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Educazione umanistica per uno sviluppo inclusivo: potenziare le competenze trasversali in un contesto di cambiamento sociale e digitale

Humanistic Education for Inclusive Development: Enhancing Soft Skills Amid Social and Digital Change

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Riassunto: Il presente studio esplora il contributo della formazione umanistica per lo sviluppo delle competenze sociali all'interno dell'istruzione superiore, in uno specifico contesto di transizione culturale e tecnologica. Secondo una prospettiva empirica basata su metodi misti, sono stati coinvolti 120 studenti italiani e spagnoli; i risultati confermano che l'educazione umanistica promuove la consapevolezza etica, la comunicazione e le capacità di lavoro di squadra. La prassi pedagogica deve favorire l'inclusione al fine di rispondere all'urgente necessità di innovare le pratiche educative che promuovono l'apprendimento della sostenibilità e della resilienza. La ricerca sostiene con forza l'importanza di programmi di studio che preparino i laureati a navigare nella rete complessa delle interazioni con una consapevolezza sociale.

Parole chiave: educazione umanistica, pratiche pedagogiche, rivoluzione digitale.

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Abstract: This study examines the role of humanistic education in developing social skills in higher education, particularly in the context of social and digital transitions. An empirical perspective adopts mixed methods, engaging 120 Master's students, which suggests that humanistic education promotes ethical awareness, communication, and teamwork skills. The pedagogical praxis needs to foster inclusion to address the urgent need to innovate educational practices that encourage learning about sustainability and resilience. This research makes a robust case for curricula that equip graduates to navigate the complex network of interactions with social awareness.

Keywords: humanities education, pedagogy practices, digital change management.

Introduction[1]

The 4th Industrial Revolution has radically transformed the educational scenario, demanding a comprehensive reassessment of teaching and learning practices in higher education organisations. These significant changes, marked by swift Technological progress, globalisation, and cultural shift paradigms, have forced educational institutions to adjust their curricula to accommodate the different requirements of students (Elayyan, 2021 p. 28). There is thus a strong demand for humanities education that would form part of the educational reforms being called for under such unprecedented change, to help students navigate complex, integrated work environments successfully. Humanities education places empathy, ethical thinking, and holistic humanistic training at its core; however, it provides a suitable framework within which skills and competencies relevant to contemporary society can be fostered (Nussbaum, 2010 p. 45).

Problems in the educational institutions of Italy and Spain have made the humanities-based approach at higher education an essential principle for inclusion and the development of critical social skills. Humanities can redefine the approach to higher education to ensure inclusion and facili-

1. G. F. contributed to drafting paragraphs 1,2, while N.C. was involved in drafting paragraphs 3,4,5,and AJLR wrote the paragraph 6 and Data analyses setting.

tate the development of critical social skills among students. Communication, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence abilities are increasingly recognised as essential factors that require a certain level of mastery in performing work in contemporary workplaces (Spöttl, 2021 p. 38).

This investigation utilised a hybrid approach to assess the experiences of 120 master's students from Italy and Spain regarding the impact of humanistic instruction on their ethical beliefs and the development of soft skills. The purpose of this investigation is to generate significant findings that could enhance mathematics pedagogy and orient curricular changes, resulting in a more effective teaching experience in both countries.

1. Theoretical Foundations: Humanistic Education as a Response to Social and Digital Change

The humanistic education theoretical framework is based on the premise that real learning extends beyond purely cognitive development to encompass the development of emotional intelligence, ethical reasoning, and social consciousness. This has relevance to current educational practice in light of challenges similar to those brought about by the Fourth Industrial Revolution. It emphasises learning as something that does not involve the acquisition of facts, but rather a holistic method that develops an individual's capacity to relate to themselves, others, and the world fruitfully (Nussbaum, 2010 p. 45). Humanistic education is based on a few fundamental theories, including the capability approach, as described by Martha Nussbaum. She says that education should direct its efforts toward developing human capabilities-the real opportunities available to people to achieve lives they have reason to value. (Nussbaum, 2010). That is more detailed than saying that such elements in the curriculum would make students fit not only for getting a job but also for making ethical decisions and being good citizens.

