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## If the Work is Doing Research? As Building School-Work Alternance Paths in the University: Reflections From a Case Study

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## **If the Work is Doing Research? As Building School-Work Alternance Paths in the University: Reflections From a Case Study**

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*Abstract:* The phenomenon of early school leaving by young people and youth unemployment are the major challenges of the education system. The School-Work Alternance (SWA), mandatory since 2015 in the Italian school system, represents a good chance to promote students' professional curriculum. The work-based learning could lead an adequate competences acquisition and connect students directly to the world of work. This paper offers some considerations regarding a case study, based on two SWA experiences, which attended by two groups of high-school students, at the Department of Political and Social Sciences (DISPeS) of the University of Calabria. This reflection underlines the main opportunity and critical issues of the SWA in the University.

*Keywords:* School-Work Alternance, situated learning, student centred learning, soft skills, evaluation

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## Introduction

The School-Work Alternance (SWA) is a policy oriented to create a learning context, in which the interaction between school and world of work aspires to improve the students' soft skills (Kautz *et al.*, 2014; Poy, Rosina & Sironi, 2018) encouraging, in some situation, the definition of a clear specific training profile (Allulli & Farinelli, 2018). In Italy, the SWA introduction calls into question the sequential didactic paradigm (first, the theoretical education and, finally, the working training), introducing the dual system. In particular, it recognises that the early entrance in work and professional contexts represents a way for young people in training to orientate their cultural, professional and personal growth projects. For this purpose, it could be necessary a definition of shared objects among the involved actors (Konkola *et al.*, 2007), in order to facilitate the *crossing of school-work boundaries* (Engeström *et al.*, 1995) that allows the communication and the skills transfer among people who move in different fields, systems, and groups. The early contact with the working environment, during the school years, could have positive effects on future employment opportunities, allowing to establish relationships with companies, profession worlds and contributing to the 'all-round' human capital formation (Morselli, 2016; Maisto & Pastore, 2017).

Additional and salient aspects in term of learning, such as the interaction with motivated experts, the possibility of using various spaces (different from the classroom), the comparison and the cooperation with peers, could configure the SWA as an opportunity for the empowerment of the younger ones and for the development of their capabilities (Sen, 2001; Nussbaum, 2012).

At the same time, the policy implementation should deal with significant obstacles and critical issues. The school should rethink itself in a new cultural and organisational way, despite an absence of inspirational practices (Giubileo, 2016; Gotti, 2018; Cuppini, 2018) and of an offering of enough resources. The hosting organisations (enterprises, professionals, public and no-profit institutions) should offer training and take care of the students in SWA experiences, in spite of belated advantages (Salatin, 2017a). The students and their family should keep the SWA costs (in terms of time and material resources) without a certain participation of the SWA project choice and without a definition of the individual training project. In addition, the impacts on the students' curriculum are determined by the territorial variety of SWA experiences and by different kind of activities (in public or private sector, and profit or no-profit sector) (Arlotti, Barberis & Pavolini, 2015; Tesselli, 2018).

The database of the Ministerial Observatory (MIUR, 2018) and the qualitative analysis, on few or singular case study, represent a good occasion

of reflection on the first two years of SWA mandatory. The first part of this paper introduces the theoretical issues regarding the SWA policy, a synthetic framework of the Italian legislative on SWA, and the state of art of SWA in Italy (numbers and experiences). In the second part, we propose the results of an SWA case study regarding two involved classes of a lyceum in two projects. Both projects have been carried out at the Department of Political and Social Sciences (DISPeS) of the University of Calabria. In the conclusion, finally, we highlight peculiar critical issues of the case study, compared with other research results; and some recommendation in order to improve the organisation of SWA activities and the collaboration among SWA stakeholders (school, the world of work, students and family).

### “Good School” in Italy and the SWA improvement paths

In several European countries, the SWA has been already adopted, although indistinct applications, which are grafted onto education systems with different levels of stratification (Schizzerotto & Barone, 2006), namely characterised by different permeability between fields and training programme corresponding to different levels of social and intellectual prestige. As noted by Raffe (2008), the school-work transition policies differ from one country to another, by reason of the institutional characteristics of welfare states (Benadusi, 2006), and by changes in the various education systems, in the labour market and in the main stages of transition from adolescence to adult life (Hannan, Raffe & Smyth, 1996; Quintini, Martin & Martin, 2007; Cedefop, 2009; Leccardi, 2014; 2017)<sup>1</sup>.

In Italy, in the theoretical reflection, oriented to the relationship between education and socialisation (namely, between the school and social integration), the SWA does not constitute an innovation. First of all, the SWA represents a reaction to the needs of creating bridges between education and work. Furthermore, the SWA is a mechanism to ensure a reciprocal contamination between the two distinct contexts<sup>2</sup>. Although, these used meaning have been considered progressively different, while the awareness of the inadequacy of the *school-centred* model and their no perfect matching to needs of the society have been considered constant (Giovannini, 1987). The polycentric model development, which recognises the variety of educational institutions and (more or less) structured training occasions (Cesareo, 1974),

<sup>1</sup> See a detailed description of the European SWA models in INDIRE website (<http://www.indire.it/scuolavoro/content/index.php?action=europa>) and in Eurybase, a database of the Eurydice (<https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/>). Moreover, the reports on European vocational education and training (VET) policies and contributes to their implementation published on [www.cedefop.europa.eu/](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/).

