



ITALIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

Editor-in-Chief: Silvio Scanagatta | ISSN 2035-4983

Access and Selection in Higher Education: Exploring New Pathways for Effective Social Inclusion

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Article first published online

June 2015

HOW TO CITE

Sideri, D. (2015). Access and Selection in Higher Education: Exploring New Pathways for Effective Social Inclusion. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 7(2), 248-277. Retrieved from <http://journals.padovauniversitypress.it/ijse/content/access-and-selection-higher-education-exploring-new-pathways-effective-social-inclusion>



PADOVA UNIVERSITY PRESS

Access and selection in higher education: exploring new pathways for effective social inclusion

*Daniela Sideri**

Abstract: This paper examines the higher education open entry policy in light of the current marketization and over-qualification phenomena. The purpose of the study is to develop a comprehensive understanding of the interrelated topics of access, meritocracy and selection, graduate skills mismatch and consumerism in universities. Indeed, the socio-economic changes affecting higher education have highlighted some weaknesses in the open entry system, which leads to hypothesising that instead of constituting an egalitarian system this could lead to limiting opportunities. The study aims to show that open entry policies may encourage consumerism and credential inflation, and negatively affect the quality of the teaching-learning environment; the ensuing wasteful competition in the labour market may generate professional and social exclusion instead of guaranteeing more and greater opportunities. A further aim of the study is to provide an agenda to guide both future research to enlighten and explain these phenomena and policy-making in higher education, with a specific focus on the Italian system. The article uses theories applied in socio-educational research to discuss opportunities to adjust open entry policies in Italian public universities.

Keywords: Over-qualification, consumerism, teacher peer control, student orientation

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Introduction: research topics and aims

This paper examines the broad issue of access to higher education specifically focusing on the possible effects of open entry policies, in light of the socio-economic changes engendered by: widening access to educational opportunities, higher education marketization, and changes in the labour market structure that have made it difficult for the highly skilled or highly qualified to find employment.

This study thus aims to provide scientific insights on the graduate “oversupply” phenomenon (addressing the issue of education and skills mismatch), and marketization and consumerism in higher education, to enable defining the current situation where higher education institutions are called on to deal with and understand the potential effects of open entry policies. The analysis specifically focuses on western systems with the aim of proposing policy adjustments and interventions for Italian higher education public institutions. Understanding how higher education institutions should deal with the new context requires a preliminary, albeit brief, reflection on the original purpose and function of universities as social institutions, calling into question the issues of access and selection, opportunity and meritocracy.

Assuming that the main function of higher education institutions is to promote the personal and professional growth of individuals, the research question at the base of this study is the following: Could educational policies that are too inclusive, such as non-selective access or so-called open entry, create disadvantages in terms of professional opportunities (i.e., social exclusion)?

Access, selection and opportunity

Determining the elements in literature that could help advance a hypothesis for this research question requires briefly recalling the role that higher education used to have, reflecting on the original purpose and function of universities as social institutions and addressing the issues of access and opportunity, selection and meritocracy.

The history of the university institution is too comprehensive to provide an exhaustive account here. However, a common feature of European and western tertiary education is that it was created to educate the future ruling classes and intended to educate the élite to guide others. It could be argued

that the institutional organization of tertiary education was for a long time determined by the political need to “produce” rulers, resulting in reducing social mobility opportunities while helping the richest maintain social control.

This then changed with the claim for democracy implied by the gradual evolution of the socio-economic structure. In the nineteenth century, the middle classes - who had built their fortunes on businesses - started claiming equal rights and were able to join the ruling classes through access to education: private schools were invented in the 19th century precisely to enable the new middle classes to join the ruling classes. This opened up the path for claims to educational rights and social mobility opportunities, and led to the politics of “we must educate our new masters” that became the purpose of public schools (Allot, 2014)¹.

This was gradually made possible by the development of welfare and democracy on one hand, and the post-war evolution of industrial society to the post-industrial model on the other (the precise chronology and order of these events varies from country to country in the western world). The idea of serving citizens became consolidated at the public level, a socially pre-determined power structure was overcome and the institutional organization of tertiary education began to form in contrast to the past by the market need to “produce” more skilled workers. Indeed, both industry and the newborn service industry called for new professionals to be educated and trained to fill job positions in more and more complex production organizations and thus favouring social mobility. It was in this context that access to education, and specifically to higher education, became a social issue: this was not only intended to enable all people to more consciously exercise political rights or duties, but also to help them acquire the professional competences the job market needed and attain qualifications that would certify them (i.e., credentials). In the subsequent decades, higher education gradually formalized its role of supplying the economy with knowledge workers: the technological evolution of capitalism led to a decisive shift towards a knowledge-based economy and thus to growing numbers of workers establishing technical, specialized and

¹ Allot specifically refers to the British Education Act of 1870 here, but the general circumstances of the first widening of access can easily be extended to other countries.

managerial careers that were previously restricted to a smaller élite, while employers formalized their recruitment practices and certified knowledge became a basic screening device. This is why higher education no longer exclusively implies an academic education and is increasingly taking responsibility for preparing students for the labour market, thus “replacing the older idea of university by a much more expansive and diluted conception of tertiary rather than higher education [with] a large variety of courses, typically vocational or preparatory to professional training” (Halsey, 2006, p. 864).

