University and Inequality

Luciano Benadusi[1]

_____

Abstract. The purpose of this article is both to analyse the different types of unfair inequality existing within the Italian higher education system, on the base of various statistical sources, and, as far as possible, to assess whether these have changed or not in the last few years following the recent instructional reform (DM 509/1999).

The first to be examined are inequalities associated to gender, which appear to have been reversed in many aspects, that is to play in favor of women, today. Then, the analysis move on to inequalities associated to students' previous scholastic career, whose effects on academic success in part merely mediate the impact of students' social origin. Taking into account this dimension of inequality, two distinct stratifications of faculties or disciplinary areas are defined here. Finally, social inequality of opportunity is directly dealt with and the persistent importance of students' social origin in academic success is confirmed, also in the light of an international comparison .

This kind of inequality could get wider in the future because of an increasing heterogeneity of the freshmen's population, even if such a tendency is not occurred as far, probably thanks to an adaptation process outlined in this article.

The first indications drawn from the implementation of the recent reform, with regard to the issue of equity in university, are not linear and homogeneous, reflecting a situation of transition which has still marked characteristics of contingency.

Keywords. University, Inequality, Equity, Social Origin, Gender, Reform

_____

    The purpose of this article is both to analyse the different types of unfair inequality existing within the higher education system in our country and, as far as possible, to assess whether these have changed or not in the last

[1] Dipartimento Innovazione e Società, via Salaria 113 - 00198 Roma - Italia. Tel: +39 0649918498; email: luciano.benadusi@uniroma1.it

few years following the recent instructional reform (DM 509/1999), adopted in the context of the so-called "Bologna Process".

On the whole, we can say that like the school, the university on the one hand reproduces social inequalities, and on the other contributes to the creation of new ones. In both cases, it is the presence of precise institutional hierarchies, be they vertical (completing or not a course of studies, or passing or not to the successive cycle) or horizontal (different degrees or categories of degrees, and also differences in the value attributed to degrees from diverse universities, despite the formal parity aimed at guaranteeing the so-called "legal value"), which foster the production/reproduction of inequalities. These hierarchies have to do with the occupational impact of the various levels and courses of study, but have also an important reputational aspect which is not always coherent with the first one. For example, capturing the most brilliant freshmen may enable a faculty or a university to increase its academic reputation and, in some national systems, also to ameliorate its evaluative rating, but not necessarily to improve the occupational and economic benefits for its graduates.

Using some indicators we aim to interpret the relevant data *in chiaroscuro,* focusing on the students as subjects in processes of choice and objects in processes of selection.

Some indicators will be of help in establishing a an evaluative relationship between these processes and the issue of equity in the system (for a theoretical and empirical overview on this point see Gerese, 2005). To this end, it is necessary to distinguish the extrinsic factors which determine success or lack of success in a university career (such as social class or gender) from the ones intrinsic to the system, or rather those which can be attributed to individual responsibility, and to assess the influence which the former have on the processes of choice and selection. As we know, (see, for example, Dubet, 2004; Benadusi, Bottani, 2006) equity can mean both "merit" and "equality". If the influence of extrinsic factors is eliminated, the university system keeps on producing (not reproducing) inequalities, but these would not be ethically illegitimate as far as they are justifiable in terms of merit (equal recognition and valorisation of individual talent and effort). However, as we shall see, data show that social origin continues to have a considerable impact on the generation of inequalities at university level, both directly and indirectly, that is through the student's previous scholastic career. We use more than one statistical source in the analyses detailed here, the main one being the CNVSU

(National Committee for the Evaluation of the University System) database, on which the periodic reports published by this organism (see, for example, CNVSU, 2007) are drawn from[2].

General data on freshmen, enrolled students and graduates

Firstly, with regard to the first level of degree, let us examine the trend among freshmen, enrolled students and graduates in the three years prior to the implementation of the reform and in the first following five years in order to verify whether or not there have been significant changes.

Table 1. General data on freshmen, total enrolled students and graduates from the academic year 98/99 to a.y. 05/06 Source: our elaboration of CNVSU data (1).

	Freshmen	Total enrolled students	Graduated
1998-1999	200.392	1.722.037	140.122
1999-2000	277.849	1.664.555	149.141
2000-2001	284.142	1.675.879	156.136
2001-2002	319.264	1.684.533	167.082
2002-2003	331.560	1.771.553	187.004
2003-2004	337.992	1.785.424	217.681
2004-2005	331.843	1.820.148	248.650
2005-2006	324.184	1.823.886	301.298

(1) The CNVSU data relative to the last academic year considered (2005-2006 for freshmen and enrollment and 2005 for the number of graduates) is to be considered temporary as it is currently being revised.

