PhD program Risorse per la Nuova P.A: Persone e Dati - Cycle 38

Curriculum in Selezione, gestione e valorizzazione del capitale umano nelle PP.AA.

INNOVATION IN EXECUTIVE EDUCATION: FROM ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TO HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Name Agnese Surname Mecella
Registration number 902589

Tutor:Alessandro Sancino

Co-tutor: Riccardo Viale

Coordinator: Alfredo Marra

2024/2025

Finanziato dall'Unione europea NextGenerationEU
Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca
Italiadomani PIANO NAZIONALE DI RIPRESA E RESILIENZA

INNOVATION IN EXECUTIVE EDUCATION BETWEEN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

INTRODUCTION TO THE DOCTORAL COLLECTION OF PAPERS

> *"We propose that in the most general way: 1) all technics is "pharmacological" in the sense of being potentially harmful or beneficial; 2) lacking a definition of a "therapeutic," or of what the Greeks called a melete or an epimeleia (discipline, solicitude, care), which presupposes a technique of the self, a pharmakon necessarily becomes toxic". – (Ars Industrialis Manifesto, 2010)* [1]

> *"We propose that consequently a politics—that is, in our time necessarily also a political economy—is firstly and above all a system of care which consists in establishing ways of life (and a culture) that know how to deal with a given pharmacological (technical and mnemotechnical) state. A culture is that which cultivates a caring relation to the pharmaka which compose a human world, and which thus struggles against their always possible toxicity" (Ars Industrialis Manifesto, 2010)*

RESEARCH CONTEXT. This doctoral collection of papers is part of the research fellowship *"Innovation in training and development models for public management"*, funded by the **National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR).** It explores the field of Executive Education (ExEd), aiming to understand its ongoing transformations and future directions. The relevance of this research is heightened by the profound changes currently affecting the field. The introduction of new technologies - such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) - along with cultural and societal developments, is increasingly shaping this domain and its practices, significantly influencing the competencies and educational methodologies required in both the public and private sectors. The research project comprises three independent yet interconnected papers, each addressing distinct research questions and adopting different methodological approaches, while being linked by a shared line of argumentation and offering complementary perspectives on

[1] Ars Industrialis is an association founded with the contribution of the philosopher Bernard Stiegler.

Executive Education that emerge through the integrated reading of the collection.

Indeed the three papers share as a common denominator a dual attention to technology and cultural aspects in addressing the challenge of innovation in ExEd. Considered in its entirety across the three papers, this research can offer some integrated insights about w*hich role culture and human development plays in defining an ethical use of Artificial Intelligence in the public and play sectors, and what contribution Executive Education can offer to this cultural, societal and human development in relation to technological innovation.* The particular attention to AI, which is common to the three papers and is particularly crucial in the second, emerged from my collaboration with the Italian National School of Administration (SNA), which was implementing the AI4SNA initiative and showed a strong interest in the topic at the time of our initial contacts. However, AI is not the central topic of the thesis but rather the broader context that enables reflection on innovation in ExEd. More precisely, the three papers approach the theme of innovation ExEd from complementary perspectives:

1. an overview of recent innovations, trends, and models in ExEd;
2. a critical examination of the role of AI in current and future developments of ExEd field;
3. an exploration of innovative and non-mainstream pedagogical approaches that foster a culture capable of supporting and balancing these transformations.

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE THREE PAPERS. Together, the three studies form a coherent trajectory: from mapping the field (Paper 1) to critically examining dominant narratives about Artificial Intelligence (AI) (Paper 2) to reflecting on innovative pedagogical alternatives (Paper 3). Across this progression, the collection advances the central thesis that, while AI has become a prominent and strategic theme within innovation in Executive Education (ExEd), **its ethical development and use are inseparable from the ethical orientation of the organizations in which it is embedded**. More specifically, the research – considered as a whole - shows that AI can be meaningfully ethical only within organizational and societal contexts that intentionally value and cultivate human, relational, and soft competencies, rather than marginalizing or underestimating their role in educational and managerial practices. From this perspective, ethical AI is not approached as a purely technical or regulatory matter, but as a cultural, organizational, and educational challenge. The collection, therefore, problematizes prevailing instrumental and efficiency-driven interpretations of AI in ExEd, drawing attention to the risks of narrowing learning processes, weakening human judgment, and reducing opportunities for critical reflection. At

the same time, it emphasizes the need to develop innovative approaches—also at the pedagogical level—capable of strengthening the human capacities that make AI both governable and meaningful, such as critical thinking, ethical reflexivity, sense-making, responsibility, and collective deliberation. In doing so, the collection as a whole contributes to reimagining innovation in Executive Education (ExEd) as a "pharmacological" process (Ars Industrialis, 2010): one that entails both potential benefits and inherent tensions, and that therefore requires continuous balance, care, and intentional design between technological advancement and cultural and human

INNOVATION BETWEEN TECHNOLOGY AND CULTURE. Given the title of my scholarship (*Innovation in Advanced Training Models for Public Management),* it seems important to better clarify what we mean here with the term ' innovation'. Talking about innovation today necessarily means addressing the growing adoption of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT in work contexts, even in the public sector. However, as argued by Kahn (2018), innovation is not understood here only as an 'outcome' or 'process', but also as a transformation of mindset. Kahn (2018) explains how Dyer, Gregerson, and Christensen identify five key skills ("associating, questioning, observing, experimenting, networking") that accompany this mental change. Innovation is not just about technology, but also about the social and cultural transformations that enable it to bring improvements to people and organizations. Referring to the opening statement of this introduction by the Ars Industrialis (2010) collective, founded by philosopher Bernard Stiegler, it is argued that innovation cannot be reduced to technology alone; rather, every technology must be supported by a culture that balances, prevents, and cares for its potential adverse effects. Ars Industrialis (2010) highlights how new technical possibilities should be placed "at the service of society: not at the service of a destructive 'innovation' based on disposability and the resulting social regression, but at the service of social innovation". Thus, the thesis aims to embrace the term 'innovation' in its full and profound sense, foregrounding both cultural and technological discourse, in a vision that combines human and technological aspects. For that reason, the three papers don't address the topic of innovation, just focusing on AI, but they aim to give space to the human and cultural side of the current changes in ExEd. Starting from this broad idea of innovation, the last paper is explicitly dedicated to Art-Based Methods in ExEd as a holistic means to develop some of the most in-demand competencies in the AI era.

RELEVANCE AND ' TO RELEVATE' (CHIA, 2014). Before discussing relevance, we would like to specify that we think that the value of research does not consist only in being

relevant, but also in ‘to relevate’ in Chia’s (2024) sense. Indeed, while on the one hand the focus on AI was defined in collaboration with the National School of Administration—highly interested in the topic—on the other hand, it was decided to address Innovation in ExEd holistically and thus to pay attention both to technology and to the centrality of the human being in its conscious use in ExEd. It is precisely in this sense that the three papers seek to engage practitioners in the spirit of Chia’s (2014) concept of “relevate,” which implies not merely responding to organizational needs, but also revealing overlooked or unconventional dimensions that can expand practitioners’ perspectives and ways of thinking. The aim is to create the conditions and motivation to broaden understanding, so that well-known problems and situations can be seen in a new light and re-evaluated in terms of their broader implications. The first two papers, therefore, respond more to the need to produce research that is relevant and interesting for practitioners. The third paper integrates a more critical perspective precisely to broaden horizons, as suggested by Chia (2014). By opening up new unconventional ideas and understanding, the research reveals its interpretive stance: it does not aspire to offer prescriptive solutions, but rather to critically engage with and interpret the phenomena under investigation. With regard to the research's relevance, several factors make the theme of innovation in Executive Education, in connection with AI and human development, particularly significant. These include the importance attributed to AI and human-based skills in current national and international policies and training guidelines; the interest shown by practitioners; and the multidisciplinary nature of the research, which enables connections across fields such as management, philosophy, ethics, and the arts.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMAN-BASED SKILLS IN THE AI ERA. The intention to integrate the discussion on AI with a focus on the human dimension is not merely the result of a philosophical reflection; it also clearly emerges from the lecture of several key national and international documents. **For example, the guidelines on executive recruitment issued by the Scuola Nazionale dell’Amministrazione (SNA) explicitly list transversal skills** as essential requirements for public management positions, alongside technical and digital skills, even if the document adopts a pragmatic approach and does not provide a theoretical definition of these transversal skills (SNA, Linee guida per l’accesso alla dirigenza). Similarly, the **Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) frequently refers to “soft skills”** as key elements for renewing the public sector workforce. At the European level, **the Joint Research Centre (JRC) report “Competences and Governance Practices for Artificial Intelligence in the Public Sector” (JRC, 2024)**

introduces the category of "attitudinal competences"—mindsets and dispositions crucial for the effective, ethical, and responsible use of AI in government. This includes critical thinking, ethics awareness, and a positive attitude toward technology, underlining that digital transformation must be accompanied by new human capacities (JRC, 2024). Across all these documents, what emerges is a new centrality of training and continuous development in the public sector, with specific attention not only to digitalization and technical skills but also to transversal, soft, or human skills. Training in Italian public administration is therefore structured along three main lines: digitization, technical skills, and transversal skills. This research has particularly focused on the first and third lines, leaving the technical component in the background to maintain scope delimitation and consistency with the critical approach adopted. This choice is not intended to minimize the value of technical skills, but rather to highlight the importance of "humanizing leadership"—as stated by Fleming et al. (2018), citing Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2015)— in an AI-dominated era. However, this operational focus does not intend to deny the importance of technical skills in the adoption of AI within public administration, nor the need to train on them as well. The research thus aims to explore and take into account both the changes brought about by the introduction of AI and the new skills - particularly transversal ones - it requires.

RELEVANCE FOR PRACTITIONERS. **A crucial element of this thesis was the dialogue with practitioners, in particular with the experts revolving around the National School of Public Administration (SNA),** which played a fundamental role in this process. The literature review on Executive Education (ExEd) was, in fact, presented in the form of **an interactive seminar at SNA**, giving rise to a direct and dynamic exchange with professionals involved in the sector. This seminar was not only an opportunity to discuss the preliminary results of the research, but also constituted an important opportunity for practitioners to meet and reflect together on the developments and challenges of Executive Education, with a particular focus on the context of the PA. The shared reflection during the seminar generated mutual enrichment: on the one hand, it offered me new ideas to strengthen and direct my thesis, and on the other, it provided participants with stimuli to think about managerial training within public institutions. This dialogue opened a space for discussion that allowed exploration of possible future directions for ExEd, highlighting the real critical issues perceived by sector professionals and also offering the experts and practitioners involved a moment of discussion among themselves on the topic. This work is conceived within an open knowledge perspective, as both a contribution and a restitution for the research community and practitioners.

THE MULTIDISCIPLINARITY OF THE RESEARCH. During the study, I had the opportunity to participate in seminars organized by the Italian National School of Administration (SNA). These opportunities to engage with experts from the public, private, and academic sectors provided valuable insights, enriching and refining the research. International and multidisciplinary exchanges have significantly broadened the project's overall vision, offering different perspectives on the challenges and opportunities of ExEd. Also, due to this variety of input and insights, the thesis gradually took on a strongly interdisciplinary character, as expected by the overall vocation of the PhD program in *The New Public Administration: data and human resources* at the University of Milano-Bicocca.

THE THREE PAPERS. As for the specific content of the three papers, they address, from different points of view and with different approach, some overarching research question: how artificial intelligence is transforming ExEd, integrating with emerging trends and the development of transversal and humanistic skills? How can we develop those skills? Here the content of the three articles:

The first article offers a **review of the literature on Executive Education** and an **analysis of the web pages of management schools and schools of government,** both nationally and internationally. The aim is to reconstruct the main topics addressed by the scientific literature **over the past fifteen years**, highlighting emerging trends and innovative models in ExEd. The analysis of the web pages will also provide an overview of the current situation of schools of management and schools of government and critically compare it to the emerging topics from the literature. The work, with its exploratory approach, is fully aligned with the objectives of the fellowship, also providing a frame for the context in which AI is used in training today. The topics identified by the analysis offer insights into how AI can be synergistically integrated and aligned with emerging trends. The article employs an interpretive and thematic approach.

The second article focuses on the role of **Artificial Intelligence in Executive Education** and aims to analyze, through a **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**, how business schools, government schools, and national public administration schools are discussing AI in their narratives and how they are using it. This can help to understand better how to talk about AI and, consequently, how to apply it in a more ethical way within organizations. In that paper I argue that the current debate on AI and ExEd has been dominated by technical and efficiency-oriented perspectives, while overlook the embodied, ethical, and contextual dimensions of **decision-making and leadership**. To address this gap, the study proposes a **4E cognitive framework — Embodied, Embedded, Extended, and Enactive cognition**

(Viale et al., 2023) — as a lens to reimagine how executives learn, think, and decide in the age of AI. This paradigm conceives cognition as a distributed and situated process emerging from the interaction among body, environment, and tools, rather than as a purely computational function. Methodologically, the paper combines a **conceptual discussion** grounded in cognitive philosophy and Critical Management Studies with a **Critical Discourse Analysis** of institutional narratives about AI across six leading schools of management, school of government and national school of public administration. Findings reveal that most institutions frame AI through a grammar of necessity - presenting it as an inevitable destiny rather than a socio-political choice. Even notions such as ethics, sustainability, and well-being are often absorbed into managerial and performance-driven logics. The paper concludes by outlining a **human-centered and critical reframing of executive education**, advocating for curricula that cultivate embodied awareness, ethical reasoning, and reflexivity alongside digital literacy, enabling leaders not merely to *use* AI, but to *think and decide with* it.

The third article explores the role of **art-based methods (ABMs)** in ExEd arguing that they represent more than mere creative techniques. Instead, they are **transformative experiences** that create "liminoid" spaces (Turner, 1974) - moments suspended from utilitarian and performative logic - where creativity, reflexivity, embodied awareness, and emotional depth can emerge. These spaces invite participants to question assumptions and organizational power structures. From a theoretical standpoint, the article draws on a **phenomenological and Heideggerian perspective**: art is not a set of tools but an **event of disclosure** (Heidegger, 1950/1995) in which hidden meanings are revealed. Within management contexts, this makes art a critical practice capable of challenging what Alvesson and Spicer (2012) call "functional stupidity,"., an organizationally supported lack of reflexivity. At the same time, the article warns against the risk of "**domestication"**: if ABMs are reduced to motivational or entertainment tools, they lose their transformative potential (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999; Contu, 2009). The link with **Artificial Intelligence (AI)** is particularly significant. As AI transforms work, **technical expertise becomes less central**, while **transversal and socio-emotional competences** grow in importance (JRC, 2024). For managers, creativity, problem-solving, empathy, communication, and ethical awareness are increasingly vital. ABMs are especially effective in cultivating these abilities, as they work on embodied, emotional, and reflexive dimensions often overlooked in traditional management training. This intersection of ABMs and AI supports a **new model of leadership**: moving away from the individualistic, rational "heroic leader" toward the

leader-as-learner, characterized by empathy, vulnerability, and continuous learning (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2018; Fleming, Millar & Culpin, 2018). In this sense, ABM resonate with the ethos of **Critical Management Studies (CMS)** and **Critical Management Education (CME)**, offering a humanistic and critical approach to management learning. Despite growing evidence of their effectiveness (Springborg, 2012; Sandberg, 2024; Holtham & Biagioli, 2021), ABMs remain marginal in mainstream curricula, still dominated by cognitive-based courses (Kuo & Tien, 2022). Barriers include cultural and organizational resistance, as well as **assessment challenges**: transformative outcomes are not easily captured by traditional quantitative metrics (Snyder, 2025). Nevertheless, extra-managerial evidence — such as the **WHO report on arts and health** (Fancourt & Finn, 2019) — highlights tangible benefits of arts-based practices for mental, social, and physical well-being.

EXPECTED RESULTS. As for the expected results and transferability of the collection, the project aims to generate theoretical knowledge useful for rethinking executive training practices, from a perspective that integrates the technological and human dimension. The expected results include: (1) a description of the central trends in contemporary Executive Education; (2) a critical reflection on the role of artificial intelligence in private and public sector; (3) the problematization of art-based approaches, capable of developing human skills relevant to contemporary leadership in a world dominated by AI.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS. Throughout this research, it has become clear that **the ethics of Artificial Intelligence should be understood as deeply dependent on the quality of the human and organizational ecosystems within which AI systems are designed, adopted, and used.** AI systems do not operate in a neutral or autonomous manner; rather, they are embedded in contexts shaped by values, practices, decision-making priorities, and power relations, which significantly influence both their functioning and their effects. From this perspective, AI tends to amplify existing dynamics rather than correct them. Understanding AI ethics as ecosystem-dependent requires shifting attention away from an exclusive focus on the technical regulation of systems toward a broader concern with human, cultural, and organizational development. While regulatory and technical interventions remain essential, their effectiveness is closely tied to the conditions under which AI is implemented in practice. While compliance mechanisms play a necessary role, they are not sufficient to account for the ethical dimensions of AI use, which emerge through situated human judgment and organizational practices. In this sense, ethical AI cannot be understood solely as a matter of compliance or system-level design, but must also be considered alongside the

development of human and organizational capacities that shape everyday interactions with these technologies.

The **Italian Guidelines for the Adoption of Artificial Intelligence in Public Administration issued by AgID (2025)** outline a comprehensive set of principles that place AI within a broad value-based framework aligned with European orientations, explicitly recalling human responsibility, inclusiveness, non-discrimination, transparency, and training (Agenzia per l'Italia Digitale [AgID], 2025). In this sense, the guidelines formally establish a link between the adoption of AI and ethical, social, and organizational values, recognizing that AI should be used as a support for human activity rather than as an automatic substitute for human judgment. However, the research suggests that this link, while clearly articulated at the normative level, risks remaining largely formal unless it is accompanied by a corresponding process of individual and organizational awareness development. In particular, although the AgID (2025) guidelines stress the need to avoid the reproduction or amplification of societal biases, this objective tends to be addressed primarily as a matter of compliance or risk management, leaving the structural, historical, and social nature of bias largely unexamined. From this perspective, AI does not generate distortions *ex novo* but rather perpetuates, reproduces and amplifies logic and asymmetries already present in the social and organizational contexts in which it is deployed.

Relevant indications in this direction also emerge at the international level. The UNESCO (2022) *Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence* emphasizes that awareness and understanding of AI should be promoted through an accessible education, civic engagement, information literacy, and explicit training in AI ethics, while considering "linguistic, social, and cultural diversity" (UNESCO, 2022, p.23). Furthermore, UNESCO grounds the understanding of AI in its effects and connections with fundamental rights, the environment, and ecosystems (UNESCO, 2022). This perspective reinforces the idea that the awareness required for ethical AI use cannot be reduced to the transmission of normative or technical knowledge; rather, it requires the development of critical sensitivity, interpretive capacities, and contextual judgment.

In summary, Italian and European AI policies already establish solid value-based foundations for an ethical and human-centered use of technology (AgID, 2025; UNESCO, 2022). However, the research highlights that **the effective enactment of these principles largely depends on the development of critical and reflective awareness among individuals and organizations adopting AI.** In order to prevent ethical values from remaining confined to declarative statements or compliance requirements, it becomes

necessary to investigate more systematically how such principles can be transmitted and internalized through the lever of training. From this perspective, policies are called not only to emphasize the importance of education, but also to question which training models are most effective in fostering ethical sensitivity, self-awareness, and critical capacity. **This implies considering, at the policy level, the promotion of innovative learning approaches that - although not fully aligned with traditional or conventional models - have proven particularly effective in developing the soft skills that are first and foremost essential for social life and for the construction of balanced and healthy organizational environments, and that consequently** play a key role in supporting a responsible, reflective, and ethically grounded use of Artificial Intelligence. **From the perspective developed in this research, the following policy-relevant reflections emerge:**

Ethics of AI as an ecosystem-dependent issue: the ethical quality of AI systems cannot be ensured solely through technical design or regulatory compliance. It depends on the human, organizational, and institutional ecosystems in which AI is developed and used. This ecosystem-based understanding is already implicitly reflected in European and national policy frameworks that frame AI within broader value-based and human-centered orientations (AgID, 2025; UNESCO, 2022). It may be useful to outline concrete methods and practical guidelines for developing the cultural dimensions underlying the proposed values.

Limits of compliance-oriented approaches: While compliance mechanisms and risk-management frameworks are necessary, they are not sufficient to address the ethical dimensions of AI use, which arise through situated human judgment, organizational practices, and contextual decision-making (AgID, 2025; UNESCO, 2022).

Role of public policies beyond rule-setting: AI-related policies play a crucial role not only in defining principles and requirements, but also in shaping the conditions under which these principles can be meaningfully enacted within organizations.

Centrality of awareness and ethical capacity: The effective implementation of ethical AI principles depends on the development of individual and organizational awareness, reflexivity, and critical understanding of the social and ethical implications of AI systems. This orientation is explicitly articulated in international policy frameworks that stress education, ethical awareness, and contextual understanding as key elements for informed participation and the protection of fundamental rights (UNESCO, 2022).

Training as an enabling condition for ethical AI: Education and training should be

understood as enabling conditions for ethical AI governance, rather than as ancillary or optional components of policy frameworks (AgID, 2022; UNESCO, 2022). **Need to reflect on training models, not only on training provision:** From a policy perspective, the question is not only whether training is promoted—as is already the case in several national and international policy documents—but which learning approaches are most effective in fostering ethical sensitivity, self-awareness, and critical capacity in AI-related decision-making.

Risk of declarative ethics: Without sustained attention to human development and organizational learning, ethical principles risk remaining at a declarative level, functioning primarily as symbolic commitments or compliance requirements rather than as drivers of responsible practice, a risk implicit in policy frameworks that strongly articulate ethical values but provide limited guidance on how these values are to be internalized and enacted within everyday organizational practices.

USE OF THE AI IN THE RESEARCH. As a final consideration, an important reflection is also opened on the use that was chosen for AI within this research. During my research period in SNA with other PhD students, we had the opportunity to organize a seminar entitled **"Social research in the era of Artificial Intelligence: perspectives and practical applications in doctoral research,**". We thus reflected together even with a group of experts on whether and how AI could be ethically integrated into research. The ethical use of AI in research is discussed internationally, for example by the **OECD (2023) - "Artificial intelligence in science"** - and by **UNESCO (2023) - "Guidance for generative AI in education and research"** - but also the "Living Guidelines on the responsible use of generative AI in research" (European Commission, 2025). In line with what emerges from these references, it was therefore considered appropriate to integrate AI into the research process, paying attention to transparency in the methods of use and integration in the research workflow. **AI was used to review and discursively rework parts of text initially written by the author, as well as in the brainstorming phase to test, challenge, and create new connections.** The role of AI was important in the translation phase. In fact, the thesis was translated into English even with the support of ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2024-2025), under the continuous human revision of the author. Some final grammatical and stylistic improvements were achieved by using Grammarly.

REFERENCES

Agenzia per l'Italia Digitale. (2025). *Linee guida per l'adozione dell'Intelligenza Artificiale nella Pubblica Amministrazione* (Determinazione n. 17/2025). Agenzia per l'Italia Digitale. https://www.agid.gov.it/it/ambiti-intervento/intelligenza-artificiale

Ars Industrialis (2010). *Manifesto 2010: For an Industrial Politics of the Spirit.* Retrieved from https://arsindustrialis.org/manifesto-2010

Chia, R. (2014). *From relevance to relevate: How university-based business schools can remain seats of "higher" learning and still contribute effectively to business. Journal of Management Development, 33*(5), 443–455. https://doi.org/10.1108/JMD-02-2014-0013

European Commission (2025), Directorate-General for Research and Innovation. *Living guidelines on the responsible use of generative AI in research* (2nd ed.). Publications Office of the European Union.

European Commission, Joint Research Centre, Medaglia, R., Mikalef, P., & Tangi, L. (2024). *Competences and governance practices for artificial intelligence in the public sector* (JRC138702). Publications Office of the European Union. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/7895569

Fleming, P., Millar, C., & Culpin, V. (2018). *From hollow hero to expert empathiser*: Leadership in transition. Journal of Management Development*, 37*(8), 632–644.

Kenneth B. Kahn, *Understanding innovation*, Business Horizons, Volume 61, Issue 3, 2018, Pages 453-460, ISSN 0007-6813, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2018.01.011.

Miao, F., & Holmes, W. (2023). *Guidance for generative AI in education and research.* UNESCO. https://doi.org/10.54675/EWZM9535

OECD (2023), *Artificial Intelligence in Science: Challenges, Opportunities and the Future of Research*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/a8d820bd-en.

OpenAI. (2024). *ChatGPT (GPT-4)* [Large language model]. https://chat.openai.com/

OpenAI. (2025). *ChatGPT (GPT-5)* [Large language model]. https://chat.openai.com/

Petriglieri, G., & Petriglieri, J. L. (2015). *Can business schools humanize leadership?*

Academy of Management Learning & Education, 14(4), 625–647. https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2014.0201

Scuola Nazionale dell'Amministrazione. (n.d.). *IA e formazione SNA*. Retrieved October 24, 2025, from https://sna.gov.it/home/attivita/ricerca/progetti-di-ricerca/progetti-in- corso/ia-e-formazione-sna/

UNESCO. (2022). *Recommendation on the ethics of artificial intelligence*. UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381137?posInSet=7&queryId=8c40fd91-472d-4427-99ec-8ccb9848fa26

Viale R, Gallagher S, Gallese V. (2023) *Bounded rationality, enactive problem solving, and the neuroscience of social interaction*. Front Psychol. May 18;14:1152866. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1152866. PMID: 37275688; PMCID: PMC10232769.

PAPER 1

PAPER 1 EXECUTIVE EDUCATION. TRENDS AND EMERGING MODELS FROM LITERATURE REVIEW AND THE OFFERINGS OF SCHOOLS OF MANAGEMENT AND SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT

Abstract. Executive Education (ExEd) is changing due to global trends, technological advancements, and evolving organizational and individual requirements. This transformation occurs within what is often referred to as the VUCA world (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) (Abidi & Joshi, 2018). As a result, executive training is adopting new forms, objectives, and methodologies. The primary aim of this paper is to delineate the current state of ExEd by identifying trends and emerging models. The core research question is: What are the trends and emerging models in executive education training? This problem is addressed through two complementary methods. First, a literature review of the past 15 years was conducted. Second, an analysis of the websites of selected schools of management and government is the empirical part of the paper. The literature review focuses on recent academic developments to capture the field's evolution and can serve as a foundation for later research on Executive Education and artificial intelligence (AI). The review balances systematic source selection with narrative analysis and theme identification. The empirical part of the research examines web pages from some schools ranked in the QS World University Rankings to assess recent practical developments in ExEd. This dual approach integrates conceptual analysis with practical examples. It offers a comprehensive overview of contemporary Executive Education at both academic and institutional levels. The study's exploratory nature establishes a foundation for future research, especially regarding new technologies such as AI and their impact on the field.

