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S.PLA.S.H.
SALES PLATFORM STUDIES FOR HE

S.PLA.S.H - SALES PLATFORM STUDIES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

TASK 1.2

ANALYSIS OF THE TRAINING OFFER

The state of art of Sales education



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1. Introduction

In developing on-going customer relationships required in a global business world, nowadays' businesses are demanding greater numbers of well-trained salespersons and sales managers with, at the same time, high levels of professionalism and skills (Deeter-Schmeltz & Kennedy, 2011). The U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics (2019) indicated that 14.54 million workers are currently employed in sales-related positions, those are critical in building and maintaining customer bases for businesses, especially in the service and wholesale sectors. This number is projected to grow 3% from 2016 to 2026, which will result in about 458,700 new sales positions that will need to be filled on an annual basis (Spiller, Kim, and Aitken, 2019).

The role of salespeople in the business-to-business (B2B) context has evolved because of rapid technological developments (Hunter and Perreault, 2007; Hughes and Ogilvie, 2019), as well as growing business complexity and environmental uncertainty (Sharma et al., 2020). The concept of sales has morphed from a 20th-century model focused only on selling products and services to a 21st-century model of building and maintaining long-term relationships (Ballestra et al., 2017). As customers place more value on the advice provided by salespeople, suppliers have rapidly recognized the key role their sales force plays in relational exchange.

Job opportunities in the field of professional sales are fast growing, with sales organizations striving to hire sales students who are prepared to embark on a sales career (Magnotta et al., 2020).

This is why the SPLASH project aims to create, test, disseminate and systematize an original learning format, based on e-learning platforms, for courses on international sales and digital selling at European level, in order to develop the skills for university (undergraduate) students, enrolled in business, marketing and sales university programs.

The main idea of this project is to analyse a series of e-learning platforms that host lessons on sales and create new content suitable for an increasingly internationalized and digital-oriented scenario. These new contents will be created in the form of OERs (in the form of interactive video training pills and narrative branched scenarios) and an adaptability/adaptation manual will be released to adapt the existing platforms to the new content that will be developed.

The S.PLA.S.H. project first intellectual output, it is therefore intended to update the state of art of the sales education in Europe, it with a particular focus on the theme of international sales and digital selling.

After investigating and deepening the literature on sales education (task 1.1), the curricula analysis at European level of sales universities intends to capture the point of view of sales scholars (task 1.2).

The synthesis of the various research will flow into the creation of a blended training program that will enrich the current offer of sales training at university level. In particular, the blended

learning method combines the use of e-learning platforms and the social learning theory for higher education as simulations of real work situations and competitions.

The present document provides an updated overview of the current state of sales education and training in the university curricula, and summarizes the results of the analyses conducted in the various countries of the partnership (Italy, Austria, Denmark, Finland).

The report is structured as follows: first, the research methodology implemented is exposed. Then, findings of each partner are illustrated, together with some conclusive considerations.

2. Curricula analysis methodology

Interest in sales education has never been stronger. Professional selling is a key occupation in both the present and future workforce. Based on the industry need to hire qualified salespeople, a call to expand sales education at universities has been continuously echoed (Spiller, Kim, and Aitken, 2019). In particular, universities are increasingly offering curricula designed to attract, maintain, and graduate professionally trained sales students (Chaker et al., 2020).

Given the high rate of turnover, corporations have been turning to universities that offer professional sales programs which educate and train individuals for the field of sales, and with good reason. The SEF (2017) reports students from university sales programs, when compared with their nonsales educated peers, are 50% more productive with standard company training, have 30% less turnover, and save companies approximately \$200,000 per hire within the first 18 months of employment. In addition, empirical research found that individuals hired from universities with a formal sales program outperform their nonsales program counterparts after the first year of employment (Bolander et al., 2014). Corporations are eager to hire these educated sales graduates as evidenced by the top universities with professional sales programs reporting a 92% (on average) job placement of their graduates (SEF, 2017).