Soft skills are playing a greater role and are increasingly crucial in the new global labour market. Several studies have highlighted an increasing tendency among employers to prioritise in recruitment decision-making potential employees who possess more soft skills than technical skills (OECD, 2018, p. 15).

Communication, teamwork, leadership, flexibility, and other aspects of emotional intelligence complement the abilities most corporate cultures value for fruitful collaboration among diverse participants from various work environments (World Economic Forum, 2020). Once infused into the curriculum, this content becomes a vehicle for instilling in students a steady flow of consciousness that leads to upright action and social responsibility. Besides focusing on ethical reasoning, humanistic education attends to the emotional dimensions of learning. Emotional intelligence involves self-awareness, self-control, empathy, and social skills. Increasing appreciation places it as a crucial factor in effective leadership and good relations (Goleman, 1995). Studies indicate that individuals with high emotional intelligence are better equipped to handle challenging social situations, resolve conflicts, and foster cooperative settings. Including training on emotional intelligence in their curricula will enable educational institutions to help students acquire the interpersonal competencies vital for effective participation in all aspects of life (Mayer *et al.*, 2016 p. 290).

Additionally, the humanistic educational approach aligns closely with the principles of inclusion and diversity. Cultural and social pluralism characterise the globalised world; thus, a humanistic educational approach includes fostering an inclusive environment, which is particularly important in institutions where interaction occurs among people from diverse backgrounds. The institution must make all students feel at home and welcome to contribute their perspectives on issues that concern them. When they express a commitment to inclusivity that makes them feel they belong, it enhances learning for everyone.

2. Integrating Artificial Intelligence for Inclusive and Personalised Learning in Adult Education

Significant progress in Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology has begun transforming the adult education environment, providing opportunities and also presenting challenges that require serious reflection and examination (Russell & Norvig, 2021). In practice, AI can dynamically identify pathways in learning through big data analysis, thereby tailoring content to suit the needs of particular learners.

Apart from personalisation, AI can upgrade the quality of feedback provided to learners. AI systems can support an immediate feedback infrastructure where timely insights about performance and existing gaps are communicated to the learners. For instance, AI could evaluate answers given in a quiz or assignment and propose further means through which comprehension can be improved. Quick analysis instils a growth mindset in learners, as they promptly realise their weaknesses; thus, accountability is fostered, enhancing active reading as it unveils its discovery phase by rectifying mistakes.

One more essential function that AI has in adult education is its ability to foster inclusivity. Educational institutions must use AI technology responsibly and transparently to establish trust between themselves and learners or educators. The prospects of enhancing learning experiences are immense when applied carefully and ethically to support ALL learners. Thus, the prescription is that continuous research on the intersections between AI and Education should be carried out, as people advocate for the maximisation of benefits while pointing out the ethical issues raised by such advances. The ultimate goal is to unleash the potential of adult learners to achieve full capacity as agents of continuous development in response to global changes.

3. Comparative Analysis of Educational Policies for Inclusivity in Italy and Spain

Italy and Spain are countries with rich traditions in educational policies, offering valuable insights into how to integrate humanistic education and the development of soft skills into higher education curricula. These are countries that traditionally attach great significance to inclusion, as well as responding to a diverse student population and their needs, especially in light of the challenges presented by the Fourth Industrial Revolution (OECD, 2018 p. 15).

