

An Empirical Study for Defining the Matrix of Competences for Effective University-Civil Society Communication

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Abstract

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, social inequality and societal incoherence have accelerated, manifesting themselves mainly through the deterioration of the communication process (e.g., negative communication, fake news, disinformation, misinformation, verbal aggression, cyberbullying). These societal trends are also felt in two-tiered universities: as divergences increase simultaneously with staff bitterness, depression or anxiety, and the communication style of university discourse tends to degrade (especially by manifesting the inability to communicate effectively online and with actors of civil society). In this context, the empirical study aims to provide a reliable resource for planning and prioritizing the training programme for critical media and communication competences of university members and civil society activists, based on the matrix of competences design reflecting the target group priority important vs. less developed competencies).

Keywords: matrix of competences, media literature, communication, democracy, dialogue, civil society, university, respectNET project

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic crisis of the last two years has propagated the manifestation of negative phenomena in communication (conflicts of ideas, fake news, misinformation, hate speech, cyberbullying, etc.) and the degradation of social dialogue at local, regional, national, and international levels (Sarfraz et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2022; Oleksiyenko et al., 2021; Kaitatzi-Whitlock, (2021). These societal trends are also felt in two-tiered universities: as divergences increase simultaneously with staff bitterness, depression or anxiety, and the communication style of university discourse tends to degrade (especially by manifesting the inability to communicate effectively online and with actors of civil society or affected by burnout) (Sarfraz et al., 2023).

Considering these phenomena, it has been developed the RespectNET project - “Respectful Communication through Media Education Network” (Erasmus +, KA2 Strategic Partnership project, 2021-1-IT02-KA220- HED-000027578, <https://respectnet.eu/>) aiming to develop a training programme with practices related to a common code of conduct of responsible media usage and training multipliers of media and communication literacy as a resource for university staff as well as civil society activists as role models for the younger generation at universities and in society (RespectNET, 2021). Four partners (Universita Telematica Pegaso, Italy; International School for Business and Social Studies, Slovenia; Politehnica University of Timisoara, Romania and Verein für sozialwissenschaftliche Beratung und Forschung e.V., Germany) have agreed to collaborate for the project implementation, to share their knowledge and experiences to create an innovative and open educational resource for training. The operational objectives of the project are: (1) to develop a matrix of media and respectful communication competences for university staff; (2) to develop multimedia modules on media competences and respectful communication; (3) to develop transmedia learning platform on media and communication competences for university members. Further on, the RespectNET consortium aim to support the contribution of science to mitigating societal tensions, as expressed in phenomena like conspiracy narratives, hate speech and cyberbullying by promoting the European values in the further internal development of universities and in their collaboration with the civil society.

In this context, the article presents an empirical study which aims to provide a reliable resource for planning and prioritizing the training programme for critical media and communication competences of university members and civil society activists, based on the matrix of competences design reflecting the target group priority important vs. less developed competencies). To achieve the research objective, the methodology adopted and applied by the members of the RespectNET consortium is presented, as well as the results obtained with the description of the competence matrix. Finally, conclusions are stated on the empirical study carried out and proposals, recommendations regarding the training programme design.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The survey aimed to empirically validate some of the findings of the previous activities developed by the RespectNET partners (e.g., collection of best practices and debates during several focus groups) (RespectNET, 2021). The aim has been to prioritize the longlist of competencies so that a shortlist of important and not yet well-developed competencies for university staff of a maximum of ten competencies results. This prioritization aims to guide the development of the staff training programme so that those competencies selected for the training programme are of the highest priority while keeping the volume and scope of the topics actionable. The methodology follows the principles of

importance-performance analysis described by (Levenburg and Magal, 2004). The key competences that should be target by RespectNET project are of those highly important, but which are currently not well developed. The project partners have agreed that these should be ten or fewer so that project resources can be used to effectively contribute to the development of these competencies. The global list of competencies considered in the research are presented in Tabel 1.

