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The sales role is one of the most common positions in the world, but options for university education in sales are limited and, in many parts of the world, non-existent. Although availability and interest in university-level professional sales studies has grown in recent years, there is still great variability. Some universities have developed sales education programs that prepare students to take a professional selling or sales management position on graduation, but these programs are in the minority.

Development of these programs are hindered by the stigma of salespeople, lack of culturally specific content, resource constraints, and the belief that sales programs don't belong at the university-level. We will take a brief journey to explore examples from every continent to provide a sense of the current state of sales education around the globe and the challenges that limit its growth.

University sales curricula were first developed in the United States and the very first sales centers were started around three decades ago. In 2021, the Sales Education Foundation (SEF) reported 200 universities in the United States have some sort of sales program, 37 of them with full sales majors.

Several organizations, such as the SEF and the University Sales Center Alliance (USCA), were started to help fledgling sales programs and promote best practice in educating students for sales positions. "Developing sales education faced many challenges within and outside of the USA. We still do. But having institutionalized resources and mentoring to help new programs has made a lot of difference in the States," according to Andrea Dixon, Past President of USCA. "It's easier than it was 25 years ago. We're not completely there, but we have made progress in overcoming barriers like stereotypes, lack of respect, and limited resources. With American universities putting a spotlight on the sales area more than 30 years ago, we are now able to spark similar conversations on these same issues in other parts of the world."

In 2006, Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences in Helsinki began development of the first European sales major with support from the University of Toledo. The two universities sponsored a conference to gather colleagues from the United States and Europe to discuss what, if anything, was happening in sales education in Europe. This first gathering led to the creation of the Global Sales Science Institute (GSSI), dedicated to promoting

sales education around the world, and holding annual conferences on five continents over the past 15 years.

Growth in USA-based programs, institutionalized through organizations like SEF and GSSI, led to new programs in other locations. With lessons learned from development in the United States, European programs grew more quickly. Today, several European universities have professional selling and sales management degrees, and many others are offering sales courses as a part of their curricula. Interestingly, most sales programs are offered at universities of applied sciences; fewer science-based universities teach sales.

To clarify, there are two different kinds of universities in Europe: universities of applied sciences and science-based universities. Universities of applied science focus on close collaboration with

companies and teach practical skills to students. Science-based universities focus on sales management and on teaching managerial issues rooted in academic research.

Though academic research underlies the education at both types of universities, universities of applied science are more practically oriented and skill-based; whereas science-based universities are more theoretical and, well, scientific. Given the practical nature of the selling profession, sales curriculum has

proliferated more rapidly at universities of applied science.

Examples of applied science programs can be seen in Austria. According to Professor Margarethe Überwimmer, University of Upper Austria, some universities of applied sciences focus on both B2B marketing and sales, some only on B2C selling, and still others teach international business and sales. Most programs are taught in German, but there are also programs taught in English. The University of Upper Austria is a forerunner with its international degree opportunity for Global Sales and Marketing. It is taught in English and collaborates closely with universities around the globe for exchange semesters.

In addition to the growing number of undergraduate degrees in sales, master's programs in sales-related disciplines have also

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**ANDREA DIXON,  
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taken root in Europe. In Finland, there is a master's program at the University of Eastern Finland, a science-based university, focusing on International Business and Sales Management; as well as at Tampere University of Applied Sciences, which offers both bachelor's and master's programs for International Selling and Sales Management. The University of Applied Sciences, Upper Austria, offers a program for Master of Global Sales and Sales Management.

***While sales education has made great strides, barriers to growth and geographic expansion abound. To truly capitalize on the full potential, we need to address sales stereotypes, add to our scholarly knowledge of selling in different parts of the world, legitimize the scholarly study at higher levels, and increase resources, especially qualified faculty.***

There are also universities in Europe that focus on sales education within engineering degrees. Both Aalen University in Germany and Turku University in Finland teach sales engineers. These programs are important to Europe as selling is often based on export rather than traditional sellers. Complex service selling needs teamwork and close collaboration with technical experts. Increasingly these non-traditional sales team members, such as engineers, are part of sales teams providing solutions for customer challenges. Offering both master's degrees and context-specific sales education in Europe leads similar efforts in the USA and seems to be driven by unique factors in Europe.

There is still room for improvement in Europe. Though common to have marketing-focused programs at the universities of applied sciences and science-based universities, opportunities for students to choose sales as a major or degree remain limited and, in some areas, are not available at all.

Despite Germany's initiatives for sales education in some engineering degrees, Professor Stefan Wengler, Hof University, says that sales education is still underrepresented there. The focus of most universities is still more on marketing than on sales. Hof University offers no dedicated sales program. However, Wengler sees that the amount of sales education is growing in Germany, both at universities of applied sciences, as well as at the science universities. "We need truly international programs that cater to the interconnectedness of markets as well as provide sales managers the necessary directions for how

to manage the digital transformation in sales." Wengler noted "People too often jump from digital tool to digital tool hoping for some improvements. They do not understand that selling needs to be looked at from a broader perspective before implementing necessary tools."

Italy is an example where programs haven't been systematically developed yet. Professor Silvio Cardinali, Marche Polytechnic University, says that sales education at Italian universities is still in the early stages of development. Courses are limited to B2B marketing and Key Account Management, although most bachelor's programs do not include sales topics. Based on his knowledge, students do not have the option to choose sales programs at the state universities because there aren't any.

The only limited options are marketing and sales programs available at some of Italy's private business schools. Cardinali admits that there is a mismatch with the labor market's requirements and the offering at the universities. He is, however, hopeful that there will be sales programs in Italy in the not-so-distant future.

