Academia A publication of the
Higher Education
Policy Network

Access to higher education in Europe: policies on access and admissions, guidance

policy, role of gender. A case study: Italian University Policy.

Alberto Fornasari

"Aldo Moro" University

Abstract

The article presents initial thoughts on higher education in Europe, fathoming the choices of policy-makers and educational policies implemented from the mid-twentieth century to today. A case study is proposed involving the Italian university system, universal rights to education and political exclusion; a review presents the fragility of the Italian system of higher education and orientation and tries to outline some possible directions for its future implementation. The article also highlights issues such as access to higher education and gender equality.

Keywords

Higher education, Access, Governance, Gender, Guidance Policy.

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Higher Education in Europe: the choices of policy-makers and educational policies in the twentieth century.

Over the past 30-35 years European university systems have experienced profound and constant structural changes which have affected the policies, governance, structure of the systems, the organization of higher education institutions, the provision of training, the number and the composition of the student population and the very purposes of higher education. In short, these systematic changes have radically changed the appearance of higher education systems, although they have been implemented with different time scales and in different ways on a national basis. After the Second World War and until the second half of the 1960s, higher education systems in Europe were all structured around a single organizational unit: the university (Bruno, Linder, Capparucci 1989).

Although several countries with post- secondary education institutions took on the task of more advanced vocational training, these institutions were not formally recognized and included in the system of higher education. They were considered to be separate entities and were confined to a local area and characterized by their small size. As a result, the university maintained a monopoly on higher education and, above all, retained its key feature which was to be an institution whose function was the training of the elite and the relatively small circle of their children (les héritiers as they are referred to by Bourdieu and Passeron, 1964). It was therefore an education system designed around the formation of a habitus that is a mindset, a character and a culture which has been created in order to fill leadership roles in society. In short, the university was the privileged domain of the elite. According to Trow (1974), in many countries in Western Europe, immediately after the end of World War II, the percentage of people

enrolling from the relevant age group was about 4-5% and five years later ranged from between 10 and 15%. However, during that twenty-five year period the landscape was preparing for change as a result of the steady increase in access to universities which, although not strong enough to disturb the status quo, began to put pressure on the university systems. It is worth recalling some data which documents the growth in that period. According to UNESCO statistics , in the richest countries , the proportion of students enrolled in institutions of higher education in the respective age group increased from 3,7% in 1950 to 8,4% in 1960 and to 13,6% in 1970 (Ramirez and Boli – Bennett 1982). According to Peter Flora (1983), the average rate of enrolment in ten Western European countries was 4,5% around 1950, 6,4% around 1960 and 17,4% in 1975. According to the OECD, the number of students in institutions of higher education in the United States grew by an average of 5% per year during the 50s and almost 8% during the 60s. The increase in university registrations during this time should be considered within the context of the construction of the welfare state systems, of accelerated economic development and more widespread social welfare, which on the whole have stimulated the demand for higher education (Rostan and Vaira 2007), which had been interpreted as a process of transition from higher education only for the elite, but is now becoming accessible to the masses (Trow 1974). This process had a direct impact on the universities, their facilities and their modus operandi as, until the first half of the 1960s, they met growing demand for higher education by expanding both in terms of size and numbers, but this expansion was not without deep structural consequences.

Universities, while maintaining the features of the elitist model, showed the first signs of transformation to the masses (Vaira 2003). New and different functions of higher

education ran alongside the traditional ones. This was not only the formation of the elite in a cultural sense, but also the elite with unique, specialized skills. It began not only reproducing the elite, but also promoting equality in the higher education opportunities open to everyone and therefore social mobility in different classes and strata . This in turn meant a fundamental restructuring of organisational processes including a wider range and specialization of curricula and the growing importance of education and an increase in the number of teachers, which had consequences for the structure of power of decision-making bodies within the university. However, their structural, organizational and financial limits prevented them from unlimited growth. In addition, the new developments and the pressures produced by the expansion , the increasing diversity of students, their motivations, and their expectations, put pressure on universities, as they were only partially able to respond to these new demands (Rostan and Vaira 2007). The institutional differentiation between universities and the vocational or professional higher education sector (known as a binary system), became the main focus of policy in Europe in the sphere of higher education in the 1960s and 1970s, with the exception of some Mediterranean countries (including Italy). These policies formed the basis of systems of higher education and thus broke the connection between higher education and universities. Today, the transition to widely available education has come to completion, and indeed almost all European countries are experiencing a new phase of development, though less radical, towards *universal* higher education, as defined by Brennan (2011) who states that more than half the population of a relevant age should have access to higher education, along with an increasing share of mature students who are already employed. This brief review is useful not only because it describes the structural and organizational changes that have affected the