Keywords: Executive Education, Emerging Trends, Literature Review, Business Schools, Schools of Management, Schools of Government, Artificial Intelligence in Executive Education

EXECUTIVE EDUCATION. TRENDS AND EMERGING MODELS FROM LITERATURE REVIEW AND THE OFFERINGS OF SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT AND SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 RESEARCH TOPIC AND STRUCTURE**.** Executive Education (ExEd) is changing due to global trends, technological advancements, and evolving organizational and individual requirements. This transformation occurs within what is often referred to as the VUCA world (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) (Abidi & Joshi, 2018). As a result, executive training is adopting new forms, objectives, and methodologies to face a new horizon. The primary aim of this paper is to delineate the current state of ExEd by identifying trends and emerging models. The central research question is: **What are the trends and emerging models in executive education?** This question is addressed through two complementary methods. First, a **thematic review of literature from the past fifteen years** was conducted. Second, an **analysis of the websites of selected schools of management and government** is the empirical part of the paper. The literature review focuses on recent academic developments to capture the field's evolution and can serve as a foundation for later research on Executive Education and Artificial Intelligence (AI). The review balances systematic source selection with narrative analysis and theme identification. The second, empirical part of the research examines catalogs from schools ranked in the QS World University Rankings to assess practical developments in ExEd. This dual approach integrates conceptual analysis with practical examples. **It offers a comprehensive overview of contemporary Executive Education at both academic and institutional levels.** The study's exploratory nature lays the foundation for future research, especially regarding new technologies such as AI and their use in ExEd.

1.2 RELEVANCE OF RESEARCH. This paper is the first of a collection of three articles for my PhD project on ongoing innovations in Executive Education. For that reason, creating an overview of the field at this stage is essential for guiding the following papers and research questions. The principal value of this study is therefore academic, as it offers insights for my PhD project and for the research community seeking to be aware of the state of the art in ExEd. At the same time, the study aims to engage in dialogue with

practice. Indeed, some preliminary findings were shared at the SNA (Italian National School of Public Administration) seminar, "*Executive Education. Presentazione e analisi delle tendenze e modelli emergenti dalla ricerca e dalle attività delle school of management*" (26 March 2024). The seminar provided a valuable opportunity for in-depth discussions about ExEd with practitioners and experts and gave valuable insights for the development of the research. Finally, this paper aims to help both researchers and practitioners by providing some analytical tables: **a summary of the reviewed literature** (Tab. A); and an overview. of the **ExEd ecosystem** (Tab.B).

By combining two complementary sources of data—the academic literature and the institutional communication of management and government schools, we aim to provide an updated, multidimensional understanding of the current state of Executive Education. This integrated approach enables capturing both what is already happening in practice and how these transformations are framed within academic discourse, thereby highlighting the interplay between enacted and envisioned change. Based on the results the paper **give suggestions for different stakeholders in ExEd** (Tab.D).

Why is an updated review of Executive Education needed, especially as AI becomes increasingly important in the field? It helps us understand how to integrate these recent changes into the domain properly and provides a basis for further reflection. In fact, AI is expected to change the workforce and how executive training is delivered. There is growing interest from private organizations and public administrations in using AI tools. For instance, the Italian National School of Administration, through the AI4SNA initiative, has established research labs, seminars, and workshops on Artificial intelligence.

The focus on AI also appears in national documents and reports, which highlight the need for new competencies to support AI adoption. For instance, AgID (2018) notes that competences are changing, and educational methods based on notions are expected to lose importance relative to those that aim to develop critical thinking. In Section 9 of AgID (2018), there is even mention of design, the arts, psychology, anthropology, and sociology to build awareness of new technology, underscoring the need to facilitate new approaches to education that foster a critical attitude. Even the '*Bozza di linee guida per l'adozione di IA nella pubblica amministrazione' (AgID, 2025)* underscores the importance of developing new skills and professional roles in AI, both technical and humanistic. Globally, there is a vivid discussion about AI and the skills needed to handle it. This is evident in reports such as JRC (2024) on AI skills in public administration and

The Future Jobs Report (WEF, 2025). Executive Education now has a key role: guiding AI use, promoting critical thinking about **its applications, and supporting fair organizations and learning to build needed competencies. It can also use AI to enhance education effectiveness.** From a cognitive perspective, AI offers new 'affordances' (Gibson,1979/2015)—opportunities for action based on the user's characteristics. Those affordances are worth exploring to advance the field of ExEd in line with new models and trends. The AI revolution presents an opportunity to rethink learning goals, methods, and values in a rapidly changing world. It is also allows reflecting on the kind of humans we aspire to be and the values that guide our use of technology. **To explore this, the study focuses on Executive Education as the setting which AI is changing, and before understanding the changes, we have to understand the field.**

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW.

The review primarily targets scholars and practitioners in public administration, as well as experts and educators working in business schools and schools of government, and professionals involved in executive learning and innovation. The overarching research question guiding the review was: "*What are the key trends and emerging models in contemporary Executive Education (ExEd)?"* Therefore, this literature review was designed to outline the current state of Executive Education (ExEd). It also aimed to identify the main trends and emerging models that characterize the contemporary evolution of ExEd. Given the interpretative aim of the study, the literature review adopts a "semi-systematic approach" (Snyder, 2019) to engage with the most relevant academic literature while maintaining a flexible approach to analysis and interpretation. The objective was not to provide an exhaustive map of all contributions on Executive Education, but rather to identify and interpret recurrent themes and emerging orientations shaping the field. A semi-systematic design allows for flexibility, can allow for tailoring the method to the specific research, and can support the reconstruction of a broader topic (Snyder, 2019). Fully systematic reviews typically involve exhaustive database coverage, formalized protocols, and article-by-article synthesis. However, these steps were not essential for the present study, as the research aim was to identify key trends and emerging models in Executive Education

rather than to provide a comprehensive bibliometric or classificatory mapping. The semi-systematic approach therefore enables methodologically guided exploration while retaining the flexibility necessary to delineate the field's evolving landscape. This flexibility favors discussing emerging themes in an aggregate form rather than building a strict systematic review. The literature search was conducted using the **EBSCO Business Source Complete database**. Given the exploratory and interpretative nature of the review, the objective was not to maximize coverage across multiple databases, but to engage with a thematically coherent and methodologically robust core literature. EBSCO was deemed appropriate due to its extensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals in management, education, and public administration, **key disciplinary domains for Executive Education research**. The search focused on peer-reviewed articles published in English between 2008 and 2023, a period marked by significant transformations in Executive Education driven by globalization, digitalization, and evolving organizational and societal demands. The keywords used were "**Executive Education" and "Executive Learning**", as they enabled the identification of a broad and thematically relevant body of literature aligned with the research question. Following an **initial screening based on abstracts, only articles directly relevant to the research question were retained**. To ensure a high level of scientific rigor and academic relevance, the final sample included exclusively articles published in journals classified as **A-class by ANVUR-13 (Italian National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes).** While ANVUR serves as a national evaluation framework, its classification was adopted here as a quality-based selection criterion, serving as an indicator for methodological robustness, theoretical solidity, and academic relevance.

2.2 CODING PROCEDURE. The selected articles were analyzed using an inductive, interpretative thematic approach inspired by Braun and Clarke (2021). Consistent with Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis, the study emphasized researcher engagement with the data, inductive pattern identification, and theme development as an interpretative process. Rather than applying each step of Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis in a prescriptive manner, the analysis drew on its underlying principles of reflexivity, pattern identification, and meaning-oriented synthesis. Given the study's exploratory and mapping-oriented aim, the analysis focused on identifying and connecting the main thematic domains rather than conducting fine-grained within-theme examinations, thereby providing a coherent yet non-rigid representation of the

Executive Education field. The analytical process unfolded across multiple stages, broadly aligned with Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis framework, as described below, and was supported by working files to ensure analytical rigor and transparency. Although analytically presented in sequential phases, the review process was inherently iterative and non-linear, with recurrent movement between data engagement, thematic refinement, and writing.

Phase 1: Screening and Preliminary Thematic Clustering of Articles (Familiarization – Braun & Clarke, 2021). In the initial selection, the articles' abstracts were read to assess their relevance to the research question, mirroring the familiarization phase described by Braun and Clarke (2021). This step provided a first glimpse of the topics covered by the corpus. **An Excel file containing the selected contributions** was created, and one or more preliminary labels were assigned to each article based on the topic emerging from the abstract. This initial labeling served as a sensitizing and provisional analytical device, rather than a definitive coding structure, and supported the inductive identification of emerging macro-themes across the literature.

Phase 2: In-depth Reading and Excerpt-Based Analysis (Data Engagement and Initial Coding – Braun & Clarke, 2021). All selected articles were subsequently read in full, extending the familiarization process through sustained and active engagement with the data. During this phase, meaningful textual excerpts -sentences or paragraphs considered particularly relevant to the research objectives- **were extracted and collected in a dedicated working document (Word)**. These excerpts were not subjected to a formal line-by-line coding process; rather, they served as interpretative anchors, supporting a comparative and reflexive identification of recurring patterns and thematic areas across the literature. Accordingly, the excerpts constituted the primary qualitative material informing the development of themes and sub-themes, without the construction of a formal codebook.

Phase 3: Thematic Consolidation and Limited Refinement (Reviewing and Defining Themes – Braun & Clarke, 2021). The extracted excerpts were re-read, with focused moments of thematic reconsideration that parallel Braun and Clarke's phase of reviewing and refining themes, rather than through a highly iterative coding–recoding process. Based on this progressive interpretative engagement, the initial thematic categories were revisited, refined, expanded, and reorganized. Articles were reallocated within the evolving thematic structure, and when a contribution offered relevant insights

across multiple thematic areas, it was assigned to more than one theme (as in Table A). This refinement process was continuously informed by ongoing analytical writing and recurrent engagement with previously extracted excerpts. This process culminated in the development of a thematic map, a key output also emphasized by Braun and Clarke (2021), which visually synthesized the main thematic areas and their interrelationships, delineating the key dimensions of the contemporary Executive Education ecosystem. Other visual support was developed in the form of the Executive Education Ecosystem diagram (Table B), as reported.

Phase 4 – Integrative Interpretation and Reflexive Validation (Interpretation and Reporting – Braun & Clarke, 2021). The refined themes were synthesized through an interpretative process aimed at identifying relationships, overlaps, and complementarities among thematic areas, aligning with Braun and Clarke's emphasis on defining and interpreting themes in relation to the overall analysis. The thematic map functioned as an analytical device, supporting higher-level sensemaking. This synthesis was supported by presentation materials (a longer Executive Summary and a shorter PowerPoint presentation). Preliminary results were discussed during a seminar at the Italian National School of Administration (SNA), where feedback from experts contributed to strengthening interpretative rigor and analytical reflexivity. The discussion of the themes was further developed during the writing of this paper, which represents the final interpretative step and the presentation of the results.

2.3 ANALYTICAL RIGOR AND TRACEABILITY. Analytical rigor and transparency were ensured through the documentation of the analytical process. Traceability was supported by **an Excel file recording the preliminary thematic clustering and labels** associated with each article after the initial screening; **a working document (Google Docs) collecting initial thematic clustering and the list of associated articles**; a working document **(Google Docs) collecting key quotations and excerpts used to support theme development and refinement**; a **thematic map and a visual diagram**, including a table providing an overview of the themes (Table A); and presentation materials, **including an executive summary and a shorter PowerPoint presentations**. Consistent with the semi-systematic and interpretative nature of the review, rigor derives from reflexivity, transparency, and coherence between the research question, analytical process, and results, rather than from exhaustive coverage or software-assisted coding.

2.4 PRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS. While all selected

articles informed the analytical process, the presentation of results does not systematically reference each individual contribution. Instead, representative excerpts and illustrative examples are used to support the interpretative synthesis of each thematic domain. This approach reflects the integrative and descriptive aim of the review, which prioritizes conceptual coherence over exhaustive source-by-source reporting.

2.5 FINDINGS: MAIN THEMES EMERGED FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW.

The analysis of the contributions made it possible to identify several thematic cores that, according to the author, reflect the ecosystem of contemporary Executive Education. Below are the main themes identified and the reasoned list of the examined literature, ordered by theme. Following the summary table, a more detailed review of the individual topics is provided, accompanied by explanatory quotes. For the sake of clarity, some topics are grouped into a single paragraph and thus reorganized in the way deemed most effective from an explanatory and consequential perspective. For this reason, there might not be a perfect match between the themes in the table and how they are presented and aggregated in the explanatory section. After presenting the topics, there is a discussion of the review.

(Table A) Themes Overview

Themes	Authors	Core Concepts	Connections
Theor–Practice Gap & Relevance	Ungureanu & Bertolotti (2018); Ramírez et al. (2021); James & Denyer (2009); Bushouse et al. (2011); Butler et al. (2015); Waller & Fawcett (2015); Chia (2014); Coghlan, Shani, (Rami), Roth, & Sloyan (2014)	Gap between theory and practice, practical impact of training	Service and Action Learning, critical pedagogy, customization, personalization, coaching, internationalization
Executive Education & Research	Ricart (2011); Sampere (2015); Choain & Malzy (2017); Little et al. (2008)	Relevant research	Theory-Practice Debate

Personalization & Customized ExEd	Stoten, (2022); Dover, Perkins & Wylie (2009); Petriglieri, Wood & Petriglieri, (2011); Campos Retana & Rodriguez-Lluesma (2022); Anderson (2010); Campos Retana & Rodriguez-Lluesma (2022) (B); Tiberius, Hoffmeister & Weyland (2021); Dover, Manwani & Munn (2018); Brown & Warren (2009)	Flexibility, participant-centered approach, customized design for the organization and specific teams	Coaching, Emotions, Authentic Leadership	
Coaching, Mindfulness and Spirituality	Hooijberg & Lane (2009); Reid et al. (2020); Taylor, Passarelli & Van Oosten (2019); Sanyal & Rigg (2021); Reitz et al. (2020); Lenssen, G. (2010)	Self-awarenes, personal development, transformative training, and customization	Authentic leadership, Vulnerability, Spirituality, Embodied leadership, Critical pedagogy	
Service Learning & Action Learning & Other Pedagogical Techniques	MacGregor & Semler (2012); Dover, Perkins & Wylie (2009); Corlett, Ruane & Mavin (2021); Rhee & Sigler (2010); Coghlan, Shani, Roth & Sloyan (2014); Rashford & de Figueiredo (2011); Ickis, Woodside & Ogliastri (2014)	Practical and experiential pedagogical techniques	Theory-Practice Gap	
Art-Based Methods & Emotions & Humanities & Creativity	Colle, Freeman, Parmar, Colle (2017); Fleming, Millar, Culpin (2018); Taylor, Ladkin (2009); Ladkin, Taylor (2010); Meisiek, Beausoleil, Barry, Dattani (2023); Corlett, Ruane, Mavin (2021); Painter, Pérezts, Deslandes (2021); Tcholakian, Khapova, van de Loo (2023); Chia (2014); Mavin, James, Patterson, Stabler, Corlett (2023); Han & Liang (2015)	Creativity, vulnerability, experiential learning	Embodied leadership, Critical pedagogy, EE	

Learning Communities & Networking	Lepistö & Hytti (2021); Haskins & Shaffer (2013); Han & Liang (2015)	Collaborative learning, relational networks	Internationalization, Theory-Practice Debate	
Authentic Leadership & Vulnerability & Reflexivity & Embodied Leadership	De Déa Roglio & Light (2009); Ciporen (2010); Pearce & Manz (2014); Mavin et al. (2023); Meisiek et al. (2023); Fleming, Millar & Culpin (2018); Ladkin & Taylor (2010); Han & Liang (2015)	Authenticity, body, reflexivity, vulnerability	Art-Based, Coaching, Critical Pedagogy, Mindfulness	
Critical Pedagogy	Mavin et al. (2023)	Social awareness, transformation, power	Gender, Etica, Leadership autentica, riflessività, vulnerabilità	
Gender Gap & Social Responsibility	Ibeh et al. (2008); Amdam & Elias (2021); Pérezts, Russon & Painter (2020); Colle et al. (2017); Chia (2014); de Jong et al. (2017)	Inclusion, ethics, responsibility	Critical Pedagogy, Leadership, Spirituality, Art-Based Methods	
Global Leadership & Internationalization	Pless et al. (2011); Ibeh et al. (2008); Ricart (2011)	Global context, intercultural values	Networking, Personalization, Theory-Practice Gap, ethics and social responsibility	
Skills	Culpin & Scott (2012)	Key competences, professional development	Coaching, Learning by doing, Art-Based Methods	
Online & Blended Learning	Wolverton (2018); Armstrong & Sadler-Smith (2008); Kaplan & Haenlein (2016)			
Future of EE	Tiberius et al. (2021); James & Denyer (2009)			

Theory-practice debate and relevance. The first emerging theme concerns the so-called "Valley of Death" (Ramírez et al., 2021), that is, the gap between what is taught in executive programs and what is actually applied in the workplace. The “Valley of Death” refers to training that lacks practical application and fails to make a concrete impact. In this context, the crucial role of business schools is highlighted as a liminal space where management theory and practice meet (Ungureanu & Bertolotti, 2018). Closely connected to the theory-practice debate is the issue of the relevance of research and training. This is a fundamental topic not only for private organizations but also for public administration (Bushouse et al., 2011). It is interesting to note that in literature, relevance is sometimes contrasted with academic rigor (Butler et al., 2015).

> **"**[…] the authors argue that the prevailing discourse of relevance provides an alibi for scholars to orient themselves towards practitioners in ways that contravene their academic identity and research ethos (whether post-positivist, interpretivist or critical)**"**
>
> **(Butler et al., 2015, p.731)**

Faced with the question of what is more important for schools of management to pursue —training with immediate practical implications or scientific rigor —there are diverse, and even conflicting, answers. On one hand, there is an attempt to understand how to design executive courses with an eye to their practical implications, through pedagogical techniques that can help bridge the gap between theory and practice, such as live cases (Ramírez et al., 2021). On the other hand, it is argued that tailoring executive training exclusively to organizations' needs is not the primary purpose of ExEd (Butler et al., 2015). An interesting position on this issue is that of Chia (2014):

> **"**[…]'relevate' implies lightening conceptual constraints and raising perceptual awareness so that what was previously unnoticed, overlooked or unattended to becomes increasingly viewed as being pertinent and relevant to decisional considerations**"**
>
> **(Chia, 2014, p.445)**

The article highlights that management schools' task is not just to create content that meets organizational needs but also to bring to light seemingly irrelevant issues, expanding participants' horizons (Chia, 2014). In this sense, there is a need not only for training focused on relevance but also for guiding learners through a process of enrichment by new perspectives. The tension between theoretical rigor and practical application opens the way to new forms of learning that better respond to individual and organizational needs. One possible answer to the theory-practice gap is **insider action research**. In the article by Coghlan et al. (2014), the benefits of this kind of initiative for organizations and practitioners are discussed. Action research conducted by professionals allows the study of systems from the inside, leveraging a deep and practical understanding of the context while producing new scientific knowledge (Coghlan et al., 2014).

Personalization of training and customized EE. Another possible response to the gap between theory and practice is the growing attention to personalized learning paths and educational experiences tailored to both individuals and the specific needs of organizations or teams. Stoten (2022) mentions a training model no longer based on pedagogy or andragogy but on "heutagogy", in which learners have greater freedom to define their own learning paths.

> "Blaschke (2012) characterises heutagogy in terms of a learner-defined learning contract, a flexible curriculum with learner-directed questions, and a negotiated mode of assessment, together with an emphasis of reflective practice. In recognising the benefits of a personalised curriculum, heutagogy enables individuals to target specific skills and domains of knowledge as areas of professional development" –
>
> **(Stoten, 2022, p.4)**

The personalization of training does not only mean that education should respond to the learner's specific needs but also that it should require their personal development. This is why transformational learning is discussed.

> "Our findings suggest that this occurs through a process of personalization, by which students examine their experience and revisit their life stories as part and parcel of management learning. This process complements the acquisition of conceptual knowledge and analytic skills from traditional coursework, strengthens students' abilities in the domain of self- awareness and self-management, and allows them to clarify, revise, and integrate their life narratives"
>
> **(Petriglieri,et al., 2011, p.431**)

It is interesting to note that the ancient Greek exhortation (γνῶθι σαυτόν) to know oneself comes to the fore again.

> "At the dawn of the 21st century, a special issue of the Harvard Business Review declared self- awareness to be "leadership's first commandment" (Collingwood, 2001: 8), and not long after, the advisory council to the Stanford Graduate School of Business deemed it the most important ability for leaders to develop (George, Sims, McLean, & Mayer, 2007).[…]"leader development is largely personal development"
>
> **(Petriglieri et al., 2011, p.430)**

Alongside the demand for personalized training, there is also a demand for educational pathways tailored to the specific needs of an organization or team (custom ExEd). The question arises of how management schools and organizations can effectively collaborate to create custom courses through co-design (Campos Retana & Rodriguez-Lluesma, 2022), and a reflection on teaching materials, such as customized case studies (Dover et al., 2009), is held. The growing emphasis on personalization and customization naturally leads to approaches that place the individual's development at the center of the learning process—among these, coaching stands out as a powerful tool for fostering self-awareness and transformation.

Coaching, Service and Action Learning. Closely linked to the trend of personalized training is the rise of coaching. In the literature (Taylor et al., 2019), coaching is described as a non-prescriptive approach, where the individual is at the center and defines their own development plan together with the coach (Taylor et al., 2019):

> "[…] we focus on coaching for development wherein the intent of the coach is to facilitate and support personal vision driven, self-directed, autonomous action on the part of the leader"
>
> **(Taylor et al., 2019, p.2)**

The article "Leadership coach effectiveness as fostering self-determined, sustained change" (Taylor et al., 2019) highlights that coaching effectiveness also depends on its connection to the sphere of desire. Therefore, the focus is on the person, their desires, and visions to generate a 360° growth experience: personal change must come before professional change. Indeed, coaching brings attention back to the **dimensions of doing and being**, in addition to knowing (Reid et al, 2020). Alongside coaching, other experiential and collaborative learning approaches—such as Action Learning and Service Learning—are emerging as effective strategies to bridge theory and practice while promoting social and relational growth.

> "Action learning was originally created by Revans (Yeo & Marquardt, 2015), to enable students to learn by working in groups to solve a real life business problem "
>
> **(Reid et al., 2020, p.5)**

Action learning promotes collaboration and addresses another core topic in contemporary ExEd: the development of relational and social skills.

> "Action learning is a relational process leading to change (Raelin, 2009); with the support of peers in an action learning set, participants tackle a problem through processes of action, learning and reflection (Pedler and Abbott, 2013). Action learning sets provide a sense of community and acknowledgement of social learning from and through each other (Marchand, 2017: 92; O'Hara et al.,1996)"
>
> **(Corlett et al., 2021, p.427)**

Service Learning, on the other hand, responds to the emerging demand for the development of moral, ethical, social, and personal qualities and a positive impact on society (Rhee & Sigler, 2010). Social responsibility is, in fact, a primary issue in ExEd today and is often referenced in the narratives on the websites of the most important management schools. The collaborative, community-based nature of these methods can

lead us to reflect on the role of learning communities and partnerships in executive education today.

Learning Communities and Collaboration. Due to the increased use of technology and the resulting risk of losing relationships with other learners, there is a need to create communities that can exchange knowledge with a focus on practice (Lepistö & Hytti, 2021).

> "Senge and Scharmer (2006) developed a theory of "learning communities" as "a diverse group of people working together to nurture and sustain a knowledge creating system" (Senge & Scharmer, 2006: 197, emphasis in original). [...] Thus, the focus is not on individuals per se, since individuals are understood as members of a community who engage in collective creation to learn together"
>
> **(Lepistö & Hytti, 2021, p.2)**

The issue of collaboration involves not only mutual relationships among learners, but also among teachers and students, as well as between organizations and training providers, as shown in the article "Learning collaborations with your executive education provider for mutual benefit" (Haskins & Shaffer, 2013). Therefore, collaborations are at the heart of contemporary ExEd discourses at all levels. Even a glance at the catalogs of management and government schools reveals a global trend toward collaboration and partnerships among schools. Within these collaborative environments, a new conception of leadership is also taking shape, one that values reflexivity, empathy, and emotional intelligence over traditional heroic models (Fleming et al., 2018).

A New Model of Leadership: empathetic leadership. The literature presents a new model of leadership that focuses on specific skills—primarily "soft skills"—such as reflexivity and self-awareness. Some of the articles analyzed (Taylor et al., 2019; Fleming et al., 2018; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010; Tcholakian et al., 2023; Mavin et al., 2023; Ciporen, 2010) also address the emotional sphere of the leader. Therefore, a leadership model emerges that stands in contrast to the "hero-leader" model (Fleming et al., 2018), as

> "The empirical findings call for a deconstruction of the hero leader through increasing reflexivity to help leaders understand their own feelings, reactions and motives.It encourages bespoke leadership competencies that can be adapted to individual needs. This suggests that contemporary leaders and managers first need to understand what capacities and deficiencies they have as individuals, and second, how to build an appropriate mix of skills through understanding and reflecting on their own individual experiences and actions"
>
> **(Fleming et al., 2018, p.606)**

highlighted in the article *From hollow hero to expert empathiser: leadership in transition*.

In a rapidly changing world, the characteristics of a good leader are also evolving and transforming. Fleming et al. (2018) talk about a more human form of leadership capable of adapting to complex contexts.

> "The prescriptive recipes of predictability and command and control offered by prolific management and leadership theories (Mumford and Fried, 2014), often grounded in trait and charismatic schools of leadership, do not always help leaders to deal with the increasing challenges of uncertainty, disagreements, and unpredictability that they face. Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2015) call for a humanisation of leadership to stimulate behaviours which are more sympathetic to the context of leaders and managers, turbulent or otherwise, reducing reliance on current business school textbook approaches to leadership"
>
> **(Fleming et al. 2018, p.607)**

Thus, training should not only take a more practical direction but also needs a more "holistic approach" – as underlined by Fleming et al. (2018), citing Thomas et al. – aiming to develop people's creative thinking. In addition to this new model of leadership, there is the overlooked rediscovery of 'vulnerability'.

Vulnerability. In some literature (Corlett et al., 2021; Mavin et al., 2023), "vulnerability" is seen as a strength rather than a weakness within both the training process and management practice. This topic is linked to the issue of a new model of leadership in contrast to the hero-leader model (Fleming et al., 2018).

> "Fourth, we theorize how recognizing vulnerability as strength is a pedagogical process that facilitates critical management and leadership education. For academics, recognizing vulnerability as strength in combination with collective reflexivity provides a 'socio-ontological resource' (Cunliffe and Jun, 2005: 230) when flipping the normative in executive education. For learners, embedding vulnerability as strength, in safe enough contexts, supports openness to reflexive thinking and to flipping the normative in learning and practice"
>
> **(Mavin et al., 2023, p.530)**

The critical strand of the literature, therefore, highlights an underlying critique of traditional models of leadership based on an occidental and male model that posits at the center the strength, the individual extraordinariness. The discussion of vulnerability as a strength instead of a weakness connects even with the concept of reflexivity, because it emphasizes the importance of questioning one's assumptions and fostering deeper self-awareness.