In Italy, the architecture of the plan for inclusive education is significantly shaped by Law 107/2015, which emphasises inclusivity and the requirement for schools to adopt teaching methods responsive to the diverse needs of learners. In this legislation, strategies by educational institutions at all levels to support students with disabilities and those

from disadvantaged backgrounds were made a requirement; it provides high-quality access to education with an equity dimension. These are the basic factors that form human soft skills, which labour markets have recently recognised as very important. The input enables students to confront various complex ethical issues and assume some degree of responsibility in society, which prepares them for the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

Spain operates under the LOMLOE (Organic Law of Education), which emphasises a general approach to education in the context of a multicultural society. A comparative review of educational policies from Italy and Spain reveals a notable focus on social skills in higher education (Caggiano, 2023). An emphasis on humanistic education and soft skills by Italian and Spanish educational institutions will empower university graduates in these countries to successfully navigate the complex job markets that prevail today.

4. The Applied Research: Evaluating Humanistic Education's Impact on Student Development

This applied study employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate the effects of humanistic education on the development of soft skills and ethical awareness among master's students in Italy and Spain. Quantitative data were collected first to identify general trends, followed by qualitative focus groups to explore and contextualise these findings. This methodological integration ensured a clear triangulation of data, thereby enhancing the internal validity and interpretative depth of the results.

Research Hypotheses: Based on the theoretical foundations of humanistic pedagogy (e.g., Rogers, 1983; Noddings, 2005; Mezirow, 1997; Fata, 2004), the study formulated the following hypotheses:

Humanistic education positively influences students' development of soft skills (communication, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence).

Ethical awareness is positively correlated with the main dimensions of soft skills.

Italian and Spanish students show significant differences in their levels of soft skills and engagement.

Participants: The study included 120 master' students, evenly distributed between Italy and Spain. Participants were enrolled in programs such as Leadership and Humanistic Management, Business Administration, and Education.

In Italy, data were collected at the University of Rome TRE. The Italian sample consisted of 40% males and 60% females, aged 23–34 years (M = 27.5, SD = 2.3). Approximately 55% had worked in education, management, or social services.

In Spain, the universities sampled were the University of Burgos and the University of Salamanca. The Spanish sample was composed of 45% males and 55% females. Their ages ranged from 22 to 30 years (M = 26.8, SD = 1.9). Relevant work experience was reported by 60% of the respondents.

Participants belonged to different disciplines and had diverse academic and cultural backgrounds, which allowed for the exploration of how contexts shape perceptions of humanistic education. Disciplinary diversity included psychology, economics, law, humanities, and engineering.

Instruments and Measures: The quantitative component utilised a structured survey with Likert-type items (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) assessing self-perceived competencies in communication, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence. Internal consistency was verified through Cronbach's alpha, which indicated acceptable reliability for all subscales. A pilot test was conducted among a small sample to ensure clarity and reliability of the items.

The qualitative component consisted of two focus groups, one held in Italy and the other in Spain, each comprising 10–12 participants. Discussions followed a semi-structured interview protocol focusing on three domains: (a) ethical awareness, (b) engagement with the program, and (c) the perceived relevance of soft skills. The structure allowed facilitators to pursue emergent themes while maintaining consistency across groups.

Procedure: Data collection occurred in three phases: Survey administration to all participants across both countries.

Conduct focus group discussions with a subsample of respondents to further understand the patterns identified in the survey data. Triangulation of results by comparing quantitative outcomes with qualitative themes to ensure validity and interpretive coherence.

Data Analysis: Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, independent-samples t-tests, and Pearson's correlation coefficients. Qualitative data were analysed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which involved iterative coding, theme development, and interpretation. The integration of both datasets followed a convergent mixed-methods framework, enabling a direct comparison between numerical findings and participant narratives.

Quantitative Results: The survey data indicated high overall levels of soft skills and ethical awareness among students. Ethical awareness was positively correlated with communication ($r = 0.72$), teamwork ($r = 0.68$), and leadership ($r = 0.75$), all of which were significant at the $p < 0.01$ level.

