



Sales education in Italian universities: state of the art and future directions

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Abstract

During the last 10 years, scholars focused their attention on how sales education has evolved and highlighted the relevant impact of teaching sales-related topics in tertiary education worldwide. However, in the universities, the number of programs, curricula, and courses is limited. This low number of sales programs can impact students' "work readiness" and not respond to company needs generating a mismatching. This study aimed to understand the state of the art of sales education in the Italian context and to explore the future challenges for universities. The results confirm the low presence of sales-related courses but, at the same time, a relevant part of the selected program presents sales as a job opportunity or a competence. Internal and external challenges are also described and suggestions to better develop sales education programs within Italian universities are provided.

Keywords Sales education · Higher Education Institutions · Sales transformation · Sales training · Sales management · Personal selling

1 Introduction

More than a decade ago, in their seminal work, Piercy and Lane (2009) questioned, "Is sales the new marketing?" This question can probably explain how sales practices have changed dramatically over the years and the importance of that function in the economic sustainability of firms. In this vein, the sales division is evolving, switching from the isolated status toward integration with the marketing, operation, and other functions; therefore, it is gaining a more strategic role (Storbacka et al., 2009). Furthermore, this evolution has also transformed the role and competencies of salespeople (Cardinali, 2019; Weitz & Bradford, 1999).

Although sales-related research has been conducted for more than 100 years (the first article appeared in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* in 1918; Rapp

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& Beeler, 2021), and with more than 800 articles in the last 40 years, scholars have increased their attention on various topics only in the last 15 years. In this literature, it is clear how selling doesn't mean "push the product" anymore, and organizations are striving to adopt a customer-oriented perspective in their selling activities, because selling requires high levels of professionalism, marketing capabilities, and adaptive and consultative approaches. As reported by Weitz and Bradford (1999) in their seminal work, the B2B salesperson is turning from a persuader into a "relationship manager" and, above all, a "value creator".

The role of the salesperson and his career path need to be rethought and, as reported by Pettijohn & Pettijohn, 2009, we are looking for a new generation of well-trained salespeople (candidates with higher education) suitable to succeed in the contemporary sales landscape (Peltier et al., 2014). Unfortunately, recruiters frequently find it difficult to persuade students to apply for sales positions (Ballestra et al., 2017). Furthermore, sales organizations are experiencing a "talent crisis": more than ever, talent is required in the face of the ongoing transformation. According to Miller and Heiman's study, the current sales force does not fully possess the necessary capabilities; only 16.4% of respondents in the CSO Insights—Sales Talent Study affirm to have all the skills their organization would need to succeed (Miller Heiman Group, 2018).

Despite this situation, many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) do not offer sales management or personal selling courses or curricula in their bachelor's or master's degrees. The paucity of sales education has been underlined by various scholars (Agnihotri et al., 2014; Deeter-Schmelz & Kennedy, 2011; Spiller et al., 2020) and also the number of studies is limited and comes mainly from North American authors and institutions. Notably, personal selling and sales management programs in national HEIs can be very heterogeneous: Fournier et al. (2014) showed that the US has a more developed sales education system, whereas in other contexts, their attention to teaching this discipline is minimal. Concerning the European context and following the results of the Erasmus+ Project—Sales Platform Studies for Higher Education (2020), 12 bachelor's or master's degrees have been established in Austria, and more are available in Finland. In Denmark and Italy, education systems have only few experiences (Cardinali et al., 2022). Deeter-Schmelz and Kennedy (2011) provided a clear representation of the state of sales education in various countries (including some European) and highlighted a lack of sales programs.

Analyzing the universities that have implemented sales programs, studies reported the role of the companies' demand as the main factor that influences the decision (Bolander et al., 2020). And, as reported by Ballestra et al. (2017), from the student's perspective, "attending sales courses" affects—with other antecedents—the student's intention to pursue a sales career. What emerges from the academic literature, confirms the relevance of sales tertiary education bridging the gap between the expectations of businesses (hire "work-ready" students) and the perception of the students (increase students' intention to pursue a career in sales). The question is also highlighted by different projects financed by the European Union to stimulate the universities to keep more attention on the topic and

develop educational programs accordingly (see SPLASH—Sales PLAtform Studies for Higher Education and LISA—Learning for Inside Sales Agents).

The primary objective of our current investigation was to increase research on sales education, to update the state of sales education programs, and propose a list of “open questions” and suggestions for the Italian universities interested in developing sales programs. The present paper is also included in the streams of sales education and aims to contribute to several calls of recent years to conduct further research coming from sales scholars (Cummins et al., 2013) and journals specializing in the topic (e.g., the *Journal of Marketing Education* and the *Journal for Advancement of Marketing Education*). In addition, our research moves on the most recent assessment of sales education during the years abroad by Deeter-Schmelz and Kennedy (2011) and Spiller et al. (2020). Finally, to our knowledge, only a few reports have partially described the Italian situation (Società Italiana di Marketing, 2017).

