

Pursuing quality in mass higher education: the dilemma of equity and excellence in Italy

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Abstract: In mass higher education systems the issue of equity and excellence becomes a dilemma that is difficult to resolve both in relation to policies and organizational practices implemented in universities. In fact, universities should make clear what their aims are or what their mission is in a modern society, harmonising their old and new functions and overcoming conflicts due to a growing number of stakeholders and their different interests. In this framework, since the 90's quality has become the key word of the Higher Education policy agendas summarizing different concepts including those of equity and excellence. For this reason, starting from the work of Harvey and Green (1993) on definitions of quality, in this work these concepts will be treated as dimensions of the concept of quality with the aim of investigating their possible forms of coexistence. . To this purpose three research activities have been undertaken: a secondary analysis of data on the Italian system, an analysis of Italian universities' websites and a case study. The exploratory hypothesis of our work is founded on the idea that there is always a combination of three definitions of quality, but that in each context the prevalence of one of them is related to the different characteristics of disciplines and students.

Keywords: quality, mass higher education, equity, excellence

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A new context for university

In recent years, the nature, distribution, transmission and growth of knowledge has taken on a new configuration due to different socio-economic changes. As stated elsewhere (Fornari, 2008 and 2009), if literature often declares the crisis (Scott, 2000; Preston, 2003), ruin (Readings, 1996) and decline (Halsey, 1992) of University, it is probably due to the difficulty in managing new instances emerging from different changes: *Mass higher education, The Knowledge society, Globalization, New Public Management in the field of Knowledge, The harmonisation of European systems through the development of a system of quality assurance with the objective of creating a European Higher Education Area*. As it is possible to guess, these phenomena are very different in their nature and their significance. Precisely for this reason, the simultaneous impact that they have had on universities has changed all dimensions of HEIs: teaching and research, administration and relations with the territory, and so on. In particular, in this work attention is given to the students' experience and to the dilemma of excellence vs. equity that appears in the wider context of change arising from the advent of mass higher education and the knowledge society. Both these phenomena have radically changed the meaning of participation in higher education (see Trow, 1974), the "habitus" of students, the expectation *of* and *on* them and subsequently the form and way of teaching and learning, and the aim attributed to the educational process.

Within this scenario of change, efficiency and effectiveness lose their consistency in public debate and are instead replaced by quality (Cameron, Whetten, 1996; Stensaker, 2005), a concept that has facilitated the convergence of stakeholders on a single goal³.

³ Symptomatic of the relevance of this concept in the public debate is the convergence in Europe on this subject by the main bodies that deal with Higher Education as the European Universities Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQUA) and the European Students' Union (ESU), as well the existence of a network of actors that at different institutional levels play different functions (see, Fornari, Pompili, 2008). The centrality of this issue was also remarked in recent document as the "Budapest-Vienna Declaration on the European Higher Education Area" (March, 2010), or in the "Stocktaking Report 2009 - Report from working groups appointed by the Bologna

In the last decades, several issues have been included within the wide discourse of reaching and improving quality in and of higher education systems through the creation of a quality assurance system, a stronger link with the external environment and the empowerment of actors inside the institutions, in particular students and professors. However, attention paid to quality does not imply agreement among the various stakeholders on a single mission of the university. On the contrary, this concept has increasingly become the priority for the agendas of policy but, at the same time, it has become more *elusive* (Gibson, 1986) and *controversial* (Taylor et al.1998). In fact, each element used to measure quality is linked to different values (Brennan, Shah, 2000) and weighted differently in academic rankings (Usher, Savino, 2006). Different visions and values remain and stress the internal dynamics at universities resulting in tension and conflict. One of the greater emerging tensions is that between equity and excellence, which in this work are read as specific dimensions of quality. Following the conceptualization of Harvey and Green (1993), and referring to their contribution for a comprehensive discussion⁴, excellence can be traced to the concept “quality as excellence” which coincides with high quality standards accessible only in certain circumstances. This definition, in fact, implies that the quality of output is a function of quality of input, independently from the value added that higher education institutions can bring. Obviously, this is a definition inherited from an elitist vision of university. As regard the measurement, if we refer to input, the excellence is linked to indicators such as the type of school or diploma's high marks, if we refer to the process - or to the output - it is linked to regularity in study and high levels of learning (which are, however, difficult to measure).

With the advent of mass higher education, and the consequent access to the system of students with different cultural, cognitive and motivational features, the circumstances for excellence tend to narrow niches and the

Follow-up Group to the Ministerial Conference in Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve”.
http://ec.europa.eu/education/higher-education/doc1290_en.htm
http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/Stocktaking_report_2009_FINAL.pdf

⁴ Other definition are: “quality as perfection” that is irrelevant compared to universities institutions because, as evidenced by the same authors, they would produce “zero defects student”; “quality as fitness for purpose” which is more relevant in an analysis of organizational and institutional processes and less in relation to actors’ attitudes; and “value for money” that emphasizes the aspects related to accountability.

question of equity emerges. Referring to the above mentioned conceptualization quality become something more connected to the institution's capacity to provide value added, that is a measure of the extent to which the educational experience enhances the knowledge, abilities and skills of students. In this sense the authors define quality “as transformation”. As regard to the measurement of equity the indicators should not be limited to data related to input (access to the system) and output (success). In fact, although is difficult to measure the value added (because of difficult of operationalization and no data are available on actual learning of students), the aim of the work presented later, about the composition of faculties based on social, curricular and biographical features of the students, is to show the need to consider such a measure and the context within which teachers and students can interact. Therefore quantitative data about Italy have a dual function: they show the actual transition to mass higher education and they highlight the persistence of inequality within higher education.

Research into excellence and equity in Italy⁵

The question of our research arises from the scenario described above. Starting from work of Harvey and Green (1993) on definitions of quality, our aim is to explore the coexistence of equity and excellence. Within the conceptualization provided by the two authors, two definitions of the concept are relevant to the issue discussed here: *quality as transformation* and *quality as excellence*. These definitions, in fact, allow us to better interpret the vision underlying the educational process: the first definition emphasizes the processes of learning and empowerment of the student, while the second the continuous growth in educational standards. The exploratory hypothesis of our work is founded on the idea that there is always a combination of these definitions of quality but that in each context the prevalence of one of them is related to the different characteristics of disciplines and students.