Table 1: The global list of competences considered in the research (for the questionnaire design)

Code	Description of competence	Code	Description of competence
C02	Awareness and knowledge of human rights and democracy	C25	Co-development of open, innovative, and digital learning and communication environments
C03	Civic mindedness	C26	Awareness of general mechanisms of constructive communication
C04	Conflict resolution skills	C27	Express your views and opinions in a generally acceptable way
C05	General Analytical and Critical Thinking	C28	Respect and appreciate diverse forms of experience/background, including intersectional experiences of exclusion.
C06	Critical awareness of yourself	C29	Identifying and setting group goals
C07	Critical awareness of societal role (professional position, privilege)	C30	Listening skills, genuine interest in the experience of other people, and opinion
C08	Holistic knowledge and critical understanding of the world (politics, law, economy, culture, etc.)	C31	Attitude to share relevant and useful knowledge, experience, and expertise.
C09	Awareness and understanding of current threats to democracy	C32	Mastery of journalistic principles
C10	Knowledge and understanding of contemporary threats to democracy	C33	Basic mastery of social media and relevant production techniques
C11	Competences for social engagement	C34	Target group analysis
C12	Competence to foster gender and other equality in university and society	C35	Agility in reacting to the societal demand for information and expertise
C13	Societal responsibility of science	C36	Presentation and communication skills
C14	Awareness and interest in open education	C37	Agile communication
C15	Netiquette in digital communication	C38	Understanding and identifying mechanisms of antiscientific narratives and conspiracy narratives
C16	Resilience to feedback and scientific debate	C39	Assessing the quality of information
C17	Active and passive coaching, mentoring	C40	Knowledge of how classical and social media select, interpret and edit information
C18	Career development, incl. career paths outside the university through staying in touch with various realms.	C41	Knowledge of the specifics of social media dynamics (algorithms for “hyping” news, phenomena like “echo chambers”)
C19	Openness to university staff and students having diverse backgrounds	C42	Knowledge and understanding of how political messages, propaganda, and hate speech are produced and how these can be identified.
C20	Openness to civil society, knowledge of relevant actors, and active communication.	C43	Competence to effectively interfere in social media to debunk and counter misinformation
C21	Open Education mind-set, empowerment of citizens	C44	Etiquette/Netiquette of responsible use of traditional and social media
C22	Co-development of open education resources	C45	Ability to produce effective traditional and new media
C23	Exchange of experience and expertise with civil society	C46	Self-awareness of media use
C24	Ability to adapt and modify one’s communication behaviours to interlocutors and cultural settings	C47	Ability to discuss and educate about the use of critical media

A general part of the survey has validated the findings from the preliminary literature review and focus group discussions (based on structured interview). The survey was based on a designed questionnaire (Annexe 2) that has been distributed online using the LimeSurvey software tool. In the first question, the respondents were asked to rate (using a 5 points Likert scale) the “importance” of each competency for good inner university and university-community communication. In the second question, the respondents were asked to rate (using a 5 points Likert scale) the “level of current development” of these competencies in university staff. Each project partner has surveyed their university population (academic staff, students); partners have also decided to include civil society members. Finally, 159 valid questionnaires were process for the matrix of competences development (Table 2).

Table 2: The research sample demography by country (valid questionnaire)

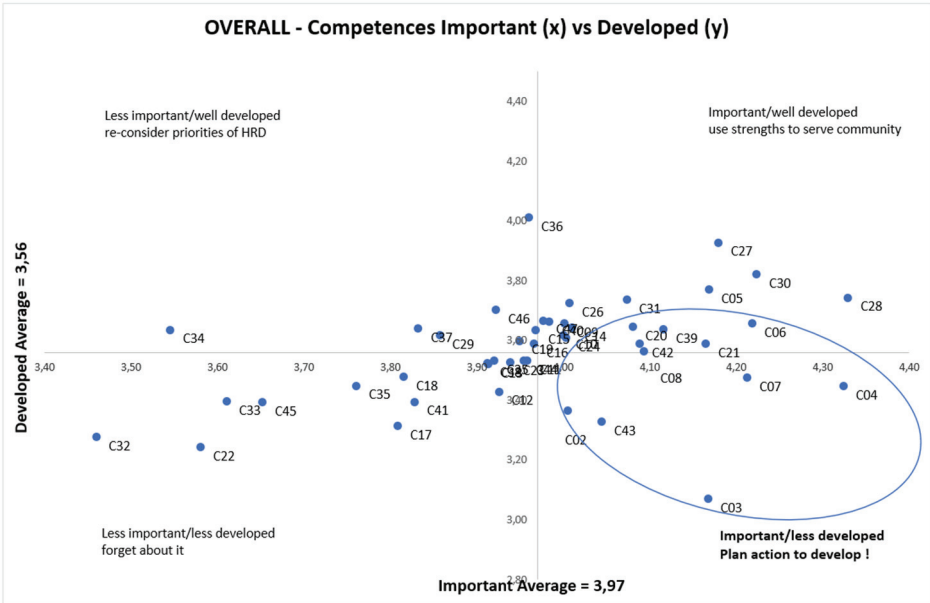
Country	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative percent
Italy	81	50.9	50.9	50.9
Slovenia	28	17.6	17.6	68.6
Romania	30	18.9	18.9	87.4
Germany	20	12.6	12.6	100.0
Total	159	100.0	100.0	