Following this background, the purpose of this study was twofold: (a) to understand the state of the art of sales education in Italian universities and the content of existing programs and (b) to suggest future directions to better develop sales education programs within Italian universities. The paper is structured as follows. A background is presented, followed by a literature review concerning the main research streams on sales education and the methodology and findings. Finally, the results and future directions are discussed.

2 Background

2.1 Sales education in HEIs

Many academic studies and practitioner reports (Miller Heiman Group, 2018), over the years have, stated that interest in sales education has never been stronger and that sales training has a pivotal role in business today (Deeter-Schmelz & Kennedy, 2011). Notably, the emerging contemporary sales profiles are heterogeneous, and the characteristics, competences, responsibilities, and tasks depend on the type of business (B2B vs. B2C), the typology of the selling approach (transactional vs. relational), the selling process, and many other elements. Account managers, KAMs, sales representatives, inside sales representatives, business developers, and many others broadly represent the variety of “sales profiles” (SEF, 2018). In response to the increased demand from large and small companies of a “new generation” of sale profiles, only a few university systems react to the rising significance of sales careers, with some placing an emphasis on developing a curriculum that integrates sales training and education (Chaker et al., 2020). Furthermore, personal selling and sales management education in HEIs remains limited (Orr, 2012).

Using a timeline, we can observe that in the United States, the sales education interest increased from the ‘80 s: in 1980, the *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management* was created; in 1984, the American Marketing Association supported the Selling and Sales Management Consortium; in 1985, at Baylor University, the first University Center of Professional Selling was created; in 2002, the University Sales Center Alliance was funded by eight University Sales Centers or Sales

Institutes; and, in 2007, the Sales Education Foundation (a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting the benefits of university sales education) was established (Rapp & Beeler, 2021). Europe, with less intense sales education, has caught the attention of few university systems, especially in the UK (see the experience of Cranfield University), the Scandinavian area, and in German-speaking countries. However, many HEIs do not yet offer sales management courses in their bachelor's or master's degrees and academic studies were not able yet to give an efficient contribution to filling this gap (Deeter-Schmelz & Kennedy, 2011).

The topic has received relatively little attention in marketing and business education literature (Cummins et al., 2020; Scott & Beuk, 2020). Coverage has increased substantially over the past 15 years, given that numerous sales education articles have been published in the *Journal of Marketing Education* (26), *Marketing Education Review* (34), *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management* (7), and *Journal for Advancement of Marketing Education* (22). The rise in these numbers is primarily due to special issues targeted toward sales education, such as the recent “*How Well Does your Sales Curriculum Sell? Research focused on (Re)Designing Sales Curriculum*” in the *Journal of Marketing Education*'s call for papers.

2.2 Sales education: a literature review

During the last decades, sales education literature has touched upon various research areas of interest and tried to face the relevance of the topic from various perspectives that we could aggregate in this mainstream (Cummins et al., 2013): (1) research on university curriculum, (2) research on methodological pedagogical tools and teaching methods, and (3) students' perceptions of sales career and research with students in general.

Considering the university curriculum stream, Deeter-Schmelz and Kennedy (2011) and Spiller et al. (2020) provided a clear representation of the state of sales management and personal selling teaching at universities in various countries (including some European countries). In a sample of universities ($n=209$), few confirmed the existence of sales curricula, a minor, a specialized track, or a certificate, whereas 30 universities reported that a sales program was under consideration. In other studies, demand from businesses has been cited as the most common reason for consideration by the university (Cardinali et al., 2022). Other studies' approach from an international perspective has described that the educational systems are heterogeneous regarding the teaching of personal selling and sales management in various national contexts (Spiller et al., 2020). Finally emerges that, over the years, sales education played an increasingly important role in marketing curricula (Cespedes & Weinfurter, 2016; Delpechitre & Baker, 2017; Loe & Inks, 2014).

Other scholars have also tried to understand the impact of sales education. As reported by Bolander et al. (2014), sales education has the following well-known effects for business students: (1) improved job prospects and better performance after graduation (Scott & Beuk, 2020), (2) reduced company costs for training (SEF, 2018), and (3) increased student intention to pursue a sales career (Ballestra et al., 2017). Few studies (Groza et al., 2022; Lilly & Stanley, 2016) have also considered

the company's involvement in terms of program sponsorship and co-teaching on students that show positive outcomes for employer branding and recruitment, for students with greater involvement, and for universities for the economic support and greater impact on the territory and on students (Agnihotri et al., 2014).