Three phenomena emerge (table1):

•   the total number of enrollments increases regularly following the introduction of the reform, but the relationship between this trend and the reform is dubious;

•   the number of freshmen shows an initial significant increase, probably due to a temporary effect of the reform on the propensity of young people, with particular reference to those who had already gained a high

---

[2] Since this article was completed, more recent data have been shown in the 2008 issue of two annual reports, whose data published in the 2007 issue has been utilised here: those edited respectively by Cnvsu and by Almalaurea. Nevertheless, in general the new data seems to confirm the analysis presented here.

school diploma few years before, to enroll at university. However, it declines slightly from the academic year 2004-2005 onwards and appears to be stabilized, today ;

• the number of graduates increases remarkably, but in part this tendency can be attributed to the duplication of the graduation levels introduced by the reform.

On the whole, these data do not provide us with the elements necessary to state that there was a substantial modification in the previous trends in the years following the reform, except that regarding the number of graduates.

Differentiation among faculties or disciplinary areas based on students' gender

A first type of inequality is that based on gender. While inequality of opportunity for women compared to men in access to university and in graduation has not only disappeared, but, as we shall see later, has been turned around up to a certain point, a division between disciplines prevalently male and prevalently female remains.

In the academic year 2005-06 the number of women among the first level freshmen varied from 89.74% in Pedagogy and 81.77% in Foreign Languages courses at the one extreme to 16.55% in Defence and Security and 18.43% in Engineering courses at the other (Table 2). It should be noted that two disciplinary areas which offer high returns in terms of occupation and income, Engineering and Economics, both register below-average female participation, although with regard to Economics it is very close to the average. On the other hand, Medicine registers above-average female participation.

The evidence presented in next table (Table 3), which refers to the intended choices expressed by upper secondary school leavers and not the choices they actually made, is not completely in line with the previous one and allows us to observe both the disciplinary area variable and that of type and score of high school diploma, as well as verifying how similar or dissimilar the relative groupings are.

Engineering attracts mainly males and those with a high diploma score, but registers the highest number of preferences among students from technical-oriented schools. A situation only apparently similar is that of

Economics, which attracts high-performing students and a majority of students from technical-oriented schools (the "Istituti tecnici"), but does not appear to be a prevalently male faculty, unlike Engineering. "Liceo" leavers are more oriented towards Medicine, MFN Sciences and most of the Humanities faculties, all areas which seem to attract mostly women. School leavers from vocational-oriented schools ("Istituti Professionali") seem to prefer 3-year degree courses for the health-care professions.

Table 2. Enrolments and freshmen according to gender and disciplinary areas, A.Y. 2005-06. Source: Miur

Disciplinary areas	Total Enrolments	% Women	Freshmen	% Women
Pedagogy	93.151	90,67	16.038	89,74
Foreign Languages	92.723	83,81	19.251	81,77
Psychology	68.165	79,77	10.873	78,86
Literature and Philosophy	162.872	68,23	28.886	65,91
Medicine	140.211	64,50	26.454	63,65
Chemistry and Pharmacy	64.235	63,64	13.125	62,24
Geology and Biology	84.634	61,77	19.193	61,30
Social and Political Sciences	211.550	60,90	39.878	61,26
Law	230.747	59,50	38.566	58,68
Total	*1.796.270*	*56,22*	*331.940*	*55,81*
Architecture	94.536	48,26	16.399	48,34
Economics and Statistics	225.911	47,71	45.199	48,29
Agronomy	42.672	44,68	7.702	43,05
Physical Education	22.651	36,04	5.129	31,25
Sciences	55.662	26,00	10.933	24,60
Egineering	204.669	18,15	33.891	18,43
Defense and Security	1.881	13,98	423	16,55

Differentiation among faculties or disciplinary areas based on freshmen's previous scholastic career

A second source of inequality is students' previous scholastic career, which – besides its general influence on students' academic attainment - generates a clear differentiation, or stratification, between faculties and disciplinary areas.

Table 3. Percentage of secondary school leavers who intend to continue their education by gender, score and type of diploma. Source: AlmaDiploma (2006).

