University Students With Migrant Background in Italy. Which Factors Affect Opportunities?

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Abstract: The paper reflects on the access of students of migrant origin to Italian universities, focusing on the choices and opportunities that these students encounter and the factors that can affect this transition. At the beginning, it presents a brief review of the international literature on this topic. Then, mainly based on a qualitative case study, the article highlights the influence of limited economic resources, social and cultural capital, type of secondary school diploma and information bias on these students' opportunities. The analysis highlights the positive impact of the permeability of Italian school system and the negative one of the weak school guidance policies. The policy implications are discussed at the end.

Keywords: university students, migrant origins, constraints, opportunities

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Introduction

The university education of children of migrant origin is an issue that affects not only individuals but also the social and economic growth of a country in a globalized world. Yet numerous studies show that inequalities in educational opportunities, which also concern higher education systems, pose one of the most persistent challenges for Western societies. In Italy, various studies have focused on the transition to higher education of students with a secondary school diploma across the population, highlighting the effects of the specific secondary school track, the students' social and cultural background, and information biases. However, little attention has been paid to the impact of a migrant background.

This paper offers a reflection on the access of students of migrant origin to Italian universities, focusing on the choices and opportunities that these students encounter and the factors that can reduce the inclusivity of the tertiary education system. In summary, the paper presents a brief review of the international literature and looks at some comparative data on the transition choices of migrant and Italian students with a secondary school diploma. Subsequently, relying on the results of a qualitative research conducted in an Italian university, it examines in detail the elements that have affected the possibilities of migrant students to continue their university studies. The conclusions highlight the need for university policies that can strengthen and support the opportunities of students with migrant background to participate in the Italian university system, similarly to what is happening in other European countries.

Theoretical background

Post-secondary education among students of migrant origin is a recent topic of study in Italian sociology (Lagomarsino & Ravecca, 2014; Bertozzi, 2015, 2016; Paba & Bertozzi, 2017), mainly because the children of immigrant parents are only recently reaching Italian universities in significant numbers.

By contrast, at the international level, the transition to university of students with a migrant background has been investigated for some time now, through comparative studies that unfortunately do not include Italy due to the lack of nationwide data (Crul, 2012; Heath & Brinbaum, 2007,

2014; Griga, 2013; Griga & Hadjar 2014; Jackson et al. 2012; Murdoch et al.2014; 2016), and by research projects conducted in the countries with the largest immigrant populations, such as the UK, Germany, France, Switzerland and Sweden (Boliver, 2006; Kristen & Granato, 2007; Vignoles et al. 2008; Singh, 2011; Picot & Hou, 2013; Griga, 2014). While it is outside the scope of this paper to provide a detailed account of the theoretical analysis emerging from the international literature, we will point to a number of theoretical elements that can be useful for our discussion of the Italian case.

   A now well-established fact emerging from the international studies is the persistence of inequalities in the school performances and levels of education achieved by migrant children compared to their native peers. These educational inequalities are rooted in both their migrant background and other factors, such as social status, parental education, economic capital, aspirations, different stratification of secondary school systems and the existence of alternative pathways to university entrance. In their detailed investigations of the influence of a migrant background, many European studies draw attention to the distinction between the primary and the secondary effects of ethnic origins, taking their cue from the analysis conducted by Boudon (1974) of the primary and secondary effects of social origins on levels of education (Heath & Brinbaum, 2007, 2014; Griga, 2013). As the performance data shows, the average results achieved by students of migrant origin are lower than those of their native peers, and these inequalities can be interpreted as the primary effects on learning (due, for example, to language difficulties, low level of parental support, mobility, and so on). There are, however, differences in the choice to continue to post-secondary and university education (when the results are the same) that are equally important and can be viewed as secondary results of migrant origins. In some cases, students of migrant origin go on to tertiary education in even higher numbers than their native peers, despite their worse secondary school performances.

