What Affects the (In)Effectiveness of School to Work Alternance in Italy: an Overall Assessment From the Point of View of Host Organisations

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What Affects the (In)Effectiveness of School to Work Alternance in Italy: an Overall Assessment From the Point of View of Host Organisations

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Abstract. This paper explores the School-to-Work Alternance (SWA) policy in Italy (now called PTSO, Paths for Transversal Skills and Orientation). This policy addresses a timely issue in Italy, where labour market flexibility, a high incidence of skills mismatch, and a rigid and sequential education system negatively affect young people's transition from school to work. Using a mixed methods approach, the research (conducted from 2019 to 2023) focuses on the less-explored experience of tutors from host organisations, taking into consideration the entire national context. Although the research reveals the external tutors' general satisfaction with PTSOs, some criticisms concerning its effectiveness also emerge. Above all, a lack of cooperation between schools and host organisations and limited organisational resources for small and micro enterprises involved in the projects. Therefore, policy implications and suggestions on how to redesign the instrument to achieve greater effectiveness are advanced.

Keywords: School-to Work Alternance, Italy, Host organisations, policy (in) effectiveness

Introduction

This paper focuses on the School-to-Work Alternance (SWA) policy in Italy. This policy is of particular importance in Italy, where labour market flexibility (Barbieri & Cutili, 2021; Bertolini, Goglio & Hofäcker, 2024), a high incidence of skills mismatch (Pompei & Selezneva, 2017), and a rigid and sequential education system (Pastore, 2015) negatively affect the transition from higher to tertiary education and the labour market.

In Italy, the 2005 Legislative Decree No. 77 introduced SWA programmes to integrate school curriculums with practical work experience, bridging the existing gap between school and the labour market. The 'Buona Scuola' Law of 2015 redefined the objectives and features of these educational projects, making SWA mandatory for all students (including lyceum students) in their final three years of high school. In 2020, SWA was replaced and renamed PTSO – Paths for Transversal Skills and Orientation.

The stakeholders involved in PTSO experiences are numerous. On the one hand, there are the schools, made up of headmasters, teachers (including the so-called internal tutors, appointed by schools to oversee the progress of students in PTSO programmes), students, and their families. On the other hand, there are the private and public organisations that host students (in particular, the figure of the external tutor, who is an employee entrusted to supervise students during their on-the-job experiences).

The value of this paper is twofold. First, it focuses on the experience of external tutors, an aspect that is often overlooked in analyses of the Italian SWA policy (Zadra, 2021). Second, it considers the entire national context, whereas previous studies have focused on specific schools and contexts (Capecchi & Caputo, 2016; Pinna & Pitzalis, 2021). Our research examines the factors that influence the (in)effectiveness of the policy from the external tutors' point of view. Through an analysis of both the positive and critical aspects regarding how PTSO projects are designed and implemented, this paper aims to highlight the policy's limits and advance proposals to improve its effectiveness[1].

The paper is structured as follows: the first section reconstructs the theoretical framework and the specificities of the School-to-Work Transition (SWT) regime in Italy. The second section focuses on the evolution and implementation of the SWA policy. The third section presents the research objectives and methodology, and the fourth section presents the main research findings. The conclusions discuss the findings and their policy implications.

The transition from school to work in the Italian context

The transition from school to work is considered a high-risk period for young people (Furlong, 2015), further exacerbated by the recent economic crisis (O'Higgins, 2012; Eurofound, 2021). However, the difficulties experienced during the transition from school to tertiary education or the labour market vary considerably across countries (O'Reilly et al., 2019). In Italy, the unemployment rate for young people was 18% in 2023 (7% above the European average). This situation is further exacerbated by the significant proportion of young people 'not in education, employment or training' (NEET), which in Italy amounts to 19.8% of the population aged 15-29 (the European Union - EU27 average is 11.7%), and by the high incidence of school dropouts, which in 2023 affected 11.5% of the population aged 18-24 (the third highest among the euro area countries) (ISTAT, 2023).