<sup>2</sup> See Bovone (1980), Isfol (1980), Agulhon (2000) for a theoretical analysis.

has diversified applications. In particular, the intentional integration among various actors considers the central (and not exclusive) role of the school (Ribolzi, 2002; Benadusi & Consoli, 2004; Besozzi, 2006; Nicoli, 2016).

Nevertheless, the school organisation and its ordinary functioning have not been affected by remarkable innovations (Dei, 2012). In terms of school-work transition, the Law no. 196/1997 (Treu's reform) is officially recognised as the earliest normative opening, which provides the apprenticeship and the traineeship after completion of compulsory schooling. The SWA enters formally into Italian education system by Moratti's reform (Law no. 53/2003), specifying its curricula character<sup>3</sup> and defining it as an occasion to acquire professional skills. Successively, Decree-Law no. 77/2005 redefines the SWA as a didactic methodology for flexible learning, acquisition of professional skills, guiding students in their vocational development. At the same time, the SWA orients the school to a better systematic relation with the world of work, attempting a correlation between the educational supply and the social and economic context. The Ministerial Decree no. 139/2007, a further expansion, introduces the educational equivalence of SWA pathways between curricular activities and extracurricular activities.

The SWA becomes mandatory for all student population, by the Good School Reform (Law no. 107/2015), confirming the mentioned fundamental principles and introducing some relevant innovations: the SWA transformation in a universalistic model; the assimilation of SWA activity in the triennial plan of educational supply (*Piano Triennale dell'Offerta Formativa, PTOF*); the expansion of the kind of authorised hosting organisations and the type of SWA pathway<sup>4</sup>.

### **The state of art of SWA: numbers and experiences**

The SWA innovation, following the reform, is shown by the last monitoring report of SWA projects (school year 2016/2017), mandatory for the Grade 11 and 12 classes. The Table 1 shows the distribution of students, hosting organisations and projects in SWA per macro regions (school year 2016/2017, latest data available)<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> The SWA differs from apprenticeship, traineeship, and stage in order to the nature of the relation among students and hosting organisations, finalised to education rather than training or carrying out a working task, or first entry in the world of work.

<sup>4</sup> The Budget Law of 2019, no. 145/2018, in articles 785-787, reduces the mandatory SWA hours and the resources of projects activation, with immediate effect already from the school year 2018/2019. At the moment, it is not still available the guidelines regarding the paths for transversal skills and orientation, a responsibility of the MIUR.

<sup>5</sup> In the Tables 1 and 2, the territorial subdivision (in Nord West, Nord East, Centre, South and Islands) intends to take into account the specificity and the heterogeneity of the socio-economic fabric of each territory, in terms of students' population, hosting organisations and SWA projects.

Table 1. Distribution of students in SWA, hosting organisations and SWA projects per macro regions (school year 2016/17, absolute and percentage values)

Macro regions	Students		Hosting organisations		Projects	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Nord West	223.868	23,9	66.744	33,9	23.959	31,4
Nord East	154.609	16,5	48.000	24,4	11.147	14,6
Centre	192.688	20,5	39.859	20,3	15.261	20,1
South	254.975	27,2	27.795	14,1	15.173	19,9
Islands	111.836	11,9	14.355	7,3	10.706	14,0
Italy	937.976	100,0	196.753	100,0	76.246	100,0

Source: Our data processing based on the MIUR data (2018)

The involved school in SWA pathways are around 6.000 and more than 900.000 students (17% are Grade 13 students), an increase of 44% than the last year (in the experimental phase, school year 2015/16, were over 600.000 students). The composition of implicated students in SWA pathways corresponds to the real students' population (Grade 11, 12 and 13): slightly less than half are students from Lyceum, 31% from technical schools and 21% from professional schools. The 'propulsive' effect of the reform has reversed the situation: the lyceums, in the school year 2012/13 (before mandatory), were only 20% of 3.177 involved schools (INDIRE, 2013). Furthermore, the SWA projects are progressively increased: in the school year 2012/13 were around 11.600, and in the school year 2016/17 were over 76.000. The SWA pathways are occurred in the enterprise (63,8%) and in the professional sector (8,2%).

The empirical studies on the SWA experiences as well as highlighting successful experiences (Giovannella, 2016; Orlandini, 2016; Cuppini, 2018; Gentili, 2018; Giubileo & Scarano, 2018; Gotti, 2018), underline some recurrent critical issues. In details, the coordination difficulty among the involved actors (the SWA governance) and the unequal distribution of training opportunities, with the risk of a 'patch-worked development' of the SWA (Esposito, 2016; Giubileo, 2016; Tino & Fedeli, 2016; Salatin, 2017b; Teselli, 2018). In particular, living in the South means to have fewer and different hosting offers of SWA activities than in the North (Benvenuto, 2017) (see also Table 2 below).

