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Levelling up leadership: Harnessing gamification to cultivate soft skills in Italian and Portuguese master's students

Potenziare la leadership: massimizzare la gamification per coltivare le competenze trasversali negli studenti di master italiani e portoghesi

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ABSTRACT This research investigates the effectiveness of gamification in enhancing leadership and teamwork abilities among Italian and Portuguese students pursuing a Master's degree in Business and Accounting Management through the "Leadership Quest" game. Employing a comprehensive data analysis methodology encompassing t-tests and ANOVA, the study assesses the game's impact on developing interpersonal skills. The results demonstrate significant enhancements in communication, strategic decision-making, and conflict-resolution skills following participation, with no discernible gender disparities. Additionally, the study delves into the differing emphasis on interpersonal skills within the educational frameworks of Italian and Portuguese institutions, highlighting opportunities for cross-border knowledge exchange and the sharing of best practices. The findings underscore the potential of gamification in bridging the divide between theoretical knowledge and the practical application of skills, cultivating an interactive and supportive learning environment. Recommendations include systematically integrating interpersonal skills training, promoting inclusive learning environments, and strengthening partnerships between universities and industries.

KEYWORDS Gamification; Leadership Skills; Higher Education; Soft Skills Development; Cross-Cultural Analysis; Curriculum Design; Educational Technology.

SOMMARIO Nel panorama educativo contemporaneo, l'integrazione di elementi di gioco in contesti non ludici, nota come gamification, è emersa come una strategia trasformativa per migliorare le esperienze di apprendimento. Questo studio indaga l'efficacia della gamification nello sviluppo delle competenze di leadership e teamwork tra studenti italiani e portoghesi iscritti a un programma di Master in Business and Accounting Management attraverso il gioco "Leadership Quest". La ricerca impiega un approccio di analisi dei dati 'multifacettato', inclusi t-test e ANOVA, per valutare l'impatto del gioco sullo sviluppo delle competenze trasversali. I risultati indicano miglioramenti significativi nelle competenze comunicative, nel processo decisionale strategico e nella gestione dei conflitti dopo la partecipazione, senza differenze di genere rilevanti. Inoltre, lo studio esplora la diversa enfasi posta sulle competenze trasversali nei curricula dei sistemi educativi italiani e portoghesi, rivelando opportunità di apprendimento transnazionale e scambio di best practices. I risultati sottolineano il potenziale della gamification nel colmare

il divario tra conoscenza teorica e applicazione pratica delle competenze, promuovendo un ambiente di apprendimento supportivo e coinvolgente. Le raccomandazioni per i progettisti di curriculum, gli educatori e i responsabili delle politiche includono l'integrazione sistematica della formazione sulle competenze trasversali, la promozione di ambienti di apprendimento inclusivi e il rafforzamento delle partnership tra università e industria. Questa ricerca contribuisce al discorso più ampio sul ruolo dei giochi nell'educazione, evidenziando la loro capacità di trascendere i confini tradizionali e promuovere l'apprendimento lungo tutto l'arco della vita in contesti diversificati.

PAROLE CHIAVE Gamification; Competenze di Leadership; Istruzione Superiore; Sviluppo delle Competenze Trasversali; Analisi Cross-Culturale; Progettazione Curriculare; Tecnologia Educativa.

1. Introduction

In the field of education, gamification – i.e. integrating game elements into non-game contexts - has emerged as an effective strategy for engaging learners and cultivating positive traits such as commitment, teamwork, and enjoyment (Deterding et al., 2011; Gomez et al.., 2016). This shift in perspective has revitalised the role of play to create effective learning environments across various educational settings, including universities and adult education. The widespread influence of new media and technology has profoundly transformed instructional approaches, facilitating the rise of game-based learning initiatives (Nesti, 2017). Drawing from scholarly research and historical pedagogical practices, the educational benefits of play extend through various stages of human development, highlighting the significant impact of games on cognitive, communicative, and relational skills. The intersection of technological advancements and evolving educational paradigms has led to a generation of digital natives characterised by dynamic learning behaviours and a preference for personalised, peer-oriented knowledge acquisition and sharing. This cultural shift emphasises the need to reassess and adapt educational practices to accommodate diverse learning styles and tailor learning experiences.

