

## Introduction

Carlo Barone<sup>1</sup> and Moris Triventi<sup>2</sup>

### Premise

In this issue of the *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education* we deal with “The transformations of Higher Education in Italy and their implications for social inequality”. The special issue contains five articles written by seven authors<sup>3</sup>. In this introduction we firstly review major changes in the Italian system of Higher Education (HE) in the last decades and, secondly, we discuss the main contents of the five papers, in order to give a synthetic picture of the topics under scrutiny and a summary of the main findings.

### The transformation of Italian University system

Higher Education (HE) has undergone deep transformations in Italy over the past two decades, and this process of reform is still going on. These deep changes look even more remarkable if we consider that HE in Italy has exhibited for long time an impressive resistance to change. Until recently, Italian universities have preserved a strong elitist inspiration in spite of the long-term growth of their student participation. This was evident at the micro-level in the persistence of a very traditional understanding of teaching, whose contents were often tailored almost

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<sup>1</sup> Dipartimento di Sociologia e ricerca sociale, Università di Trento, Via verdi 26- 38100 Trento, Italy. Email: carlo.barone@soc.unitn.it.

<sup>2</sup> Dipartimento di Sociologia e ricerca sociale, Università di Milano-Bicocca, Via Bicocca degli Arcimboldi 8 - 20126 Milano, Italy. Email: moris.triventi1@unimib.it.

<sup>3</sup> These papers have been submitted to a double refereeing process: a blind review from a qualified expert and the guest editors' comments. The usual disclaimers apply: possible remaining errors are under authors' responsibility.

exclusively for students from the pre-academic tracks (*licei*), and of examinations, which preserved a high degree of selectivity. Resistance to change could be found also at the meso-level, for instance in the poor connections with upper secondary schools and in the weaknesses of counselling activities, as well as in the organization of learning processes, where frontal teaching prevailed while laboratories and stages were very uncommon.

At the macro-level, resistance to change was evident in the weak differentiation of HE, which was virtually equated to long, university studies that formally required four to five years for completion, but actually needed two or three more years on average. In the volume edited by Shavit et al. (2007) on the expansion, differentiation and stratification of HE, Italy figures among one of the very few unitary, undifferentiated national cases. This lack of differentiation was coupled with the virtual absence of any form of screening or selection of the upper secondary graduates applying to enrol into university. More precisely, all students holding a five-year diploma could enrol in any Faculty, without sitting any examination and regardless of their achievement in upper secondary education and of the type of school they had attended. Also economic barriers related to student fees were extremely limited. The lack of internal differentiation went hand in hand with a pronounced degree of centralization, where the national government could exert a detailed control over the administrative activities and the budget of every university.

In the meanwhile, the student population had become less and less selected, and increasingly heterogeneous in terms of school and social background, given the unprecedented expansion of upper secondary attainment rates, which grew from 44.1% to 69.2% in just a decade, between 1989 and 1999 (CNVSU, 2009). When universities preserve a strong elitist, traditional orientation but open their doors indiscriminately to a poorly selected student population, the outcome is easily predictable: a high rate of failures and graduation behind schedule, witnessed by the impressively high drop-out rates of Italian HE, as well as by the abnormal length of university studies (on average 7.6 years). Tertiary attainment rates were extremely low in Italy, as compared to other OECD countries. Not surprisingly, the preferred victims of this elitist system were working class students coming from vocational education: they both enrolled less often in university education and faced higher risks of dropping out.

The first significant element of internal differentiation was introduced only in 1989, with the institution of short, vocationally-oriented “university special courses”, known in Italy as *diplomi universitari* (or *lauree brevi*). These courses were offered only in a limited number of fields of study, mostly involving some professions in the technical and welfare sector (e.g. telecommunication, electronic, nursery, social work, etc.). They were organized by the universities and preserved a rather academic stance in comparison with similar courses in other countries (e.g. the German or Austrian *Fachhochschulen*). Still, they had a practical orientation and they involved extensive periods of internship that were uncommon in traditional Italian universities.

