

INTRODUCTION

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Students' university mobility patterns in Europe: an introduction

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Abstract

This thematic series collects some papers on Italian students' mobility. The aim of this thematic series is twofold. First, to describe the phenomenon which is important for universities and for its negative socio-economic implications for the South of Italy. Second, to propose new applications of statistical methods for this topic and applications which can be extended to other forms of migration, too.

Introduction

Education and tertiary education is very important on the European agenda: it has been addressed since the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy. Over the last 25 years, university education in the EU 15 has undergone a transition from an elitist to a mass form of education. Consequently, the student population has more than doubled from 12.6 million in 2000, or 5 percent of the population of working age (15–64). However, the rise in the student population in Europe in the last 25 years has been less pronounced than the OECD average. This is because, in the 1960s, university participation had been comparatively high in the EU 15, while many other OECD countries were catching up. Improved student mobility is a core goal of the European Higher Education Area and a major policy priority on the EU agenda for modernizing higher education. As stated in the Council conclusions on benchmarks for learning mobility (2011/C 372/08), *'learning mobility is widely considered to contribute to enhancing the employability of young people through the acquisition of key skills and competences, including especially language competences and intercultural understanding, but also social and civic skills, entrepreneurship, problem-solving skills and creativity in general'*.

Against this backdrop, there is a lack of empirical studies on degree mobility at the tertiary level across and within countries (with differences across regions). This was also true across tertiary education levels, such as, for instance, the transition to undergraduate, graduate, and PhD. This GENUS Thematic Series contributes to the educational literature by addressing this research gap with a selection of eight articles focusing on Italy, as a kind of laboratory. The selected articles are useful for the thorough application of diverse and innovative applications of statistical methods.

In this Thematic Series, we preferred the term “student mobility” to “student migration”, as mobility is usually temporary. Nevertheless, the two terms may overlap and are sometimes used interchangeably. Most of the times the approaches and the theories developed for migration can be applied to mobility as well. Moreover, the word *student mobility* is understood as *international student mobility* (see, for instance, the International Encyclopedia of Social & Behavioral Sciences), while the domestic/internal student mobility is not commonly examined in this literature because it is generally considered to be less relevant. International degree mobility appears to be concentrated in certain countries, with the top three European destinations (the United Kingdom, Germany, and France) accounting for almost 80 percent of the mobile student population: eight of the top ten HEIs that receive degree mobile students are based in United Kingdom, mostly in London. A consistent number of degree mobile students come, as Eurostat official statistics show, from outside the EU.

In Europe, domestic student mobility can be characterized on a geographical/regional basis: Bulgaria, Cyprus, Hungary, and Lithuania are the countries where there are the greatest differences across universities. Only a very few universities receive a relevant number of mobile students (Barrioluengo & Flisi, 2017; Dolińska et al., 2020; Van Bouwel & Veugelers, 2013). Interestingly, Van Bouwel and Veugelers (2013) distinguished two perspectives in UK internal mobility: the “consumption perspective”, which is defined by the urban services utilized by the students; and the “investment perspective”, which is essentially defined by the quality of the university. For example, Oxford and Cambridge in the UK, collectively known as “Oxbridge”, are part of the “investment perspective”, while London belongs to both groups because some universities are top quality, and the city offers good urban services (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018).

Similarly, another way of approaching mobility is “description and explanation”, which in the literature are usually institutional and regional factors. The nature and quality of the institutions shape the attractiveness of the university: teaching, research, organization, funds for the students, and so forth. Regional factors concern regional characteristics and students’ consumption choices: level of urbanization, employment opportunities, and regional education systems, and so forth (Hemsley-Brown, 2015).