Widening access was therefore intended as a policy to guarantee the same educational opportunities to all, potentially ensuring the widest possible social mobility. However, only selection through the assessment of different outcomes according to skills, motivations, engagement and ultimately performance actually enables the opportunity to succeed. Here the contrast is evident between “communal egalitarians who are concerned about differences in outcomes - in income and power - and meritocratic egalitarians who are interested primarily in equality of opportunity to compete for outcomes that may be vastly unequal” (Kariya & Dore, 2006, p. 142). It could be said that achieving the purpose of selection substantially requires assessing “merit”, but only if the concept of merit is perceived as relative and is contextualized in relation to the educational field in which good performance is to be pursued, eventually coinciding with the notion of “achievement” as expressed and defined by Young’s (1961) formula “Intelligence + Effort = Achievement”.

The latest criticisms (Guinier, 2015) stress that Young’s formula was intended to evidence the risk of the tyranny of meritocracy rather than welcoming it as an increasingly good social rule and practice, criticizing the *testocratic* interpretation of assessment, determining college and university admissions in the Anglo-Saxon system and in private European higher education. However, leaving aside the discussion on assessment tools for the moment, diverse “merits” precisely make people different, unique and more suitable for one professional task and social role than another - hence the great diversity of courses and educational paths pursuable today - and require assessments to enable selecting and promoting social inclusion for all, preventing people from failure and exclusion. Guinier emphasises the individualistic nature of merit that disregards “the ability to collaborate and the commitment to building a

better society for more people". However, this may not necessarily be true when considering that certain higher education courses and programs are aimed at selecting the best for this specific purpose and that the individualistic nature of merit - the fact that it surely addresses individuals - does not necessarily contrast with the importance of collaborative learning, which is instead widely becoming a major goal and task to be achieved. Classic sociology accorded the two principal functions or key-roles of socialization and selection to education (Durkheim, 1956), namely, filling positions with economic, political and social elites according to individual achievements. The idea of selection based on "merit" has "drawn all the stake-holders in education towards a consensus because in socially mobile industrial societies it opens the way to educational and occupational success based on individual achievement rather than inherited privilege" (Lauder et al., 2006, p. 9).

The achievements of expanding higher education systems as a result of widening access can be summarized in increased opportunities for social mobility and higher income levels, with academe opened up to women and "historically disenfranchised groups worldwide" (Altbach, 2006, p. 2). Alongside the arrival of mass higher education, a neo-liberal culture emphasising individual responsibility became dominant: "a meritocratic ideology is central to this culture, bringing with it the message that your privileges are all your own achievement". In a meritocracy, social status theoretically increasingly depends on an individual's level of education (Moore, 2004). As we shall see, education level no longer determines social status or social inclusion in such direct proportion but "undeniably, the accumulation of educational credentials has been a major route to upward social mobility for many in modern industrial societies" (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008, p. 290). The relation between educational attainment and social status is the reason for much resistance to and criticism of the issue of selection, and especially selective access. Although admission tests such as SATs (Scholastic Aptitude Tests) can be deceiving and unfair selection tools (Tellez, 2011), this does not imply that an open entry policy is the best possible way either: this paper precisely aims to propose some reasoning on this issue. Given the general shift towards a late selection

education system,² as open as possible to continuing in higher education, then at least higher education should be granted an actual selective purpose otherwise there would be no selection at all: has higher education somehow abdicated its selective function? In addition, can in certain circumstances disadvantages in professional opportunities (i.e., social exclusion) be determined by educational policies that are too inclusive such as non-selective access or so-called open entry? Has widening access become a “trap” (Brown, 2003)?

A new socio-economic context for higher education institutions in western societies

Over-education and over-skilling

Can we still state, as Bell (1973) noted, that colleges and universities that once reflected the status system of society continue working as “gatekeepers” of class positions and access to them determines the future stratification of society? If considering the over-education and over-skilling phenomena perhaps this can no longer be said to be true since the economic power - a key defining element of social status - supposedly deriving from a higher level of education is no longer granted.

These two phenomena are not exactly the same thing, the former referring to qualifications and attainment (hence alternatively termed “over-qualification”) and the latter to less tangible assets such as skills: albeit interrelated with the study course/path undertaken, these also relate to personal abilities, talent and capacities. They both represent the “upward” dimension of respectively education mismatch and skills mismatch. Again, although related, these are not the same concept since they lead to different types of analyses and policy implications (Desjardins & Rubenson, 2011).

This paper focuses on the upward dimension of the two aforementioned phenomena since “over-education is a serious concern in Italy and Spain” as stated in the European Commission Report *Occupational mismatch in*

² Education systems are distinguished in early selection and late selection systems (Turner, 1960) depending on the possibility of pursuing a higher educational path according to the type of secondary school attended or disregarding the secondary school respectively.

Europe: Understanding overeducation and overskilling for policy making (Flisi et al., 2014, p. 5). “Although a university degree offers better opportunities than a secondary-school diploma, four out of ten graduates now hold jobs requiring a lower level of education” (Cocozza, 2014, p. 258). In my view, this is only an apparent paradox, for qualification attainment does not always reflect owning adequate skills.