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DEBATES

Rating of competences for effective university-civil society communication

As a first research result, there have been listed and analysed those competencies selected as important but less developed, along with others, where reasonable to gain insight for the development of the RespectNET training programme. As the Figure 1 shows, most of the competencies are clustered near the crossing point between the axes, which means that there is a balance between perceived importance and development at the sample level.

Picture 1: Global overview of the research results on “Important – Development” matrix



The activities of RespectNET can count on a good perception of the importance of some key competencies for good university - civil society dialogue, as well as a perceived good level of

development of these competencies. Finally, and most critical for shaping the training programme planned to fill up potential gaps in competence are those competencies that are considered important but currently developed below average. As there are quite a few “outliers”, which fall into this category very clearly, we will discuss a somewhat expanded group of potential candidates for a training curriculum. Those very visible as very important but less developed are: “C04 Conflict resolution skills; C03 Civic mindedness; C02 Awareness and knowledge of human rights and democracy; C43 Competence to effectively interfere in social media to debunk and counter misinformation”.

There have been added some competencies that are high in the importance ranking but developed only to an average level, despite their relevance. These are: “C07 Critical awareness of the societal role (professional role, privilege, perspective); C21 Open education mind-set, empowerment of citizens; C08 Holistic knowledge and critical understanding of the world; C42 Knowledge and understanding of how political messages, propaganda, and hate speech are produced and how these can be identified”. Interestingly, some competencies are marked, a more detailed part of overarching competencies rated as key and well developed. Obviously, the respondents are confident that they have these key competencies, but some specific fields of knowledge, skills, and attitudes can be further developed.

While general communication is well developed, learning, and practising more conflict resolution skills is necessary. Self-awareness is high, but the respondents want to talk more specifically about critical awareness of their societal role. Most of the competencies that the respondents feel could be developed more are related to modern citizens' skills. Overall civic mindedness (C03) is seen as improvable, and understanding human rights and democracy is also regarded as a learning field. In addition, there is an awareness of the importance of social media in the context of these debates.

