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Towards Identifying the Soft Skills Needed in Curricula: Finnish and Italian Students' Self-Evaluations Indicate Differences between Groups

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Abstract: Background: The identification of soft skills by Higher Education (HE) students is important for curriculum design, as is to evaluate if the students' soft skills are adapted to the needs of the socioeconomic environment. This paper presents a study conducted to determine to what extent Finnish and Italian students' perceptions of their own soft skills differ. Methods: The cohort of the study consisted of 80 Finnish and 80 Italian HE students. Results: The results reveal that, regardless of cultural aspects, both groups share specific soft skills whilst showing significant differences in others. The observed differences in the profiles of the two countries are explained on the basis of the cultural and curricula design frameworks that are well established in Finland and Italy. Conclusions: The implications of the findings for HE teachers and researchers are presented, which may bear relevance in guiding the implementation of curriculum design in Finland, Italy and beyond.

Keywords: soft skills; curriculum design; competence; organizational culture; higher education

1. Introduction

Due to a rapidly changing labour market, educational programmes must be continuously re-evaluated and revised. Many researches, as well as many documents published by the European Commission and World Economic Foundation, point out that the needs of the labor market shift continuously [1]. In recent decades, technical skills were the only demanded in career jobs descriptions [2]; currently, the labour market indicates that technical skills are not the only ones to be demanded by teachers and researchers [3]. Accordingly, the report *Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Access Retention and Employability*, published in 2018 [4], considers the employability of recent graduates as a priority in higher education policy debates. A common agreement between the training and professional fields highlights the importance of being trained in relation to transversal skills [5], also named soft skills. Soft skills are supposed to affect career success to the extent that their attributes and traits are profoundly underlined [6] in *An agenda for new skills and new Jobs* and have been the focus of the recent *Rethinking education strategy—Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes* [7].

Evidently, the labour market needs ever more specific technical skills, but it is also increasingly becoming in need of other types of skills, such as teamwork, assertiveness, and the ability work under pressure [8]. Nonetheless, while technical skills are visible in many academic curricula, the character

and formation of soft skills still needs to be examined and highlighted among academics and students [9]. This role brings Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to self-assess their quality indicators based on their planned and provided orientation activities [10]. Particularly important is the planning of outbound orientation activities and placement aimed at favouring the entry of graduates into the labour market [11].

This article focuses on the role of soft skills in the curricula of European HEIs´ and students' perceptions regarding them. In addition, cultural differences within Europe, as well as the role of gender, related to these skills are taken up. Soft skills are linked to personality traits, objectives and motivations. They can be considered a significant added value that allows for the attainment of broader and better valued achievements in the current labour market [12], obtaining more consistent and accurate results, improving the quality of the objectives and the strategies adopted. The definition and evaluation of soft skills cannot be considered easy [13]; but it is suggested that they improve interactions, work performance, critical thinking and career prospects [14]. Soft skills are transversal in practical use in daily life and in workplaces, adapting and modifying according to the situation and the motivations [15]. Their main feature is that they cannot be linked directly to a specific profession or activity. As soft skills are constantly adopted and promoted through practical use in daily life and within workplaces [16], their usage depends on one's approach to the elaboration of problem-solving strategies and to interact with and within different environments. Unlike hard skills, which refer to the ability to perform a certain type of task or activity, soft skills are interpersonal and broadly applicable [17]. In recent years, it has been reported that soft skills can be learned, and, therefore, it is necessary to design learning methods for them [18].Thus, the development of soft skills in higher education students can be considered a key factor to ensure an effective transition from higher education into the labour market [19].