Portugal is similar. As Professor Jorge Gomes, ISEG, School of Economics and Management in Lisbon, explains, sales education is not well-developed there. As far as he knows, there is no degree associated with professional selling. ISEG offers only a short executive education course focused on B2B selling.

CEO Sergi Ramo from Growz Consultants, from Spain, shared similar thoughts. He believes that selling is not taught at the universities because graduates do not appreciate it. Ramo knows what he is talking about. He works both as a sales teacher and as a sales consultant at his consultancy company.

In Europe, the main barrier to advancing the number of sales programs seems to rest predominantly with the universities' understanding of the importance of sales for future business. As we move toward increased selling on digital platforms and doing sales in international, complex environments with the help of different digital tools and technologies equipped with artificial intelligence, the need for more faculty with an understanding of how to sell grows. We need more opportunities to develop faculty who study and research selling and sales management, as well as how selling is linked to marketing and strategy.

Sales education in other parts of the world is less developed. At one extreme, colleagues in Japan report no development in sales education. According to Kenichi Hosoi, Professor at Hiroshima University of Economics, "We have no sales coursework. Students may learn about sales as a part of marketing, a textbook chapter or a mention by a guest speaker. If sales-related coursework were introduced, it could be cutting edge. The problem is nobody intends to provide the opportunity to learn about sales." Hosoi says companies view students as a commodity and prefer to do their own sales training.

Similar reports come from the Middle East, where preliminary efforts to encourage development of B2B sales education were being promoted prior to the pandemic. However, efforts are now

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stalled. According to Professor Piotr Kwiatek, formally of the American University of the Middle East, there are no sales programs in Kuwait. “Sales education at the university level is limited to some courses or topics within courses in the marketing, HRM, and new venture areas. There is some vocational training in sales available, mainly through (short) diploma courses delivered through licensed western educational institutions.

The situation is better, though not developed, in other parts of Asia. In India, post-graduate management programs are two-years. Sales courses are offered as electives. Still, specialized sales programs are hardly evident in top-tier business schools.

G. Sridhar, Professor in Marketing, Indian Institute of Management, Kozhikode notes that “Sales education in post-graduate management course is still in its infancy despite having a good and large salesforce in the country.” He adds further, “Selling in India is different in rural and urban markets. Rural markets have 70% of the country’s population and are geographically scattered. These markets are different on economic, social and cultural parameters. This poses the challenge of optimizing cost to serve and requires a different selling approach. The urban markets are densely populated and are akin to other markets in the world.”

Dr. Sridhar feels that most sales education in India is based on western findings. “There is a need for indigenous knowledge to be accumulated, classified and disseminated. As of now, such knowledge is in anecdotal form. It is high time that there is a concerted effort to enrich the understanding of sales, specifically the Indian way of selling.”

In China, Jianguo Wang, Program Director for the Joint Sales Degree at Zhejiang University of Finance and Economics (ZUFE) claims that sales education is virtually non-existent as a major at the university level in favor of technical or trade school offerings. However, there are some courses taught at universities. Some students start their sales-related programs in the business innovation parks on campuses. Wang commented “In my opinion, practical selling skills are cutting edge and should be taught in China.” According to Wang, this belief is behind ZUFE’s joint degree program in professional sales with the University of Toledo. Wang claims it is the only program of its kind in China.

Overall, University-level sales education in Asia seems hindered by lack of context-specific knowledge and of the failure to recognize the need for university-level coursework.

In Australia, Associate Professor Joona Keranen, Acting Deputy Dean (R&I) for the Graduate School of Business and Law at the RMIT University, notes that sales higher education in Australia and New Zealand “seems to be behind European and USA counterparts. Most universities tend to offer only one basic or general course on sales management, or embed sales management into marketing management programs, but no specialized sales programs, centers or majors seem to be available.” He believes “this is especially visible at the industrial selling level, which is (re)gaining momentum in sales higher education elsewhere in the world.”

According to Vincent Onyemah, Associate Professor of Sales at Babson College, who has close connections to Africa and is originally from Nigeria, sales “still has no decent home in the business curriculum of most Universities in Africa. It is rare to find courses on sales at the undergraduate and graduate level. For example, at the Lagos Business School (Pan Atlantic University), there is no standalone course on professional selling and sales management. Rather, sales is taught as part of business-to-business marketing. However, the school offers 2–3 days open enrollment workshop on sales management a few times a year.”

Generally, across the continent of Africa, it is common to refer to salespeople as marketers, so the need for sales education is less obvious. Besides, most believe it can be learned on the job. Higher education in sales in Africa also remains hindered by the stigma associated with the career.

Sales education is also in an embryonic stage in South America. According to Jorge Bullemore, Associate Professor and Academic Director of Executive Education, at the Universidad del Desarrollo, “for example, the business area of my university is one of the only universities in my country that has two elective courses in sales at the end of the studies. Without a doubt, there is a lot to move forward and do in Chile and in South America.”

At universities in Chile, sales can be offered as a short course or executive education certification. Bullemore’s university offers two certifications that last approximately five months each, and two short courses. Bullemore suggests “In my opinion, we have to continue increasing the quantity and quality of teachers, who have both solid academic training and practical experience in sales.”

While sales education has made great strides, barriers to growth and geographic expansion abound. To truly capitalize on the full potential, we need to address sales stereotypes, add to our scholarly knowledge of selling in different parts of the world, legitimize the scholarly study at higher levels, and increase resources, especially qualified faculty.

Institutions like Sales Education Foundation, USCA, and GSSI, among others, are likely the best way to continue to reach new markets for sales education and to mentor new colleagues to grow the programming at their own locations around the world. Local businesses can help by promoting their need to hire well-prepared students from their local universities. △



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