	Gender		Diploma Score		Type of Diploma			
	M (2.184)	*F* (2.308)	*High* (2.591)	*Low* (1.888)	*Lic* (1.489)	*Tec* (2.288)	*Pro* (720)	*Other Diploma (451)*
..	*88,7*	*89,8*	*91,6*	*85,7*	*97,9*	*89,3*	*74,5*	*69,6*
Engineering	24,6	4,2	18,5	7,7	11	19,2	6,6	*0,8*
Economics and Statistics	12,0	13,7	14,7	10,3	8,7	18,0	9,9	*0,6*
Architecture	6,8	7,8	7,2	7,4	5,4	6,2	4	*22,4*
Health Care Professions	5,1	8,7	5,6	8,8	7,7	6,5	12,9	*3,5*
Lawbb	4,7	7,5	6,2	6,1	6,3	6,8	6	*2,4*
Social and Political Sciences	4,3	6,6	4,6	6,8	7,2	4,7	3	*5,3*
Literature and Philosophy	4,1	6,8	4,9	6,3	6,9	3,4	6,6	*12,2*
Medicine	4,2	6,3	5,2	5,4	12,6	2,0	1,3	*1,7*
Sciences	7,1	3,3	6	3,8	7,2	4,7	2,6	*1,7*
Foreign Languages	2,1	7,6	5,4	4,3	5,3	5,1	3,3	*2,7*
Psychology	1,6	4,6	2,5	4,3	3,8	3,3	6	*4,2*
Chemistry and Pharmacy	1,6	2,3	2,2	1,9	3,2	1,5	2	*0,8*
Agronomy	1,5	1,7	1,4	1,7	1,7	1,4	2,6	*1,3*
Physical Education	2,4	0,8	1,2	2,2	1,3	1,8	1,3	*0,8*
Geology and Biology	1,6	1,3	1,3	1,6	2	1,1	1,7	*0,8*
Pedagogy	0,3	2,2	0,9	1,9	1,2	0,9	3	*3,3*
Defense and Security	0,3	0,1	0,1	0,3	0	0,3	0	*0,7*
Not specified	*4,1*	*4,2*	*3,1*	*4,9*	*5,9*	*3,4*	*2*	*4,2*

Let us turn our attention now to the composition of the freshman population in relation to this dimension and in relation to the various faculties, or rather, areas of discipline. The two indicators pertaining to this dimension, which will be presented now, are really ambivalent from an

equity point of view. In fact, the stratifications based on them can be either positively evaluated as connected to the merit principle or negatively as mediating the influence of an extrinsic factor, students' social origin.

To begin with, it is possible to identify the type of upper secondary school the freshmen come from. On examination of the data (fig. 1), it emerges that there is a general decline in the number of the holders of a "liceo" diploma. Given the well known association between the choice of this channel of upper secondary school and a students' high social origin, what emerges from the data may be considered, to some extent, as a sign of growing democracy within the university.

Figure 1. Percentage of the holders of a "liceo" diploma over a total number of university freshmen. Source: our elaboration of CNVSU data.
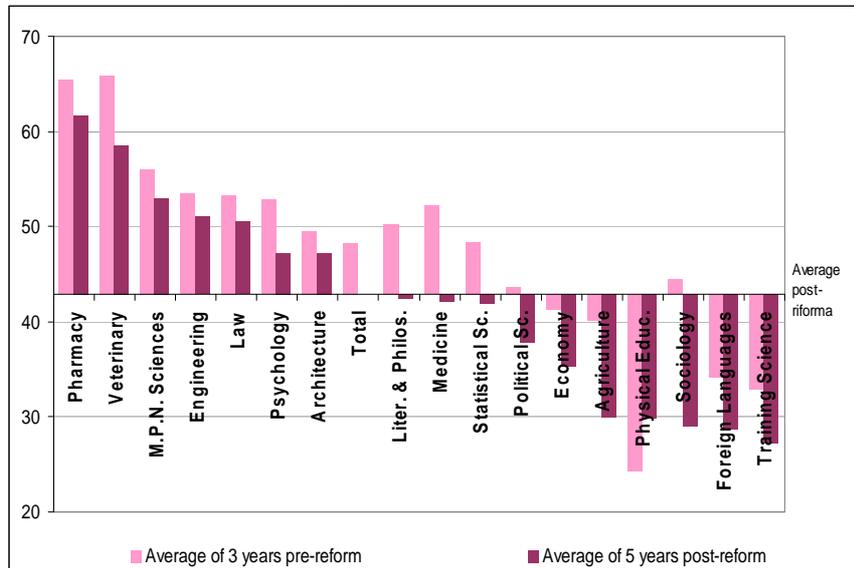
On analyzing the present composition (average over the 5 years after the reform) according to the type of diploma obtained with regard to each of the faculties or disciplinary areas, three groups can be identified:

•   a first group of faculties in which the number of the holders of a "liceo" diploma far exceeds the average (Pharmacy, Veterinary Medicine, MFN Science, Engineering, Law);

•   a second group where values are about average (Psychology,

Architecture, Literature and Philosophy, Medicine[3], Statistics);

• a third group (Political Science, Economics, Agronomy, Sociology, Physical Education, Foreign Languages, Training Sciences, that is Pedagogy) where the number of the holders of a "liceo" diploma is decidedly below average.

The present structure is no different from that in the period before the reform, or only marginally so, due to the re-collocation of two faculties (Psychology and Medicine) in the second group rather than the first. This is an indication that the apparent process of democratization has not altered the influence of a student's previous scholastic career on his or her choice of faculty, and neither has it altered the stratification, in terms of prestige, of the various university options available. It is not possible to label this phenomenon as a form of segregation, but surely it reveals how choices appear "anchored" to previous types of studies.