Any higher education curriculum needs to be drawn up from the idea that students are being prepared for a future that is largely unknown [20]. Based on their autonomy, HEIs in Europe are allowed to develop, design and optimise their own curricula. At university level, curricular design can be understood as a process of anticipation and planning of the learning experiences that students go through during their university course in order to accomplish the final educational aims [21]. Regarding soft skills, their definition has been topical for some time in both educational settings and in curriculum development as they are considered to improve interactions, job performance, critical thinking and career views [22]. Previous concepts must be examined as an important benefit that allows for reaching brighter and broader opportunities [23], providing more consistent and accurate results, improving the quality of detailed aims and of adopted procedures, methodologies and strategies [24]. The definition, assessment and evaluation of soft skills cannot be treated lightly since they are often referred to as close to personal, inborn abilities [25]. The curriculum project is at the core of the functioning of universities, and the formation of their value priorities [26] has pointed out that Higher Education [HE] systems and cultures play a crucial role in interpreting the concepts related to the curriculum design standard. Therefore, the terminology of curriculum design is multi-faceted and impregnated with various culturally determined connotations [27].

The curriculum applied in Finnish and Italian HEIs follows international approaches and methods, but, presenting two distinct university cultures, it is important to consider the different backgrounds. Based on the data from the Survey of Adult skills, Scandinavian countries follow the pattern of a high level of vocational education orientation and a low level of tracking, whereas Italy follows a combination of tracking and vocational education orientation. The vocational education orientation intends to capture both the extent to which education provides students with vocational skills as well as the specificity of these skills in education.

Finland has, at present, around 300,000 students enrolled in higher education. Finnish higher education is based on the Nordic ideology of a welfare state in which citizens can participate in a tuition-free higher education system, and on a management-by-results system implemented by the Ministry of Education, according to which each university receives its core funding directly

from the state [28]. The Finnish HE system involves a blend of 13 universities of science and 23 universities of applied sciences, most of which are public. Each university has the autonomy to recruit students, and entrance tests are generally used. The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council, FINHEEC (*Korkeakoulujen arviointineuvosto*), was established in 1995 to assist universities in carrying out their own curriculum design standards, as prescribed by the Finnish Universities Act. FINHEEC has been authorised by the Ministry of Education to supervise and implement evaluation and to define curriculum design standards.

The number of students in higher education in Italy is currently around 1.8 million [29]. Historically, the Italian HE system has been very centralized, and has undergone several reforms since the 1960s, which have affected its societal and cultural role. However, universities have nowadays gained full autonomy so that 'government has yielded all operational power to universities' [30]. Italy also has a non-university sector for fields such as music and the arts. Hence, individual institutions are self-governing in statutory, financial, pedagogical and staff recruiting matters. Nonetheless, university budgets consist primarily of governmental funds, which are given as a lump sum to each university. Currently, Italy has 77 universities, 13 of which are private. When the additional campuses of several universities are taken into account, the number of university locations nationwide rises to over 90. A National Centre for the Evaluation of University Performance, CNVSU (*Comitato Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema Universitario*) was created by the Ministry of the University in the late 1990s to determine the general criteria for the evaluation of all universities, drawing up an annual report on the evaluation system of higher education. It promotes experimentation with and implementation of curriculum design standards [31].

The differences in organizational terms of Higher Education reflect the cultural and social differences of the countries; Finland is following the standards set by the national agencies rigorously, whereas, in Italy, there is less systematization in putting into practice the guidelines of the national agencies. The differences in historical cultural background have an impact in the curriculum design; both countries reflect the European tendency to schedule training curricula that respond to the needs of the labour market and of the students in terms of expectation for training towards soft skills.

The contribution of this article comes from a comparative research of Italian and Finnish higher education students. As they belong to the European community, it can be expected that they have certain similarities. On the other hand, they might have differences due to the different educational systems and the different cultures they present. The impact of gender will also be considered. The results are aimed to give curricula designers within Europe insights on cultural and individual differences, for the design of curricula enabling better inclusion of soft skills, and thus a better entry into the changing European labor markets.

2. Materials and Methods

A cross-sectional descriptive study was carried out with two groups of business students, one in Italy and one in Finland, in order to comparatively map out their soft skills profiles. The sample is non-probabilistic and consists of 160 Master Degree students; specifically, 80 subjects belong to an Italian group (from the University of Roma Tre), and the other 80 belong to a Finnish group (from the University of Turku University of Applied Sciences.