To this purpose, three research activities have been undertaken. The first one is related to the transition to mass higher education and to the analysis

⁵ This work is based on separate research into evaluation and quality of the Italian higher education system conducted by both authors using different methods. Our aim here is to emphasize the convergence of results on equity and excellence.

of main indicator of inequalities at university. The second and the third activity of research, instead, are linked to the demand for quality that arises in this new scenario that entails both a more capacity of communication to the university's stakeholders (*in primis* students and their families) and an activation of each organization to guarantee (or, at least, to combine) equity and excellence.

Transition to mass higher education: data on Italian system

The first research activity is a macro analysis of the system with particular reference to the degree of participation, both in absolute terms and in reference to particular categories of subjects. As sociology of education has shown the growth rate of tertiary education requires attention because it might lead to an increase in inequality rather than its reduction. The mechanistic approach, for example, does not pay attention to this consequence because it is related to the theory of human capital, founded on the relationship of mutual reinforcement between the expansion of educational systems and economic growth. In sociology of education, on the other hand, many authors have considered the issue of educational inequalities, produced or reproduced by the educational system (see Benadusi, 1984) and have highlighted the negative and/or perverse aspects of massification. The authors of theories of social and cultural reproduction, for example, have emphasized the importance of success rather than access to the system. These authors showed the influence of structural factors (such as employment status of parents) and materials or symbolic elements – such as language, behaviour, the ability to use the information – which constitute what Bourdieu called *cultural capital* (1978, 1984; Bourdieu, Passeron, 1971, 1972). Cultural capital is transmitted through the various educational authorities (family, school, free culture) and it operates along educational pathways through the *habitus*, a mechanism that allows the transmutation of the objective possibilities - given by social conditions and the trajectory of life - in subjective choices (that become the subject's objectives). Several researches (Gambetta, 1990; Cavalli, Facchini, 2001; Schizzerotto, 2002; Benadusi, 2009a; Giancola, 2009) have revealed that cultural rather than economic capital has a much greater impact on successful education.

The objective possibilities, expectations and motivations play an important role also in rational action models, in particular in the analysis related to education transitions and to educational attainments (Breen,

Goldthorpe 1997; Erikson, Jonsson, 1996; Breen, Jonsson, 2000; Davis et al., 2002; Becker, 2003; Breen, Yaish, 2006). This approach highlights the importance of secondary effect of class inequalities (Boudon, 1974) because shows that educational choices are conditioned by family background even also when there are not differences in ability or performance. As stated by Breen and Yaish (2006), “young people (and their family have), as their major educational goal, the acquisition of a level of education that will allow them to attain a class position at least as good as that of their family of origin”. Evaluation of returns of each level of education would be made, following this approach, with reference to *current class position* and with expedient of *intergenerational status maintenance* (“risk aversion”) (Becker, 2003; Goldthorpe, 1996; Stoké, 2007). So, tertiary education would be more attractive for middle-class student, whom need to get a degree to maintain their parents’ class position, than for working class students, for whom there is no need to invest in higher education to reach the same social status of family (Davis et al, 2002; Lucey, Reay, 2002; Becker, Hecken, 2009). Moreover, Breen and Yaish (*ibidem*), testing this model, have found that pupils define the threshold value not in terms of future class position but in terms of a particular level of educational attainment, probably because in the absence of adequate information about the likely future returns to education, students simply use parents’ educational level as a heuristic (same educational level equal to same class position).

The negative effects of mass higher education have been investigated also in a different approach, focused on for example, has placed the emphasis on the idea of “waste” of individual and collective resources. Boudon (1978, 1981) emphasizes the importance of individual action, and, with reference to educational career introduces the concept of “crossroads” and rational choices on the basis of the costs-benefits analysis. The reflections of Boudon start by noting that parity of degree does not automatically mean parity of employment status. For this reason is possible to affirm, as demonstrated by studies on social mobility and intellectual unemployment, the “inflation of qualifications”, the “perverse effects” of education. This continuous effort to obtain higher degrees and reach (but usually to maintain) a privileged position generates, according to Collins, the emergence of a “spiral” in the educational system in which the educational credential increasingly takes on only formal value. The fact remains that universal education may be an “obligation” rather than an

opportunity of getting certain qualifications (Trow, 2005).

In any case, it seems to transfer the issue of inequality to the issue of choice of subjects, with all the consequences that this entails in terms of ability to choose, access to information, diversification and, above all, in terms of construction of a personal life project. Dubet (2002), in the description of "post-institutional socialization" highlighted, as a "must to play", one of the mechanisms in which social domination acts. For the author, while the "power" is defined in terms of inequality of resources, the "domination" is hidden inside the categories of personal experience itself (as "*conscience malheureuse*"). This type of domination leads people to feel that it is their fault and to be unable to master of their experiences. In the educational field this "obligation" can produce phenomena such as hostility and violence among pupils in high school and a sense of frustration, automatism and disaffection with tertiary education. Finally, it contributes to the shift of educational issues, especially the phenomenon of dropping out or failure, from a social dimension to an individual problem linked to the personality of the subject, in the same way in which habitus moves the determining factors of social structures within biographies and personal expectations.

Issues highlighted by sociologists of education will be explored through a secondary analysis of data on the Italian system provided by Miur, Cnvsu and Almalaurea⁶. In particular, we consider the following questions: how

⁶ MIUR (*Ministry of Education, University and Research*) in recent years replaced the ISTAT in the production of many of the data for the training system. The General Directorate for Studies and Planning is responsible for the reorganization and integration of information on different components of the system, using a variety of sources: administrative databases of the Ministry, the ISTAT surveys on the professional integration of graduates, the budgets of the universities, and others. Result of this systematization of data is the report "Universities in figures" that includes a selection of key indicators on campus (registration, membership, degree and postgraduate activated, and graduate work). In the Statistical Bulletin, published monthly, are treated specific themes, such as that on an international comparison (No 10/2008) and the number of students and graduates (No. 7 / 2008). On the site of the Ministry of Education can collect data in tabular format (starting from 1997) on enrollements, graduates, faculty (by gender and institutional level). It is possible to consult the database of the Registry of Students, provided in collaboration with the CINECA, where you can get more information, such as age of enrollment. www.miur.it The CNVSU (*National Committee for the Evaluation of the University System*) is a institutional body of Ministry. It provides an online portal on the data of the university from

great is the level of participation? What are the characteristics of students in terms of age and gender? How important is the weight of social background on their choices and their success at university?