The high vulnerability of young people in Italy compared to other European countries is due to the persistence of different school-to-work transition (SWT) regimes, which differ from country-specific structural features: the labour market and its regulatory mechanisms (Unt et al., 2021), the welfare state, and particularly the passive and active labour market policies targeted at young people (Caroleo & Pastore, 2009), and national education and training systems (Raffe, 2008; Villa, 2011). Italy is part of the *Southern European* school-to-work transition regime, which has particularly unfavourable structural conditions for young people (Vogel, 2002, Pastore, 2015).

In Italy the first weakness is represented by the labour market conformations. Although *labour market flexibility reforms* are affecting all European countries, the use of atypical and fixed-term contracts is pronounced in southern European countries and mainly affects young people (Blossfeld et al., 2012; Bertolini, Goglio & Hofäcker 2024). With a labour market characterised by a high concentration of small and medium-sized enterprises and low investment in research and development (Bugamelli et al., 2012), the Italian economy struggles to absorb young workers, especially highly skilled ones (Di Stasio & Van de Werfhorst, 2016). Furthermore, the weaknesses of the Italian labour market are not compensated by a generous welfare state, and adequate active labour market policies (ALMPs) for young people (Caroleo & Pastore, 2009).

The education system also has a significant impact on the risks associated with the transition from school to work. In Italy, the education system is traditionally *rigid* and *sequential* (Krueger & Kumar, 2004 Eichhorst et al., 2015). Indeed, the educational is traditionally generic rather than specific one and work experience has been postponed until after high school (Pastore, 2015). This results in low or ineffective links between schools and the labour market (Pastore, Quintano & Rocca, 2022) and a high mismatch between the

skills young people possess upon leaving the education system and those required by the labour market (Pastore, 2016; Pompei & Selezneva, 2017). In contrast, the European-continental model, of which the German case is emblematic, is based on a *dual* education system, promoting both general and vocational education (Eichhorst et al., 2015), and encouraging a work-based (or situated) learning approach (Lave & Wenger, 1990; ETF, 2013). This model favours the development of skills and human capital in both formal (school) and informal (company) educational settings (Ryan & Wolter, 2010; Eichhorst et al., 2015).

In the 1990s, European institutions began to acknowledge the effectiveness of work-based learning programmes (Gruber, Harteis & Rehrl, 2008; ILO, 2019) and the importance of the lifelong learning (LLL) approach (Ceschi et al., 2021; Parreira do Amaral, Kovacheva & Rambla, 2020), calling on member states to strengthen policies targeted at young people and to reform national education and training systems (European Commission, 2012, 2013). Although they vary across countries, SWA policies are an integral part of these reform processes. Following the premises of the capability approach, SWA experiences aim to promote the development of young people's human capital by focusing on students' needs and opportunities (Sen, 2000).

From SWA to PTSO in Italy: policy evolution and implementation

In recent years, the Italian education system has increasingly moved towards a dual education and training system, with SWA playing a crucial role in the transformative process (Gentili, 2016). As stated above, in 2020 SWA was replaced by PTSO, which better aligned with the European Commission's new concepts of lifelong learning. Indeed, in line with the European Council Recommendation of May 22, 2018, the PTSO guidelines view transversal competence as a blend of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The scope of the 2005 SWA was to aid students in developing technical and disciplinary skills and to integrate practical work experiences with knowledge acquired in the classroom. On the contrary, PTSO focuses specifically on self-orientation capabilities and the transmission of soft skills. Its scope is to help students to develop cross-curricular and interdisciplinary skills, so that they can better understand which type of work is best suited to their aptitudes and make a more informed choice when it comes to starting a career or choosing a type of tertiary education to continue their studies. Despite an increased focus on the development of various skills, the transition from SWA to PTSO has led to a significant reduction in the number of hours allocated to training activities: 210 hours for vocational high schools and 150 hours for technical high schools, both down from 400; and 90 hours for lyceums, down from 200.

