement among English MA students at Mohammed I University in Oujda, and to identify key factors that influence student agency and engagement within academic and social contexts.

This study holds significance in its investigation of the role of students' voices in Moroccan HE, which are often missing from discussions about HE reforms. Since the latter often fail to meet expectations, this study can highlight how students engage in academic and social life and what factors support or limit their participation, which are vital for any university adjustment. As Cook-Sather (2006) states, "young people have unique perspectives on learning, teaching, and schooling; their insights warrant not only the attention but also the responses of adults" (p. 359). This research aims to ultimately yield findings that would be of great assistance to teachers and policymakers alike in creating environments that encourage participation, build confidence, and support meaningful learning, which, in turn, would boost the quality of HE in Morocco.

With this aim in mind, the study attempts to answer three central questions:

- 1) How do English MA students at Mohammed I University perceive their own empowerment within the university setting?
- 2) What is the relationship between perceived student empowerment and levels of social involvement?
- 3) What institutional or cultural factors facilitate or hinder student agency and engagement?

Against this background, the study postulates the following hypotheses:

- 1) H1: There is a significant positive correlation between student empowerment and social involvement.
- 2) H2: Students with higher levels of perceived empowerment are more likely to engage in social and academic activities.
- 3) H3: Institutional support and participatory culture positively influence both empowerment and engagement levels.

In addition, to fulfil its aim, the study seeks to investigate students' perceptions of empowerment and agency, examine the extent and nature of students' social involvement within the university, analyse the correlation between perceived empowerment and social involvement, and identify structural or institutional factors that impact student participation.

1.1 Empirical Background

Research on student empowerment and involvement shows that when students take an active role in their learning, their engagement and achievement improve. Astin (1984) describes involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 518). He explains that learning improves when students invest time, attention, and effort in their studies. Trowler (2010) also found "robust correlations between student involvement in a subset of educationally purposive activities, and positive outcomes of student success and development" (p. 2).

Research on student voice has reached similar findings. Cook-Sather (2006) points out that "student voice calls for a cultural shift that opens up spaces and minds not only to the sound but also to the presence and power of students" (p. 363). When students are listened to and respected as partners, they develop confidence and feel more connected to their learning community. In the same way, Zimmerman (2000) stresses that "empowerment is context and population specific" (p. 45), suggesting that participation depends on how much space individuals have to act within their own environment.

In Morocco, most research still focuses on reform policies rather than students' lived experiences. As Ayad, Bannani, and Elhachloufi (2020) note, "few scientific articles have dealt with the subject of university governance" (p. 94). This study therefore aims to fill this gap by examining how Moroccan MA students perceive empowerment and how it relates to their social involvement at university.

1.2 Zimmerman's Psychological Empowerment Theory (1995)

Zimmerman (1995) believes that empowerment is about how people gain control over their lives, make decisions, and take actions that improve their situation. He presents it both as "a value orientation for working in the community and as a theoretical model for understanding the processes and consequences of efforts to exert control over decisions affecting one's life, organizational functioning, and the quality of community life" (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 43). In other words, Zimmerman views

empowerment as both a belief that people deserve control over their lives and a process through which individuals learn, act, and bring about change in their surroundings. As a value, we try to understand the “*why*” behind it: why we believe it matters and what goals it serves. As a theory, we are more concerned with the “*how*” of empowerment, that is, how it works, how we study it and how it brings change. Importantly, Zimmerman (2000) explains that the very concept of empowerment is a “context and population specific” (p. 45). What it means and how it is achieved vary depending on a person’s circumstances, such as for a college student starting their first job versus an elderly retiree adjusting to life after work.

Moreover, Zimmerman (2000) explains that empowerment takes place at three levels: interpersonal, interactional, and behavioral. The interpersonal level concerns how people see themselves and their sense of confidence. The interactional level involves understanding how systems work and how to navigate them. The behavioral level refers to the concrete actions individuals take to influence their surroundings. Empowerment is therefore better understood as an ongoing process rather than a fixed state. As Rappaport (1984) defines it, “Empowerment is viewed as a process: the mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their lives” (p. 3). Zimmerman (2000, p. 46) adds that empowerment becomes a process “if it helps people develop skills so they can become independent problem-solvers and decision-makers”. Examples of empowerment appear at different levels. A student may feel empowered when joining a university club or volunteering. Within an organization, it may occur when employees share in decision-making or take leadership roles. At the community level, empowerment can arise from access to public resources such as community centers or local media. Although these levels are distinct, they remain closely connected. As Zimmerman (2000) notes, “Individual, organization, and community empowerment are mutually interdependent and are both a cause and a consequence of each other” (p. 46).