Moreover, the lack of planning and sharing of the students' path in SWA could be an additional critical aspect (Dacrema, 2018; Fondazione di Vittorio, 2018). In absence of significant partnerships, the major effort of school, indeed, is the planning of training paths, joined with the students' aspirations and interests. The risk is that the SWA could be experienced, mainly

by students and school, as a mere fulfilment of an obligation rather than an opportunity of growth (Cantillo, 2017). Therefore, a greater synergy between the school and the world of work is required (Arlotti, Barberis & Pavolini, 2015; Morselli, 2016) in terms of taking into account the students' training and of stimulating the collaboration for the resolution of the skill mismatching (Caputo & Capecchi, 2016).

Table 2. The SWA opportunities: distribution hosting organisations and SWA projects for each 100 students in SWA per macro regions (school year 2016/17)

Macro regions	Hosting organisations	Projects
Nord West	29,8	10,7
Nord East	31,0	7,2
Centre	20,7	7,9
South	10,9	6,0
Islands	12,8	9,6
Italy	21,0	8,1

Source: Our data processing based on the MIUR data (2018)

The literature on SWA experiences highlights the conditioning of socio-economic and scholastic context. Beginning from the empirical analysis remains, however, one of way to figure out local peculiarity and possible correctives. For those purposes, the proposed study case is shown below.

### The case study

The involvement of Italian universities in the SWA activity date back to school year 2016/2017 and their participation will probably increase. At present, it is not available a structured and detailed reconstruction of university contribution as a hosting organisation, considering also that it is included in the item "Ministries", in the MIUR monitoring report (2018).

The University of Calabria (UNICAL) has become more involved and has provided, in the school year 2017/2018, an internet portal to uploading the SWA proposals toward schools (<https://portalescuolalavoro.unical.it>). A total of 22 SWA projects were included, involving just over 300 students. The projects were presented by five Departments, out of the 14 present at UNICAL, and by some university structures such as the UNICAL Health Centre, the Liaison Office, the Energy Management Office, and the Guidance Office.

The case study, presented below, refers to two SWA projects of the DIS-PeS, which involved 20 students of a (scientific) Lyceum of Cosenza, concerning the construction and use of the questionnaire and the application of the photovoice in the social research. Each project was followed by two

internal figures: the manager and the tutor. The activities and the main outcomes, in terms of research work, are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The brief contents of SWA projects

<p>The first project - The interview in the Social Sciences: an experience in the construction and the use of the questionnaire</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students: 11</li> <li>• Hours: 40</li> <li>• Meetings: 10</li> <li>• Main activities: an introduction to the construction and use of the questionnaire; analysis and understanding capacity of the proposed questionnaire as an investigative tool; examination of the essential skills for the questionnaire and its administration; imputation of data on an SPSS matrix; first analysis of the frequencies; final report.</li> <li>• Dispensed questionnaire: 308</li> </ul>	<p>The second project - Communicating with images: the photovoice as a technique of research-intervention and participatory research</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students: 9</li> <li>• Hours: 43</li> <li>• Meetings: 13</li> <li>• Main activities: an introduction to the use of photovoice in social research; photovoice cycle analysis; preparation of the photovoice flyer and the form for the release of images; simulation of a photovoice cycle; realisation of 3 photovoice cycles (shots of UNICAL campus, individual definition of taglines, group choice of photos and taglines improvement); final report.</li> <li>• Produced images/taglines: over 200</li> </ul>
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The departmental spaces and two laboratories were used for the activity's implementation. Moreover, for the specificity of the research activity, the students spent several hours in the university campus.

Both projects have been promoted the *situated learning* of social research techniques, following the homonymous approach (Lave & Wenger, 2006), favouring the possibility of practice and theory integration, and adopting a cross-curricular model (Salatin, 2018) and a cognitive apprenticeship model (Ajello *et al.*, 2013). The projects have been developed to allow students to gain a mastery in the research process, in motivations, and in goals. One of the main objectives is to lead the students to think about their task in a larger dimension and to cooperate with others. The tutors, together with the students, were encouraged to ask themselves how to linking the competences to the practices “not only of work but also of daily life, of interpersonal and associative relations, of active citizenship” (Benadusi, 2018).

The analysis adopts the case study method. The typical tools of the qualitative approach were used in order to adequately respond to the “innovation” and complexity of the research object and to take into account the influences of the socio-institutional environment (Simons, 2009). The case study, indeed, does not separate the phenomenon from its social field and, at the same time, offers the possibility to analyse the different phases of an experience, its dynamic aspects, and not only its specific outcomes (Yin, 2014),

enhancing the point of view of involved actors. Various types of research methods are implemented: the observations of the two groups, the focus groups with the involved students, the compilation of self-assessment forms by the participants, the interviews of tutors.