A second significant variable, again associated with students' social origin and with their chances of academic success, regards how the freshmen scored in their final exam of upper secondary school ("diploma di maturità"). In general, the number of students whom we define "excellent" (corresponding to a score of over 9/10) increased in the period after the introduction of the reform. However, the most significant fact is the presence, also in this case, of a marked stratification among the faculties, thus allowing us to identify three distinct situations (fig.2):

• the faculty which distances all the others in attracting the excellent students is Engineering;

• it is followed by a considerably large group (11) of faculties which can be classified as performing slightly above or slightly below average in attracting the best-performing students[4];

• lastly, there is the group made up of Political Science, Agronomy,

---

[3] Here, Medicine includes both: 5 year degrees (defined "specialistici a ciclo unico") which prepare for the professions of physician, surgeon and dentist and the first level degrees preparing for some other health care professions. If we consider only the former, the position of Medicine in this ranking notably rises and this area should be included at the top in the first group.

[4] Here, Medicine includes both: 5 year degrees (defined "specialistici a ciclo unico") which prepare for the professions of physician, surgeon and dentist and first level degrees preparing for some other health care professions. If we consider only the former, the position of Medicine in this ranking notably rises and this area should be included at the top in the first group.

Pedagogy, Sociology and Physical Education which performs considerably below average.

Figure 2. Percentage of freshmen who obtained a score of 90%+ in their school leaving certificate out of a total number of freshmen. Source: elaboration of CNVSU data.
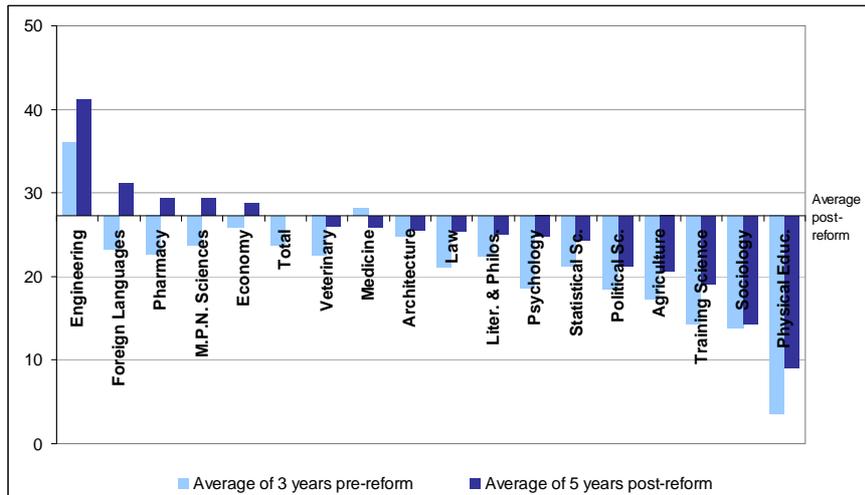
There is an evident structural homogeneity between the two stratifications based on previous scholastic career, nevertheless, compared to the previous one, the second appears to be more polarized. In fact, marked differences are here detectable: at the two extremes of the classification, we have a faculty which enrolls more than 40% of the excellent students, and one which enrolls less than 10%. Furthermore, between these two stratifications some interesting discrepancies are worth to be noted. Engineering attracts the most brilliant students but fewer holders of a Liceo diploma than other disciplinary areas, especially Sciences. In both stratifications we find Psychology, Architecture, Literature and Philosophy, Medicine[5] and Statistics in an intermediate position, while Political Science, Agronomy, Pedagogy, Sociology and Physical Education are always in the low-ranking sector. Economics is to

---

[5] It is necessary to remember what has be précised in the previous note regarding Medicine.

be found in an intermediate position as far as diploma score is concerned, and in a low-ranking position if we consider the number of ex-Liceo students.

Rates of persistence and dropout

From the equity point of view, other relevant indicators are the rate of persistence and its opposite, the dropout rate. Though independent in their nature, also these indicators are, to some extent, associated with students' social origin. Really, as demonstrated by sociological research, family background operates through two distinct mechanisms: selection or self-selection at the access to university and not completing university degrees. Again with reference to the first level of degree, we will now observe whether there have been changes in these rates following the reform. In general, it can be said that the expected reduction in the number of dropouts does not appear to have been achieved, although other sources (Miur, 2007) produce more heartening data in this respect.

However, also in this case it could be interesting to observe the situations and trends in the individual faculties or disciplinary areas in order to allocate them into distinct groups, which are remarkably different from those constructed on the basis of the two previous indicators (fig.3):

•   one group with a high rate of persistence, comprising Architecture, Veterinary Medicine, Medicine, Physical Education and Psychology;

•   an intermediate group which includes Engineering, Literature and Philosophy, Statistics, Pedagogy, Foreign Languages, Economics, Political Science, Pharmacy, Law and Agronomy;

•   two areas, MFN Science and, above all, Sociology with a particularly low rate of persistence.