European higher education sector since 1945 and continue to do so to this day, but especially because it is relevant to an understanding of the reasons and conditions that underlie the growing importance that is now attached to the question of the transition and orientation between secondary school and higher education (especially for that type of university). If there had not been the huge growth in demand for higher education and diversity (social, cultural and even ethnic) by those who could access it, the structural changes that we have seen, would not have taken place and the same goes for the problems of transition and orientation, which would never have altered (Brock 1981). These processes of institutional change are widely shared by different countries (Eurostat 2013), both in terms of the problems that underlie them, and with regard to solutions that are identified, proposed and pursued as instruments deemed able to cope with and solve them. The first question is related to the expansion of participation in higher education.

Education systems in developed countries have now become of an appropriate size for the masses and in some cases are looking towards further expansion towards universal systems, i.e. systems that are accessed by more than 50% of the population of a relevant age. Added to these figures are increasingly significant numbers of non-standard students entering the higher education system with regards to lifelong learning (Di Fabio 2009). A second set of challenges is related to the transformation of the advanced societies of the post-fordism era (Brown and Lauder 1997, Kumar 1995, Hall and Martin 1983, Vaira 2003), which have led to major restructuring not only in manufacturing, but also in the institutional structure of society. The restructuring of the welfare state, the increased introduction of the market and business reasoning into organized social sectors where they were hitherto unknown, the rhetoric of globalization

and the knowledge-based society and economy , and the expansion and the emergence of an individualist ethic have also had a strong influence on education and on tertiary education in particular. Policies have had a tendency to pursue and ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of higher education, the improvement of individual choices in courses of study, and the reduction of waste and inefficiencies produced by poor choices, all of which have repercussions both for the cost of higher education as well as for the welfare system (in terms of taxes which are considered too low by the population with higher qualifications and with the knowledge and skills necessary for higher economic systems). These aspects of a more general nature lead us to the third set of considerations relating more specifically to the problems underlying political orientation - improving the range of choice in order to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of higher education, to ensure better performance by the students and to allow them to better cope with the new demands of the economy and society (Fabbri and Rossi 2010). This, in a nutshell, is the goal that we intend to reach by the development of guidance policies both pre and intra university. A second aspect is related to the increasingly greater share of young people of relevant age who are enrolling, especially those belonging to the most disadvantaged social classes. This issue is undoubtedly related to policies regarding equality, but this has proved inefficient in terms of social integration. The issue of the accessibility of higher education and the success of these young people is not just a problem of social justice and equality, but it also has socio-economic importance. The rhetoric of society and an economy based on knowledge arises from indications of development and competitiveness on an economic scale resulting from the rate of higher education of the population of a country and this, in turn, depends on the ability to create competitive knowledge which is the basis of global competition

(Cobalti 2006, Drori 2003). Adherence to this rhetoric, in the form of a collective belief in a streamlined global myth (Meyer and Rowan 1977), implies that the policies of higher education in advanced countries - and those considered in the research are no exception - take charge and pursue these goals in order to expand the potential targets of higher education, through the adoption of extensive policies aimed at expanding participation (Kumar 2000).

A weakness in guidelines for higher education in Italy: suggestions for a possible implementation.