This view is confirmed by others: “Increasing dispersion in the returns to graduate education is found, using quantile regression, this trend being related to rising overqualification. We distinguish between and validate measures of “Real” and “Formal” overqualification, according to whether it is or is not accompanied by underutilization of skill” (Green & Zhu, 2008, p. 2). Not surprisingly, in the aforementioned report, the European Commission states, “Results on the high percentage of the population which claims to be overqualified (education mismatch) but not simultaneously over-skilled (skills mismatch) suggest certain inefficiencies in the educational systems” (Flisi et al., 2014, p. 5). Furthermore, and as a direct consequence, the results also “indicate a very high predicted probability of being over-educated, but relatively low predicted probabilities of being over-skilled, independently from the age or the educational level: this result somehow questions the ability of the education system to provide the necessary skills for the jobs currently available in the labour market” (Flisi et al., 2014, p. 5). “The share of people who are simultaneously mismatched (both overeducated and overskilled) is pretty low (roughly around 15% of those employed for the EU-17). On the contrary, around 30% of those employed reported being overeducated (but not overskilled), while roughly 17% are found to be overskilled (but not overeducated)” (Flisi et al., 2014, p. 4).

The consequent and growing phenomenon of job mismatch (the non-encounter of employment supply and demand) means that in Italy over 45,000 jobs remain vacant, particularly in the commercial and services sectors (Grassia, 2012) and “the greatest difficulty encountered today by those trying to enter the working world, especially the young, now translates into an increasing willingness to accept less skilled jobs” (Cocozza, 2014, p. 258). This concern could be the reason for the increasing and specific attention accorded to over-skilling rather than over-education (Bárcena-Martín et al., 2012). This clearly has consequences on the effectiveness and efficiency of meritocracy since it affects wages,

namely, the social mobility supposedly granted to the most deserving and capable: “possibly the most important and definitely the most well-researched consequence of mismatch is the effect it may have on wages” (Mavromaras et al., 2013). A common result in literature is that mismatches are associated with lower pay reflecting the lower productivity of a suboptimal worker-job match. To be noted however is that over-educated workers receive higher wages than their educationally appropriately matched co-workers, suggesting some productivity advantage to being over-educated (Sicherman, 1991). Green and Zhu (2008) find that those in the real over-education category suffer from higher wage penalties than those in the formal over-education category, as well as showing significantly lower job satisfaction. In any case, the initial paradigm highlighted (Bell, 1973) does not seem to be respected.

Not only does occupational mismatch put this at risk, but also actual unemployment. In this regard, Bell and Blanchflower (2011) underline that, (i) the more educated (among all 16 to 65 age groups) seem to be less likely to experience it; (ii) the increase in youth (16-24 vs. 24-49) unemployment has been accompanied by an increase in applications for tertiary education (OECD, 2013); (iii) nevertheless, in the EU as a whole, and in certain countries more than others - Italy among these - the unemployment rate among people with a tertiary-education qualification has risen more sharply than for those with primary and secondary qualifications. The unemployment rate among graduates is higher than among those with a secondary qualification.

The reasons for this situation are to be sought in a variety of causes and, as previously mentioned, some inefficiency at the education level is likely to be included in these. A key contextual factor is that many jobs are disappearing and being replaced by new integrated technology systems, i.e., the labour market structure has changed. The progressive and significant change in demand for skills due to the most recent post-industrial changes has led to an increase in demand for low-skilled workers and for high scientific-technological knowledge (Autor et al., 2003), while demand for other types of skilled work has fallen. “This trend began with operational jobs, like those of supermarket check-out cashiers and bank clerks or, in the future of drivers, once the driverless car spreads. With the integration of quick databases, it may soon be the turn of lawyers, market analysts, accountants and other professions [...] this profound transformation is now

affecting not only the blue-collar but also the white-collar workers” (Cocozza, 2014, p. 253). The two key elements of job market structure and education appear to be linked in Lauder’s and Brown’s reasoning. “The demand for knowledge workers has failed to keep pace with the rapid increase in the supply of University graduates” (Lauder et al., 2006, p. 6). “Widening opportunities within education are not identified as a problem because the demand of skilled workers is assumed to increase, creating more and more room in the middle if not at the top of the occupational ladder [...] For much of the twentieth century, when there was an economic downturn it was unskilled, blue-collar workers who wore the brunt of redundancies. The downsizing of companies in the recent decades has had a dramatic impact on the job tenure of knowledge workers” (Brown, 2003, pp. 146-152). Whereas the major trend implied during the early 1980s was increasing “demand for technical, managerial and professional workers and a more intensive struggle for competitive advantage in education” (Brown, 1995).

Marketization and consumerism in higher education

The hypothesis proposed in this article begins from this consideration: the degeneration into consumerism of a market logic applied to universities could explain the inefficiency found by the European Commission, which as mentioned above states the “results on the high percentage of the population which claims to be overqualified (education mismatch) but not simultaneously over-skilled (skill mismatch) suggest certain inefficiencies in the educational systems” (Flisi et al., 2014, p. 5).

Since the market logic has entered the field of higher education, numerous concerns have arisen on the “commodification of education”. “Everywhere schooling is being privatized, and private schooling has become expensive; [...] commercialization and privatization have been encouraged by capital and international financial agencies [...] at the time of Polanyi’s Transformation [...] it was understood that universities had a role that stood apart from market economy, [they] were expected to promote character” (Standing, 2009, p. 131; also see Sennet, 1998). “As an absolute minimum” the modern University could be said [to provide] “some form of post-secondary-school education, where ‘education’ signals something more than professional training; [and to] further some form of

advanced scholarship or research whose character is not wholly dictated by the need to solve immediate practical problems” (Collini, 2012, p. 7).