The analysis conducted by partners consists of a description of the availability of national databases on HEI sales education, specifying links, characteristics, language, purposes (e.g., ministry of education report, high school students guide to university, etc.).

Furthermore, researchers proceeded to summarize in an Excel database all the programs (or profiles, for applied science universities), tracks/majors, and courses, collected using the keywords sales / personal selling (both in English and partners' language).

The objective was to understand the emerging gaps relating to the training offer in the field of international sales and digital selling.

The partnership collaborated and shared their own findings, highlighting the total amount of degree programs available in HEI/universities, reporting their features, output knowledge and skills to be learned and stating the major learning strategies and activities that students will experience.

Final reports and results have been presented in English to guarantee the best results elaboration and comparability.

3. Findings

3.1. State of art of sales education in the University curricula at Italian level¹

The prominence of professional sales careers is evidenced by an increasing number of job opportunities at every level of sales organizations (Krogue, 2013; Bolander et al., 2014; Peltier et al., 2014). Although sales professionals are the most in demand by companies around the world since more than a decade, training proposals aimed at bridging the gap between business needs and students' career opportunities are few. Unfortunately, university business programs and faculty often lack the resources necessary to thoroughly prepare students for a sales career, or to expose them to career opportunities within their local market (Magnotta et al., 2020).

The responsibility for preparing professionals to embark successfully in a given field has often fallen on Universities. Scholars and academia generally deem disciplines such as marketing, accounting, finance, management, and others as requiring in-depth and comprehensive curricula to prepare students for their respective fields. As the study of professional selling has grown in acceptance in higher education and gained incremental levels of credibility as a profession to pursue, a more comprehensive curriculum is needed to attract and prepare future professionals, and to attract high-quality companies to campus to recruit for their sales forces.

The **Italian** situation seems not to be consistent with labour market trends, but with clichés and prejudices related to sales professionals that can have a negative effect on students' willingness to pursue a career in sales, but also on Universities to teach them. Examining the master's degree courses for the marketing, communication and sales area, a SIM study for the academic year 2015-2016 notes the absolute residuality of the theme of sales. In particular, the following table (Table 1) highlights the number of recurrences – in terms of keywords – in post-graduate courses where it emerges the absolute prevalence of communication (132 cases); later the word marketing (40 cases), and only 6 for the sales area.

Table 1. Frequency of words marketing, communication and sales in post-graduate courses offered by Italian Universities in the A.A. 2015-2016

WORDS	a.v.	%
Communication	132	81%
Marketing	40	25%
Other (Vendite / Sales / Salesperson)	6	4%

Source: SIM (2017)

The Italian results obtained in terms of courses/curricula dealing with the theme of sales indicate that, although the benefits of sales training for business students are well-known (Leasher & Moberg, 2008; Bolander et al., 2014) and include improved job prospects and better

¹ Autors: Silvio Cardinali, Marta Giovannetti, Barbara Kulaga, Giulia Amadio from UNIVPM.

performance after graduation, few Universities offer a sales curriculum. Altogether, 185 out of 536 courses dealing with the theme of sales were found.

As it can be seen from the table below, the majority of courses with the aim to transmit knowledge and skills about sales are included in the L-18 Degree class, for a percentage equal to 43.24%. 29.19% is included in the LM-77 Degree class; 13.51% is included in the L-33 Degree class; 6.49% is included in the L-20 Degree class; 4.86% is included in the LM-56 Degree class; 2.16% is included in the LM-59 Degree class and, finally, 0.54% is included in the LM-92 Degree class. In addition, out of 536 degree courses, only 32 mention the keywords 'sales', 'vendite', 'vendita', or 'selling' in the section dedicated to the brief description of the course (for a percentage equal to 5.97%).