Contrasting results emerge when examining the impact of SWA on students' human capital and their school-to-work/tertiary education transition. For lyceum students, SWA is mainly useful in terms of providing guidance and shaping their educational pathways, while for students enrolled in vocational and technical schools, it serves to improve soft and technical skills and facilitate entrance into the labour market (Giubileo & Scarano, 2018). Indeed, since job searches in Italy are mainly conducted through informal networks and weak ties (Mandrone, 2011), SWA helps to level the playing field, providing students from weaker families backgrounds have access to formal networks to find a job (Consolini, 2016). Nonetheless, some studies show the little impact of the policy on youth employment rates (Gjergji & Cillo, 2021).

Moreover, since the implementation of SWA is extremely heterogeneous, the quality and effectiveness of the projects is not a guarantee (Salatin, 2018; Pinna & Pitzalis, 2021).

One reason for the heterogeneity of SWA projects relates to the human and economic capital of the actors and organisations involved. Not all schools and teachers are able to provide innovative educational experiences in line with the required pedagogical paradigm shift (Nicoli & Salatin, 2018). Disparities become particularly evident when looking at the type of school (Giancola & Salmieri, 2021) and its location (Pinna & Pitzalis, 2021). Despite higher rates of youth unemployment and skills mismatch, southern regions struggle to guarantee quality pathways due to a lack of placement opportunities (Arlotti, Barberis & Pavolini, 2016; Capecchi & Caputo, 2016).

Organisational aspects also influence the effectiveness of SWA. Policy guidelines advocate the creation of local partnerships and require collaboration between internal and external tutors throughout the different project phases: *planning, implementation, monitoring* and *evaluation.* Although the 'Buona Scuola' law created a platform to promote networking between companies and schools, the latter face difficulties in finding organisations willing to host students (Fedeli & Tino, 2017). Finally, certain bureaucratic obligations serve as an additional obstacle for organisations to get involved or actively participate in projects (Maisto & Pastore, 2017).

Our contribution addresses these issues, by focusing on PTSO policy, which is currently under-researched.

Aims, data and methods

This paper analyses PTSO implementation in Italy by focusing on the experience of external tutors from host organisations. To assess whether PTSOs affect the transition from school to work and promote a multisite and integrated training model, the paper investigates: 1) how the norm guidelines and principles are applied in practice; and 2) which factors and elements

influence the (in)effectiveness of the policy, by highlighting potentially relevant differences in relation to the type of host organisations and schools involved.

The results of this contribution come from a broader study on PTSOs in Italy, which was conducted from 2019 to 2023 and focused on the experiences of all stakeholders (students, headmasters, internal and external tutors).

A mixed methods approach was used. In 2020, an exploratory phase, comprising 12 semi-structured interviews with key informants, was conducted to establish familiarity with the theme and identify research questions. Both PTSO representatives from various institutions and external tutors from different host organisations were involved via convenience sampling[2]. Universities comprise a substantial part of the interview sample[3]. The research began in February 2020, just before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy. Therefore, most interviews (10 in total) were conducted online using video conference platforms.

During the analysis phase, two techniques were adopted. Initially, a thematic analysis was conducted. During this first phase, themes and interpretations emerged directly from the empirical data (Boyatzis, 1998)[4]. Subsequently, the research team employed the content analysis technique (Krippendorff, 2004). The outcomes and interpretations that emerged from the two phases of analysis were compared and integrated.