Given this, in an HE setting, empowerment is not only about students having opportunities. It is also about how they see themselves and the value they give to their voices in bringing change. When students feel interpersonally empowered, it shows in their confidence and in their belief that they can affect their academic and social environment. This, in turn, may shape their willingness to join class discussions or take part in student activities. On the interactional level, students begin to understand how the university functions and learn how to use resources and networks to take part in the institution and its decisions. Behavioural empowerment is then seen in the actions they carry out with their peers, teachers, and community, such as starting study groups, joining student clubs, or volunteering.

1.3 Astin’s Student Involvement Theory (1984)

Building on the concept of empowerment, Astin’s (1984) Student Involvement Theory highlights that students’ learning and development depend on the time and energy they dedicate to both academic and extracurricular activities, meaning both in-class involvement (like attending lectures, participating in discussions) and out-of-class involvement (like joining clubs, volunteering, or interacting with peers and faculty). For him, student involvement refers to “the amount of physical and psycho-logical energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (p. 518). In simple terms, this theory illustrates how HE institutions’ desired outcomes are connected to the ways students learn and develop through engagement in co-curricular activities. Given this, Astin explains that:

a highly involved student is one who, for example, devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students. Conversely, a typical uninvolved student neglects studies, spends little time on campus, abstains from extracurricular activities, and has infrequent contact with faculty members or other students. (p. 518)

According to Astin (1984), students develop through the time and effort they put into their studies and campus life. The more they engage in class, clubs, and university activities, the more they learn and gain confidence both academically and personally. Astin identifies five main ideas that explain this process. First, involvement is an “investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects” (p. 519). This energy may be directed toward broad experiences such as university life or toward specific tasks like preparing for an exam. Second, involvement differs in degree; students participate at different levels and in different ways. One student may be active in clubs but study less, while another may focus

more on academic work. Third, involvement has both quantitative and qualitative sides; for example, how much time a student spends studying and how deeply they understand what they study. Fourth, the extent of learning and development is proportional to the quality and amount of that involvement. Finally, “the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement” (p. 519). These principles show that student learning depends not only on institutional resources but also on the effort students invest in their own education.

2. Methods

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between student empowerment and social involvement among English MA students at Mohammed I University in Oujda and to identify the key elements that affect their agency and engagement in academic and social contexts. To this end, it adopts an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design. This design is well suited to this research because it allows for a comprehensive investigation of both students’ experiences and the relationships between key variables. Creswell (2009) argues that “Unlike the sequential explanatory approach, which is better suited to explaining and interpreting relationships, the primary focus of this model is to initially explore a phenomenon”. This approach allows for a deep understanding of student agency and engagement before testing hypotheses statistically. This is because the sequential exploratory strategy “involves a first phase of qualitative data collection and analysis, followed by a second phase of quantitative data collection and analysis that builds on the results of the first qualitative phase” (Creswell, 2009).

The initial interviews explored how students described empowerment, voice, participation, and institutional barriers in their own words. Recurring themes from the interviews shaped the focus and wording of the questionnaire items. For example, students frequently referred to feeling heard in classroom discussions but excluded from broader institutional decisions. This insight informed the item measuring perceived value of one’s opinions within the university. Similarly, repeated references to participation in conferences, workshops, and academic activities guided the development of the academic involvement item.

In this way, the questionnaire did not emerge independently from theory alone but was refined in light of students’ lived experiences. The qualitative findings also guided the interpretation of quantitative results, allowing the study to connect statistical patterns with students’ narratives rather than treating the two strands as separate forms of evidence.

Fifty-five Master’s students from the English Department took part in this study. They were chosen through convenience sampling, which relies on the availability and accessibility of participants (Babbie, 1990, as cited in Creswell, 2009). This choice made it possible to collect the data within one week. Participants were recruited through direct contact within the MA program. Students were invited voluntarily to take part in the study and were informed about its purpose, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any time. Because face-to-face access was limited, interviews were conducted online through WhatsApp. Before beginning each interview, participants gave their consent to participate and to have their responses used for research purposes. Interviews were conducted in English and collected in written form through WhatsApp exchanges. The responses were compiled into text files and lightly cleaned for clarity (for example, correcting obvious spelling errors) without altering meaning. No translation was required. All identifying details were removed to ensure anonymity.