Table 2 – Target (graduate, undergraduate)

TARGET (graduate, undergraduate)	Course Summary (a.v.)	Courses that provide knowledge and skills about sales (a.v.)	% calculated on the total of courses that provide knowledge and skills about sales	Courses whose brief description contains the keywords mentioned above (a.v.)	% of the courses whose brief description contains the keywords mentioned above
L-18 - Scienze dell'economia e della gestione aziendale	125	80	43.24%	11	8.8%
L-33 - Scienze economiche	59	25	13.51%	1	1.69%
L-20 - Scienze della comunicazione	59	12	6.49%	2	3.39%
LM-77 - Scienze economico-aziendali	173	54	29.19%	15	8.67%
LM-56 - Scienze dell'economia	78	9	4.86%	3	3.85%
LM-59 - Comunicazione pubblica, d'impresa e pubblicità	25	4	2.16%	0	0%
LM-92 - Teorie della comunicazione	17	1	0.54%	0	0%
Total	536	185	100%	32	5.97%*

Source: Italian researchers' elaborations

*(32/536) = 0.0597 = 5.97%

According to a geographical profiling and as shown in the following table (Table 3), the majority of Universities whose courses deal with the theme of sales come from Northern Italy (44.86%), followed by Southern Italy (29.73%) and Central Italy (25.41%).

Table 3. Geographical profiling of Universities

GEOGRAPHICAL ORIGIN	Courses that provide knowledge and skills about sales (a.v.)	%	Courses whose brief description contains the keywords mentioned above (a.v.)	%
Northern Italy	83	44.86%	23	71.88%
Southern Italy	55	29.73%	4	12.5%
Central Italy	47	25.41%	5	15.63%
Total	185	100%	32	100%

Source: Italian researchers' elaborations

Through the consultation of each individual SUA (acronym for "Scheda Unica Annuale", that is a management tool functional to the design, implementation, self-evaluation, and re-design of the course of studies), any degree courses related to the theme of sales were identified. The majority of classified courses are included in the LM-77 Degree class. The table below (Table 4) lists the only 13 courses selected by Italian researchers.

Table 4. List of identified courses

COURSES	DEGREE CLASS
1. International sales management	LM-56
2. Retail & sales management	LM-77
3. Retail & sales management (corso avanzato)	LM-77
4. Trade marketing and sales management	LM-77
5. Pianificazione e gestione delle vendite	LM-77
6. Sales management	L-18
7. Marketing B2B and Sales Management	LM-77
8. International retail & sales management	LM-77
9. International sales & logistics	LM-77
10. Politiche di trade marketing e canali di vendita	LM-77
11. Organizational Issues in Marketing and Sales	LM-77
12. Organizational Issues in Marketing and Sales	LM-77
13. Tecniche di vendita	L-20

Source: Italian researchers' elaborations

Finally, the sales curricula retrieved by the Italian team are only 5 (Table 5).

Table 5. Curricula / major / track / specialization

COURSE OF STUDIES	CURRICULA	DEGREE CLASS
1. Management	Marketing	LM-77 – Scienze economico-aziendali
2. Economia aziendale e Management	Marketing	LM-77 – Scienze economico-aziendali
3. Economia e Management internazionale	Marketing and Digital Export	LM-77 – Scienze economico-aziendali
4. International Economics and Commerce	Business Organization and Strategy (BOS)	LM-56 – Scienze dell'economia
5. Economia aziendale	Management e gestione aziendale	L-18 – Scienze dell'economia e della gestione aziendale

Source: Italian researchers' elaborations

3.2. State of art of sales education in the University curricula at Danish level²

By focusing on the **Danish** point of view, the educational institutions role in sales training, can be traced back to latter part of the 19th century, where an emerging industrialization and growing trade spurred the large captains of industry and merchants in the Copenhagen area to establish "The community for the training of young tradesmen" (FUHU) in 1880. FUHUs purpose was to offer students "an affordable sales education led by skilled teachers' ' where part-time students were studying at night time and inaugurated students were offered a diploma. Prior to FUHU, most sales training was carried out internally in the large trading houses.

