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Fostering Risk Management Skills for Future Sustainability Leaders: An Exploration of Project Management Training in Higher Education

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The rapid challenges produced by technological innovations, AI, climate change, and global instabilities require "sustainability citizens" to acquire critical thinking and transferable competencies to navigate complexity and boost their lifelong employability. Risk management embodies complex problem-solving, critical thinking, and systems analysis - key components identified by the World Economic Forum (WEF) as crucial for future employability. The study builds on recent research on the connection between learning project management and acquiring transferable skills that foster individuals' employability. Projects are the means by which we introduce and manage change, and uncertainty is embedded in projects. Risk management is a well-known skill in project management discipline and sustainable project management learning. Learning risk management emerges as a transferable competence that allows individuals to address uncertainty and adapt to evolving work environments. This study explored how project management learning can allow higher education students to develop risk management competencies, fostering sustainable employability. The case study research is a 15-hour project management course delivered at the Master of Science in Risk Management at the University of Tirana. It covers topics such as risk management, change management, and human resource management within project organizations. Students' enhanced transferable skills were measured through a self-evaluation questionnaire with self-reflective statements, which was administered before and after the course. Analysis showed considerable progress in students' perceived transferable skills for sustainability: communication and emotional intelligence. Improving risk management skills through project management training has found strong connections with the significant perceived improvement of students' emotional intelligence.
Project management effectively develops risk management competencies if used as an embedded pedagogical device in higher education through experiential and reflective learning approaches. Risk and project management integration enhances students' capability for complex decision-making in uncertain environments. Future research could examine long-term professional outcomes and transferability across diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: Risk Management Competencies, Project Management Education, Transferable Skills, Sustainable Employability, Higher Education Pedagogy, Experiential Learning.

1. Introduction

Modern organizations face unprecedented complexity in managing sustainability and risk, creating new demands for educational approaches that bridge technical expertise with transferable competencies. The World Economic Forum (2020) and UNESCO (2017) emphasize that future sustainability leaders must develop advanced capabilities in complex problem-solving, critical thinking, and systems analysis. Within this context, project management education has emerged as a promising avenue for developing these crucial competencies, particularly in risk management.

Recent research has established the effectiveness of project management learning in fostering sustainable employability through integrated approaches combining cognitive development with practical application. Building on these findings, this study investigates how project management education can specifically enhance risk management competencies among graduate students. Through a mixed methods design incorporating insights from industry professionals and an educational intervention, we examine the development of critical capabilities for managing uncertainty in complex environments.

This research contributes to advancing pedagogical approaches in both project and risk management education by demonstrating how experiential learning and competency-based frameworks can prepare future sustainability leaders. The paper begins with theoretical foundations of sustainability leadership and risk management, followed by an examination of innovative pedagogical approaches. We then present our methodology and findings before concluding with implications for educational practice and future research.

2. Literature Review

Risk management and sustainability leadership are increasingly connected in contemporary organizational contexts, with researchers emphasizing their joint support in addressing complex global challenges (Metcalf and Benn 2013). As sustainability leaders navigate the complexities of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) risks, their ability to anticipate, assess, and mitigate potential threats becomes paramount (Willard 2012). This dynamic relationship mirrors the evolving demands of modern education, where future leaders must develop both technical and transferable skills to address multifaceted challenges effectively (Bernstein, 2000; Guraziu, 2022; 2023).

Research by the Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership (Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership 2021) demonstrates that effective sustainability leaders must possess advanced risk management capabilities to tackle issues such as climate change, resource scarcity, and social inequality. These competencies align with the "7-factor model of Project Management as a sustainable pedagogical device" (Guraziu, 2022; 2023), which set in project management methodologies into education to prepare students for real-world complexities. For instance, Raworth's Doughnut Economics framework (Raworth 2017) positions risk management as a crucial tool for operating within planetary boundaries while meeting social foundations, a perspective echoed in educational contexts emphasizing experiential and problem-based learning.