The Italian cohort comprised 92.5% females and 7.5% males, whilst the Finnish group comprised 67.5% females and 32.5% males. The age range of the interviewees in both groups was 21 to 27 (M age = 25.79). The students in the Italian and Finnish cohorts are Master Degree students. All participants indicated their agreement to participate in the research through formal consent and have been informed that participation was completely voluntary and that all information would be treated anonymously and confidentially.

Each student responded to the Business-Focused Inventory of Personality [BIP] questionnaire [32] and received a personal profile indicating his/her soft skills as feedback. Questions were distributed over two sections: the first section corresponded to the sociodemographic characteristics [gender,

age and origin] and to the studies [University and type of degree]. The second section corresponded to the self-evaluation of individual soft skills. The questionnaire comprises 14 scales, grouped in four domains plus the scale of impression management. In this case, six soft skills have been assessed: assertiveness, team orientation, sensitivity, action orientation, work under pressure, social desirability (Table 1).

Table 1. Description of the soft skills assessed in the questionnaire.

Soft Skill	Description
Assertiveness	'Social ability that allows us to express our opinions, ideas, needs and feelings in a conscious, honest and sincere way without harming others' [33]. It includes the ability to convince others, persevering in supporting one's position.
Action Orientation	'A bipolar dimension: the orientation to action favors the transformation of intention into action. On the contrary, the orientation towards the state is characterized by having thoughts related to the attainment of a goal in the mind.' [34]
Team orientation	'To actively create a pleasant human environment for work, show empathy, accountability, humility, friendliness, unselfishness.' [35].
Sensitivity	'Ability to understand people's thoughts, conduct, feelings and concerns. To perceive if the behavior is the appropriate dependent of the social situation.' [36].
Work under pressure	'The image of themselves on the ability to perform their functions in adverse circumstances, maintaining a constant level of efficiency.' [37].
Social Desirability	This variable refers to one's impression about the effect of social interactions and has a direct relation with important dimensions like the motivation and the ethical point of view. Grimm, [38] Social desirability bias.

The response is requested on a scale of six points that vary between 'Completely true' and 'Completely false'. The variables studied are grouped into three areas: intra-personal, interpersonal and activity development.

In addition, some questions focusing on impression management were presented. This scale indicates the tendency of the respondents to, consciously or unconsciously, give a positive and socially accepted image of oneself. Very extreme scores on this scale invalidate the complete questionnaire, since it is considered that the subject has not responded with sincerity. The profile of soft skills obtained in the two samples is presented through the standardized BIP questionnaire, comparing it with its normative score. and a culture of innovation are crucial.

In order to make a comparison and detect differences that are statistically significant, SPSS 23.0 was used. Quantitative data were tested for normality on sub-groups with the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test according to the sample size of the group. The values are reported as mean (standard deviation). The following statistical tests were used to compare groups: Mann–Whitney test (non-normally distributed quantitative data, two groups). A P-value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant whenever two groups were compared. The average of results for each variable in stannous has been obtained. The scores of this measurement scale range from 1 to 9, in which 5 corresponds to the normative average of the standardized BIP questionnaire. The variables are evaluated according to the individual perception of each participant. And possible biases, such as fatigue, have also been taken into account.

3. Results

The perceptions of soft skills do not exhibit any remarkable differences between genders (Table 1), with the exception of Sensitivity, where females score 5.07 against 3.75 by males. This difference is statistically significant, and thus it cannot be explained by the big share of females in the sample.

The differences in soft skills that may exist intergroup were also studied (Table 2). The assessed soft skills have been grouped in the two following categories: interpersonal and intrapersonal. 'Action orientation' includes both as it favours the transformation of intention into action. On the

contrary, the state orientation is characterized by having in mind thoughts related to the attainment of a goal. There are differences between the two groups, as an example, Finnish students are more action-oriented and Italian students are more state-oriented. The ability to work under pressure is amongst intrapersonal variables, and this showed that Italian students tend to perform in functions in adverse circumstances, maintaining a constant level of efficiency, whereas Finnish students seem to have a better ability to work under pressure.