Considering research on methodological pedagogical tools and teaching methods, it could be noted that scholars and professionals agree that the sales area—particularly for the personal selling area—needs to shift from traditional learning methodologies. It has been highlighted that experiential learning leads to higher results in the construction of skills (Inks & Avila, 2018). This is particularly true in contexts where the skill component is as important as the construction of knowledge. In this sense, other studies have demonstrated that students enrolled in sales courses show better absorption because of experiential learning models (Cummins et al., 2013). In addition, in this area, the rise of interest is highlighted by the presence of special issues published by the *Journal of Selling* and the *Journal of Advancement in Marketing Education*. Some of the recommended methods suggested by these studies are hands-on experience in the field, mentoring, role-playing, and expert involvement confirming the relevance of “active” methods in courses in which the development of behavioral skills is more important (Inks & Avila, 2018). Among the suggested teaching methodologies proposed by scholars and educators are the following:

- Role-playing games and videotaping: considered effective in personal selling and negotiation (Cardinali et al., 2022).
- Sales presentations: communication (involving, handling, suggestions/objections, incisiveness, visual image, improvisation/adaptiveness).
- Scenarios/roleplaying support the development of the following skills: teamwork, problem solving, negotiating, communication, and selling skills.
- Experiential assignments: organization, budgeting, and interpersonal communication.
- Sales mentor (professional/practitioner): for the development of professional relationship/network, interpersonal communication, and time management.

Most sales management and personal selling university courses are delivered with traditional face-to-face lessons, and only a part of these courses adopt a blended methodology (frontal and online e-learning training; Deeter-Schmelz & Kennedy, 2011) or the interactive learning methodologies mentioned above.

Considering students' perception studies from the '80 s, scholars have reported that HR managers face difficulties in attracting students to do job interviews for sales positions and encouraging them to agree to work in this area (Dubinsky, 1981). In addition, those who start a career in this field are not ready for that type of work, with obvious repercussions on the timing of onboarding and lack of productivity in the first month (Lee et al., 2007).

The topic of feeling towards selling and the perception of selling and sales management as a career was studied in the last 50 years, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon context, and the majority of these studies show the low intention of university students to choose sales as a career. According to Peltier et al. (2014), this misconception has remained constant over the years. Students often have a negative impression of this

profession; therefore, their intention to pursue a career in this field is substantially low (Karakaya et al., 2014). It is evident from the various studies on the subject (Avlonitis & Panagopoulos, 2010)—with particular reference to personal selling—that the causes of this lack of attention from students are due to the low prestige of the profession.

The research on students' perceptions of the sales profession is based on different lines of research. The first focuses on the students' orientation towards the sales job and their attitudes or preferences for selling; the conclusions of many of these research works are that there is a low orientation and a misconception about the salesman's job. They also found out that preference for a sales career is influenced more by associated characteristics of financial benefits and decision-making power than by functional aspects of the job (Fournier et al., 2014).

Other studies have questioned whether this image varies across individuals. The variables considered in the qualitative studies are: gender (Amin et al., 1995), nationality (Honeycutt et al., 1999; Karakaya et al., 2014), and race (Cort et al., 2012; Del Vecchio & Honeycutt, 2002). If we take into consideration the studies conducted in different national contexts and with different cultures, similarities in the conclusions reached by the studies are highlighted; in fact, there does not seem to be any substantial difference in the perception of the seller's profession and career in this area (Cort et al., 2012).

Scholars have focused on job attributes and personal characteristics that have an impact on students' perceptions. There are several variables that the studies have considered, such as enrollment in sales management courses, training courses (Cummins et al., 2015; Pettijohn & Pettijohn, 2009) and the presence of salespeople between relatives and friends. In this respect, the main studies have shown that attendance at personal selling and sales management courses improves students' perceptions of the "sales career" (Bristow et al., 2006). Ballestra et al. (2017) confirmed that those who attend a sales course have a more positive perception of the sales profession and a greater intention to pursue a career. In this regard, it should be added that those who have a more positive assessment of sales also have a greater intention to continue a career (Karakaya et al., (2014). Other studies have indicated the main antecedents that influence the "feeling towards selling" and among these we include: salesperson attributes, sales job attributes, sales knowledge, and sales ethics.

In the end, it could be noted that attention to the teaching of this discipline is minimal, and systematic literature analyses of state-of-the-art sales education are rare in Southern Europe and Italy in particular.

3 Methodology

Our study on the current state of sales education in Italy uses various methods coherently with the purpose of this paper. In particular, our multiple research approaches included the following: the analysis of the university programs in Italy to understand the presence of sales-related topics (first method) and the analysis of the available syllabus of the sales-related courses (using the title as discriminant—second method). In addition, a qualitative analysis among international sales educators was conducted (third method).

Considering method one, we focused, firstly, our attention on having a holistic view of the sales programs. To obtain an overall view, as a main source of information we used the contents of the “Scheda Unica Annuale” (SUA; used for the design, implementation, self-evaluation, and re-design of the program of studies) that each Italian university needs to provide every year for accreditation. We used the following procedure to collect the data: to obtain overall access to the Italian university program, we used the “University.it” dataset of information for the 2020/2021 academic year. To our knowledge, this dataset is trustworthy because it includes the official data of the Italian Ministry of Education.