The intentional integration of game-based educational tools has demonstrated an ability to enhance motivation, engagement, and cognitive development, facilitating a state of "flow" where learning intersects with intrinsic satisfaction and optimal performance (Bruner, 1980; Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Implementing gamification in education aims to innovate teaching methods and foster increased student engagement and active participation.

This study concentrates on developing soft skills related to leadership among Master's students from Italy and Portugal. Prior research indicates that the incorporation of soft skills training within University Master's programs in these countries lacks standardization and largely depends on the discretion of program coordinators (Caggiano et al., 2020, p. 110). Despite variations in teaching methodologies, there is a growing interest in soft skills training in Italy and Portugal. Analysing the curriculum design and learning methods employed in these countries offers valuable insights for developing strategies akin to those seen in video games. The following text emphasises the significance of conducting a comparative analysis to understand the perceptions and experiences of Master's students in Italy and Portugal regarding the development of video game skills. This analysis seeks to reveal potential cultural differences and inform best practices for curriculum design.

The implications of this study extend to curriculum designers, educators, and policymakers, as it will provide a deeper understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in the current approach to soft skills development, thereby facilitating the integration of effective pedagogical strategies.

Moreover, the study highlights the importance of considering cultural and contextual factors when designing curricula, ensuring that Master's programs address the diverse needs of students from various cultural backgrounds. The research aims to enrich the literature on soft skills development by

exploring the experiences of Italian and Portuguese Master's students. The study seeks to enhance educational practices that nurture these vital competencies by identifying the similarities and differences in developing soft skills. Ultimately, the goal is to equip Master's students for leadership positions in their respective fields, regardless of their cultural backgrounds.

2. A novel approach to learning: embracing video games as educational tools

The past century has seen a notable connection between learning and formal education. However, advancements in information technology are fundamentally challenging this relationship. Modern technologies provide individuals with access to extensive libraries simply through a wireless Personal Digital Assistant, while vast social networks are readily available to anyone with a cell phone. This unprecedented access enables individuals to create personalised learning paths by integrating various resources. Despite this, traditional classrooms still need to evolve. The conventional theories of learning and instruction remain deeply embedded in educational systems and require modernisation to remain relevant today (An, 2018). While some educators and leaders advocate for adopting new technologies and methods, others feel disheartened by the widening gap between traditional schooling and the demands of a postindustrial, global, high-tech society.

Consequently, many students now perceive school as increasingly irrelevant beyond the elementary grades. When envisioning the future of learning, it is crucial to move beyond traditional educational environments and explore the potential of video games. These games are significant as they immerse players in simulated worlds that mirror social practices and diverse ways of thinking. Playing video games enables players to participate in valued communities of practice, enhancing their cognitive abilities and deepening their understanding of various disciplines (Anderson & Hilton, 2015).

When assessing video games' origins and educational value, it is crucial to consider their potential benefits for students. For instance, the U.S. Army is developing games to expose civilians to diverse perspectives. At the same time, initiatives in other sectors employ games in health, history, engineering, and mathematics for educational purposes.

Nonetheless, many educational games need a coherent learning theory or research foundation. It is vital to understand how commercial games create immersive virtual worlds and how these environments foster knowledge and skills (Bayeck, 2020, p. 421).

By recognising the impact of video games on developing effective social behaviours and understanding complex systems, we can leverage this insight to create games that encourage diverse perspectives. Beardsley et al. (2021) highlighted the potential of video games to transform education. Delving into the fundamental questions within this context enables us to utilise video games to transcend traditional academic boundaries and foster an innovative learning approach through immersive experiences in virtual environments.

This educational journey will prepare individuals for meaningful engagement in our technology-driven, post-industrial society.