Between 2021 and 2022, a longitudinal e-mail survey (two waves conducted one year apart) was carried out, involving the host organisation tutors from a representative sample of 78 Italian schools. The first wave considered 367 projects involving third-year students; the second wave considered 776 projects realised by the same students during their fourth year of school. In total, 356 external tutors responded to the survey (130 in the first wave and 226 in the second wave). Tutors involved in projects with lyceums are slightly over-represented in the sample (40.8%), compared with their colleagues working with technical (26.3%) and vocational schools (32.9%). The host organisations were classified as enterprise (65%), university/other educational institution (10%) and public authority/association (25%), and, in terms of their size, as micro (up to 9 employees, 42%), small (10 to 49 employees, 33%), medium (50 to 249 employees, 9%) and large (more than 249 employees, 16%). As table 1 demonstrates, most micro and small organisations are enterprises, while large organisations are over-represented by universities and public authorities/associations. Furthermore, while 94.7% of vocational schools and 82.2% of technical schools rely on enterprises to implement PTSOs, the proj-

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[2] The interviews are coded as "Inst." For representatives in institutions, and "Org." for external tutors in the host organisations.
[3] Some university offices (e.g. library) can host students for PTSO projects.
[4] The coding scheme and results interpretation process was supported by Nvivo software.

ects supported by lyceums are more heterogeneous: 48.8% are with public authorities/associations, 30.5% with enterprises and 21.3% with universities.

Table 1. Characteristics of online survey sample, combining type and size of host organisations (%)[5]

	Micro	Small	Medium-large	Tot
Enterprise	81	61	27	61
University/other educational institution	1	1	41	11
Public authority/association	18	38	31	28

Finally in 2022, starting with the sample involved in the first wave, 15 in-depth qualitative interviews with tutors from host organisations were conducted. A multi-layered sampling strategy was adopted, considering the following selection criteria:
- *type of school:* lyceum, technical high school, vocational high school;
- *type of host organisation*: enterprise, university/other educational institution, public authority/association;
- *geographical location*: north, centre, south and islands.

Although the aim was to obtain a homogeneous sample for each of the dimensions of the sampling criteria, homogeneity was only partially achieved, as shown in Table 2. The tutors' willingness to be involved in the study conditioned the final sample. Companies are overrepresented, as they engage in PTSOs more often than other host organisation categories.

The second wave of interviews was also conducted online using video conference platforms, and a thematic analysis was carried out using Nvivo software. To confirm observations about the value and effectiveness of PTSOs made during the first research phase, an abductive discovery process was adopted.

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[5] The data concerning organisation size are missing for 35 host organisations.

Table 2. Interviewed PTSO external tutors

Type of school	Organisation size	Organisation type	Geographic area	Interview code
Lyceum/ technical high school[6]	Medium-large	University	Centre	Uni1
	Small	Enterprise	South-islands	Ent1
Lyceum	Medium-large	University	South-islands	Uni2
	n.a.	Public authority / association	North	PA/A1
	Medium-large	Enterprise	South-islands	Ent2
Technical high school	n.a.	Public authority / association	South-islands	PA/A2
	n.a.	Public authority / association	South-islands	PA/A3
	Micro	Enterprise	North	Ent3
	Micro	Enterprise	South-islands	Ent4
	Small	Enterprise	Centre	Ent5
Vocational high school	Micro	Enterprise	North	Ent6
	Small	Enterprise	Centre	Ent7
	Small	Enterprise	North	Ent8
	Small	Enterprise	North	Ent9
	Micro	Enterprise	North	Ent10

Legend: Uni (University); PE/A (Public Authority/associations); Ent (Enterprise).

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[6] Some host organisations promote PTSO programmes for both lyceums and technical schools.

Research findings

In this section we explore the research findings, by focusing on two main aspects. The first section highlights the relationship between internal and external tutors and the degree of collaboration throughout the various phases of the PTSO projects. In the second section, we discuss the policy implications and the motivations for host organisations to participate, highlighting some positive and critical aspects. The survey results refer to aggregated data from both waves, as no significant differences emerged between the two.

The lack of synergy between schools and the host organisations

According to some authors, successful PTSO experiences result from a solid partnership between schools and host organisations (Salatin, 2016, 2018; Zadra, 2021), but, as our data demonstrate, such collaboration is not always guaranteed. Considering that PTSO is mandatory for schools, schools are the ones to initiate participation in the programme in 89% of cases (this percentage rises to 93% when vocational schools are considered), with host organisations initiating participation in only 35% of cases. This dynamic persists even when companies express interest and willingness to take on trainees, simply because it has become common practice.