Reflexivity. Many of the articles reviewed also discuss reflexivity (Fleming et al., 2018;

Meisiek et al., 2023; Mavin et al., 2023; Han & Liang, 2015). Reflexivity seems related to the ability to question one's own truths and beliefs and to be able to change mental frameworks.

> " We understand reflexivity as 'questioning our own positionality, what we and others may be taking for granted, what we are seeing, saying and doing. and not seeing, saying and doing' (Cunliffe, 2022: 20), in our practice and relations with oth-ers."
>
> **(Mavin et al.2023, p.529)**

To develop reflexivity, reference is made to the emergence of design- and art-based approaches in Executive Education, which can provide immersive, genuinely transformative training experiences. Reflexivity, in turn, lays the foundation for more authentic forms of leadership that integrate rational, emotional, and embodied dimensions.

Authentic Leadership. In another article, Ladkin and Taylor (2010) highlight the embodied aspect of leadership training, which should no longer develop only the leader's rational side. There is indeed a demand for 'authentic leadership', where what is said and what is done are consistent. This implies the acquisition of skills different from merely rational ones.

> "This paper argues that although authentic leadership may be rooted in the notion of a 'true self', it is through the embodiment of that 'true self' that leaders are perceived as authentic or not. In making this claim, we consider how a somatic sense of self contributes to the felt sense of authenticity, and how engaging with somatic cues enables leadership to and to those they seek to lead. In developing our ideas further, we draw from the acting theory of Stanislavski (1936a, 1936b, 1961) to explore how authentic dramatic performances are created, focusing on the role of emotional memory, the magic 'if' and physical action in performances. We propose three key components of a resulting theory of how embodied authentic leadership is created: self-exposure, relating, and making leaderly choices"
>
> **(Ladkin & Taylor, 2010, p.64)**

Even if it may seem paradoxical, the use of dramatic arts, for example, can be useful for learning to act authentically. Indeed, to convince an audience, an actor must truly have experienced certain emotions, must have developed empathy, but must also have the technique to express best those same feelings (Ladkin & Taylor, 2010).

> "Underneath both Adler's and Weick's arguments is a realization that there is a fundamentally different way of approaching the world than is embodied in the traditional tools of logic and rationality that have dominated management research and business school education"
>
> **(Taylor & Ladkin, 2009, p.56)**

The attention to authenticity and embodied experience aligns with a broader pedagogical shift— one that questions dominant leadership models and promotes a more critical and emancipatory approach to management education.

A Critical Pedagogy. In some articles, leadership is considered a product of social constructions (Mavin et al., 2023) grounded in a cultural model that must be questioned.

> "Traditionally, teaching leadership in business schools has relied on narrow psychological assumptions and models that are leader-centric, stressing miracle worker, charismatic, White men, selling strategies and visions without attention to power, context, dissent and resistance (Collinson and Tourish, 2015). Such programmes normally deliver stand-alone subjects, taught in modules by different academics – who rarely share a pedagogy. In this study, the programme-long critical pedagogy is in opposition to these traditional norms and much of the leadership literature"
>
> **(Mavin et al.2023, p.529)**

For this reason, we talk about a critical pedagogy that challenges the dominant leadership model so far (Mavin et al., 2023). The move toward critical and reflective pedagogies also encourages the integration of creative and humanistic methods, fostering empathy, ethical awareness, and innovative thinking among executive learners.

A Humanistic and Creative Approach to Executive Education. Among the articles reviewed, five are specifically devoted to exploring the impact of creative, artistic, or humanistic approaches within executive education (Colle et al., 2017; Taylor & Ladkin, 2009; Meisiek et al., 2023; Tcholakian et al., 2023; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). The literature clearly shows that methods based on humanistic approaches, such as the study of history (Tcholakian et al., 2023), can stimulate the critical thinking, reflection, and sense of responsibility that should characterize the contemporary leader. Tcholakian et al. (2023) show how:

> "A historic turn in management and executive programs could entail executives interacting with their histories and engaging with the possibility that their collective traumas are connected to their worldview and their social realities"
>
> **(Tcholakian et al.2023, p.5)**

Moreover, techniques like Design Thinking and art can be a valuable tool for managerial training (Meisiek et al., 2023; Colle et al., 2017). Creative arts can be a good ally in Executive Education, especially in a context where leadership is viewed in its emotional, self-awareness, and reflective dimensions, and training is considered for its transformative power. For example, theatre can help improve improvisational skills and understanding of change and leadership (Colle et al., 2017). Faced with the demand for more human and authentic organizations that focus on ethics, artistic languages can be valuable methodologies even for developing the leader's moral development (Colle et al., 2017). For that reason we address the growing attention to inclusivity and diversity, particularly gender equality, highlighting how executive education is evolving both pedagogically and socially to respond to broader challenges of representation and fairness in leadership.

Responses to the Gender Gap. Another issue emerging from the literature is the gender gap affecting executive roles. Executive training plays an essential role in tackling this phenomenon. The topic is addressed in the article published in the Journal of Business Ethics *How Focused are the World's Top-Rated Business Schools on Educating Women for Global Management?* According to the article (though it dates back to 2008), some schools had begun offering solutions to the gender gap, such as scholarships and programs dedicated to women. However, at the time of the study, few schools had specialized centers for women's leadership development or programs specifically for women. Reviewing the school's web pages today, they now include courses expressly dedicated to female leadership in their Open Programs. Overall, the attention to gender equality further illustrates how executive education is evolving beyond the mere transfer of managerial skills toward a broader social mission. From the analysis, it is clear that there is a new interest in themes as sustainability, inclusion, and diversity that seems to shape the future of ExEd.

Future of ExEd. In the article "Prospective shifts in executive education: An international Delphi study" this horizon in delineated concerning ExEd (Tiberius, Hoffmeister & Weyland, 2021):

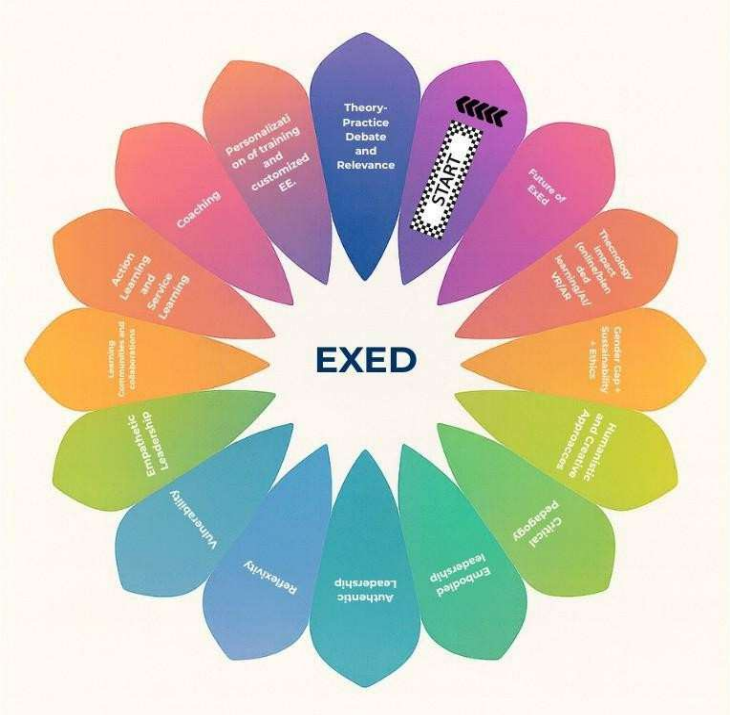
- Growing importance of Executive Education
- Increasing relevance, with positive effects on universities' reputation and funding
- Greater advantages for individuals engaging in executive learning
- Adaptation and evolution of program content
- Stronger focus on soft skills, business ethics, and sustainability as integral parts of curricula

- Expansion of customized and personalized programs for individuals
- Wider adoption of blended learning models
- Integration of new technologies
- Emergence of new methods alongside traditional teaching approaches
- AI, VR, and AR are playing a central role.

Our themes and findings confirm the article by Tiberius et al. (2021) and identify many points of contact. The following section discusses how these trends and models emerged in the review reshape the meaning and purpose of ExEd today and tomorrow.

2.6 DISCUSSION. In the review, Executive Education (ExEd) is not conceived just as a tool for organizational utility, designed to serve immediate business needs. Instead, it is increasingly oriented toward the autonomy and well-being of individuals, giving value to their capacity for choice. This shift resonates with the principles of heutagogy (Blaschke, 2012; Stoten, 2022), which emphasize self-determined learning paths and view education as a process of personal growth and meaning rather than a top-down transfer of competencies. In this new perspective, ExEd becomes a transformative experience in which participants actively shape their own learning trajectories, connecting professional development with identity formation and self-awareness (Petriglieri et al., 2011). In this context, Executive Education is no longer simply about acquiring managerial skills or knowledge, but about fostering a profound change in perspectives, behaviors, and ways of being. Learning is increasingly seen as a developmental journey—a process that stimulates critical reflection, awareness, and adaptability to the complexity and uncertainty of contemporary work environments (Reid et al., 2020). Therefore, ExEd today embraces not only the knowing and doing dimensions but also the "being" dimension (Reid et al., 2020). To achieve this, programs are becoming increasingly customized and co-designed with organizations, balancing institutional needs with the learner's autonomy and developmental aspirations (Campos Retana & Rodriguez- Lluesma, 2022). Learning communities also play a crucial role in this evolution: they transform executive education into a collaborative, dialogic process where participants co-create knowledge, share experiences, and reconstruct their professional and personal narratives (Lepistö & Hytti, 2021). In this light, business schools emerge as epistemic actors, mediating between theoretical knowledge and practical relevance, and cultivating reflective spaces where management practice is reimagined (Ungureanu & Bertolotti, 2018). Among emerging trends, the literature highlights the adoption of arts-based and humanistic approaches that stimulate creativity, empathy, and moral reflection (Colle et al., 2017; Meisiek et al., 2023; Tcholakian et al., 2023). The growing attention to inclusivity and gender equality in executive programs (Ibeh et al., 2008) and the pervasive influence of digitalization and Artificial Intelligence are likewise

reshaping both the content and the form of ExEd, fostering experiential and personalized learning. In the public sector, similar patterns are visible: executive programs increasingly value participatory and dialogic methods, enhancing soft skills, ethical awareness, and collaborative capacities (Bushouse et al., 2011). Coaching emerges as a fundamental lever of this transformation, fostering self-reflection, motivation, and alignment between the learner's ideal and real self (Taylor et al., 2019). Overall, the synthesis of these tendencies reveals a transition toward a more human-centered model of executive education, characterized by autonomy, reflexivity, and emotional intelligence. Leadership development moves away from the traditional "heroic" paradigm to embrace authenticity, vulnerability, and relational awareness (Fleming et al., 2018; Mavin et al., 2023; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010). ExEd thus evolves into an integrated ecosystem of lifelong learning that not only supports organizational innovation but also nurtures the individual's ongoing growth to humanize management (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2015).



(TABLE B) The Executive Education Ecosystem. This diagram represents the ExEd ecosystem. Starting from the beginning, the scheme traces the main themes, where each theme is linked to the next.

2.7 LIMITATIONS. Although the selection criteria guarantee a certain degree of rigor, the review presents some methodological limitations. In particular, the decision to use only one database (EBSCO) - also due to time constraints - excluded integration with

other relevant repositories such as Web of Science or Scopus, thus limiting the breadth of the analyzed sample. However, given the review's exploration and thematic aims—which do not systematically analyze all existing literature on the topic—the references selected through EBSCO were considered numerous and significant for the subject under investigation. Therefore, the decision to use only EBSCO – Business Source Complete, rather than broadening the research to other scientific databases such as Scopus or Web of Science, was also dictated by the nature of the inquiry itself. The objective of this review was not to detect every existing contribution to Executive Education, but to identify and analyze a broad, sufficiently representative corpus to capture the emerging themes and trends of the past fifteen years. Because many relevant articles are duplicated across major international databases, additional searches in other repositories would likely yield only a marginal increase in value and no additional themes, due to the saturation principle. Therefore, the use of EBSCO and the selection of A-class journals according to ANVUR 13 ensure the solidity and scientific quality of the analyzed sample.

3. EMPIRICAL SECTION: WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THE SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT AND THE SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT?

3.1 METHODOLOGY**.** The analysis of the educational offerings was conducted through an exploratory qualitative study based on the direct analysis of the official websites of leading Schools of Management, Schools of Government, and some national schools of public administration (using the same SNA model). The schools were selected through a purposive sampling based on the **QS World University Ranking** and their relevance in executive training, to include a variety of geographical and sectoral contexts (public/private). The website's consultation was conducted in a flexible, targeted manner. In fact, the navigation was guided by an observation grid composed of 22 analytical categories, developed from the previous review themes and later refined during the analysis. These include access modalities, coaching, custom programs, technological innovation, curriculum flexibility, sustainability, declared values, and offerings for public administration, among others. For each school, significant evidence was collected to answer the categories, drawing from website sections dedicated to programs, mission,

teaching, offered services, events, and partnerships. In cases where information was not explicitly organized, a cross-sectional review of individual courses and presentation materials was conducted. The adopted method thus constitutes a Qualitative Document Analysis (Morgan, 2022) with a thematic approach. This strategy enabled the identification of recurring trends, innovative practices, and emerging educational models, consistent with the interpretative objective of the work. The analysis did not follow a systematic or quantitative logic, nor does it claim to be exhaustive of the entire corpus of courses offered by each school. Instead, it is a completion of the literature review because it maps recurring features, differences, and emerging signals, capable of providing a significant overview of the trends currently underway. This approach fits within a qualitative research tradition that prioritizes understanding meanings and cultural orientations over the systematic measurement of variables. The analysis of theeducational offerings of Schools of Management (SoM) and Schools of Government (SoG) reveals a landscape in transformation, where training is increasingly personalized, interactive, and able to respond to contemporary challenges, from technological acceleration to sustainability. The experiences mapped across the different international schools confirm and broaden this reading, highlighting how the diversification of offerings and alignment with the emerging needs of professionals have become cornerstones of educational innovation.

3.2 FINDINGS. In this section, we present a summary table of **the main themes that emerged**, accompanied by a brief discussion and a selection of supporting codes.

TABLE C (Findings Empirical Section)

DISCUSSION	QUOTES
Flexibility and customization of pathways Regarding course delivery modes, there is generally great flexibility in curricula. Many schools offer online or face-to-face training, even if not all schools provide blended learning. Many schools also allow for part- time or weekend courses to suit everyone's needs. Flexibility is also evident in the ability to combine multiple courses to earn certifications and diplomas, thereby customizing one's educational path (e.g., at Warwick Business School).	«The Warwick Leadership Pathways are a fully flexible framework that allow you to design your own development journey. You can choose from a selection of themed pathways to earn a subject-specific Executive Diploma, or choose any combination of Postgraduate Awards from across the portfolio, to build towards your Executive Diploma in Advanced Management. This stackable approach to learning allows you to complete a single module, and later complete the further Awards needed to build up to a higher qualification level.». (Warwick Business School – direct link)

Tailored training and co- design A noticeable trend is the development of custom programs for companies, along with increasingly targeted training tailored to each organization's specific needs. The keyword is tailor-made (e.g., ESADE). There is also a focus on the co-design of such programs, which are structured through active collaboration between management schools and organizations. Some schools of government offering custom courses include the Institut national d'administration publique (Luxembourg), the School of Public Administration (Latvia), INSP (France), the Netherlands School of Public Administration, and the National Academy of Public Administration (U.S.).	«At Esade we design tailor-made learning experiences that allow organizations and their executives to develop and become leaders of change. Innovating, opening new ways, accompanying them in all phases of the process, to guarantee that their learning experience generates a real impact». (ESADE – direct link) «Our tailored consultative approaches ensure that federal agencies can enhance efficiency, effectiveness, and overall performance. By partnering with the Academy, federal agencies gain access to a wealth of knowledge, innovative strategies, and a proven track record of success, ultimately driving sustainable improvements in public administration and fostering enhanced service delivery to the American public». (National Academy of Public Administration – direct link) «Des formations sur mesure ancrées dans votre pratique [...] Des formations co-construites avec vous [...]». (INSP – direct link)
Personal development and awareness The theme of training that supports not only technical skills development, but also personal qualities, is also reflected in the educational offerings of management schools and government schools. For example, the Metropool program at the Netherlands School of Public Administration allows participants not only to deepen their theoretical knowledge but also to become more aware of their talents, so they can leverage them more effectively in practice. In the Strategic Leadership in Public Domain (Strategisch Leiderschap in het Publiek Domein) program, personal development is also emphasized. Both mentioned programs include a study trip to make learning more experiential.	"The Metropolis has two learning pathways: cognitive deepening and personal development. This double learning line crosses the entire programme. The cognitive components provide participants with current insights from public administration theories and the translation into their own case studies. By reflecting on the work practice of the participants themselves, they gain more insight into the stratification of metropolitan issues and they gain a better sense of the political-social context in which they operate. In the components aimed at personal development, participants investigate their own qualities and talents, and know how to make better use of them after the training. In this way, the Metropolis serves as a training space for both substantive issues and for the development of personal leadership. Within Metropool, theory, own case histories and personal development are interwoven in such a way that the training optimally matches the work practice and the personal learning questions of the participant"[22]. (NSOB - direct link)

[2] Automatically translated with Google.

Experiential and interactive learning In executive training, increasingly active and engaging teaching methods are emerging that focus on direct experience and peer interaction. Among these, the use of case studies, role-playing, group exercises, and business games—such as those offered by Bocconi—allow participants to confront realistic scenarios and develop decision- making and relational skills. Tools like coaching and mentorship, adopted in contexts such as IESE, support personalized paths for professional and personal growth. Experiential learning, which integrates theory and practice in real or simulated contexts, is also particularly significant. Meanwhile, attention is also growing toward informal learning opportunities, such as networking events, which help build professional relationships and encourage the exchange of ideas and best practices among participants.	«l'offerta formativa Executive Education si caratterizza per una metodologia didattica basata sull'Experiential Learning (apprendimento esperienziale) che coinvolge il partecipante ben oltre la didattica tradizionale attraverso la riflessione sulle esperienze di lavoro vissute, simulazioni, giochi di ruolo, business case ed esercitazioni». (Luiss Business School – direct link)
Topics covered by courses Among the topics addressed, Big Data and Digital Transformation, Leadership and soft skills development, Diversity & Inclusion, Project Management, Human Resources, Finance, Marketing and Communication emerge as prominent. Sustainability represents a transversal theme, sometimes addressed as an autonomous field. An increasing number of courses are dedicated to Artificial Intelligence. An interesting case is that of the Polimi Graduate School of Management, which has introduced courses in the humanities such as "Humanities for Business," including the Executive in Philosophy for Management and courses on Spirituality, Diversity, and Identity. In European schools of government such as ESDDA in Greece or INAP in Spain, courses cover areas such as public governance, fiscal policies, human rights, sustainable development, digital skills, soft skills, and principles and values of public administration. The Latvian School of Public Administration, meanwhile, structures its offering in five main areas: managerial skills, communication skills and design thinking, legal aspects of administration, information technologies and language skills.	

Collaborations and networking

Schools of management and government are increasingly strengthening their collaborative dimension through strategic partnerships and networking initiatives. For example, Bocconi Business School promotes international programs such as the International Board Program, created in collaboration with the University of St. Gallen, and the GEMBA, developed with the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto. In addition to collaborations with other schools, there are partnerships with external providers, such as online courses offered by Bocconi in collaboration with GetSmarter by 2U. Networking activities are an integral part of the learning experience, particularly in person, and include lunches, aperitifs, dinners, and reunions, as in the Bocconi Managerial Development Program. These practices are also widespread internationally, as at INSEAD or the Blavatnik School of Government, where participants join Alumni communities at the end of the programs. Schools of government, such as INAP in Spain, are part of a dense network of international collaborations, involving institutions like ENAP (Brazil), EIPA, IASIA, OECD, and DISPA. The Portuguese INA follows the same direction, promoting scientific cooperation globally.

"Il CIB si articola in quattro pilastri formativi interconnessi e si basa su un approccio pratico e manageriale, fondato sulla discussione di situazioni reali affrontate dai partecipanti nel proprio contesto lavorativo. Il programma promuove un metodo orientato ai problemi e alle soluzioni, incentivando il confronto diretto tra partecipanti e docenti per favorire un arricchimento reciproco e creare un solido networking professionale." (SDA Bocconi – direct link)

Evaluation and access to programmes Access and evaluation methods in the programs of schools of government and management vary depending on the type of training course. In the Open Programs of government schools, there is generally no strict selection at entry, but rather a focus on matching training demand and supply. In this context, schools offer orientation tools for candidates, such as the option to be supported by a Board Advisor in choosing their path, or they explicit the target audience for each course. Conversely, for more advanced programs like Executive MBAs, selection procedures are more structured and often involve curriculum screening, an interview with the committee, and an assessment of language skills, as in the Executive MBA Flex at POLIMI GSoM	"Find out how our solutions can address your business challenges, suit your development needs and elevate your skills. Our expert team are available to discuss a solution that is right for you or your business". (Warwick Business School – direct link) "Program Counseling. Contact our Program Advisor for more detailed information about the program or to build a customized plan for you or your organization".(SDA Bocconi – direct link)
Access to school resources Two virtuous examples are the National Academy of Public Administration and Sciences Po Executive Education. The former provides a "Virtual Library" where nearly all Academy content can be accessed in a single digital space, with navigation filters that facilitate exploration of podcasts, multimedia content, articles, conferences, and updates. Sciences Po, on the other hand, highlights as a key strength access to the largest European library of humanities and social sciences.	"Resources. Here, you will find a wealth of valuable information and tools to enhance your understanding and engagement with public administration. Rental Space. Looking for a space to hold your conference or event in the middle of everything in Washington, D.C.? Conference and Board Rooms are available with sweeping views of the city and more, just steps from the White House! Virtual Library.Search nearly all of the Academy's content in one place. Use the filters on the left-hand side to help navigate through our resources. Podcasts. Access to current and previous podcast episodes brought to you by the National Academy of Public Administration. Academy Insights. What's currently happening in government, and at the National Academy of Public Administration.

	Media. The National Academy of Public Administration helps government leaders solve their most critical management challenges" (National Academy of Public Administration – direct link)
Artificial Intelligence Artificial intelligence is a crucial challenge for both management and government schools. A noticeable trend is that of courses dedicated to AI; however, only at Polimi GSoM is the application of AI to school activities explicitly mentioned, such as in the FLEXA – Knowledge Amplified project, which includes: "assessment of skills, daily learning modules, personalized learning paths, curated content search, community & networking" (https://www.flexa.polimi.it/it/professionisti/). Government schools also address the topic of AI in their training offering: INSP (France), for example, offers a continuing education course titled "Apprivoiser l'intelligence artificielle", whose main objective is to "raise awareness of AI tools and issues." The centrality of AI is also confirmed by the strategic challenges identified by the National Academy of Public Administration, including "Ensure Data Security and Privacy Rights of Individuals" and "Make Government AI Ready." The Italian National School of Public Administration is a virtuous example with the AI4SNA project.	"Progetta la tua carriera professionale con l'aiuto di FLEXA. Se ti chiedi come far avanzare la tua carriera, FLEXA ti potrà aiutare. FLEXA crea un progetto dinamico su misura per le tue competenze e i tuoi progetti, ottimizzandolo per il tempo a tua disposizione". (Polimi GsoM – direct link)

Gender Equality and Responsibility

In the context of sustainability and social responsibility, many educational institutions and business schools are actively promoting initiatives related to gender and inclusion. For example, SDA Bocconi offers a 20% discount on management training programs for women until March 8th, encouraging female participation in high-level training. Institutions like INSEAD and Rotterdam Business School offer targeted courses on female leadership, such as the Aspiring Women Leaders Programme and Women in Leadership, designed to develop specific skills for women in management and communication. At Harvard, the initiative, The Women's Leadership Forum, stands out as a leadership program supporting women in honing their managerial skills through engagement with other professionals, fostering personal and professional growth in a supportive environment. Furthermore, inclusion is central in several academic offerings, such as Polimi courses on neurodiversity, corporate inclusion, and the use of new technologies to promote diversity and equity. Internationally, INSP in France proposes the "Talenteuses" program, targeting 100 women with the ambition to take on managerial roles. This program emphasizes leadership development through a multimodal and personalized approach, aiming to create a support network among participants. INSP also offers courses like "Femmes dirigeantes : leadership et égalité professionnelle," which address the issue of the "glass ceiling" and promote gender equality in leadership positions, providing practical tools to overcome cultural and educational barriers and assert one's role in the professional world.

"Expand your repertoire of leadership strategies at The Women's Leadership Forum by learning from other successful women who've overcome challenges in their industries and organizations. You'll leave re-energized about your career with a new approach to leadership and a realistic agenda for creating change in your organization. " (Harvard Business School – direct link)

Post-course experience and continuous learning

The learning experience does not end with the conclusion of a course but evolves into a true learning journey, which continues after the lessons are over. In many advanced training programs, such as the EMBAs offered by Polimi GSoM, participants can benefit from free access to the Management Academy for two subsequent years, participating in inspiring workshops they may have missed during the master's program. This approach ensures that learning continues to grow even outside the classroom. A similar example is found at the Blavatnik School of Government in Oxford, where joining the Alumni network and engaging in a lifelong network provide numerous opportunities for professional and personal growth. These initiatives highlight the importance of continuous learning and integration into a community of professionals who support each other even years after completing the program.

«A lifelong community. After your studies at the Blavatnik School, you will be part of a lifelong community in which alumni can turn to each other and our faculty to find trusted sources of advice and research. These connections also serve as powerful reminders for all of us of our shared commitment to public service and our desire to make a real difference in the world. We aim to support all of our alumni – across degrees and years – in sharing expertise, building networks and seizing opportunities well beyond the completion of their studies with us.» (Blavatnik School of Government – direct link).