2.1. Gamification and curriculum innovation in Master's Education

Amid rapid technological progress, evolving economic landscapes, and complex socio-political challenges, it is crucial to strategically shape university education qualifications and curriculum

designs to ensure that graduates possess the skills and competencies necessary to thrive in a multi-faceted and dynamic society (Meyer, Norman, 2020, p.15). Curriculum design approaches vary across countries and institutions, reflecting diverse educational curricula and objectives. Italian Master's programs generally emphasise structured, academically focused curricula prioritising acquiring theoretical knowledge. In contrast, Portuguese programs tend to adopt a more flexible and interdisciplinary approach, highlighting the importance of practical application and problem-solving skills through project-based learning and real-world case studies. These differing methodologies significantly influence the development of both theoretical and soft skills.

Incorporating gamification into university curricula can enhance various curriculum design approaches by fostering student engagement and improving practical skill development. By incorporating game elements such as challenges, collaborative activities, and rewards, gamification creates an engaging and dynamic learning environment that can facilitate theoretical knowledge acquisition and nurture the development of essential soft skills, such as effective communication, collaboration, and adaptability. This integration presents an opportunity to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge acquisition and practical skill development, better preparing students to meet the demands of the modern workforce.

Moreover, it is becoming increasingly crucial for curriculum designers to address the demand for interdisciplinary knowledge and skills. By integrating interdisciplinary approaches into Master's programs, students can broaden their comprehension across various disciplines and develop the ability to integrate and apply knowledge from diverse areas (Schleutker et al., 2019, p.135). Additionally, fostering global citizenship and intercultural competence is crucial for preparing students to navigate the complexities of our interconnected world. Universities can meet this challenge by incorporating international experiences, such as study abroad programs, international collaborations, and cross-cultural projects, into the curriculum, enriching students' global perspectives and intercultural abilities.

Faculty members are instrumental in implementing innovative teaching strategies, integrating soft skills into the curriculum, and staying abreast of the latest developments in their fields. Overall, strategic enhancement of university education qualifications and integration of innovative educational tools, such as gamification, into diverse curriculum design approaches are essential in addressing this multi-faceted challenge.

2.2. The role of technology in soft skills development

Incorporating soft skills into the accounting curriculum is increasingly essential to meet the evolving demands of the profession. International accounting organisations have historically stressed the need to revamp accounting education to make it more practical and to produce more well-rounded accountants (Baswara et al., 2020, p. 37). Employers now look for accounting graduates proficient in technical skills and a wide array of soft skills, including communication, strategic decision-making, and conflict management (Molenaar et al., 2019). Recent technological advancements have further highlighted the importance of integrating soft skills into accounting education. Using Learning Management Systems (LMS) has enabled innovative teaching methods that enhance student engagement and improve the learning experience (Helfaya, 2019).

The shift to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for better preparedness among educational institutions and faculty to effectively impart essential skills in a virtual setting (UNESCO, 2020).

Moreover, research highlights the significance of personalised learning in creating an adaptive learning environment and promoting digital learning approaches (Molenaar et al., 2019). This approach involves integrating various levels of automation in personalised learning to enhance student engagement. Additionally, a combined human-system regulation is essential to ensure that technology complements rather than replaces the human aspects of education (D'Mello, 2021).

The transition to remote learning prompted by the pandemic has necessitated educators to swiftly adapt by integrating online activities that positively impact student engagement, attitudes, and performance (Lim, 2020). Despite the challenges, LMSs such as Microsoft Teams, Blackboard, and Moodle, offer valuable tools for virtual interaction, including live or recorded lectures, chat functions, online exams, quizzes, and assignments (Helfaya, 2019). These platforms can be particularly effective in delivering prompt feedback, which is essential for continuously enhancing teaching and learning methods (Mihret et al., 2017).

The rapid transition to distance learning posed significant challenges for higher education institutions, particularly regarding technical infrastructure. Institutions in low-and middle-income countries observed that some students lacked Internet access due to financial constraints. On the other hand, institutions in high-income countries grappled with the economic implications of investing in LMSs (UNESCO, 2020a). This shift highlighted unequal access to learning opportunities among students, with some having robust access to LMSs, while others lacked it. Additionally, educators found that distance learning required more time than traditional teaching, as it involved integrating online activities to enhance student engagement, attitude, and performance (Bastos, De Oliveira, 2019, 2021). The effectiveness of distance learning varies across different fields of study, with practical disciplines like medicine and laboratory-based courses facing significant challenges. The success of these disciplines heavily relies on reliable online learning technologies (Brâncoveanu, 2020). While the flexibility of e-learning has led to its widespread adoption, the lack of interpersonal interaction between students and educators remains a significant criticism. The abrupt transition to e-learning could have unintended consequences that may impact students' future professional opportunities (Aguguom et al., 2020). With the digitalisation of the accountancy profession, universities must update their teaching methods to impart the necessary skills for the profession's future. Accountants must quickly adapt to new business practices and processes while upholding accounting principles. The profession faces various challenges in digitalisation, including Big Data, Cloud Computing, Artificial Intelligence, and Blockchain (Moore & Felo, 2021).