Table 2. Differences between male and female.

	Sex	N	Mean	Sd	p	t
Action Orientation	Female	131	4.58	1.15	0.201	1.319
	Male	29	4.27	0.95		
Sensitivity	Female	131	5.07	2.05	0.001	3.333
	Male	29	3.75	1.18		
Team Orientation	Female	131	5.85	1.44	0.674	−0.275
	Male	29	5.93	0.75		
Assertiveness	Female	131	5.48	1.58	0.154	1.168
	Male	29	5.13	0.63		
Work under pressure	Female	131	5.38	1.35	0.989	0.38
	Male	29	5.37	0.82		
Social Desirability	Female	131	4.09	1.20	0.099	1.802
	Male	29	3.62	1.63		

Assertiveness as a form of communication is an interpersonal variable and thus a social competence. In this skill, the Italians considered themselves more assertive persons than the Finns. This social ability allows one to express rights, opinions, ideas, needs and feelings in a conscious, clear, honest and sincere way without harming others, also including the ability to convince others.

Participants in both groups also see themselves as cooperative people, group-oriented, always trying to put the group's ideas before their own. They believe that teamwork is, in most cases, more effective than individual work. Both the Italians and the Finnish are comfortable within a teamwork environment.

Sensitivity is another interpersonal skill, referring to the ability to capture the emotional tone and mood of other people and to understand what the expectations are. As for this soft skill, significant differences have been shown between the Italian and the Finnish groups. Finns do not perceive themselves to be as sensitive as the Italians and perceive themselves to having some difficulties in understanding the messages sent by others, thus showing a not so effective reading of the relational context. The most significant differences between these groups are related to this soft skill.

Social desirability is a control scale, meaning that the subject has responded in a more or less socially desirable way. The results show that they have answered honestly within what would be expected by the proximity to the average of the scores of both groups.

Regarding soft skills according to nationality, we found that there are significant differences in sensitivity, assertiveness, and social desirability. Italians score higher than Finns on all variables (Table 3).

Table 3. Differences between the Finnish and the Italian groups.

	Nacionality	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	p	t
Action Orientation	Italian	80	4.600	1.062	0.385	0.841
	Finnish	80	4.450	1.189		
Sensitivity	Italian	80	6.112	1.935	0.000	10.572
	Finnish	80	3.562	0.952		
Team Orientation	Italian	80	6.050	1.668	0.086	1.719
	Finnish	80	5.687	0.880		
Assertiveness	Italian	80	5.750	1.919	0.001	2.870
	Finnish	80	5.100	0.648		
Work under pressure	Italian	80	5.525	1.645	0.073	1.369
	Finnish	80	5.250	0.720		
Social desirability	Italian	80	4.237	1.265	0.026	2.211
	Finnish	80	3.787	1.309		

According to the statistical test, the differences are significant in sensitivity, assertiveness and social desirability.

4. Discussion

Typically, soft skills have been important to the user support staffing area; however, recent research shows that these skills have become increasingly important in a wide range of working fields [3], especially seen from the employability and career success points of view. Consequently, they are suggested to be taught in most faculties, even if the need for specific soft skills probably differs in various fields and occupations. As far as the impact and the matching of higher education with society are concerned, more effort should be invested in detecting the skills needed in different work positions and professions [7]. Lecturers could benefit from weaving opportunities throughout the students' undergraduate experience, including those that were to incorporate increased chances for them to share ideas, gain different perspectives, and solve problems in environments inside and outside the classroom [39].

The expression "hidden curriculum" refers to the implicit and latent dimensions of teaching and learning, i.e., the process of socialisation that takes place in formal teaching/learning contexts. The study allowed to propose particular soft skills to be part of the hidden curriculum depending on the country. Our results indicate that "Sensitivity", "Action orientation", "Assertiveness", "Work under pressure" and "Team orientation", related to interpersonal areas, obviously critical for success at work, are perceived in differing ways in different cultures. In these skills, the national differences were significant in sensitivity, assertiveness and social desirability emphasizing Italians, which might imply higher appropriateness in social contexts. Regarding Sensitivity in terms of gender, the significantly higher scores reported by feminine students confirms the common understanding of females sensing and feeling their environment more than males. Interestingly, sensitivity seems to be a skill that can be improved, whereby one could benefit from internalising different interpretations of the situation, especially in contexts where the person feels safe and his/her self-esteem is not undermined [40].