Sales training from one of large Danish trading houses (such as the East Asian Company) was recognized as a valid education in line with the artisanal training system, which in similar way

² Authors: Karina Burgdorff Jensen, Poul Houman Andersen from Aalborg University

relied on a craft community for training professionals. The FUHU organization was active in establishing and financing the Merchant's school (Købmandsskolen) in Copenhagen in 1917 and later on played an important role in establishing and financing Denmark's first academic commercial education: the Copenhagen Business School (CBS) in 1960, which was also operating on private terms until 1965. With the university reforms in Denmark in the 1960s and 1970s, which also fostered two new universities, CBS gained status as a university in 1975. However, already prior to that in the late 1960s, the Danish government had realized the importance of sales and commercial education for building a skilled workforce that could support the competitive effectiveness of the private sector – not least in international trade, which also led to a national system of commercial education.

A second business school was established in the city of Århus and several affiliations of CBS was established throughout the country, for instance in Aalborg and other cities. They became seen as part of the state-governed institutional systems. This also meant that most of the private funding of academic sales education in Denmark stopped around the mid-1960s and that the Danish educational system became highly regulated by the Danish Ministry of education. From the 1990s and onwards till today, the corpus of higher commercial education (Bachelor and Graduate) in Denmark has developed into two main routes: full and part time education. In addition, two types of institutional actors offering various forms of sales education developed: The universities and business schools on the one hand, which focus on academic education and the Academies and colleges on the other, focusing on professional training of adults, emphasizing applied sciences. Hence, the Danish system contains academy- and professional bachelor training courses (2,5 to 3,5 years duration) and University Bachelor and graduate training. On top of this, there are MBA programs, which are offered by private as well as public offers. This is shown in the table below (Table 6):

Table 6. Key findings on the Danish sales education

		UNIVERSITIES	COLLEGES AND ACADEMIES	PRIVATE EDUCATORS
FULL TIME STUDIES	BACHELOR	X		X
	GRADUATE	X		
PART TIME STUDIES	BACHELOR	X	(X) Offers Basic Diplomas	
	MASTER (MBA)	X		X

Source: Danish researchers' elaborations

3.3. State of art of sales education in the University curricula at Finnish level³

Finland is a typical Nordic country with free public education. Traditionally, education in Finland has been oriented more towards engineering than marketing and sales. Quite a few programs can be found in two groups:

- Business Administration
- International Marketing

After their analysis, there might be no more than one e.g. 5 ECTS module of sales. Although Finland is a large country, it has a population of only 5.5 million. There are 14 Universities and 22 Universities of Applied Sciences located around the country.

Generally, there are four different levels of sales education in Finland on higher education level.

1. Public Universities of Applied Sciences offering BBA and/or Master education;
2. Public Universities offering Bachelor's and Master's degree education;
3. Public Universities offering both free and paid further training;
4. Commercial companies organizing short or longer sales training.

Referring to the first category, the education begins with nongraduate students who will reach BBA (210 ECTS) level by passing the education (Table 7).

Table 7. Key findings – Public Universities of Applied Sciences

DEGREE/MASTER PROGRAM	UNIVERSITY/INSTITUTION	MONTHS (DURATION)	TARGET (GRADUATE, UNDERGRADUATE)
Sales Management BBA	TAMK	210 ECTS	Undergraduate
Sales and Marketing	XAMK (Kouvola)	210 ECTS	Undergraduate
Sales Engineer BBA	TUAMK	210 ECTS	Undergraduate
International Business BBA	TAMK	210 ECTS	Undergraduate
International Sales & Marketing BBA	Haaga-Helia	210 ECTS	Undergraduate

Source: Finnish researchers' elaborations

³ Authors: Pia Hautamäki, Teppo Yrjönkoski, Pauliina Airaksinen-Aminoff, Leena Katto from TAMK

Referring to the second category, the education begins with nongraduate students who will reach Master level by finalizing their studies. Lack of sales oriented programs is remarkable (only one course was identified by Finnish researchers).