   Thus, while the migrant experience (direct or indirect) has negative primary effects on learning outcomes, educational choices can be positively influenced by migrant origins since they are often linked to personal and family assessments of the costs, benefits, and success opportunities of a particular educational choice, to higher educational expectations and a high value attributed to a university degree, to selection processes among migrants, and to the view that investing in education can be a way to avoid

unemployment and greater discrimination in the labour market (Griga, 2014; Rothon, 2007; Kristen & Granato, 2007; Griga & Hadjar, 2014; Jackson *et al.* 2012). However, the secondary effects of a migrant background are not consistently positive but vary according to nationality, socio-economic status, gender or area of residence (Griga, 2014). Moreover, the determinants of educational success are attributed not only to individual but also to institutional factors, such as the school system's organization.

A major study in this respect is the international standardised research programme known as TIES, conducted in eight European countries (Crul, 2012). Through this survey, the authors found that the educational opportunities and school outcomes of second-generation students from the same group of origin vary considerably across countries. The main focus of the study is the effect on school careers of the institutional arrangements of different school systems. The institutional factors considered include the degree of permeability of the school system, i.e. the extent to which students attending secondary school have the opportunity to change from a vocational to an academic track and vice-versa, and the method of transition to HE, i.e. whether it is automatic or the result of a specific choice. While academic tracks in secondary school usually lead students to go on to university, students with an academic diploma don't always continue their studies and, vice-versa, students enrolled in university don't always have an academic diploma. Both aspects play an important role for students with a migrant background, with significant differences across national contexts (Crul, 2013).

Research findings show that inequalities are lower in countries with a low-stratified school system, which provide alternative methods of entry to university (Griga, 2013, Griga & Hadjar, 2014). Studies focusing on France, Switzerland and Germany also show the benefits to second-generation students of having the opportunity to enter university with vocational diplomas insofar as these offer a "second chance" to many children of immigrant parents (Murdoch *et al*. 2016).

Going into higher education can therefore be assumed to be an important milestone for children of immigrant parents, and, to some extent, a frequently unlikely outcome considering the economic, social and cultural capital of many families (Schnell, Keskiner, Crul, 2013). Transition to higher education can result from rational or random choices, from conditioned or free choices, and can interconnect in different ways with the

family's cultural and social capital. Individuals can decide based on "what they themselves have thematized as restrictions and have recognized as desires arising from specific beliefs" (Ceravolo, 2016, p.47) thanks to the social networks they turn to. But choices can also be affected by different educational aspirations and expectations, which make a difference in terms of what students hope and what they think may actually happen with respect to their investment in university education (Minello & Barban, 2012; Vlach, 2017). It is therefore clear that it is possible to break the "perpetual cycle of the habitus inherited through class position" (Crul *et al.* 2017, p.16) and embarking on counter-intuitive trajectories.

Nevertheless, there are clear educational inequalities, and the socio-economic variable remains one of the main sources of explanation for at least half of the gap between native and immigrant background students, even though it does not completely explain educational disadvantage. Indeed, even after controlling for social background, there remains a gap, which can be explained by looking at other factors, such as poor knowledge of the education system, language skills, upward social mobility aspirations, and ethnic segregation and stereotypes.

Turning to the Italian context, research studies show the persistence of educational inequalities between Italian students and students with an immigrant background in primary and secondary school, particularly with respect to outcomes, lagging behind and drop-out rates (Azzolini, 2011; Santagati, 2015). The stabilization of migrant projects, however, has shown that there are growing differences between first- and second-generation migrants. The gap with Italian students narrows when students of migrant origin were born or went to school in Italy from an early age, bringing second-generation migrants close to their native peers. The effects of this stabilization are also felt in tertiary education, with an increase in the number of students with migrant backgrounds. Even at this level, however, some inequalities arise and are beginning to attract growing attention.

Studies focusing on students with migrant origins in tertiary education have only recently been carried out. They include a pioneering research study conducted by Lagomarsino and Ravecca (2014) based on a sample of immigrant students from the University of Genoa, and a first analysis performed at the national level by Paba and Bertozzi (2017) on participation rates of students with a migrant background in tertiary education.