In Italy, in recent years and especially after governmental reforms, the subject of guidelines for university studies has gradually become more and more important. Universities are beginning to be more responsive and sensitive to this practice and to develop structures, personnel and activities in this area. However, there is no denying that Italy still lags behind other countries and continues to show some limitations both in the adoption of instruments used and the objectives that arise (Almalaurea 2011). This backwardness causes a fundamental delay in university policy as the reasoning behind the function *and organization of universities has not adapted to the broader social and institutional changes that have hit the country since the1970s*. This is not the place to find reasons for and talk about the effects of this delay , which are fairly well-known and have already been *addressed by the Italian debate on the university system* , nor is it the place to praise examples of successful guidelines which some more business-minded and/or careful institutions have put in place. From a more general perspective we believe it is not a rash judgment to say that, at present, the guidelines

adopted by Italian universities serve mainly as promotional marketing activities, alongside the more traditional institutional information (such as the classic student guide to university faculties presenting training and services on offer).

It is apparent to everyone that universities and even individual faculties use advertising to attract students by focusing on their unique selling points regarding training, the learning environment and the facilities which students can make use of (De Francesco and Trivellato 1985). University open days, which are becoming more and more widespread, are mainly responding to this kind of logic. This is not to say that this is a bad thing or wrong in any way, but it is a strategy which is undoubtedly rather limited and, above all, does not produce effective results in terms of the choice and the results of the course (Mc Mahon and Patton 2006). Again, there are cases in which these guidelines have reached quite an advanced level which is comparable to that of other university systems, but they are exceptions, not the norm. Starting late undoubtedly has disadvantages (primarily having to build what is not there, or is only there to a limited extent) , but it also offers some benefits which consist of making use of the experience of, and the conclusions drawn by, others who have already been down the same road. One of the first examples of this kind of analysis was offered by German case studies (Teichler 1986) and in particular the Hochschul – Informations - System anaylsis (HIS) into the causes of the abandonment or the change of courses of study.   Having detailed data on these phenomena at system, individual institution, faculty and course of study level is invaluable in order to understand the causes, patterns, and especially the critical factors that cause this. This data is quite easy to find today thanks to the presence of the Nuclei Evaluation of the university, which carries out these surveys and then communicates the data to the body for national evaluation. This data could be used as

an important source of information for students in order to make comparisons and then decide how best to improve. Alongside this type of analysis should be one which gets to know the students, in terms of their motivations, expectations and the aspirations behind their choices of study at university. In several cases (especially those in the Netherlands and the UK) some institutions conduct surveys of their freshers every year.

Armed with this information it is possible not only to set better guidelines but also to help prepare those teachers who still have a stereotypical, traditional and elitist image of university students i.e. they are young, studying full-time, with an adequate knowledge base and attend university mostly for cultural reasons. This image is now outdated and must change. Having a better understanding of students means adapting teaching methods to suit today's social and cultural heterogeneity. A second strategy which has proved effective in many of the case studies is the establishment of cooperative networks between universities and secondary schools (Pautler 1981). This kind of relationship also began to be initiated in Italian universities and sometimes by individual study courses, but it still lacks an adequate degree of organization. Several research papers, as well as the daily experience of university lecturers, have shown there is still a pronounced gap in terms of level of preparation, methods of self-study and maturity of attitude between secondary school and university students (Gargiulo and Labriola 2007). On the other hand the teaching methods of both universities and secondary schools need to be renewed. Cooperation between schools and universities could create a useful bridge between two institutions which have historically been far apart (Pombeni 1996).

The students, for their part, can have different types of college experiences, such as those shown by the various case studies, which all have a significant educational value

and allow them to make better choices. Another path which universities could investigate is the development of facilities and events regarding career guidance and counselling which are almost entirely absent in universities (Simeone 2002). It is still up to students themselves to do this, sometimes with the assistance of some teachers (as an addition to their normal duties) and senior students (although generally only a few) although this is woefully inadequate. Careers guidance, as is organised in British institutions and in the case of the Universities of Amsterdam and Leiden, grants greater responsibility to students throughout their course of study, whilst monitoring and evaluating their performance and allowing the identification of problematic cases and possibly their solution (Lamoure 1981).

