Unveiling the Potential of Artificial Intelligence and Humanistic Management in Enriching Higher Education: Insights from Italian and Mexican Universities

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Abstract

In the rapidly evolving landscape of educational technologies, especially with the rise of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI), it is crucial to understand these concepts and effectively use these innovations to shape contemporary educational practices. This article delves into a comprehensive analysis of the strategic initiatives within academic institutions, predominantly focusing on humanities, law, economics, and socio-political sciences courses. A primary emphasis is placed on integrating soft skills and Artificial Intelligence (AI) competencies in Master's programs, as existing literature highlights their critical role in enhancing employability and workplace performance. By exploring the strategies implemented by Italian and Mexican universities, the study provides valuable insights into the transformational approaches designed to enhance soft skills and AI competencies. The findings uncover significant differences and convergences, shedding light on the diverse responses of institutions to the evolving demands of the contemporary academic and professional landscape.

Keywords: Higher education; Artificial Intelligence; Soft skills; Curriculum design, master's program

First submission: 09/08/2024, accepted: 13/12/2024

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Doi: 10.3280/ess2-2024oa18314

1. Introduction

The evolving educational landscape warrants a strategic analysis of universities in Italy and Mexico to effectively address the challenges posed by the AI era and Humanistic Management principles. The topic holds great significance, as the incorporation of AI into higher education curricula is increasingly acknowledged as vital for equipping students to meet the evolving demands of the professional landscape. In this context, understanding the concepts of soft skills and AI competencies is essential, as existing literature emphasizes their critical role in enhancing employability and workplace performance.

By exploring these strategies, the study seeks to illuminate the effectiveness of current approaches and identify best practices that can be adopted across various educational contexts. This article presents a comparative analysis between Italian and Mexican universities regarding the strategies adopted to raise awareness of Artificial Intelligence (AI) among their Master's students.

The initial sections of this study explore the strategies utilized by higher education systems to enhance competencies in the use of AI tools. In contrast, the latter sections focus on an exploratory study that includes the administration of a survey aimed at gathering students' perceptions of the relationship between soft skills and AI.

In higher education, AI offers personalized learning experiences, fosters student collaboration, and facilitates fair and practical assessments. Moreover, it supports the development of essential soft skills such as communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity, enabling students to navigate the complexities of the real world. Additionally, Master's programs are increasingly incorporating AI learning opportunities, allowing students to become familiar with fundamental concepts, tools, and practical applications of AI across various professional contexts. This dual role of AI – as both an enriching teaching tool and a vital competency for future professionals – highlights its growing importance in higher education and the modern job market.

To comprehensively understand the emphasis on soft skills development in correlation with AI competencies, a comparative study of Italian and Mexican Master's students was conducted. The research collected data from 300 Master's students, featuring a balanced gender distribution and diverse academic backgrounds. This rigorous examination of sociodemographic data enables an analysis of variations in perceptions of soft skills, teaching methods, and AI competencies development between Italian and Mexican students. This comprehensive approach allows us to draw parallels and distinctions in how Italian and Mexican universities leverage educational strategies to foster the

growth of essential soft skills among their students. We seek to offer actionable recommendations for enhancing soft skills development and preparing students for leadership roles in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

Furthermore, this study goes beyond theoretical analysis by incorporating empirical evidence from selected Master's case studies. By synthesizing existing literature on soft skills development in higher education, we aim to contribute valuable insights to the ongoing discourse on academic excellence and innovation.

The exploration of similarities and differences in the approaches taken by universities in Italy and Mexico underscores the significance of contextual factors in shaping educational practices. By illuminating the strategies employed by these institutions, we seek to offer actionable recommendations for enhancing soft skills development and preparing students for leadership roles in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

The World Economic Forum engages prominent political, economic, and cultural leaders and representatives from various sectors of society to define global, regional, and industrial agendas (World Economic Forum, 2020). In a recent report, the Forum highlighted a study on human skills, identifying the ten most valuable skills for skilled professionals in the 21st century.