Second, we selected bachelor’s and master’s degree courses that could include sales-related courses or programs. Although it was possible to associate the topic of “sales” in various degree courses, instead of considering all the university programs, we decided to consider the bachelor’s and master’s degrees in economics, management, and communication as more adequate for our study. In particular, we selected the following bachelor’s (Laurea Triennale) or master’s degree (Laurea Magistrale) programs: L-18 (Scienze dell’economia e della gestione aziendale), L-33 (Scienze economiche), L-20 (Scienze della comunicazione), LM-56 (Scienze dell’economia), LM-77 (Scienze economico-aziendali), LM-59 (Scienze della comunicazione), and LM-92 (Teorie della comunicazione). Other bachelor’s or master’s programs could include personal selling or sales-related topics. However, upon interviewing three experts (director of L-18 course, dean and director of LM-77), we expected to find more in the selected programs than in the rest of non-social sciences programs. For example, considering their opinions, in the STEM area, the profiles of technical sales (e.g., sales engineers) are not covered by Italian university programs.

Third, we performed data collection by extracting from University.it the courses according to our procedure and all the brief descriptions and SUAs that included the following keywords: “sales,” “vendita,” “vendite,” and “selling.” The keyword “commerciale” was not considered because of its various meanings, which can be misleading. A dataset of 536 programs was generated and used for a descriptive analysis of frequency, course level, and university location. In addition, we analyzed the professional profiles described in the SUAs. These descriptions contained a brief overview of the key content, expected knowledge, and skills to be learned and stated the major learning strategies and activities that students would experience. The data collection was managed in Italian.

The second method we adopted was concentrated on the syllabus analysis; to understand the topic and skills currently delivered in the sales courses, we created a database with the main information provided on the university website or collected directly by the sales educator. The selection of the syllabus comes from the previous analysis of courses having one of the keywords (considered in the first methodology) within the title. A total of 12 courses are taken into consideration but only 11 have the syllabus available online or provided by the lecturer/scholar, in addition, we also added one course to the knowledge of the researchers (an optional course not included in the previous analysis). Most of the syllabus was well-structured and easy to access. Due to the low numbers of courses, the content of the Syllabus was analyzed considering the following topics: general description, suggested background

knowledge, content summary, learning outcomes, teaching methods, and assessment methods.

The third method is a panel discussion of international sales scholars on the topic of the “future of sales education worldwide”. We collected qualitative data from a panel discussion conducted at the GSSI Conference 2022 hosted in Frankfurt Am Main (Global Sales Science Institute) in cooperation with other colleagues from Tampere University of Applied Sciences (Finland), Universidad del Desarrollo (Chile), Consultant Company (Spain), University of Upper Austria (Austria), and Lisbon School of Economics and Management (Portugal). The aim and scope of this qualitative data collection was to understand the main challenges that international universities must face in the journey of adopting sales curricula or programs. A panel discussion was managed in three main phases: (1) a general introduction of the topic, supported by a literature background, was presented; (2) the attendance was split into three groups with two supervisors each; (3) in the last phase, all the groups worked separately and only at the end a final discussion was organized among the groups. The profile of attendees could be considered as experts in the sales education field: sales professors, sales lecturers, and sales researchers, also two scholars in charge of the sales program took part in the session. Considering the nature and scope of the conference and the distribution of the sales education, the participants were from various nations, mainly the US, Germany, and other European countries. The qualitative data were collected using the debriefing session that each group provided at the end of all the sessions in a written form and we discussed the data at the end of the session. Considering the number of participants, 23 panelists took part at the session—the 5 coordinators are not included in the list. Because of its nature, the research has only a descriptive scope and needs to be supported by further deep understanding.

4 Findings¹

4.1 State of the art of sales education in Italy

This section presents the main results of the descriptive analysis of Italian university programs. Approximately 35.45% of the programs mentioned at least one of the selected keywords within the SUAs or brief descriptions. Regarding bachelor’s degree courses, L-18 had the highest number of programs mentioning at least one of the selected keywords (65% of the total). This was followed by L-33 (42%) and L-20 (20%). With reference to master’s degree courses, LM-77 had a percentage of courses mentioning at least one of the selected keywords of approximately 33% of the total (Table 1). Out of the 77 institutions (“Atenei”), 66 (85.71%) provide degree courses that mention at least one of the selected keywords (86.54% public universities and 83.33% private universities). Regarding short descriptions, 38.46% of public

¹ Data collection and analysis was conducted by dott.ssa Giulia Amadio, PhD candidate at Università di Macerata—PhD program in “Quantitative methods”.