Two instruments were used, namely interviews and a questionnaire. The interviews explored students’ experiences and attitudes toward empowerment and involvement. The questionnaire was designed based on Zimmerman’s (1995) Psychological Empowerment Theory and Astin’s (1984) Student Involvement Theory. It included three parts: demographic questions, items measuring perceived empowerment, and items measuring social involvement. The interview data were analysed through thematic analysis to find key patterns and ideas, while the questionnaire data were analysed using correlation analysis in SPSS to examine how empowerment relates to involvement. Themes were finalized through repeated comparison between coded extracts and the full dataset to ensure that each theme captured a consistent pattern of meaning across participants rather than isolated statements (Table 1).

Table 1
Emerging Themes

Theme	Short Description	Example Extract
Partial Voice and Limited Influence	Students feel heard in class but excluded from institutional decisions	<i>“When it comes to bigger university decisions, I don’t think students’ voices are taken into consideration.”</i>
Motivation through Learning and Connection	Participation is driven by skill development and networking	<i>“I participate because I want to expand my network and learn from colleagues.”</i>
Structural and Cultural Barriers	Lack of time, communication, and institutional support limit engagement	<i>“Some activities are not well advertised, so I don’t always know about them.”</i>

Table 2 shows the examination of internal consistency. Cronbach’s alpha was calculated for each construct. The Student Empowerment scale included three items and showed high internal consistency ($\alpha = .87$). The Social Involvement scale included two items and showed acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = .78$). These values suggest that the items within each construct moved in a consistent direction, which allowed the study to proceed with the exploratory analyses.

Table 2
Reliability Test

Construct	Item	Cronbach’s α	Interpretation
Student Empowerment	3 (Interpersonal, Interactional, Behavioral)	0.868	High internal consistency
Social Involvement	2 (Academic, Co-curricular/Extracurricular)	0.780	Acceptable internal consistency

It is important to note that both constructs were operationalized using a limited number of items. While the internal consistency values were acceptable, the brevity of the measures may restrict construct breadth. Empowerment and involvement are conceptually related in theory, and short indices may not fully differentiate between closely linked dimensions. The findings should therefore be interpreted as exploratory rather than as definitive construct validation.

The questionnaire items were developed in alignment with the theoretical foundations of Zimmerman’s (1995) Psychological Empowerment framework and Astin’s Student Involvement Theory. The initial qualitative phase helped clarify how students described voice, participation, and institutional barriers in their own words. Recurrent ideas from the interviews, such as confidence in classroom discussions, understanding university procedures, and participation in academic events, informed the wording of the survey items.

To strengthen content validity, the draft questionnaire was reviewed by two faculty members in the department who examined the clarity and relevance of each item in relation to the study constructs. Minor wording adjustments were made based on their feedback before distributing the survey. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the instrument was designed as a brief index rather than a comprehensive scale.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Qualitative Results

In this study, ten MA students voluntarily participated in online interviews conducted through WhatsApp due to limited physical access. The interviews were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) following Braun and Clarke’s (2019) six-phase approach. This method was chosen for its flexibility and its focus on the researcher’s active role in meaning-making, which makes it suitable for exploring students’ sense of empowerment and social involvement. In this regard, Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that thematic analysis “is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 79), and its strength lies in being “theoretically flexible” (p. 78). Following

their framework, I immersed myself in the data, coded meaningful segments, developed and refined themes, and constructed coherent narratives from the patterns that emerged. Throughout the process, I kept a reflexive journal to document analytic decisions and reflections. This approach treats themes as interpretive patterns that grow from the interaction between the data and the researcher's understanding, rather than as predefined categories.

To understand how students experience empowerment and social involvement, I carried out semi-structured interviews based on five open questions. These questions asked students whether their opinions are valued when decisions are made at the university, what kinds of activities they take part in, and what motivates or prevents them from getting involved. They were also asked if they think the university encourages participation in classes, clubs, or other events. The open format made it easy for participants to share their own experiences and examples, and I used short follow-up questions when needed to get more detail or clarification.

After collecting the ten interviews, I started the process of thematic analysis by carefully reading each transcript several times. This first stage helped me become familiar with the data and notice early patterns and ideas. I began to see that students often talked about similar issues, such as feeling that their voices were only partly heard, finding it difficult to participate in university life, and feeling more motivated when activities were meaningful and connected to learning or networking.