How the school tells its story	
Many business schools incorporate values such as sustainability, inclusiveness, and social responsibility among the fundamental principles of their training. Responsibility emerges as a key concept. Another important aspect in the narratives of management schools is immersive and experiential learning. Luiss Business School, for instance, claims that digital tools enhance each participant's learning journey through immersive and experiential methods, supporting personal and professional development.	«INSEAD brings together people, cultures and ideas to develop responsible leaders who transform business andsociety». (INSEAD – direct link) «Excellence, Diversité, Responsabilité, Esprit entrepreneurial». (HEC – direct link) «We IMPACT business and society through research, education, and action, to contribute to a more inclusive, prosperous, and sustainable world» (HEC – direct link) «We THINK and push the boundaries of knowledge, We TEACH, learn and grow together, We ACT, to unleash human potential». (HEC – direct link) «The School promotes a pedagogical approach where digital becomes a lever to enrich and strengthen each participant's learning journey. The student is engaged in immersive, experiential, and active learning in which they will develop both theoretical and applied knowledge and disciplinary and transversal skills». (Luiss Business School - direct link)

3.2 DISCUSSION**.** In summary, the analysis of the web pages of Schools of Management, Government, and Public Administration shows a focus on participants' needs, on integration between theoretical and practical content, and openness to the international community. This confirms the strategic role of these schools in building competent, responsible, and change-oriented leadership. The qualitative analysis fully confirms the findings from the literature on the evolution of Executive Education (ExEd): we are witnessing a transformation not only in content and formats, but also in the very meaning of adult learning. The programs offered today are not limited to transmitting technical skills but increasingly aim to offer transformative experiences, impacting how participants think, act, and relate to their roles. This transformation goes hand in hand with a growing focus on personalization and co- creation of learning paths, with organizations playing an active role in training design. Schools are no longer mere content providers but have become partners in the construction of tailor-made experiences capable of responding to specific and changing needs. In this logic, formats become hybrid and multiply: modular, intensive, blended, flexible paths, often designed to foster

continuous and distributed learning over time, in line with lifelong learning needs. Another distinctive feature that emerges is the centrality of relationships. **ExEd increasingly appears as a context for social learning, where peer interactions, experience sharing, networking and community building become an integral part of the training process**. All this signals a progressive openness towards unconventional forms of knowledge, capable of activating emotional, relational, and critical dimensions often. Ultimately, contemporary Executive Education is increasingly taking on the characteristics of a dynamic and complex educational ecosystem, where theory and practice, individual and collective learning, technical and reflective dimensions intertwine. It is not just a place where skills are acquired: it is a space where one reshapes one's identity, builds meanings, and imagines new ways of inhabiting one's role (personally and professionally). This ongoing changes makes ExEd one of the most interesting and strategic frontiers for rethinking not only training but also how we imagine leadership, work, and social change.

Reflections and implications emerging from the review. Building on the reflections that emerged during the literature review, some **directions** can be identified across the analyzed sources. These insights do not aim to prescribe specific actions but rather to **highlight trends, practices, and orientations** that appear to characterize current debates in the field of Executive Education and inform different stakeholders.

Target	Emerging directions identified in the literature
Schools of Management / Schools of Government / Institutions	-Increasing attention to *customized programs* for specific teams or organizations, often including co-creation processes. - Emphasis on *lifelong learning* through alumni networks and ongoing professional communities. - The strategic importance of *networking opportunities* as part

Target	Emerging directions identified in the literature
	of the learning experience. - A growing focus on *inclusive, ethical, and sustainable organizational cultures*. - Expansion of *international partnerships and networks*. - A trend toward *open access to learning resources* and greater flexibility (online, blended, part-time, modular learning paths). - Interest in *PhD programs for executives* and *insider action-research models*. - The diffusion of *experiential and transformational learning* fostering the "expert–empathiser" leadership profile.
Facilitators	-Integration of *action learning* and *service learning* approaches in course design. - Alternation between traditional teaching and *art-based workshops* (theatre, music, cinema, dance). - Emergence of *critical and philosophical approaches* in leadership development. - Reinforcement of *in-person formats* to enhance networking and trust-building. - Incorporation of *insider action research* projects within training activities. - Alignment between training practices and *ethical, social, and SDG-related issues*.
Learners /Participants	-Engagement in *individual coaching* and *mindfulness* practices as part of executive learning paths. - Openness to *alternative methodologies* and learning outside the comfort zone. - Active contribution to *asynchronous co-creation platforms*. - Involvement in *self-directed learning* and personal development pathways, consistent with *heutagogical principles*.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Now that we have explored the ExEd field, we can open the way to future research on AI and its role in Schools of Management and Schools of Government. Therefore, this research raises several fundamental questions about the role of Artificial Intelligence in ExEd, especially in the public sector. How can AI help management schools make training paths truly relevant and capable of making a tangible impact on professional practice? Is it possible to imagine a use of AI that fosters transformative learning capable of triggering profound changes in behaviors and mental models? Can AI effectively help

to personalize learning, adapting to individual needs and contexts without sacrificing the collective and relational dimension of the educational experience? Critical ethical and political questions also arise: how can we avoid AI amplifying pre- existing inequalities by excluding those with less digital skills or access to technology? How, on the contrary, can it help promote inclusion, gender equality, and accessibility? AI challenges the training of executives: will they be able to exercise complex soft skills—critical thinking, empathy, and emotional intelligence in a world where human- machine interaction is destined to increase? How can AI support human development without replacing it? Moreover, how can it foster practices of co-creation, networking, and collaborative learning, enhancing the social dimension of education? These questions outline the direction of future research, highlighting the need for an integrated, critical, and responsible approach to ExEd innovation. In conclusion, this research has allowed us to outline a portrait of the current state of Executive Education and to develop some pertinent questions about the introduction of AI.

4. References

Abidi, S., & Joshi, M. (2018). *The VUCA learner: Future-proof your relevance.* SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd. https://sk.sagepub.com/books/the-vuca-learner

Agenzia per l'Italia Digitale. (2018, March 21). *L'intelligenza artificiale al servizio del cittadino: Libro bianco.* Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri – Task Force IA.

Agenzia per l'Italia Digitale. (2025). *Bozza di linee guida per l'adozione di IA nella pubblica amministrazione.* AgID.

Amdam, R. P., & Elias, A. L. (2021). *Business Schools and the Role of the Executives' Wives*. Academy of Management Learning & Education, 20(3), 300–319. https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2020.0129

Armstrong, S. J., & Sadler-Smith, E. (2008). *Learning on Demand, at Your Own Pace, in Rapid Bite-Sized Chunks: The Future Shape of Management Development?* Academy of Management Learning & Education, 7(4), 571–586. https://doi.org/10.5465/AMLE.2008.35882197

Blaschke, L. M. (2012). *Heutagogy and lifelong learning: A review of heutagogical practice and self-determined learning*. The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning, *13*(1), 56–71. https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v13i1.1076

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide.* SAGE Publications.

Brown, T. C., & Warren, A. M. (2009). *Distal goal and proximal goal transfer of training interventions in an executive education program*. Human Resource Development Quarterly, 20(3), 265–284. https://doi.org/10.1002/hrdq.20021

Bushouse, B. K., Jacobson, W. S., Lambright, K. T., Llorens, J. J., Morse, R. S., & Poocharoen, O. (2011). *Crossing the Divide: Building Bridges between Public Administration Practitioners and Scholars.* Journal of Public Administration Research & Theory, 21(suppl_1), i99–i112. https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muq063

Butler, N., Delaney, H., & Spoelstra, S. (2015). Problematizing 'Relevance' in the Business School: The Case of Leadership Studies. *British Journal of Management*, *26*(4), 731-744. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.12121

Campos Retana, R., & Rodriguez-Lluesma, C. (2022). *Overcoming boundaries between companies and business schools: The case of customized executive programs*. International Journal of Management Education (Elsevier Science), 20(1), N.PAG. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2022.100608

CHIA, R (2014). *From relevance to relevateHow university-based business school can remain seats of "higher" learning and still contribute effectively to business.* Journal of Management Development, [s. l.], v. 33, n. 5, p. 443–455, 2014. DOI 10.1108/JMD-02-2014-0013. Disponível em: https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bth&AN=95973857&site=ehost-live. Acesso em: 12 jan. 2024.

Choain, L., & Malzy, T. (2017). *Research by professionals: from a knowledge-intensive to a research-intensive PSF*. International Journal of Human Resource Management, 28(2), 276–282. https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2016.1244896

Ciporen, R. (2010). *The Role of Personally Transformative Learning in Leadership Development: A Case Study*. Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies, 17(2), 177–191. https://doi.org/10.1177/1548051810368544

.

Coghlan, D., Shani, A. B. (Rami), Roth, J., & Sloyan, R. M. (2014). *Executive development through insider action research: voices of insider action researchers*. Journal of Management Development, 33(10), 991–1003. https://doi.org/10.1108/JMD-06-2012-0072

Colle, S., Freeman, R., Parmar, B., & Colle, L. (2017). *Practicing Human Dignity: Ethical Lessons from Commedia dell'Arte and Theater*. Journal of Business Ethics, 144(2), 251–262. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-015-2898-4

Corlett, S., Ruane, M., & Mavin, S. (2021). Learning (not) to be different: The value of vulnerability in trusted and safe identity work spaces. Management Learning, 52(4), 424–441. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507621995816Culpin, V., & Scott, H. (2012). *The*

effectiveness of a live case study approach: Increasing knowledge and understanding of 'hard' versus 'soft' skills in executive education. Management Learning, 43(5), 565–577. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507611431530

De Déa Roglio, K., & Light, G. (2009). *Executive MBA Programs: The Development of the Reflective Executive*. Academy of Management Learning & Education, 8(2), 156–173. https://doi.org/10.5465/AMLE.2009.41788840

Dover, P., Perkins, S., & Wylie, D. (2009). *The role of custom case materials in action-based executive education programs.* Journal of Management Development, 28(4), 285–300. https://doi.org/10.1108/02621710910947335.

Fleming, K., Millar, C., & Culpin, V. (2018). From hollow hero to expert empathiser: leadership in transition. *Journal of Management Development*, *37*(8), 606–612. https://doi-org.unimib.idm.oclc.org/10.1108/JMD-07-2018-0209

Gibson, J. J. (2015). *The ecological approach to visual perception: Classic edition* (Original work published 1979). Psychology Press. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315740218

Han, J., & Liang, N. (2015). In Their Own Eyes and Voices. Journal of Management Education, 39(6), 741–773. https://doi.org/10.1177/1052562915582268.

Haskins, M. E., & Shaffer, G. R. (2013). *Learning collaborations' with your executive education provider for mutual benefit.* Journal of Management Development, 32(10), 1080–1092. https://doi.org/10.1108/JMD-04-2012-0049

Hooijberg, R., & Lane, N. (2009). *Using Multisource Feedback Coaching Effectively in Executive Education*. Academy of Management Learning & Education, 8(4), 483–493. https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2009.47785468

Ibeh, K., Carter, S., Poff, D., & Hamill, J. (2008). *How Focused are the World's Top-Rated Business Schools on Educating Women for Global Management?* Journal of Business Ethics, 83(1), 65–83. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-007-9653-4

James, K. T., & Denyer, D. (2009). *Historical Roots and Future Directions: New Challenges for Management Learning.* Management Learning, 40(4), 363–370. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507609335844

Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2016). *Higher education and the digital revolution: About MOOCs, SPOCs, social media, and the Cookie Monster*. Business Horizons, 59(4), 441–450. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2016.03.008Ladkin, D., & Taylor, S. S. (2010). Enacting the 'true self': Towards a theory of embodied authentic leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly, 21*(1), 64–74, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2009.10.005.

Ladkin, D., & Taylor, S. S. (2010). *Enacting the 'true self': Towards a theory of embodied authentic leadership*. Leadership Quarterly, 21(1), 64–74.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2009.10.005

Lepistö, T., & Hytti, U. (2021). Developing an Executive Learning Community: Focus on Collective Creation. Academy of Management Learning & Education, 20(4), 514–538. https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2018.0338

Lenssen, G. (2010). *Practical wisdom for turbulent times: exegesis beyond historical and canonical concerns.* Journal of Management Development, 29(7/8), 686–696. https://doi.org/10.1108/02621711011059121

Little, V., Brookes, R., & Palmer, R. (2008). *Research-informed teaching and teaching-informed research: the Contemporary Marketing Practices (CMP) living case study approach to understanding marketing practice*. Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing, 23(2), 124–134. https://doi.org/10.1108/08858620810850245

MacGregor, S. P., & Semler, K. (2012). *Towards whole person learning through sustainable executive performance.* Journal of Management Development, 31(3), 231–242. https://doi.org/10.1108/02621711211208862

Mavin, S., James, J., Patterson, N., Stabler, A., & Corlett, S. (2023). Flipping the normative: Developing and delivering a critical pedagogy for executive education in a UK business school. *Management Learning*, *55*(4), 528-552. https://doi.org/10.1177/13505076231162717 (Original work published 2024)

MEDAGLIA, R., MIKALEF, P. and TANGI, L. (2024), Competences and governance practices for artificial intelligence in the public sector, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/7895569, JRC138702.

Meisiek, S., Beausoleil, A. M., Barry, D., & Dattani, A. (2023). *Gaining Flexibility in Expertise through Executive Education: Tuning Schemas in Design Thinking*. Academy of Management Learning & Education, 22(4), 574–594. https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2021.0392

Morgan, H. (2022). Conducting a Qualitative Document Analysis. *The Qualitative Report*, *27*(1), 64-77. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2022.5044

Painter, M., Pérezts, M., & Deslandes, G. (2021). *Understanding the human in stakeholder theory: a phenomenological approach to affect-based learning*. Management Learning, 52(2), 203–223. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507620978860

Petriglieri, G., & Petriglieri, J. L. (2015). Can business schools humanize leadership? *Academy of Management Learning & Education, 14*(4), 625–647. https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2014.0201

Petriglieri, G., Wood, J. D., & Petriglieri, J. L. (2011). *Up Close and Personal: Building*

Foundations for Leaders' Development Through the Personalization of Management Learning. Academy of Management Learning & Education, 10(3), 430–450. https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2010.0032

Pless, N. M., Maak, T., & Stahl, G. K. (2011). *Developing Responsible Global Leaders Through International Service-Learning Programs: The Ulysses Experience*. Academy of Management Learning & Education, 10(2), 237–260. https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.10.2.zqr237

Ramírez, R., Rowland, N. J., Spaniol, M. J., & White, A. (2021). *Avoiding the valley of death in educating strategists.* Long Range Planning, 54(3), N.PAG. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lrp.2020.102000

Reid, A., Cook, J., Viedge, C., & Scheepers, C. B. (2020). Developing management effectiveness: The nexus between teaching and coaching. *International Journal of Management Education (Elsevier Science)*, *18*(1), N.PAG. https://doi-org.unimib.idm.oclc.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2019.100334

Rhee, K. S., & Sigler, T. H. (2010). Developing Enlightened Leaders for Industry and Community. Journal of Management Education, 34(1), 163–181. https://doi.org/10.1177/1052562909338143

Ricart, J. E. (2011). *A Push for Research and Internationalization in European Business Schools.* British Journal of Management, 22(3), 550–554. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8551.2011.00770.x

Sanyal, C., & Rigg, C. (2021). *Integrating Mindfulness Into Leadership Development*. Journal of Management Education, 45(2), 243–264. https://doi.org/10.1177/1052562920934040

Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research, 104*, 333–339. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039

Stoten, D. W. (2022). Escaping from the valley of death: Reconfiguring executive education through a differentiated curriculum. International Journal of Management Education (Elsevier Science), 20(2), N.PAG. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2022.100650

Taylor, S. N., Passarelli, A. M., & Van Oosten, E. B. (2019). Leadership coach effectiveness as fostering self-determined, sustained change. *The Leadership Quarterly*, *30*(6). https://doi-org.unimib.idm.oclc.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2019.101313

Taylor, S. S., & Ladkin, D. (2009). Understanding Arts-Based Methods in Managerial Development. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, *8*(1), 55–69. https://doi-org.unimib.idm.oclc.org/10.5465/AMLE.2009.37012179

Tiberius, V., Hoffmeister, L., & Weyland, M. (2021). *Prospective shifts in executive education: An international Delphi study*. International Journal of Management Education (Elsevier Science), 19(3), N.PAG. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2021.100514

Tcholakian, L. A., Khapova, S. N., & van de Loo, E. (2023). Historical consciousness in executive education programs: Engaging with transgenerational collective traumas. *Academy of Management Learning & Education, 22*(3), 459–480. https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2020.0271

Ungureanu, P., & Bertolotti, F. (2018). *Building and Breaching Boundaries at Once: An Exploration of How Management Academics and Practitioners Perform Boundary Work in Executive Classrooms.* Academy of Management Learning & Education, 17(4), 425–452. https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2016.0095

Waller, M. A., & Fawcett, S. E. (2015). *Executive Education is an Implementation of Supply Chain Management in Collegiate Schools of Business*. Journal of Business Logistics, 36(2), 135–138. https://doi.org/10.1111/jbl.12085

Wolverton, C. C. (2018). *Utilizing synchronous discussions to create an engaged classroom in online executive education*. International Journal of Management Education (Elsevier Science), 16(2), 239–244. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2018.03.001

World Economic Forum (WEF). (2025). *The Future of Jobs Report 2025. https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of jobs-report-2025/*

WEB PAGES

Retrieved *October 31, 2025*, from, https://www.esade.edu/executive-education/en/programs-for-organizations

Retrieved *October 31, 2025*, from, https://napawash.org/partnering-with-the-academy

Retrieved *October 31, 2025*, from, https://www.insp.gouv.fr/formation-continue/formations-courtes/formations-sur-mesure

Retrieved *October 31, 2025*, from, https://www.nsob.nl/opleidingen/opleidingsaanbod/leergang-metropool

Retrieved *October 31, 2025*, from, https://businessschool.luiss.it/individual-executive-programme/metodologia-didattica/

Retrieved *October 31, 2025*, from, https://www.sdabocconi.it/it/formazione-manageriale/cib---executive-management-program-in-banking-272937

Retrieved *October 31, 2025*, from, https://www.wbs.ac.uk/courses/executive-education/for-organisations/

Retrieved *October 31, 2025*, from, https://www.sdabocconi.it/en/executive-open-programs/senior-management-program-315563

Retrieved *October 31, 2025*, from, https://napawash.org/resources

Retrieved *October 31, 2025*, from, https://www.flexa.polimi.it/it/

Retrieved *October 31, 2025*, from, https://pll.harvard.edu/course/womens-leadership-forum

Retrieved *October 31, 2025*, from, https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/alumni

Retrieved *October 31, 2025*, from, https://www.insead.edu/about-insead/mission-values-history

Retrieved *October 31, 2025*, from, https://www.hec.edu/fr/l-ecole/qui-sommes-nous/mission-et-valeurs

Retrieved *October 31, 2025*, from, https://businessschool.luiss.it/en/programs/

SECOND PAPER

LEARNING AI: RETHINKING EXED THROUGH A 4E PERSPECTIVE AND A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Abstract. Artificial intelligence is reshaping the cognitive environment in which executives make decisions, influencing how information is generated, interpreted, and legitimized. This paper investigates how Executive Education can strengthen leaders' decision-making capabilities in a context where AI has become an integral part of the cognitive landscape. The contribution draws on the 4E cognitive model (Viale et al., 2023) to examine how decision-making conditions are changing and integrates this perspective with key ethical and social issues raised by AI adoption. Through a discourse analysis of business schools, schools of government, and national schools of public administration, the paper explores how these institutions narrate AI, thereby shaping the imaginaries and expectations that orient managerial choices. Finally, it discusses implications for the design of executive training programs capable of supporting more responsible decision-making and the creation of public value.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. WHY THE INTEREST IN AI? On November 30, 2022, OpenAI released ChatGPT, marking a turning point in the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and making a generative AI tool accessible to the broad public for the first time. This event also set a new direction for my academic journey; therefore, that period coincided with the beginning of my PhD in *"Resources for the New Public Administration: People and Data"* at the University of Milano-Bicocca. Thus, my PhD began at a moment when Artificial Intelligence was rapidly emerging as a topic that demanded not only urgent attention but, above all, deeper understanding. This growing attention came from both private organizations and public administrations. However, with different approaches: while private actors tended to focus on efficiency and competitiveness, public administrations were, by their very nature, more deeply concerned with the creation of public value (Babsek et.al., 2025). Since then, ChatGPT has made significant advances, and generative AI tools have proliferated, revealing a wide range of potential applications for Artificial Intelligence across the

private and public sectors. In particular, several applications within public administration encompass a wide range of possibilities, from internal operational processes to public service delivery and policymaking (Babšek et al., 2025). Possible uses include, for instance, the development of intelligent digital systems to support citizens' upskilling and reskilling, or the implementation of virtual agents designed to enhance interactions with citizens and improve the quality of public services (Babšek et al., 2025). Other applications involve predictive and recommendation tools that can assist in evidence- based policymaking and strategic planning (Babšek et al., 2025)[3]. The sudden emergence of AI in public discourse directly affected my research experience at the National School of Administration (SNA), where I spent six months during my PhD. At that time, SNA had just launched the **AI4SNA initiative** (Scuola Nazionale della Pubblica Amministrazione)., exploring how to integrate artificial intelligence into its training programs for public sector executives, as well as how to support instructors and improve internal processes. The internal debate within the school—comprising strategic reflections, workshops, and collective discussions—prompted reflection on how AI is transforming ExEd, both in the public and private sectors, within schools of management and schools of government, and on what transformations it introduces in models of leadership and in the competencies required of contemporary managers.

1.2 AI IN EXED: TWO POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS. These questions required progressive refinement, given the breadth of the field and the multiple ways in which AI discourse can be addressed in the domain of ExEd. Accordingly, the following reasoning was developed. As rightly emphasized by the National School of Administration (SNA), the discussion on AI in executive training can move in two directions: "AI for training" and "Training for AI" (Scuola Nazionale della Pubblica Amministrazione). This paper focuses primarily on the latter dimension—namely, the set of competencies that must be developed to use AI consciously and responsibly —and on how executive education can be redesigned to effectively transmit the skills needed both to use and to understand artificial intelligence.Once the focus on the *"Training for AI"* dimension had been established, the next step was to identify the issue that most directly concerns executives and is most affected by the advent of Artificial Intelligence. Among the various possibilities, **the question of decision-making emerged as the core theme**—a crucial competence for public leaders and private managers that is being profoundly reshaped by AI technologies.

[3] In his article, **Babšek et al. (2025)** provides a comprehensive table summarizing multiple examples of AI use cases in public administration, based on an extensive review of the existing literature.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**.** Therefore, we can elaborate the main research questions as follows. **How are decisions made in the age of AI? What should managers be taught to make good and responsible decisions? What are business schools, schools of government, and national schools of public administration currently doing and talking about this topic? What can they do and say better?**

1.3 PAPER STRUCTURE. To address those questions, the paper consists of two independent but complementary sections: a theoretical–conceptual part and an empirical one:

A) Conceptual Section. When discussing "Training for AI" in ExEd, one inevitably confronts the issue of **decision-making**. The 'executive', by definition, is someone who occupies a *high position*, and decision-making is an inherent element of their role, as stated in the **Cambridge Dictionary** (Cambridge University Press). For this reason, to understand how to reshape executive curricula, we need to reflect on decision-making supported by AI.

How does AI change decision-making and our cognitive environment, and what are the most important features that ExEd has to develop in the future to support good decision-making? Therefore, this section discusses the key characteristics that ExEd need to have within **an AI augmented environment**. We want to elaborate some suggestions based on the 4E model proposed by Viale et al. (2023), following *Newen et al.* (2018), which offers a valuable lens for designing AI-related learning.

The **4E cognition model** (*Viale et al.*, 2023) is a **theory of mind and decision-making** that emerges from the intersection of "*pragmatism [...], but also incorporates insights from phenomenology, analytic philosophy of mind, developmental and experimental psychology and the neurosciences*" (*Viale et al.*, 2023, p. 4). Cognition is tush viewed as a **distributed, bodily, and environmentally situated process**. There is no mind processing information independently: the mind comprehends the **dynamic interaction** between the body (is *embodied*), the surrounding context (is *embedded*), the tools and technologies that extend cognitive capacities (is *extended*), and the action itself (is *enactive*).

> "We take embodied cognition in a broad sense to include what has been termed 4E (embodied, embedded, extended and enactive) cognition (Newen et al., 2018). On this view, the body's neural and extra-neural processes, as well its mode of coupling with the environment, and the

> environmental feedback that results, play important roles in cognition. Similar to Simon's approach." **(Viale et al., 2023, p. 4***)*

What does the model of enactive ecological cognition tell us about ExEd? For sure, the model suggests that there is no good decision made solely from data analysis and the power of calculation, but decision-making is a complex process**.** Therefore, AI cannot reproduce the complexity of that process, but only to help with large amounts of data, and executives must understand that during their training. **U**nderstanding how our cognition works opens new reflections on how Artificial Intelligence should be taught to executives. The section highlights the importance of "perceptual refinement", critical thinking, and **ethical awareness** for the executive's future.

B) THE EMPIRICAL SECTION. The empirical part of this paper investigates, through a Discourse Analysis, how **business schools**, **schools of government, and national schools of public administration currently** integrate Artificial Intelligence (AI) into their narratives. The research asks: What kinds of narratives dominate discussions of AI in these schools? To what extent do these narratives show awareness of the embodied, enactive, and embedded dimensions of decision-making? Moreover, how do they address the key competences that AI is expected to promote? How are they reshaping ExEd to meet the new characteristics required by an AI-augmented world? Following a Discourse Analysis (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; Phillips & Hardy, 2002; Grant, et al., 2004; Hardy, 2001), the paper discusses the critical points that emerge from current educational discourses, to open a reflection on possible directions for improvement. The purpose is to shed light on the **discursive context** surrounding AI, to learn how to engage with it critically, and to develop a genuine awareness of the issues that raises within public and private executive education. In doing so, the paper aims to contribute to the creation of an environment more conducive to *good decision-making*, starting from language itself, understood as an *affordance* (a concept introduced by Gibson, 1979), that is, a possibility for action offered by the context. Indeed, if we speak about AI as something detached from us, as something autonomous and inevitable, we will not use AI responsibly, and we risk forgetting that AI is just a tool that is now part of our environment and extended cognition. The way we speak about AI shapes the way we decide with it.

But which is the connection between the two sections of the paper? Integrating the two sections makes it possible to reveal a meaningful gap: on one side, the characteristic ExEd would need in order to foster responsible decisions in increasingly AI-augmented

environments; on the other, the current characteristic of executive schools showed by their practices and narratives. By connecting the educational ideal with actual discursive practices, the paper does not simply propose an abstract reflection nor limit itself to a descriptive account of the status quo. Instead, it performs a dual operation that points out a direction for change starting from the state of the art. This methodological choice generates an original contribution to the literature on AI and Executive Education. Theoretically, it applied the 4E cognition model to the characteristics ExEd needs to acquire to align with our concrete decision-making approach. Empirically, it shows how institutional discourses shape ExEd. It suggests that improving ExEd does not only require introducing new tools but rethinking the narratives and cultural assumptions that drive how technology is understood and used. In conclusion, the two parts of the paper converge on a single message: leaders must be prepared not only to use AI, but also to interact with it critically, recognizing that the quality of decisions depends not only on data but also on our collective capacity to remain human in an increasingly automated world. Therefore, using AI is not just about technology but the form of our societies and institutions.

1.4 EPISTEMOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS. The research makes dialogue between different philosophical traditions. The first section adopts a phenomenological and cognitive philosophical perspective. The main approach of the empirical part is constructivist and interpretative in line with a Critical Discourse Analysis and thematic approach**.**

1.5 UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION. This work offers an original contribution by connecting three dimensions that are often addressed separately in the literature: 1) the transformation of decision-making in the era of artificial intelligence; 2) the embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive perspective on cognition; 3) the institutional discourses that shape the use of AI in Executive Education. The paper employs the 4E paradigm (Viale et al., 2023) to clarify the cognitive processes underpinning decision-making and links them to the desirable ExEd environmental characteristic to foster responsible decisions. This is a unique contribution in the literature and represents a multidisciplinary perspective that connects cognitive philosophy with a reflection on ExEd.