The integration of risk management into sustainability leadership has evolved from traditional compliance-focused approaches to more dynamic, systems-based frameworks that emphasize resilience and adaptive capacity (Visser 2015). This evolution reflects the growing recognition that sustainability challenges present unique risk profiles requiring leaders to develop specialized competencies in uncertainty management, strategic foresight, and emotional intelligence (EI). By integrating emotional and technical skills, leaders can foster collaboration and innovation, which are critical in both professional practice and pedagogical contexts (WEF, 2020; UNESCO, 2017).

Emotional intelligence (EI), a foundation of collaborative learning, further underscores the importance of bridging the human and technical aspects of sustainability leadership (Nogueira, Castro, and Magano 2023). EI fosters resilience, flexibility, and open-mindedness—traits essential for addressing multifaceted challenges (Rodrigues and Matos 2024) and aligning with the "7-factor model," which emphasizes communities of practice and interdisciplinary collaboration. By embedding these principles into educational frameworks, future sustainability leaders gain the ability to approach complex challenges holistically, ensuring a seamless transition from academic learning to professional application. Meanwhile it has been observed a progress referring to the research on emotional intelligence, addressing various challenges. However, most of the research has similar characteristic as they consider emotional intelligence as a variable that affects a certain issue. These issues may be a concern of the effective leadership (Rosete and Ciarrochi 2005), the expertise of the teamwork (Jordan et al. 2002), or other effects of proper employment or establishing a positive work environment (Lopes et al. 2006), job satisfaction (Sy, Tram, and O'Hara 2006), ways of resolving the conflicts (Jordan and Troth 2004), creating effective results in the workplace (Darvishmotevali, Altinay, and De Vita 2018) and to what level is the auditors' judgement affected by emotional intelligence (Yang 2013).

The connection of sustainability leadership, risk management, and innovative pedagogical approaches provides a foundation for developing the competencies necessary to direct uncertainty, and constant change. This alignment between the theoretical foundations of sustainability leadership and the structured, practical methodologies of project management creates transformative learning environments (Fabbri and Romano 2017).

These environments prepare students to address contemporary organizational and societal challenges, fostering a generation of sustainability citizens equipped with the technical expertise, critical thinking, and systems analysis capabilities demanded by the modern labor market (WEF, 2023; UNESCO, 2017).

3. Project management learning in Higher Education

Project management discipline in higher education has evolved to address complex demands of sustainability (Weltkommission für Umwelt und Entwicklung 2009) and risk management in modern organizations. The latest project management methodologies, such as PRINCE2® 7th Ed. (PeopleCert 2023) embed sustainability holistically, addressing environmental, social, and economic dimensions throughout the project lifecycle. Sustainability becomes the 7th performance indicator (alongside benefits, costs, time, quality, scope, and risk) and integrates into all practices, including the business case, where sustainability targets are explicitly included as investment considerations.

As project management embraces sustainability principles, it fosters competencies vital for employability. This convergence aligns with foundational studies on employability in higher education (Yang 2013); (Yorke and Knight 2006) which established the importance of connecting academic knowledge with professional competencies. The relationship between project management education and sustainable employability has developed through research on sustainable careers (Akkermans et al. 2020) and studies in project management education (Thomas and Mengel 2008; Cicmil and Gaggiotti 2018), emphasizing complex problem-solving and adaptive capabilities. Recent research (Guraziu 2022; 2023; Guraziu and Gobbo 2023) confirms project management learning's role as a bridge between cognitive learning and professional competencies required for sustainable employability (Watts 2006). The pedagogical approach to project management emphasizes its function as a "region of knowledge" (Bernstein 2000), integrating theory with practice for decision-making in uncertain environments.

To develop these sustainability-oriented competencies, project management education requires recontextualizing professional practice within academic settings (Hanney 2018; Garraway 2005), transforming workplace knowledge into pedagogical content that integrates experiential learning (Kolb and Kolb 2005) and reflective practice (Schön 2017) to develop reflective learning capabilities (Cicmil & Gaggiotti, 2018).