Although understandable and sharable to some extent, these concerns disregard that the “true function of education” - intended as “socially-organized personal development contributing to the wellbeing of the human individual and the wellbeing of human society” (Allot, 2014) - in today’s world is also accomplished by enhancing the possibilities of professional inclusion. The concern about education turning away from the most authentic purposes of transmitting culture and identity in favour of the employability issue cannot ignore that the purposes of socialization and selection require employability to be taken into consideration to fully guarantee the opportunity of social inclusion in a global post-industrial society. Preparing people for the job market should not mean subordinating education to the market, but promoting the skills match rather than its opposite in developing more articulate and complex citizenship. As previously noted, higher education no longer consists exclusively of academic education, increasingly taking responsibility to prepare students for the labour market and “replacing the older idea of university by a much more expansive and diluted conception of tertiary rather than higher education [with] a large variety of courses, typically vocational or preparatory to professional training” (Halsey, 2006, p. 864). It is no coincidence that the debate on citizenship education suggests that as a minimum, pupils should develop the ability to earn a living, beyond becoming considerate and supportive family members, partners, parents; active, responsible and environmentally aware members of their communities; active democratic citizens; lifelong learners (Rand, 2001, p. 6); pupils must now have more knowledge to participate in an increasingly complex world (Osler & Starkey, 2001; Humes, 2002).

Moreover, the competition implied by marketization has been proven to have positive effects on education institution policies. Numerous studies (Johnes & Cave, 1994; Blair & Staley, 1995; Zanzig, 1997) show that a major increase in competition in the education sector between institutions can lead to greater efficiency in both a production and allocation perspective. This means that institutions perform better in terms of teaching and therefore prospective student choices are more coherent with their utility functions (Agasisti, 2009). If highly motivated and well prepared for

the transition from secondary school, they choose the best possible higher education.

Education marketization and commodification do not necessarily have to be seen or connoted negatively as long as the efforts are on the actual “product” (i.e., education) quality. Consumerism is a risk that these two phenomena could bring about due to the shift of focus from product quality to marketing strategies. Universities are intended to produce three types of outcomes: research, teaching (Cohn, Rhine & Santos, 1989) and knowledge transfer (Johnes et al., 2005). Providing “good education” for students is one of their main priorities - summarily intended as better teaching and in general a higher degree of teacher responsibility - and involves a variety of factors³. What is generally meant by “consumerism” in higher education (also studied from a number of perspectives by Murphy, 2011; Gibbs, 2009; Norris, 2006; amongst others) is that the institutions cease to treat students as learners and start to see them as customers. This implies a series of consequences affecting teaching and learning, and above all assessment practices (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005).

When the market approach stretches to the point that making money from student enrolment fees becomes the priority, then consumerism ensues. There are circumstances that would seem to favour such an attitude. This phenomenon has been widely attributed to those contexts where tuition fees are high or rising, but not enough studies address the consumerist attitude of institutions with low tuition fees, which occurs, for instance, in public Italian universities that I specifically address. In this case, the more students are persuaded to enrol in university courses the better, and it does not seem to matter to what extent students are motivated to learn and succeed nor the actual quality of the educational offer, which instead must be a determining factor in the marketing strategies of universities with high tuition fees, i.e., private Italian universities. It is no coincidence that the OECD recommended Italy should increase the amount

³ The Educational Productive Function (Coleman et al., 1966) can account for the variety of factors involved in the production of good education: $O_t = f(R_{t-1}, O_{t-1}, P_{t-1}, F_{t-1}, E_{t-1})$, where the productive process output at time t (O_t) is function of inputs such as organisational resources used (R_{t-1}), scholastic background of students (O_{t-1}), familiar background of students (F_{t-1}), the average level of ability during the study course (P_{t-1} , the so-called *peer effect*), and the efforts and motivation of the students (E_{t-1}).

of private financial investments in tertiary education “through higher tuition fees and private sector financing, to increase the supply (quality and quantity) of university places and reduce drop-out rates; introduce student loans with income-contingent repayment” (OECD, 2009, p. 82).

The paradox of open entry as a limitation of opportunities and possible adjustments: a theoretical hypothesis

This section addresses the questions posed in the introduction (have universities given up their selection functions? Has widening access become a trap?), leading to hypothesizing that given the aforementioned context characterized by marketization and over-qualification, open entry policies may entail negative effects on the quality of the teaching-learning environment and wasteful competition in the labour market, increasing the risk of professional and social exclusion instead of guaranteeing more and greater opportunities.

Potential side-effects of open entry

Open entry policies could incur the risk of public university institutions taking a consumerist attitude. The mass higher education system has given rise to problems that were unimaginable prior to widening access.

As noted, widening opportunities in education - hence also open entry policies - was not considered a problem since the demand for skilled workers was assumed to increase (Brown, 2003). Nevertheless, the phenomenon of the so-called credential inflation had already been identified by Collins (1979). The expansion of higher education was not deemed to reflect the changes in demand for high-skilled workers but merely the increasing struggle to offer (by institutions) and obtain (by students) the credentials required for professional or managerial jobs. This resulted in the supply of qualified people that does not meet demand - precisely, an “oversupply” and hence the phenomenon of over-qualification - reducing the value of the credential itself and competition moving to an even higher level: this is deemed to reinforce inequality in opportunities because it would favor those with the personal and family resources that are able to meet the costs associated with an extended competition (Hirsch, 1977). This dynamic entails the risk of consumerism that marketization can

lead to, and may occur in contexts where admissions are not subject to any requirements and can be more easily implemented, irrespective of whether tuition fees are high or low.