This reflects a growing number of reports published by essential studies and research centres that aim to strengthen the connection between education, training systems, and economic development.

The OECD has been expanding the notion of skills as the focus of human training, shifting towards assessing socio-emotional skills, commonly called non-cognitive skills. Universities worldwide are increasingly required to provide highly skilled graduates able to cope successfully in response to the evolving and more complex expectations of the contemporary world of work in the modern world (Possa, 2006).

Additionally, the rapid expansion of higher education in Europe over the past two decades has led to questioning the quality of the graduate labour market and their ability to meet the needs of employers (Elias and Purcell, 2004, p. 56).

There is an increasing 'gap' between graduates' competencies and skills and the work environment's requirements and demands in an ever more mobile and globalized context (King, 2003). Recently, efforts have been made to enhance graduates' employability and ensure that research informs education. Teaching and research have traditionally been regarded as distinct disciplines. Balkin and Mello (2012) argue that the disconnection between teaching and research is a long-standing cultural perception embedded in academia and particularly prevalent in most business schools. In their view, the realities in Today's schools encourage, if not mandate, closer links to faculty's teaching and

research activities. Research-informed teaching activities utilize information and perspectives from research to improve curriculum content and student motivation (Renshaw, 2016, p. 63). The university mentioned here has significantly supported RIT initiatives to achieve Higher Education. The adopted perspective emphasises the transferability of skills from one occupation to another, both in a transversal and vertical sense. The most transferable competencies are commonly referred to as soft skills; for instance, in the New Vision for Education project initiated by the World Economic Forum, about one-third of the qualities (six out of sixteen) deemed essential for the future of an "active citizen", and their well-being belongs to the realm of non-cognitive skills.

Developing soft skills is increasingly crucial to higher education and professional success. Curriculum design and pedagogy play a vital role in shaping educational experiences and preparing students for the challenges of the modern workforce. Master programs, in particular, aim to excel in their chosen fields and equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills to excel in their chosen fields. Soft skills like communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and AI are essential for effective leadership. They enable individuals to navigate complex work environments, collaborate with others, and find innovative solutions to challenges. Understanding the development of these skills,s among Master's students is very important to educators and curriculum designers (Caggiano, Belsaguy, 2023).

2. Curriculum Design and Master Skills

Society faces multifaceted and dynamic challenges regarding university education qualifications and the strategic development of organisations and institutions for teaching in humanities, legal economics, and socio-political sciences. Global society is experiencing rapid technological advancements, shifting economic landscapes, and complex socio-political issues. To address these challenges, universities must adapt their curriculum design and teaching strategies to ensure that graduates have the necessary skills and competencies to navigate and thrive in an ever-changing environment (Meyer, Norman, 2020, p. 15).

Curriculum design approaches vary between countries and institutions, reflecting their educational curricula and goals. In Italy, Master's programs often follow structured and academic-focused curricula, emphasising theoretical knowledge acquisition (Ragusa et al., 2023, p. 123). On the other hand, Mexican Master's programs may have a more flexible and interdisciplinary approach, allowing students to explore the practical

application of their knowledge (Del Gobbo, 2021, p. 4). Learning methods employed in Italian universities often involve lectures, seminars, and individual assignments. The emphasis is on acquiring theoretical knowledge and developing analytical thinking skills.

In contrast, Mexican universities may emphasise project-based learning, group discussions, and real-world case studies, promoting practical application and problem-solving skills. The different approaches to curriculum design and learning methods can significantly impact the development of soft skills. Italy focuses on theoretical knowledge acquisition, which may provide a strong foundation for critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Gonzalez, 2024, p. 457). However, it may offer fewer opportunities for students to develop their teamwork and communication skills through practical application. In Mexico, emphasising practical application and project-based learning can enhance students' ability to collaborate and communicate effectively in a team setting. These experiences can foster problem-solving and adaptability skills as students are exposed to real-world challenges and must navigate them (Evans, 2019). By incorporating a balanced approach that combines theoretical knowledge acquisition with practical application and teamwork, educators can better prepare Master students for the demands of the modern workforce.