The ongoing changes are prompting educational systems to transition towards digitisation, which in turn is reshaping accountants' approaches to their work and necessitating the acquisition of new skills (Gulin et al., 2019). Formative assessments have increased significantly during the pandemic, offering valuable insights into students' learning needs. According to a survey by UNESCO (2020b), various countries have implemented diverse strategies for end-of-semester examinations, including rescheduling and adopting alternative assessment methods such as home-based exams and online testing. In restructuring the education system and envisioning the future, embracing the concept of blended learning is crucial. Nations should be prepared to adopt hybrid schooling models that combine in-person and remote learning (OECD, 2021). Including soft skills in the accounting curriculum is vital to prepare graduates for the challenges of the digital era (Ntoung et al., 2019). By incorporating innovative teaching methods and fostering collaboration between academia and industry, educational institutions can equip students with the necessary skills to thrive in their professional careers. The ongoing digital transformation of the accounting profession requires a curriculum that provides technical knowledge and develops the soft skills essential for effective practice in a rapidly evolving landscape.

3. Soft skills development behind video games. The applied research with Italian and Portuguese master students

This research investigates the effectiveness of gamification in enhancing leadership and teamwork abilities among Italian and Portuguese students pursuing a Master's degree in Business and Accounting Management through the "Leadership Quest" game.

Games like "Leadership Quest" create realistic scenarios that necessitate the application of communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills, ultimately leading to more engaging and effective learning (Deterding et al., 2011, p. 121).

In our study, the 'Leadership Quest' game served as an interactive platform, incorporating competitive and collaborative tasks that closely mirrored real-world organizational dynamics. The use of such structured environment was aimed to foster essential skills such as communication, negotiation, and strategic decision-making, while simultaneously promoting meaningful interactions among students and educators. Ultimately, the initiative aimed to foster meaningful interactions among students and educators, enriching the overall educational experience and amplifying engagement.

3.1. Context and participants

The 'Leadership Quest' video game involves teams competing in various business missions and leadership challenges, creating an environment resembling real-world organisational dynamics. The study included 150 students enrolled in the Master's programme at the Rome Business School, with an equal split of 75 participants from Italy and 75 from Portugal.

Among the Italian participants, there was a higher representation of female students, with 67% females and 33% males. In contrast, the gender distribution among Portuguese participants was equal, with 50% males and 50% females. The average age of the Portuguese students was 27 years, while the average age of the Italian students was slightly lower at 25.

The study included participants with diverse academic backgrounds. Approximately 30% were from business and economics, 25% from humanities and social sciences, 20% from engineering and technology, and 15% from natural sciences, with the remaining 10% from other disciplines such as arts and communication.

Similarly, the Portuguese participants had various academic backgrounds and pursued a master's in business and accounting management. Regarding work experience, 20% of Italian participants had experience in business, 25% in engineering, and 30% in humanities and social sciences. Meanwhile, 25% of Portuguese participants had prior work experience in business, 20% in engineering, and 25% in humanities and social sciences.

Notably, 30% of Italian participants showed an entrepreneurial career orientation, compared to 25% of Portuguese participants.

This diverse composition aimed to capture a wide range of perspectives and experiences, enriching the insights gained from the study. The balanced distribution between Italian and Portuguese participants helped provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of gamification on leadership skills development within a culturally diverse group.

The purposive sampling allowed for the inclusion of individuals deeply engaged in their Master's program, enhancing the depth and breadth of the findings.