In the next stage, I coded the data by highlighting short pieces of text that represented important ideas. These included codes such as limited student voice, participation in academic events only, motivation through skill development, lack of time, unequal opportunities between BA and MA students, and activities driven by professors rather than students. After reviewing these codes, I grouped them into broader patterns of meaning, which became the main themes of the study. Three key themes emerged.

3.1.1 Theme 1. Partial Voice and Limited Influence

Most students expressed that their opinions are only partly valued within the university. They feel their voices are heard in classroom settings but rarely beyond that space. Several participants explained that while professors sometimes ask for feedback or encourage open discussions, students' input does not extend to broader institutional decisions. One participant said, *"Yes, I feel that my opinions are valued to some extent, when it comes to class discussions or when professors ask for feedback. However, when it comes to bigger university decisions, I don't think or see that students' voices are fully taken into consideration."*

Others described a clear gap between students and university administration. One MA student shared, *"There is a huge gap between the administration and the students. As students, we're not aware of the procedures we should take when we want to organize any academic event... we find ourselves deadlocked."* This sense of distance and confusion reflects how institutional processes remain opaque, which makes students feel excluded from decisions that affect their academic life.

These accounts show that empowerment at the university level is still limited. Students experience a kind of *situated empowerment*, they feel confident and heard within the classroom but powerless when it comes to formal or collective decision-making. This reflects Rappaport's (1984) view that empowerment is not a fixed state but a process shaped by opportunities to exercise influence. Likewise, Zimmerman (1995) highlights that empowerment requires both individual competence and opportunities for participation in decision-making. When those opportunities are missing, empowerment remains incomplete.

In this study, students' voices seem strongest in small, familiar spaces where relationships are direct and supportive, but they weaken at the institutional level where decisions are top-down. This finding supports Christens' (2012) argument that empowerment involves both *intrapersonal* and *interactional* dimensions; people must not only feel capable but also perceive that their environment allows them to act. Without visible structures for participation, students' sense of agency becomes limited to the classroom, thus preventing them from seeing themselves as partners in shaping university life.

3.1.2 Theme 2. Motivation through Learning and Connection

Most participants said they take part in university activities when these experiences help them grow personally, academically, or professionally. Their motivation often comes from the chance to develop new skills, expand their networks, and feel part of an active learning community. One student explained, *“What could motivate me to join university activities is that they help with learning new skills, meet new people, and feel more engaged in the university community.”* Another added, *“I participate because I want to get to know the academic life more and more. I want to expand my network, collaborate with and learn from my colleagues.”*

Students view meaningful participation as an opportunity for self-development rather than an obligation. They prefer activities that connect to their studies or future goals, such as conferences, workshops, and research events. For instance, one participant shared, *“I have participated in several academic activities. For example, I took part in conferences as both a participant and a speaker, and I also attend club events. These experiences have helped me grow academically and socially.”*

This sense of motivation mirrors with what empowerment theorists describe as the *interactional component* of empowerment (Zimmerman, 1995). When students find activities that link learning with real experience, they begin to see themselves as active contributors rather than passive learners. Rappaport (1984) also argued that empowerment involves people gaining mastery over their lives through participation in meaningful contexts. In this study, meaningfulness appears to be the central driver: when students see a clear purpose and connection between university activities and their own goals, they are more willing to engage.

These findings also echo Christens’ (2012) idea of *relational empowerment*, where empowerment grows through social connection and collaboration. Students who participate in activities often describe a stronger sense of belonging and confidence. They start to see themselves as part of a community that values their input. Yet, this motivation remains fragile when opportunities are rare or poorly supported by the institution.

3.1.3 Theme 3: Structural and Cultural Barriers to Engagement

Despite students’ motivation to participate, most of them feel limited by several institutional and personal barriers. The most common challenges include lack of time, poor communication, and limited access to information about university activities. One student explained, *“What prevents me from participating is mainly the lack of time due to academic workload. In addition, I sometimes avoid social gatherings because they can become unbalanced, where certain individuals dominate the space and limit equal participation.”* Another said, *“Some activities are not well advertised, so I don’t always know about them.”*

Many participants also mentioned that activities often seem professor-driven rather than student-initiated. This creates a sense of distance and passivity. One student observed, *“The university provides opportunities and encourages students to participate in various activities; however, this does not seem to happen consistently. In many cases, the activities appear to be professor-driven rather than student-initiated.”* Others noted that unequal access reinforces this problem, as one participant stated, *“Yes, I think the university encourages students’ participation, but not all students. Only MA or PhD. As BA, we weren’t concerned.”*

These insights show that structural and cultural barriers limit how students engage and how empowered they feel. Zimmerman (1995) emphasizes that empowerment requires both personal agency and access to opportunities. When institutional systems fail to support participation, motivation alone cannot sustain engagement. Rappaport (1984) similarly notes that empowerment depends on creating environments where individuals can act and influence decisions.