Table 1 Sales-related programs in the Italian university

	Courses	Mentions in “SUA”	%	Mentions in “Brief Description”	%	Number of Citations in “SUA”	Number of Citations in “Brief Description”
L-18—	Scienze dell’economia e della gestione aziendale	81	64.8	11	8.8	248	17
L-33—	Scienze economiche	25	42.37	1	1.69	63	1
L-20—	Scienze della comunicazione	12	20.34	2	3.39	24	2
LM-77—	Scienze economico-aziendali	57	32.95	15	8.67	192	28
LM-56—	Scienze dell’economia	10	12.82	3	3.85	16	3
LM-59—	Comunicazione pubblica, d’impresa e pubblicità	4	16	0	0	12	0
LM-92—	Teorie della comunicazione	1	5.88	1	5.88	0	1
		190	35.45	33	6.16	555	52

Source analysis of data from Universitaly.it

and 20.83% of private universities present courses which short description mentions at least one of the selected keywords. Considering the data from the perspective of educational level, at least one of the selected keywords was mentioned in 49% of the bachelor's degree courses and 25% of the master's degree courses (Table 2).

From a geographical point of view, the percentages of programs mentioning at least one of the selected keywords were 33% in Northern Italy, 36% in Central Italy, and 39% in Southern Italy (Table 3). Considering the institutions ("Atenei"), programs that mentioned at least one of the selected keywords were provided by 26 (96.30%) of the universities in northern Italy, 17 (73.91%) in central Italy, and 23 (85.19%) in southern Italy.

Another element we considered in our analysis was the number of courses focusing on sales management and personal selling. The SUA provides a list of mandatory courses (university exams) presented in each program, but it does not include all optional courses. Considering this limitation (sales-related courses could be in the optional courses), the results showed a very low number of courses: we found only 12 courses (university exams) in all the 190 programs. In addition, the LM-77 degree courses had the highest number of courses on the subject of *sales* (9 courses). Most of the courses concentrated in the area of Northern Italy (7 courses).

An analysis of the contents and descriptions of SUA showed various professional profiles. These profiles were mainly presented in opportunities ("Sbocchi occupazionali"). The most cited profession was the general profile of the salesperson (90), and the area manager (district manager, "responsabile di area") was cited 75 times. Only a few times the highest profile as sales director or key account manager roles emerged (Table 4).

4.2 Sales courses analysis and teaching practices in the Italian universities

We also considered the content of the course syllabus which could provide a picture of what the universities delivered in the courses. In the present sections, we are going to present the result of the syllabus analysis conducted among 12 courses labelled "Sales" or "Sales management" (see the KW adopted previously).

As reported in Table 5, courses have from 6 to 9 ECTS (CFU in Italian) and the majority of the courses are included in L77 Master Degree. Only one of the courses is part of a Bachelor's Degree and few of the programs are delivered in English.

The content of the courses is mainly focused on the macro topics of Sales Management/Sales Force Management (8), Sales Process (4), Personal Selling (3), Trade Marketing (3) and other subtopics. Only in one case, an entire personal selling course is provided. The results show that the general content of the courses is directed to complex selling and business-to-markets business sales. It also emerges that sales management activities are—in some cases—integrated with trade marketing courses.

Considering the learning outcome, it should be noted that part of this section of the syllabus follows the Dublin descriptors (generic statement) and in other cases only presents the knowledge and the application of knowledge. The basic knowledge

Table 2 Sales-related programs per level

	Courses	Mentions in “SUA”	%	Mentions in “Brief Description”	%
Bachelor’s degree	243	118	48.56	14	5.76
Master’s degree	293	72	24.57	19	6.48
Total	536	190	35.45	33	6.16

Source analysis of data from University.it

Table 3 Sales-related courses: geographic area distribution

	Courses	Mentions in “SUA”	%
Northern Italy	257	86	33.46
Central Italy	137	49	35.77
Southern Italy	142	55	38.73
Total	536	190	35.45

Source analysis of data from University.it

provided to the students is related to: business market, distributor challenge and marketing management (international); and the core knowledge is sales process, sales force management and sales strategies. Generally speaking, sales courses aim to provide students with a solid foundation of theoretical and conceptual knowledge while developing more practical skills to address the challenges in sales and sales force management. Students should learn to translate theory into action, applying their knowledge to solve problems and make informed decisions in an increasingly complex and digital business environment. It should be however noted that only two of the Syllabus face extensively the issues of sales transformation and the impact of digitalization in process and sales organizations.

The teaching method reported in the syllabus seems to confirm the need of not using only the traditional approach (face-to-face lectures) in teaching sales. In fact, case studies are frequently claimed in the syllabus (9 to 12 courses) and “guest speaker talks” are already used with the same frequency. Also “group assignment” and “in-class exercise” are present as claimed teaching methodology in almost 50% of the cases.