These shorter courses were a privileged target for students with a low family background and moderate or poor achievement in upper secondary education, typically completed in secondary vocational education. However, they displayed lower failure rates than university studies and their graduates benefited from good occupational prospects. In many respects, they represented an appealing alternative to direct access to the labor market for upper secondary graduates. Unfortunately, these courses were introduced right at the beginning of a period of strong contraction of enrolments to HE in Italy, that is to say the ‘90s. Moreover, their reputation has been damaged by their not counting as valid qualifications for public competitive exams. Therefore, they suffered from a slow growth, so that they were regarded as a failure: they covered no more than 9% of total enrolments in HE in 1999.

In the course of the ‘90s a number of interventions increased the autonomy of Italian universities in several respects, such as budget, study programmes, personnel recruitment. Unfortunately, this process has never been coupled by any systematic effort to assess the quality of research and teaching in Italian universities. However, the “big” reform arrived in 1999. Under the auspices of the so-called “Bologna Process”, university studies were differentiated into bachelor (3 years) and master (2 years) courses. Italy moved with impressive rapidity to this new sequential system: in 2001 it had been implemented in almost all Italian universities. A central tenet of this reform was that the new bachelor degrees should replace the old, long university degrees, whereas access to master courses would be restricted to a minority of bachelor graduates to be prepared for occupations of particularly high profile. Hence, the time, the economic burden and the

study effort to reach the *laurea* (university degree) have been reduced (Cappellari and Lucifora, 2009). Furthermore, the organization of teaching and of university assessments has been rearranged according to the new model of university credits, where longer courses and exams are fragmented into smaller units. According to several observers, this second innovation has lowered academic standards: university studies are now perceived as less selective (Bratti et al., 2006). In the context of the growing decentralization of HE, universities were allowed to offer additional specific courses in small towns to further attract students by means of spatial proximity.

These transformations made university studies more appealing for upper secondary graduates, as unequivocally revealed by the impressive growth of enrolments in the years following the 1999 reform. Between 1989 and 1999, enrolment rates had declined from 79.4% to 61.3%, but in 2003 they had recovered to 74.4% (CNVSU, 2009). At that point, some scholars diagnosed the “success” of the Bologna process in Italy (Cappellari and Lucifora, 2009), particularly because enrolment rates of students from a low social background and from technical schools increased faster than upper class children from general, pre-academic schools (*licei*).

Unfortunately, several trends indicate that this diagnosis was a bit too optimistic<sup>4</sup>. First of all, enrolment rates have begun to decline after this initial growth, so that in 2008 they are only 4.5% higher than in year 2000 (CNVSU, 2009). Second, there is growing evidence that the initial enrolments expansion was accompanied by a growth of drop-out rates (Argentin and Triventi, 2010; Barone and Fort, 2010). Third, it has become apparent that the partial reduction of social inequalities in university education reflects merely a ceiling effect: students from highly educated families and from *licei* had already reached complete saturation before the 1999 reform. Hence, any increase of enrolments would necessarily translate into a reduction of absolute distances between social groups (Barone and Fort, 2010). However, this reduction was only one side of the coin. The other side relates to the new forms of social inequality associated with the new system: upper class children are more likely to continue to master

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, a similar positive evaluation has been made by several commentators immediately after the 1969 reform, without considering the long-term consequences of such policy intervention (de Francesco and Trivellato 1978).

courses and to invest in *post-lauream* professional education (Argentin and Triventi, 2010; Almalaurea, 2007).

At the same time, HE in Italy has continued to preserve weak connections with the functioning of the labor market. The curricula and the contents of teaching entertain vague relationships with the skills and competencies valued by employers. Traditional forms of teaching, inspired to a very traditional pedagogy, remain the rule in Italian universities. Internships and stages are still very uncommon. It could be argued that, after all, this state of affairs is not necessarily troubling, provided that there is a strong vocational sector of HE that emphasizes a more applied orientation. Unfortunately, the 1999 reform cancelled university special courses (*diplomi universitari*), but it was not followed by any real effort to promote the growth of vocational HE. This vocational pillar of HE would be particularly important for the Italian economy, characterized by a fragmented tissue of small firms that need skilled high-level technicians more than university graduates with a highly theoretical background. Unfortunately, in the frame of the sequential system introduced by the 1999 reform, bachelor courses offer only a basic, generic background on a given discipline and master courses develop its theoretical foundations, rather than its applied contents.