Students in this study show a clear desire to take part in academic and social life, yet they often face conditions that discourage or exclude them. The lack of communication, transparency, and shared responsibility weakens their sense of belonging. As Christens (2012) argues, empowerment is relational; it grows when institutions and individuals interact on equal grounds. In this case, the absence of clear communication channels and student-led spaces limits that relationship and prevents genuine engagement.

This theme highlights that the main barriers are not a lack of interest but rather structural and cultural conditions that restrict student agency. For empowerment to develop, universities need to move from top-down control toward inclusive and participatory practices that recognize students as active members of the academic community.

With this being said, the study's results provide clear answers to its central questions. First, students perceive their empowerment as partial and uneven. They feel confident when expressing opinions in class or small academic settings but powerless when it comes to university-wide decisions. Their sense of agency remains limited by weak communication, unclear procedures, and a culture that still favours top-down decision-making. Second, the study confirms a strong and positive link between empowerment and involvement. Students who take part in academic or social activities tend to feel more capable, confident, and influential. This supports the first and second hypotheses and strengthens Zimmerman's (1995) and Astin's (1984) claims that participation nurtures empowerment and that learning improves through active engagement. Third, the data reveal that institutional support and participatory culture play a decisive role in shaping both empowerment and involvement. When students see fair access to opportunities and genuine inclusion in university life, their motivation and confidence increase. Conversely, when activities are poorly advertised or dominated by professors, participation declines, and empowerment weakens. These findings confirm the third hypothesis and emphasize that empowerment is not an internal state but a shared process between individuals and their institutions. True student agency emerges only when personal motivation meets structures that allow action, trust, and recognition.

3.2 Quantitative Results

The following section reports the quantitative findings that shed light on the relationship between student empowerment and social involvement. It includes both descriptive and inferential analyses. The descriptive part outlines the overall trends in students' perceptions of empowerment and involvement, while the inferential part tests the hypotheses and explores the strength of the relationships between the two constructs.

3.2.1 Descriptive Analysis

Table 3 shows data from 55 MA students who have moderate levels of empowerment across the three dimensions. The mean scores were 2.58 (SD = 1.01) for interpersonal empowerment, 2.62 (SD = .99) for interactional empowerment, and 2.75 (SD = .97) for behavioural empowerment. The results indicate that students feel somewhat more able to act and participate than to express confidence or navigate university structures. Still, the differences are small, which suggests that empowerment is generally limited and uneven across students.

Table 3
Descriptive Analysis of Students Empowerment

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Interpersonal Empowerment	55	1	4	2.58	1.013
Interactional Empowerment	55	1	5	2.62	.991
Behavioural Empowerment	55	1	4	2.75	.966

These findings reflect what Zimmerman (1995, 2000) describes as the gradual nature of empowerment, a process that begins with self-belief, develops through understanding one's environment, and leads to meaningful action. The relatively low interpersonal and interactional means point to weak confidence and limited awareness of how decisions are made or how to engage with institutional systems. This is not unusual in contexts where students' voices are rarely part of university dialogue. Cook-Sather (2006) notes that when students are excluded from decision-making, they may feel less entitled to speak or act. In the Moroccan setting, Ayad, Bennani, and Elhachloufi's (2020) observed that participation in university governance remains narrow and formal and this leaves few spaces for real student agency. The slightly higher behavioural mean might suggest that some students manage to act within small spaces of opportunity, joining clubs, volunteering, or initiating projects, but these efforts often depend on individual motivation rather than institutional support. In short, the

descriptive findings report that empowerment does exist but has not yet become a shared or supported culture within the university environment.