The pedagogical framework for project management (Guraziu 2022) emphasizes transformative learning experiences (Mezirow 1991; Mezirow and Taylor 2009; Fabbri and Romano 2017) that combine theoretical understanding with critical reflection (York-Barr et al. 2016) and practical application (Marsick 1998; Yorks, Marsick, and O'Neil 2007; Nicolaides and Marsick 2016). This approach prepares students to become sustainability leaders who effectively manage complex projects while advancing environmental, social, and economic goals.

3.1. *7-factor model of Project Management as a sustainable pedagogical device*

Building Bernstein's recontextualization theory (Bernstein 2000), the "7-factor model of Project Management as a sustainable pedagogical device" (Guraziu 2022; 2023) establishes a framework for integrating project management methodologies into tertiary education to develop students' transferable skills. The model assumes that project management, implemented through structured approaches, creates environments where students engage in authentic professional experiences while developing critical reflection and complex problem-solving skills (WEF 2020; Unesco 2017). This integration of theory and practice aligns with demands for graduates able to navigate the complexity and uncertainty of modern organizational contexts.

The model comprises 7 key factors transposable from informal practice to educational contexts: informal communities of practice, integration of hard and soft skills, cross-functionality, dialectics with labor market organizations, experiential learning, logical analytical frameworks, and complex problem-based learning.

Each factor supports specific learning outcomes: Communities of practice foster emotional intelligence and communication. The integrated approach merges technical with transferable skills for sustainable employability. Cross-functionality prepares students for interdisciplinary work in sustainability contexts, while industry engagement connects academic

learning to professional practice. Experiential methods emphasize practical application crucial for risk management. Analytical frameworks guide decision-making in uncertain environments, while problem-based learning develops cognitive abilities for sustainability challenges.

This approach aligns with sustainability citizens' needs (Unesco 2017) who must develop technical expertise alongside problem-solving, critical thinking, and systems analysis capabilities - competencies identified as crucial for future employability (WEF 2020; 2023). Furthermore, the connection between project and risk management education is particularly relevant for developing leaders who can navigate uncertainty, change, and ambiguity.

4. Research methodology

This investigation employed an Exploratory Sequential mixed methods research design (Creswell 2015; Hernández Sampieri 2014), progressing from qualitative exploration to quantitative analysis. The study unfolded in two phases to examine how project management learning facilitates the development of risk management competencies that enhance students' sustainable employability.

The initial qualitative phase centered on a focus group with seven human resource professionals from Albania's diverse sectors, generating insights into labor market demands for transferable competencies (European Commission and Directorate-General for Employment 2011).

This foundation informed the subsequent quantitative phase: a pedagogical intervention consisting of a 15-hour project management course within the Master of Science in Risk Management at the University of Tirana, involving 42 graduate students.The intervention's effectiveness was assessed through a pre-post self-evaluation instrument comprising 20 items aligned with project management learning outcomes (Guraziu 2023; Guraziu and Gobbo 2023). The assessment framework drew upon the European Commission's EntreComp model (Bacigalupo et al. 2016), enabling measurement of competency progression through self-reflective statements. This validated framework was selected for its demonstrated ability to evaluate the transformation of conceptual understanding into actionable capabilities through resource mobilization.

The investigation centers on a fundamental research question: How does project management learning facilitate the development of measurable risk management competencies that enhance students' sustainable employability?

The study employed methodological triangulation (Trinchero and Robasto 2019; Patton 2015; Hernández Sampieri 2014; Creswell 2015) to synthesize empirical evidence with established frameworks of sustainable employability (Watts 2006) and risk management education, enabling assessment of measurable improvements in students' capabilities following their engagement with project management principles.

5. Research results

5.1. *Results from the focus group*

Analysis of focus group data from seven human resource managers across Albania's diverse sectors revealed a substantial gap between employer expectations and candidate capabilities regarding transferable competencies (European Commission and Directorate-General for Employment 2011)

Participants identified critical workplace competencies - interpersonal communication, psychological resilience, collaborative capabilities, adaptability, and analytical reasoning - as foundational requirements across sectors, while noting persistent challenges in finding candidates with these capabilities..