The first study is very interesting because it shows that access to university is actually a stage in these young people's career progression rather than merely an achievement in itself or a sign of successful integration. The findings show how the university experience can be lived as a conscious and positive investment, though also as a frustrating or uncertain experience. The students interviewed in the study have followed different paths and have different expectations and resources. Their university experiences are therefore different and delineate different student profiles[1] and different ways in which students are affected by an immigrant background.

The second study provides insights into the transition choices of Italian and migrant students, highlighting the incidence of different secondary school diplomas, nationalities, and socioeconomic variables at the provincial level. Its findings highlight some important features of these transitions. The analysis confirms that the transition rates of the two groups differ substantially: the proportion of secondary school graduates with migrant origin who enrol in tertiary education in the academic year 2013/14 is significantly lower compared to that of Italian students.

Another important finding is the role played by type of secondary school attended. In the case of Italians, 75.9% of new university students hold a liceo diploma, and only the minority a technical (20.1%) or vocational (4%) diploma. By contrast, when immigrant students enrol in university, only 46% of them hold a liceo diploma and the majority attended a technical (39.3%) or a vocational school (14.1%). However, the authors explain that "this does not mean that immigrant students with a technical or a vocational diploma show a higher propensity to enter further education compared to natives. Transition rates by diploma type are actually similar for the two groups. The interesting finding is that a large proportion of immigrant students with a liceo diploma don't enrol in university" (Paba & Bertozzi, 2017, p.328). In other words, it is more common for migrant students to enrol in university without an academic diploma and, for those with an academic diploma, not to continue their studies. The analysis finds also other factors at play, such as national origins, youth unemployment rates and local community cohesion.

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[1] From the analysis of the data gathered in the research, the authors identified three student profiles: straight "targeters", novice walkers and disoriented students.

Further differences between immigrant students and their native peers enrolled at the university emerge from the Government's statistics, such as lower grades in the final high school degree, an higher graduation age and a higher preference for social studies in their subsequent academic career (MIUR, 2015). Once enrolled at the university, immigrant students on average achieve fewer ECTS in their first year and have a higher drop out rate in the second year.

However, the Government's statistics, as well as the other national research findings, do not enable us to investigate the motivations of such choices or the factors that affect them. For this reason, qualitative analysis conducted by focusing on the biographical profiles of university students with migrant background, such as the first study we described above, can offer complementary insights.

Research aims

The study presented below builds on the research conducted in Genoa by Lagomarsino and Ravecca. Using their research design and expanding it with further topics of investigation, the project explored the experiences of students with an immigrant background enrolled in the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. The research used qualitative methods to retrace their school paths to try to determine the extent to which their choice to go to university was influenced by the schools they attended prior to university, and by their social status, immigrant background, educational expectations, social and cultural capital, and teacher's guidance.

The empirical material consists of 33 interviews conducted in 2012-2014 with university students of migrant origin who obtained their secondary school diploma in Italy and enrolled in the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. The interviewees have different backgrounds: 8 were born in Italy, 5 were born abroad and were reunited with their families at an early age, and 20 were born abroad and arrived in Italy during primary or secondary school; a third of them have Italian citizenship; the majority hold technical (16) or vocational (11) diplomas and a minority have liceo (academic) diplomas (6). The groups of interviewees were set up with a view to ensuring diversity in terms of countries of origin (12), gender (13 males and 20 females) as well as type of degree course (14).

As shown by the literature, decision-making processes can be of different kinds and be influenced by various factors. Previous studies have already shown the role played by social networks as well by structural factors in guiding choices. But the importance of personal aspirations and expectations is also widely recognized (Lagomarsino & Ravecca, 2014; Eve, 2017). Our case study has enabled us to investigate the students' motivations for choosing to go to university and the conditions in which they made that choice, evaluating the role played by migration backgrounds.

The research also focuses on the dynamics for accessing higher education and aims to offer insights into the possible increasing of inclusivity of the Italian university system with respect to students with an immigrant background.

Factors affecting opportunities

As mentioned earlier, students with an immigrant background seem to make different transition choices compared to their native peers. This does not imply that we assume "ethnic effects" to be the same for all the children of immigrants, since we believe in the importance of an intersectional approach (Eve, 2017). But our focus will be on the tertiary education opportunities for the children of immigrants and the factors affecting their choices in that respect. In other words, do they have the same opportunities?