“Qualities” in university

The second action of research is an analysis of the implications arising from policy change at the *meso* level of the system represented by Universities. The research was developed through an analysis carried out on the websites of 77 Italian universities, with the aim of identifying structures, organisational practices, roles and responsibilities for quality assurance and finally to elaborate a typology of initiatives undertaken. Certainly an analysis carried out on the websites has limitations in terms of completeness, but we believe that it is able to present a reliable scenario. The survey on the websites was integrated by some interviews with experts on quality in Higher Education who were able to offer a more complete vision of the Italian university system.

Faced with the pressures arising from policies, some strategies aimed at

which it is possible to export data into Excel. For the purposes of our survey data were considered to "offer, students, graduates and teachers" on which you can ask queries about the number of registered (total, high school, graduated with a vote of greater than 9/10, inactive), number of missing registrations the second year, number of enrollments (total, current, inactive), number of graduates (current and off course). The information may be required for single year (since 2000), aggregated by university, faculty groups, region, class course, and filtered for such type of courses (three years, Specialized, etc..) Or type of university (state, non-state). Moreover CNVSU prepare an annual report on the state university. www.cnvsu.it

ALMALAUREA is an inter-university consortium, founded in 1994 by Statistical Centre of University of Bologna, and it is managed by a Consortium of Italian Universities with the support of MIUR. In recent years, the consortium has grown exponentially, reaching a quota of 60 Italian universities (75% of total graduates). AlmaLaurea annually presents two surveys which provide aggregated data for institutional level and for some principal characteristics such as gender and employment status. The first survey concerns "the profile of graduates" and it is organized into 10 sections (demographic information, social origin, upper secondary education, success in university studies, study conditions, working while studying, university guest experience, language and computer skills, perspective for study and work). The second survey concerns "the employment status of graduates" that highlights aspects university outcome (type of work that monthly net income, degree of effectiveness in working, quality the work). www.almalaurea.it

improving quality, output and outcome have been developed. Italian universities have been striving to meet the ever more pressing demand for quality, while taking into account new demands emerging from the mass higher education system, which require greater attention to the issue of equity. Universities have developed their own response: the norms, in fact, have activated a “system of action” with its own institutional and organizational culture (Fornari, Pompili, 2008). In an attempt to respond to these needs, the semantic container “quality” has often been used as an all-embracing term, and adopted also in the implementation of the systems designed to assure it⁷. This reveals an effort to strive towards continual improvement and at the same time represents the label which comprises various organisational practices designed to compensate for the inefficiencies, in terms of effectiveness and equity, of the policies of past years and especially not to create others in the future.

The third action of research is to analyse the micro level of the system through a case study. As outlined above, every university has developed its strategy for quality assurance and related instrumentation. The aim of this part is to analyze what system of action is actually activated by the policies, going beyond the appearance of “ceremonials and rituals” (Meyer, Rowan, 1977, 1986) of such practices. We try to understand what impact the issue of quality produces in the universities’ organizational field by focusing on the practices in which the quality is materialized: organs, structures, routines and tools aimed at its management. What *is* quality? What are the meanings attributed to it by the actors? In che modo questi significati si ricollegano ai concetti di equità e di eccellenza? Furthermore we try to search out the trajectories of change taking place in an academic context, and also to analyze possible sources of differentiation produced by the implementation of micro policy for quality.

The case study drew on 30 interviews with relevant actors of the institution and on documentary analysis. We interviewed the President of the Committee for the Certification of Quality and professors and administrative staff involved in the process; professors and administrative staff who have participated in the *Campus* and *CampusOne* experiences in the past, particularly as self-evaluators and teaching managers; and finally,

⁷ We refer to experiences of various kinds that include the definition of roles and policies for quality or participation in projects of institutional assessment. Approximately 25 universities among the 77 analysed have adopted a policy for quality, in many cases published online.

professors who are members of structures not involved in the certification process in order to understand their vision of quality and compare it with the vision of the actors involved.

Level of participation, characteristics, choices and performance of Italian students

According to the formulation of Trow (1974; 2005), in the elitist model only 15% of the relevant age group (18-24 years) is involved in the university system and its function is “shaping mind and character of the ruling class; preparation for elite roles”. In the mass model participation reaches 50% and the function of the university becomes the “transmission of skills; preparation for broader range of technical and elite economic roles”. Finally, in the third model, the universal one, participation exceeds 50% of the population reference, and university is seen as an institution useful for the “adaptation of the ‘whole population’ to rapid social and technological change”.

To observe in greater detail the characteristics of the Italian university system, we decided to “stress” the data and analyse trends of enrolments taking as reference only the 19 year old population. According to this reading, the move from elite to mass took place between the ‘60s and ‘70s, while the transition to the universal model took place from 2000/2001 with the index of tertiary education equal to 51%, followed by a continuous increase until the year 2003-2004 (up to 56%). As can be seen, however, in the last two academic years the rate of registration has slowed, losing about three percentage points each year.

In addition to this quantitative expansion it is necessary to take into consideration the capacity of the universities to include students with different characteristics, motivations, learning styles and needs. With regard to the characteristics of students, we observe an increase in students coming from technical and professional high schools (see CNVSU, 2009).

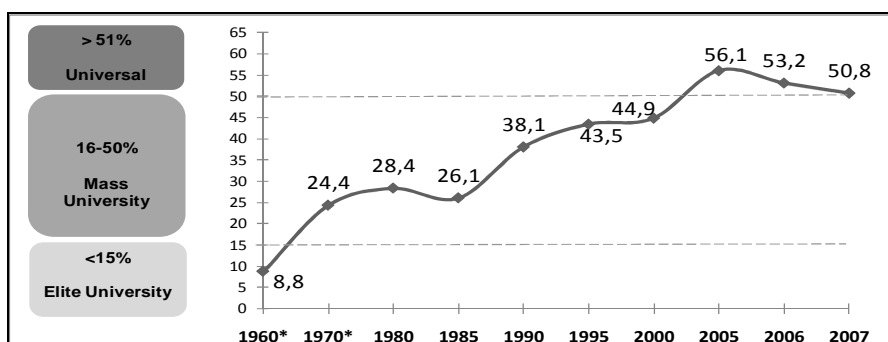
With regard to the student population, it is necessary to underline that not only the natural population of reference (those who immediately continue secondary studies full time) has increased but, at the same time, other population groups are increasing, such as student-workers⁸ and that of

⁸ See Argentin’s article in this number for more data on student-workers in Italy.

adult learners. If we consider the data from the Registry Office of Students, we can make a comparison by age. The graph below shows the total registrations to first level and “one cycle” (duration of study is five years instead of 3+2) over the last five years by gender and age.