Counselling should primarily be an asset to complement career guidance especially in problematic cases and secondly, should be a service to provide efficient help for that not inconsiderable number of students who have decided to change course (Nathan and Hill 2006). Making the wrong choice once is more than enough, so the new choice cannot and should not be wrong as it may result in students dropping out altogether. In a system like ours that even in the academic year 2004/2005 produced a dropout rate between the first and second year of 21.2% (but with peaks of between 23 and 29% in some subject areas) (MIUR 2006), developing this strategy is critical. There are two remaining strategies that are the subject of debate among experts: whether it is appropriate or not to channel access to university towards congruence with the course of studies followed in high school and whether it is necessary to introduce entrance exams. These two strategies show certain ambivalence.

Rigid channelization, where already employed, does not seem to work effectively even with regards to the allocation of students to different courses of study, as has been

shown in Holland (where these reforms have been deemed to be failures) and also in Sweden. On the other hand, in systems that do not require congruence between secondary and higher education, or only in a loose way, the heterogeneity in the levels of training and competence of the students is a factor behind the abandonment and change of courses of study. In short, it comes down to finding a happy medium between these two systems (closed and open) that, at the moment, does not appear to be on the horizon.

With regards to entrance tests, if we take into account what has happened in Spain and, to an extent, Germany, we can see that they have little if any predictive power in terms of the final result of studies, which depends mainly on other factors such as social origin (which has a large influence on the choice of secondary educational path and also the university itself) and the cultural background of individuals (related to social origin).

With regards to these two strategies it becomes more necessary to suspend judgment because more research is needed in this area. If you create a course using the organic and structured strategies discussed, you would get the predicted results. If in high school you offered effective and efficient guidance for students about how to continue their studies (Rossi 2008), if you developed an organic cooperation between schools and universities, if the universities were equipped with facilities for career guidance and counseling, and if they knew in greater detail the factors that cause dropouts and course changes as well as the establishing of students' expectations, you would achieve better results, without having to establish rigid, cumbersome (and maybe even bureaucratic) structures such as channeling and entrance exams. These considerations and indications are valid in principle and, we think, widely shared. However, we must not forget that in order for the principles to be translated into concrete practices they must have two

essential ingredients: the will and the resources to implement them effectively and efficiently in reality. Under the present circumstances one can only hope that these issues will come up on the agendas and strategic actions of political institutions as soon as possible, especially for education in a country like Italy, where the funds for education, according to data from Eurostat, are equal to 4,4% of the GDP and which currently stands in 21st place among EU countries, immediately after Bulgaria (4,5%). Specifically with regard to university funding, according to the OECD Report 2013 (Education at a Glance 2013), Italy is positioned in 30th place out of the 33 countries investigated in the research. According to the same OECD report, Italy is the country that has instigated the most significant cuts to education and research leaving it in penultimate place out of 33 nations (OECD 2013).

The question of admission to Italian universities: between the universal right to education and exclusion.

The question of limiting university admissions has been the subject of debate for a long time, albeit intermittently, and has recently been reopened in connection with the discussion of university policies (the revision of the teaching and methods of assessment of universities). It is a complex issue due to the intertwined issues of the formative role of the university in society and also in the business world of today, with its own problems of change to consider, and in order to seek a satisfactory solution we must try to distinguish the different factors involved. In addressing the debate on «closed numbers", we must consider the regulations in place at the time (Buzzi, Cavalli and De Lillo 2007).

On the one hand there is an Italian Directive (law 264/99, article 1) that covers a limited number of faculties (medicine etc.) and which calls for a restriction on admissions, whilst on the other hand the Italian Constitution sanctions the right of every citizen to higher education. This reading of the Constitution provides the main argument that public universities should be for all and should give everyone the opportunity to acquire skills.

It should however be remembered that the Constitution states (Article 34): "Capable and deserving pupils, even without financial means, have the right to attain the highest levels of education» therefore implicitly stating that selection should be based on merit and ability. At the same time, it is clear that certain objective conditions do not allow for the application of this law in its entirety to everyone (such as the achievement of the highest skills) which in turn provides an argument in favor of limited numbers. The current situation and the limited resources of the University (in terms of faculties and facilities) are not sufficient to permit unlimited numbers of students and moreover, students who enroll in the various faculties are sometimes not in possession of the necessary requirements (knowledge, skills and interest) to ensure academic success. In light of this, the idea of selection should discourage people who do not meet the requirements and direct them down different avenues which are better suited to their personality and which offer them a better chance of educational success.   Finally, there is the problem of employment opportunities and the demand of the job market which sets quotas on certain professional categories.