One of the critical challenges is the increasing demand for interdisciplinary knowledge and skills.

Curriculum designers must incorporate interdisciplinary approaches in Master's programs, allowing students to gain a broader understanding of various disciplines and develop the ability to integrate and apply knowledge from different areas (Biasi et al., 2019, p. 135). Another challenge is the need to foster global citizenship and intercultural competence. Universities can address this challenge by incorporating international experiences, such as study abroad programs, international collaborations, and cross-cultural projects, into the curriculum. Faculty members are crucial in implementing innovative teaching strategies, integrating soft skills into the curriculum, and staying updated with the latest developments in their respective fields. In conclusion, university education qualifications and strategic development of organisations and institutions for teaching in the humanities, economics, and socio-political sciences are essential in responding to the current challenges faced by global society.

2.1 *Learning Methods and Soft Skills for Higher Education*

Learning methods and soft skills for higher education are essential for preparing students for success in academic and professional endeavours. In a rapidly evolving and competitive environment, students must develop effective

learning strategies beyond simple memorisation, problem-solving abilities, and the capacity to adapt to new situations. Higher education institutions should prioritise the development of soft skills by integrating them into the curriculum, providing opportunities for experiential learning, and offering support services and resources to enhance students' personal and professional growth (López-Alcarria et al., 2019).

These words encompass a broad range of human capacities that always involve two elements: action and connection. Aristotle refers to virtues or skills specific to thinking (dianetic virtues) and virtues or abilities specific to action (ethical virtues) to prevent misunderstandings. However, the entire person is always involved, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions (Pellerey, 2023, p. 15).

The ancient Greek term "Meraki," which has recently resurfaced in political debates, denotes wholeheartedly dedicating oneself to a task, including one's core values. In the Anglo-Saxon work context, it is more common to use the term "soft skills" instead of "personal expertise," attributing certain specific characteristics to them that personal skills may not possess, such as easier development, measurement, and articulation based on the tasks, projects, and rules at hand. Additionally, they appear to be more easily transferable (Caggiano and D'Amante, 2022). Another approach is using the term "soft skills," developed in the world of work, which contrasts soft skills with hard skills. On the other hand, the cultural context in which non-cognitive skills have emerged in the past decade explains the reasons behind some scepticism and critical reactions.

2.2 *Role of Artificial Intelligence in Enhancing Teaching Strategies and as a Desired Competency in Master's Programmes*

Artificial Intelligence (AI) represents a set of emerging technologies and a powerful tool to enhance teaching strategies for developing soft skills and as an increasingly desired competency among future professionals. Over the past decade, there has been a rapid surge of interest in Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) technologies (Ali et al., 2024; Moorhouse et al., 2023), particularly in educational settings, including primary and secondary schools and universities. Recent advancements in GenAI promise to revolutionise teaching and assessment practices by opening up new opportunities. However, they also raise concerns about academic integrity (Cotton et al., 2023; Nikolic et al., 2023), equity (Sandvik et al., 2023), and the need to provide adequate support for teachers in designing and using educational tools supported by such technologies consciously and responsibly (Wang and Zhang, 2021). AI can create personalised learning experiences in higher education, foster student

collaboration, and promote fair and practical assessments. Moreover, AI can facilitate the development of fundamental soft skills such as communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity, allowing students to experiment with real and complex situations (Holt et al., 2022; Lee and Kim, 2022). Concurrently, acquiring AI skills is becoming increasingly relevant for Master's candidates as companies and organisations seek professionals capable of understanding, utilising, and harnessing AI to enhance decision-making processes, operational efficiency, and competitiveness in the job market. As a result, Master's programmes should integrate AI learning opportunities, enabling students to gain familiarity with fundamental concepts, tools, and practical applications of AI in various professional contexts.