The trends observed in the pre- and post-reform periods appear to be highly differentiated: the persistence rate remains virtually unchanged as far as Literature and Philosophy, Languages and Political Science are concerned; it increases in Agronomy, Statistics, Engineering and MFN Science; it declines in Architecture, Medicine, Veterinary Medicine, Physical Education and Sociology. The most accentuated declines can be found in Architecture and Medicine, as well as Sociology. It is worth to remember that the last of these faculties was already in a particularly

critical situation in this respect.

The impact of students' social origin on university career

Fairly reliable data on Italian students' social origin with regard to specific faculties or disciplinary areas are not available at the moment, even if utilizing indicators relative to previous scholastic career as a proxy is, to some degree, a possible remedy to this serious lack.

In order to both discover the weight of students' social origin in favouring or disfavouring academic attainment more directly and compare it with the weight of other relevant factors, we must move on from data regarding students to that regarding graduates. An historical analysis conducted by Pisati (2000) found a constant influence of both students' social class and cultural capital on the probability of completing their university career and acquiring the relative credential. Only gender and the scores obtained at the final exam of upper secondary school seem to add a remarkable effect to that of the two social origin variables. More recent information can be drawn from the data supplied by Almalaurea, together with an analysis carried out on them (Benadusi, Mignoli 2007).

An aggregate examination of the graduates' profile highlights an over-representation of students having a high social background, whether this be considered in terms of parents' educational qualifications or in terms of their occupational status. There is also an over-representation of students coming from "Liceo" and those with a high diploma score. The two factors (social origin and secondary school career) are closely connected in that, as we have already mentioned, social origin still has a strong bearing when choosing the type of upper secondary school.

This data also allows us to make comparisons between the two cycles of the reformed university, and between the pre- and post-reform situations. As can be seen (figure 5), the two over-representations, and especially the second rather than the first, are significantly reduced in the three-year degree cycle but increased in the subsequent specialist degree cycle.

These results may be considered partially positive, although perhaps they are inferior to the hopes of democratization associated with the reform. We must be cautious in formulating judgement with regard to this, however, as we are still in a transitional phase, so the outcomes of the reform cannot be considered stable. In order to correct this bias up to a point, the data

concerning the pre-reform period presented in the following figure (Fig.5) has been "normalized" using some statistical adjustments aimed at rendering it less heterogeneous compared to the post-reform data.

Figure 3. Percentage of enrollments in the 2nd year compared to number of freshmen in the previous one: average pre and post-reform. Source: our elaboration of CNVSU data
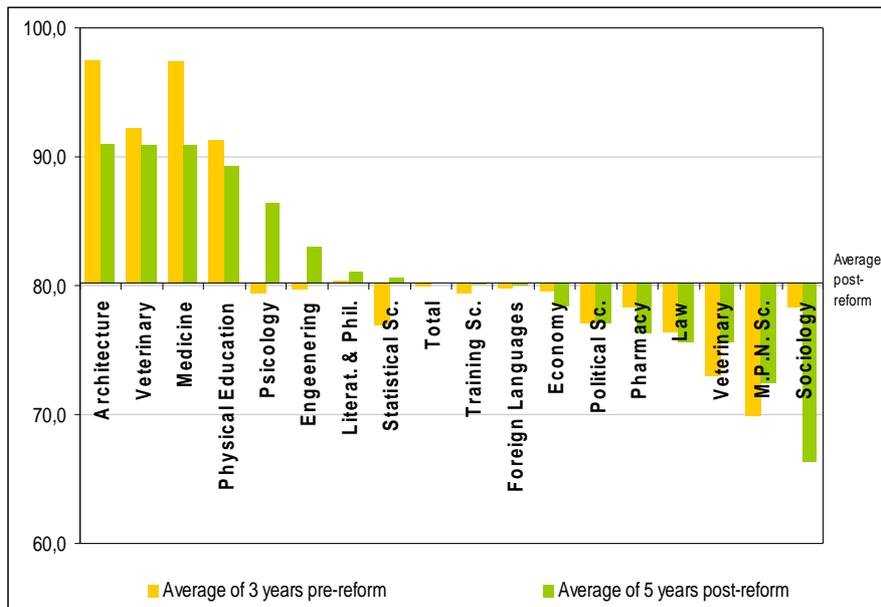
In order to analyse the influence of social origin on success at university in greater depth comparing it with that of other variables, various logistic regression models were applied to the Almalaurea data. Our models assume as dependent variable the degree grade obtained at the end of the second educational cycle of the reformed Italian university ("laurea specialistica"). The first two are the most explanatory. The first measures the impact of gender and social origin, while the second introduces two further variables relative to previous scholastic career into the analysis – high school diploma type and score (Table 4). The first model indicates a higher success rate among women that among men and the robust impact of the two social origin variables, greater for cultural capital compared to that of occupational capital. With the introduction of the variables regarding upper

secondary school diploma type and score in the second model, the incidence of family cultural capital is reduced (that of occupational capital is annulled), thus revealing it to be of a prevalently indirect nature. The influence of the upper secondary school diploma score is shown to be the strongest. As far as type of diploma is concerned, having attended a classics-oriented "liceo" ("Liceo classico") has a greater impact on our indicator of success at university than having attended schools of other type, as expected.