The contribution presents an empirical analysis of the SWA experiences in the university, attempting to answer the following research questions: a) to understand how the SWA projects arise and how they are presented, and what general difficulties of SWA emerge in the university context; b) to interpret the evaluation of the experience by the involved actors in order to bring out the opportunities and the difficulties of two projects in the DISPeS.

### Blind School-Work Alternance

The first meeting with the students, dedicated on their motivations of the choice and their expectations towards the experience, has allowed to focus on their limited participation in the definition of the SWA paths.

The SWA periods should enable young people in training to experiment themselves in activities that may support and increase their skills, and also testing their future aspirations. In addition, the SWA should be based on a personalised project and consistent with the educational project (Salatin, 2017a).

In the interviews, the students reported that, although at the beginning of school year they indicate preferences on their SWA experiences (in relation to the field and to the hosting organisation) *after nobody takes it into account*. The School, by the SWA representative, has adopted some criteria to choose students' group, considering also the limited local opportunity<sup>6</sup>. The students are aware that the local context, and in general the South, may not offer great opportunities to carry out the SWA. Nevertheless, they challenged the vertical management of the opportunities and, sometimes, complained about the existence of differential treatment.

Teachers tell us: in this year you may this SWA project at the university; that at Arnone Palace (a museum of the city) and in another. We have a limited choice, and we do not can choose by ourselves! (student 2, Focus I, ex ante).

<sup>6</sup> It could be useful to remind that the SWA is a very innovation in the lyceums, which react as a neophyte, enhancing the territorial opportunities and inserting in "curriculum of life" of students. In the SWA pathway definition are implicated, mainly, professional world, service sector (education, research, cultural heritage, volunteering) and high-tech sector (Salatin, 2017a). The involved lyceum arranges the SWA governance in the *PTOF* report as pyramid scheme: the School Head, who has the main SWA responsibility; the Scholar Representative, with a Teachers Commission, who oversees the management of SWA paths and the partnerships care with hosting organisations; and the Scholastic Tutor, an internal teacher, who supervises the single SWA project.

I lived personally it, I have been obliged to an SWA path in the artistic field and, therefore, I was put there and I was forced to do that SWA even if, actually, I did not want to do it. And it did not help me, because I was not stimulated, I was not interested (student 1, Focus I, ex ante).

The recurring lack of participation and personalisation of the SWA projects is also emphasised by national student protest mobilisations<sup>7</sup>. The reasons are different: some are related to the schools' difficulties to establish links with local authorities; others to reproduce a model in which decisions are taken by a single governing body (the head teacher, the SWA representative, and school tutors) and only subsequently communicated to the students. Certainly, the lack or weak inclusion of the single student in the definition SWA process prevent the overcoming of the traditional scholastic model because of reducing the student's autonomy (Benadusi, 2018).

The non-choice of hosting institution and of the SWA experience have recurred, in the SWA activities (carried out at school and outside), as well as in the previous school year. Consequently, often the SWA has been re-interpreted as a useless exercise.

### The general critical issues

The study on SWA experience at the DISPeS allows delineating some general critical issues, regarding the roles of school representative, school tutors, external tutors, and school teachers.

The scholastic representative was put to the test by the lack of adequate reference models for a Lyceum, called for the first time to establish a collaboration with the world of work.

I accepted this challenge blindly since the first mandatory year of the SWA. There were no other models to follow. In the past, in fact, it was difficult for me to avoid making mistakes. In these three years I have learned a lot, however, there is still much more to learn (scholastic representative).

The local context, with a "frayed" socio-economic fabric, offers few opportunities to the *doing* SWA. For this reason, the scholastic representative encounters difficulties, in many cases, looking for newly available hosting organisations. And it does not concern only a quantity problem. The quality of the training offers is also a difficult challenge, taking into consideration the elaboration of an SWA triennial plan by high school (consistent with the

<sup>7</sup> See the investigative report of Students' Union, published on website Repubblica.it, on 30th May 2017: [http://www.repubblica.it/scuola/2017/05/30/news/uds\\_Alternanza\\_scuola\\_lavoro-166780031/](http://www.repubblica.it/scuola/2017/05/30/news/uds_Alternanza_scuola_lavoro-166780031/) & <http://www.unionedeglistudenti.net/sito/Alternanza-scuola-lavoro-presentati-dati-inchiesta-nazionale-diritti-non-piegati-parte-il-riscatto/>

school curriculum). In addition to planning difficulties, the scholastic representative should also manage, in general, the reporting and evaluation of the experiences, and, in particular, of the learnings of the student.

Regarding the tutors' role, the legislation does not establish a mandatory *ad hoc* training or an adequate incentive system (Giubileo & Scarano, 2018). However, the MIUR portal provides general tutorship guidelines. On the other hand, the Regional School Offices and private organisations, specialised in the educational sector, organise training courses for SWA tutors.