Moreover, the study shows that a sound decision-making environment cannot be reduced to technical proficiency in AI. However, it must extend to the socio-cultural context, the values that characterize it, and the discourses that shape it. In this way, the paper contributes to connecting the tradition of the 4E model with that of CMS (Critical

Management Studies), underscoring how both fields highlight the importance of an ethical, culturally situated reflection on AI.

Another unique contribution is the research's empirical section. Once it becomes clear that decision-making is not merely computational, but a complex activity embedded in a particular context, a further question emerges: what kind of context is Executive Education today? How does it talk about AI and about decisions? Are the dominant discourses conducive to a conscious, reflective, and responsible use of AI, or do they promote narratives that risk limiting human agency and critical awareness? To address these questions, the Critical Discourse Analysis examines how business schools and public administration schools present and teach AI, highlighting which visions are promoted and which values are implicitly conveyed. Observing what educational institutions truly prioritize reveals a structural gap between current discursive practices and a more critical and informed understanding of AI, which is essential to support better decision-making. Because the discourses we use create expectations, imaginaries, and forms of rationality, responsibility-oriented training must also reconsider how AI is communicated and represented. The contribution of this work therefore lies in showing that discourses are not merely a communicative backdrop, but an active component of the cognitive ecosystem in which decisions take form. In this sense, analyzing narratives about AI enables us to understand how AI is perceived today and to guide its future use and communication in a more ethical direction.

2. CONCEPTUAL SECTION

"L'artificio, in fondo, non è che una delle forme possibili della natura; non c'è artificio che non sia, nel profondo, naturale" – (Colamedici, 2024, ebook)[i]

2.1. WHAT ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TRURLY IS. This section aims to clarify what Artificial Intelligence actually *is,* with the goal of **demystifying** the concept. We will therefore not delve into issues related to *machine learning*, algorithmic functioning, or *deep learning*. These notions are widely known and thoroughly discussed in the existing literature. Rather, the focus here is to ask: *what is Artificial Intelligence beyond its operational mechanisms?* The intention is to highlight its nature as a **technical instrument—both material and natural—rather than artificial**, and as a **tool that**

extends intelligence rather than being intelligent in itself.

Is AI intelligent?

> "The 'I' in machine learning AI has no relation to intelligence as we know it, which is why the term automated decision making (ADM) is often used instead."
>
> ***Gigerenzer, G. (2022, ebook edition)***

When we speak of *artificial intelligence*, the first term that captures our attention is *intelligence* itself. But what does it actually mean to be intelligent? Cristianini (2023) explains this well: as human beings, we hold a profoundly anthropocentric view of intelligence and often neglect what he calls *alien forms* of intelligence—such as that exhibited by certain animal groups like ants. In his words:

> "[…]ant colonies combine the information of thousands of individuals to make collective decisions about where to gather food or build a nest. This is the kind of intelligence that most closely resembles what we are building today with Artificial Intelligence and that we are now called upon to regulate by law."
>
> **(Cristianini, 2023, Kindle Ed.)**

Although AI displays behaviors that may appear intelligent, it possesses neither consciousness nor sentience. To attribute to it intentions, emotions, or mental states is a clear act of anthropomorphism. AI systems generate responses based on probabilistic and statistical rules, not through understanding or awareness. From a terminological standpoint, however, the debate remains open. Quiroga Rodríguez (2023) observes that the very expression *Artificial Intelligence* is misleading. Using the term *intelligence*, he argues, can lead to "Association with human intelligence", "Anthropomorphism and overestimation", "Misunderstood internal processes", "Responsibility and morality", and "Limitation of the term 'intelligence'". Such connotations introduce several risks — from minimizing the limitations of AI, to the "Attribution of motivations and emotions", to the delegation of decision-making authority, and a general misunderstanding of the complexity of the concept of intelligence itself.

> "Human intelligence is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that goes beyond the ability to process data and perform specific tasks. It includes aspects such as creativity, intuition, imagination and self-awareness. Using the term 'intelligence' to describe the capabilities of AI limits our understanding of what it actually is and can do (Bringsjord, S., 2011)."
> **Quiroga (2023)**

Changing the term *Artificial Intelligence* at this stage may indeed be an unrealistic and overly ambitious project. Yet, at the very least, we should cultivate awareness of how inadequate and misleading this terminology is — understanding that *intelligence*, in this context, refers not to sentience or thought, but to a set of technical operations that mirror only fragments of human cognition. Even though everybody is now aware that we don't speak about General AI when we speak about AI today, everybody can fall into the tricky problem of AI humanization.

Is AI artificial? In *Atlas of AI*, Kate Crawford (2021) demonstrates how artificial intelligence is "anything but abstract," (Crawford, 2021, p.19) revealing its **material, ecological, and human foundations**.

> "The creation of contemporary AI systems depends on exploiting energy and mineral resources from the planet, cheap labor, and data at scale"
>
> **(Crawford, 2021, p. 15)**
>
> "AI can seem like a spectral force—as disembodied computation—but these systems are anything but abstract. They are physical infrastructures that are reshaping the Earth, while simultaneously shifting how the world is seen and understood. It's important for us to contend with these many aspects of artificial intelligence—its malleability, its messiness, and its spatial and temporal reach"
>
> **(Crawford, 2021, p. 19).**

AI thus emerges as a **planetary apparatus of extraction**, dependent on both the exploitation of natural resources and the invisible labor that enables machine learning (e.g., data labelers, content moderators, and low-paid click workers). This hidden system of exploitation and control is further illuminated in *Empire of AI* by Karen Hao (2025), who describes the artificial intelligence industry as a new **technological empire** driven by economic and political domination. Based on extensive investigative research, Hao (2025) exposes the **extractive and unequal foundations** of the AI economy—from the non-consensual appropriation of data to the concentration of scientific production within a few Big Tech corporations. The growing alliances between private actors like OpenAI

and governments, she warns, risk shifting governance toward a **post-democratic model**, in which corporate logic supplants public accountability. Following both Crawford (2021) and Hao (2024), we can derive that AI is not merely a computational innovation but a socio-economic event. Recognizing this means not only asking what AI can do, but also who benefits, who pays the price, and which forms of intelligence and power we are institutionalizing. In that sense, it is important not to consider AI as "artificial" but to reconnect it with the natural environment and beings to make its concrete effects tangible. As argued in the *Handbook of Critical Studies of Artificial Intelligence* (Lindgren, 2023), adopting a **critical approach** to AI entails moving beyond superficial ethical discussions and addressing the deeper narratives and interests that structure the field. As Metzinger (2019) observes:

> "Industry organizes and cultivates ethical debates to buy time—to distract the public and to prevent or at least delay effective regulation and policy-making." (Metzinger, 2019)

Far from being a neutral instrument, AI can contribute to the **amplification of inequalities**, concentrating benefits and decision-making power within a restricted elite, while externalizing its environmental and social costs. Therefore, the adoption of AI, if not framed within a critical and ethical perspective, can risk reinforcing pre-existing hierarchies and dependencies rather than promoting democratic and equitable transformation. Without this perspective, ethics itself risks becoming another form of "AI-washing" (Al Haddi, 2024), obscuring rather than revealing the true implications of this technology. In this light, we can connect reflections on AI to those on social innovation, which Kim et al. (2022) define as social practices aimed at generating collective value and meeting social desires and needs in various spheres, including education, work, health, and others. A genuinely ethical use of AI, therefore, requires a critical examination of both the technology itself and the **socio-political systems** in which it is embedded. This means interrogating the **structures of power, governance, and economic extraction** that AI tends just to reproduce. As Langdon Winner (1980) argued, technologies are never politically neutral:

> "[…] some kinds of technology require their social environments to be structured in a particular way, in much the same sense that an automobile requires wheels in order to run. The thing could not exist as an effective operating entity unless certain social as well as material conditions were met." **(Winner, 1980, p.130)**

This insight raises essential questions for the contemporary debate on AI: What kind of technology is artificial intelligence? Does it inherently depend on a society organized around **extraction, surveillance, and control**, or can organizations foster its development toward more democratic and sustainable arrangements?

2.2 THE PROBLEM OF DECISION-MAKING. Reflecting on the meaning and role of AI in our society inevitably leads to the topic of decision-making, which lies at the very core of managerial and leadership activity. Understanding how AI technologies intervene in decision-making processes requires questioning not only the tools themselves but also the nature of human rationality and how it unfolds within organizational contexts. Herbert Simon first introduced the concept of **bounded rationality** (Viale et al., 2023). Individuals do not choose the perfect solution, but rather a solution that is *"good enough"* relative to the context and the information available:

> "In an important sense these conceptions of rationality don't—ironically, similar to the rational expectation model of economics—meaningfully require any assumptions about the organism itself. That is, the architecture of cognition is general (Anderson, 2013). The models assume an objective conception of the environment (which has particular visual or statistical features), and organisms then have some kind of delimited, bounded, or biased view of their environment, or a view that is proximate and good enough to satisfice. This environmental focus is also captured by Simon who argued that "an ant [or human being], viewed as a behaving system, is quite simple. The apparent complexity of its behavior over time is largely a reflection of the complexity of the environment in which it finds itself" (1981: 63–65; also see Anderson, 2013)."
>
> **(MacLeod & Nersessian, 2020)**

This perspective, although seemingly distant from AI, is in fact highly relevant today: contemporary AI systems do not operate according to an "infinite" rationality, but instead rely on computational criteria, data, and goals determined by their designers and the availability of data. In this sense, they too enact a situated and limited form of rationality, deeply rooted in human constraints, though characterized by far greater data amount and computational power. Moreover, even though AI displays intelligent behavior, this does not mean it can engage with the complexity of its environment if left alone to reflect on it. Therefore, AI is not only not "superior" to human intelligence, but in fact lacks the very reflective and situated character that defines it. Simon's reflection thus opens up an important space: the relationship between **decision-making, context, and cognition**. It is precisely within this space that the **enactive perspective**, as discussed in Viale et al. (2023), is situated. The **4E paradigm**—embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive

cognition—emphasizes that cognition is bodily, situated, extended, and generated through interaction with the world.

According to Viale et al. (2023), decision-making is not a purely mental act but rather an **embodied and distributed process**, in which the body, the environment, and technological tools cooperate in constructing the choice. Human rationality is therefore **situated**, rooted in the perceptual, social, and material constraints that shape the context of action.

Gallese (2017), through his studies on **embodied simulation** and **mirror neurons**, has further demonstrated that the understanding and evaluation of others' actions—central components of decision-making—are grounded in **bodily and empathic mechanisms** that precede and support abstract cognitive processing. The adoption of AI in executive decision-making processes, as informed by these theories, cannot be interpreted as an enhancement of rational capacity. Instead, AI becomes part of a **cognitive ecosystem** in which decisions emerge from the interaction among human agents, technological tools, organizational contexts, and regulatory constraints. AI does not replace human rationality but instead becomes integrated into its broader **cognitive horizon**. For ExEd, this implies a profound rethinking of how decision-making skills are learned and taught. While AI amplifies our computational capacities, what remains outside its reach is precisely the **embodied, embedded, and enactive** dimensions of cognition. As the perspectives explored so far suggest, **good decision-making** is not merely the outcome of efficient computation but the result of a **dynamic balance** among perception, experience, relationships, and context. It is, therefore, **perception, relationships, and context** that we must train, cultivate, and design for.

2.3 THOWARD A THEORETICAL FOUNDATION BASED ON 4E COGNITION.

Within this perspective, the **4E paradigm** can provide a framework for rethinking **ExEd** in the age of Artificial Intelligence as a learning space that needs to integrate **body, context, and technology**. Preparing executives to operate in complex environments means teaching them to recognize that every decision is **embodied, situated, and co-constructed**. The four dimensions of cognition—**embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive cognition** (Viale et al., 2023)—thus can become guiding principles for designing educational programs that do not separate knowing from doing, reflection from action, or ethics from technique. In this framework, AI is not an autonomous entity but part of a **cognitive and social ecosystem** in which the quality of decision-making depends on how individuals interact with tools, with others, and with their environment. The

challenge of education about AI is therefore not only **technical**, but also **deeply cultural**: it requires fostering awareness of how human cognition extends into the world—and how, in turn, the world shapes cognition. Only through such an approach ExEd can become a space where individuals learn not merely to *use* artificial intelligence, but to *coexist* with it critically, ethically, and creatively.

(Table A). An Executive Education Framework from 4E paradigm

Dimension	**Cognitive Principle**	**Application to ExEd**	**Key competencies to develop**
Embodied	Cognition is bodily: thought arises from experience and action.	Training should foster awareness of embodiment and value the bodily and emotional dimensions of learning. Be open to alternative learning methodologies that give value to perceptual refinement and bodily dimension (e.g., Theatre, Art-based methods, mindfulness, coaching).	Bodily awareness, "perceptual refinement" (Springborg, 2012).
Embedded	Cognition is situated: decisions depend on social and organizational contexts.	Develop the capacity to think critically about the environment in which decisions occur. Integrate philosophy, history, and humanistic disciplines in ExEd curricula. Reflect on ethical concerns related to AI. Promote a free and authentic dialogue in class throughout the whole course. Favor debunking activities to recognize fake news and information.	Critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and self- and contextual awareness.

Extended	Cognition is extended through tools and technologies.	Teach the critical use of AI as a cognitive extension rather than a substitute. Encourage reflection on AI affordances. Teaching prompting skills. Understand how to integrate AI in the workflow to avoid a massive and ineffective use.	Critical digital literacy; hard-skills concerning the use of AI.
Enactive	Cognition emerges through interaction and action in the world.	Promote experiential, dialogical, and collaborative learning among humans; encourage reflective, adaptive decision-making. Favor openness and decision co-design.	Curiosity, openness to experimentation, relational and collaborative skills.

3. Empirical Part

3.1 HOW THE ANALYSIS WAS CONDUCTED. The empirical analysis examined 126 documents drawn from a purposive sample of **six institutions**, including **two schools of management**, **two schools of government**, and two **national schools of public administration.** This sampling strategy was designed to capture discourses across key organizational institutions involved in executive education. The schools were selected on the basis of their international prominence and quality, using widely recognized rankings such as the *Financial Times* and *Quacquarelli Symonds (QS)* as practical indicators of field centrality and visibility; **in practice, schools positioned at the top of these rankings were prioritized**. Geographical diversity was included primarily to avoid reliance on a single institutional or national context, for this reason, **European and non-European institutions were considered[3].** Given that the discourse analysis is based primarily on institutional websites and publicly available promotional materials, this type of communication was considered to be relatively standardized, shaped by branding and marketing logics, and therefore characterized by a high degree of repetition in formulas and narrative frames. For this reason, a purposive small sample was adopted to represent different institutional types, with the expectation of discursive saturation. In this sense, the sampling strategy was guided not by statistical representativeness, but by the search for sufficient discursive variation to identify recurrent patterns and meaningful differences, in line with established approaches to **Critical Discourse Analysis** (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Phillips & Hardy, 2002; Grant et al., 2004; Hardy, 2001).The main objective was therefore to examine how specific meanings are constructed, stabilized, and legitimized, rather than to measure their frequency of occurrence. In line with Critical Discourse Analysis, "discourse" is understood here as ideologically shaped patterns of meaning that play a central role in social and institutional life. As Groff (2023) argues, "CDA posits that discourse is ideological and plays a crucial role in reinforcing or contesting societal power imbalances. It emphasizes the importance of language in shaping thought and discourse, illustrating how even seemingly neutral terms can uphold dominant social norms, such as gender bias" (Groff, 2023). In this perspective, discourses do not merely describe phenomena such as AI, but actively participate in constructing what AI is, what it means, and how it is authorized to speak

[3] The selected schools are SDA Bocconi, IMD, Harvard Kennedy School, Blavatnik, INSP (France), NSOB (Netherlands).

and act in relation to it. Discourses are therefore treated as socially embedded patterns of meaning that both reflect and shape institutional understandings and actions. At the same time, the empirical strategy adopted in this study does not aim to implement CDA in its "strict" sense and systematically. Rather, general principles of CDA are used to examine recurring frames, metaphors, assumptions, and constructions of agency and responsibility in institutional communication about AI.The corpus of 126 documents was collected through web searches, the internal search tools available on each school's website, and open browsing of the school's pages. The corpus included promotional material such as course descriptions, school news, event announcements, and some external articles retrieved via Google referencing the schools. Documents were identified primarily through exploratory navigation of each institutional website and the internal search function, using keywords such as "Artificial Intelligence" and "AI.". The selection process was relevance-driven and flexible: priority was given to materials that explicitly addressed AI and appeared particularly salient for the research questions, including highly visible pages, recent items returned by the search tool, and documents that stood out as especially pertinent to AI in executive education. This approach can be characterized as purposive and opportunistic sampling guided by theoretical relevance, rather than an exhaustive or fully systematic retrieval of all available materials. In addition, targeted Google searches combining each institution's name with AI-related keywords were used to retrieve relevant external pages or articles referencing the schools. The corpus was not intended to be exhaustive; instead, it was constructed to capture a sufficiently rich set of texts through which institutional discourses on AI could be examined.

Coding Procedure. Coding was conducted using NVivo software to organize, tag, and retrieve relevant passages. All documents were carefully read to identify recurring topics, metaphors, discourses, and practices related to AI. **Coding was guided by complementary sets of categories that oriented the analytical process.** In particular, the coding strategy **combined deductive guidance (the use of theory-informed categories) with inductive openness (the emergence of new codes from the data)** Here are the deductive initial categories:

→ **Categories addressing declared practices of AI integration**, aimed at exploring how institutions describe the use of AI in their educational and organizational activities: AI as a support for teaching and pedagogy; AI as an administrative tool; AI as a support for students; AI-related competences and skills; AI in research; Contexts and purposes of

AI discourse appearance; Methods and approaches for teaching AI.

→ **Categories focusing on the interpretive and rhetorical dimensions of how AI is represented:** Emerging themes; Implicit assumptions; Recurrent metaphors and narrative frames.

Coding was conducted by the author through close reading and the selection of relevant excerpts, with new codes created when recurring ideas or rhetorical moves were identified. Coding was primarily conducted in a single main pass focused on identifying relevant segments and building a working set of codes, rather than through multiple rounds of formal recoding. Subsequently, during the thesis-writing and interpretation phase, codes were consolidated into broader discursive themes and higher-order patterns to structure the analytical discussion. These higher-order themes are therefore presented as an interpretive synthesis built from coded materials. The coding procedures and categorizations were documented in **NVivo**, ensuring transparency and enabling access to the analytical process. The traceability of coding decisions supports the auditability of the analysis and allows readers to connect interpretive claims to specific textual excerpts.

Interpretive Approach and CDA Framework. This analysis presents the author's critical interpretation of institutional discourses, without claiming objectivity or universal validity. Its robustness is supported by:

→ the use of multiple document types and sources;

→coding via NVivo;

→theoretical anchoring in the 4E cognition framework and in Critical Management Studies (CMS).

These elements collectively strengthen the study's analytical credibility. Consistent with the CDA perspective, the analysis acknowledges the situated and partial nature of interpretation and emphasizes researcher reflexivity and critical engagement with empirical material. Through this approach, the empirical section identifies key discursive patterns - such as AI as inevitable, as a competitive imperative, or as a collaborative "teammate" - and explores how these narratives shape values, agency, responsibilities, expectations, and practices promoted for leaders in AI-augmented environments. The discussion focuses primarily on discourses that recur across the corpus as a whole, while also noting selected differences observed between institutional types (e.g., public-sector

versus private-sector education contexts), without claiming a fully systematic cross-case comparison. The analysis highlights the interpretive nature of CDA: it is a lens for making sense of discourse rather than a tool for producing objective validation. In other words, the aim is not to assess every institutional claim about AI, but to examine how certain representations become plausible and legitimate and what practical consequences they entail, including the reproduction of specific forms of power, expertise, and authority.

MAIN RESULTS. By bringing together the 4E cognition framework (Viale et al., 2023) Critical Management Studies tradition, and CDA-informed analysis, this study shows that dominant **institutional narratives tend to frame AI primarily as a technical and strategic resource,** while marginalizing its situated, relational, and practice-based dimensions. Empirically, the analysis reveals that representations of AI as **inevitable, autonomous, or quasi-agentic coexist with limited attention to embodied experience, contextual constraints, and situated judgment**. This discursive configuration contributes to normalizing a **technocentric understanding of learning and leadership**. Theoretical reflection and empirical findings thus converge in highlighting a structural tension between a human-centered, practice-oriented conception of cognition and the dominant institutional imaginaries surrounding AI. This tension has significant implications for how responsibility, agency, and ethical engagement are constructed in executive education.

POSSIBLE FUTURE DIRECTIONS. The findings of this study suggest that future developments in executive and public administration education should move beyond predominantly technocentric approaches to AI and place **greater emphasis on situated, practice-based, humanistic, embodied, experiential, and reflexive forms of learning**. Rather than focusing primarily on proficiency and performance optimization, educational programs could integrate experiential laboratories, case-based simulations, and critical reflection sessions that engage participants with the social, organizational, and ethical complexities of AI use. **In line with the 4E cognition framework**, future curricula may benefit from foregrounding embodied experience, contextual constraints, and collaborative sense-making processes, thereby reinforcing the role of human judgment in AI-supported decision-making. At the same time, institutions could develop pedagogical spaces dedicated to the critical analysis of dominant technological narratives, enabling learners to recognize and question discursive constructions of inevitability, neutrality, and efficiency. From an organizational perspective, the study highlights the importance

of creating institutional mechanisms that support ongoing reflexivity and accountability in AI governance, such as cross-functional deliberative forums and transparent decision-tracking practices. Finally, future research could extend this work through ethnographic and longitudinal studies examining how institutional narratives interact with everyday practices over time, and how alternative discursive framings may foster more responsible and context-sensitive forms of AI adoption.

MAIN EMERGING THEMES AND POINT OF INTEREST. Here is a brief discussion of the main emerging themes isolated.

A) Business Imperatives. One of the most recurrent themes across the analyzed materials is what I have coded as the "business imperatives." In almost all the schools examined, the discourse on AI is built around the logic of a binding force—an obligation that frames innovation as an unavoidable necessity. AI appears as a natural law of progress rather than as an object of political or ethical choice. It represents a form of "technological determinism" ("Technological determinism," n.d), where technology becomes destiny. AI is therefore presented **not as a choice**, but as an **imperative of survival**. We can reflect that this language of necessity can produce two main effects:

1. **Depoliticization of AI,** removing the possibility of questioning its social or cultural implications; of interrogating the desirability of its application in specific domains and contexts; or of debating whether it can genuinely be used ethically and sustainably. The rhetoric of resilience suggests that individuals should adapt to a continually evolving technological environment; it is not about questioning the system, but about navigating it with flexibility.

2. It legitimizes institutional power, as institutions present themselves as the entities capable of interpreting, governing, and "harnessing" change. In this sense, schools speak about AI to speak about themselves—above all, to reaffirm their **epistemic authority** and their ability to define what it means to be modern, efficient, and responsible. The codes associated with this theme (*customer needs, harness emerging technology, competitive advantage, speed, value, productivity, success vs. failure, etc.*) construct a narrative in which education itself is reduced to an instrument of performativity, a way to generate value. However, what kind of value are we talking about? The term is used assertively, as if its meaning were shared and uncontested. "Business" and customer need ultimately emerge as the only legitimate sources of value. In contrast, workers' well-being or the protection of human rights are acknowledged—sometimes even extensively and

profoundly—but as they are functional to productivity or corporate reputation. Sometimes, even ethically dense concepts such as sustainability are often bent to the logic of economic efficiency:

> "Technology and people are the two fundamental assets to win the challenge of sustainability... enterprises are made up of people, who must expand organizational values and define strategies that take into account the interests of all stakeholders... owners may face fewer risks and obtain better returns on their investments precisely if companies decisively pursue the path of sustainability."
>
> (**SDA Bocconi – direct link**)

Sustainability, therefore, is not treated as a value in itself but as a **means** for investment returns. This reveals a **form of instrumental rationality**, an expression of the neoliberal culture described by Boltanski and Chiapello (1999/2007), which is capable of incorporating moral critique to strengthen itself. In this logic, what should constitute an end— such as dignity, well-being or freedom—becomes an economic means. However, as Sen (1999) reminds us, human wealth is not just an instrument of economic growth but its precondition. Beneath the surface of the analyzed discourses lies a set of **implicit assumptions** that constitute the ideological foundation of the institutional narrative on Artificial Intelligence. First and foremost, AI is presented as a global challenge to be won, an inevitable race in which Europe must "strengthen its material and human foundations" to avoid falling behind.

> "The first concerns the need to strengthen the material and human foundations of European AI: computing infrastructure, data access, energy mastery, and talent development. This base is presented as indispensable to avoid growing dependence on major non-European technological powers. The second principle requires a simplification of the digital regulatory framework: the current environment is judged fragmented and sometimes counterproductive for innovative enterprises; therefore, harmonization of rules at the single-market level is considered a precondition for investment attractiveness and for the competitiveness of European firms in the field of AI."
>
> (Agenda Digitale on SDA Bocconi – direct link)

The **language of necessity and competitiveness** intertwines with a rhetoric of urgency and fear of delay. Therefore, the use and understanding of technology seems to invoke logics of sovereignty and geopolitical power implicitly. Within this logic, **knowledge and measurement** are assimilated to processes of power. This idea of a **total computational rationality** reveals the persistence of a **technocratic faith**.

B) Complexity and Metaphors. The use of navigation as a discursive image reflects the constant perception of living in a world that is "too complex." C**omplexity** is often evoked in relation to decision-making, which is presented as one of the main domains of AI applications. AI is described simultaneously as both a cause and a solution to complexity: it contributes to creating a more intricate world while also proposing itself as the compass with which to "navigate" it.

Within this framework, AI is constructed as a means to re-establish control a new form of epistemic compass that promises to reduce uncertainty through data processing. Complexity, then, is conceived both as something to be controlled and as something new. On the one hand, AI must itself be navigated and it represents the sea to be crossed; on the other, it is also the solution to complexity. Although the metaphor evokes the sea, fear, and the unknown, it also recalls adventure, enthusiasm, and challenge. Thus, there is a contradiction not only in how AI is perceived—complex yet capable of managing complexity—but also in how complexity itself is experienced, with both fear and excitement. Perhaps the idea that AI can help us navigate this sea of contemporaneity is a pious illusion of control. I wonder whether people are not truly seeking other, more human forms of guidance.

What emerges, nonetheless, is a reality **overwhelmed** by complexity. One may question whether this rhetoric of complexity is in fact neutral. Has the world truly become more complex, or is this merely a perception? What does "complex" mean? Should this increasing reference to a controllable complexity not itself be treated with critical attention? It appears almost as a legitimation of a theology of AI. At the same time, AI is presented as a beginning.

Other interesting metaphors highlighted during the analysis are that of *journey* and that of *landscape* which represent two discursive strategies for legitimizing technological change. In the first case, the adoption of AI is narrated as a path of moral and professional growth (*"AI transformation journey"*); in the second, as a new natural world to be explored and understood (*"AI landscape"*). Both seem to share a common ideological feature: AI is not a choice, but a horizon — a sea or a landscape in which one must learn to move, or a journey that we must undertake.