3.2. Method and tools

As already mentioned, this study aimed to explore the effectiveness of the 'Leadership Quest' gamified learning initiative in enhancing leadership and soft skills among Master's students from Italy and Portugal.

The primary research questions guiding this inquiry were:

1) How does participation in the 'Leadership Quest' video game impact the development of leadership effectiveness, communication skills, and team management abilities among students?
2) Are there significant differences in the improvement of these skills when comparing Italian and Portuguese participants?
3) What demographic factors (age, gender, academic background, and work experience) influence the perceived effectiveness of gamified learning in developing soft skills?

To gather robust data, the study employed a meticulously designed questionnaire, aimed at measuring leadership effectiveness, communication aptitude, and team management abilities.

The questionnaire was meticulously designed to capture a comprehensive range of insights into participants' awareness and understanding of various soft skills, including leadership, and their perceptions of teaching methods and learning experiences related to video games. It was distributed online from November to December 2023, ensuring a convenient and efficient data collection process through a secure link for participants.

To assess the impact of gamification on life skills, including teamwork, leadership, and strategic communication, the study utilised the questionnaire before and after the students participated in the "Leadership Quest" game. This instrument measured leadership effectiveness, communication aptitude, and team management abilities while providing insights into participants' teamwork skills. Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS software, employing both t-tests and ANOVA to evaluate the impact of the gamified learning experience on leadership and teamwork skills. The analysis aimed to evaluate whether the data supported the initial hypotheses regarding the expected improvements in soft skills.

To develop a well-rounded profile of the participants, we first conducted a descriptive analysis of sociodemographic variables such as age, gender distribution, educational background, and work experience. This analysis aimed to uncover potential demographic differences between Italian and Portuguese Master's students, enriching our understanding of the sample's diversity.

4. Results

Given that our investigation was guided by three primary research questions, we report the results accordingly.

RQ1 - How does participation in the 'Leadership Quest' video game impact the development of leadership effectiveness, communication skills, and team management abilities among students?

The results demonstrate a significant improvement in leadership and teamwork skills following participation in the 'Leadership Quest' game. As illustrated in Table 1, the average score for effective communication increased from 2.5 to 4.2, and the average score for leadership orientation rose from 2.8 to 4.6. These substantial enhancements indicate that the gamified learning environment effectively fosters the development of critical competencies. The t-tests conducted yielded very low p-values

(<0.001), confirming the statistical significance of these improvements. This suggests that the immersive and interactive nature of the game not only engages students but also equips them with practical skills necessary for real-world applications in leadership and teamwork contexts. The significant gains in conflict management (from 2.3 to 4.1) and team management (from 2.7 to 4.0) further emphasize the game's effectiveness, as students learned to navigate complex scenarios that required negotiation, collaboration, and strategic decision-making. Such skills are crucial in today's dynamic workplace, where the ability to work effectively in teams and manage conflicts is often a determinant of success.

RQ2 - Are there significant differences in the improvement of these skills when comparing Italian and Portuguese participants?

The analysis of variance (ANOVA), as detailed in Table 2, revealed noteworthy differences between the two participant groups—Italian and Portuguese students. For instance, the effective communication scores for Italian participants improved from 2.4 to 4.1, while Portuguese participants experienced an increase from 2.6 to 4.7. This indicates that, although both groups benefited from the gamified learning experience, Portuguese students exhibited a slightly higher average improvement in communication skills.

The ANOVA results indicated significant differences in leadership skills, with Italian students showing an increase from 2.7 to 4.4 compared to the Portuguese students' rise from 2.2 to 4.6. This suggests that while both groups gained from the experience, the Portuguese students may have responded more positively to the gamified approach in enhancing their leadership capabilities.

Understanding these cultural nuances is crucial, as it implies that educational strategies may need to be tailored to different demographic backgrounds to maximize their effectiveness.

RQ3 - What demographic factors (age, gender, academic background, and work experience) influence the perceived effectiveness of gamified learning in developing soft skills?

The demographic analysis revealed that various factors, including age, gender, academic background, and prior work experience, significantly influenced students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the 'Leadership Quest' initiative. The diverse academic backgrounds of the participants enriched our insights, highlighting how students from different disciplines exhibited varying levels of engagement and skill development.

