



Project "Milan and its doors"

The internationalisation of Milan higher education system

Gabriele Ballarino, Department of Labour and Welfare Studies, University of Milan

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Milan is not an historical "university town", as Padua, Bologna or nearby Pavia. However, starting from the late 19th century it has become seat of many public and private higher education (HE) institutions, so that today we can think of HE as one of Milan's "doors", opening the city to the global fluxes of people, goods and informations. The only systematic data source available at the moment to measure global fluxes reaching Milan's HE institutions is the number of students enrolled: a time series is available from academic years 1998/99 to 2004/05. We will refer to the percentage of stranger enrolled as the "grade of internationalisation" of the area and its HE institutions.

Milan's metropolitan area includes seven universities, three public and four private: they are the empirical core of this work. In addition, three other ancient HE institutions have been recently officially recognized as "universities", and there are also other private tertiary education institutions offering university-level education in "niche" disciplines, especially in two fields, namely business management and fashion and design. Moreover, Lombardy (Milan's region, the richest and more populated of the country) has other five universities, plus some local courses of Milan's institutions. It is thus possible to speak of an "HE system" because of the high number of actors involved and of the variety of the education offered. However, it would be wrong to refer the term to the governance, because neither public nor private universities or other HE institutions existing in Milan participate to any instance of coordinated governance with effective power.

Restricting our view at Milan's seven "established" universities, it can be noticed that during the observed period (7 years) more than 5.500 students enrolled to the first year of undergraduate education. It is a growing flux: on a yearly basis, the percentage of strangers with respect to the total enrollments has risen from 2.2 to 3.7 percent. Fields of study more in demand are economics and business and technical disciplines (engineering and architecture), followed by the humanities, social sciences, medicine and natural sciences. Longitudinally, a shift in demand can be seen: at the beginning of the observed period, the field of study most in demand were the humanities. So, the

shift is in the direction of occupationally stronger disciplines. This shift is related to a change in the composition of the flux. At the end of the 90s, most of the foreign students came from Western Europe, but during the observed period they were outnumbered by students coming from Eastern Europe (it must be remembered that the EU was enlarged to East during the observed years). Eastern Europeans are more attracted by occupationally “stronger” fields, such as business, economics or engineering. The flux from Western Europe, mostly oriented towards the humanities, diminished only slightly, but the one from Eastern Europe did increase by a factor of three. To the increase of the total flux also contributed students from Latin America, Africa and the East. Northern America and Oceania are the only continents whose contribution is scarce and declining, while Europe on aggregate remains the source of 70% of the total flux.

Foreign students prefer public universities, because they are cheaper. But the private ones have increased their share of the total, and now are in proportion more internationalised than the public ones. Small universities have been more dynamic and have increased their internationalisation more than the public ones. However, institutions more internationalised and more growing from this point of view are the ones, both public and private, who show a “concentrated” supply of courses, that is who offer education in only one field of study, or in a few but closely related ones. This is confirmed looking at non-university higher education, where both public and private institutions offering education in arts, fashion and design, show a degree of internationalisation much higher than the one of the universities mentioned above.

Generally speaking, internationalisation is much higher in graduate education. Less systematic data are available for this, but the aggregated internationalisation rate of graduate education for the seven main universities is 8%. Graduate education at Bocconi university, the most internationalised, has some 16% international students.

In comparison, the Milan area is more internationalised than Italy, as expected, but not than Lombardy. There is no “metropolitan area-effect”, attracting international students toward metropolitan centers, as a small town as Pavia has a more internationalised university than most of Milan ones. Not much data are available for international comparisons, but some observations can be made. On an aggregate level, the degree of internationalisation of Milan’s university system is comparatively not low, being similar to the one of the American HE system. However, it is much lower than the ones of other big nearby European countries (Germany and France), although higher than Spain’s or Japan’s. On an individual level, only two universities can parallel, at the graduate level, the degree of internationalisation of anglo-saxon elite institutions, namely the Bocconi and the Politecnico. But the small private institutions offering education in fashion and design show a much

higher degree of internationalisation, because they participate of the central global role of Milan in this sector.

The lack of individual-level data makes it difficult to describe motivations and goals of international students in Milan. However, looking together at geographical origin, field of study and chosen institution of international students, it is speculatively possible to distinguish at least four fluxes. One comes mostly from Western Europe, is the oldest and is oriented towards the humanities. It is a very specialized niche, for people aiming at an academic career or at expressive self-development. A second flux comes mostly from Europe, especially Eastern, and from other developed countries, and it is oriented towards business management education, in order to enter the international labour market already existing in this sector. This flux includes many graduate students. A third flux comes mostly from the Third World, especially from countries with strong immigration links with Italy (Latin America and Northern Africa), with students enrolling in engineering, medicine and science programs in order to get “strong” degrees for (presumably) entering the labour market in their countries of origin with a good foreign credential. A fourth flux, finally, comes from all over the world and is interested in the niche education given in art and fashion and design institutions, and it is a function of the central role that Milan’s fashion and design industries play on a worldwide level. While the first flux is stable or slightly declining, the other three are growing.

It must be kept in mind that in Italy the effect of field of study on graduates’ careers is quite strong, in comparative perspectives. It is usual, in both academy and public opinion, to distinguish between “strong” degrees (economics, engineering, medicine and, to a lesser extent, natural sciences) and “weak” degrees (humanities, education, social sciences and law).