C) **The Grandiosity of the Event.** In many documents, AI is described as an epochal and global event. The Harvard Kennedy School, for instance, states that:

> "Generative AI is already transforming industries across the globe, with even bigger shifts on the horizon."
>
> (**Harvard Kennedy School – direct link**)

Similarly, AI is said to have "already profoundly changed the way we live and work," (IMD – direct link) and its potential benefits appear "seemingly limitless" (Harvard Kennedy School – direct link). At the same time, however, some schools acknowledge the excessive hype around AI. While occasionally tempering this hype, these same institutions also fuel it when they describe AI as a "historic transformation." This **discursive ambivalence** reveals the plurality of voices and interests coexisting within organizations, aware of the risk of exaggerating the positive effect of AI, yet at the same time complicit in its construction.

D) Oppositions. Across the analyzed discourses, several **binary oppositions** emerge—risk versus opportunity, human versus technological, and control versus freedom—which structure the common sense surrounding AI. One of the most recurrent is that between **human intelligence and artificial intelligence**.

> "Even the hardcore AI evangelists will agree that we still need good humans. We don't want AI to amplify weak or corrupt people – especially not among leaders responsible for material decisions. Two qualities become particularly critical in an AI-abundant world: resilience and integrity."
>
> (**Shin Un Kang, 2025**, from Blavatnik School of Government)

> "Tech strategists now talk about an 'AI workforce': a concept that emphasizes augmentation, not replacement—AI agents as teammates rather than substitutes."
>
> **(Shan, 2025, IMD – direct link)**

Even if it is acknowledged that human beings must remain central and that AI is just an augmentation of human capacities, AI is, at the same time, viewed as another person (a teammate) and thus anthropomorphized. Moreover, the value of this encounter between AI and humans is once again legitimized through the logic of **competitive advantage**:

> "Only through the encounter between technology and human intuition is it possible to optimize processes and decisions, creating a real long-term competitive advantage."
>
> (SDA Bocconi-direct link)

E) AI and Human Resources. Discourses dedicated to human resources foster an understanding and acceptance of AI among the people. The Harvard Kennedy School emphasizes the need for a "**holistic understanding of these technologies' mechanics and unforeseen effects**," (Harvard Kennedy School, direct link) while INSP proposes paths of literacy and awareness:

> "Comprendre l'outil IA: algorithme et conceptualisation. Comprendre les enjeux de l'IA: technicité, souveraineté, éthique et juridique."
>
> (INSP – direct link)

In the logic of business schools, however, understanding remains **application-oriented**. Moreover, concerning the topic of HR, AI is presented as an **ally of human resources domains, such as education**, but often with references to organizational productivity.

> "Leverage generative AI to boost organizational productivity and enhance continuous learning."
>
> (Harvard Kennedy School – direct link)

Even **critical thinking**, which should constitute a core transversal competence for human resources, is reduced to a functional skill:

> "Participants will learn critical insights necessary for working productively in an AI-augmented future."
>
> **(Harvard Kennedy School – direct link)**

This raises the question: can a course truly develop critical thinking, or is a **structural change in organizational culture** required? Is it possible to develop critical thinking to increase productivity? Don't we need a different mindset to develop authentic critical thinking?

F) The Time and the Future. The theme of time emerges across the documents. AI is something projected into the future—a future to be anticipated, dominated, and made efficient. However, time is also what AI promises to **"free up"**:

> "Most users say AI saves them time (90%), helps them focus on more important tasks (85%), and makes them more creative (84%)."
>
> "The goal across all these domains is not simply to do more work. It's to free up our time and mental energy for what truly matters." (Shan & Wade, 2025, IMD – direct link)

This "freed time" assumes a **dual function**: improving work-life balance or being reinvested into new productivity. As Bernard Stiegler suggests, AI time **is political time**—not liberated, but reorganized according to the logic of efficiency.

G) Leadership and Accountability. Finally, **leadership**. In the analyzed discourses, it appears as a device of **individual responsibility** rather than as a space for collective reflection:

> "The Leading in Artificial Intelligence: Exploring Technology and Policy executive program sits at the vital nexus of technology and policy, offering frameworks and strategies to navigate emerging challenges."
>
> **(Harvard Kennedy School – direct link)**

The figure of the leader is narrated as *the one who navigates*, capable of facing complexity with pragmatism and vision. However, this **heroic vision of leadership** seems to elude the crucial question of **ethical responsibility**:

> "The central question is what kind of leaders and governance structures we want to cultivate to ensure human accountability, even if AI exceeds human capability."
>
> **(Shin Un Kang, 2025, Blavatnik – direct link)**

The phrase *"even if AI exceeds human capability"* acknowledges that even if AI may surpass human cognitive abilities, it should not replace **moral responsibility**. However, in the discourse on accountability, responsibility tends to be reduced to **an individual, rather than a collective commitment.** Therefore, the attention on accountability in the age of AI does not save the human element; it merely preserves human **culpability**.

Interpretative Synthesis. Through thematic and discursive analysis of the documents,

several **structural lines of meaning** emerge that cut across the institutional discourse on AI in schools of management and government:

- **Depoliticization**. AI is narrated as a natural destiny, not as a political construction or choice. The imperative of adaptation replaces choice.
- **Ambiguity about Human Value**. Ethical dimensions (well-being, sustainability, responsibility) are absorbed into the language of efficiency and transformed into tools of competitive advantage.
- **Discursive Ambivalence between hype and moderation**. Institutions oscillate between warning against hype and reproducing it, between criticizing excess and celebrating unstoppable progress.
- **Languages of Complexity and Control**. Metaphors of navigation, journey, and landscape construct complexity both as a threat and as a field of cognitive conquest.
- **Reaffirmation of Epistemic Authority**. Schools legitimize their role as mediators between the chaos of innovation and the promise of meaning, positioning themselves as **custodians of the right knowledge** to "navigate the AI era."
- **Time.** AI will (at best) free up time — but whose time will that be? There is a persistent tension between the promise of improved work–life balance and the instrumental use of time as a means to increase productivity.
- **The image of leadership.** The "AI leader" is portrayed as an extraordinary individual — visionary, inspired, and capable of embracing change. Yet, despite frequent references to ethics, empathy, and soft skills, the underlying representation of leadership seems to remain anchored in a **traditional and heroic paradigm**.

Overall, the analyzed institutional discourse constructs a **grammar of necessity**: AI must be adopted, understood, leveraged, and governed. Doubt, critique, and the political dimension of change are largely mentioned but often reabsorbed into a **managerial and strategic rationality**. In this way, AI is not only the object of discourse but becomes a lens through which organizations reformulate their identity, their power, and their mission within the contemporary world. At the same time, the growing emphasis on **ethics, sustainability, collaboration, and work–life balance** should not be dismissed. Even if these notions are often reabsorbed into managerial or instrumental logics, their increasing visibility signals a **deeper cultural shift**. Institutions are beginning to acknowledge that technological transformation cannot be sustained without rethinking the human dimensions of work, responsibility, and well-being.

Some differences between school types. In this section, we present — through a table and NVivo-generated word clouds — the main differences that emerged between the two groups of schools. The schools of government and public administration have been grouped together because of their similarity in aims and content. Understanding how different types of institutions narrate Artificial Intelligence is crucial, because these narratives shape the cultural foundations of executive education. Business schools and schools of government train leaders who operate within distinct value systems, and their discourses on AI reflect—and reproduce—these systems. While business schools often frame AI in terms of competitiveness, innovation, and market performance, schools of government tend to emphasize efficiency, ethics, and public accountability. Examining these differences is not a matter of classification, but of understanding how educational institutions construct meaning around technology. Each discourse implies specific assumptions about what kind of leaders and citizens we are educating, and what kind of relationship between humans and machines is being normalized. Recognizing these divergent logics helps identify opportunities for convergence—towards a more ethical, human-centered, and culturally aware vision of innovation.

This table outlines the primary differences between the two groups of schools.

Dimension	School of Management	School of Government & Administration
Discursive tone	Promotional, performative, market-oriented	Institutional, ethical, civic, and technocratic
Dominant lexicon	business, transformation, management, innovation, data, analytics, strategy, journey, impact, leadership	policy, government, public, digital, governance, segurança, direitos, administração, justice, leadership, information, service, data, formação
Object of AI	Instrument of competitive advantage, innovation accelerator	Instrument of public service, security, governance, and accountability
Dominant values	Efficiency, agility, growth, impact	Ethics, responsibility, service, transparency, justice
Vision of AI	AI as a natural and inevitable economic force to be exploited	AI as a political and administrative object to be regulated, understood, and governed
Function of leadership	To lead and motivate change; to be "visionary"	To ensure balance, responsibility, and ethical orientation in decision-making
Implicit narrative on AI	AI as a lever of power and personal and organizational transformation	AI as an infrastructure of governance and a collective good

WORD CLOUDS GENERATED WITH NVIVO

School of Management
The vocabulary of **management schools** revolves around words as *business marketing, strategy*, *data*, *transformation*, development, and *analytics*, reflecting a performance-oriented and market-driven understanding of innovation.

n contrast, **schools of government** emphasize terms such as *policy, security, privacy, technology, decision and resources*, indicating a focus on governance, ethics, and the societal implications of digital transformation. Finally, **national schools of public administration (on the right)** display a language grounded in *data*, *information*, human *rights*, and *service*s. .

How Schools Are using AI in Training and Research in practice. Beyond the discursive dimension, it is noteworthy that detailed documentation of how AI has been implemented in schools is difficult to find on schools' websites. While it is essential to acknowledge that this analysis is not exhaustive of all available materials, but rather limited to a selected sample, it remains significant that such information was not easily accessible.The following table summarizes the main uses related to AI that we found in the analyzed documents. A deeper understanding, however, would require further investigation through interviews or survey-based research. However, we detected some tendencies that are acknowledged by the material we deal with.

Category	Main Practical Uses	Examples / Citations
AI for Training	- Support for administrative activities, automated tutoring, and personalized feedback. - Use of AI to personalize the educational experience Creation of virtual assistants and chatbots to support students and faculty.	"'L'intelligenza artificiale entra ufficialmente nei corridoi della Bocconi. Non come oggetto di studio, ma come strumento quotidiano per studenti, docenti e staff". Rivista AI (sulla Bocconi) "[...] l'utilizzo di modelli avanzati di AI per quantificare concetti astratti a partire da testi, video e altre fonti di dati non strutturati su larga scala e la personalizzazione dell'esperienza educativa". Fortune Italia (sulla Bocconi)
Training for AI	- Workshops on prompt engineering -Training of executives and managers to lead digital transformation and AI adoption. - Development of technical and strategic skills to use AI in business and public administration.	"Leading Digital and AI Transformation" IMD "AI AND PUBLIC LAW" Blavatnik "Unit 2: How to Use Generative AI Prompt Engineering Beyond Chatbots When and How to Use Generative AI AI Tools in Practice: A Case Study" HKS
AI for Research	- Application of AI in social sciences for simulations and analysis. - Development of autonomous agent-based systems to support research. - Advanced data analytics to improve training programs and identify emerging needs.	"L'ambizione è lo sviluppo di agenti intelligenti capaci di operare su teorie economiche, manageriali e di policy, in grado di simulare comportamenti, condurre esperimenti e generare dati utili sia alla ricerca accademica che all'applicazione pratica. Sarà poi possibile, in ambito statistico, la misurazione concettuale da dati non strutturati, ovvero quantificare concetti astratti come i tratti comportamentali o le narrazioni, a partire da testi, video e altre fonti" Agenda Digitale (su SDA Bocconi)
Research for AI	- Academic research on AI foundations, ethics, safety, and social impact. - Multidisciplinary projects on AI governance and regulation.	"The TONOMUS Global Center for Digital and AI Transformation provides world-leading research and analysis on digital transformation and prepares executives to take advantage of digital opportunities, especially AI. These insights also inform IMD's digital and AI transformation programs for individuals and organizations". IMD

Future Directions. Despite the decidedly critical tone of this paper, we want to conclude with a constructive reflection on how the challenges raised by AI can inspire new directions for both **educational practice and research**. Reflections on the narratives

surrounding AI reveal how too often, AI is portrayed as a technological or economic necessity rather than a socio-political and ethical choice that entails global responsibilities. Therefore, we think that **future work should therefore explore how education and inquiry can foster ethical awareness and critical literacy**, helping individuals and organizations to question the assumptions that frame innovation. Learning to live with complexity means understanding and accepting uncertainty rather than seeking to control it. Both teaching and research should cultivate **self-awareness, emotional resilience, and reflective judgment**, creating spaces where learners and scholars alike can confront the anxieties of technological acceleration. **Investigating how these capacities develop—through embodied, experiential, and dialogical forms of learning—represents a key area for future exploration.** At the same time, the grand narratives that surround AI—often marked by excessive enthusiasm or fear—need to be critically deconstructed. **Research and educational programs alike should interrogate the discourses that define AI**, revealing how they shape institutional practices, values, and forms of knowledge. Realistic evaluation, supported by case studies and philosophical reflection, can help expose both the potential and the limits of AI, while situating it within broader cognitive and social ecosystems. This also calls for a shift in how we understand leadership and collective intelligence. **Educational and organizational contexts can investigate new participatory and relational models of governance**, in which ethical sensitivity, empathy, and collaborative intelligence become central forms of competence. Investigating how such models can emerge within AI-mediated environments remains a crucial challenge for both scholars and practitioners. Finally, **the idea of progress itself demands renewed critical attention**. Instead of assuming technological advancement as an unquestioned good, future research and educational design should approach progress as an opportunity for **social innovation and moral imagination**—a chance to rethink the values that guide our shared futures.

2. CONCLUSIONS

This study has shown that institutional discourses on Artificial Intelligence in Executive Education often frame technology within a grammar of inevitability and control, reinforcing a managerial logic centered on efficiency rather than reflection. Both the theoretical and empirical analyses highlight the need to challenge this narrative and to cultivate alternative imaginaries that re-embed intelligence within its human, embodied, and relational dimensions. Drawing on the 4E cognitive framework (Viale et al., 2023)—

Embodied, Embedded, Extended, and Enactive cognition—this paper has proposed a more situated understanding of how leaders think, learn, and decide in the age of AI. Such a perspective shifts attention from the purely computational to the experiential and ethical, recognizing that decision-making is always shaped by bodies, contexts, and relationships. Reframing Executive Education through this lens means designing curricula that foster embodied awareness, ethical reasoning, and reflexivity alongside digital literacy. It implies re-humanizing the educational space so that technology becomes not a substitute for judgment, but a catalyst for deeper understanding and collective responsibility. In conclusion, the challenge is not simply to learn how to use AI more effectively, but to use it as an opportunity to rethink what it means to lead, learn, and decide together. AI should not dictate the future of leadership and education—it should invite us to reimagine them. An ultimate reflection emerges: we often fail to recognize that AI is neither truly intelligent nor entirely artificial, yet we treat it as a natural destiny—as if destiny itself were not a human artifice. When we claim that we must harness AI, we overlook that it is both human and natural; thus, exploiting AI may also imply a deeper exploitation of human and natural resources. In doing so, we risk neglecting to question how the very notions of "natural" and "artificial" are situated within philosophy and discourse, and how these categories shape our understanding of intelligence and technology. Perhaps, to truly benefit from AI, we need to invert our logic and look at the world upside down—seeing technology not as a destiny to master, but as a mirror that reflects who we are, what we value, and how we choose to evolve. AI reflects humanity itself, and it is our own humanity—not the technology—that should ultimately be placed under scrutiny.

REFERENCES

Al Haddi, H. (2024, December). *AI Washing: The cultural traps that lead to exaggeration and how CEOs can stop them*. California Management Review. https://cmr.berkeley.edu/2024/12/ai-washing-the-cultural-traps-that-lead-to-exaggeration-and-how-ceos-can-stop-them/

Alvesson, M. & Karreman, D. (2000). *Varieties of Discourse: On the Study of Organizations through Discourse Analysis*. Human Relations, 53, 1125 – 1149.

Babšek, M., Ravšelj, D., Umek, L., & Aristovnik, A. (2025). *Artificial Intelligence*

Adoption in Public Administration: An Overview of Top-Cited Articles and Practical Applications. AI, 6(3), 44. https://doi.org/10.3390/ai6030044

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021*). Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications.

Cambridge University Press. (n.d.). *Executive*. In Cambridge Dictionary. Retrieved October 13, 2025, from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/executive

Colamedici, A., & Arcagni, S. (2024). *L'algoritmo di Babele. Storie e miti dell'intelligenza artificiale* [e-book]. Solferino. https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=-sgsEQAAQBAJ

Contu, Alessia (2009), ' *Critical Management Education'*, in Mats Alvesson, Todd Bridgman, and Hugh Willmott (eds), The Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies (2011; online edn, Oxford Academic, 2 Sept. 2009), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199595686.013.0027, accessed 13 Oct. 2025.

Crawford, K. (2021). *Atlas of AI: Power, politics, and the planetary costs of artificial intelligence* [E-book]. Yale University Press.

Cristianini, N. (2023). *La scorciatoia: Come le macchine sono diventate intelligenti senza pensare in modo umano* [Kindle ed.]. Il Mulino.

Gallese, V. (2019) "*Embodied Simulation. Its Bearing on Aesthetic Experience and the Dialogue Between Neuroscience and the Humanities* Gestalt Theory, vol. 41, no. 2, Society for Gestalt Theory and its Applications (GTA), pp. 113-127. https://doi.org/10.2478/gth-2019-0013

Gigerenzer, G. (2022). *How to stay smart in a smart world: Why human intelligence still beats algorithms* [E-book], https://www.amazon.com/HOW-STAY-SMART-WORLD/dp/0241567432

Grant, D., Hardy, C., Oswick, C., & Putnam, L. (2004). *The SAGE handbook of organizational discourse*. SAGE Publications Ltd, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781848608122

Groff, A., (2023), Critical Discourse Analysis, https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/language-and-linguistics/critical-discourse-analysis-cda.

Hardy, C. (2001). Researching Organizational Discourse. *International Studies of Management & Organization*, *31*(3), 25–47. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40397507

Metzinger, T. (2019, April 8). *EU guidelines: Ethics washing made in Europe*. *Der Tagesspiegel*. Retrieved October 30, 2025, from https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/ethics-washing-made-in-europe-5937028.html

Phillips, N., & Hardy, C. (2002). *Discourse analysis*. SAGE Publications, Inc., https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412983921

Quiroga, E. (2023). *Why we shouldn't call Artificial Intelligence "Artificial Intelligence": A suggestion for a change of nomenclature that is much more important than it appears* [Manuscript]. Universidad del Atlántico Medio, DOI:10.13140/RG.2.2.32352.70400

Scuola Nazionale dell'Amministrazione. (n.d.). IA e formazione SNA [Pagina web]. SNA. https://sna.gov.it/home/attivita/ricerca/progetti-di-ricerca/progetti-in-corso/ia-e-formazione-sna/

Shan, J., & Wade, M. R. (2025, September). *The rise of agentic AI: A new era in workplace productivity*. IMD Business School. https://www.imd.org/news/artificial-intelligence/the-rise-of-agentic-ai-a-new-era-in-workplace-productivity/

Kang, D. S. U. (2025, October 2). *3 big questions to prepare leaders for the age of artificial intelligence*. Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford. https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/blog/3-big-questions-prepare-leaders-age-artificial-intelligence

Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom.* Oxford University Press.

Simon, Herbert A. "Rationality in Psychology and Economics." The Journal of Business, vol. 59, no. 4, 1986, pp. S209–24. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2352757. Accessed 13 Oct. 2025.

Spicer, A. and Alvesson, M. (2025), Critical Management Studies: A Critical Review. J. Manage. Stud., 62: 446-483. https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.13047

Technological determinism. (n.d.). *Oxford Reference*. Oxford University Press.https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.201108031028132

53

Viale R, Gallagher S, Gallese V. *Bounded rationality, enactive problem solving, and the neuroscience of social interaction*. Front Psychol. 2023 May 18;14:1152866. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1152866. PMID: 37275688; PMCID: PMC10232769.

Viale, R. (Ed.). (2020). *Routledge Handbook of Bounded Rationality* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315658353

Whiteley, P. (2023, October 19). *Why artificial intelligence is a misnomer*. British Politics & Policy at LSE. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/why-artificial-intelligence-is-a-misnomer/

Winner, Langdon (1980). *Do artifacts have politics?* Daedalus 109 (1):121--136.

MAIN WEB PAGES CONSULTED FOR THE CDA

https://www.sdabocconi.it/it/home

https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/

https://www.imd.org/

https://www.hks.harvard.edu/

https://www.insp.gouv.fr/

https://www.nsob.nl/node/52

PAPER 3

RETHINKING EXECUTIVE EDUCATION WITH ART-BASED METHODS THROUGH HEIDEGGERIAN *ALETHEIA*

Abstract. This paper explores the meaning, benefits, and risks of Art-Based Methods (ABMs) in Executive Education (ExEd). Drawing on Heidegger's (1950/1995) concept of art as aletheia—an event of "disclosure" and "truth"—ABMs are not treated merely as a set of artistic or creative tools. Rather, they are understood as practices that unveil hidden meanings and can reorient ExEd toward a more human and authentic form of learning. The study is grounded in Critical Management Studies (CMS) and Critical Management Education (CME), answering calls for alternatives to rationalist and utilitarian paradigms in management education. Situating ABMs within a CMS/CME framework is crucial, as it shifts their role from creative instruments to critical practices. This stance helps to avoid the instrumentalization of art as a means to make management more creative, innovative, or efficient—an approach that paradoxically reinforces the very calculative logic these critical traditions aim to challenge. In this perspective, ABMs are conceived as acts of resistance to mainstream managerial rationalities, embodying the emancipatory and reflexive aspirations central to CME. The paper also examines the risks of "domestication" (Contu, 2009) and co-optation (Parker, 2023), emphasizing the need for organizational contexts capable of sustaining the transformative potential of ABMs. Finally, the proposal of a phenomenological lens for defining ABMs enables reflection on the conditions under which they generate meaningful impact in ExEd. Although Heidegger is not a common reference within CMS/CME scholarship, his ontological reflections on art enrich the paper's critical stance and deepen the understanding of ABMs as a site of truth-revealing practice.

Keywords: art-based methods, Executive Education, Critical Management Studies, Critical Management Education, Heidegger.

Agnese Mecella, PhD Candidate, University of Milano-Bicocca

1. INTRODUCTION

> *"The nomos which art obeys is not that of the established reality principle but of its negation." – (Marcuse, 1977/1978 p.73)*

> *"The inner logic of the work of art terminates in the emergence of another reason, another sensibility, which defy the rationality and sensibility incorporated in the dominant social institutions". (Marcuse, 1977/1978, p.7)*

1.1 AN INTRODUCTORY HISTORY**.** In 2010, at MoMA (Museum of Modern Art) in New York, Marina Abramović sat motionless for hours, inviting each spectator to meet her gaze without speaking. This piece of art was named 'The Artist is Present'. As she explained in an interview with Sean O'Hagan (2010)

> "I test the limits of myself in order to transform myself, but I also take the energy from the audience and transform it … A powerful performance will transform everyone in the room."
>
> Marina Abramović

In that silent and prolonged act, art did not serve to produce anything. It offered no immediate instrumental utility. Instead, it provided personal transformation and a relationship with others. That episode, and many others, show why bringing art into dialogue with organizations and ExEd is difficult. These two worlds often appear opposed: one is supposed to use the world instrumentally for profit and private interest; the other is supposed to lend a simple gaze to things and people, enabling new perceptions and meanings. Because it bridges two different worlds, the use of ABMs practices in organizations is often seen as a "liminoid" space, in Turner's (1974) sense. The "liminoid" is characterized by play and the suspension of instrumental logic (Turner, 1974), representing a temporary break from productivity. In other terms, "liminoid" (Turner, 1974) is a zone where the world we know is destabilized, allowing creativity and novel possibilities to emerge (Turner, 1974). It is precisely this "liminoid" experience that we want to investigate in this research.

1.2 THE TOPIC AND AIM. This paper aims to explore Art-Based Methods (ABMs) in Executive Education (ExEd) programs through a **conceptual investigation.** The goal is **to better understand ABMs' nature, risks, and potential.** The study positions ABMs within a Critical Management Studies (CMS) and Critical Management Education (CME) perspective. To provide a coherent structure, this paper adopts the framework proposed by Lange and Pfarrer (2017) for writing conceptual papers, which includes establishing a common ground (what we agree on), identifying a problematization (what could be explored more deeply or what is the problem that is not already told), and a concern (why the topic is essential today), proposing a course of action (what the author is doing to address the problem), and presenting a contribution (what is the value of the research and the output). This approach strengthens the argument and aligns the paper with a recognized model in the literature. Why is a conceptual approach to the topic of ABMs considered important? It is undoubtedly one of many possible ways to address the subject. In this paper, reference is made to the article by Meisiek and Barry (2014), which argues, for example, that philosophical theories of art and management can inspire more scientifically grounded theories through a transdisciplinary approach. Moreover, this approach aims to challenge Sandberg's (2024) idea that we need, first of all, more

empirical and quantitative research on ABMs outcomes. We show that even a more profound theoretical reflection could advance the field.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS. This research asks: **how can art-based methods be defined and understood in the ExEd field? What potential, risks, and resistances can emerge around their use in Executive Education?** Answering these questions helps develop a deep definition of ABMs. Therefore, even though definitions may seem secondary or apart from practice, they can guide both interpretation and actions. Definitions can act as affordances, in Gibson's (1979) sense, shaping our engagement with ABMs. These ideas can open perspectives on how to integrate ABMs into ExEd, manage eventual connected risks, and leverage their strengths.

1.4 RESEARCH DOMAIN. In this study, ExEd refers to programs in business schools and schools of government. While these areas differ, many educational practices cross both. Criticisms of private-sector Executive Education—including reliance on rationalist models and neglect of emotional and embodied leadership (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009) — also affect the public sector. This is primarily due to the introduction of New Public Management (NPM) models into Public Administration. Bozeman (2007) writes, "*the term New Public Management has become a brand, one signifying market-oriented governance"* (Bozeman, 2007, p.69). Corporate ExEd programs often reveal insights for government and education, with adjustments. As Hudon and Rouillard (2015) say:

> "Critical Management Studies (CMS) have long been concerned with these issues in business management, but have made few inroads in public policy and public management research. Nevertheless, CMS can provide a coherent framework for observing public administration critically."
>
> **(Hudon and Rouillard, 2015, p.528)**

We argue that art-based methods (ABMs) are well-suited to Executive Education across both sectors. ABMs challenge rationalist approaches and enable free play, beyond products or efficiency. Moreover, ABMs can be valuable experiences in the public administration domain because they could help to foster social innovation, public value, and public interest. Adopting ABMs means setting aside some institutional logics and posing ethics, reflection, and embodied awareness at the core of ExEd.

2. COMMON GROUND

This section clarifies the current state of the art in ABMs for Executive Education (ExEd).