As previously reported, since the “over-supply of qualified” human resources does not coincide with an equal “over-supply of skilled” human resources, it could be that open-entry policies help create the preconditions for such a mismatch between qualifications and skills. Brown’s (2003) argument that “the rhetoric of expanding educational opportunities should not disguise the fact that the value of credentials is strengthened by exclusion and weakened by inclusion” is taken to extremes, although he himself concludes, “the power shift in the direction of knowledge workers has been greatly exaggerated”⁴ and defines it the “opportunity trap”. If the number of those with higher education continues to expand at the same time as demand for skilled labour weakens, “returns may not be as clear-cut as the rhetoric of ‘learning is earning’ would have us believe” (Wolf, 2002).

If there is not enough empirical evidence to prove and claim that open entry can cause or at least emphasise the over-qualification phenomenon, there are enough arguments to hypothesise such a relation. How may this process have occurred? If the first successful phase of widening opportunities increased the expectations of middle-class lifestyles (Brown, 2003, p. 152), which is a good thing in itself, it also gradually led to a sort of artificial creation of a need for higher education. Indeed, this means that potentially all members of the middle classes and working classes - whether prepared or not, passionate about a discipline or not, convinced about what to commit to in the future or not, aware of what such commitment means or not - would want to attend higher education in order to be entitled to participate in the redistribution of wealth. The consequence is a considerable waste of efforts and resources as many compete for prizes that only a few are able to achieve, i.e., precisely wasteful competition (Frank & Cook, 1996) that compromises social inclusion.

Another line of criticism is that the mass abolition of access requirements has favoured a cultural conception of higher education as a

⁴ Brown’s implication is that “the power decisively remains with employers”, but this is not to be discussed here.

“right” rather than a “responsibility” and a “chance” to be earned. Of course, some would argue that this is exactly what it ought to be, but this is not the view shared here since responsible citizenship postulates that every right is in itself a duty. Humes (2002) cites Faulks’ (2000) view that citizenship education has an almost universal appeal since it recognises the dignity of the subject with certain rights but at the same time reaffirms ideas of community, different roles, mutual respect and individual responsibility. Although originally identified as an effect of grading competition (Dore, 1976), the pupil’s concern of being certified as having mastered rather than with mastery itself is a disease of very low competitive environments, precisely due to the lack of sense of responsibility these imply.

Furthermore, open entry courses may inevitably represent a second easier choice for those not entering restricted or selective access courses and become over-crowded. This has two different consequences. Since public universities in Italy are mostly open entry, they are over-crowded, whereas private competitors can guarantee a higher level of attention to a lower number of students, resulting in a very unequal situation. Exceptions of courses in public universities include medicine, veterinary and architecture, where access is selective and number-limited. As a consequence, the over-crowded courses are those considered closer to these, or those in the realm of socio-economic sciences and humanities in which the great majority who do not have a clear idea of what to do in the future enrol.

Finally, in the 16-24 age group, graduates from all fields generally tend to have less work experience (yet higher earning prospects) than the poorly qualified, and in comparison to older people will generally have “less specific human capital [...] fewer contacts and less experience in finding work” and fall into the so-called “experience trap” (Bell & Blanchflower, 2011, p. 242). If over-qualification is to a certain extent brought about by open entry policies, then these can only emphasise the experience trap and perpetuate the vicious circle.

From paradox to oxymoron: if open entry were selective

All the theoretical reflections presented above express my concerns and perplexities about open entry being the best possible solution to guarantee

opportunities to the widest audience possible and thus social mobility, job satisfaction and meritocracy.

These concerns lead me to conclude that open entry may end up worsening the level of graduate quality and play a role in emphasising the over-qualification phenomenon together with that of under-skilling. This would lead many to seek jobs that are inadequate or inconsistent with their actual preparation and skills, thus contributing to their social exclusion and preventing higher education from accomplishing its purpose of promoting individuals' personal and professional growth. Employers select employees based on their credentials: if higher education fails thereby, making employers fail, then the labour market may be able to adjust the errors and reward skills; yet the focus of universities should be on how to foster skills-match. This analysis aims to develop understanding on how higher education can promote the skills-match rather than the education-match, i.e., providing better and more effective education rather than substantially producing credentials, since inflation is believed to arise when credentials are not actually sustained by adequate preparation.

It could of course be argued that universities should "learn" how to teach skills better rather than excluding someone from educational opportunities. Again, the concept of education as a "right" that excludes the element of "responsibility" is called into question, since my assumption is that both institutions/teachers and students need to share the effort and commitment. This is the reason behind the provocative subtitle *if open entry were selective*. This oxymoron is intended to emphasise the idea of a university that adopts an open entry policy but then promotes selection criteria: once having been provided with equal opportunity to understand what universities are for and what one is supposed to do and learn to succeed, then students should be required to reach a certain degree of motivation, responsibility and performance in order to proceed in higher education.