### **Contents of the special issue**

Nowadays Italian universities, as most of HE institutions in the industrialized world, have to deal with several issues typical of a period of mass student participation and changes in the expectations about the role of HE within the broader context of knowledge-based societies. Universities are expected at the same time to attract students and maintain high levels of participation, in order to: a) guarantee access to students from all social groups; b) achieve effectiveness of learning and teaching; c) transmit students not only general knowledge, but also specific competencies that will be useful in the labour market (Clancy and Goastellec, 2007; Teichler, 2007; OECD, 2008). However, universities have to achieve these goals in a context of financial constraints, due to a relative decrease of public investment. Universities are also expected to improve their connections with external actors and institutions – as private firms, organizations, public

administrations, etc. – in order to increase the market value of their knowledge and to enhance the private funding of their research activities (Teixeira et al., 2004).

Articles published in this number deal with some of these issues, in particular those related to social inequality and graduates' labour market outcomes, analysing them with an empirical approach. The first two papers examine several topics related to university students: Fornari and Pompili explore issues of equity and excellence relating them to the broad concept of quality, whereas Triventi analyses long-term trends of gender segregation in different fields of study. The last three papers focus on graduates' labour market outcomes, analysed from different points of view: long-term trends of the occupational outcomes of university graduates compared to high school leavers (Zella); the increasingly blurred transition from university to labour market and the role of previous job experience and academic performance (Argentin); occupational attainment of PhD graduates in terms of kind of job and wage (Ballarino and Colombo). We present now the approach adopted by the authors in dealing with these topics and the most important results, discussing their implications for future research.

In the 90s the term "quality" has become a key term in HE policy agendas, summarizing different concepts, including those of equity and excellence. The paper by Fornari and Pompili explores how "quality" is defined by Italian universities and departments, the differences in its conceptualization according to academic disciplines and the tension between goals of equity and excellence, conceived as two dimensions of quality. The article presents three research activities: a secondary analysis of quantitative data on student participation in the Italian university system; an analysis of Italian universities' websites; and a case study on the University of Perugia.

The first part describes trends in student access, before and after the implementation of the "3+2" reform, and maps the main characteristics of fields of study in terms of social composition of student population and academic results. The authors show that with the "massification" of HE the percentage of students from pre-academic tracks (*licei*) has been decreasing over years, especially after the reform; therefore, an opening to non-traditional students occurred, as signalled by previous studies too (Cappellari and Lucifora, 2009; Benadusi, 2009). It is worth noting that

fields of study still attract students with very different social background and academic performance. Law, Physical sciences, Architecture and Engineering mainly attract students with a high social background, whereas Health professions, Teacher education and Social work prevalently attract students with low social background. These results suggest that faculties have to deal with very diverse student populations, with distinct abilities, motivation and school preparation. This, in turn, affects faculties' ability of achieving equity and effectiveness in learning and teaching processes.

The peculiar characteristics of fields of study (e.g. area of knowledge, student composition, and relation with external stakeholders) seem to affect the way professors define and implement activities which promote quality. In the second part of their paper, Fornari and Pompili describe some results from the analysis of universities websites and in-dept interviews with professors and actors involved in the implementation of activities related to quality assurance. They show that in technical fields of study an entrepreneurial vision of university prevails and quality is defined as "value for money". Here quality means accreditation, accountability to consumers, rules for the control of processes of innovation, and competition for research funds and students.

On the other side, university professors in the humanities and pure natural sciences conceive quality as a process of transformation. Education is seen not as a service for the consumer, but as a continuous process of transformation of the participants. This vision implies more attention to students' needs and promotes an improvement of teaching and learning processes. The authors argue that this second vision is more likely to pay attention to equity, while the first one to excellence. Future research is needed to understand whether and to what extent these visions translate into real interventions or, on the contrary, they merely serve as a legitimating label to attract external funding and prestige.