Art-Based Methods (ABMs) are learning interventions that use artistic practices —such as theatre, visual arts, writing, music, poetry, sculpture, or movement—to foster embodied reflection, emotional engagement, and new forms of knowledge construction (Safaa et al., 2023). Through a narrative literature review (Bourhis, 2017), this section also considers their connection with CMS/CME. ABMs are a growing approach in Executive Education, both in academia and practice. These methods often respond to traditional ExEd approaches, which privilege rationality and logic over embodied and emotional experience (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009). In practice, examples include MBA and ExEd courses at the Darden School that use theatre and *Commedia dell'Arte* (de Colle, Freeman, Parmar & de Colle, 2015), and *The Concert of Ideas* described by Taylor & Ladkin (2009), which employs music.

The literature is presented here according to themes we identified as central and relevant, using a flexible narrative review process to capture authoritative sources in the field. This review was conducted by searching articles using keywords in academic databases such as EBSCO and Web of Science, as well as through Google Scholar. Furthermore, starting from the most relevant and authoritative sources identified, the investigation was extended by examining the references cited within those works. For instance, searches were performed using the following query to identify articles related to the topic:

(TS = ("critical management education" OR "critical management studies" OR "executive education" OR "managerial learning" OR "business school" OR "school of management")) AND TS = ("art-based methods" OR "art-based" OR "music" OR "theatre" OR "poetry").

This strategy enabled the capture of a wide range of conceptual and empirical studies that connect critical management perspectives with art-based practices in ExEd.

2.1 WHAT ABM ARE AND WHAT THEY DO. ABMs encompass a plurality of methods that can serve different functions and respond to diverse objectives within training (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009). Taylor & Ladkin (2009) identify four main ways in which ABMs can impact managerial learning: skill transfer, projective technique, illustration of essence, and making:

- *Skill transfer* refers to the ability of art to develop and transfer new competences that can be used in professional contexts.
- *Projective technique* refers to the capacity to surface thoughts and emotions that would not have emerged without artistic intervention.

• *Illustration of essence* means grasping the essence of a concept through a different, less linear type of experience.

• *Making* refers to reconnecting with oneself through the act of creation, thereby also serving a therapeutic function (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009).

2.2 SOME EXAMPLES OF ART LANGUAGES APPLIED TO EXECUTIVE EDUCATION. The purpose of this section is illustrative. It aims to provide readers with a concrete sense of the types of initiatives commonly referred to when artistic practices are associated with Executive Education. Those examples were drawn from publicly available web sources. Illustrative examples of initiatives mobilising artistic practices in executive education include:

→ **Music- and sound-based approaches.** Music-inspired training formats often use ensemble performance or orchestral experience as models for organisational coordination and leadership dynamics. Participants can, for example, engage in collective music-making, rhythmic exercises, listening practices, and conductor–ensemble simulations in order to experience interdependence and distributed forms of leadership. An_example of a music-based approach is the three-day **Music Thinking** programme offered collaboratively by **Berklee's Institute for Creative Entrepreneurship (BerkleeICE)** and **ESADE Business School**. This programme engages leaders from diverse industries in a structured exploration of music-inspired leadership concepts, inviting participants to strengthen creative mindset skills such as **improvisation and collaboration.**

> "Through lectures and interactive workshops, participants will: practice and strengthen creative mindset skills, such as improvisation, collaboration, and performing, inspired by the instincts of musicians, actors, and dancers; identify how creative thinking is applicable to a successful business or entrepreneurial ecosystem; apply leadership and management skills used by teams of artists; and observe and adopt best practices used at Berklee's campus in Valencia"
>
> (Berklee College of Music, n.d.)

→ **theatre and performance-based approaches.** Several Executive Education programmes employ theatrical practices and improvisation to foster leadership, presence, communication, trust, and collaborative awareness. These approaches can involve, for example, guided improvisations and experiments with bodily expression or voice. One concrete instance of this theatre orientation is mentioned in the *Business Education Innovations Report (2021)*: the activity of Vlerick Business School under the guidance of Professor Ralf Wetzel (Education Innovation Report, 2021, p.29). who adopts an arts-based and performative approach to leadership development, placing particular emphasis on embodied experience. As reported in the Business Education Innovations Report (2021):

> "Along with bringing participants into playful interaction, the session strengthens the remote physical and emotional connection between participants by means of emotional and physical work."
>
> (Business Education Innovations Report, 2021, p.29).

→ **Visual arts and multi-artistic approaches.** Some executive programmes draw on visual arts and multidisciplinary practices to stimulate imagination, reflexivity, and creative problem-framing. These programmes can involve, for example, art observation sessions in museums and collaborative artistic production.The **Art Thinking** method developed by Sylvain Bureau at ESCP Business School and mentioned by the *Business Education Innovations Report (2021)*: exemplifies this orientation. The **Art Thinking Workshop** encourages participants to suspend habitual cognitive frames and learning through the creation of a piece of art, the steps to create "the improbable**".**

> "The Improbable method pushes participants to think outside the box, but also to address complex paradoxes, such as the Innovation-Sustainability or Profit-Purpose Paradox. These challenges require a mindset that balances seemingly opposing goals—creativity with responsibility, profitability with impact"
>
> (ESCP, 2024)

→ **Arts-integrative leadership laboratories.** Integrated initiatives that combine multiple expressive forms are also evident. The **Arts-Powered Leadership** programme in Madrid, offered by IE Business School, uses" immersive sessions in theatre, music, and visual arts".

> **"**Beyond the skills acquired, the experience provides a space for personal growth and collective discovery. By connecting with peers across industries, participants will co-create insights that link culture with purpose, vision with action, and creativity with resilience. This unique integration of arts and leadership not only expands the executive toolkit but also inspires leaders to foster more inclusive, innovative, and meaningful impact within their organizations"
>
> (IE University, n.d.).

Considering that the present exemplificative list of cases is based on online material, it does not allow for a close examination of how these initiatives are enacted in practice, nor of the depth and quality of participants' lived experiences. A promising direction for future research would be the collection of in-depth qualitative data through interviews with people involved with art-based practices in executive education, including facilitators, programme designers, and participants. Such an empirical investigation would enable a more systematic exploration of the perceived strengths, limitations, resistances, and benefits of these approaches from multiple stakeholder perspectives. Moreover, it could shed light on how these practices are positioned in relation to the utilitarian logic that characterises executive education contexts, and on the extent to which they may also operate as spaces of heideggerian *aletheia*, understood as processes of disclosure of meaning within such institutional settings. Although the author has had informal contacts with actors in the art-based education ecosystem, the development of a dedicated empirical study was deliberately postponed in the present work to ensure greater conceptual depth and coherence. Future research could therefore build on this conceptual paper by examining how these practices are experienced, negotiated, and institutionalised in concrete educational settings.

2.3. WHAT IS THE ABM CONTRIBUTION TO EXED? Even if ABMs are connected to creativity development (Kuo & Tien, 2022), curricula continue to be dominated by "cognitive-based courses" (Kuo & Tien, 2022). A distinctive contribution of ABMs appears to be the cultivation of "perceptual refinement" (Springborg, 2012) that concerns

the improvement of bodily, expressive, and cognitive capacities. Therefore, according to Springborg (2012), Arts-Based Methods (ABMs) have been linked to "reflection", "critical reflection", "transformational learning", "mindful learning/presencing", and "perfection of action" (Springborg, 2012, p.123). However, their unique contribution—one that seems to be achieved just with ABMs—is exactly "making and expressing more refined perceptual refinement"(Springborg, 2012, p.123). According to Sandberg (2024) and his literature analysis it is clear that ABMs are conceived as an holistic response to more traditional approaches:

> "The analysis revealed that art-based methods significantly enhance reflective and reflexive practices, higher-order cognitive skills, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal competencies. Representing leader development, art-based initiatives facilitate holistic self-discovery and transformative shifts in mindset, offering a valuable complement to conventional skill-based approaches."
>
> **(Sandberg, 2024, p.1)**

Moreover, to address the question "what is the ABM contribution to ExEd?", we highlight that, according to Holtham & Biagioli (2021), art-based pedagogy offers an effective response to the challenges of a VUCA world, where the complexity and uncertainty of reality are high, confirming that ABMs are framed as something that can help to deal with complexity. ABMs are often presented alongside the VUCA world topic, for example, in Antonacopoulou & Bento (2018).

2.4 ABM AND LEADERSHIP MODELS. The literature on ABMs is closely tied to discussions of leadership models and styles, since—as Sandberg (2024) points out—the discourse on leadership development goes hand in hand with the "theoretical understanding of leadership" (Sandberg, 2024, p.1). In particular, Sandberg (2024, p.1) builds on "post-heroic theories," which challenge the view of leadership as purely individual and frame it as a shared, social phenomenon.

> "Post-heroic theories posit leadership as a complex social process and multidirectional collective activity that necessitates the process of sensemaking in dynamic, complex, and volatile environments. In recent perspectives on leadership, the aesthetic and corporeal dimensions of leadership are acknowledged, thus embracing an embodied view of knowledge, sensory engagement, and experiential learning."
>
> **(Sandberg, 2024, p.1)**

The literature, in fact, highlights creativity (Fleming et al,, 2018), reflexivity (Fleming et al., 2018; Meisiek et al., 2023; Mavin et al., 2023; Han & Liang, 2015), and self-

awareness (Petriglieri et al., 2011) as essential competencies in leadership development, offering an alternative to the traditional "hero-leader" model (Fleming et al., 2018). Other studies emphasize the importance of the emotional, authentic, and embodied dimensions of leadership (Taylor et al., 2019; Fleming et al., 2018; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010; Tcholakian et al., 2023; Mavin et al., 2023). This explains the interest in ABMs which aligns well with new models of leadership found in literature. ABMs are also contextualized by Antonacopoulou & Bento (2018) in opposition to the traditional "laurels" model of leadership with the "leader-as-learner" model.

> "In this approach, becoming a leader is the metaphorical equivalent of being crowned with laurels, celebrated for the qualities and achievements of a winner, worthy of influencing others and exercising power over them. This approach is characterized by the prescriptive models prevalent in the socialization of managerial elites, where leadership is treated as exclusionary and hierarchical, and leaders belong on a 'league of their own: a mythical world of possibility that everyone can envision, very few can be a part of, and only a handful can deliver'"
>
> **(Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2018, p.624).**

In contrast, the "leaders-as-learners" (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2018, p.625) model emphasizes that:

> "[…] leaders are keenly aware of both the limitations and potential of human nature, in themselves and others."
>
> **(Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2018, p.624)**

This approach moves toward a humanization of leadership, as emphasized by Petriglieri & Petriglieri (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2018). The same authors (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2018) note that ABMs appear particularly promising for developing emotional aspects, which are essential to the "leaders-as-learners" (Antonacopoulou & Bento, 2018, p.625) paradigm. Fleming et al. (2018) similarly connect ABMs to vulnerability and empathy, framing them as part of a new leadership model that contrasts with the traditional "hero leader" (Fleming et al., 2018, p.606) approach.

2.5 ABM AND ETHICS. Another topic arising from the review is the relationship between ABMs and ethics. This relationship is complex and philosophical, rooted in the connection between aesthetics and ethics. According to Ladkin (2018), the aesthetic dimension can be related to the ethical dimension of organizations. This relationship is nuanced: through a review of influential philosophical traditions, Ladkin (2018) explains how aesthetics can stimulate moral action, but can also be misused for hostile or propagandistic purposes, as in Nazi Germany. Other research, such as that of Yang et al. (2021), highlights how visual art can be employed in education to raise awareness of sustainability, which represents one of today's

most pressing ethical challenges for organizations. Similarly, Molderez et al. (2021) argue:

> "Art-based approaches can be a powerful method in helping people to deal with sustainability aspects alternatively to traditional learning (Ivanaj et al., 2014). Moreover, it contributes to understanding and even implementing such complex concepts as 'sustainable strategy' in a business setting (Ivanaj et al., 2014)."
>
> **(Molderez et al., 2021, p.18)**

Beyond sustainability, ABMs can also address diversity, fostering its development within organizations (Bacouël et al., 2024). According to these authors (Bacouël et al., 2024)., ABMs are particularly effective in developing creativity within increasingly diverse workforces. It is not enough to fill a workplace with diverse individuals in order to enhance creativity—people must be engaged in ways that enable them to transform diversity into creativity, and ABMs appear to be an excellent ally in this process (Bacouël et al., 2024)., .

2.6 EVALUATING ABMs. Another key theme in the review concerns the evaluation of ABM's impact, which presents challenges compared to traditional training. How can we assess whether interventions are effective? In Sandberg's opinion (2024), what is missing in the literature are precisely quantitative and empirical investigations. However, is this really what is needed to evaluate ABMs effectiveness? As Snyder (2015) emphasizes, the effectiveness of artistic interventions in organizations cannot be assessed solely by outcomes. Instead, one must consider the extent to which the broader organizational setting fosters the transfer of learning, encourages co-creation, and supports dialogue—since only in such a context can ABMs produce their best results. In other words, ABMs are effective only within a particular organizational logic that foster (Snyder, 2025).

> "The learning organization model promotes the importance of developing the necessary systemic practices to transform individual learning into organizational learning. To generate value for organizational learning, arts-based interventions are dependent on the presence of systemic process supported through infrastructural architectures to support deep learning. […]Absent the architecture, ABIs may be reduced to "point-in-time" activities rather than developed as transformative agents".
>
> **(Snyder, 2025, pp.6-7)**

2.7 ABMs and CMS/CME. The paper's theoretical background is grounded in Critical Management Studies (CMS) and Critical Management Education (CME). This direction allows us to frame art-based methods and initiatives not only as valuable pedagogical tools but also as potential acts of activism and resistance against dominant logics of utility, efficiency, and productivity (Contu, 2020). The term CMS was used to refer to a type of scholarship in 1992 (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992), though its history is longer. As Spicer and

Alvesson (2024) note:

> "Since the manager appeared as a formal position, there has been some kind of criticism of management."
>
> **(Spicer and Alvesson, 2024, p.448)**

Mavin et al. (2023, p.530) discuss the four principles of CME derived from Reynolds, which this research also adopts as guiding points:

- "questioning taken-for-granted assumptions in the theory and practice of management" (Mavin et al., 2023, p.530)
- "making explicit the role of power and ideology in institutional and societal practices";(Mavin et al., 2023, p.530)
- "confronting claims of rationality and objectivity, and examining how privileged interests benefit from such claims";(Mavin et al., 2023, p.530)
- "working towards an emancipatory ideal".(Mavin et al., 2023, p.530)

The alignment of ABMs' considerations with CME is evident in how this research resonates with the directions of that field identified by Contu, such as "deviation from the traditional business school curriculum" (Contu, 2009, p 545), hybridization of established teaching models, and experimentation with classroom practices (Contu, 2009). While this study does not directly introduce or test new methodologies, it aims to reduce barriers to their adoption and to promote greater awareness of non-mainstream practices, of which ABMs represent a significant and radical example. Concerning CMS, the study is inspired by its key principles, such as the denaturalization of management practices, a critical attitude about dominant performative logics, and an emphasis on reflexivity in both educational and managerial contexts (Fournier & Grey, 2000; Alvesson et al., 2009). As Grey (2004) argues:

> "CME is sometimes criticized as being overly theoretical as compared with more traditional business school realism. I argue that something like the opposite is the case. The traditional approach is forever attacked from inside and out for its lack of relevance to the real world. […] In this sense, CME can speak far more effectively to practice, if it can find the voice to do so. In this way, business schools could reinvent themselves."
>
> **(Grey, 2004, p.184)**

Since ABMs are marginal practices in ExEd, they can legitimately be considered part of

CMS and CME research. By their very nature, they call into question the "functional stupidity" identified by Alvesson and Spicer (2012). Some connections between ABMs and CMS become evident, considering that, as the literature shows (Sandberg, 2024), Art-Based Methods emerge as responses to mainstream educational techniques and leader-centered approaches. Most approaches to ExEd, in fact, emphasize rational skills and give little attention to emotion and the aesthetic dimension of leadership. Reflection on ABMs, therefore, directly challenges mainstream models, destabilizing them by opposing their instrumental logic with a more humanistic and holistic orientation.

3. PROBLEMATIZATION

> "Redonner à l'école son sens de *skholè*, c'est refuser l'idée qu'elle ne servirait qu'à nous adapter à l'*askholia* (au *nec-otium*) plutôt qu'à nous en émanciper : c'est la comprendre comme apprentissage du temps libre et souverain". (Ars Industrialis, Skholé)

3.1 THE NEED FOR A PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION ON ART IN THE MANAGEMENT CONTEXT. This section serves to deepen the understanding of Art-Based Methods (ABMs) and to advance a broader reflection on their nature and role in Executive Education. This allows us to expose the original contribution of this research. The management literature on ABMs rarely explores, in philosophical terms, what art is, even if researchers use, observe and study it. However, to bring art into organizational contexts and ExEd, it is essential to reflect deeply on its nature. This seems particularly important to prevent the risk of "domestication" (Contu, 2009), that is connected with the functional stupidity" (Alvesson & Spiecer, 2012) we spoke about. Therefore, if ABMs are reduced to technical exercises or superficial "creative" activities, they risk being "co-opted"[6] as forms of managerial or cultural "washing" and can lose their transformative and powerful potential. .By contrast, we will show that when art is understood in essence, it necessarily disrupts "functional stupidity" (Alvesson & Spiecer, 2012) : it opens new relations, questions assumptions, and discloses organizational dynamics, even when these are uncomfortable. It reveals what was previously hidden. In this sense, introducing art into ExEd is inherently transformative when art is understood in its very nature, as it challenges their capacity to accept critique and engage in self-examination. For this reason, a philosophical reflection on the nature of ABMs is proposed here through an interpretation of Heideggerian *aletheia* (Heidegger, 1950/1995). Critical Management Education (CME) and Critical Management Studies (CMS) provide the political and social foundation for this reflection, offering a critique of managerial ideology. This paper

extends that critique by engaging with Heidegger's ontology of art. Heidegger's thought is not critical in a political sense, yet it carries a radical critical force. Proposing an ontological and epistemological reflection within the managerial world is in itself a critical act, as it compels us to question the essence of things. In a context primarily concerned with the use, control, and optimization of objects, phenomenological observation already represents a moment of rupture. Although Heidegger is not a canonical author within CMS or CME, this paper engages in dialogue with his philosophy to bring together the political insights of CMS and CME with an ontological form of critique.

This reflection does not aim to exhaust the complex and old discourse on what art is or is not, but rather to provide a lens for interpreting the nature of these practices in the ExEd and organizational context. This makes it possible to promote those practices more effectively, thereby encouraging leadership development in a human, holistic, and profound manner. This contribution is particularly relevant because the human capacities that AMBs promise to cultivate are increasingly in demand, as we will discuss in the section "Concern".

3.2 ART AS AN EVENT OF TRUTH: HEIDEGGER'S ALETHEIA**.** In this research, art is not understood merely as a list of "fine arts" disciplines, but rather through a phenomenological perspective. For Heidegger, a work of art is an event in which "truth" is disclosed, opening a world of meaning rooted in the materiality of the artifact (Heidegger, 1950/1995). Art, therefore, is not simply a set of objects or techniques but a process through which meaning emerges and significance is revealed. In the famous passage devoted to Van Gogh's peasant shoes, Heidegger shows that the work of art is not limited to representing an object but rather opens access to the world to which it belongs (Heidegger, 1950/1995). The mere material description of the shoes—leather, soles, nails—does not reveal their essence, since it reduces the equipment to a set of physical properties. What truly makes the shoes what they are is their everyday use: the work in the fields and the lived experience of the peasant woman who wears them. In Van Gogh's painting, this world unfolds: the shoes reveal the burden of agricultural labor, the harshness, and at the same time the dignity of that life (Heidegger, 1950/1995). Art, in this sense, is an event of truth (*aletheia*), a process of disclosure in which the being of the world's instruments does not appear as an isolated object but as an integral part of a horizon of meaning (Heidegger, 1950/1995). Even if it would be more appropriate to speak of the "arts" in the plural, we argue that what fundamentally characterizes ABMs

is not the use of specific techniques or tools, but their ability to create a space of *Aletheia* in which meaningful content arises for participants. In that sense, we disagree with the following consideration by Taylor and Ladkin:

> "Currently, it is very difficult to talk about "arts based methods" in any coherent way because a wide range of approaches that can result in a variety of different goals and outcomes are used".
>
> **(Taylor & Ladkin, 2009, p.55)**

Following the previous reflection, we can argue that although art encompasses a wide variety of techniques and functions — as rightly emphasized by Taylor and Ladkin (2009) — it can still be experienced as a unified phenomenon of reflection.

3.3 THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL UNITY OF ABMs AND THE SUSPENSION OF THE INSTRUMENTAL LOGIC. Therefore, it is not inappropriate or difficult to speak of ABMs as a coherent category: even if the methods differ, they are all grounded in the same fundamental phenomenon of art. What makes an experience authentically "art-based" is not simply the unusual recourse to artistic practices in an ExEd setting, but the opening of a world of sense through the production or encounter with an artifact. When understood in a Heideggerian sense, ABMs are not instruments for 'producing' creativity or awareness in a controllable, predictable way. Their specificity lies in creating conditions that suspend utilitarian logic, setting the stage for a possible disclosure of new meanings that cannot be entirely controlled. In other words, the point is not to apply the notion of *aletheia* as a technique, but rather to acknowledge that ABMs can serve as occasions in which such an opening may manifest itself. If art is a suspension of the instrumental use of the world, it incontrovertibly confronts us with the theme of utility. If there is anything art "serves," it is precisely the suspension of instrumental use of the world and so the very profound nature of private organizations. Perhaps this is why art seems so distant from the organizational sphere, representing a profound negation of its implicit logic. However, saying that art is not useful is incorrect. It all depends on what we mean by utility. Indeed, art resists instrumental use, but this does not mean it is useless. If we reflect deeply, what distinguishes art from design is precisely its instrumental function. We basically use design to use objects and the world more effectively, but art serves another function in our experience. According to Carrie Buchholz (2025):

> "One of the most compelling ways to distinguish art from design is through the presence—or intentional absence—of affordance."
>
> **(Buchholz, 2025)**

Affordances (Gibson, 1979) are what open up worlds of possibilities—they are the features of an object that enable us to use it in certain ways. Design invites use; it makes us understand how something is to be used. Art, instead, presents us with the object as unusable. Although the concept of affordance, originally introduced by psychologist James J. Gibson (1979), is useful for understanding the distinction between art and design, we propose an alternative interpretation. It is not true that art does not produce affordances. Unlike design, which "affords" the specific use of an object, art "affords" contemplation, a *world-opening,* a reflection on the world. Thus, art can be understood as an affordance, but one that invites us to act within a world different from that of functional objects. It predisposes us to another attitude toward things, which can be considered "useful" from a human perspective, as it fosters personal well-being and authentic development. Art is therefore not something to be *used* by the managerial world; rather, it is the managerial world that may begin to enter the world of art to draw something beneficial from it, precisely because the work of art, following a Heideggerian reflection, suspends the instrumental use of the world and thus the typical logics of organizations.

> "Nell'epoca della metafisica compiuta, cioè nell'epoca della tecnoscienza imperante, l'arte è colta da Heidegger come l'estrema, residua possibilità di guardare all'ente, alla realtà che ci circonda, da un punto di vista diverso rispetto a quello che lo riduce a un semplice utilizzabile-funzionale a disposizione: l'unica possibilità di mantenere l'ente nell'Aperto (nella libertà a cui l'arte, aggiungiamo noi, ci *obbliga*)".
>
> **(Carboni, 2001)**

Art, in its refusal of instrumentality, is never neutral: it can transform, move, destabilize, and reveal. It is precisely in this dichotomy between the useful and the useless that the tension within the world of organizations, between art and work, resides. Art is not useless if we reframe our notion of utility. From the perspective of immediate profit, it may appear unproductive; yet if we conceive of well-being in broader terms, art emerges as profoundly useful, practical, and applicable.

3.4 THE ART OF MAKING AND THE ART OF RECEPTION. Another important consideration on art is that people may be invited to approach it in multiple ways, as producers and as receivers, since the artistic process involves both figures and sometimes blurs the distinction, being relational in nature. However, does art primarily concern the one who creates it or the one who interprets it? In the context of ExEd it is important to note that art is created both in production and in reception. These two moments are not easily or clearly separated. Within this framework, Ricoeur gives some valuable

reflections. He emphasizes that, once produced, the work of art acquires its own autonomy and becomes a site of meaning-generation through reception (*mimesis III*) (Ricoeur, 1983/1986). Art, therefore, cannot be reduced either to the creator's intention or to the receiver's interpretation alone, but instead emerges from the hermeneutical process that relates the two (Ricoeur, 1983/1986). From this perspective, art can be understood as existing independently of both creation and reception. Whenever a subject wants to understand the world, new meanings are generated, and an eminently artistic act is performed. In this sense, spectators are as much artists as those who produce the artifact. This perspective confirms that art is not identical with a material object (a painting, a sculpture) or a technique (dancing, singing, sculpting ecc). It does not coincide with a social role (the professional artist). Rather, it is an intentional act of understanding: at the moment in which a subject manipulates or contemplates the world in order to derive meaning from it, an artistic gesture takes place. If both spectators and creators equally participate in the process of meaning-making (even if in different ways and moments): art thus constitutes a shared and distributed event . Moreover, it suggests that School of Management, School og Governments, organizations and public administrationscould propose to executives different types of interaction with art that could be more comfortable for some people and find their unique way to deal with ABMs in customized manner.

3.5 A SPACE AND TIME FOR LEARNING. Reflecting on the nature of art makes us understand that ABMs, and indeed any educational approach, can achieve genuine effectiveness only when freed from purely utilitarian logics, as shown by the opening quote from Ars Industrialis (2010). It states that although training undeniably serves a practical purpose, learning time must also be experienced as "*skholè"(Ars Industrialis, 2010)*: a time of freedom, reflection, and self-discovery. Ars *Industrialis (2010)* shows that education is not a mere acquisition of immediately marketable skills, but becomes a transformative process aimed at cultivating the inner dispositions of human beings

.

> *Skholè*, pour les Grecs, a aussi le sens général d'une trêve, d'un répit, d'une suspension temporelle et en ce sens d'un repos ; cette suspension prime sur ce qu'elle suspend, à savoir les affairements de la vie quotidienne (*a-skholia*) ou les occupations serviles qui sont la marque d'une soumission aux besoins de la vie animale. La *skholè* désigne ainsi la temporalité libre propre des activités qui font, aux yeux des Grecs anciens, la valeur de l'existence proprement humaine. Le temps « skholaïque » ou « scolaire » est « calme », « tranquille » voire « lent » (traductions possibles de l'adjectif *skholaios*) parce qu'il est le temps de prendre son temps, un temps dans lequel l'action peut se dérouler à loisir et se donner le temps au lieu d'être emportée par lui.
>
> **(Ars Industrialis, Skholé)**

The adoption of ABMs, therefore, requires a profound reflection on the time and space we dedicate to ExEd and whether they are adequate. When we speak about ABMs we have to understand that we cannot expect a single workshop to produce deep and lasting transformations in a person's inner dispositions. Therefore, perceptual refinement, critical thinking, empathy, etc., they are more like taste; they need to be developed over time. ABMs require more than superficial enthusiasm: it calls for a deep awareness of both their emancipatory potential and the risk of their being neutralized or depotentiated within an organizational context that does not make space for them and, more in general, for human-based skills development. Even if a one-off ABM intervention may generate intense and stimulating experiences capable of activating reflection and personal growth, without a prolonged process that allows participants to exercise and consolidate these competences, it is difficult to imagine that they will result in stable changes in ways of thinking or acting (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009). The power of these approaches could be more profound if we use them continuously, training our human skills as we train our muscles at the gym.