This dual role of AI as a tool to enrich teaching strategies and as an essential competency for future professionals demonstrates its growing significance in the higher education context and the modern job market.

3. Curriculum Design and Master Skills

Soft skills, often referred to as non-technical or transferable skills, are essential in both academic and professional contexts. They encompass a range of personal attributes and interpersonal abilities that empower individuals to navigate and succeed in various situations.

The significance of developing soft skills within Italian and Mexican Master's programmes is underscored by the growing recognition of their importance in higher education and the pressing need to integrate them into curricula. Reputable studies indicate that soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability significantly enhance employability and career advancement (Schleutker et al., 2019).

Italian Master's programmes increasingly acknowledge the necessity of soft skills, particularly in response to evolving job market demands. Some programmes offer specific courses or modules dedicated to cultivating these skills, while others implicitly integrate them through project work and collaborative learning activities. Likewise, there is a burgeoning recognition of the value of soft skills within Mexican higher education. Mexican Master's programmes frequently prioritise the development of soft skills through project-based learning, internships, and community engagement, enabling students to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings while enhancing their interpersonal and problem-solving capabilities.

Furthermore, understanding the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) competencies is crucial, as they can facilitate the development of soft skills. In a context where AI is increasingly relevant in both academic and professional

spheres, the ability to comprehend, utilize, and integrate AI into daily activities has become vital for future professionals the ability to comprehend, utilize, and integrate AI into daily activities has become vital for future professionals. Research indicates that integrating AI competencies into Master's programmes can foster the growth of essential soft skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and effective communication (AlAfna et al., 2024). AI competencies also provide students with opportunities to confront and navigate complex situations, thereby contributing to the development of transferable skills like flexibility and adaptability.

To comprehensively examine the interplay between soft skills development and AI competencies, the research questions focus specifically on understanding students' perceptions of the relationship between soft skills and AI competencies.

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews with a quantitative survey to provide a holistic understanding of the issue. The survey was designed based on insights gathered from preliminary interviews with faculty and students, ensuring its relevance to the educational context. To validate the survey instrument, a pilot test was conducted with a small group of students to refine the questions and ensure clarity. The final version of the survey comprised Likert-scale questions aimed at measuring students' perceptions of the effectiveness of their programmes in fostering both soft skills and AI competencies. Additionally, open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences and provide qualitative data that complement the quantitative findings.

The purpose of the quantitative survey was to assess how effectively the Master's programmes in both countries are integrating soft skills and AI competencies into their curricula. This comparative analysis will yield valuable insights for curriculum designers, educators, and policymakers, enhancing the integration of soft skills and AI competencies in Master's programmes and ultimately promoting effective education that prepares students for the challenges of the professional world.

Sample: The sample for this study consisted of 300 Master's students, with 150 participants from Italy and 150 from Mexico. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who had completed at least one semester of their Master's program, ensuring that they had sufficient exposure to both the curriculum and the associated teaching methodologies. The demographic characteristics of the participants were carefully recorded, including gender distribution and academic backgrounds, to provide context for the analysis.

Regarding the demographic characteristics of the participants, the Italian sample consisted of 75 females (50%) and 75 males (50%). The age distribution of the Italian participants showed that 40% were between 25 and 30 years old,

30% were between 31 and 35 years old, and the remaining 30% were above 35 years old. In the Mexican sample, there were 90 males (60%) and 60 females (40%). Of the age distribution of the Mexican participants, 50% were between 25 and 30 years old, 35% were between 31 and 35, and the remaining 15% were above 35. The data revealed a diverse range of academic backgrounds among the Italian participants. Approximately 30% of the participants had a background in business and economics, 25% were from humanities and social sciences, 20% were from engineering and technology, 15% were from natural sciences, and the remaining 10% were from other disciplines such as arts and communication. Similarly, various academic backgrounds were observed among the Mexican participants. Approximately 35% of the participants had a background in social sciences, 30% were from engineering and technology, 20% were from business and economics, 10% were from natural sciences, and the remaining 5% were from other fields such as arts and humanities. These demographic characteristics provide insights into the sample's composition and highlight the gender distribution and age ranges within the Italian and Mexican Master student populations. These factors should be considered when educational methods are related to leadership skills.