The results of our research show firstly that there are a variety of life experiences which closely mirror the challenges typically associated with transition to adulthood (as generational experience) and the elements of complexity linked to a migrant background. There are confident students who have consciously chosen to go to university, have their families' support along with clear social mobility goals and a strong performance record. There are students with a non-linear educational pathway, marked by interruptions or changes, random or uninformed choices, inadequate support due to their immigrant background, but who are aware of the importance of continuing their education. Finally, there are students with language deficiencies, lack of commitment, who are more disoriented and lack family support, and for them drop out risks and failure rates are higher.

For many interviewees, the desire to continue their education derives from family-based social mobility goals, although there are different levels of parental involvement and support, especially in relation to cultural capital. Student profiles show the various life chances (Dahrendorf, 1981) they have to face, with possible options and existing constraints. It is quite clear that opportunities are influenced by limited economic resources, social and cultural capital, type of secondary school diploma and the information they have. It is equally clear, however, that there are choice processes in which individuals have different ways of using their background and resources, sometimes even attaining unexpected outcomes.

An initial finding from the analysis is the positive effect of the permeability of the Italian school system. The Italian education system is based on a non-selective principle whereby the school track chosen at the age of 14 is not restrictive in terms of providing access to university after five years of secondary education. Irrespective of their diploma, students have the same opportunities for access to university, and indeed the interviewees come from different, mainly technical and vocational, tracks. However, previous school experience matters: students with vocational diplomas have a stronger representation in 'struggling' and 'reoriented' student profiles. This does not mean that the type of diploma determines success. The interviews reveal the existence of unexpected pathways: these are mainly students streamed to lower level tracks due to their migrant background and difficulties with integration into the Italian school system, but who have high personal and family ambitions and are therefore strongly motivated in their university course. In such cases, the permeability of the education system leaves open greater opportunities.

> In lower secondary school it was quite difficult because of course I didn't speak Italian. Vocational school went better, but I had support from a lady who lives near my home ... I had one of the highest grades in my class for my diploma (...) I chose university because I like economics (...) I'll graduate, then I'd like to do two more years of postgraduate studies. (F., 23, Pakistan)

> I was advised to a vocational school because I was not very inclined to the studies … it was like a personal challenge I said no, because I want to study and then I had the idea of doing the engineer, so I did a technical institute. Then I did a year in environmental engineering for continuity, but I left

because it was not my way. I enrolled in Education. I am now in the Erasmus programme (M., 26, India).

I was born in Italy. For lower and upper secondary school a friend always helped me with my assignments. I chose an academic school, I was rejected and I did not want to go to school anymore. Then I chose a vocational school. I noticed at the university that this school gave me little preparation. I had to learn a method of study over the years. Throughout this path, I always had the youth center as a support (M., 24, Morocco).

Another interesting aspect concerns the impact of cultural, social and economic capital on opportunities for access to tertiary education. All the interviewed students live in families with limited economic resources and this influences choice processes, leading to a preference for universities closer to home or to work and study at the same time. As other studies also show (Eve, 2017), low family income does not automatically affect dropout rates but is associated, rather, with lifestyles and the level of independence that students aspire to. Under Italian national policies on the right to education students with financial difficulties receive scholarships, and indeed almost all the interviewees are recipients of such scholarships. These awards, however, do not cover travel and living costs, and are conditional on gaining a minimum number of ECTS credits annually. This means that students place priority on passing exams at the expense of performance, while, for others, exam failure results in losing the financial assistance and the risk of not being able to continue their studies.

I liked economics, so I wanted to go to the university in Modena, but then I saw the cost of transport and said to myself that my parents couldn't afford to spend that much, so I chose this university, which is closer to home. I got the scholarship, but I didn't get the credits in time and I lost everything, I had to pay for everything (F., 22, Sri Lanka).

I got the scholarship. I took the exams a bit quickly for that reason, too. So, for some exams I only got a score of 20, and although I knew I could prepare better and retake it, I accepted the score to avoid the risks of loosing credits (F., 23, Albania).