> In my experience, I've never reached out to schools to secure internships; typically, it's the other way around. However, given the length of my involvement in this work, professors now contact me in September or October, asking how many placements I need, almost like discussing fruit quantities (laughs). It might sound trivial, but it's become somewhat routine (Ent10).

Surprisingly, host organisations are the ones to advance the idea of participating in PTSO projects more often when lyceums are involved (48%) than when students come from vocational (23%) or technical schools (30%).

Each PTSO represents one component of a multi-year educational project, and, as policy guidelines make clear, collaboration is central during all phases. Indeed, internal and external tutors are expected to collaborate in shaping the objectives of the pathways and all related activities. However, as previous studies have also shown (Fedeli & Tino, 2017; Salatin, 2018), a lack of collaboration is evident during the design phase of the PTSO projects, which is frequently entrusted entirely to the school (or, to a lesser extent, to the host organisation). According to our data, 43% of projects are entirely defined either by the host organisation (18%) or by the school (25%), highlighting poor collaboration between schools and host organisations (only 31% of projects have equal involvement). This prevalence of poor collaboration also emerged from our interviews.

> It's the school that finds the companies in the sector and then sends us young people... In terms of training and project planning, we honestly have very little impact, almost none... it's limited to an exchange of communication with the girls and boys who then have to come to our company. There's no meaningful collaboration (Ent3).

Other studies claim that host organisations often leave the design and management of the projects to schools and their internal tutors (Capecchi & Caputo, 2016; Salatin, 2018), trusting the success of the PTSOs entirely to the commitment of headmasters and internal tutors. However, our data reveals some differences among schools. The organisations that host students from lyceums design PTSOs more autonomously (25%); on the contrary, the projects for students from vocational schools are designed entirely by the school in 44% of cases (Table 3a). These data can be interpreted in the light of the fact that VET schools, as opposed to lyceums (and even technical schools), are not only harder pressed to provide their students with skills that can be used in the labour market immediately after graduation, but also require their students to devote significantly more hours to PTSO projects (210 compared to 90 for lyceums).

Finally, larger organisations exhibit greater involvement in planning compared to micro and small organisations (Table 3b). This trend can be attributed to a fundamental issue within the Italian industrial structure, which historically consists of many very small enterprises. These smaller enterprises have limited organisational resources to allocate towards innovation and vocational training, relying more heavily on the institutional environment and policies for technology transfer and training. The challenges faced by small enterprises in actively participating in PTSOs are part of this broader context and pose a risk to the effectiveness of school-to-work policies. When looking at the relationship between the actors responsible for project design and the type of school, controlling for the size of the host organisation, we see that the impact of the size of the host organisation is particularly pronounced in the case of micro-sized organisations, which tend to delegate project design to schools to a greater extent, especially when vocational schools are involved (projects are entirely/mainly designed by vocational schools in 65% of micro organisations, 56% of small organisations and 45% of medium/large organisations).

Table 3a. Actors responsible for designing PTSO/SWA projects by type of school (%)

	Lyceum	Vocational school	Technical school	Tot.
Project designed entirely by host organisation	25	11	19	18
Project designed entirely by school	13	44	23	25
Project co-designed by school and host organisation	31	25	35	31
Project designed mainly by host organisation	17	4	11	11
Project designed mainly by school	14	17	12	15

Table 3b. Actors responsible for designing PTSO/SWA projects by size of host organisation (%)

	Micro	Small	Medium-large	Tot.
Project designed entirely/mainly by host organisation	26	24	44	28
Project designed entirely/mainly by school	48	43	20	40
Project co-designed by school and host organisation	26	33	36	31

Our interviews with key informants and external tutors confirm this observation, suggesting that the principles of partnership and cooperation are hardly followed in practice. Poor collaboration between internal and external tutors can be observed during the project implementation phase as well. Only one in three projects recorded a high frequency of exchanges between the two tutors (17% less than once a month, 16% monthly). Indeed, in a significant number of cases (40%), interactions between internal and external tutors were limited to the initial and final phases of the projects. Moreover, the remaining 12% of projects were characterised by hardly any collaboration at all (in 4% of cases, the tutors worked together only at the end of the project, in 8% of cases they never collaborated at all).