The human resource professionals advocated for systematic educational interventions emphasizing experiential learning opportunities. Their recommendations highlighted the need for embedding transferable competency development throughout formal education pathways (Knight and Yorke 2003; Melacarne and Nicolaides 2019; Boffo 2019) suggesting that while technical skills can be enhanced through workplace experience, transferable competencies require sustained cultivation beginning in formal education.

5.2. *Results from the educational intervention*

The research analyzed responses from two sample groups: an initial cohort of 42 participants who completed the pre-intervention assessment instrument and a subsequent group of 33 respondents who participated in the post-intervention evaluation. Prior to conducting inferential statistical analyses, the research team examined the distributional properties of the data

through measures of skewness and kurtosis. These analyses revealed pseudo-normal distributions across the measured variables, providing justification for the application of parametric statistical techniques utilizing mean-based comparisons. The analytical framework incorporated matched-pairs analysis for a subset of 20 participants who provided complete data sets with corresponding identification codes across both pre-intervention and post-intervention assessments, enabling direct examination of individual-level changes in the measured constructs.

Analysis of the paired-samples t-tests yielded heterogeneous outcomes across the measured competencies. The examination revealed significant positive mean differences in Communication ($t(19) = 0.943$, $p = .06$) and Emotional Intelligence ($t(19) = 2.078$, $p = .05$), indicating enhancement of these competencies following the intervention. In contrast, the Learn to Learn dimension demonstrated a significant decline ($t(19) = 3.008$, $p < .05$), suggesting a potential regression in this domain post-intervention. The variability in statistical significance across competencies warrants careful interpretation, as some observed differences may be attributed to chance rather than systematic intervention effects. These findings underscore the complex nature of competency development and suggest differential impacts of the training program across various skill domains. (Table 1).

Table 1. Results of Paired Samples t-test Comparing Pre-intervention and Post-intervention Scores for Transferable Skills Development. Source: Authors' analysis.

Pair	Transferable Skill	Standard Deviation	Standard Error of the Mean	T-value	Degrees of Freedom	Sign. (Two tailed) (=p)
1	**Communication**	**2.41650**	**0.54035**	**1.943**	**19**	**0.067**
2	Creativity	2.74149	0.61302	-0.979	19	0.340
3	Leadership	2.15455	0.48177	0.623	19	0.541
4	Risk Management	1.75919	0.39337	1.525	19	0.144
5	Problem Solving	2.44680	0.54712	-0.457	19	0.653
6	Negotiation	1.69830	0.37975	-1.580	19	0.131
7	Teamwork	2.83029	0.63287	-0.474	19	0.641
8	Resilience	1.78001	0.39802	-1.759	19	0.095
9	Self-organisation	2.02614	0.45306	0.000	19	1.000
10	**Learn to Learn**	**1.48678**	**0.33245**	**-3.008**	**19**	**0.007**
11	Time Management	1.80351	0.40328	-0.248	19	0.807
12	Analytical and critical thinking	1.63111	0.36473	0.960	19	0.349
13	Doing research	2.14231	0.47903	0.418	19	0.681
14	Self-esteem	2.56443	0.57342	0.087	19	0.931
15	Planning	2.18307	0.48815	-1.332	19	0.199
16	Presentation	2.32775	0.52050	1.057	19	0.304
17	Change Management	1.78001	0.39802	-0.754	19	0.460
18	People Management	2.40832	0.53852	0.557	19	0.584
19	Emotional Intelligence	2.15211	0.48123	2.078	19	0.052
20	Self-awareness	1.49649	0.33462	-1.046	19	0.309

Examination of the correlation matrix post-intervention revealed several significant intercorrelations among the assessed competencies. Creativity exhibited moderate positive associations with both Negotiation ($r = 0.265$, $p < 0.05$) and Learn to Learn capabilities ($r = 0.347$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting potential synergistic relationships between creative thinking and these complementary skills. A more robust correlation emerged between Analytical and Critical Thinking and Change Management ($r = 0.396$, $p < 0.01$), with Change Management demonstrating an additional strong association with People Management ($r = 0.434$, $p < 0.01$). These relationships indicate possible interconnections between cognitive, adaptive, and interpersonal competencies.