The second article by Triventi deals with social inequality issues in HE because it examines the long-term trends of gender segregation according to fields of study. First of all, the author shows that in Italy, as in most of OECD countries, a rapid increase of women participation in university occurred. Moreover, this expansion has lead women to overcome men's rate of enrolment and graduation in recent years. Given this huge growth of females' access to tertiary education and the persistence of gender-differentiated labour market outcomes, Triventi focuses the attention on the

horizontal gender segregation across fields of study. The topic is analysed both from a theoretical and an empirical point of view. From the first one, the definition of gender segregation is discussed and several dimensions are identified, on the basis of the international literature on this topic and its specific application to the Italian context. After this, several theories from distinct disciplines which try to explain the gender gap in the choice of field of study are critically discussed. The hypotheses derived from rational choice theory (differential occupational returns in lifetime, job-family conciliation, and comparative advantage) are not sufficient to account for the gender gap in fields of study. Hence, this perspective has to be integrated with socio-cultural theories, which stress the importance of gender-oriented values, socialization and social control.

In the empirical part the author analyses data from the Italian Household Longitudinal Survey (ILFI) and from the Italian University Graduates Survey (Istat) to examine long-term trends over time in gender differences in the choice of field of study. Relying on the work of van de Verfhorst and Kraaykamp (2001), the author proposes a theoretically-driven typology of fields of study based on the kinds of skills prevalently transmitted to students. In line with previous comparative studies, women are more present in the cultural fields, whereas men are more likely to enter technical/scientific fields. The data shows that in the first academic area a trend of desegregation over time is visible and it is particularly due to the increased females' propensity to enrol in the relational/communicative and economic fields. In fact, in these two areas gender differences are negligible in the recent cohorts of graduates. On the contrary, the huge males' overrepresentation in technical/scientific fields tends to persist over time, with only minor changes. Future research, both qualitative and quantitative, is needed to better understand which processes are more important in the choice of field of study and at what time this decision is taken.

The following articles focus on university graduates and their transition to the labour market. This topic has received much attention by public debate and academic researchers, especially in the field of sociology and economics of education. Previous studies analysed the wage premium or time to get the first job among university graduates and upper secondary school leavers to see if a tertiary degree pays off in the labour market (Naticchioni et al., 2007). Other studies, instead, analysed the horizontal



differentiation within tertiary education and they found that economic returns vary by fields of study, showing an advantage of engineering and economics graduates over humanistic and social sciences graduates (Buonanno and Pozzoli, 2009; Ballarino, 2006; Ballarino and Bratti, 2009). The papers included in the special issue try to expand this literature in several aspects.

Zella's article examines long-term trends in the association between educational attainment and the prestige of the first job after finishing school or university. This characteristic is a good indicator of labour market outcomes because previous research showed that in Italy career mobility is rather low and the first job is highly predictive of future job status (Pisati and Schizzerotto, 1999). In the first part the author briefly reviews the major characteristics of the Italian educational system, labour market and their change over time. After this description, the author discusses the main sociological and economic theories which try to explain the link between education and labour market: human capital theory, job queue model, screening and signalling theories, incentive-enhancing preference theory.

In the last part of the article Zella analyses data from ILFI in order to examine changes over time in the relation between educational qualifications, social origins and the prestige of the first job along three cohorts of labour market entrants. Unlike previous research the paper classifies educational levels explicitly accounting for both the vertical distinction (primary, lower and upper secondary, tertiary) and the horizontal one (vocational, technical and academic track in upper secondary education). The analysis shows that university graduates are the most advantaged in the labour market, followed by technical and academic graduates at upper secondary level. They are followed respectively by those who received a vocational qualification and those who have not more than lower secondary education. Looking at long-term trends, the analysis reveals that university graduates' advantage over high school leavers (both from technical and academic tracks) increased over time, a trend which Zella interprets in the framework of credential inflation at the secondary level. Looking at the contribution of social origin, results indicate that both parental education and occupation are positively associated with the prestige of the first job: the effect of the first variable is slightly declining over time while the second one is more persistent.