Table 4 Professional profile

Salesperson (“tecnico delle vendite”)	90
Area manager	75
Sales manager	32
Key account manager (KAM)	12
Sales director	5
Sales representative	5

Source analysis of data from University.it

Table 5 Syllabus analysis

General description	<p>Courses have from 6 to 9 CFU and the duration is from 36 to 72 h Majority of the courses are included in L77 master's degree (only one of the courses is part of a Bachelor Degree). Following the distribution:</p> <p>LM-77—Scienze economico-aziendali (9) L-18—Scienze dell'economia e della gestione aziendale (1) LM-56—Scienze dell'economia (1) L-20—Scienze della comunicazione (1)</p> <p>Considering the distribution 6 of the courses and in the university of North, 5 Central and South Almost 40% of the program is delivered in English</p>
Suggested background knowledge	<p>There are no formal requirements but, in many of the syllabus, basic requisites are suggested to attend the courses (mainly marketing or business marketing)</p>
Content Summary	<p>Six of 12 courses are exclusively focused on Selling and Sales Management (only one is dedicated to Personal Selling) Three of the courses are integrated into Trade marketing courses and others with Logistics or Marketing B2B or organizational Essentially all the courses are focused in B2B sales or complex selling contexts (e.g. Trade or KAM—Key Account Management) The content of the courses are mainly focused on the macro topics of Sales Management/Sales Force Management (8), Sales Process (4), Personal Selling (3), Trade Marketing (3) and other subtopics Two of the Syllabus face extensively the issues of sales transformation and the impact of digitalization in process and sales organizations</p>
Learning Outcomes	<p>Analyzing the learning outcome of the syllabus we found basically heterogeneity, but we propose the following synthesis divided between Knowledge and Application of Knowledge</p> <p>1. Knowledge and Understanding: Knowledge of different distribution channels, the importance of managing business relationships, and international marketing strategies Acquisition of theoretical knowledge concerning the sales process, sales force management Understanding the fundamentals of sales strategies and challenges in the sales industry</p> <p>2. Application of Knowledge and Understanding: Applying acquired knowledge to analyze and solve real-world issues related to marketing and sales management Utilizing theoretical models and tools to develop sales strategies and make decisions regarding sales force management Applying acquired skills to assess the effectiveness of sales and improve business performance Participating in simulations, projects, and practical cases to develop the ability to work in teams and make decisions under pressure in uncertain contexts</p>
Teaching methods	<p>Face-to-face lectures (also online): 12/12 Guest speaker's talks (in class or in distance) 9/12 Case studies / Incidents (traditional, online) 9/12 Group assignments 6/12 Exercises (in class) 5/12 Interactive class activities (role-playing, business game, simulation, online forum, instant polls) 1/12</p>

Table 5 (continued)

Assessment methods	<p>The assessment method is variable, but the majority of the courses differentiate the assessment method between attendees and not attendees</p> <p>Type of evaluation: Written (at least) 8/12 Oral (at least) 4/12 Mixed 7/12—Oral or written mixed with “attendances interaction”, mixed with results of exercises and project works (also in the group). Many of the syllabi describe the different weights of the assessment methods in percentage</p>
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Coherently with the interactive approach of the courses and the need to develop also soft skills and practical capability, the assessment method declared in the syllabus went beyond the written or oral assessment; in fact, in 7 to 12 cases a mixed method that include “attendances interaction”, “results of exercises” and project works (also in the group) are included. Many of the syllabus describe the different weights of the assessment methods in percentage (Table 5).

4.3 Challenges in the adoption of the sales education curriculum: an international perspective

The panel discussion among sales scholars/researchers/lecturers was conducted to have a professional and well-informed opinion and acquire an international perspective of the challenges and barriers in the development of sales programs. The main challenges arising from the scholars’ panel could be organized into the following subtopics: external challenges, internal challenges, and educational and pedagogical challenges.

Concerning the external challenges, the scholars involved in the panel described the key elements they had to face for the implementation of new courses, curricula, or programs in sales education. One of these was the involvement of companies. From that point of view, the literature and practitioner report agreed to the increasing demand for sales profiles and the request for a new sales education. In this vein, the participants in the panel reported an increasing demand from the business, but at the same time, they described the emerging challenges concerning company involvement. First, they reported the complexity of transferring to companies the value of well-educated students in sales. Companies understand needs but are mostly passive. A better approach is to start cooperating with companies with a specific organizational culture. Companies frequently claim an interest, but transforming this interest into a profitable engagement is challenging because of the different mindsets, cultures, and knowledge of the educational environment. In particular, one scholar reported the importance of stakeholder engagement in “competence-based curriculum development,” but that maintaining an ongoing relationship useful for curriculum co-creation is complex. Finally, finding private funds was also one of the

challenges that arose from the panelist discussion. Transforming the general interest of a company to long-term financial support doesn't seem to be easy.

The second group of external challenges that panelists reported was related to the student's perception of sales as a career. With decades of literature, students' perceptions about sales as a career are generally not positive and stereotypes are clearly one of the causes of the low desire of students to pursue a career. This aspect can have an impact on student engagement and on the communication of the program, in general, in enrollment.