In this framework, Italy represents a special “case-study”. Italian student mobility is mostly one-way from the South to the Center and North [for a review of the domestic mobility flows across the last 15 years, see Attanasio and Priulla (2020)]. This selective process could get in the way of the development of high-quality institutions in the areas from which the share of movers is larger. After all, this is the area in which students will invest their acquired human capital once they graduate, not the region of origin. According to survey data (Almalaurea, 2015), the vast majority of southern graduates, who obtained their degree in the Center-North, settle in the Center-North: this points to a substantial “brain-drain” from the South. This effect is compounded by reforms to higher education governance, starting with the university autonomy in the 1990s and, later, with evaluation systems and the introduction of additional financial resources. These reforms have changed the geography of national universities in the last 15 years, as the universities have started to mirror the historical Italian North-Center South divide. Taken together, these peculiarities of Italian university student mobility make Italy a telling case study both socially and economically.

Most of the papers in this Thematic Series are based on the Italian *Anagrafe Nazionale Studenti* (ANS), which is an administrative archive of the Italian Ministry of University (MUR). Access to this database has been given thanks to a special agreement between the MUR and the Universities of Palermo, Cagliari, Florence, Naples Federico II, Siena, Sassari, and Turin. The database has collected data at the student-level from all higher Italian education institutions for more than a decade (from 2008 to 2019). It also includes students' high school identification codes, as well as information on students' high school careers. This database allows us, for the first time, to trace the transition from high school to university, nationally, and the transition from BA graduation (1st level) to MA (2nd level); it is worth noting that this second transition is especially crucial because it includes second student migration flows.

The first set of papers included in this collection addresses several and diverse research questions, mostly concerning the analysis of Italian student mobility at enrollment in BA and MA courses. Which students migrate and which stay? What are the differences in performance between the stayers and the movers and between the movers and the native central-northern students? (D'Agostino et al., 2021). Is there student mobility across northern regions? Do large northern cities, like Milan and Turin, attract students from small northern cities and villages? Do top-rated private university attract students from northern regions? (Rizzi et al., 2021). How are the flows of the three-step path high school/BA/MA? What are the profiles of the different types of mobile students in terms of field of study, region of residence, and personal characteristics? What are the push and pull factors in driving the dynamics of student mobility flows? Is it possible to depict some networks between regions of origin and destination that can help us understand mobility patterns? (Columbu et al., 2021). Is there a gender gap in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) courses in terms of degree course completion? Is there any difference among the STEM degree courses in terms of gender gap? How important is first year performance in terms of degree completion? (Priulla et al., 2021). Is it true that the dynamics of student mobility in Campania are different from other Italian southern regions? Are those differences stronger in the transition between the BA and the MA level? (Santelli et al., 2019).

The second set of papers deals with diverse research questions, around two issues: foreign students' performances; and parental background and students' choices. What is the academic performance of foreign students compared to Italian students? What are the personal characteristics (with a focus on nationality) that influence university success? (Giudici et al., 2021). Is there an association between social background and the propensity to be a mover at university? What is the influence of educational background and parental education level on student migration choices and performance? (Galos, 2022). Is there an association between family background and the propensity to study abroad for Italian Ph.D students? In particular, is parental socio-economic status, operationalized with parental education, the mother's economic status, and the father's social class, associated with a higher or lower mobility among Italian PhD students? (Tocchioni & Petrucci, 2021).

With this Thematic Series, we seek to set the stage for future developments in the field. First, the study of Italian international mobility in foreign universities is a promising research path. This information is important, as in 2019 Italian students enrolled in BA and

MA degree courses abroad number 56,000, while in 2013 they numbered around 33,000. Their favorite destinations are, in order, Great Britain, Austria, Germany, and France (Eurostat, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>). Second, more attention should be given over to the motivations for students' decision to enroll at an out-of-region university, including (but not limited to) anticipated job mobility, study programs, university's prestige, and students' welfare policies. Some ad hoc surveys may give insights into the motivations behind Italian students' mobility. Very possibly there will be a difference between students who are going to enroll in a BA courses and students who are going to enroll in a MA course. Clearly, it would be useful to step up research into the motives behind BA and MA mobility.

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