The reading of this data reveals some interesting elements. First, we may notice that during the last seven years the distribution relative to the age groups are widely stable (2009-2010 total registered amounted to 290,268 subjects), also with reference to their distribution by gender (for regarding the 2009-2010, there are respectively 126,979 males and 163,289 females). Secondly, the comparison between graphs A, B and C, shows that the largest component of new entrance is included in the 20-30 year old age group. Those enrolled “later” (this group is composed mainly of 20 year olds: 60% of the group) are those for whom we can observe a more relevant decrease in last years. Until 2007-2008 in fact they represented 60% of the total but now they are around 55% of total.

Figure 1. Index of tertiary education in Italy (years 1960-2005).

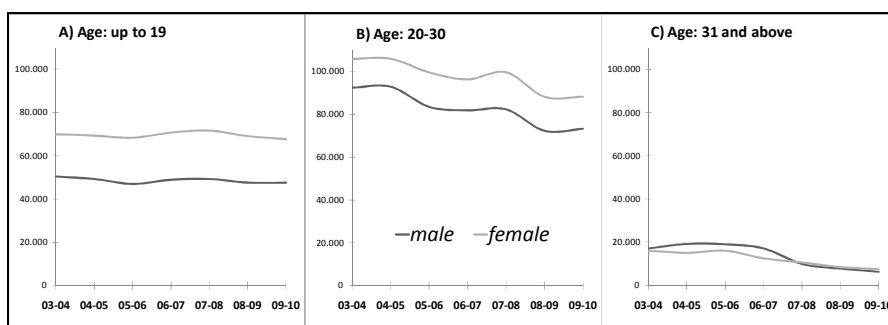


Source: Elaboration from Cnvsu 2009 and Stanchi 2001*

The “regular” group, up to 19 years old, is about 36-38% of the total registered each year. The remaining consists of adults over 31 (and of these a third are over 41). Finally, we can observe the distribution of the three age groups by gender. This shows that the percentage of females in the three age groups decreases significantly: from almost 60% in the “regular” age group, just over 50% in the age group 20-30, just fewer than 50% in the age group over 31.

Compared with the motivations of students we can surmise, following the argument of Dubet (1994), a distinction between “traditional” and “new” students. The former are strongly anchored to the idea of excellence in education that involves the totality of their lives or at least of their time. Whether they come from the elite or from the “mass”, they are guided by a strong sense of success to be reached by passing tests. Diversely, the “other” students possess an idea of study that stresses the credential aspect of academic titles (needed for the career) or that is strongly linked to the achievement or development of specific skills for employment. In addition, people who belong to this group are interested in university primarily for cultural reasons, for their personal growth or to have more contact with professors, other students or different context. Study time is often shared with work time and it is often lived in a piecemeal manner, as residual or in watertight compartments.

Figure 2. Number of new entrance (First Level and One Cycle) by gender and age.



Source: Elaboration from Registry office of students, 2008

With regard to the inequalities in the university system, the theories illustrated above are supported by the analysis of the data on post-reform degree courses. It shows that the percentage of graduates with a high level family background are still a large majority: 53% of graduates from three-year courses and 60% of graduates from specialized courses come from families belonging to upper and middle classes and have at least one graduate parent.

Therefore, the above-illustrated representation requires comparison with

the weak retention of the Italian system. The dropout rate between the first and second years is one of the elements that characterize our university system to which the reform has paid great attention. The phenomenon of early dropout is one that affects all educational cycles, but this assumes a distinctive characteristic in the case of tertiary because in the university experience the person is much more alone and less assisted in his/her effort in socializing with new rules and new knowledge (Ricotta, De Cataldo, 2007). That is, in this case, to be able to exercise or to elaborate a "job of student" (Coulon, 1997) through a process of self-socialization with rules and dynamics typical of an experience - educational and personal - carried out by exercising personal discretion and in a context characterized by multiple and complex actions. Despite the reform's attention, however, the data show a substantial continuity, rather than a break with the values recorded in the period before the reform. An analysis of data provided by CNVSU we saw that in 2005-2006 the percentage of dropouts between the first and second year at university stood at 20.3%, essentially unchanged from the academic year 1999-2000 (21.0%).

Although the data here used do not allow investigation of the direct relationship between family background and dropping out⁹, we can observe the internal differences within the faculty. Family background strongly affects the choice of university faculty, both directly and through the mediation of the type of school attended previous to registration. Later, we shall see in detail the differences between the faculties and degree courses, for the moment, we can say that the phenomenon of dropping out between the first and second years of university shows a strong differentiation within the groups of faculty: from a maximum of 35% in the faculty of Sociology to around 10% in that of Psychology.

Let us now observe the internal composition of faculty to analyse the choice of students. Regarding the internal composition of faculties there are significant differences, both in quantitative (number of enrolled and dropout students) and in "quality" (characteristics of students) terms. In the university system, as we saw above, with regard to participation there are no more gender inequalities, but we can not say that they are completely gone. Gender inequalities are concentrated in the different choices that determine the paths of males and females (Giancola, Fornari,

⁹ Studies on this theme can be found for example in Di Pietro (2006); Cingano and Cipollone (2007); Triventi and Trivellato (2009).

2009). Data on registrations show that in 2006-2007, women were 55.7% of total enrolments, but they were concentrated in specific areas such as teaching, languages and psychology. On the contrary, they are less represented in physics, engineering, defence and security. However, if we examine the change over the first seven years of reform (see ISTAT, 2009) we observe a strong growth of female presence in some scientific and technological areas: Architecture (+78%), Chemistry-pharmaceuticals (+73%), Geo-biology (+47%). At the same time, the presence of women is declining in those areas which have long constituted the “pink” groups, in particular Teaching (-4%) and Psychology (-15%). Women are discovering new fields of choice: not in engineering (which sees only an increase of 4%), but discovering new knowledge through which they can invent and test technologies. Fields closer to them, perhaps, but also and above all, more oriented to intervening in the social world.