3.6 THE RISK OF DOMESTICATION. Organizational "functional stupidity" is an "organizationally-supported lack of reflexivity, substantive reasoning, and justification." (Alvesson & Spicer,2012, p.1196) In such contexts, educational practices (even ABMs) risk losing their critical and emancipatory force, becoming instruments of adaptation rather than transformation. In this regard, the reflections of Fleming & Spicer (2014) on power within organizations are highly relevant. They argue that organizational power often manifests not through explicit means but through forms of domination. Power in organizations frequently operates by shaping ideology and molding the identities of those within them (Fleming & Spicer, 2014). This danger is not new. Boltanski & Chiapello (1999/2007) have shown how contemporary capitalism frequently appropriates the language of

creativity and autonomy while stripping it of its deeper transformative meaning. Similarly, Contu (2009) warns that even CME itself risks domestication if it becomes a mere category within the academic marketplace: its critical power is muted when absorbed into the very logics it seeks to challenge. For that reason, it's really important to remember that art must be free to challenge dominant beliefs during ExEd, or it risks being neutralized. From these considerations, we argue that it is not art that makes organizations better, but rather that only the best organizations can allow art into their environment. Attention to art is a symptom of a healthy society, as well as institutions or organizations that allow art to question dominant logics. Therefore, instead of asking what art can do for ExEd, we might ask how we can prepare organizations and schools capable of welcoming art – that means being able to question itself. How can they become places where there is not only an instrumental use of the world, but also reflection upon the world? The only way to avoid the risk of domestication is to flip the perspective, discuss organizational logics, and give space for learning. In other words, art needs to be let free to express its subversive potential:

> "Art breaks open a dimension inaccessible to other experience, a dimension in which human beings, nature, and things no longer stand under the law of the established reality principle. Subjects and objects encounter the appearance of that autonomy which is denied them in their society. […] The autonomy of art reflects the unfreedom of individuals in the unfree society. If people were free, then art would be the form and expression of their freedom. Art remains marked by unfreedom; in contradicting it, art achieves its autonomy,"
>
> (**Marcuse** 1977/1978. p.72-73)

In this reflection, Marcuse explains that art possesses a subversive dimension that reveals the reality of oppression in which people find themselves and restores to them the freedom that has been denied. It is therefore not surprising that art can be frightening to organizations, since to be ready to move toward art, they need to be capable of radically questioning themselves in an authentic manner.

3.7 IS MEASURE THE REAL URGENT GAP IN ABMs STUDIES? Now that we proposed a definition of art and the main problems that underlying the adoption of ABMs in ExEd we try to address one of the gaps that emerged from the literature review, showing that it is not as obvious as we might think. Sandberg (2024) points out that more quantitative studies on ABMs are needed. We question whether quantitative studies are truly necessary for evaluating practices whose benefits have already been widely recognized in the literature, even outside management studies - for example, by the

literature on neuro-aesthetics (e.g. Di Dio & Gallese, 2009) or the literature reviewed in the WHO's report (Fancourt & Finn, 2019) and by qualitative studies on real experiences. Such benefits often concern dimensions that are difficult to measure or reduce to indicators—such as empathy, self-awareness, or reflective capacity.

> "At the heart of business metaphysics is what Martin Heidegger calls 'calculative thinking.' In Heidegger's view poetic thinking, represented by genuine art, is the antagonist to that kind of thinking. Genuine art always presents 'poetic dwelling' (Heidegger, 1978). To dwell means, 'to be cared-for the dwelling-place and to care for the things of the dwelling place.' (Young, 2002: 64) So dwelling is basically guardianship. 'Instead of exploiting and violating things for the purposes of purposeless production our concern becomes the preservation and completion of the order of things revealed to us.' (Young, 2002: 70)"
>
> **(Zsolnai & Wilson, 2016, p.1535)**

In other words, as W. B. Cameron (1963) reminds us: "[…]not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted" (Cameron, 1963, p.13). This perspective invites us to consider forms of evaluation that are coherent with the human, experiential, and transformative nature of such practices. It also raises a fundamental question: is it really true that what is missing in ABMs studies is measurement? Or perhaps what is missing is precisely a context that is not obsessed with it?

3.8 BOUNDAY CONDITIONS. A fundamental boundary condition for the transformative potential of Arts-Based Methods (ABMs) lies in the architecture of the context in which they are applied (Snyder, 2025). Intentions cannot be directly measured, yet they profoundly shape the meaning and outcomes of any intervention. As Taylor and Ladkin (2009) note, the arts in organizational contexts have the power to foster deep forms of knowing—emotional, embodied, and relational—yet these forms of learning can only take root in environments that value meaning and human growth alongside measurable outcomes. Similarly, Adler (2006) argues that introducing the arts into leadership and management practices invites a moral and aesthetic dimension to organizational life, one that cannot be reduced to economic gain but instead supports more humane and ethical forms of development. This perspective suggests that integrating the arts into organizations should be part of a broader effort to promote access to culture and artistic experiences, thereby supporting social and organizational well-being. . Transforming organizations into flexible and nurturing spaces where individuals can genuinely flourish may thus represent the most fertile ground for the full expression of ABM's potential. In such contexts, artistic practices can cultivate empathy, imagination,

and critical awareness—qualities that sustain both individual well-being and collective transformation.

Main considerations. These theoretical reflections have raised some questions.

→**Integration** Why ABMs, despite their recognition in literature, remain marginal in ExEd curricula? How might ABM be integrated with existing executive education curricula without losing their critical edge?

→**Boundary Conditions** What concrete steps can organizations take to foster the necessary conditions for ABM's transformative potential? How can organizations avoid the domestication or instrumentalization of ABM in practice through their architecture? Some of those problems already have partial answers in our arguments. For example, we think that ABMs are marginal due to a lack of understanding of their nature and due to an intrinsic conflict between the non-measurable value of art and organizations. However, we think that conceptual reflection alone does not suffice and that other reasons must be found in the concrete experiences of participants, facilitators, and other stakeholders.

For the moment, as a conclusion of our reflections, we want to offer some advice to the Schools of Management, Government, and Administration that want to integrate ABMs into their ExEd programs.

- Initiate elective workshops that allow participants the choice to explore art-based methods without being forced. Introducing ABMs with sensitivity, respect for autonomy, and a commitment to voluntary engagement enables authentic reflection and discovery.

- Propose some questions to avoid the risk of "domestication" (Contu, 2009) and co-optation (Parker, 2023): are those practices challenging the status quo? Are those practices affording a stimulating new perspective? Are they opening new meanings and visions?

- ABMs could be integrated into the broader curriculum or be separated, offering a variety of art media—e.g. visual arts, theater, and music — to allow people to choose freely. The more languages we can use, the better it is. The most important thing is to create a free and safe space for critical discussions and authentic expression.

- Promote sufficient space and time for art-based practices in your organizations by proposing more sessions or courses that will last and not just one-shot experiences. Promote a welfare plan that encompasses the possibility of dealing with art as a performer or as a spectator, even outside the organization or the school's courses. Remember that:

> "Only the domain of leisure escapes the technical environment, escapes necessity, in other words, escapes depersonalization. In our leisure activities, we are already beyond techniques. We achieve a leap from necessity into freedom, from the enslavement of the individual into whatever will permit his self-development,"
>
> **(Lefebvre, 1947/1991, p.37)**

- Ensure ABMs facilitators are trained to create environments conducive to personal reflection and creativity, enabling participants to engage with art as a means of self-discovery. Involve artists between facilitators. Even if they are not prepared for management, they are experts in dealing with the arts.

- Facilitate structured dialogue and debrief sessions post-ABMs activities to evaluate individual and collective learning experiences, helping participants articulate and integrate their insights. Collect direct feedback from participants to evaluate the activities and the way people are feeling. The true value of art-based methods lies not in their impact on organizational efficiency; rather, it is in their ability to promote holistic well-being, facilitate deep contemplation, and advance authentic human development among learners.

- Consider opening ABMs initiatives for everyone, as executives can learn from people outside their expertise. While technical competencies depend on the task, human competencies are equally important across the whole organization and are richer when they involve different types of people.

- Ultimately, try to understand other conditions that support genuine artistic engagement. This is the key to realizing the human potential of ABMs in ExEd.

4. CONCERN

ABMs AND AI**.** The relevance of a discussion around ABMs is heightened by current changes in education and work, particularly the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI). As AI reshapes work environments and societies, developing transversal, socio-emotional, and

behavioral competencies is increasingly perceived as important. As highlighted by the literature:

> "AI can reduce the need for human knowledge, experience, and skill, and emphasize the importance of behavioural repertoires. As a result, humans do not necessarily need to learn domain specific knowledge that earlier was required for competent behaviour. In particular, as domain-specific knowledge becomes less important for competence, transversal and domain-independent generic competences may become relatively more important."
>
> **(Tuomi, 2018, pp.30-31)**

The importance of socio-emotional skills is particularly evident for managers. According to an OECD (2021) report:

> "Of AI-related jobs, 87% relate to the professionals occupation, and the networks for professionals looks very similar to the one for all occupations combined. In the case of managers, however, socio-emotional skills are much more important (12 out of the top-30 skills, as compared to the 5 socio-emotional skills found across all occupations). When it comes to these socio-emotional skills, high centrality is observed again in the case of communication skills, problem solving and creativity, but for managers in the AI field, also presentation skills, planning, budgeting and business development are important."
>
> **(Samek et al., 2021, p.7)**

This trend is further reinforced by the recent JCR report (2024), which highlights several key attitudinal competences required for the use of AI in the public sector, such as empathy, awareness of ethical implications, critical technology assessment, and awareness of sustainability implications. Even the literature outside the topic of AI shows how creativity (Fleming, Millar & Culpin, 2018), reflexivity (Fleming, Millar & Culpin, 2018; Meisiek, Beausoleil, Barry & Dattani, 2023; Mavin et al., 2023; Han & Liang, 2015), and self-awareness (Petriglieri, Wood & Petriglieri, 2011) are essential competencies in contemporary leadership development, offering an alternative to the traditional "hero-leader" model (Fleming, Millar & Culpin, 2018). Moreover, several studies emphasize the importance of the emotional, authentic, and embodied dimensions of leadership (Taylor, Passarelli & Van Oosten, 2019; Fleming, Millar & Culpin, 2018; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010; Tcholakian et al., 2023; Mavin et al., 2023; Ciporen, 2010). Taken together, these elements suggest that it is urgent to have a profound reflection on how to develop those competencies that we can call transversal, human, socio-emotional, or soft. In the age of AI—creativity, communication, problem-solving**, empathy, ethical and sustainability awareness, reflexivity** is a serious issue to address through education.

These socio-emotional skills—now central in both public and private work contexts—are often mentioned as a positive outcome of ABMs practices. Therefore, in this frame, ABMs can help cultivate these essential capacities, representing a holistic response.

Evidence from the World Health Organization. The space for art and aesthetics is relevant even in terms of people's and organizations' health. The most substantial evidence of the benefits of the arts, however, comes from the World Health Organization, which in 2019 published the report "*What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review"* (Fancourt & Finn, 2019), later translated into Italian by the Cultural Welfare Centre. The report recalls the WHO's definition of health, which emphasizes not only the absence of disease but also the mental and social components of well-being (Fancourt & Finn, 2019).

> "Artistic activities can be considered **complex and multimodal interventions**, as they combine multiple components, all of which are known to support health. Such activities may involve aesthetic engagement, stimulation of the imagination, sensory activation, emotional evocation, and cognitive stimulation. Depending on their nature, they may also include social interaction, physical activity, engagement with health-related issues, and interaction with care contexts"
>
> **(Fancourt & Finn, 2019, p. 2)**

ABMs are relevant in ExEd because they are relevant in broader educational context. A final, somewhat provocative observation may be offered: are executives mythical creatures who somehow escape the normal functioning of the human brain in contact with the world? It hardly seems necessary to design new quantitative studies to demonstrate that engaging in art can enhance empathy, cognitive well-being, or emotional health. The scientific evidence for these effects already exists, albeit outside the managerial domain —for instance, in neuroscience, psychology, and the health sciences (Freedberg & Gallese, 2007; Chatterjee & Vartanian, 2014; WHO, 2019). What seems to persist instead is the **mythologization of the executive figure**, an enduring belief that leaders must learn "seriously"—through rational, measurable, and efficiency-oriented methods. This assumption neglects the fact that executives, like all human beings, learn and grow through emotional resonance, imagination, and embodied experience. In fact, when we speak of developing empathy, critical thinking, and reflexivity, we are speaking of cultivating one's humanity. These capacities are not only essential at every level of organizational life but are arguably even more crucial for those in leadership roles, whose

decisions carry amplified consequences for others. Recognizing this shared human ground reframes leadership development not as a departure from the human condition, but as a deeper engagement with it—an invitation to relearn what it means to be fully human. In summary, failing to reflect on ABMs is a missed opportunity both to counterbalance the adverse effects of AI on organizations and people's lives and to align with a holistic concept of education, health, and the latest scientific discoveries. In contrast, prioritizing ABMs' adoption means prioritizing the ethics, social, emotional, and embodied dimensions of ExEd, not because ABMs are the only way to do so, but because they are one powerful tool to address these topics holistically.

5. COURSE OF ACTION

In this paper, the Course of Action was represented by the Problematization part. Because the problem was a lack of theoretical awareness of the nature of ABMs, this research addressed this problem through a conceptual approach, aiming to question what Art means. Bringing a phenomenological and Heideggerian perspective on "Art" into the managerial literature, the paper problematized the topic of ABMs, adding complexity and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The value of the paper lies first of all in raising new problems and questions around ABMs; second, it gives some insights and suggestions to ABM's stakeholders based on the problems identified in the Problematization.

6. PAPER CONTRIBUTION

This paper offers some interrelated contributions to the literature on ABMs in Executive Education:

- It advances a phenomenological understanding of ABMs, framing them as events that open new worlds of meaning (Heidegger, 1995 [1950]), rather than as a mere list of creativity techniques. In doing so, the paper contributes to more profound reflection on the nature of ABMs and proposes a vision that can further advance the debate.
- It underscores the importance of time in ABMs practices and a non-instrumental vision

of ABMs, stressing the need for organizations to be capable of embracing such practices. It situates ABMs within the contemporary transformations associated with Artificial Intelligence (AI), identifying them as holistic pedagogical responses to the growing demand for transversal, socio-emotional, and ethical competences.

→Moreover, the paper proposes several insights for organizations, Schools of Management, Schools of Government and Public Administration to include ABMs with awareness.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has provided a conceptual reflection on Arts-Based Methods (ABMs), aiming to deepen understanding and encourage more thoughtful adoption. The lens of Heideggerian '*Aletheia'* could be a strong theoretical base for further research in the field. To conclude, a provocative reflection. When we ask about the risks business and government schools face in integrating ABMs into Executive Education, perhaps we should shift the question: what risks do the adoption of these practices in ExEd pose to art itself, to its perception, to its authenticity, to its subversive potential? There seems to be no real reason to shield the business world from something that nurtures well-being, strengthens communities, stimulates critical thinking, and opens new ways of making meaning. There are, however, reasons for art to be cautious toward the ExEd executive world, where it risks being appropriated or reduced to a decorative, symbolic veneer rather than a transformative and provocative force. Therefore, it becomes crucial questioning how we can prevent this from happening.

REFERENCES

Alvesson, M., & Spicer, A. (2012). *A stupidity-based theory of organizations.Journal of Management Studies, 49*(7), 1194–1220.https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2012.01072.x

Alvesson, M., & Willmott, H. (1992). On the idea of emancipation in management and organization studies. The Academy of Management Review, 17(3), 432–464. https://doi.org/10.2307/258718

Alvesson, Mats, Todd Bridgman, and Hugh Willmott *(2009), ' Introduction', in Mats Alvesson, Todd Bridgman, and Hugh Willmott (eds), The Oxford Handbook of Critical*

Management Studies (2011; online edn, Oxford Academic, 2 Sept. 2009), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199595686.013.0001*, accessed 24 Oct. 2025.*

Antonacopoulou, *E., & Bento, R. F. (2018). From laurels to learners: Leadership with virtue. Journal of Management Development, 37(8), 624–633.*https://doi.org/10.1108/JMD-12-2016-0269

Bacouël, A.-S., Shantz, A., Jentjens, S. & Goudal, C. (2024)*, An artful workplace of the future: The role of art-based interventions in fostering levers for creativity amongst a diverse workforce. European Management Review, 1–18.* https://doi.org/10.1111/emre.12680

Berklee College of Music (n.d.), Executive Education Programs: Musica Thinking, https://college.berklee.edu/focused/ice/esade-berklee-valencia.

Boltanski, L., & Chiapello, È. (2007). *The new spirit of capitalism* (G. Elliott, Trans.). Verso. (Original work published 1999)

Bourhis, J. (2017). *Narrative literature review*. In The sage encyclopedia of communication research methods (Vol. 4, pp. 1076-1077). SAGE Publications, Inc, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483381411.n370

BOZEMAN, B. (2007). *Public Values and Public Interest: Counterbalancing Economic Individualism*. Georgetown University Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2tt37c

Buchholz, C. (2025, May 29). Affordance: The silent signal that divides art and design. Skillshare Blog. https://www.skillshare.com/en/blog/affordance-the-silent-signal-that-divides-art-and design/?srsltid=AfmBOopVCCyHxrQQVDCL0jdQgtu1a--Htddj1OpDVF2qfKwOqbcqsAkM

Business Education Innovations. (2021). *Business Education Innovations Report: 10 pedagogical innovations from business school professors around the world.* ttps://hbsp.harvard.edu/inspiring-minds/4-traits-of-innovative-business-educators

Cameron, W. B. (1963). *Informal sociology: A casual introduction to sociological thinking*. Random House.

Carboni, M. (2001, February 24). *L'arte, ultima risorsa nell'era della tecnoscienza*. il manifesto. https://ilmanifesto.it/archivio/2001002956

Contu, Alessia, ' *Critical Management Education'*, in Mats Alvesson, Todd Bridgman,

and Hugh Willmott (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies* (2011; online edn, Oxford Academic, 2 Sept. 2009), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199595686.013.0027, accessed 24 Oct. 2025.

de Colle, S., Freeman, R. E., Parmar, B., & de Colle, A. (2017). *Practicing human dignity: Ethical lessons from Commedia dell'Arte and theater.Journal of Business Ethics, 144*(2), 251–262.https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-015-2898-4

Di Dio, C., & Gallese, V. (2009). Neuroaesthetics: A review. *Current Opinion in Neurobiology, 19*(6), 682–687. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.conb.2009.09.001

ESCP Business School , (2024), *Leveraging innovation potential like an artist,* https://escp.eu/news/leveraging-innovation-potential-artist.

European Commission, Joint Research Centre, Medaglia, R., Mikalef, P., & Tangi, L. (2024). *Competences and governance practices for artificial intelligence in the public sector* (JRC138702). Publications Office of the European Union. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/7895569

Fleming, K., Millar, C., & Culpin, V. (2018). From hollow hero to expert empathiser: leadership in transition. Journal of Management Development, 37(8), 606–612. https://doi.org/10.1108/JMD-07-2018-0209

*Fournier, V., & Grey, C. (2000). At the Critical Moment: Conditions and Prospects for Critical Management Studies. Human Relations, 53(1), 7-32.*https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726700531002 *(Original work published 2000)*

Gibson, James J. "The Theory of Affordances" The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979. Print.

Grey, C. (2004). Reinventing Business Schools: The Contribution of Critical Management Education. Academy of Management Learning & Education, 3(2), 178–186. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40214248

Heidegger, M. (1950/1995). *L'origine dell'opera d'arte.* In V. Venier (Ed.), *L'origine dell'opera d'arte di Heidegger e il problema della verità* (pp. 25–76). Paravia.

Holtham, C., Biagioli, M., Owens, A., & Pässilä, A. (2021). *Crafting strategic thinking: Creative pedagogy for management studies.Innovative Practice in Higher Education: GLAD-HE Special Edition*

Hudon, P.-A., & Rouillard, C. (2015). *Critical management studies and public administration: Reinterpreting democratic governance using critical theory and poststructuralism.* Canadian Public Administration, *58*(4), 575–592.https://doi.org/10.1111/capa.12132

IE University (n.d.) Arts-Powered Leadership, https://www.ie.edu/lifelong-learning/programs/arts-powered-leadership/#:~:text=Set%20in%20Madrid's%20vibrant%20cultural,spark%20creativity%2C%20and%20rediscover%20purpose..

Kuo, T.-H., & Tien, H.-K. (2022). *Mechanisms of learning transfer in creativity training.* Journal of Workplace Learning, *34*(7), 609–627. https://doi.org/10.1108/JWL-08-2021-0107

Ladkin, D., & Taylor, S. S. (2010). Enacting the 'true self': Towards a theory of embodied authentic leadership. Leadership Quarterly, 21(1), 64–74. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2009.10.005

Ladkin, D. (2018). *The "aesthetic" and its relationship to business ethics: Philosophical underpinnings and implications for future research.Journal of Business Ethics, 147*(4), 715–726. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-015-2928-2

Lange, D., & Pfarrer, M. D. (2017). *Editors' comments: Sense and structure—The core building blocks of an AMR article.Academy of Management Review, 42*(3), 407–416.https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2016.0225

Lefebvre, H. (1991). *Critique of everyday life* (Vol. 1, J. Moore, Trans.; Preface by M. Trebitsch). Verso. (Original work published 1947)

Mavin, S., James, J., Patterson, N., Stabler, A., & Corlett, S. (2023). Flipping the normative: Developing and delivering a critical pedagogy for executive education in a UK business school. Management Learning, *1.* https://doi.org/10.1177/13505076231162717

Marcuse, H. (1978). *The aesthetic dimension: Toward a critique of Marxist aesthetics* (Original work published 1977). Beacon Press.

Meisiek, S., & Barry, D. (2014). *The science of making management an art.* Scandinavian Journal of Management, *30*(1), 134–141.https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2014.01.004

Meisiek, S., Beausoleil, A. M., Barry, D., & Dattani, A. (2023). Gaining Flexibility in Expertise through Executive Education: Tuning Schemas in Design Thinking. Academy

of Management Learning & Education, 22(4), 574–594. https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2021.0392

Molderez, I., Baraniuk, D., & Lambrechts, W. (2021). The Role of Poetry in Promoting a Sustainability Mindset: Walter Benjamin as a Guide Toward a Slow Journey. *Frontiers in Sustainability*, *2*, 694317. https://doi.org/10.3389/frsus.2021.694317

O'Hagan, S. (2010, October 3). *Interview: Marina Abramović. The Guardian.*https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/oct/03/interview-marina-abramovic-performance-artist, Accessed October 24, 2025.

Parker, M. (2023). *Hard lessons: (Critical) Management Studies and (Critical) Work and Organizational Psychology.Psychologie des Alltagshandelns / Psychology of Everyday Activity, 16*(1). Innsbruck University Press. https://doi.org/10.15203/1998-9970-16-1-08

Petriglieri, G., Wood, J. D., & Petriglieri, J. L. (2011). Up Close and Personal: Building Foundations for Leaders' Development Through the Personalization of Management Learning. Academy of Management Learning & Education, *10(3), 430–450. https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2010.0032*

Ricoeur, P. (1986). Tempo e racconto (Vol. 1; G. Grampa, Trad.). Milano: Jaca Book. (Opera originale pubblicata nel 1983).

Safaa, L., Khazi, A., Perkumienė, D., & Labanauskas, V. (2023). Arts-Based Management between Actions and Conjunctions: Lessons from a Systematic Bibliometric Analysis. Administrative Sciences, 13(9), 200. https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci13090200

Samek, L., M. Squicciarini and E. Cammeraat (2021), "The human capital behind AI: Jobs and skills demand from online job postings", *OECD Science, Technology and Industry Policy Papers*, No. 120, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/2e278150-en.

Sandberg, B. (2024). Outcomes of Art-Based Leadership Development: A Qualitative Metasummary. *Behavioral Sciences*, *14*(8), 714. https://doi.org/10.3390/bs14080714

*Snyder, K. M. (2025). Exploring the value of arts-based interventions in organizations from a systems perspective. Systemic Practice and Action Research, 38(7).*https://doi.org/10.1007/s11213-025-09719-0

Spicer, A., Alvesson, M., & Kärreman, D. (2009). Critical performativity: The unfinished business of critical management studies. Human Relations, 62(4), 537-

*560.*https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726708101984 *(Original work published 2009)*

Spicer, A., & Alvesson, M. (2024). Critical Management Studies: A Critical Review. Journal of Management Studies, 62(1), 446-483. https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.13047

Springborg C. (2012). Perceptual Refinement: Art-based Methods in Managerial Education. *Organizational Aesthetics*, *1*(1), 116-137. Retrieved from https://oa.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/oa/article/view/15

Sukhera J. Narrative Reviews: Flexible, Rigorous, and Practical. J Grad Med Educ. 2022 Aug;14(4):414-417. doi: 10.4300/JGME-D-22-00480.1. PMID: 35991099; PMCID: PMC9380636.

Taylor, S. S., & Ladkin, D. (2009). Understanding Arts-Based Methods in Managerial Development. Academy of Management Learning & Education, 8(1), 55–69.

Taylor, S. N., Passarelli, A. M., & Van Oosten, E. B. (2019). Leadership coach effectiveness as fostering self-determined, sustained change. Leadership Quarterly, 30(6), N.PAG. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2019.101313

Tcholakian, L. A., Khapova, S. N., & van de Loo, E. (2023). Historical Consciousness in Executive Education Programs: Engaging with Transgenerational Collective Traumas. Academy of Management Learning & Education, 22(3), 459–480. https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2020.027

Turner, V. (1974). Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology. *Rice Institute Pamphlet - Rice University Studies*, *60*(3). https://scholarship.rice.edu/handle/1911/63159

Venier, V. (1995), *L'origine dell'opera d'arte di Heidegger e il problema della verità*. Paravia.

Yang, C., Ivanova, E., & Hufnagel, J. (2021). *Using contemplative photography in transformative sustainability management education: Pedagogical applications in the United States, Russia, and Germany.The International Journal of Management Education, 19*(3), 100568.https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2021.100568

*Zsolnai, L., & Wilson, D. (2016). Art-based business. Journal of Cleaner Production, 135, 1534–1538.*https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2016.03.056

La borsa di dottorato cofinanziata con risorse dell'Unione europea-*NextGeneration EU*
Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza Missione 4 – Componente 1 – Riforma 4.1 Riforma dei Dottorati – Inv. 4.1
Borse PNRR patrimonio Culturale –*CUP H41J22000170002*