The structuring lack of a training course for tutors leads, mainly, tutors to have a very vague idea of SWA: above all, the external tutors, who are often extraneous to educational practices. The information relating to the legislation is also acquired in an autonomous and fragmentary manner both by the school tutor and by the external tutors.

The legislation provides that the internal tutor may receive an additional compensation for the assumed role, although it is not always considered adequate to the workload.

The workload is a lot and if I look out the money, I would not have done it. I earned a few for the instrumental work. However, the effort is constant every day (scholastic representative).

The external tutors do not collect any monetary compensation (Legislative Decree No. 77/2005, art. 5), although their workload is not trivial, and requires a reorganisation of working days and a continuous reinterpretation of the role at work. This last aspect could produce positive results, such as greater flexibility and new learning of the host organisation; on the other hand, specifically in the case studies, it causes hidden dissatisfactions and ill-feeling in organisational terms.

The SWA days were overloaded with other activities related to my work and maybe I struggle to manage one and the other, no given the best. (...) I can not deny the complexity of managing the two activities, because we did the SWA also during working hours (tutor 1, I project).

The *partnership* is another aspect that school should be taken into account, in particular by the SWA representative: the partners could influence the SWA project success, especially it is not adequately curated. As mentioned above, the two projects have been chosen by the school on the University Portal. Although, the school has not been proposed any changes and/or improvements in order to better join the educational needs of students, neither the university has been imposed particular conditions. Even during the SWA realisation, the relationship between the school and the external tutors was sporadic, and almost always centred on administrative aspects. The Lyceum teachers reveal two different positions regarding SWA activities. On the one hand, someone appreciates and encourage the new way of

*doing school* despite the difficulties, and trying an improvement every year. On the other hand, someone else, often the majority, obstruct it, especially the teachers anchored in the traditional system, in which knowledge is transferred and not constructed.

Now, I think that doing SWA requires passion. (...) You have to confront yourself every day with colleagues who are still anchored to old systems. (...) For them, the SWA is a waste of time, has no impact on students. (...) They consider the SWA as an obstacle to traditional teaching, to their quiet classic lesson (...) (scholastic representative).

Teachers' behaviours inevitably affect the students, who suffer the consequence of their dissatisfaction.

In most cases, professors complain (...) because they do not want the SWA activities in the morning, they do not want to stop the lesson, they keep on going (student 1, Focus group I, ex post).

For instance, the periodic test is set without taking into account the SWA students' commitment. The lessons' recovery, when granted, are reduced to the simple mention of treated issues, in the previous days. The traditional knowledge teaching, therefore, is not adapted to new teaching approaches in order to favour the SWA integration in the students' school life.

If we are involved in SWA activities, the teachers still continue the lesson, and, maybe, the second day when we come back (...), they reply that: "I can not stop because of you". They are not available to repeat the lessons (student 2, Focus group I, ex post).

Eventually, even the students' families are inevitably involved. On the one hand, some parents approve favourably the SWA, looking at their sons who are satisfied about living out of educational experiences, away from classrooms. On the other, most parents feel a sense of uncertainty about the SWA repercussions on the quality of scholastic path.

### **The experience evaluation: who learn what?**

As proposed by Salatin (2017a), the SWA could enhance: i) the knowledge and the learning desire; ii) the awareness of "where we go"; iii) the ability to thinking ourselves in the future; iv) the group learning. In both studied projects, a central role was assigned to the students, giving them responsibility, for their own training, encouraging the comparison among themselves and, consequently, the activation of group learning dynamics. The tutors have assumed a guiding function in the research work (through asking questions, highlighting any deviations from the objective, reminding the need to "plan the use of time"). The learning experience is, therefore, constructed by adopting a *student-centred learning approach* (Fabbri & Melacarne, 2015),

oriented to *learning by doing* and *project-based learning* (Salatin, 2018), and focused on the activation of cooperative mechanisms. This setting certainly encouraged a responsible participation from students, introducing, as well, a greater unpredictability regarding the previous steps and the results of the two projects. Moreover, the analysis of the experience evaluation by the tutors and the students acquire relevance.

### **Tutors' evaluations**

The final experience evaluation report and the individual student assessment form were prepared by external tutors, and further considerations regarding the experience has also emerged during the interviews.

For both projects, the tutors were able to understand an initial resistance to involving by students, probably linked to the disappointment of previous SWA experiences and, in general, to the adopted top-down management (of the choice of SWA opportunity) by the school. This attitude has been required, therefore, specific interventions in order to stimulate the students' curiosity and motivations. The motivational corrections, introduced during the experience, have been required intermediate evaluations and modifications of (previously designed) work plan.

In the beginning, everyone had a negative attitude because, in past experiences, they were passive participants and passively had attended the courses, on the contrary of the real SWA expectations (external tutor 1, I project).

Initially, they showed an absence in the real participation, (...) they did not trust ... (external tutor 3, II project).