This idea is also based on the following reasoning. If as reported, a market-competitive context leads educational institutions to perform better and if at the same time the 'best' student choices are more coherent with their utility function, then the introduction of more rigorous selection criteria alongside maintaining an open entry policy would push all prospective students to pursue this 'best', i.e., the objective of performing better and making an effort to acquire skills before the mere pursuit of

credentials. Conversely, the absence of any requirement - aside from a secondary school qualification - would obviously discourage prospective students from taking responsibility, developing motivation and commitment to perform better. Thus, market competition between institutions together with some type of selection is deemed to engender efficiency. Market competition, when no selection criteria are adopted, leads to consumerism, i.e., the pursuit of enrolment fees and retention that can produce credential inflation and wasteful competition.

Quality and selection

The adoption of any selection criteria must be accompanied by better quality teaching performance, the first and a priority “service” that institutions must provide. Without such quality, any idea of selecting students based on their quality fails.

However, the concept of quality is complex and needs to be defined. Many definitions or conceptualizations of quality emphasise the need to meet standards or expectations, “higher quality is typically related to higher levels of customer satisfaction” (Schraeder, 2013). This consumerist approach to quality led to the adoption of SETs (Students’ Evaluation of Teaching), which are controversial tools (and beyond the scope of this article) whose validity is widely debated (Young, Delli & Johnson, 1999; Chambers & Schmitt, 2002; Gump, 2007). Nevertheless, with regard to standards, the notion of quality is less controversial and, let us say, more universal. Once the priority functions of a social or private institution have been defined (in the case of universities, research, teaching, knowledge transfer) they need to be measured and meet a certain standard to be considered effective. Although research impact measures also exist in Italy, we are apparently less willing to develop effective teaching measurement tools beyond SETs. The notion of quality adopted and considered as desirable here precisely presupposes the fulfilment of this requirement. Moreover, “it is generally acknowledged that quality contributes to higher levels of productivity, while also reducing cost [...] higher productivity and lower costs have important implications for the overall success/performance of the organization” (Campanella, 1999). This dimension of quality is also taken into account when productivity itself is seen as the capacity to “produce” skilled graduates.

The more universities and departments increase the quality of their teaching performance, the more they can attract and select self-aware and motivated students (aware of their learning objectives and motivated to pursue them). The quality of the teaching-learning environment subsequently increases as a whole, enhancing university reputation, credentials consistent with skills and their appeal for the labour market in a kind of virtuous circle of reputation. Looking at this the other way round, the less universities care about the quality of their teaching, the more they risk attracting and retaining those who are not willing to get actively involved in the educational process, thus facilitating the development of a consumerist culture without any further long-term objectives for their students and their reputation, and ultimately fostering credential inflation.

With this brief explanation of quality and its potential benefits, the oxymoron (i.e., a university that simultaneously adopts an open entry policy and selection criteria) can be better explained. If it is important to ensure that all are educated for global citizenship and hence an open entry policy, it is equally important not to negate human potentiality: “a good society requires élites, requires people exceptionally well-prepared to exercise exceptional social responsibility” (Allot, 2014). Thus it is important to distinguish people, social roles and economic functions based on aptitudes, abilities, talent, effort and willingness, which universities are called on to select. It could be argued that social backgrounds influence these elements as well as merit itself, thus creating fertile ground for social inequality, yet educational institutions can only restrict the influence of diverse social backgrounds; if primary and secondary schools fail, universities cannot solve the problems created therein, but can try to alleviate inequality. It is right and fair that everyone should be offered the opportunity to be helped and selected, as much as it is fair to then be selective alongside promoting alternative types of post-secondary education such as other vocational courses or apprenticeships.

Setting the agenda to guide future research and policy-making

As stated in the introduction, a further aim of this research is to set an agenda to guide future research and policy-making. The theoretical hypothesis proposed on the open entry paradox and its possible adjustments

enables advancing some consistent policy proposals, albeit requiring more extensive studies and testing.

“Higher Education has surrendered to crude testing: that has now become a self-justifying end in itself, a spurious *raison d’être*. So testing - there’s a lot of discussion about it - has a terribly fundamental effect: it predetermines what is taught and how” (Allot, 2014). This is precisely the reason why admission criteria relying on “crude testing” such as SATs are not deemed a solution to open entry paradoxes. Open entry policies can instead be maintained as long as a quality-centred culture and the value of responsibility are also developed and promoted amongst teachers and students.

To accomplish these desirable objectives while also granting equal opportunities, some recommendations are made including developing quality devices such as teacher peer-control, self-reflection and self-assessment, establishing a compulsory orientation programme in the first year of study and thereafter meeting certain performance standards.

Developing a quality-centred culture: teacher peer-control as a tool for self-reflection and self-assessment

The main benefit of selective entry is that selecting fewer students would enable smaller classes, guaranteeing better teaching and learning opportunities, and hence a greater likelihood of succeeding in academic and professional life. Without disregarding the importance of this correlation, the suggested perspective is different and somehow opposite: better teaching can also guarantee a good service to bigger classes.

In my opinion, the SET (Student Evaluation of Teaching) mechanism, considered to provide limited and controversial results, could produce more reliable outcomes in a high quality teaching-learning environment. However, since we are here attempting to create the basis for such an environment, the SET tool could never be enough and other practices need to be studied and implemented. The alternative suggestions given here are only initial theoretical ideas to be further explored and defined and concern peer-control practices to be established on a regular basis and teacher self-reflection and self-assessment tools.