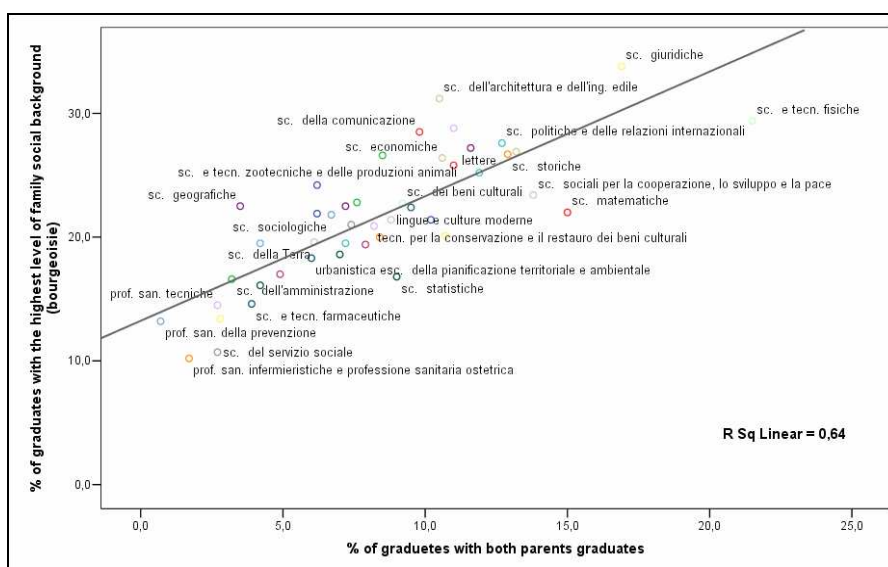
With regard to the different characteristics of students, the trend is similar to that observed for total values: the percentage of students from *liceo* decreases over the years, especially following the reform. Some faculties and courses, however, are characterised by a low presence of these “excellent” students. The same faculties are those in which students have a low level of family social and cultural background. As it is possible to see from the chart below (fig.3), the degree courses with a higher percentage of graduates with high level family social and cultural background are: Law, Physical sciences and technology, Architecture and Engineering. On the contrary degree courses with a lower percentage of these students are: Health professions, Science of education and training and Science of social service.

Another representation can be obtained through a Principal Component Analysis which aims to summarize the characteristics of the path of those belonging to the various faculties (academic year 2005-2006). Based on the *component loadings*, we have decided to name the first component “renouncing the path versus excellence on output” and the second component “excellence on entrance”.

Through this projection on two axes we may notice fundamental differences among some faculties (fig.4). Some, such as Engineering and Pharmacy are characterized by the ability to attract students with a stronger previous course of study; other faculties, such as Medicine and Surgery have been considered those where the paths of students are more regular; others, such as Maths, Physics and Natural Sciences, and Law, are faculties

which attract large numbers of excellent students but at the same time are characterized by the presence of inactive or later students; finally, Sociology appears to be the "worst case" characterized by non excellent students on entrance and students with irregular or failure paths.

Figure 3. Distribution of first level degree courses by percentage of graduates belonging to bourgeoisie¹⁰ and with both parents graduates.



Source: Elaboration on Almalaurea, Profile of graduates 2006

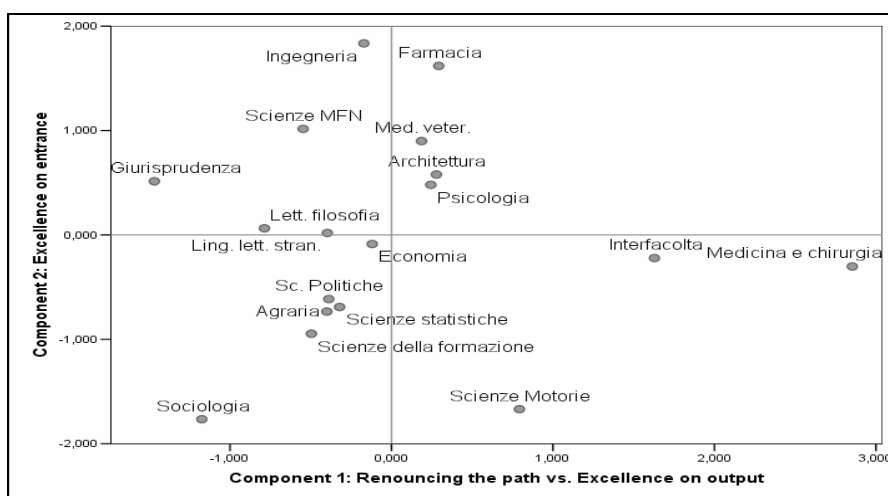
Lastly, we can compare excellence on entrance with distribution by gender. The graph below shows the distribution of degree courses by the degree of excellence on entry¹¹ divided into low, medium and high and the ratio female: male of new entrance students. This representation is a good summary of the issues analysed until now. From this, we can reconstruct

¹⁰ In Almalaurea data, bourgeoisie includes higher grade professionals, managers and employers with at least 15 employees. See the website www.almalaurea.it for further methodological notes.

¹¹ It has been obtained with the same analysis described above applied to the degree courses instead of the faculties.

the distribution of gender, the educational background (and proxy as that of family background) and choices of students as combinations of two variables.

Figure 4. Faculties projected on axis of the two components extracted from a Principal Component Analysis.



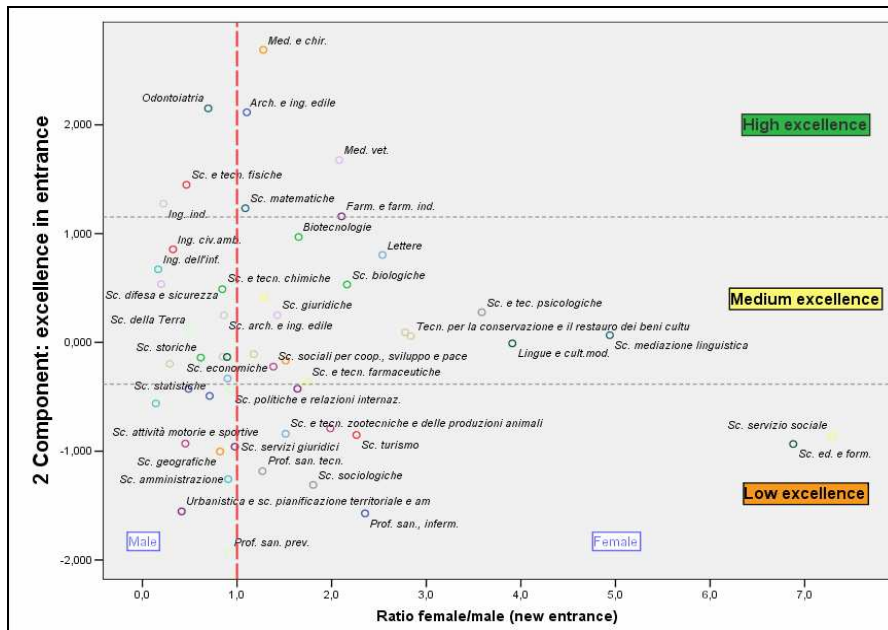
Source: Elaboration on Cnvsu, 2007¹²

We can see that degree courses are strongly characterized by the level of excellence of their students (high, medium and low) and by gender (there are some courses that are almost full of women, such as “Social services”