In the following meetings, there was a quiet change. As one of the involved tutors tells:

When we have done the pre-test, (...) even who seemed to want to be only sleeping, wanted to be the interviewer and interviewed, even if this took time. Thanks to this attitude, we understand that they were involved and that they wanted to learn the know-how of the activities (external tutor 1, I project).

The project success (in terms of student involvement, participation, and motivation) may also be attributed to the established relationship among external tutors and students. The tutors tell a positive and profitable relational climate, even though a personal and direct relationship may not be established in the short available time and with all the involved students.

There was not an individual relationship because they were a lot, however, overall something was done. In those few meetings (...),

we tried to listen to their expectations, to give them information on how to do this activity (...). We have always tried to create a positive relationship in terms of exchange, stimulation, and encouragement (external tutor 1, I project).

The care of relationships with students has enabled tutors to understand some nuances in learning processes, even in less promising situations.

At the end, I saw a bit of change. (...) One of them was very reluctant to take pictures as if he were to “consume the roll of film”. He was parsimonious. This happens to half the course. Finally, he was the one that asked for more information from everyone and managed to integrate into the group (tutor 3, II project).

I think the project has given something. If they start unmotivated, successively I think the “un” went away. I saw, together with my colleague, a growth in terms of participation and motivation (tutor 1, I project).

In the final report of the first project, a very positive evaluation emerges that emphasises the students’ ability to position themselves in the role of the interviewer-social researcher and to carry it out responsibly. In the report:

The involved students in the project showed interest in the activities, maturing, in the project course, a mastery with the questionnaire tool. During the project implementation, the students have acquired the necessary skills to set up the preparation of a questionnaire and, above all, to administer it correctly (external tutors report, I project).

As well, in the second project:

All students have acquired the theoretical and technical skills for the realisation of a photovoice action (...) (external tutor report, II project).

The *student-centred learning approach* has been effective, on account of the students are inspired to become an active subject in activity definition, in the resolution of an unexpected event and in time management. This did not occur always and not for everybody. It was probably easier for some of them to listen more traditional training offer or to respond to specific tasks.

I could say that the students were all solicited by the research question, they carefully followed dedicated hours to the photovoice introduction, they also responded positively to the collaboration requests. However, someone has not been activated from the beginning, and others, more proactive in the initial phase, have held back

themselves in the empirical realisation, especially when it comes to getting involved themselves (external tutor 4, II project).

The second project tutors have highlighted more difficulties. In fact, if during the early hours, students actively were involved in the research design, defining the preparatory tools, and demonstrating originality and creativity in the “photovoice flier” composition, subsequently emerging some critical issues.

The transition to the photo realisation phase around the Campus represented (...) a critical moment for many of them. Despite the familiarity with the image use and the dedicated apps on smartphones, some students came to a standstill, also linked to the difficulty of relating directly to the people that were to photograph. In the process of images and tagline elaboration, some students proved to be particularly original and communicative, others, instead, found difficulties to valorise the produced shots. The three-cycle articulation of photovoice activity has only partially reduced these difficulties (external tutor report, II project).

Students have not only had the opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills related to the use of the questionnaire or the photovoice. They also learned something else.

Above all, in the tagline writing, the students have stimulated their reflexivity. In the illustration phase of the images to the group, they have trained their communication skills. Finally, in the phase of images choice for the final report, they experimented the difficulties and the potentiality of workgroup (external tutor report, II project).

The project was for them the opportunity to learn a way of working respecting the other and to acquire the ability to understand a work process (carried out in several steps). Once the project was completed, it was possible to observe, overall, a matured sense of responsibility regarding assigned role (external tutor report, I project).

In the first project, the external tutors have highlighted the relevance of opportunity for students to participate in a research work (distinguished in different phases), in which the individual ability to complete the task in time has important repercussions on the overall work outcome. The maturation of responsibility, towards the group, seems to emerge as the most interesting result of the experience. Overall, Table 3 shows very positive results in terms of soft skills evaluation. The evaluations should be worth considering in reason of the specific skills, recognised by external tutors, who are able to acknowledge the meanings and the know how to formulate its measurement, related to the single student who participates in the specific and brief SWA activity.

Table 3. Soft skills evaluation of students by external tutors  
(average values, from 1 = none to 10 = high)

Soft skills	Average value
Communication skills	9,05
Adaptability to working in teams	9,05
Ability to coordinate with others	8,95
Work management	8,80
Adaptability and flexibility	8,70
Stress management	8,65
Overview skills	8,65
Time management	8,60
Problem-solving	8,55
Cultural awareness	8,55
Sense of initiative	8,55
Analytical skills	8,50
Decision making	8,45

Source: Our data processing based on the collected data at the end of SWA pathways<sup>8</sup>

### Students' evaluations

At the beginning of SWA activities, the students' expectations seem generic, rather than negative. Almost all students, indeed, expect to *know something new*, to *work in groups*, to *learn something useful for their future*. In the majority, they believe to have the necessary knowledge to face the experience. For some, the qualifying element is the university context and the possibility to orient oneself better in the future choice of the academic course.