I'm not as good now as I was in Ghana, because of both the language and the commitment ... then I didn't have any help at university, no one helps

you (...) I have my scholarship but I'm afraid I may lose it this year because I didn't get the required credits (M.,22, Ghana).

With regards to social capital and cultural capital, on the other hand, there are greater differences in relation to student profiles. Among confident students with smoother educational trajectories we find a higher proportion of parents with mid-high[2] levels of education who support their children's motivation to study. The situation is different with students whose parents have a low level of education. There can be a lack of interest in school, a low ability to provide support due to language difficulties or lack of knowledge of the school/higher education system, and an expectation that family circumstances will be improved through the children's educational career.

With respect to relational capital, the interviews bring to light two particularly interesting aspects. For many parents the main sources of information on educational choices were found to be ethnic networks (relatives, fellow nationals). Many parents do not possess the required information about the Italian school system even though they have lived in Italy for many years, and as a result they construct their beliefs simply by replicating the choices of cousins and other members of the community. This lack of knowledge becomes an additional source of disadvantage. In some cases, children compensate for their family's limited social capital by using their networks of friends and local education services. In such circumstances, the children may decide to undertake a different path from the one that their parents advise, relying on their own relational resources, or, alternatively, they may decide to accept the beliefs and advice of their family network and give lower priority to their own personal aspirations.

My parents enrolled me in a vocational school, I didn't know how the school system worked in Italy, because in Ghana it was a bit different ... they enrolled me in a vocational school simply because that's what my cousin did, they didn't know much about schools and didn't even know what I was doing in Ghana (F., 22, Ghana).

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[2] The parents' educational qualifications are hardly ever recognized in Italy, but the fact that they have a degree or a secondary school diploma means having symbolic and cultural resources that translate into greater support for their children's education.

This is a factor that seems to adversely affect children's opportunities, leading to random or uninformed choices or to decisions that are heavily influenced by relatives, friends, and teachers. However, the analysis of these students' school trajectories has shown how an initially low social capital can evolve and change through the course of their school career (Costa & Lopes, 2011), thanks, for example, to the consolidation of their network of friends and to the people they met during their primary and secondary school years, thereby significantly diversifying the resources available to them. Actually, almost half of the students surveyed are engaged in local associations, both culturally mixed and voluntary, and this is a valuable aid in their choices.

> I was born in Italy, I lived here for 6 years, then for family reasons my parents took me to Ghana, left me by my uncles for five years and then I returned here during the lower secondary school. I had some difficulties getting back, because moving, family problems... I was somewhat scumbagged, but afterwards I succeeded. Family problems made me isolate. I had a close relationship with the youth workers of my neighbourhood, they helped me, I always went to them, they gave me the motivation to move on. They also helped me in choosing the university (M., 20, Ghana).

Teachers also affect the students' opportunities. For some students, teachers offer valuable encouragement to continue to study despite the challenges they face; for others, the teachers' advice is systematically directed to 'downward' choices, highlighting stereotypes and prejudices linked to immigrant origin. The latter is the most common situation in the interviewees' experiences, as teachers' guidance often directs them to vocational schools. Some of the interviewed students feel they have gained insufficient skills from previous study and only realize when they are at university that they had made the wrong about which secondary school to enrol in. Confident students are those who have more tools to go against teachers' advice.

> A teacher said to me 'if you like languages, go to this vocational school', instead of sending me to a technical school, she too advised me to go to a vocational school (F., 20, Moroccan).

> What really upset me was this situation you're in, with teachers forming an opinion of you, because I wasn't doing badly, I did have some difficulties, but they said to me 'go to a vocational school', i.e. foreigner-vocational school. But I didn't want to take vocational courses (...) I sent my pre-enrolment form to the social sciences liceo and forged the signature (…) Then, for university, I got everyone officially involved when I took the test for Biology (F., 23, Albanian).