Considering the internal challenges, the panelists reported the following key elements: the general lack of resources, general perception about personal selling and sales management, and University board commitment.

The second and the third elements received more attention in the discussion. The panelists reported a general lack of understanding of "sales transformation" and, consequently, the consideration of the new role of sales in terms of impact in strategy, results, and technology. In addition, few panelists reported a lack of consideration of the differences and similarities between marketing and sales and, in many cases, were associated with a similar topic. This could mislead the role of sales as only a practical and not a strategic topic or as involving isolated and non- inter-functional activities.

Internal commitment is also a critical element to consider. The panelists defined it using the sentence "*have the Rector in the room*" to explain how it is important to have top-level commitment to a fruitful start of a sales program or curriculum. The level of autonomy and the presence of a decision maker clearly differ in different university systems, considering the various types of institutions, such as universities, universities of applied science, and business schools.

Furthermore, educational and pedagogical challenges emerged from the panelist discussions, and some of them were very practical and urgent. From this perspective, there is a clear lack of sales scholars and sales educators. In this vein, it is easier to find trainers (on practical skills for executives) than educators for students. This is a practical issue that is perceived as a critical point by the panelists because of the impact it could have on program outcomes and student engagement.

The last key point from the scholars was related to the pedagogical challenge and was mainly related to personal selling courses: the question is how to bring "sales" in the classroom. It is well known how traditional face-to-face lectures can only cover a part of a successful training program in personal selling. For these reasons, the challenges are how to involve companies in applied projects, create student challenges or competition, involve testimonials and, in general, create real-life situations to better understand sales processes and sales interactions. Many of the universities where the panelists worked still use the traditional pedagogical approach.

5 Discussion

This study presents a first description of the current state of sales education in Italian universities. The results (“Scheda Sua” Analysis) indicate that although the benefits of sales education for business students are well-known abroad (Bolander et al., 2014; Leasher & Moberg, 2008) and include improved job prospects and better performance after graduation, few Italian universities offer sales programs, curricula, and courses. Our study is consistent with the results of a report edited by Società Italiana di Marketing, carried out for the 2015–2016 academic year and that considered 93 master’s degrees (LM—Laurea Magistrale), 59 first-level masters (Master di primo livello), and 10 s-level masters (“master di secondo livello”). The study showed a paucity of the “sales” theme: in post-graduate courses it emerges the absolute prevalence of communication (132 cases); then marketing (40 cases), and only 6 for the commercial and sales area. Considering the descriptive analysis, the level of sales education in Italy seems extremely low.

In addition, although more than 35% of the university programs considered in our studies reported sales as a skill or job opportunity, only a few courses (university exams) are established in these programs. This gap between the number of job opportunities cited in the “Scheda SUA” and the low number of sales-related courses needs to be better understood. Sales seems to be a job opportunity; however, in terms of teaching, the topic is included in broader courses? Does sales have an adequate “space” in the programs? Or is teaching sales not considered relevant?

In this vein, it should also be noted that the effects of “not teaching” sales can be twofold: the first is related to the job mismatch, and the second is related to the student’s perception of sales as a career. Concerning the first element, and contrary to what few expected, with the diffusion of digital channels, sales figures continue to be among the most in demand at the global level. In the LinkedIn report “Lavori in Crescita” (2023), the first and fourth of the 25 emerging professions were somehow related to the commercial field (sales development representatives and customer success managers); furthermore, we also must consider the development of new professional profiles, such as an inside salesperson. It seems difficult to satisfy the ever-increasing demand for qualified salespeople and to support recruiters to find work-ready students in sales positions if adequate sales curricula or courses are not implemented (Peltier et al., 2014). Concerning the students’ perceptions, because of the differences between students who attended personal selling courses and those who had not in terms of student perception of sales as a career (Bristow et al., 2006) and the role of “understanding of the salesperson role” described by Ballestra et al. (2017), the paucity of university programs could not have an impact on “feeling toward selling” and consequently not increase the “intention to pursue a sales career.”

From the syllabus analysis, it emerges that only a small part of the courses considered are totally focused on sales-related topics and, if we exclude one of the courses, personal selling is not considered one of the main topic in the Italian courses. These findings are not consistent with what the international literature