Independent-samples t-tests revealed significant differences between Italian and Spanish students:

Communication: Italians ($M = 4.5$, $SD = 0.4$) > Spaniards ($M = 4.1$, $SD = 0.5$), $t(118) = 3.25$, $p < .01$

Leadership: Italians ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 0.5$) > Spaniards ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 0.6$), $t(118) = 3.45$, $p < .01$

Engagement: Italians ($M = 4.6$, $SD = 0.4$) > Spaniards ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 0.5$), $t(118) = 3.05$, $p < .05$

Students enrolled in Leadership and Humanistic Management programs scored higher in ethical awareness and soft skills compared to their peers in Business Administration and Education, confirming that the program's focus and pedagogical structure have a positive influence on developmental outcomes.

Qualitative Findings: Focus group data illuminated the lived experiences behind the quantitative patterns. Italian participants reported higher engagement, describing humanistic education as fostering critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and personal responsibility. One student shared:

"Ethical decision-making content in our coursework has made me realise that I have responsibilities to be aware of as a future leader. It is not just about getting results, but how we get the results."

Spanish students acknowledged the importance of humanistic training but spotted a lack of more applied and experiential learning opportunities. They found the program to be substantially theoretical, which restricts the application of soft skills in real-world practice. This observation answers Fata's (2004) argument on significant learning: *"students achieve significant learning when they can relate theory to lived experience"*.

Cultural differences also emerged: Italians emphasised collaborative and community-based learning, while Spaniards spoke of competition in academia, which could be construed as a lack of development of cooperative skills.

Discussion: Findings confirm that humanistic education contributes significantly to the development of ethical sensitivity and soft skills, echoing the principles of humanistic pedagogy that emphasise self-awareness, empathy, and moral reasoning (Noddings, 2005; Rogers, 1983).

The positive correlations between ethical awareness and interpersonal competencies suggest that fostering ethical reflection within curricula strengthens students' ability to communicate, collaborate, and lead effectively.

Cross-cultural differences underline the importance of contextualising pedagogical approaches: while Italian programs emphasised collaboration and reflective practice, Spanish institutions may benefit from integrating more experiential and practice-based components.

Conclusion: To enhance the curriculum, universities can incorporate service-learning, internships, and group projects as assignments within courses to connect theory with practice.[14] This aligns with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997) and modern AI-enhanced adaptive learning models, which propose the development of curricula to foster both ethical sensitivity and competencies related to employability. However, this is exactly what the ever-changing professional contexts require: training that reflects those needs. This mixed-methods study, combining quantitative rigour with qualitative depth, provides empirical evidence

supporting the effectiveness of humanistic education in sensitising ethical consciousness and developing soft skills among master's students in Italy and Spain. Triangulation of data reaffirmed the outcomes between theory and application, supporting the relevance of humanistic pedagogy as a framework for higher education and lifelong learning in an era where artificial intelligence amplifies instruction.

6. Conclusion

This study, therefore, considers humanistic education as a transformative agent in higher education, which is regarded as paramount, especially in the changing social and digital contexts of Italy and Spain. From the results obtained, humanistic training has been recognised as crucial for developing essential skills, including ethical consciousness and emotional intelligence, among students. Institutions of learning need to develop and implement inclusive pedagogical approaches that involve all learners in response to the challenges arising from rapid technological development, compounded by societal heterogeneity. The focus on inclusivity falls squarely within the education plea for innovative practice that embraces the challenges of a multicultural world and the new dimensions of relationships. Humanistic principles in curricula will create learning settings that lead to academic achievement, as well as social cohesion and critical thinking, helping learners adjust to the demanding and dynamic nature of work while fostering a sense of belonging and shared responsibility.

In education, AI can help make teaching systems more personalisable to meet students' varying needs, supporting the core goals of educational humanism. Universities, however, continue to recognise their moral responsibilities related to these tools while promoting equity and equality in the educational process.

The sharing of effective methods and resources by educators, policymakers, and the community would help create a more powerful yet supportive educational environment that promotes individual responsibility and success in an ever-evolving world.

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