For example, as reported in Table 2, both groups expressed high appreciation for teaching methods such as case studies and gamification, with similar mean scores (Italian: M=4.25; Portuguese: M=4.30). However, there was a notable disparity in the ratings for lectures and seminars, with Italian students scoring this method significantly higher (M=4.68) than their Portuguese counterparts (M=2.97), although this difference was not statistically significant (p=0.29). This variation suggests that Italian students may have a greater affinity for traditional teaching methods, while Portuguese students may find more value in interactive learning experiences, such as gamification. The correlations observed between leadership and teamwork skills among both Italian and Portuguese students reinforce the interconnectedness of these competencies.

For instance, Italian students exhibited correlations of r=0.30 for communication and leadership skills, and r=0.52 for teamwork and leadership skills, while Portuguese students demonstrated even stronger correlations (r=-0.46 for communication and leadership; r=-0.72 for teamwork and leadership). These findings indicate a strong relationship between the development of these skills, which is vital for fostering effective collaboration in professional settings.

Table 1. Test Analysis of Leadership and Teamwork Skills Before and After "Leadership Quest" Game.

Soft Skills	Mean bef.	Mean aft.	Mean Diff	p-value
Effective communication *	2,5	4.2	1,7	<0.001
Leadership Orientation	2.8	4.6	1,8	<0.001
Conflict Management	2.3	4.1	1.8	<0.001
Team management	2.7	4.0	1.7	<0.001
Collaboration with others	2.4	4.1	1.6	<0.001

Table 2. ANOVA Evaluation for Soft Skills and Teaching Methods between Italian and Portuguese Groups.

Soft Skills/Teaching Methods	Italian		Portuguese		p-value
	Italian Mean Before (M)	Italian Mean After (M)	Portuguese Mean Before (W)	Portuguese Mean After (W)	
Effective communication *	2,4	4.1	2.6	4.7	<0.001
Leadership Orientation	2.7	4.4	2.2	4.6	<0.001
Conflict Management	2.2	4.0	2.4	4.2	<0.001
Team management	2.3	4.2	3.1	4.4	<0.001
Collaboration with others	2.1	3.9	2.9	4.1	<0.001
Case Studies	4.2	4.2	4.3	4.3	0.57
Gamification	4.3	4.4	4.4	4,5	0.03
Lectures and Seminars	4.6	4.7	4.6	2.9	0.29

5. Discussion and conclusion

As a result, students improved their communication, negotiation, and strategic decision-making abilities while learning to manage limited resources and deal with the consequences of their actions. Combining elements of competition and collaboration, 'Leadership Quest' effectively increased student participation and motivation, strengthening their problem-solving skills, adaptability, and creative thinking. Furthermore, aside from nurturing leadership skills, the initiative facilitated meaningful interaction among students and teachers, enriching the overall teaching and learning experience and boosting engagement. Ultimately, this initiative highlighted the potential of gamified learning as a powerful tool for academic institutions looking to enhance the leadership training of Master's students.

The study on gamification for leadership skill development at the Rome Business School yielded significant results. Participants in the "Leadership Quest" game exhibited notable improvements in leadership and teamwork skills, with their average scores reflecting a substantial increase after engaging in the game; this indicates the effective development of these competencies. Notably, there were no significant differences between male and female participants, suggesting that both genders can equally benefit from the game in enhancing their leadership skills. These findings indicate that gamification can be an effective tool for developing leadership skills, particularly among students with diverse academic backgrounds. Consequently, this study provides a solid foundation for further research into gamification to cultivate leadership and teamwork skills.

The results underscore the critical importance of soft skills development in higher education, as these competencies are essential for preparing students for the challenges of the modern workforce

(Kieu & Singer, 2020, p. 24). Communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability are crucial for effective leadership and success in professional settings. A comparative analysis of Master's programs in Italy and Portugal revealed similarities and differences in the emphasis on soft skills. While both countries recognised the importance of these skills, variations were observed in their integration within the curriculum and the pedagogical strategies employed. These distinctions provide opportunities for cross-country learning and the exchange of best practices.