Referring to free further training in Universities of Applied Sciences, having minimum 2 years working experience after BBA, it is possible to upgrade BBA to Master level 90 (ECTS), as shown in the table on the next page (Table 8).

Table 8. Key findings – Free further training in Universities of Applied Sciences

DEGREE/MASTER PROGRAM	UNIVERSITY/INSTITUTION	MONTHS (DURATION)	TARGET (GRADUATE, UNDERGRADUATE)
International Sales Management	TAMK	90 ECTS	Graduate (BBA or Master)
Project & Sales Management	XAMK	60 ECTS	Graduate (BBA or Master)
International Business management	CENTRIA	90 ECTS	Graduate (BBA or Master)

Source: Finnish researchers' elaborations

Considering the free further training specialized sales courses, the Finnish team shared the following data (Table 9):

Table 9. Key findings – Free further training specialized sales courses

MAJOR/TRACK/SPECIALIZATION	UNIVERSITY/INSTITUTION	HOURS/ECTS	TARGET (GRADUATE, UNDERGRADUATE)
Selling and Sales management	Aalto University	24 ECTS	Undergraduate
Sales & Operations planning	Aalto University	6 ETCS	Undergraduate
Sales Management	TUAMK	30 ECTS	Undergraduate

Source: Finnish researchers' elaborations

In addition, many Universities of Applied Sciences offer paid further training in either short courses or longer ones. Paid education usually has its own separate business unit. Students have possibilities to study part of the degree. For example, Vaasa University offers Sales MBA course (95 ECTS), including:

- Strategic Business Development;
- Strategic Financial Management;
- Managing in a Multicultural Environment;
- Managing Customer Value and Customer Experience;
- Leadership and Personal Development;
- MBA Development Project;
- Strategic Sales Management.

Lastly, many commercial companies organize sales training and education. Duration of programs vary from short courses to one year. Mainly the subject of the courses are sales technology or customer handling.

3.4. State of art of sales education in the University curricula at Austrian level⁴

In conclusion, before the establishment of the Universities of Applied Sciences, sales specific education was not available in the **Austrian** HEIs. Austrian universities offered isolated negotiation or distribution courses, mostly specified as electives. Distribution and sales were seen as a partial aspect of marketing. Courses and trainings geared to the job profile "sales" was therefore not offered.

With the establishment of the universities of applied sciences about 25 years ago, sales courses also found its way into the tertiary education landscape. In contrast to the classical universities, universities of applied sciences have clearly defined job profiles for which they provide the necessary education. They were created as HEI especially for regional companies.

Nevertheless, it took until 2003 before the first sales study program was offered. In the diploma system of the time, the University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria was the first tertiary, accredited HEI to establish the diploma program "International Technical Sales Management" with the core subjects 1) Sales/Distribution, 2) B2B Marketing and 3) Mechatronics. The

⁴ Authors: Christian Stadlmann, Sophie Wiesinger from FHOÖ

background for this focus is the Upper Austrian economy with its sectoral focus on the automotive, mechanical engineering and plastics industries.

In the following years, more and more universities of applied sciences offered study programs with a sales focus, which were mostly designed at the bachelor level due to the Bologna process.

The focus of the sales studies has varied, however, as the underlying regional business structure is always decisive for the content.

In the meantime, 7 different universities of applied sciences offer 5 Bachelor's and 5 Master's programs with a sales focus in Austria. The studies are almost always linked to a second or third major subject in order to provide a broader education for the labour market. These hybrid forms are offered with the complementary fields of marketing, technology, business development and export.

Another tendency, which reflects the general trend of the universities of applied sciences, is the shift or strengthening of part-time courses in sales education.

This is particularly evident in the Master's programs. In addition, some degree programs have a focus on business-to-business. In order to take international sales into account, 40% of the degree programs are designed as exclusively English-language programs.