Table 6 Sales education open questions and research areas in Italian context

Internal challenges	International literature	Topic	Open questions in the Italian context
Internal challenges	Cummins et al. (2013)	Internal perception of selling and sales management	What is the perception among the Italian marketing educators/scholars? What is the perception of sales transformation among Italian marketing educators/scholars? How to involve program leaders and the University board program decisions?
External challenges	Bolander et al. (2020)	Commitment of the university's top management Understand the company's needs and involvement in curriculum development and in delivering education	How to engage the companies in a long-term perspective? How to involve the companies in the different stage of educational process? How to commit the companies in supporting the program?
	Pettijohn & Pettijohn, 2009	Student perceptions of sales	How the perception of selling and salespersons an impact on attitude toward selling in Italy? How the current teaching material had an impact in student perception? How to engage the students and overcome the salesperson stereotype?
	Peltier et al. (2014)	Impact of sales education on intention to pursue sales career	How much does the intention to pursue a sales career change after attending university-level sales courses?
Pedagogical challenges	Mich et al. (2014)	Impact of experiential learning in student perception	How does the teaching method (experiential vs non experiential learning) have a different impact in student perception?
	Inks and Avila (2018)	Adoption of "active method" in teaching sales (mentor, videotaping, national or international sales competition ecc)	What is the level of awareness of the "active method" typically applied in personal selling and sales management courses?
	Spiller et al. (2020)	Lack of lecturers/professors in the established teaching staff	How much the issue is perceived by the Italian universities? How to hire and train sales educators?

reported; in Spiller et al. (2020) “Professional Selling and “Advanced Selling” are the most relevant specialization areas in the sales curriculum and “Sales Management” is only in the third position. Clearly, this benchmark does not consider the different university systems we have all around the world and particularly the presence of teaching universities. In addition, only two of the Syllabus face extensively the issues of sales transformation and the impact of digitalization in process and sales organizations. The teaching methods adopted are reliable with sales management topics, and the lack of experiential learning or behavioral learning methods—like videotaping, sales competition, simulation, sales mentor etc. that are suggested for the personal selling or professional selling courses—is coherent. The large adoption of sales leader/speaker talks is highly indicated also from the international sales literature for the efficacy in giving the student a close perception of the real world of sales (Inks & Avila, 2018).

6 Future direction and limitations

The present paper has a descriptive purpose to define the state of the art of sales education in Italy and describe the future challenges. The low level of sales education is not easy to address in the future, and considering the panelist session findings the same universities which perceived the relevance of sales education in their program have to face relevant barriers. In this vein and because of the preliminary role of this study, it is necessary to better understand where to orient future steps in the Italian context. Considering the internal, external, and pedagogical challenges few “open questions” are developed as follow (see Table 6).

Starting from the internal challenges one of the factors to consider is the perception of sales and the lack of knowledge of sales transformation that could have an impact on the decision of the universities (Cummins et al., 2013). In future studies, it could be interesting to investigate the opinions of marketing teachers toward selling to better understand if these points of view are relevant to the formation of new curricula. For that reason, how to involve program leaders and the university board in sales program decisions is relevant for the future.

Considering the external challenges, the mismatch could also be considered in the light of the methodology used for curriculum development; the competence-based curriculum design methodology suggests a high level of stakeholder engagement (Chyung et al., 2006; Gervais, 2016). As reported by the scholars in the panel session, this is considered a relevant challenge for the development of the curriculum, but also for keeping the competence updated. In addition, numerous studies (Deeter-Schmelz & Kennedy, 2011; Spiller et al., 2020) have reported companies’ need of motivation to increase sales curricula and how the establishment of an increasingly open dialogue between companies and universities is crucial. Engaging the companies in a long-term perspective and involving them in the companies in the different stages of the educational process is relevant for the future.

Because of the paucity of studies on the Italian student perception of sales (Ball-estra et al., 2017; Cardinali et al., 2023) deeper analysis could support us in increasing the knowledge on how to involve the students and understand the factors that

have an impact on attitude toward selling in Italy and how overcoming the salesperson stereotype or the intention to pursue sales career increase after participation to a sales course. A teaching material analysis could also be a further investigation area: just starting at the level of the marketing handbook we adopted in marketing courses could be a step further (sales could be not considered under the sales transformation perspective—Cummins et al. (2013).

Touching upon the pedagogical challenges, the sales education literature and scholars in our panel highlighted the importance of adopting specific methods for teaching sales; as reported by Mich et al. (2014) the impact of experiential learning in student perception it could be interesting to understand the level of awareness level of “active method” method typically applied in personal selling and sales management courses.

Finally, concerning the lack of lecturers/professors in the established teaching staff, is the question perceived by the Italian universities? And how to train and hire sales educators (See Table 6)?

Sales education is still in the infant phase in Italy and more research could enrich the awareness of scholars and educators and help to fill the gap between business needs and university programs.

A few limitations clearly emerged from the selection of programs (only 3 bachelor's and 3 master's degrees) and the identification of courses (optional courses were not considered), in addition the data set should be updated periodically with the new version and the “Scheda SUA”. The panelists could represent only the first step of an extensive qualitative analysis among scholars, which could give us a picture of the challenges and barriers. Future research using qualitative data collection through in-depth interviews with sales educators/researchers on “what” they delivered in the courses and on “how” they use teaching methods to achieve the development of an ideal sales curriculum could provide a new perspective in the field. In addition, the study did not consider the job market and the company perspective, and it represents clearly a limitation.

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