The following contribution by Argentin is focused on recent cohorts and on the internal differentiation of labour market outcomes within the population of university graduates. In his article the author tries to improve the knowledge on this topic by: a) enlarging the types of occupational outcomes taken into consideration (risk of unemployment, unstable job, overqualification); b) paying attention to delay in graduation and final mark (graduates' qualifying elements, GQE) as additional predictors of occupational attainment; c) analysing in detail the role of anticipatory entrance in the labour market during university studies (an overlooked topic in our country); d) looking at the differentiated effects of GQE according to fields of study.

In a context characterised by a huge expansion of graduates and several labour market reforms introducing more flexibilization, it is reasonable to assume a growth in the competition among graduates in the transition into labour market. It is also plausible that employers increasingly rely on additional information besides field of study to screen and select highly educated candidates for the positions they have to fill. In fact, Argentin's article shows that GQE matter in reducing the risk of unemployment, having an unstable job or being overqualified. Moreover, final mark and previous work experience play different roles. Previous work experience, if continuous in time, reduces the risk of being unemployed or unstable, but not the risk of overqualification. On the other hand, final mark heavily reduces the risk of being overqualified, but does not affect the probability of unemployment and instability.

Looking at the differentiation of the role of GQE in different fields of study, final mark and delay have more or less the same impact in all the fields, whereas having a continuous job during university studies has different effects. In the humanistic field previous continuous work experience does not lead to lower grades or to a longer delay, while it has a penalizing effect in the more demanding fields. Furthermore, it improves the chance of being employed three years after graduation and reduces the risk of entering an unstable job only in the humanistic field. These results suggest that humanistic and scientific students have a distinct structure of incentives of starting a job during their studies, and this has important implication for their transition to the labour market. In particular, humanistic graduates have higher incentives to start a job during their study, even if it could lead to longer time to get the degree and to a kind of

“entrapment” in the same job after graduation. Future research should address some additional issues: for example, when do students start to work? At the beginning, in the middle or at the end of their studies? Do they enter in field-related jobs or not related ones? How do these phenomena vary by field of study?

The last paper deals with an often overlooked, but increasingly relevant, issue: the occupational outcomes of PhD graduates. As a first step, Ballarino and Colombo help us to understand why this topic has been neglected in the past, discussing the historical origins, meanings and development of doctorate courses in our country. The academic title of “doctorate” was introduced late in Italy compared to other countries (at the beginning of the ‘80s) as a way to overcome pervert unintended effects of the academic recruitment procedure called *libera docenza*. At the beginning the PhD title was intended to be an educational degree with a specific value only in the context of scientific research and as a preliminary step into the academic career. Nevertheless, the authors show that, after a period of slow expansion, in the last years a dramatic increase in the number of PhD graduates occurred. This growth was more than proportional with respect to the overall expansion of Italian universities and it has generated an imbalance between the demand from universities and the offer of PhD graduates. Hence, an increasing proportion of PhDs is looking at the non-academic labour market to find a job. The paradox is that the increase in the number of PhD students is probably linked not only to the recent possibility the doctoral schools have to enrol students without granting scholarships, but also to the worsening of graduates’ occupational perspectives. If the PhD programmes serve as a “parking lot” for graduates who do not find a suitable job in the labour market, but at the same time the probability to enter the academic profession decreases, these PhD graduates will face the same or even worse occupational perspectives after the doctorate.

The article by Ballarino and Colombo analyses data from a survey on PhD graduates between 1998 and 2005 in three universities in the North of Italy. Since a national survey on this topic is not available, this is one of the best sources of micro-data to explore PhDs’ transition to the labour market. The results show that university remains the main occupational outcome for PhD graduates, but with a noticeable differentiation across fields of study which resembles patterns of graduates’ outcomes. PhDs in hard sciences and engineering have more chances to get a research job both inside and

outside university and they have a substantial wage premium over PhDs in the humanities and the social sciences. Moreover, the data signal the survival of the presence of a credentialist use of the PhD title outside universities, as a way to increase the prestige or wage of people working in specific professions. The traditional “liberal professions” are also characterised by a kind of social reproduction, because graduates from upper classes have higher probability to enter these occupations.

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