

SHAPING THE FUTURE OF ITALIAN EDUCATION: OVERCOMING CHALLENGES AND SEIZING OPPORTUNITIES¹

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Abstract. This conference speech discusses key findings from the ISTAT Annual Report 2024 on Italy's education system, highlighting both progress and significant challenges. While Italy performs comparably to other European countries in bachelor's and master's degree attainment, it lags in doctorate and specialized degrees, as well as overall education levels among young people, many of whom hold only secondary school diplomas. These gaps stem from systemic issues but can be addressed through joint efforts by families, students, and universities. Families should foster resilience and independence rather than overprotection, while students must demonstrate accountability, motivation, institutional discipline, and a commitment to learning. Universities, in turn, must embrace their evolving role by teaching lifelong learning skills, aligning with labour market needs, fostering innovation, and strengthening ties with businesses and other institutions. Pursuing high-quality academic research to enhance institutional reputation and to grow doctorates, adopting innovative teaching practices, improving resource allocation, and collaborating effectively with external stakeholders including companies are essential steps to transform universities into drivers of growth, benefiting young people, businesses, and Italian society as a whole.

I take my cue from three passages (stated on page 78) in the ISTAT Annual Report 2024.

The first: "Between 2013 and 2021, in Italy, the trend in the share of graduates with a bachelor's degree or equivalent in relation to the population aged between 20 and 29 maintained the same levels and growth profiles observed in France, Germany and Spain".

The second: "Italy is midway between the highest in France and the lowest in Germany for master's degree or single-cycle degree graduates, which are also growing, while it is in last place and in retreat for doctorates or specialised graduates".

And the third: "In spite of progress, in 2022 the overall level of education of the population aged between 25 and 34 remains on average lower than in the countries surveyed due to the effect, as in Spain, of a still high proportion of young people

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with at most a secondary school leaving certificate (22 percent, compared with around 11 percent in France), and to the low prevalence of short-cycle university degrees, mostly of a technical nature”.

The evidence is on a razor’s edge, between structural deficits (whose origins go back a long way) and encouraging trends (all to be verified, consolidated, and developed).

This is not the place to dissect the strengths and weaknesses of the Italian education system, probing what has been happening for decades at school desks and in university classrooms. It is, however, an opportunity to launch a few provocations on what is happening and how the role of the university might evolve.

I have often commented on trends in the education sector using the metaphor of a stormy sea. Macro-trends in university education, evolving learning models, demographic scenarios, technological development, the spread of artificial intelligence, competitive dynamics between players..., are phenomena that are there for all to see.

I emphasise one aspect: the intensity, speed and irreversibility of the challenges at hand. To cope with it, a kind of ‘general mobilisation’ of the entire civil society would be needed. Yes, it would serve! In fact, Paolo Crepet’s words come to mind: “The educational challenge and its intrinsic crisis seem to reject an idea of radical change, which would challenge privileges and accommodations that have convinced entire generations, despite the evidence of how close we are approaching an ‘educational catastrophe’, as Pope Francis has lucidly called it”.²

Navigating in the stormy sea, facing the risk of an ‘educational catastrophe’, bringing about a revolution of historic proportions is not the exclusive task of a university, or even of a school. It is everyone’s responsibility. In this regard, I shall not dwell on this, I will mention just two references, among many possible ones.

First, the role of the family, increasingly oriented towards protecting children, avoiding their stresses, and softening their trials. In the words of Massimo Gramellini, columnist for *Corriere della Sera*: “I begin to doubt that what dictates certain defensive measures is not so much the increased fragility of the recipients, but that of parents who are terrified at the idea of young people measuring themselves against a test whose outcome includes failure”.

And second, the role of students, from whom one can legitimately expect accountability and institutional discipline, strong motivation and hard work, depth of thought and constructive criticism, et cetera. This is often the case. Occasionally it is not. And what is the direction of the ‘sense of work’? Again, from the columns of the *Corriere della Sera*, Ferruccio De Bortoli observes: “In the new generations we have to note that work is no longer at the centre of their lives. Perhaps for today’s

² Paolo Crepet, *Lezioni di sogni*, Mondadori, 2022, p. 7

older ones it has been too much so. But are we sure that this devaluation of work, sometimes reduced to a mere source of livelihood, is a sign of the times to be accepted as inescapable? And is there not an Italian declination that questions us on the quality of our education and training in general? In other European countries, even richer than ours, this is not the case. Not to mention the rest of the world, where there is an atavistic hunger for work, where a desire for redemption and social revenge bites”.

And so, to the role of a university, which has never shone much in the imagination of Italians. Beyond the rhetoric about young people, the proclamations on the development of human capital, the circumstantial celebrations on research (emblematic are those at the time of the pandemic), occasional scandals continue to make more headlines than the structural brain drain. The litmus test, if proof were needed, is the allocation of resources, which are insufficient and poorly allocated.

In order to take a step forward, the contribution to the country’s growth must be communicated with determination. The ISTAT Annual Report 2024 does this effectively in several places in the section on ‘education and training in the labour market’. I quote one of them: “Investment in human capital is confirmed as a development factor for businesses. The analyses conducted indicate complementary strengths between business strategies, investment in human resources, innovative skills and technology adoption on the one hand, and performance on the other. The companies that are most active in all these aspects, qualified in the Report as highly dynamic, are also those that have created employment, and have absorbed a university-educated workforce”.

This is not enough, however. At the same time, we must put our mission in order, update our educational objectives, rethink our teaching content and the services offered to students. The ‘profession’ of a university is undergoing intense evolution, partly as a result of the epochal changes I mentioned in the introduction. Derek Bo, Chancellor of Harvard, saw this coming more than thirty years ago, addressing his students with these words: “If you think you are coming to this university to acquire specialisations in exchange for a better future, you are wasting your time. We are not capable of preparing you for a job that will almost certainly no longer exist around you. Nowadays, work, due to structural, organisational and technological changes, is subject to rapid and radical change. We can only teach you to become capable of learning, because you will have to re-learn all the time”.

The derivation is spontaneous, even obvious: if the mission of a university is increasingly to teach how to learn, how do you do it?

A few pointers, as a convinced corporatist, and as a deep admirer of good management. Quality academic research must be pursued, so as to develop reputational capital, to grow doctorates, and to nurture dissemination activities that, in turn, generate strong links with stakeholders. It is necessary to keep research and

teaching closely linked: investing in them strengthens market positioning, attracts outstanding resources, and projects oneself in the international context. It is essential to innovate teaching, in all its components: lectures, exercises, experiential activities, assessment models, career service, et cetera. And it is becoming increasingly important to manage the 'transmission belt' linking a university with the worlds of education and business.

I could continue with examples of 'related actions', and of 'virtuous circularity', but it is no use dwelling on them. Instead, it is useful to observe that, within a university system, something is happening in this direction.

Much remains to be done: a university, like other institutions in the country, now struggles to fully express the existing potential for innovation. The road forward is marked, where change and repositioning are a must, and where constraints and resistance must be removed... for the good of young people, businesses and the entire civil society.