Procedure and Tools; The research instrument consisted of an online questionnaire to assess the participant's awareness and understanding of various soft skills, including leadership skills. It also included items to evaluate the participants' perceptions of the teaching methods and learning experiences associated with these skills. The online questionnaire was distributed to the participants from June to August 2023, allowing for a convenient and efficient data collection process. Participants were provided with a secure link to access the questionnaire, which they could complete at their convenience within the specified timeframe. The questionnaire incorporated Likert-scale questions to measure the participants' agreement or disagreement with statements concerning each soft skill. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement on a scale ranging from strongly disagree to agree strongly. Additionally, open-ended questions were included to allow participants to provide more detailed responses and insights into their experiences with teaching methods and educational approaches related to AI competencies. Any necessary adjustments were made based on the feedback received during the pre-testing phase.

Data Analysis: The collected data from the online questionnaire were subjected to various statistical analyses using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Firstly, a descriptive analysis was conducted to examine the sociodemographic variables of the sample, providing an overview of the participants' characteristics such as age, gender, educational background, and work experience. This analysis helped establish a clear participant profile

and understand potential demographic differences between Italian and Mexican Master's students. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to explore the differences between the two groups. The ANOVA examined any significant variations between Italian and Mexican students' perceptions of soft skills, teaching methods, and AI competencies development. This analysis provided insights into whether the two groups had significant differences in the responses to the questionnaire items. These statistical techniques provided a more in-depth understanding of the data. They allowed for identifying key factors influencing AI competencies development in both Italian and Mexican Master students. This comprehensive methodological framework allows for a nuanced understanding of how institutional strategies impact student experiences and skills development, thereby addressing the overarching theme of the article.

Results: The data analysis revealed statistically significant differences between Italian and Mexican Master students regarding their perceptions of soft skills and the educational methods related to them. Firstly, Italian Master students reported significantly higher levels of proficiency in theoretical knowledge acquisition ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.68$) compared to Mexican Master students ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 0.72$), $t(200) = 3.65$, $p < 0.001$. This finding supports the notion that Italian universities tend to have a more structured curriculum focused on theoretical understanding. This significant difference suggests that the Italian curriculum design emphasises a more traditional lecture-based approach, while the Mexican curriculum design promotes active and participatory learning methods. This considerable difference indicates that the Mexican educational system promotes a student-centred approach, empowering students to participate actively in their learning process. The statistical analysis provides robust evidence supporting the theoretical framework, highlighting the differences in curriculum design, soft skills development, and educational methods between Italian and Mexican Master students.

Tab. 1 - Table 1: ANOVA analysis between groups (Italians and Mexicans) for Teaching Methods and Leadership-related Soft Skills

N	**Group 1: Italians**	**Group 2: MexicansXX**	F-value	p-value
Lectures and Seminars	M = 4.15, SD = 0.71	M = 4.46, SD = 0.62	2.87	<0.01
Case Studies	M = 3.98, SD = 0.65	M = 4.25, SD = 0.68	1,79	0.08
Project-based Learning|	M = 4.12, SD = 0.72	M = 4.08, SD = 0.69	0.23	0.63

		Soft Skills		
Communication Skills	M = 4.56, SD = 0.58	M = 4.32, SD =0.64	3.21	<0.01
Teamwork skills	M = 4.25, SD = 0.68	M = 4.30, SD = 0.66	0.32	0.57
AI skills	M = 4.48, SD = 0.61	M = 4.40, SD = 0.59	2.84	0.87