Peer-control is intended to address both research and teaching activities. To monitor research advancements, each department should promote sharing research in progress amongst scholars through for instance

compulsory periodical meetings to evaluate the actual commitment of academics to research. “Out of class spaces” (Bloom et al., 2013) should also be provided in universities to encourage peer and even non-peer interactions. In terms of the main topic of interest, namely, teaching, it is worth pointing out first that “the assessment of professional competence requires methods that differ from the assessment of knowledge competence” (Miller, 1990). Although the actual performance in both standardized contexts and unpredictable professional situations should be assessed (Rethans et al., 2002), there are claims of assessment practices being widely de-contextualized. Without going into the details of how an assessment process should be structured (which is not the purpose of the present study), there is room here to suggest what the tools should practically measure actual performance in terms of clarity and knowledge transfer, and this is why academic professionals in other fields are thought to be the best peers for control.

The numerous contributions on reflective practice in teaching (from Schön, 1983 and 1987 onwards) would require another article, but the suggestion starts from the criticism that reflective practice is too individualistic in its conception of learning and leaves out the “social dimension”. Some authors argue that reflection does not really explain how people learn professionally, partly undermining the idea of reflective practice itself (see, for instance, Newman, 1999; Erlandson, 2005; Procee, 2006). The question is whether people genuinely learn through a process of introspection rather than through conversation and interaction with other people (Kotzee, 2012). According to Fullan (2007), teaching practices need to be improved by establishing a community of practices where colleagues collaborate and debate the quality and effectiveness of teaching. Peer-control may be an answer as it could serve this purpose and also become a tool or at least a basis for self-reflection and self-assessment of one’s teaching (and, more broadly, academic) performance. Indeed, similarly the purpose of peer reviews is “to promote professional development, collaboration and self-assessment” (Wilkins & Shin, 2011, p. 50). Caring and mutual regard are integral to effective collaboration in a strong community (Peterson Nelson et al., 2013) where student curricula, instruction and learning can consequently improve (see: Allington and Walmsley, 1995; Bezzina, 2006; Servage, 2008, although mostly referring to secondary school students). DuFour (2002) talks of “professional

learning communities” (PLC) and reports that at-risk schools⁵ with strong PLCs are four times more likely to improve academic outcomes than schools with weaker faculty collaboration. A related idea promoted in literature is relationally-bound communities, whose core element is that effective teacher development is both collegial and collaborative (Servage, 2008). Such communities give rise to an increased sense of responsibility for performance (Hughes, 2006) and greater personal commitment to work (DuFour, 2007). A further benefit of these communities is the promotion of self-regulation rather than rule-based control over teacher behaviour and strongly encouraging inquiry and innovation (Kruse, Louis & Bryk, 1995).

Developing a responsibility-centred culture: the orientation year and continuation requirements

The orientation programme in the first year of study - hence called “orientation year” - is conceived as a set of tools to alleviate previously constructed inequalities. This aims to help all first-year students gain greater awareness of their learning objectives and the professional roles they may be called on to play in their lives, greater achievement motivation and ultimately good learning performance (hopefully resulting in good academic outcomes in the first year).

According to this proposal, during the first year of every higher education study course, from engineering to philosophy, half the time should be dedicated to the discipline foundation courses and the other half to orientation activities. Dedicated teachers would substantially be in charge of teaching reflective learning. Some authors have taken issue with how the demand that students reflect on what they do has become institutionalized in higher and professional education (Kotzee, 2012; Boud & Walker, 1998). Accomplishing reflective learning could be pursued through: (i) providing students with some introductory insights on their possible careers and the social functions and importance of knowledge and work in relation to the chosen academic field; (ii) promoting envisioning; (iii) stimulating the personal and autonomous formulation of learning goals (Sideri 2013; Tillema, Kessels & Meijers, 2000; Bruner, 1961; Piaget,

⁵ His empirical study is limited to the Chicago Public School system: nevertheless, the findings are relevant to the present analysis, which focuses on a public university system.

1959; Dewey, 1910 and 1944) that everyone needs to accomplish to become who they want to become.

In terms of point (ii), “envisioning means imagining, at first generally and then with increasing specificity, what you really want: that is, what you really want, not what someone has taught you to want” (Meadows et al., 1992, p. 224). Based on this theoretical assumption, the Futures Workshops experience is considered, albeit originally developed for slightly different purposes. The futurist Robert Jungk ran workshops all over Europe with a wide range of community, business, government and activist groups. These consisted in four main phases: the preparatory phase where participants stated the reasons that led them to the workshop; the critique phase that focused on complaints and critiques to identify the key components of the problems in the present dimension; the fantasy phase involved envisioning a preferable future, generally accomplished through various processes such as brainstorming; the implementation phase designed to identify the practicable schemes among the various more or less utopian suggestions for action (Jungk & Mullert, 1987; Hicks, 2002). Similar suggestions derive from the work of Boulding (1994). Her workshops were run with an opportunity sample of students from three higher education institutions in the southwest of England and based on the idea that “participants had to step, in fantasy, into a future very different from the present, and report back from that future on their observations of a society, which they must then analyse in terms of the social institutions that could sustain society itself” (Boulding, 1994, p. 67). Clearly, these models were not intended for students and their future careers but for general issues considered as social problems.