Sales education is now also offered at traditional universities. However, these programs are only established in the form of MBAs. Since MBAs are also aimed at specific professions, this form can be used to adequately offer training or further education for the desired job profile.

Currently, the Business School of the University of Salzburg and the Executive Academy of the Vienna University of Economics and Business offer MBAs with a sales focus.

The following table shows the current sales study programs at the universities of applied sciences and the traditional universities (Table 10).

Table 10. Current sales study programs at the Universities of Applied Sciences and the traditional universities

LEVEL	STUDY PROGRAM	UNIVERSITY	MODE OF STUDY	LANGUAGE	FOCUS
Bachelor	<u>Global Sales and Marketing</u>	University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria	Full-time	English	Business-to-Business
Bachelor	<u>Marketing and Sales</u>	University of Applied Sciences Campus 02, Graz	Full-time; Part-time	German	-
Bachelor	<u>Marketing and Sales</u>	University of Applied Sciences for Management and	Full-time; Part-time	German	-

		Communication - FHWien der WKW Wien			
Bachelor	Technical Sales and Distribution Management	University of Applied Sciences BFI Vienna	Part-time	German	Business-to-Business (Industry)
Bachelor	Export-oriented Management	IMC FH Krems - University of Applied Sciences	Full-time	English	-
Master	<u>Global Sales and Marketing</u>	University of Applied Sciences Upper Austria	Full-time; Part-time	English	Business-to-Business
Master	Marketing and Sales Management	University of Applied Sciences for Management and Communication - FHWien der WKW Wien	Part-time	German	-
Master	Sales Management	University of Applied Sciences Campus 02, Graz	Part-time	German	-
Master	Business Development & Sales Management	University of Applied Sciences Wiener Neustadt	Part-time	German	Business-to-Business
Master	International Marketing & Sales	Vorarlberg University of Applied Sciences	Part-time	English	-
Exec. MBA	Marketing & Sales	University of Salzburg Business School	Part-time	German	-
MBA	Marketing & Sales	<u>Vienna University of Economics and Business</u>	Part-time	English	-

Source: Austrian researchers' elaborations

4. Conclusions

Due to the rapidly growing industry need for qualified salespeople, higher educational institutions have an opportunity to prepare students for actual workplace needs. Most marketing educators care deeply about preparing their students for success in the real work world and research supports that sales education continues to be a highly valuable curriculum for educators to offer (Spiller, 2019). The benefits of sales training for business students are well-known (Leasher & Moberg, 2008; Bolander et al., 2014) and include improved job prospects and better performance after graduation.

This interest and growth in sales education argues for a broad assessment of the specific characteristic of university-level sales education globally. In particular, the main issues are: what courses are being taught, how are these courses being delivered, how many sales programs exist, and how many schools are considering sales programs, what is the trend globally. These important matters could provide insight to educators seeking to develop or revise sales programs as well as firms seeking to hire students from these programs.

Ongoing efforts to improve the relevance of marketing program content and teaching excellence are essential. Marketing professors should strive to prepare students to be effective performers in the workplace (Robideaux & Good, 2001). This approach requires teaching students both knowledge and skills needed in the business world (Hunt & Laverie, 2004; Bicen & Laverie, 2009; Madhavaram & Laverie, 2010). In addition, faculty should work to motivate students to perform to the best of their abilities.

This research work made it possible to explore the sales curricula offered by universities located in 4 European countries. Results illustrate that, unfortunately, University business programs and faculty often lack the resources necessary to thoroughly prepare students for a sales career, or to expose them to career opportunities within their local market. Universities should establish a sales program or at least increase their sales curriculum offering with the aim to effectively prepare their students for a position in this highly competitive industry, considering that demand for graduates seeking a sales career has never been higher.

In the succeeding phases of the work of the S.PLA.S.H. project, these stimuli will be taken and put into a system to create the foundations of an education program design that is balanced and that above all responds to the lack of sales education at European level, through the introduction of targeted, specific sales teachings, tailored to the needs of firms, such as emerged from this research.

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