Figure 4. Social origin and previous scholastic career (Benadusi, Mignoli, 2007)
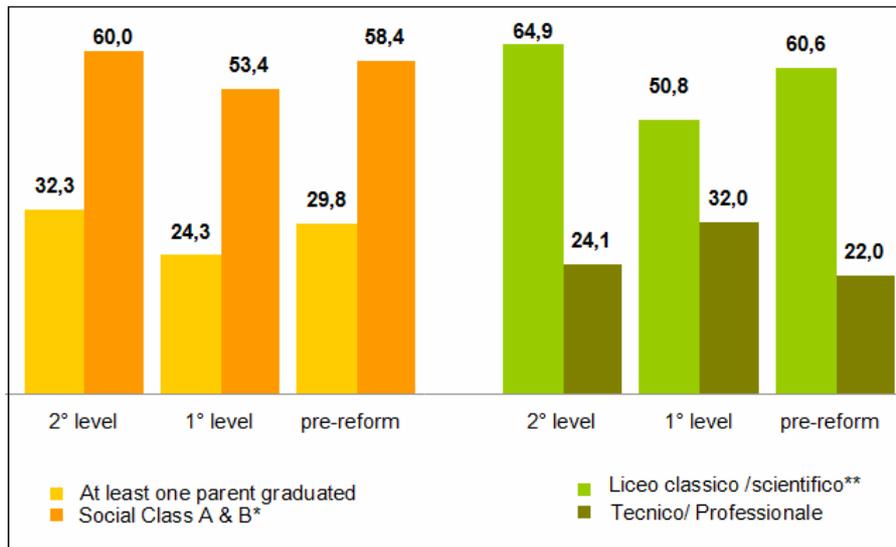
*Middle-upper classes.
** The two most prestigious diplomas at upper secondary level.

Table 4. Logistic regression models by social origin and previous scholastic career[6] (Benadusi, Mignoli, 2007)

	Model 1	Model 2

[6] This table shows the estimations of maximal likelihood relative to the $\exp(\beta)$ parameters which are resulted statistically significant.

	Social origin N=10.282	*Previous scholastic career N=10.285*
Gender		
Male	0,51	0,60
Female	.	.
Parents' educational status		
Both gradued	1,62	0,96
Only one gradued	1,35	0,94
Upper secondary school diploma	1,26	1,05
Low credentials or no-credential	.	.
Parents'social class		
Bourgeoisie	0,80	-
Routine employees	0,97	-
Petty bourgeoisie	0,97	-
Working class	.	-
Type of upper secondary diploma		
Liceo Classico	-	2,61
Liceo Scientifico	-	1,75
Liceo psico-socio-pedagogico o Istituto magistrale	-	1,87
Liceo linguistico	-	2,34
Arts Education	-	2,34
Istituto Tecnico	-	1,09
Istituto Professionale	-	.
Diploma score	-	
100	-	4,04
81-99	-	1,67
60-80	-	.

Further models adopted for data analysis[7] did not reveal the presence of factors of equal importance to social origin and previous scholastic career, except for that of disciplinary area which, however, probably impacts on degree grade more on a purely formal plane – that is, linked to the existence of more or less severe students' evaluation criteria – than on a substantial one. We could advance here the hypothesis that some faculties or disciplinary areas have reacted to the expansion of their intake and to the

---

[7] Other regression models are been applied by Almalaurea to the data concerning the time employed by students to graduate at the first level of reformed degrees (Almalaurea, 2008). The variables which appear to be meaningfully influential are social origin (in particular, again, family cultural capital), gender (females graduate more rapidly than males), upper secondary diploma type and – even more – score, disciplinary areas and the condition of student-worker.

access of many students with weak scholastic and social characteristics by softening evaluation and selection criteria.

In turn, such an interpretation could provide us with a possible answer to a question raised by Pisati (2002), relative to the results of his analysis on the data of a longitudinal survey on Italian families (Ilfi). This author found that for students enrolled at university the influence of social origin on the probability of obtaining or not a final credential kept constant in the period examined (involving all people from the oldest generations to the cohort 1958/1967). On the basis of a very plausible theory - the theory of "differentiated selection" (Mare, 1980), he noted that augmentation rather than constancy of this influence could be expected, given that the increase in the influx into university has generated greater heterogeneity over time in terms of students' abilities and motivations. Thus, he answered why it did not occur.

Our interpretation is that, more than to a specific reform or macro-policy, the lack of a worsening of social inequalities in students' career might be attributed to a diffused micro-policy, mainly enacted by several faculties and disciplinary areas[8], oriented towards gradually relaxing evaluation and selection criteria.