The analysis further identified a significant relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Presentation Skills ($r = 0.385$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that emotional awareness may facilitate more effective presentation capabilities. Additionally, Self-awareness demonstrated meaningful correlations with both Self-esteem ($r = 0.304$, $p <$

0.05) and Planning ($r = 0.338$, $p < 0.05$), highlighting potential connections between metacognitive awareness and both affective and organizational competencies.

6. Final reflections

The empirical research has shown that through project management learning in the context of the Master of Risk Management, Albanian students have been able to master some transferable competences that scientific literature demonstrate being correlated with the ability of individuals to remain employable throughout their lifetime.

In fact, the statistical analysis has shown a significant improvement of students in Communication and Emotional Intelligence. The examination of correlations has shown that, among others, there is a strong association between change management and people management; Emotional intelligence and Presentation Skills as well as Analytical and Critical Thinking and Change management.

In its report of 2020 (WEF 2020), the World Economic Forum organizes into 7 Clusters of Competence the "Human Skills", non-cognitive skills, which will become increasingly important when developed in tandem with technological skills. Using these Cluster of Competences, we can very that Emotional Intelligence and People Management are listed among the Cluster "Working with people". The Cluster refers to the attitudes, behaviors and beliefs that individuals exhibit and that influence their approach to ideas, people and situations ((WEF 2020). In its report of 2020, the World Economic Forum defines "Emotional Intelligence" as "*Developed capacities used to work with people to achieve goals and in particular being pleasant, cooperative, sensitive to others, easy to get along with and enjoying work with people" (p. 156).*

"Communication" and "Presentation" skills are envisaged in the Cluster "Management and Communication", that collects all those skills and abilities necessary to compete a task and therefore a job. Planning, another skill included in the Cluster emerges as meaningful correlated with Self-awareness and Self-esteem.

Finally, significant correlation has emerged among Analytical and Critical Thinking and Change Management. Together with Risk Management, these skills are included in the Cluster "Problem-solving", which is connected with the capability of thinking and coping with the complexity of today's world and rapid changes, i.e.: analytical, critical, creative, systemic, striving for innovation, ideation, originality, initiative and foresight. Risk Management', in fact, is a complex and integrated problem-solving approach that requires critical, analytical and systemic thinking, aimed at forecasting (risks are uncertain events, not yet verified).

The Project management PRINCE2® Method (PeopleCert 2023) defines Risk Management as: "*The systematic application of principles, approaches and processes to the tasks of identifying and assessing risks, planning and implementing risk responses and communicating Risk Management activities with stakeholders"* (p. 329). In the field of Project management, Risk Management coincides with what is defined by UNESCO (Unesco 2017) regarding the "Anticipatory competency", defined as "*The abilities to understand and evaluate multiple futures – possible, probable and desirable; to create one's own visions for the future; to apply the precautionary principle; to assess the consequences of actions; and to deal with risks and changes*" (p. 10).

This study explored how project management training fosters risk management competencies. While based on students' self-assessments, the results show improvements in transferable skills. Future research should include external validation, such as employer feedback, and address the limitations of the small sample size and lack of a control group. The 15-hour intervention, though brief, showed potential in enhancing competency, with follow-ups suggested to reinforce learning. Despite its limitations, this study underscores the value of project management education in developing sustainability-related competencies. Embedding Project management with Risk management learning contributes to the sustainable employability (Watts 2006) of the individuals who learn them, although recognizing that employability is a process that stems from complex forms of learning and, therefore, cannot be measured simply by transferable competences (Yorke and Knight 2006).

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