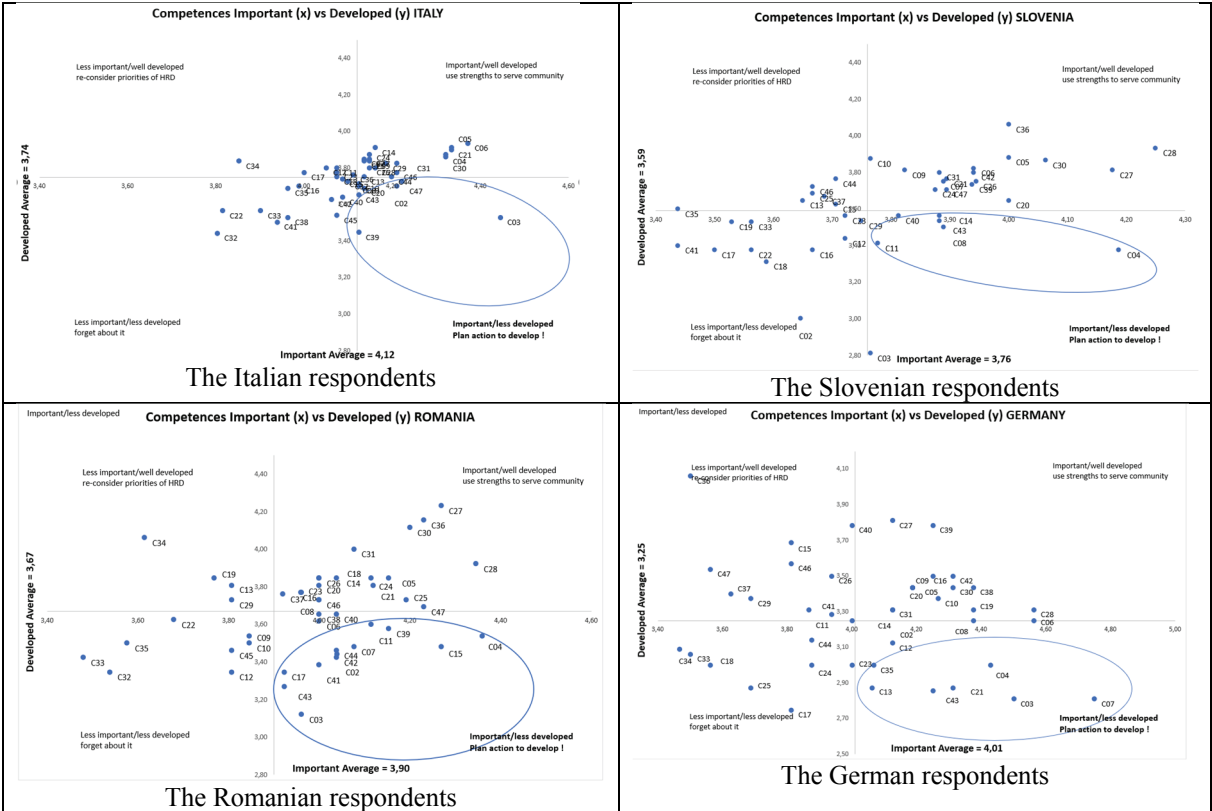
However, competencies like identifying hate speech and effectively interfering in social media are yet less or only averagely developed. The indication of open education and science as a field of development also corresponds to a general attitude of preparedness of openness towards civil society and the general citizenry, as is the general interest and appreciation of the importance of a general outlook and critical understanding of the modern world, which corresponds well to the ancient university ideal and principle of a “*studium generale*” next to the specific disciplines. In conclusion, these competencies should be focused by the training programme. In addition, particularly interest has been given to the analysis of the competences rating by each partners' country (Figure 2).

The Italian respondents rated most competencies as close to the average, at least by analysing only the averages. Later, a detailed analysis may identify subgroups of respondents with different fields for development. Since the project's mission is to develop a relevant programme for all, here we are primarily interested in the common aspects. The competencies clearly marked as important but less developed in Italy are few. Also, civic mindedness is assessed as very important but not sufficiently developed. On the technical side, the ability to assess the quality of information is also in this category. In addition, listening skills and conflict resolution skills are a priority and need to be developed as these are regarded as very important.

Slovenian respondents rated that competencies conflict resolution skills are considered a learning priority (C04); they share with the general average C43 competence to effectively interfere in social media to debunk and counter misinformation and the general citizen competencies such as holistic knowledge of the world (C08). A distinct result is relatively to C11, the competencies for social

engagement, because the respondents connect civic-mindedness with the actual competence for social engagement as an expression of civic-mindedness.

Picture 2: Research results on “Important – Development matrix” for Italian respondents



The evaluations of the Romanian respondents result in a rather long list of development areas. There is a similar need as in the case of the other groups for the development of conflict resolution skills (C04), but a unique need expressed for C15 (etiquette in digital communication). Moreover, C03 civic mentality is considered of medium importance, but relatively little developed. Respondents expressed an average need for the competences: C43, the competence to effectively intervene in social networks to debunk and counter disinformation; C17, active and passive coaching (distinct for Romania in this field); C41, knowledge of the specifics of the dynamics of social networks (algorithms for "hying" news, phenomena such as "echo chambers"), C02, awareness and knowledge of human rights and democracy, C42, knowledge and understanding of how political messages, propaganda and are produced hate speech and how to identify it, C44, media etiquette/etiquette (confirming C15), C07, awareness of societal role, C11, competence for societal engagement, and C39, how to assess the quality of information. The results confirm the overall priorities of other countries as well, with a distinct desire to expand skills in digital etiquette and general communication etiquette.