The strong impact of family cultural capital on university success in our country is also confirmed by some comparative surveys at international level. We refer in particular to an analysis based on Eurostat data (the ad hoc module on transition from education to work) which was carried out in 13 European countries, and in which Italy is classified in third place as far as the influence of this factor on the likelihood of obtaining a degree is concerned (Fig.5).

Figure 5. Likelihood of graduating in relation to parents' academic qualifications (Iannelli, 2003)
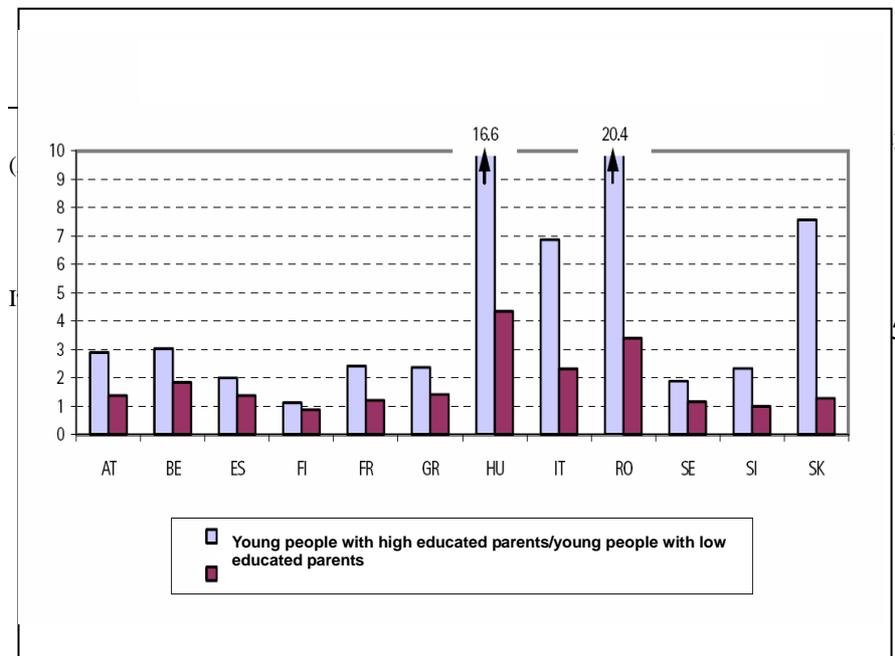
Conclusions

The data and analyses presented here enable us to formulate several conclusions.

Under many aspects, inequalities of gender have been reversed, so that today women are even favoured compared to men. However, there is still a certain degree of sectioning by gender in the choice of faculty or disciplinary area, although among the areas highly sought-after on the labour market only Engineering continues to register a distinct imbalance in favour of men.

On the contrary, inequalities based on students' social origin show a considerable degree of persistence. In part the mechanisms generating such inequalities operate within university, but, probably in greater part, they operate within upper secondary school and university makes students' social origin influence academic careers only indirectly, that is through variables such as the type and score of upper secondary diploma. Consequently, these indicators may be considered, to some extent, proxies with regard to university students' social background. Thus it can be

deduced that in order to reduce social inequality of opportunity at university, intervention at secondary school level is still even more crucial.

However, the aforementioned theory of "differentiated selection" suggests that an increase of inequality of opportunity at university level is likely to occur in the future, because of an increasing heterogeneity in the freshman population. Here we have sustained that probably such a tendency would have already arisen if a relaxing of evaluation and selection criteria, mainly on the part of some faculties and disciplinary areas, had not avoided this potential drift.

The risk of a worsening of social inequality of opportunity at university level is particularly grave, in that international comparison places Italy among the European countries where at present the impact of social origin on success in university studies is strongest. This is an unequivocal, though often underestimated, indicator of the lack of equity in our higher education system. Truly, at the same time, we can observe the strength of social inequality reproduction together with its limits, which make our system open to an appreciable extent of intergenerational mobility.

A support to intergenerational mobility comes from the inconsistencies existing between different types of institutional stratifications, in particular between those that we could define input inequalities, those that rather we could define outcome inequalities. If we compare the two Cnvsu rankings between disciplinary areas based on the freshman previous scholastic career (relative to upper secondary diploma type and score) to a third one regarding the family cultural capital of graduates economic return of higher education five years after graduation (Almalaurea, 2007)[9], we find many important convergences but also some meaningful discrepancies. We are going to point out some specific examples of this inconsistency. While Engineering is at the top everywhere[10], Sciences, wholly considered, is in the middle as far as the first and the third ranking are concerned, but at the top in the second one. Economics, placed respectively in the middle and at the bottom in the two first rankings, figures at the top in the latter. On the

---

[9] For this comparison we consider the graduates in the year 2002 at the end of pre-reform degrees. These seem to be closer to post-reform second level degrees than to first level ones. Given the high rate of passage from the first level to the second, assuming for this comparison the first level graduates would be less congruent.