This argument though seems rather weak and simplistic if planning and selections are made at a local level which would not take into account the national and international job markets. The two sides of the debate refer to the different sensitivities with respect

to the two aspects of the problems highlighted above, not just the requirements in the professional dimension of the university (which emphasizes the functional aspects and justifies the limited number) but also the subject of cultural regulation (which justifies the opening).   In these terms, the debate could quickly become ideological, and therefore fundamentally irresolvable. In fact, the issue of admissions is intrinsically linked with the overall structure of the entire educational cycle from its qualitative and quantitative outcomes to the forms of regulation of the employment market. It is the opinion of many politicians that it is imperative to include the idea of the unity of the entire educational path from childhood to higher education in the debate.

From this point of view, and despite what the constitution says, there is often still an aristocratic prejudice and so the idea that the university cannot, or even should not, be for everyone, appears to be widespread even if it is not explicitly stated. The historical evolution of education, both school and university, has gone completely the other way in other countries, that of a change and differentiation of the paths followed at different levels and different vocations, not just at school, and not only in IFTS and ITS (Higher Technical Institutes) and not only in lifelong learning.

In recent years universities have been working through all the problems and difficulties involved in redefining their teaching mission offer, the 3+2, and though painful and contradictory in its application, it is however, based on the idea of the internal specialization of the educational, cultural and professional departments which all give rise to different questions (Almalaurea 2011). This does not mean resigning to "liceizzazione" of the University, which is not an inevitable outcome, but the product of processes and choices that must be considered critically governed and, if necessary, whose root should be investigated. The current choices are lacking and much criticized

but an answer should be given, and it certainly is not the mere repetition of old models. Let us try to line up some premise paradigms.

The University of the masses corresponds to a natural and positive increase in the average levels of education, and a lengthening of the period of youth and study and this is a consequence of higher life expectancy, a higher disposable income for the population and the desire for social and professional achievement. If this is the case, then it follows that the university must find ways to reconcile mass and the quality of education. In recent years there has been a significant fall in the academic level and standard of new students and it is from this point of view that not only the University must look at its own systems.

If you don't consider the quality of standards at school within the perspective of uniformity of all the cycles of education, the problem of quality will be unsolvable for Universities too. The real issue of Italian University Education is not the excellence that exists. Excellence won on the field and not self proclaimed, has always existed and will always exist and this is secured by the loving care of schools, places of knowledge, and is guaranteed by its ability to attract talent and resources (Cammelli 2005).

The real issue is to discover the average quality of the academic systems and their final product. Average quality also means avoiding repetitive production of the usual roles and specializations. The first task of our university system is to guarantee adequate standards of preparation possibly comparable between the different standards in terms of quality and content. But today it is not like this. The question of access should be placed within this problematic framework (Miur 2006). From this point of view the

"closed number" is a short cut to solve practical problems that could appear non-resolvable in the short term.

In fact, even in the past and even in the presence of higher levels of educational attainment; the "closed number" was practiced as organizational streamlining: not being able to accommodate all students, skimming occurred at entrance. But if one assumes that the goal is to increase the average level of education, then the "closed number" appears for what it is: an extremely rough and approximate answer to the complex demands of the system. You then need to extend the debate to the adequacy of existing forms of selection and the alternative forms possible: the predisposition prior to access, and a closer link between high school and university as explained previously. Hence the action of channeling the student cannot be limited to just voluntary submission of the courses offered by the universities, during the last year of high school (most likely with the aim of attracting new applicants). The student channeling process needs to become practice during the last three years of high school, not only to inform and direct but - with an explicit scouting approach - to encourage informed choices that will bring to the surface attitudes and inclinations otherwise not visible. From this point of view, it is possible to consider a different approach to the idea of the admission test. If you forsake the idea of the "entrance test" as rigid and selective and tied to a "closed number", it is possible to consider it instead as being part of the channeling process: a test that helps the student realise his/her degree of compatibility and the degree of preparation and attitude needed for the chosen course, to highlight the learning gaps, to allow an informed choice: a choice that does not exclude but directs.