Tab. 2 - Correlation of Soft Skills among Italian and Mexican Master Students

N	***Italian Master Students***	***Mexicans Master Students***
Soft Skills		
Communication Skills	r = 0.65, p < 0.001	r = 0.65, p < 0.001
Leadership skills	*r = 0.52, p < 0.001*	of r = 0.72, p < 0.001.
AI Skills	*r=0.75, p<0.001)*	*(r = 0.71, p < 0.001)*

The data indicated a significant positive correlation between communication and leadership skills among Italian and Mexican Master's students. Italian Master students showed a correlation of $r = 0.65$, $p < 0.001$. This significant positive correlation aligns with existing literature, underscoring the vital role and effective communication in developing leadership qualities.

Improving communication skills can effectively contribute to enhancing leadership abilities in both student populations. Additionally, a notable positive correlation was identified between AI and leadership skills among Italian Master's students ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$) and Mexican Master's students ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.001$). This discovery aligns with existing research and underscores the pivotal role of collaboration and teamwork in fostering leadership capabilities. The significant positive correlation ($r = 0.75$, $p < 0.001$) between AI skills and leadership attributes indicates a significant association between competence in Artificial Intelligence and effective leadership. This correlation affirms the growing relevance of AI skills in shaping leadership capabilities in the modern academic and professional landscape, emphasising the need for educational

institutions to integrate both soft skills and AI competencies into their curricula to better prepare students for future challenges.

4. Conclusions

This comprehensive analysis delves into the strategic examination of academic institutions offering courses in humanities, law, economics, and socio-political sciences, addressing the global challenges of higher education in the era of Artificial Intelligence and Humanistic Management. The study thoroughly analyses the strategies adopted by Italian and Mexican universities to enhance soft skills in Master's programmes by integrating principles of AI and Humanistic Management. It emphasises the significance of soft skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability and presents a comparative analysis of curriculum design and pedagogical strategies. This research also underscores the necessity of clearly defining soft skills and AI competencies, as existing literature highlights their critical role in improving employability and workplace performance. This extensive exploration uncovered similarities and differences in the approaches taken by Italian and Mexican universities to promote soft skills development (Caggiano and Ragusa 2023). These findings are crucial for guiding future educational practices, arming students with a profound skill set to thrive in an AI-centric professional environment, and enhancing the global competitiveness of higher education institutions.

This study provides valuable insights for curriculum designers, educators, and policymakers by offering actionable recommendations for integrating soft skills and AI competencies into educational frameworks such integration is essential for preparing students for the challenges of the modern workforce, particularly in a rapidly changing job market where adaptability and collaboration are paramount. This approach holds significant promise for shaping successful and adaptable professionals, contributing to the evolution of effective educational practices for the modern era.

It is essential to recognize the limitations of this study. The data gathered for this research is part of an international initiative launched by the Mexican Government, designed to improve educational quality and relevance. Ongoing analyses are currently under review and will be presented in a dedicated study that focuses on evaluating curriculum quality. In conclusion, future research should focus on longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of integrated soft skills and AI competencies on students' career trajectories and their ability to navigate complex professional environments. The statistical analyses demonstrated substantial differences in the perceptions of soft skills

and related educational methods between Italian and Mexican Master's students, notably in theoretical knowledge acquisition and curriculum design. Furthermore, the correlation analysis revealed significant positive associations between AI competencies and leadership abilities, highlighting the relevance of AI skills in shaping effective leadership traits in the contemporary academic landscape. By recognising and leveraging the positive correlations between AI competencies and leadership qualities, academic institutions can tailor their programs to foster well-rounded and adaptable graduates equipped to navigate the challenges of an increasingly AI-driven professional environment. By continuing to investigate these dimensions, future studies can further illuminate the pathways through which educational institutions can adapt to the demands of an increasingly complex world, thereby fostering a generation of graduates who are not only knowledgeable but also equipped with the essential skills to lead and innovate.

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