According to external tutors, limited exchanges with schools often stem from the challenges teachers face in managing their numerous responsibilities.

> It's not easy for teachers to keep up with all the commitments. They're forced to balance many things. But some work hard [...] Generally, however, they only call us once per internship to see how it's going. Then, for any problems, I have the professors' phone numbers, and I can call them. On the other hand, if they don't hear from me, they know everything is fine (Ent10).

Motivations of host organisations and (in)effectiveness of PTSOs

Our data allow us to explore the point of view of external tutors concerning the effectiveness of PTSOs (Table 4). The projects prove to be effective mainly in "providing training opportunities for young people" (rated 4.11 out of 5).

Table 4. PTSO outcomes for host organisations* by school type (means)

	Lyceum	Vocational school	Technical school	Total
Providing training opportunities for young people	4.07	4.13	4.12	4.11
Fostering relations with schools	4.10	3.77	3.89	3.95
Offering a good corporate/ business image	3.77	3.59	3.84	3.76
Strengthening relations with the local community	3.65	3.31	3.75	3.59
Supporting internal training strategies	2.92	3.15	3.07	3.07
Supporting recruitment strategies	2.33	3.34	3.22	2.91

(*) 0= not at all and 5= very much.

While this outcome might seem to be the reflection of an altruistic approach, it could also point to a deficiency in practical training within the education system. Indeed, many of our respondents argue that students graduate with skills that are not immediately applicable or valuable in the job market. Many host organisations perceive the idea of helping to mitigate this skills gap positively.

> In my opinion, what tends to occur is that… perhaps, for once, they experience the realisation of things they've only studied in school… Because in terms of hands-on workshops and practical aspects, they are often lacking due to deficiencies in their school-based training (Ent8).

On the contrary, the least important outcome appears to be "supporting the company's recruitment strategies" (rated 2.91). While our data reveals the potentially limited impact of PTSOs on the Italian labour market, it also challenges the belief (often perpetuated by the media and public discourse) that host organisations participate in PTSOs primarily to acquire free labour.

An exploration of the companies' motivations for participating in PTSOs further confirms this observation. Contrary to what other studies claim, the most important goal is "offering training opportunities to students'' (82%), followed by "fostering relations with schools" (68%), with the least common purposes being "supporting recruitment strategies" (20%) and "supporting the companies' training strategies'' (26%).

> For the company, there's no direct benefit. So, in our experience, it's primarily our commitment, which then becomes a personal commitment rather than an organisational one, to give young people as much knowledge as possible… Because if we're not the first… if we're not training the new generations, where are they going to get that experience? (Ent7).

Nonetheless, upon examining the empirical evidence from interviews with key informants and external tutors, a more nuanced and intricate picture begins to emerge. Indeed, some external tutors, particularly those from small companies, point out how the opportunity to have temporary workers, as well as the opportunity to 'evaluate' promising students for potential employment, affects their decision to participate in these initiatives.

> The best thing is having a trial period where you can dedicate yourself fully to the student, who you might consider hiring afterwards (Ent6).

> Honestly, it's a means of getting to know potential new employees to hire once they graduate. Some of our current employees started as interns with us, and after getting to know them during their internship, we decided to hire them… So, from our perspective, PTSOs are valuable because they give us the chance to assess candidates who could potentially join our team (Ent3).

In line with the traditional trajectory of Italian educational paths, recruitment strategies are considered more important when organisations host students from vocational (37%) and technical (30%) schools, and less so when students come from lyceums (15%). Moreover, recruitment strategies are

more important for small (34%) and medium/large organisations (24%) than micro organisations (19%).