Despite the significant findings, this research has limitations. The study's sample size may not fully represent the broader population of Master's students, potentially limiting the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data from the questionnaire could introduce bias, as participants may have overestimated their skills or the effectiveness of the gamified learning experience. Furthermore, the study did not explore the long-term retention of the skills acquired through the "Leadership Quest" game, nor did it account for external factors that may influence students' development of soft skills.

Despite these limitations, in our view, the findings suggest several recommendations for improving soft skills development in Master's programs. First, a more systematic approach to integrating soft skills into the curriculum is essential. This can be achieved by incorporating soft skills training into core courses and providing dedicated modules focused on these competencies. Second, creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment is vital for promoting the acquisition of soft skills. Collaborative projects, group discussions, and experiential learning opportunities can encourage students to actively engage and practice these skills (Malavasi, 2022, p. 65). Third, strengthening partnerships between universities and industries is crucial to ensure that the soft skills developed align with job market demands. Involving industry professionals in curriculum design and offering internships and mentorship programs can bridge the gap between academic learning and practical application.

Moreover, the research emphasises the importance of adaptability and flexibility in leadership roles. Leaders must skillfully navigate and adjust to changing circumstances, a competency that can be cultivated through targeted educational interventions. The Italian Master's students exhibited significantly higher levels of theoretical knowledge acquisition than their Portuguese counterparts, suggesting varying curriculum designs that prioritise traditional lecture-based methods in Italy and active, participative learning approaches in Portugal.

The successful integration of the "Leadership Quest" game underscores the potential of gamified learning in cultivating leadership and soft skills. The game involved teams competing in diverse business missions and leadership challenges, creating a setting analogous to real-world organisational dynamics. This approach enhanced students' communication, negotiation, and strategic decision-making abilities, fostering interaction between students and educators while strengthening the overall teaching and learning experience.

Additionally, integrating gamification into university curricula can complement various curriculum design approaches by improving student engagement and fostering practical skills development. By incorporating game elements such as challenges, collaborative activities, and rewards, gamification creates a dynamic learning environment that facilitates theoretical knowledge acquisition while nurturing essential soft skills such as effective communication, collaboration, and adaptability. The growing need for interdisciplinary knowledge and abilities presents a significant challenge for curriculum designers. Introducing multidisciplinary approaches in Master's programs enables students to comprehend multiple disciplines and integrate knowledge from diverse areas (Schleutker et al., 2019, p. 135).

Furthermore, nurturing global citizenship and intercultural competence is crucial for preparing students to navigate the complexities of a globalised world. Universities can address this challenge by

integrating international experiences such as study-abroad programs, international collaborations, and cross-cultural projects into the curriculum, enriching students' global perspectives and intercultural competencies. Faculty members can play a pivotal role in implementing innovative teaching strategies, integrating soft skills into the curriculum, and staying updated on the latest developments in their fields.

In conclusion, strategic advancements in university education qualifications and the innovative use of tools like gamification are essential for addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by global society, ultimately preparing students for success in the contemporary workforce. By implementing the recommendations outlined, universities can enhance the educational experiences and qualifications of Master's students, better preparing them for the demands of a global society. This research represents a step forward in addressing the existing challenges faced by society regarding university education qualifications and the strategic development of organisations and institutions in the humanities, legal economics, and socio-political sciences. Emphasizing soft skills development in Master's programs can significantly contribute to preparing graduates with the necessary competencies to stand out in the rapidly evolving global landscape.

Moreover, conducting a comparative analysis of the perceptions and experiences of Master's students from Italy and Portugal regarding developing video game skills yield valuable insights into potential cultural variances. These insights can inform the establishment of best practices for curriculum design. Effective pedagogical strategies can be integrated by understanding the strengths and weaknesses of current approaches to soft skills development. It is essential to consider cultural and contextual factors in curriculum design to ensure that Master's programs cater to the diverse needs of students across different cultural settings.

In essence, this study aims to contribute to the existing literature on soft skills development by examining the experiences of Master's students from Italy and Portugal. By identifying commonalities and differences in the development of soft skills, we can shape educational practices that foster the growth of these indispensable skills. Ultimately, the objective is to prepare Master's students from all cultural backgrounds for leadership roles in their respective fields.

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