[10] As far as only the 5 year degrees preparing for the professions of physician, surgeon and dentist are considered, the position of Medicine becomes even better compared to Engineering.

contrary, Literature and Philosophy is located in the middle in the two first rankings but at the bottom in the third. Finally, comparing to the latter another ranking based on family cultural capital of second level graduates (Amalaurea, 2007) - which may be considered such as an indicator of output inequalities - again we find both convergences and divergences. Here, Medicine is ranked at the top, as well as in the outcome classification, while Law is at the top too but appears clearly worse placed in the classification regarding economic returns. Economics is at the bottom, while in the classification based on economic degree outcomes figures in the high ranking group, as already seen. Engineering also ranks better in the classification relative to economic returns than in that regarding family cultural capital of graduates, whilst the opposite occurs in the case of Literature and Philosophy.

We can maintain that behind these inconsistencies there is a broader divergence between an upper secondary school where the dominant cultural axis is still humanistic (primacy of the "liceo classico") and an university system where the dominant cultural axis is rather techno-scientific (primacy of faculties like Engineering, Medicine and Sciences).

As to the question if the recent reform has bring about some changes relevant from an equity point of view, we can advance the following remarks. Fundamentally, the reform of the university educational cycles has not modified the pre-existing trend with regard to enrolment, and neither has it changed that regarding the stratification among the different faculties or disciplinary areas based on the freshmen's high school diploma type and score. The dropout rate between the 1st and 2nd year remains high also after the reform, but in this case (another element of inconsistency) the stratification among the faculties or disciplinary areas is different from those regarding the composition of their freshmen's population by diploma type and score. As far as Engineering and Science, the two areas which we previously found in the top rankings, are concerned, the first can now be found in an intermediate position, while the second is among those with the highest dropout rate. We cannot but note, on the contrary, the absolute linearity of the position of Sociology, which can be found in the worst position in all three rankings: composition of the influx by diploma type and score, dropout rate after the 1st year of the course. The closeness between Sociology and Sciences – two very different faculties - at the top of the ranking regarding the drop-out rate may appear surprising. An explanation might be found again by considering evaluation and selection

criteria. These seem to be particularly severe in the latter, but could be considered fairly so also those adopted in the former, as far as both the pretty weak social and educational characteristics of its students and the uncertainty about its graduates' chances on the labour market are taken into account.

The number of graduates is considerably increased in the post-reform years. On observing the composition by social origin and scholastic extraction among post-reform graduates, we noted how in general there continue to be very marked inequalities, but there has been some improvement, as far as the first cycle is concerned, compared to the pre-reform period. With regard to the two dimensions of social origin, family cultural and occupational capital, the first appear to be the most influential, at least with reference to the degree grade obtained by second cycle students.

Finally, we can state that the equity issue remains very relevant and unsolved in our higher education system. The current government policies of allocating resources to the universities appear not to take this into account. In fact, the evaluation criteria adopted focus solely on issues of quality which, if equity fails to be taken into consideration, risk generating consequences which could be not only in contrast with equity but also dubious in terms of authentic merit and quality.

References

AlmaDiploma (2006), *Indagine sul Profilo dei diplomati 2006*, Bologna.
Almalaurea (2007), *Condizione occupazionale dei* laureati, Bologna.
Almalaurea (2007), *Profilo dei laureati*, Bologna.
Almalaurea (2008), Profilo dei laureati, Bologna.
Benadusi L., Mignoli G.P. (2008), "I primi laureati specialistici puri"*, in Cammelli M. (a cura di), *IX Profilo dei laureati italiani. La riforma allo specchio*, Il Mulino, Bologna.
Bottani N., Benadusi L. (a cura di) (2006), *Uguaglianza e equità nella scuola*, Erickson, Trento.
CNVSU (2007), *VIII° Rapporto sullo stato dell'università,* Miur, Roma.
Dubet F. (2004), *L'école des chances. Qu'est-ce qu'une école juste ?*, Seuil, Paris.
Gerese (2005), *Equity of the European Educational Systems. A Set of Indicators*, Liegi, Università di Liegi.
Miur (2008), *Università in cifre 2007*, Roma.
Iannelli C., (2003), *Parental Education and Young People's Educational and Labour Market Outcomes: A comparison across Europe*, in Kogan I., Muller W. (eds), (2003), *School-to-Work Transition in Europe: Analyses of the EU LFS 2000 Ad Hoc Module*, MZES,

Mannheim.

Mare R.D. (1980), "Social Background and School Continuation Decisions", in *Journal of the American Statistic Association*, n.75.

Pisati M. (2002), "La partecipazione al sistema scolastico", in Schizzerotto A. (a cura di), *Vite ineguali,* Il Mulino, Bologna.