Despite 'supporting the companies' recruiting strategies' being both the least frequent motivation and outcome, our data highlight some interesting points: 39% of the organisations involved claim to have initiated further collaborations with students after PTSO experiences (Table 5), an element confirmed also during interviews:

> For the company, I think it is a moment to get to know young people who can be employed in the company .... in the future. We happened to have some guys who did SWA with us in their 4th year, and when they passed their exams in their 5th year, we hired them. Why is that? Because I think it's a moment, even if it's short, to get to know the person (Org5).

Focusing on the type of school, the percentage of host organisations initiating further collaborations rises to 51% for vocational schools and 41% for technical schools. Therefore, some positive impacts of PTSOs on SWT can be observed.

Table 5. Further working collaborations with students by size of host organisation

	Micro	Small	Medium-large	Total
Yes	32	56	30	**39**
No, because we did not meet suitable people	19	14	9	**16**
No, because the host organisation has not recruited in the last period	29	14	9	**20**
No, because the process does not allow it	19	16	53	**24**

Small organisations register significantly more collaborations after the implementation of PTSOs projects (56%) compared to micro (32%) and medium-large organisations (30%). The latter claim that the process does not allow for collaborations (53%). Here, it ought to be noted that 75% of large organisations work with students from lyceums, for whom the PTSOs focus on university orientation rather than recruitment. On the other hand, almost half of the micro organisations (42%) work with students from vocational schools, who are prone to enter the labour market after school. Nonetheless, 29% of micro organisations are not involved in further collaborations with students simply because they 'have not recruited in the last period',

confirming the structural weaknesses of smaller enterprises in Italy, further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The weaknesses of the Italian industrial structure must be considered when discussing policy effectiveness. For micro and small organisations, the availability of financial and organisational resources is a central issue. Hosting students requires the investment of time and resources, which in turn affects tutors' workloads and ability to focus on regular tasks. Indeed, among the critical issues to emerge from the survey, difficulty finding internal staff to supervise PTSOs was one of the most frequently cited. Indeed, our interviews underline how time and resources serve as significant constraints for tutors in small companies, where human resources are often lacking.

> It's challenging to be available because we need to arrange for someone to supervise students... Hiring someone who's already trained is one thing; hosting a 17- or 18-year-old is another... In such cases, we need to train them and provide step-by-step guidance, but (in our company) there aren't that many of us (Ent4).

Indeed, according to our data, 80% of tutors have a leadership role in their organisation, partially since 42% of host organisations have fewer than 10 employees.

Furthermore, some external tutors claim that the economic incentives for companies are insufficient compared to the resources invested and the responsibilities shouldered to implement PTSOs.

> The company is not in it for the money. However, a company is still a company. It would be foolish to think that an entrepreneur does not consider expenses and revenues...Since the company makes efforts, spends resources, and spends on human resources, the government should give it some credit and, why not, financing as well (Ent2).

Additionally, some interviewees highlight the risks and responsibilities organisations take on when agreeing to host students. For instance, according to guidelines, students should attend health and safety training courses before starting their PTSO projects. However, students are often inadequately trained, leaving companies to deal with the issue down the line.

> What always surprises me is that everything falls on the company's shoulders...When students come to us, they lack knowledge about work safety and self-protection...It shouldn't be the company's responsibility because there isn't enough time to teach them these things. They should already know! (Ent8).

The challenges associated with finding internal resources, particularly substantial for micro and small organisations, together with the lack of external incentives can discourage organisations from participating in PTSO

programmes. This, in turn, can negatively impact the quality of the experiences offered to students and their educational effectiveness.

Many colleagues ask me, 'You're participating in SWA? Are you crazy?' I tell them that you have to, because these kids have to start working in the field. Otherwise, we can't keep complaining about their lack of training… But companies are accepting these projects less and less…The risk is that you accept students and don't have them do much. That way, they don't learn, and companies will continue to struggle to find skilled young workers to hire (Ent5).