In fact, for the lack of minimum information on the project content, the students are not able accurately to express an expectation of skills' development, and whether and what links will be established between the SWA experience and the acquired skills at school.

<sup>8</sup> The used form of students' evaluation follows the suggested ministerial model (see MIUR 2015).

I will be aware of what I will be able to learn at the end of the SWA because I have not cleared the fields of study and research of this course (7,1 ex ante).

Regarding the school, I do not think that links will form among the competences (5, 2 ex ante).

Consistent with the *student centred learning approach*, at the end of the two projects the students have described themselves in the SWA experience (through the focus groups) and provided a self-assessment on learned skills (through an *ex post* evaluation form). Positive judgments emerge concerning transversal skills and learning, and the responsibility which the tutors have referred in their final report.

A positive experience, which helped me to have a good organisational autonomy (3,1, ex post).

I carry a great critical spirit along, but also a great satisfaction for the personal realisation and the project (5,2, ex post).

After this experience, I am better able to relate to others and even with little fear than before. It helped me in organising daily activities, respecting timetables and reorganising my study plan, then preparing for any unexpected events (4,1, ex post).

Surely, I take home a higher maturity. It has helped me to be more autonomous and organised. In general, it gave me a lot of responsibility (6,1, ex post).

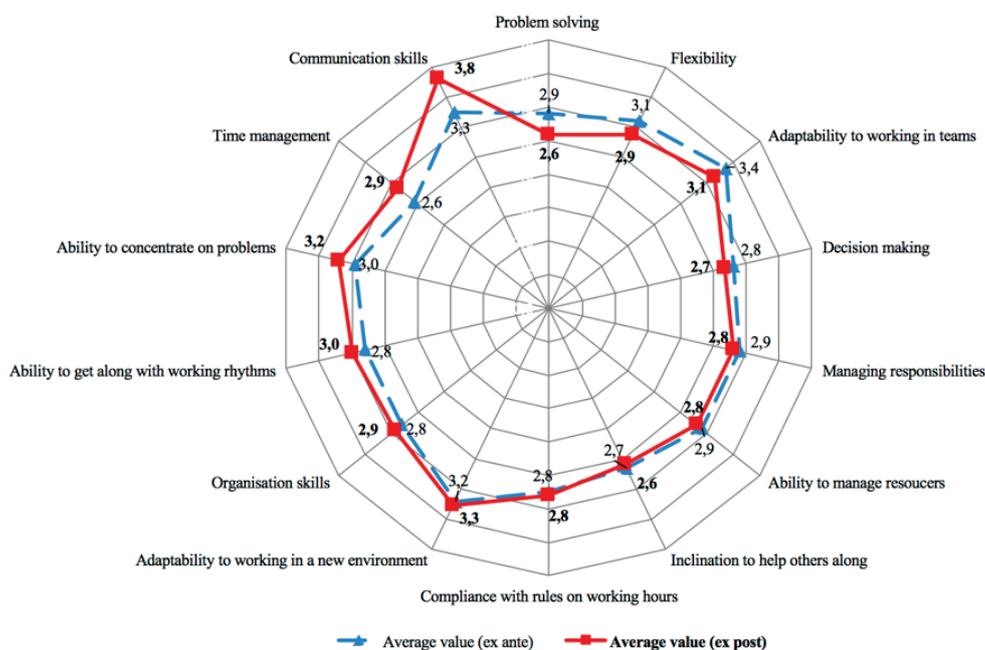
The two projects had a limited duration and although it has been intentionally defined a setting in which to experiment actively themselves, it should have other information to establish if they have really been able to produce important and lasting effects on the soft skills development of the students.

In order to investigate the long effects, an attempt was considered to compare the abilities that the students declare to have strengthened by the SWA experience and the same recognised (*ex ante*) skills. For this purpose, the same list of learnings was proposed to the students, in the self-assessment form, at the start and at the end of the two SWA projects. The figure 2 presents the areas defined by soft skills, *ex ante*, and *ex post*. As showed, the skills are almost overlapping except for some of them that have a slight worsening in self-assessment following the SWA experience.

This overall result could be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, the study case highlights the SWA failure in terms of intervention and effectiveness on some specific skills. In fact, it should be noted that the examined projects were not designed to contain activities enhancing all the listed transversal

skills in the table and, more generally, were not fully integrated in a didactic evaluation system for each skill (Benadusi & Viteritti, 2018). Particularly, then, as well the focus of activities (on some transversal skills) were designed regardless of the potential participants. Secondly, the negative deviation on some soft skills, expected by the two projects, such as “adaptability to working in teams” or “decision making”, could suggest that the SWA experience has helped the students to understand it more thoroughly and led them to express a more aware assessment.

