

University Choices and Work Destinies in Italy¹

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Summary. The need to match academic education with the ‘know how’ required by the labour market may give birth to both co-operation between universities and enterprises, and to ‘flexible’ academic curricula. Students can choose from a wide range of University degrees, and within each program can choose the applicative field/major and opt for a short work experience, the internship. The feedback from the university-enterprises interaction may be observed in graduates’ job opportunities, since they constitute the third pole in a triad of changing relationship. The case of the Faculty of Statistical Sciences at the University of Milan – Bicocca, in the academic years from 1998/99 to 2002/2003, allows one to identify patterns in undergraduates’ educational strategies and poses questions as to the relationship between academic knowledge, individual expectations and actual experiences at work.

Keywords: Competences; Transition times; Non-metric individual differences.

1. Academic and entrepreneurial perspectives

The weakening self-governance of the university system, in favour of the labour market, has raised questions about the usefulness of undergraduate studies with regard to professional requirements (Ottaviani, 2004). The consequent adjustment process gave birth to experiences of co-operation between universities and enterprises, which has put into motion a process that favours some disciplinary areas.

¹ Sections 1 and 4 were jointly written by F. Crippa and P. Mariani, Sections 2 e 3 by F. Crippa.

The traditional hiatus between theoretical and applicative disciplines allows the latter a ready and flexible fine-tuning adaptation of curricula, *via* the inclusion in the undergraduate education on the job experiences, hence merging the academic and the entrepreneurial perspectives.

In the creation of a professional identity, this experience widens the students' range of choices and may affect their means entering the labour market: so it is possible to calculate multiple career paths arising from specific choices, in terms of their external efficacy² (Fabbris, 2003).

Our study focuses on a particular case: in accordance with the guidelines for university/enterprises interactions, the Faculty of Statistics at the University of Milan-Bicocca includes forms of job training (*internship*) at selected companies' sites in its curricula, under both academic and corporate supervision.

Ever since the so called "3+2" reform, that started in 2001, some undergraduate credits can be acquired for periods of training no less than three months, as well as introducing students into the labour market. This is particularly relevant for statisticians, whose qualifications are still not well defined in the Italian labour force scenario, with a gap between an offer of 1,862 positions for statisticians in 2004³ and 1,287 graduates in Statistical Sciences in 2003 (Unioncamere-Ministero del lavoro e delle politiche sociali, 2004).

In order to improve its services, a first survey on the Faculty outcomes was carried out in the Academic Year (A.Y.) 2000-2001 (Martini, 1997), thereafter replicated every academic year, named 'Statisticians and Work'. In 2003, it was devoted to the Faculty graduates' work situations.

Data collection was conducted in November 2003 by means of telephone interviews regarding curricular and professional characteristic of the 300 graduates at the Faculty of Statistics, University of Milan-Bicocca from A.Y. 1988/89 to A.Y. 2002/2003, using lists of former students provided by administrative offices⁴. The response rate was 76.7%.

Each interviewee, in addition to the characteristics of his course of studies, provided information on the qualifications gained during her/his educational experience, such as internships, masters or other specialisations believed to be relevant to occupational opportunities. The occupational status at the time of the interview was classified as employed, unemployed and in search of first employment. In addition, it was pinpointed whether any kind of employment was entered into prior to graduation.

² Average waiting times before occupation, apart possible *post lauream* experiences (such as internships), may be considered indices of external effectiveness of education (Fabbris, 2003).

³ Estimates of the Excelsior Information System.

⁴ Data collection, retrospective dating November 2003, includes more than ten cohorts and spans across a time interval with changing market conditions. Thanks to the favourable conditions of the labour market in Lombardy in these years, such sources of heterogeneity are, at least partially, mitigated.