The German respondents, many of whom are involved in civil society, defined a large list of skills that need to be developed: C07 critical awareness of the societal role (professional role, privilege, perspective); C03 civic attitude; C04 conflict resolution skills. Thus, respondents want a more prominent civic mentality and identify communication deficiencies in this area, expressing the need for professional development of conflict resolution skills. Along with these, with a lower degree of importance and/or a higher level of development, are: C43 the competence to intervene effectively in

social media to debunk and counter disinformation; C17 active and passive coaching; C41 knowledge of the specifics of the dynamics of social networks (algorithms for "hyping" news, phenomena such as "echo chambers"); C02 awareness and knowledge of human rights and democracy; C42 knowing and understanding how political messages, propaganda and hate speech are produced and how they can be identified; C44 etiquette/netiquette for responsible use of traditional and social networks; C11 competence for social commitment; C39 assessment of information quality. The need for definition is noted of the role of universities in the dialogue with civil society actors.

Definition of the matrix of competencies

The empirical study suggests a list of those competencies that have been rated as important but less developed, plus those national priorities which are not part of the overall list but are a priority for one or more partner countries. Along with the typology of four areas of competence, these can be presented as the most important in each area, as described in Table 3. In addition, for each competence has been provides a set of descriptors that have been documented based on the European Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture>), the OpenEdu Framework, (https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/what-open-education/openedu-framework_en) and the European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators DigCompEdu (https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/digcompedu_en). In addition, descriptors were established by the common work of the RespectNET partners consortium. Finally, the complete description matrix of competence will be exploited in the development of RespectNET training programme for the course modules design.

Table 3: Research results on “Important – Development matrix” to be developed by RespectNET training programme

<p>CRITICAL MEDIA COMPETENCES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • C42: Knowledge and understanding of how political messages, propaganda, and hate speech are produced and how these can be identified; • C43: Competence to effectively interfere in social media to debunk and counter misinformation; • C39: Assessing the quality of information. 	<p>DEMOCRACY COMPETENCE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • C02: Awareness and knowledge of human rights and democracy; • C03: Civic mindedness; • C04: Conflict resolution skills; • C07: Critical awareness of the societal role (professional role, privilege, perspective); • C08: Holistic knowledge and critical understanding of the world; • C11: Competences for social engagement.
<p>GENERAL COMMUNICATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • C15/C44: netiquette/etiquette; • C17: Active and passive coaching and mentoring; • C14: Open education. 	<p>SCIENCE COMMUNICATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • C14: Open education.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The impact of research results will help universities reflect on negative communication styles and find competencies that need to be improved. In addition, competencies of understanding and identifying mechanisms of antiscientific narratives, conspiracy narratives, rules of fact and evidence-based reasoning and communication as well as essential skills of effective science communication will be defined. The transferability of research results will be high, as the result will be relevant for all designers of training courses (modules, lessons, or programs) on media competences and communication for the

target group of universities, scientific institutions, science communication, and civil society, users of social networks, and producers of media content. The designed matrix of competences will be appropriate as a basis for curricula but also as a coaching tool and as a guideline for policy makers.

The presented research has revealed a common ground of areas of competence which are most needed but not developed sufficiently in the project partner's organizations and countries. Based on the research results, few recommendations were formulated for the training programme design. It must be focused much on the foundations of democracy (in a quite general and universally applicable way) and the civic competencies needed; it should point to threats to democracy and the role modern media platforms, channels play in a democracy, as these are often described as a threat to democracy. In addition, the training programme should point out what civic mindedness means, discussing the classical tension between individual rights in the liberal understanding and rights to civic participation, as understood by current theories of democracy. It should highlight the importance of civil society and discuss the potential cooperation, dialogue between civil society and the university.

Critical media competencies need to be considered in the training programme supporting the development of democracy (the ability to assess information, debunk misinformation, and identify political propaganda). The training topics should include a general understanding of the differences between university science, public deliberation, classical curated quality media and the logic of the digital platforms. This should be highlighted from the perspective of the economic and technological logic of these platforms. Furthermore, the training materials should give the first insight into the use and logic of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and related algorithm-driven information selection. However, the project's staff training events should be used interactively to discuss and expand on the targeted competencies and their associated descriptors and to fill in the gaps where additional competencies were found in the exploratory study (e.g., such as netiquette, the ability to intervene in social networks and online coaching and mentoring approaches).

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