Overall, the university experience of young respondents is less problematic than their experience of previous school stages, especially from a relational point of view (there is more individual study, groups are more flexible and open). Migrant origin, however, adds some elements of complexity, both in the construction of educational paths, due for instance to language issues and interruptions in school careers, and in the definition of individual life plans (due to the presence of different cultural models, the redefinition of the sense of belonging, and expected behaviours among fellow nationals). Cultural variables also affect some choices: the prestige of certain professions in the countries of origin influences family expectations and enters into the cost-benefit analysis of choice. There are also some cultural differences in the transmission of parental aspirations concerning schooling.

> After secondary school, I immediately thought of going to work ... but there was a part of me who wanted to continue studying, because even in Morocco, we do not stop at the secondary education. In Morocco we have the university and if you stop before they give you nothing. Even my cousins went to the university in Morocco ... and then I said they are in Morocco and I'm here in Italy where there is more chance to go out, go abroad. I also thought I would continue to study (F., 21, Morocco).

> My parents know that I did a vocational school, more oriented towards work, and they are surprised that I am so well at university ... moreover this university in Egypt corresponds to one of the most prestigious in Egypt, absolutely (F., 22, Egypt).

Discrimination and racism are experienced by some students due to their immigrant background and have had an impact on their educational trajectories (e.g. interruptions, illness, school failures). The main

difficulties arise for late-arrived children, but even those who were born in Italy are not immune: in all cases, the successful resolution of this situation occurs in the final years of secondary school, and the problems seem to disappear at university.

> My class mates said bad things about us thinking I couldn't understand, but I did understand ... and things got worse from year to year... in fifth grade I also had some health issues because being there for 8 hours a day, listening to all the things that were being said didn't do me any good. After secondary school diploma, I stopped for a year (F., 24, Indian).

Finally, looking the school histories of these young people enables us to identify a number of elements that can be linked to the secondary effects of immigrant origins on choices. Although their previous school outcomes are not always brilliant and their family's social status is generally low, the young interviewees have decided to invest in tertiary education for various reasons. These include the desire to attain a higher social status than their parents, the idea that a higher education qualification could counteract any discrimination they may face in the employment market, the wish to act consistently with the investment made through migration by their family unit, and the belief that entering higher education puts their educational career on an equal level with that of their Italian peers. Access to university is thus perceived as a means to achieve greater inclusion.

> I continued to study because I had my mother pushing me. The reality is that if you are not Italian through and through and employers have to make a choice, they'll choose Italians, and if you have something extra, you are in a better position (M., 27, Moroccan).

> I don't want to be considered the foreigner who stops ... who becomes a factory worker like my mother, NO! I would like to continue to study forever. (F., 20, Moroccan).

> I decided to continue to study first of all because I'd like to have good qualifications, I mean, basically I'd like to do what my parents haven't been able to do. (F., Egyptian, 20).

Widening the inclusivity of Higher Education

The research points to the factors that might affect the inclusion of students with immigrant background in Italian HE, such as previous schools experience, social and cultural capital, language skills, ethnic stigma, economic resources and migrant background. For migrant origin students being kept out or at best at the margins of post compulsory education can actually mean missing out on significant opportunities and benefits since participation in higher education is linked to more and better employment options, higher levels of income and prosperity, and improved health and wellbeing.

Higher education is an important milestone for the inclusion of these students. Many respondents are studying to get more highly skilled jobs than those of their parents. Many believe that employment selection will be made on the basis of qualifications and that a university degree may counterbalance the ethnic stigma. But the equality of employment opportunities for these graduate students still needs to be investigated in Italy, as well as the possibility of social mobility provided by their qualifications. Initial insights from Eurostat data (2016) show that second generation immigrants[3] in Italy aged 25-54 had higher tertiary educational attainment (26.7%) than their native peers (19.1%) but lower employment rates (66.7% vs 68.6%). A number of recent studies provide grounds for reflection on the benefits that an immigrant background can provide to children of immigrant parents with a degree in terms of their professional careers, thereby opening new areas of inquiry for future research (Eve, 2017).