Concerning participants' social involvement, the quantitative results show that levels of involvement were slightly higher in academic settings than in co-curricular ones (see Table 4 below). The mean score for academic involvement was 3.27 (SD = 1.04), while co-curricular or extracurricular involvement averaged 2.75 (SD = 1.07). This pattern makes sense if we recall Astin's definition of involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (1984, p. 518), that is, most students are fairly engaged in their academic work, attending classes, participating in discussions, and completing assignments, but are less active in activities beyond the classroom such as clubs, student associations, or community events. The high standard deviations suggest notable variation among students, with some showing strong engagement and others remaining detached from university life.

Table 4
Descriptive Analysis of Social Involvement

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Academic Involvement	55	1	5	3.27	1.044
Co-curricular/Extracurricular Involvement	55	1	5	2.75	1.075

Astin (1984) reminds us, "the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to its capacity to increase student involvement" (p. 519). The lower mean in extracurricular involvement therefore points to missed opportunities for broader growth. Trowler (2010) found that students who engage in activities outside class develop stronger interpersonal and leadership skills and feel more connected to their learning community. In the Moroccan context, this gap is unsurprising. Ayad, Bennani, and Elhachloufi (2020) note that student participation in university life often remains formal and restricted, as institutional structures rarely give students a real sense of partnership. Without spaces that value student initiative, as Cook-Sather (2006) argues, it is difficult for learners to "open up spaces and minds not only to the sound but also to the presence and power of students" (p. 363). What emerges, then, is a portrait of students who are academically engaged but socially cautious, that is to say, interested in learning, yet uncertain about how much their voices and participation matter beyond the classroom.

3.2.2 Inferential Analysis

Before running inferential analyses, it is necessary to check whether the data meet the assumption of normality (see the result in Table 5). Parametric tests such as the t-test, ANOVA, Pearson correlation, and regression depend on the idea that the data (or residuals) are roughly normally distributed. If this condition is not met, the accuracy of p-values, standard errors, and effect estimates can be affected (Ghasemi & Zahediasl, 2012, p. 487). As Ghasemi and Zahediasl (2012) explain, "the assumption of normality needs to be checked for many statistical procedures, namely parametric tests, because their validity depends on it" (p. 486). They also point out that with larger samples, even small deviations from normality are likely to be detected by significance tests (p. 487). For this reason, researchers are advised to combine numerical normality tests with visual tools such as histograms and Q-Q plots to judge whether deviations are meaningful or minor (Ghasemi & Zahediasl, 2012, p. 488).

Table 5
Tests of Normality for Empowerment and Involvement

Variable	Kolmogorov–Smirnov			Shapiro–Wilk		
	Statistic	df	p	Statistic	df	p
Empowerment_Total	.185	55	< .001	.927	55	.002
Involvement_Total	.195	55	< .001	.933	55	.004

I examined whether the Empowerment and Involvement total scores followed a normal distribution using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov and the Shapiro–Wilk test. Both tests produced p-values below .01 (Empowerment: D = .185, $p < .001$; W = .927, $p = .002$; Involvement: D = .195, $p < .001$; W = .933, p

= .004), showing significant departures from normality. Considering the moderate sample size and the known sensitivity of normality tests to small deviations (Ghasemi & Zahediasl, 2012, p. 488; Field, 2016, p. 9), the distributions were treated as non-normal. As a result, subsequent analyses relied on nonparametric or robust statistical procedures.

3.2.3 Correlation Between Empowerment and Involvement

Table 6 is a Spearman correlation that examined the association between empowerment_total and involvement_total. The correlation was very strong and statistically significant ($\rho = .985$, $p < .001$, $N = 55$). This indicates that higher levels of involvement are closely associated with higher levels of empowerment among participants.

In contrast, the correlations between gender and the two main variables were weak and statistically non-significant ($\rho = -.158$, $p = .248$ for empowerment; $\rho = -.118$, $p = .392$ for involvement), suggesting that gender did not influence students' sense of involvement or empowerment in this sample. Given the non-normal distribution of the total scores and the extremely strong association between the two variables, the study relied on Spearman's rho as the main inferential test. The analysis was intended to examine association, not causation.

Table 6
Spearman's rho Correlations Among Study Variables (N = 55)

Variables	1	2	3
1.Gender	-		
2.Empowerment_Total	-.158	-	
3.Involvement_Total	-.118	.985**	-

The strong positive relationship between involvement and empowerment shows that students who take part more actively in academic, co-curricular, or community activities tend to feel more capable, confident, and willing to take initiative, which are qualities that reflect their sense of empowerment. This result supports Zimmerman's (1995) view of empowerment as a "process that varies across levels of analysis and across people" (p. 582), where active participation plays a central role in developing one's sense of agency. Likewise, Perkins and Zimmerman (1995) explain that "empowered individuals participate with others to achieve goals, exert influence, and make social change" (p. 570).