¹² Six variables have been taken into account and two components have been extracted using *varimax* rotation. Together they reproduce 69.8% of total variance. The first component reproduces 43.9% of variance. The variables that give the major contribution to its formation are, on the positive side: “the percentage of graduates in legal time on the total number of graduates” and “the percentage of students in legal time on the total number of students”, while, on the negative side the variables: on “the percentage of not re-enrolled to the second year in the total registered the previous year” and “the percentage of students inactive on the total number of students”. The second component reproduces 26.8% of variance. The variables that give the major contribution to its formation are (on the positive side): “the percentage of newly enrolled “liceali” on the total newly enrolled” and “the percentage of newly enrolled with a diploma mark equal or up to 9/10 on the total number of newly enrolled”.

and “Sciences of education and training” in which there are 7 women for each man; on the contrary, there are no courses completely made up of men).

Figure 5. Distribution of Italian first level degree courses by level of excellence on entrance and ratio female: male



Source: Elaboration on Cnvsu, 2007

The most interesting thing is that choices of males and females are different within each level: in the High level women prefer Medicine, Maths and Pharmacy, while men choose Dentistry, Physics and Industrial Engineering.

In the Medium level women prefer courses in Psychology, Literature, Biology and Biotechnology, Law and Social Sciences for Cooperation and Peace, and finally Techniques of Pharmacy and Chemistry, Architecture and Construction Engineering. Men prefer Civil Engineering, Information Engineering, Defence and Security, Agronomy, History and Economics. In the low level women are significantly over-represented in Social Services

and in Education and Training, and are very present in Tourism and Social Sciences, Health Professions, Science of Legal Services, Political Science and International Relations. Instead men prefer Urban Planning, Sciences of Geography, Sciences of Administration and Sciences of Sport and Physical Education.

After this overview on trends in the Italian system, let's see now what single universities are doing to improve their quality.

“Quality Systems” from Italian universities: an analysis on web.

Although it was a uniform framework elaborated in the past by way of experiments conducted all over the country, and represented the universities' first approach to the issues related to quality (such as the Project CampusOne by the Italian Conference of University Rectors – CRUI - for example), today the Italian system appears almost fragmented. In fact, it is through the contextualization and *translation* (Callon, 1986; Gherardi, Lippi, 2000) of these patterns that those which can define the “quality systems” of Universities have emerged. These “quality systems”, intended here as structures, roles, practices and competencies, rarely cover the entire University and much more frequently were introduced only in some sectors of the institution. Even those universities that have a total quality certification (ISO norms, etc.) have triggered processes that affect only those structures that have joined voluntarily or that academic leaders have wanted to include in quality management system (QMS). It seems to us that the pressure for excellence has also produced a certain level of diversification within the universities, both in relation to organizational formulas and with regard to the objectives.

The aim of the Universities' website analysis is to describe what is going on in Italian universities, identifying some trends of action. First of all universities have considerably increased their use of the network in promoting their activities and in attracting students. The publication of activities for quality on the websites responds to various needs, such as accountability; communication with students and enterprises of actions taken and achievements; presentation of themselves as promoters of good practices.

The survey carried out allows us to make a first consideration: the rapid development of structures used for quality management where these had

never been envisaged, shows a certain capacity for innovation in the university system, although we can't exclude the influence of isomorphism (Powell, Di Maggio, 1991) which led universities to comply with the pressures of their environment. Nevertheless, the procedures through which they comply show certain creativity on the part of the universities, highlighted by the different names and organizational formulas adopted. In an effort to systematize this rather uneven framework, the interpretation of actions was divided into five areas of analysis (Teaching, Administration and Support Services, Governance, Research, Processes of Knowledge sharing) but for the purpose of this study we will refer only to issues relating to students¹³.

Testing models aimed at ensuring the quality of teaching represents the starting point for universities which decide to activate a project for quality. The pressure in most cases is exogenous, and is represented by participation in national projects (such as Campus, SINAI and CampusOne, etc.) promoted by CRUI or other bodies. Specifically, the Project CampusOne financed by the Italian Government, saw the participation of all Italian universities, and in many cases it has represented the imprinting to further develop initiatives for quality. In fact, different universities have not only implemented the "CampusLike courses", but the model was extended to many Degree Courses, or adopted for certification of quality required for accreditation. As is clear from surveys by CNVSU¹⁴, the model continues to be the one most used to implement a quality assurance system, even in the absence of funding. The CNVSU model (RdR 01/04), and ISO 9001:2000 norms are widely disseminated too. With reference to accreditation we also have to report that, although the process has involved all Italian regions, some universities in Lombardy, Piedmont, Campania, Umbria and Tuscany seem to have been able to develop this experience more positively than others, creating appropriate structures to improve training.

The survey has also highlighted local experiences linked to the quality of teaching. Many universities, in fact, have developed models and instrumentation, often drawing inspiration from past experiences, or by mixing elements of different models on the basis of their needs. We refer to activities aimed mainly at monitoring management of training processes

¹³ See also Pompili (2008) for a complete analysis of these actions.

¹⁴ National Committee for Evaluation of Italian University System

such as questionnaires to students or assessment tools developed locally.

With regard to administration, many universities have launched initiatives aimed at improving the quality of processes, especially in those offices dealing with support services for students (such as guidance, tutoring, job placement, etc.), and particularly in relation to the provision of statistical data. Some of them have obtained, or are trying to introduce, a quality certification, at both central and peripheral level. The attention to quality is also highlighted by some surveys aimed at measuring customer satisfaction, in particular with regard to support services, or through the activation of Public Relations Offices.

The case of the University of Perugia

The University of Perugia¹⁵ has voluntarily undertaken a project for quality going beyond the Italian laws which only require the implementation of Internal Evaluation Units. It has implemented a quality assurance system according to ISO norms, which provides a comprehensive approach to managing the institution. Moreover, this experience was preceded and accompanied by other projects for quality, such as CampusOne, activities by the Internal Evaluation Unit, and informal practices led by single professors or faculties. Further interesting innovations were introduced as the University Planning Unit which consists of an agency for training, operating in the national and international market to carry out activities in the sectors of University Higher Education, Life-long Learning and Higher Training Courses.