Figure 2. Skills self-assessment by students at the beginning and at the end of SWA experience (1=none, 2= low, 3= moderate, 4= high)



Source: Our data processing based on the collected data at the beginning and at the end of SWA pathways<sup>9</sup>

These results indicate, in any case, that the SWA project planning has suffered the lack of a stable relationship with the school and, specifically, in terms of coherence in students’ abilities.

### Conclusive remarks

In Italy, the main attempt of SWA is the school-work integration, from an “under-protected” model in the transition of young people into the labour

<sup>9</sup> The definition of skills follows the suggested ministerial model (see MIUR, 2015).

market (Arlotti, 2016). However, the SWA is not able to be an exhaustive solution, especially if the labour market is *exclusive* and *not very dynamic*, and if the territorial inhomogeneity of the SWA paths are not exceeded. The SWA, at the same time, has a “guiding” value considering that offers the opportunity to develop and to test the skills, allowing the creation of the life project. It could be possible if the SWA is not limited to a bureaucratic fulfilment, and if it is capable to reinforce territorial governance and to find a greater legitimacy among teachers, students and external subjects (enterprises, institutions, non-profit organisations). For this purpose, it should be also necessary a supporting to the SWA quality. On the one hand, an expansion of the public resources’ investment for its implementation could support the hosting organisation and, above all, it could bridge the disadvantage of some territories or schools. On the other, further support to improving the quality of SWA experiences could be: encouraging co-planning between the school and the external organisation; the identification of coherent skills respect to the *PTOF* and to the territorial development; and the constant evaluation of experiences. The latter should require, in particular, a more reliable verification in terms of obtained results by students, and a co-definition of the evaluation tools by the involved actors (students, external and internal tutors).

In accordance with these general observations, the presented case study allows drawing the following conclusive considerations.

Considering the first purpose of this study, focused to understand the definition procedure of SWA projects and the implication of some critical issues, it is highlighted a lacking of the planning project that should be, instead, oriented to personal growth of each student. The first critical signal could be identified in a participatory deficit of the students in relation to the SWA opportunities, offered by the school and by the territory. In fact, the students have been expressed an initial prejudice, reinforced by previous negative or unsatisfactory experiences. Hence, it was necessary to take on the initial resistance to genuine involvement in the activities, and overcoming the policy de-legitimation and the attitudes of a pure fulfilment of the normative obligation among the students. In terms of the SWA planning, the studied experiences have suffered the lack of an adequate reference models and of a moderate extent and quality of local SWA offer, aggravated by the absence of a tutors’ specialised know-how (due to a lack of structuring training system and of adequate incentive system for the tutors). Moreover, both in the SWA project definition phase and in the subsequent starting phase, the weakness of the School-DISPeS relationship has implicated a lacking of information exchange between the school and the hosting organisation, regarding the activity’s contents and, above all, the definition of personalised educational projects. As pointed out, the school has tried to respond to the “placing emergency” of all the students in available institutions, operating

a minimal selection of the offers and adopting internal criteria (even not shared with the students) in order to favour the matching with demand. The DISPeS, in turn, has offered consistent activities with the ordinary functioning of the structure, without seeking a particular dialogue with the schools in the projects' definition phase. Therefore, the overall result does not seem to be an SWA development around and with the student (the individual, in fact), on the contrary, falling back on him/her. Another critical issue is certainly represented by the lack of SWA legitimacy among the teachers, who are not willing to question the teaching organisation and their way of *doing school*. From the proved difficulties by the students and the scholastic representative, it seems to confirm the idea of the school as a loosely connected system, already used in the mid-seventies, namely the existence in the school of released or disagreed behaviours to the organisation and the system functioning rules (Weick, 1976).

The answer of the second research question – to interpret the evaluation of the experience by the involved actors in order to bring out the opportunities and the difficulties of two SWA projects in DISPeS – is referred to the major evidence from the evaluation of tutors and student. Indeed, the initial students' deficit of the motivation has been, partially, attenuated by the tutors' investment in time and strength in order to build a good relationship with the students. In addition, the *student centred learning* approach seems to be efficient in terms of students' motivation and development of soft skills, especially relational skills. Lastly, from point of students' view, the university context appears as an added value in the SWA projects in terms of orientation for their future training paths.

Nevertheless, some incoherent aspects are recorded in the knowledge and skills assessment, sustaining in the SWA experiences. As emerged in the two DISPeS projects and in the evaluations by external tutors, the students have been achieved an excellent level of knowledge and know-how concerning a social research exercise, working on their soft skills. Although, the shared identification and the measurement of the soft skills identify another critical element, that could be ascribable to the "nebulosity" of SWA model.

Therefore, many critical issues have emerged. At the same time, the tutors' availability has been transpired to exposing themselves, perhaps, to build new social learning. For this purpose, some preliminary conditions should be satisfied: a greater connection among the school, the offered opportunities (in coherence with the DISPeS activities) and the students' expectations; a co-definition of general training objectives and personalised SWA projects; a reasoned and adequate definition (respect to the peculiarity of school and of individual students) of the criteria for students' skills measuring, at the beginning and at the end of the SWA activities.

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