From a social-change perspective, this connection between involvement and empowerment shows how participation both expresses and strengthens people's sense of control. In this spirit, Rappaport (1984) described that empowerment is "the mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their lives" (p. 3). Thus, students' engagement in learning or community settings can improve both the interpersonal and interactional sides of empowerment, helping them move from awareness to concrete action.

The very high coefficient ($\rho = .985$) points to a near-perfect relationship between the two variables. However, this closeness may also point to some overlap between them, since both include ideas such as participation, responsibility, and influence. As noted in empowerment research, involvement can be seen as both a step toward and a reflection of empowerment (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 47).

Finally, the non-significant gender results suggest that the connection between involvement and empowerment was similar for male and female participants. This is consistent with studies showing that empowerment depends more on context and social experience than on gender itself (Christens, 2012, p. 123).

It is important, however, to note that the size of the correlation requires caution. Both empowerment and involvement were measured through brief indices and collected through the same self-report questionnaire at one point in time. This design can inflate associations because of common-method effects and because short measures may not fully separate related constructs. The strong coefficient may therefore reflect a real relationship in this context, but it may also reflect limited item breadth and conceptual proximity between the two measures. For this reason, the quantitative results are treated as exploratory and context-specific.

The very high correlation between empowerment and involvement cannot be ignored. It is possible that part of this strength comes from the way the two variables were measured. The questionnaire was short, and both constructs were assessed at the same time through self-report. Students who generally feel positive about their university experience may have responded positively across both sections. In addition, empowerment and involvement are closely related ideas. In this study, both include elements of participation and engagement, which makes it difficult to draw a sharp line between them. The sample was also limited to one MA program, where students share similar academic experiences. This may have reduced variation in responses. For these reasons, the result should be interpreted with caution. It suggests a strong link in this specific context, but it does not prove that the two constructs are fully independent or that one clearly determines the other.

3.3 Integration of Qualitative and Quantitative Findings

Reading the interview accounts alongside the statistical results makes the relationship between empowerment and involvement easier to understand. Many students did not describe empowerment as a general sense of power within the university. Instead, they spoke about concrete moments such as taking part in a conference, contributing to a discussion, organizing an event, or working with peers. In those situations, they felt capable and recognized. This helps explain why the correlation between involvement and empowerment was so strong. For these students, feeling empowered often begins with doing something, not simply believing something. At the same time, several participants made it clear that their influence rarely extends beyond small academic spaces. They may participate in class or academic events, yet still feel distant from institutional decisions. This tension between local participation and broader exclusion helps clarify why empowerment remains moderate overall, even when academic involvement appears relatively higher.

4. Conclusion

This study set out to explore how empowerment and social involvement interact in the lives of MA students at Mohammed I University. The findings point to a close and meaningful relationship between the two. Students who take part more often in academic and social activities tend to feel stronger, more confident, and more capable of influencing their environment. The statistical results show a very high link between involvement and empowerment, confirming that participation helps students build a sense of control and voice. Involvement, therefore, is not just an outcome of empowerment but one of its main sources. This supports Zimmerman's view that empowerment develops through active engagement with one's surroundings and Astin's idea that learning and growth depend on the energy and time students devote to their studies and to campus life.

The qualitative results confirm these numbers. The emerged themes demonstrate how empowerment and involvement are experienced day to day. Students feel heard inside classrooms, where they can express opinions and interact with teachers. Yet, they often feel invisible when decisions are made at higher levels. Many students link their motivation to the value of activities that help them learn new skills, meet people, and feel part of a community. Still, they face obstacles such as poor communication, lack of institutional support, and limited spaces for student-led action. These barriers turn motivation into frustration and weaken their sense of belonging.

The study shows that empowerment in higher education depends on two dimensions. One is personal: students need confidence, awareness, and motivation. The other is structural: institutions must offer fair opportunities, access to information, and a culture of participation. Without both, empowerment remains incomplete. This confirms Rappaport's view of empowerment as a mechanism that allows people and communities to gain mastery over their lives. It also supports Christens' argument that empowerment grows within relationships built on trust and mutual respect. A university that values students' voices, includes them in decisions, and recognizes their contributions creates a culture where empowerment and involvement support each other.