Initial steps for the implementation of a quality management system

¹⁵ In 2008 the University of Perugia celebrated the 7th Century Anniversary of its founding. Historically it is famous for its Faculties of Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine. Today it constitutes a pole of attraction for many students from all over Italy: the number of students enrolled has grown exponentially beginning in the post-war period, and the University has reached a position of great importance among Italian universities. The University of Perugia numbers 34.000 students and, according to the classification made by CNVVSU, it is a medium sized university. The training offer consists of 11 Faculties, 83 First Cycle Degree Courses, 59 Second Cycle Degree Courses, 12 Long Cycle Degree Courses (4 or 5 years), 10 Schools of Specialization, 22 Masters of first and second level and 37 PhD Programs. The academic staff consists of 350 full professors, 380 associate professors and 438 researchers. Among teachers, 61 of them hold positions of head of departments or faculties. The administrative and technical staff amounts to approximately 200 subjects.

(QMS) have been undertaken to obtain the ISO 9001:2000 certification since 2001. At the same time some actors in the university have started to work on increasing the interest of all actors towards issues of quality assurance. In April 2003 this project was formalised into a Quality Policy and the constitution of the Committee for Quality Certification (CQAP) whose task is to implement the Quality Policy, and manage and extend the QMS. The Quality Handbook was subsequently drawn up; it contains the basic principles underlying the activities of the structures and it also has the function of spreading the culture of quality, increasing relations between structures and stimulating the establishment of a team of people who will become core assets of a future Quality Centre.

In May 2004 it obtained the certification of QMS, which originally included three structures (the Centre of Excellence for Research on Beer, the NPU and some Engineering laboratories). From the outset, however, the experience was open to all structures of the University, because the ultimate goal is to involve an increasing number of subjects in the process. Currently, this certification has been extended to the first level training offer of the Faculty of Agriculture.

Different reasons, that have prompted the actors of this University to follow this path, have emerged from interviews. This project, in fact, constitutes a response to an internal process of development but at the same time external pressures have played an important role. A primary motivation is linked to the competitiveness of the University, and therefore its capacity to attract both students and enterprises. The key actors involved in the QMS consider that being the first in Italy to possess total quality certification automatically guarantees the excellence of the University, or at least indicates it as a promoter of good practices. There is also a matter of economic order, because companies want the academic research centres to adopt a QMS. For this reason, the university has undertaken the project in order to strengthen its relationship with them, thus bringing in substantial revenues. According to actors, the advantage derives also from the triggering of virtuous circles, so the more contracts you have with the enterprises, the more you are able to attract them and improve your research. Furthermore the degree courses that have implemented a quality assurance system obtain a higher score in the distribution of FFO (Ordinary Public Funding), as a consequence of the so-called "quality factor" among the benchmark parameters. The University of Perugia, in fact, reached the maximum score in this parameter in 2007.

From a symbolic point of view, certification plays an important legitimising role in re-establishing credibility and regaining the social prestige lost. The certification is understood to be a symbol, a brand that conveys a message of quality to students, to businesses, to the university system and to the Government.

The University of Perugia, furthermore, *moving* towards quality, has certainly proved to be able to handle its autonomy in coping with external demands and pressures. By exploiting skills already present, previous experiences, relationships established over the years, national and local policies, the University was able to realize a project. The outcome of this project can be traced but not defined in a stable way, as it is constantly evolving. Certainly, as even the most skeptical actors reported, the QMS has led to greater rationalization where previously chaos reigned. Furthermore, despite the fact that it leads to a considerable increase in the workload of the professors involved, they do not feel overburdened, maybe because they recognize the benefits they can receive from participation in the process. They seem to have internalized a certain pressure towards change that involves their profession. Unlike other contexts, rather than bureaucrats involved in the formalization of practices, they have taken a proactive attitude. They have chosen to become managers of their institution through a strategy that allows them to sell the “product” to better meet customers’ satisfaction. All this without ever losing sight of the benefits that this strategy has on teaching and research.

However, despite the fact that the experience is narrated by the principal actors as a moment of cohesion, it emerges from the research that very few academics and structures are still involved. In fact, entire sectors are totally unrelated to these events, due to lack of information or lack of interest. In pure social science and humanities faculties, for example, almost all the actors interviewed were unaware of the existence of quality certification. This does not imply, however, a lack of attention to the issue, but a different vision of quality. If the actors involved in the QMS reveal an almost entrepreneurial concept of university (Clark, 1998) and of its customers, during interviews the professors not involved in these processes have shown particular attention to the needs of the student. In fact, when they speak about quality they often refer to a range of support services designed to make training more accessible, to support students during their studies and in the choices to be implemented, and to help graduates to enter the labour market more easily. An attempt to represent the University to the

student as a place of learning, growth and comparison emerges from the interviews with these professors. In this sense, activities aimed at making their stay within the university structures even more pleasant, such as technologically equipped classrooms available for study until late evening, are cited. The concept of quality declared by these teachers is closely linked to new needs of students arising from recent social changes, but at the same time remains anchored to a more traditional vision of universities, viewed as a place of production and sharing of knowledge, far from market logics. These professors rarely define the student as a customer: they prefer to use term as “boys and girls”. The care of the student seems to be constantly pursued also by the Internal Evaluation Unit, which has been trying to resolve the negative aspects that have derived from the implementation of the recent reforms in all Italian Universities (such as the proliferation of degree courses or excessive fragmentation of lessons provided in programs). In this sense, it is trying to introduce quality criteria and is going beyond the minimum requirements established by the Ministry, such as a number of teachers four times greater or increasing accessibility of classrooms and laboratories to students. This attention is also reflected in the practices concerning the evaluation of teaching by students: the Internal Evaluation Unit, in fact, has made an effort to better adapt the questionnaire to the needs of the various disciplinary sectors. Moreover, in order to increase the participation of students it is their task to distribute and collect questionnaires.