The idea proposed here consists in using described procedures in guided individual processes intended to enable envisioning not the society of the future but the self in the future, and his\her place in society. If readapted, future workshop activities could be an important preparatory step for the personal formulation of learning goals. With regard to point (iii), the fundamental goal to be achieved through the personal formulation of the student’s expected learning goals is establishing a “meaning-oriented learning pattern” (Vermunt, 1996; Vermunt & Vermetten, 2004) that

should accompany students throughout their academic career⁶ and is deemed to coincide with a more self-aware attitude towards learning. The idea of meaning-oriented learning pattern is borrowed from Vermunt's Learning Pattern Model that is built on the SAL (Students Approaches to Learning) tradition, but fosters the inclusion of more components in the definition of the "approach". An approach does not only consist of strategies + intention but requires distinguishing between processing (first component), regulation strategies (second), conceptions of (third) and orientations to (fourth) learning. These distinctions help highlight the different dimensions of the learning process in each component as shown in Table 1.

The identification of the dimensions enables understanding the principles, i.e., the reasons and conditions for which certain learning patterns develop (Table 2). The meaning-oriented learning pattern or self-awareness attitude that the orientation programme aims to develop builds on the idea that processing must be deep and requires self-regulation is required. Both can be achieved based on the conception of learning as construction and thanks to a motivational component that includes personal interest in learning.

In practice, students would be asked to formulate a "wish list" of learning goals, to search for the meaning of areas they expressed an interest in and the deep meaning of their personal interest in them, coherently expressing their opinions in a written text and hence achieving more self-regulation and self-awareness. Some empirical studies show that teaching methods that promote self-regulation have consistent effects on student outcomes (Vermunt, 2007).

If the activities planned in the orientation programme were to be introduced and established as mandatory, then students would become more engaged and more involved in the educational process as potential resources rather than being treated as passive subjects, i.e., mere customers.

⁶ Such activity is better carried out in small classes but also may work in larger classes - which are typical of the Italian open entry courses - on condition of providing space for self-expression to all students (either verbal or written): organizational issues are not intended to be dealt with here and may be left to the discretionary governance of institutions, as long as the fundamental requirements are met.

Since customers are generally external to an organization, students who internalize a consumer identity in effect place themselves outside the intellectual community and perceive themselves as passive consumers of education (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005).

Table 1. Learning Components and relative Dimensions

Processing	Deep
	Stepwise
	Concrete
Regulation	Self-regulation
	External regulation
	Lack of regulation
Conception	Intake of knowledge
	Construction of knowledge
	Use of knowledge
	Cooperative learning
	Stimulated learning
Orientation	Personally interested
	Self-test oriented
	Certificate oriented
	Vocation oriented
	Ambivalent

Source: Elaboration of the author from Vermunt & Vermetten, 2004

Table 2. Examples of Learning Patterns

Meaning oriented	Application oriented
Deep processing	Concrete processing
Self-regulation	Both external and self-regulated
Construction of knowledge	Use of knowledge
Personally interested	Vocation oriented

Source: elaboration of the author from Vermunt & Vermetten, 2004

Currently, the Italian orientation system is mainly aimed at addressing the needs of prospective students for information during the so-called open days, and when addressing actual students it is based on individual rather than classroom activities. It is not driven by any actual didactic aim but by a mentoring objective that is often reduced to a purely informational

function, with the exception of the counselling services provided by some universities. Since the service is not actually didactic, dedicated staff is rarely recruited with rigorous selection criteria. Orientation activities are not mandatory or subject to assessments and do not determine any continuation.

In the proposed orientation programme aimed at ensuring equal and effective guidance and promoting greater levels of self-regulation, self-awareness, motivation, engagement and performance, the emphasised value of “responsibility” is pursued through a “coercive” element represented by the requirement of achieving certain standards in the aforementioned dimensions that should determine continuation or alternative re-orientation. Decisions are to be based on rigorous assessment tools (although their development is beyond the scope of this paper), which are considered the main priority for the future research agenda that this section has attempted to set.

Conclusions and limitations

This article presents research and reflections on the over-education and over-skilling, marketization and consumerism phenomena in higher education with the aim of highlighting the paradox of open entry policies. These supposedly egalitarian policies may foster credential inflation and under-skilling.

Some major interventions are therefore proposed as adjustments aimed at preserving educational opportunities for all and granting selection at the same time. To translate these initial ideas into actual policies requires further research and hence an agenda is set.

The theoretical conclusions themselves will need further investigation to be empirically confirmed: case-studies in both selective and open entry courses are deemed to be able to provide empirical evidence of the motivation and self-awareness of first-year students in the two contexts. The level of student skill development could also be tested in environments where quality practices of the type proposed here are already implemented. There are numerous tools - for example, questionnaires enabling quantitative and qualitative analysis - which could be used or adapted for

these purposes: their selection would depend on the specific skills to be evaluated. In addition, purposeful tools could also be developed.

These follow-up studies should enable accomplishing the purpose of providing policy makers with stronger evidence on the need to study and implement those suggested and believed to be the most necessary adjustments.

Moreover, a follow-up study will discuss the actual assessment procedures (how to structure teaching peer evaluation; how to assess the level of self-regulation, self-awareness and achievement motivation) that should be adopted to determine continuation, and a second study will empirically test the reliability and validity of such procedures.

Although only the first theoretical step of broader research to be empirically developed and deepened, this study provides some interesting insights. One element of interest resides in its synoptic character, which enabled a comprehensive, but inevitably non-exhaustive, theoretical analysis of the cultural, economic and social implications of open entry policies. Advancing some initial policy-proposals also allowed accounting for some research perspectives that influence European educational research.

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