All in all, this study shows that students have the willingness and potential to contribute meaningfully to their universities, yet the system does not always allow them to do so. Empowerment does not come from motivation alone; it grows when institutions make space for students to act, speak, and lead.

Genuine reform in higher education starts with creating a relationship of trust between students and their universities. When students are treated as partners rather than as passive learners, they develop the confidence, creativity, and sense of belonging that true empowerment requires. Importantly, the findings reflect the experiences of students within one MA program and should not be generalized to all Moroccan universities without further investigation.

4.1 Limitations

The study has a few limitations that should be noted. The sample size was small and limited to one department, which makes the results suggestive rather than representative. Interviews were held online, which may have reduced the richness of interaction. The very strong correlation between involvement and empowerment may also reflect some conceptual overlap between the two ideas. These limits do not weaken the findings but point to the need for broader and more diverse studies that can test the same relationship in different contexts and disciplines.

4.2 Recommendations

Universities that aim to strengthen empowerment should start by listening to their students. Real inclusion begins with trust and shared responsibility. Creating student councils that participate in decision-making, supporting student-led events and clubs, and ensuring open communication about opportunities would help build a more participatory culture. Teachers can also play a major role by encouraging initiative, collaboration, and dialogue in everyday learning situations. Mentorship programs and leadership training would further help students develop the skills and confidence needed to shape their academic and social environment.

4.3 Implications

Students feel empowered when they are trusted to participate, not only when they are told their voices matter. For researchers, this calls for models that see empowerment as both psychological and structural, shaped by how students experience inclusion in their everyday academic life. For universities, the results carry a clear message. Change starts with small, practical steps that make students visible in decision-making and campus life. Clear communication, fair access to activities, and space for student-led projects can make participation real rather than symbolic. Teachers can help by giving students a say in class decisions, encouraging them to organize events, or guiding them toward leadership roles. When universities share power with students instead of speaking for them, empowerment becomes part of the culture rather than a slogan.

4.4 Future Research

Future research should include a wider range of students and compare different universities to explore how context shapes empowerment. Studies could also examine how digital tools and social media influence student voice and participation in Moroccan higher education. A longitudinal approach could trace how empowerment evolves through time and how institutional reforms affect it. Integrating frameworks such as intercultural and critical digital literacy would also provide new insight into how empowerment functions in digital and global learning spaces.

Competing Interests

The author declare that they have no competing interests.

Availability of data and materials

The dataset supporting the conclusions of this article is available in the Google Drive repository https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1BsFAADhQssgv9v58m_atoLQNhIEjZbvj4yDauBOEIdA/edit

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the financial support provided by the National Center for Scientific and Technical Research (CNRST) under the PhD-Associate Scholarship – PASS. The authors also acknowledge the use of ChatGPT (OpenAI), which was employed in two limited ways: (i) to proofread and enhance the clarity of the manuscript, and (ii) to assist in structuring and interpreting the data analysis. All outputs from the tool were critically reviewed and revised by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final content.

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Biography

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Appendix A

Survey Instrument: Student Empowerment and Social Involvement Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to measure students' perceptions of empowerment and their level of social involvement within the university context. It consisted of two sections: demographic information and construct-based Likert-scale items.

All construct items were measured on a five-point Likert scale:

- 1 = Strongly Disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Neutral
- 4 = Agree
- 5 = Strongly Agree

Section 1: Demographic Information

1. Gender

- Male
- Female

2. Have you previously participated in any university activities (e.g., clubs, volunteering, events)?

- Yes
- No

3. Type of activities previously participated in (if yes) (Open-ended response)

Section 2: Student Empowerment (Based on Zimmerman, 1995)

Interpersonal Empowerment

- 4. I believe my opinions are valuable within the university community.

Interactional Empowerment

- 5. I feel I understand how the university works and how to use its resources.

Behavioral Empowerment

- 6. I feel I actively take part in activities that affect my university community.

The Empowerment_Total score was calculated as the mean of items 4–6.

Section 3: Social Involvement (Based on Astin, 1984)

Academic Involvement

- 7. I feel I actively participate in class discussions, complete my assignments on time, and study regularly.

Co-curricular / Extracurricular Involvement

- 8. I feel I regularly take part in student clubs, volunteer activities, or events organized by the university.

The Involvement_Total score was calculated as the mean of items 7–8.