With regard to our first question, therefore, it is impossible to confirm the existence of a single shared project for quality or a strong link between the practices designed to increase it, except in very rare cases. Despite the fact that a Policy for Quality that involves all of the institution is formally present, it has taken root only in certain niches formed by the bodies that have decided to join the QMS. Many areas of the institution, in fact, were completely unrelated to this policy. Nevertheless it seems appropriate to note that in this University, total attention to the issue of quality is present. Probably because it derives from different needs and ideas regarding the quality of the system and instruments to assure it, the project fails and is not shared by the various segments of the institution. Quality in this context is *an idea that travels* (Czarniawska, Joerges, 1996), and that acquires content, meanings and methods of expression, depending on the actors and areas which attempt to manage it.

With reference to the well-known classification made by Harvey and

Green (1993) in this context, the definition “quality as excellence” is not very relevant, because it requires high standards in input and output: “*an institution that takes the best students, provides them with the best resources, both human and physical, by its nature excels*” (*ibidem*). This is a definition of quality almost unattainable, except in very rare cases, especially in a university system that has to deal with high (and not selected) numbers of students, typical of the mass H.E. systems.

In this respect, the attempts towards improvement which emerged in this research can be better attributed to other definitions of quality. What at first sight can be viewed as a striving for excellence in practice leads into an entrepreneurial vision of university, especially in instruments to assure quality and can be defined as “*value for money*”. It is a popular concept of quality (Ball, 1985), which has often been taken as reference in public policies since the mid-'80s. This concept is based on the notion of accountability, both with regard to those that supply funding and to consumers, and it is formalized through rules for the control of the processes of change and improvement, but also through competition for research funds and students. According to this concept, it is the market which ultimately takes care of the quality issue through the mechanisms of competition. A “market-determined” mission directs the activities of those who are involved in the process of quality assurance, both with regard to research and in an attempt to increase its attractiveness to students. This concept is expressed by those professors who interpret their role in a managerial way, trying to sell their product “in the best way”. They feel competition with other universities strongly, in fact to be the first in Italy to have a certification is for them not only a cause for pride and a form of gratification, but also a source of competitive advantage. They are academic managers aware of the costs and benefits of these processes; for this reason they “do” quality and do not suffer it.

The second concept to emerge is “*quality as transformation*”, which as we saw in the introduction, is related to the concept of equity. It implies the notion of qualitative change and a fundamental change in a form which includes cognitive transcendence (Harvey, Green, *ibid*). As the authors write, in fact, while in other services the provider “is doing something for the consumer” in education the provider “is doing something to the consumer”. In this vision Education is not a service for the consumer, but a continuous process of transformation of the participants; it is a process necessarily unique, not unidirectional, dialectical with a negotiated

outcome (see Harvey, Green, 1993). This concept emerges from questions posed in an attempt to understand the meaning that actors give to their profession and to the mission of the university; it emerges from the dichotomy expressed between the "satisfied student" and "the student that has learned", from the willingness to maintain an elevated content for the courses without taking into excessive consideration the requests of the labour market, from the desire to build a community of students capable of critical thinking and able to justify their views and to select teachings and professors in order to negotiate the learning experience. A transformation, then, that responds to the moral obligation of "disturbing the students intellectually" (Wiggins, 1990, cited in Harvey, Green, 1993), and whose quality is assessed also in terms of democratisation of the processes, rather than its results. A concept that emerges especially where the professors have the desire to lead the students, and to perpetuate a scientific community, understood as a *place* of production and dissemination of knowledge, not only as a metaphor but also with reference to the meaning of "a place" in which the student can better live that process of cultural transformation that includes the growth of conceptual skills, but also a greater awareness of being involved in this process.

For the University of Perugia the definition of quality is, therefore, a hybrid greatly influenced by disciplinary sectors and that opposes two factors: the market and the institution. The presence of the concept *quality as transformation* permits us to say that the push towards managerialism clashes with cultural elements that are rooted in the Italian academic community, where the student continues to be a significant actor. As this study has shown, in fact, there are contexts where a traditional approach to the university mission does not produce an elite vision, but opinions and practices closer to issues of equity.

Conclusion

The work presented suggests some reflections and conclusive considerations.

First of all, with regard to a general objective, the academic world is well aware that the changes brought about by mass H.E. and the knowledge-based society require the guiding of students through provision of services, the restructuring of spaces and methods and a cultural change

of professors and other staff.

Secondly, with regard to the concrete realization of these changes, we can say that Italian universities have already developed (or are in developing) different strategies (see also Boffo, Dubois, Moscati, 2006; Mazza, Quattrone, Riccaboni, 2006; Moscati, Vaira, 2008). The emphasis on these strategies varies from context to context, determining differences among the various universities. Above all, there are significant differences within universities themselves, as in the case of the University of Perugia, and they are due to different disciplines and to different meanings and visions of quality. In this context, in fact, the concept of quality is faithful to its ambiguous nature, and takes on different meanings in different areas. Using a metaphor, it is not quality which flows in communicating vessels, but stops in watertight compartments, each of which is distinguished by specific characteristics, needs, actors and branches of knowledge. With reference to the classification of disciplines made by Becher (1989), we note that if in the hard-applied disciplines quality is seen in an instrumental and procedural way in order to achieve certain objectives, especially in terms of economic return on investment, in the hard-pure and soft disciplines quality is still something inherent in traditional academic life. The emphasis on support services that accompany the student in training, rather than on procedures of certification, may be read in fact as a moment of renewal of the university mission, as well as greater attention to issues related to equity. When the training offer is amplified and diversified, practices such as guidance, counselling or tutoring become necessary in order to ensure an effective right and access to studies. Even job placement becomes an indispensable tool in ensuring that all students embark on a satisfactory career undocked from the constraints dictated by social and cultural background. So, while in hard-applied disciplines quality emerges as a characteristic of services offered to customers, a guarantee for efficient functioning and effective compliance with the norms guaranteed by an outside body, in hard-pure and soft disciplines it seems that a constant relationship with the student assures the added value that would allow everyone to achieve educational attainment.

Thirdly, the local contexts are characterized by a strong diversity. In our opinion, the quality issue and, above all, the excellence vs. equity dilemma can be resolved only within this diversity. Where contexts are equipped with extensive materials and symbolic resources and, consequently, they attract the best students and professors, a vision of *quality as excellence*, in

a traditional and elitist sense, can be promoted. On the contrary, where the contexts must face dilemmas of mass H.E. we can understand why the concept of *quality as excellence* is marginalized and other concepts such as *quality as a transformation*, more attentive to a new and varied reality, emerge. In these contexts, in fact, the question of equity arises in pragmatic terms and can be resolved only through the activation of a set of good practices designed to remove obstacles that make the path "arduous", "anomic" and often a failure.

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