Another important point is the little attention paid to this topic in Italy. The increasing number of university students with migrant background is highlighting an apparent paradox: while Italian universities and the labour market are placing more and more emphasis on internationalization, they don't seem to be aware of this other kind of international presence. Often, Italian universities restrict their use of the term "students with foreign origins" to international students or "foreign mobile students" (Teichler, 2015), but scarce attention is given to youths with migrant background who have graduated in Italy and who will most likely remain there for the rest of

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[3] In Eurostat data second generation immigrants are defined as immediate descendants of immigrants born in their country of current residence.

their lives. As Lagomarsino & Ravecca (2014) have pointed out, immigrant students are invisible at the university level, but the reason for this remains unclear: is it because they are well integrated or because the HE institutions are unaware of their needs? Again, international students have different services available (such as language courses, Erasmus contact persons, housing provision etc.), while immigrant students don't, and this could be a sign of inclusion (because they have the same services as natives) but also a problem for those needing focused support due to their migrant background or weak family capital. The issue has to do with Higher Education policies aimed at promoting immigrant students' access to university.

Looking across Europe, there are several examples of policies tackling this question – although they tend to be regional and local rather than national policies – as well as studies evaluating them. The UK policy of widening participation is a well known national approach that aims to encourage students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to participate in higher education. The significant impact of this policy in 1990s was to increase the numbers of ethnic minority students applying for and starting university degrees (Singh, 2011). Although widening participation policies were designed to increase opportunities for underrepresented groups to benefit from higher education, researchers proved that the main focus of the universities was on recruiting students and less on supporting them during their university careers (Singh, 2011; Camilleri & Proli, 2013).

If we also look at other countries, we can identify 'access' as the main focus of many institutional policies. The ways in which improving access is implemented across Europe are very different. We have activities focusing on cooperation between schools and higher education institutions to ensure students' motivation to progress, as well as reduced attendance fees or income-contingent grants for students from low socioeconomic groups. But we also have mentoring projects in which university students act as mentors to secondary students in order to provide support in preparing for their final exams and in their choice of career. The majority of these programmes support the participation of disadvantaged groups in HE, without targeting exclusively students from ethnic minorities (Guerin, 2014; Osborne, 2003). However, these programmes are interesting for their impact on immigrant student participation in HE.

In our analysis we have seen the gap between immigrant and Italian graduates in the transition rate and this holds true especially for students with academic diplomas (even if this finding needs to be explored). In that

sense, institutional policies that are more oriented towards widening access to university could take into greater consideration the obstacles and information bias[4] of students with an immigrant background, introducing greater cooperation between schools and universities, as well as between secondary school students and university students.

Another important policy area is the support of student success during their educational career. The most common projects in this field are mentoring initiatives (Schneller, 2013; Camilleri & Proli, 2013; Guerin, 2014). For example, in Germany there are different projects run by different universities that focus on one-to-one mentoring initiatives and match new university students from immigrant background with experienced students. They are grouped by subject area and work together through workshops, personal counselling, language training and support in academic work. Fewer projects take advantage of these students' multilingualism by offering courses in their mother tongue and support in German as second language.

Other strategies are focused on making the learning experiences of students more inclusive, through inclusive and internationalized curricula that give students the skills to operate in cross-cultural contexts and use the experience of immigrant students for the benefit of all.

Another initiative is to support race equality in university practices by developing toolkits for academic staff or guidelines and better staff training, in order to raise awareness among university professors and office workers.

The focus on the organizational changes required in higher education institutions in order to achieve a more inclusive policy highlights two dimensions (Berry & Loke, 2011): institutional-level change (institutional policy, strategy at the national or local level) and individual-level change (which means targeting attitudes, awareness, knowledge, perceptions of individuals).

Whatever the policy, all the analyses stress the importance of planning actions and support mechanisms for students with an immigrant background in a sensitive way, so as to not reinforce stigma. This means offering supportive activities for the benefit of all students known to be at

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[4] Abbiati & Barone (2012) investigate the role that information plays in students' post-secondary school choices, and show that there are systematic biases in the students' beliefs about costs, dropout issues and the usefulness of university studies.

risk rather than only targeting students with immigrant background (Singh, 2011; Schneller, 2013). At the same time, there is a need to recognize the specific challenges for these students and to find the adequate supports in order to ensure equal opportunities for all. This also seems to be a possible area of improvement for Italian HE institutions.

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