Discussion and conclusion

The research presented in this paper reveals some partially unexpected results regarding the implementation of the PTSO policy and its impact on the school-to-work transition in Italy.

First, although some studies have highlighted the importance of external tutors and host organisation proactivity in achieving effective programmes (Salatin, 2016, 2018; García-Cabrero & Ruiz-Gutiérrez, 2018; Zadra, 2021), little collaboration can be observed between schools and host organisations. This is particularly evident during the design phase, where planning is almost entirely delegated to the schools. On the one hand, schools are constrained by the compulsory nature of the measure, and, on the other hand, they find it difficult to actively involve host organisations in the planning of the projects. Conversely, the implementation phase is characterised by poor communication between internal and external tutors, who tend to meet only at the very beginning and very end of the students' experiences. In addition, the implementation phase seems to weigh most heavily on host organisations, which often face difficulties due to a lack of human resources and financial incentives.

The effectiveness of PTSOs is often jeopardised by aspects that characterise the Italian labour market (Ballarino, 2014). In fact, companies that struggle to find qualified young people, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which make up most of our sample and the Italian industrial structure, do not always possess the human capital necessary to guarantee high-quality training pathways (Giubileo & Scarano, 2018; Giancola & Salmieri, 2021).

Furthermore, our research shows that the primary motivation for host organisations to participate in PTSOs is the desire to provide training opportunities for students, as confirmed by the external tutors' assessment of the project outcomes. This can be explained by the fact that many host organisations perceive high levels of deficiency in the skills students develop at school (Maisto & Pastore, 2017; Pompei & Selezneva, 2017). Finally, while the

desire to recruit new employees does not emerge as a primary motivation for organisations, our results show that, in a not insignificant percentage of cases, PCTOs favour subsequent working relationships with the students involved.

These results are particularly interesting given the structural weaknesses of the Italian school-to-work transition regime (Pastore, 2015; Vogel, 2002). Despite the limitations of the instrument, the continuation of collaborations following the completion of PTSOs is evidence that the policy could have positive effects if the institutional vacuum it currently stands in were to be overcome. Indeed, work-based learning programmes in Italy seem to have a positive impact on the transition from school to work. However, to ensure that positive experiences do not remain isolated instances, it is necessary to redesign the instrument taking into account two critical issues: lack of resources and lack of synergy between the actors involved.

With regard to the former, incentives could be an effective means of encouraging the involvement of micro and small host organisations (often lacking in economic and human resources to invest in the projects) and ensuring the quality of pathways. Indeed, 81% of the external tutors who responded to our survey stated that they had not received any training on the educational value of PTSOs, and it could be useful to introduce resources for specific training courses to more deeply involved the host organisations and external tutors.

With regard to the latter, it is necessary to encourage greater synergy between the various actors involved, primarily by strengthening cooperation during the design stage and promoting a dialogue that enables host organisations to better understand the needs of students and schools to keep up with the emerging demands of the labour market. The enhancement of local networks and the establishment of synergies between schools and the public and private organisations engaged in these initiatives may also play a critical role in preventing PTSOs from devolving into mere bureaucratic formalities, particularly given the mandatory nature of the policy. Indeed, in the absence of adequate training for host organisations regarding the objectives of these pathways, and without mechanisms designed to facilitate their active participation, there is a risk that the policy will fail to serve as an effective instrument for the career guidance and skills development of young students. Conversely, it may inadvertently perpetuate entrenched inequalities in educational and employment opportunities among youth students in the country (Pinna and Pitzalis, 2020).

Furthermore, given the fragmentation of the Italian regional context, greater involvement of local associations and institutions has the potential to encourage the creation of partnerships and projects more closely linked to the characteristics and potentialities of different territories. In this respect,

the continuous updating and enrichment of the register of organisations involved in PTSOs, introduced by the 'Buona Scuola' law, could also play an important role.

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