Taking on board this idea of the test, you are able to strengthen its role in the same way, for example by giving the test score for the elements of the curricular. The cultural and

organizational point to be addressed concerns the connection between school and university, both as regards the practical arrangements for the report and also in terms of training content and curriculum.

Today the gap for students between the two cycles is wide and perhaps even more so for teachers and institutions. However for students this passage is a 'shock' to the system, it can often be a positive 'shock' because it forces an exercise of will, commitment and healthy self discipline but just as often it can be deadly as the gap of content and preparation can seem objectively unbridgeable. For teachers and institutions the problem has so far been manageable: two systems that happily ignore each other, each taking care of their own needs. The gap is filled when you realize certain conditions such as: greater continuity of content and higher quality training. The endeavour falls primarily to the schools which must be able to ensure the highest quality standards. But the universities must also rethink their curricula: not to simplify them or "licealizzare" but to make them more substantial/meaningful, and less artificial, and to establish programs that take into account the knowledge that has been acquired. It should also be a partial rethinking of the teaching function and the operating conditions of the profession. Half of the universities in Italy today are governed by contracted professors working in humiliating conditions or researchers forced to ensure the provision of training for their universities by assuming control of multiple courses (Almalaurea 2006).

The pay condition of all Italian teachers also makes the required reasoning complicated for the evaluation of educational quality. On the 28th of December 2007 the council of ministers passed a decree proposed to intervene on the issue of orientation, the relationship between school and university and the requirements for access to the

university system but that has not dealt with the problem of the "closed number" and university tests and therefore created nothing of innovation with respect to the current situation, except express provision for the enhancement of marks obtained in high school as "reserve points": 25 out of a total of 105 for the "closed numbers" faculty. It would also be useful to highlight the "false information" that is being given in the Italian and high school educational systems. One of these is that in Italy there are too many graduates. This does not correspond to reality (Istat 2012) since Italy is one of the countries in Europe with the lowest number of graduates between 25 and 34 years old. Only 19% (as in Slovakia, Czech Republic and Romania), compared to an EU average of 30% which corresponds to half of the figures for the UK, France and Spain. The target set at the European level is 40% (more than double the current one in Italy) by 2020. That is to say, logically speaking in the next 7 years we should strive to promote enrolment to university, which instead is falling sharply (-58,000 enrolments in the last ten years).

 Another common belief is that tests are an impartial tool, those who study will pass them without problems. In fact the way in which admission tests in Italian universities are structured is mechanical and notational, which is far from the method and content used in schools. For this reason over the years many companies and private institutions have emerged to prepare students for a future university test, and rather than teaching content, reasoning and connections, the students are taught tricks and methods to respond quickly to a type of preset question. The cost of these courses is very high and only accessible to those who have the ability to invest financially in the preparation for admission tests, which goes against any discourse on fairness and social mobility.

It is no coincidence that today the number of graduates who come from families where at least one parent has a degree is seven times higher than that of graduates who come from families with a low level of education. More common is the fact that there is only a limited number of places in the more difficult subjects because not everyone is able to study subjects that are particularly complex.

Even so, this figure does not correspond to reality: the limited number is gradually becoming a universal barrier to college. Today, 57,3% of degree programs in Italy require some sort of entry test, which is well over half (Almalaurea 2011). Beyond the faculties that are regulated by a system of national selection (L. 264/99, which covers medical and health disciplines, Architecture and the Science of Education), individual universities can decide whether or not to implement the entry test. Abutted by the cuts in public funds, the block in turn-over and the inability to hire new teachers, the historic lack of space and infrastructure, as well as the infamous decree AVA and the imposition (Grimaldi 2001) of the strictest requirements for admissions to studies, the "closed number" has become the primary tool with which to tackle the problems of the public university, while waiting for something to change in terms of national policies. In the light of the arguments discussed we believe that what our country needs at this time is to review the policies of university access and initiate a large public investment plan for universities, so as to ensure its sustainability and the ability to accommodate and provide quality instruction to all those who desire it. All this should be supported by a new system of grants and services to protect the rights of people to continue their education beyond the diploma regardless of their income conditions.