Even though there are several factors other than culture that affect the dynamics of a group, they are outside the scope of this paper and suggest future studies. However, even if soft skills are becoming increasingly taught/learnt at schools and universities, their evaluation remains, for the most part, a challenge [41]. Efforts for providing adequate evaluation methods have been produced in some fields, such as medicine studies, while most fields, such as Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) and business fields still lack adequate assessment methods [42]. As mentioned above, soft skills are often referred to as close to personal, inborn abilities. Consequently, it seems inevitable that traditional methods, quizzes or exams cannot accurately measure them and thus do not apply, for the most part, to skills such as communication, leadership or team working. For these types of personal abilities, self-assessment seems a necessary element of evaluation [43]. The self-assessment

method presented in this study shows that students are able to perceive their personal skills in a reliable manner, whenever the assessment is connected to an action where such skills are needed.

Higher Education curricula are a significant example substantiating the fact that there are different methodologies for teaching and learning soft skills in Europe. The study tried to highlight the impact of cultural dimensions and students´ self-evaluations of these skills as an element of obtaining the skills and competencies needed in future working life. The Italian and Finnish education systems diverge substantially when it comes to tracking students according to their ability or career aspirations, and the preponderance of vocational education. These two aspects of school system draw-ups are likely to affect the aggregation of skills in considerable ways, e.g., through peer effect or curriculum content [44]. The Italian HE system does not include vocation-oriented institutions equivalent to those in Finland. Italy does not have a universal grant/loan system such as Finland's, due to which the level of state financial assistance to students is lowest in Italy [45]. Of the two national HE systems considered in the study, the Italian system is distinctly more traditional and also the least differentiated both in vertical and horizontal dimensions [46].

In contrast, some improvements could be performed both in Finland and Italy by placing more weight on the inter-functional aspect of required competences and focusing more on soft skills, as suggested by some authors [47]. The objective of these integrations in curriculum design in both countries is to reduce the differences and to standardise the higher education training offer in order to facilitate the mobility of people and workers within the European area [48].

5. Conclusions

The effort to define specific competences underlying transversal competences has focused the cultural debate on the questioning of the role of HEIs in relation to the more general mission of work orientation. The empirical evidence has shown that soft skills can be learned. However, due to the different conditions of the labour market, there is a need to more clearly define the types of learning outcomes in educational programmes, as well as to match them to specific job occupations [49]. Ultimately, as noted by Šťastná, curricula should help students develop knowledge, skills and mental attitudes that allow them to reflect on their convictions and choices [50], to be aware and critical of their own assumptions and to approach different cultural forms and different historical moments with openness [51].

The conclusion of this study is that the support given to higher education teachers in developing their curriculum design competences and in generating high-quality learning facilities and assessment activities for students is obviously of the utmost importance.

Furthermore, this study indicates that students are able to perceive their personal abilities in a reliable way, especially when the evaluation is connected to activities where the students are personally engaged.

Another limitation refers to the use of pedagogical approaches in this study that the researchers were most familiar with, yet future research could experiment with other strategies, such as the peer T-group. Future research could also examine ways to provide graduates who have to work with managerial-type feedback, and could be helpful to assess soft skills across different teaching contexts and in private and public organizations.

This paper proposes the "complex triangle education–soft skill–work process", highlighting their importance as the three major areas contributing to project's complexity.

Author Contributions: V.C. responded for the conceptualization, original draft and methodological design, while K.S. arranged the Finnish part of the investigation and assisted with writing and editing. L.P. responded for the Italian sample and formal analysis of the material, and J.G.-B. did data curation, validation and supervision for the article. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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