Access to higher education and gender equality

Looking at the Gender Gap Index, Italy ranks 84th out of 128 countries, among the last countries in Europe and especially in comparison to others from the Mediterranean region. Spain, which occupies 10th place, is a summary of our situation as regards the realization of gender equality. This index, prepared annually by the World Economic Forum, points out the gap between men and women in terms of labor participation and wages, access to education, health care, life expectancy, and institutions' admissions. Despite a worldwide reduction in the gap, Italy is ranked 101th for labor participation and wages, 82nd for health and 80th for women in decision-making positions, while considerably better positioned at 32nd for access to education. In addition to this bleak picture of Italy, you have to add the slowness with which we advance: there are many laws and equality bodies, but with poor efficacy results obtained in their application, and only a few, long paths to improving opportunities (Fontana 2002). As regards education, the OECD PISA data show that Italy records abstention rates and punctuality among the highest in Europe, including low performance in scientific and technical disciplines and still a significant gender segregation in training. In fact, if we wanted to achieve a better balance between males and females (Ghepardi 1998) within the various degree programs, one in three students would have to change course. Still the most significant difference is gender-related subject areas, which sees in the case of undergraduates studying humanities, 68% women versus 32% men, while the proportion is reversed in the sciences, where 41% of the graduates are female, compared with 59% male. As is also shown in the ISTAT data, female students make a subject choice based on more personal motivations, linked to interest rather than discipline, while male students use more pragmatic reasons, related to the labor market and

income. Other data shows that the proportion of women in training develop faster, showing higher performance at school and a growing tendency to consolidate their knowledge through advanced degrees, graduate schools, masters and doctoral degrees. Nevertheless, the predominance of men (Altieri 1993) is already evident at the beginning of their academic path and access to careers, with the attribution, often discretionary, of the role of the permanent teacher. Nor is it a coincidence that there is little research on careers at University, while abroad there is a rich tradition of research in this area (Irigaray 1985, Istat 2013). In the last decade the number of university teachers has significantly increased (+25%), albeit unevenly across the various disciplines (economics has registered an increase of 52%). If we consider the different levels of their careers (Bombelli 2009), researcher recruitment sees 43% women versus 57% men, at the level of associate professor, 33% compared with 67% males, and as far down twenty-five years the ordinary degree level, 76% against 24%. There is no doubt, therefore, that there has been a growth in the number of women, although there is still a significant imbalance in the total teaching body: they currently make up 45,2% of researchers, 33.5% of associates and 18,5% of women at the first grade. The largest percentage of female researchers is to be attributed to a failure to promote, rather than consistent recruitment, also their average age is gradually increasing, and now stands at around 36 years old, with almost no difference between the ratio. For associates there is some variation to be emphasized: recruitment has not occurred only through promotions, but also with the input of subjects outside the university, and also in this case, women were once penalized (Di Pietro, Piccardo and Simeone 2000). The most significant asymmetries relate to the degree level and to distribution across the various disciplines (women are less present mainly in the field of science and technology, and

their presence is more significant in the context of language and literature). Even more significant is their absence in decision-making positions: the academic senate, board of directors, heads of departments, deans and rectors. The Ministry of Education data show that nationally the Italian academic situation is marked by a lack of women, a high rate of aging, an increase in the casualisation of teaching staff and administrative and technical staff, and a lower teacher / student ratio, amounting to 22,3%, compared to an EU average of 16,4%. And there is no doubt some small success for women (Ajello and Meghnagi 1993) both in admission and in career progression. The phenomenon of the underrepresentation of women in research is very worrying and is described using the analogy of the leaky pipeline, i.e. the "leaky pipe", understood in terms of female talent and creativity wasted. Thus, even today, women remain in a "hybrid" or "limited integration", with poor access to key positions, low employment rates and low fertility rates: a vicious circle that not only contributes to the weak social position of women, but also limits the economic growth of our country (Zanfrini 2005).

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