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**Could Regional Universities Promote Access To Higher Education For
“Less Favourite” Students?**

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Introduction

Several studies demonstrated that in last decades many changes occurred in the global economical system, leading to crucial shifts in labour market organization, rising employment flexibility and social inequalities in labour market entry and early careers (Castells 2000; Blossfeld et al. 2005). The key word for these deep transformations is *globalization* that revealed its huge potential by structural shifts in the economic system, connecting at a global level markets, competition among firms and knowledge.

The quick rise of Knowledge Society, pushed also by policies fostered by European Union toward the rise of the best competitive knowledge' economy for Europe (see Lisbon Strategy), made knowledge as a key element for global competition. It forced governments and institutions to focus the attention on educational systems and in particular on Higher Education, given the crucial role it has for innovation and competition in modern economies.

Since competition in the era of globalisation is mainly based upon innovation and embedded knowledge, at a macro level, the educational level of its workforce is crucial for the competitiveness of single countries. At the same time, knowledge is crucial at a micro level, on the labour market: the higher the level of education that one employee achieves, the higher will be the probability to put in practice defensive strategies against precariousness. White collar are not immune to unstable jobs forms, but unstable work can serve as a bridge. The lack of human capital makes higher the risk to enter in a more precarious situation (Blossfeld et al. 2005) and at the same time a high level of education helps to collect coherent experiences of work (Bertolini, 2008).

Thus investing in education (and especially in HE) is one of the strategies that workers can put in practice to avoid the trap of precarious jobs and uncertainty on labour market.

However many authors revealed that there are still some difficulties in the access to HE, and also in Italy the attitude to invest in higher education is affected by not only the level of economic resources available by the family of origin but also, and especially, by the educational level of parents (Shavit, Blossfeld, 1993; Hertz et al., 2007; Schizzerotto, 2002; Ballarino, Checchi, 2006; Brunello, Checchi 2007).

Class differences in educational attainment

Theories of modernisation dominated the period 1950-70 and were based upon the belief that there is a sort of mechanic relationship between education and economy, in which rational choice of actors assures a feedback between economic system and educational system, where actors will benefit of a better productivity that will be recognized on competitive labour market with better remunerations. In theories of liberal industrialism or technical functionalism the development of the education system is functional to the development and rise in complexity of the economic system (Ballarino, Checchi 2006). Modern economies and social relationships are more and more complex, so they need employees with standard and specific skills, acquired formally in institutions dedicated to education. People who is educated in such institutions -schools- are more productive because more technically skilled and became more confident with learning processes; thank to this, the economy becomes more efficient and modernization process goes on.

On the side of the actor, the theory of human capital says that individuals have economic incentives for investing in their education because they are aware that education permits to improve their productivity and, as a consequence, gain better income on competitive labour market (Ballarino, Checchi 2006).

However, some theories didn't confirm the positive relationship between wages and productivity: many other variables can enter in determining the level of wage. There are variables like gender,

race, nationality that influence the level of wage and the relationship between education and productivity is not assured: a certain level of education is a “visa” for better and prestigious places but not a real certification of skills acquired (Cobalti, Schizzerotto 2006)

As already highlighted by Cobalti and Schizzerotto (1993) for the Italian context, despite the expansion of education in last fifty years, educational inequalities (in particular in higher education) based upon social classes didn't decrease but remained stable. In his analysis the level of education of individuals is determined by father education and his occupational status, with the former much more important in explaining differences: “the weight of cultural capital in explaining the variability of educational attainment is greater than that of social position of origin” (Cobalti, Schizzerotto 1993, p.167).

Checchi and Flabbi (2006) studied the effect of tracking at high school level in Italy and highlighted that the educational background of family of origin is crucial for persistence of inequalities in education. In most cases the choice of a course oriented to academic studies (*liceo or gymnasium*) or the choice of a technical, labor-market oriented course (*istituto tecnico; istituto professionale*) is not a direct result of abilities showed by students, but it is affected by educational level of parents. The study shows that, even controlling for all individual characteristics of the student (for example age, skills, ...) the son of a graduated parent has +25 p.p. to study in a *liceo* than a son of a parent with high school diploma. They show also that once that student entered in a course of study (*liceo* or technical) individual abilities loose relevance and the courses influence the expectations of students: probability to continue to next level of education (higher education) differs a lot according to different kind of diploma. For example 80% of students coming from a *liceo* is willing to continue to HE, on the contrary, the ratio fall to 35% among students of technical schools and to 16% among students of vocational schools. In conclusion, the impression is that the choice of high school is crucial for further access to HE. It depends on the joint effect of family background and individual abilities, but once one enter in a specific course of study the latter becomes the major determinant. The fact of having a graduated parent has a strong positive effect on probability to enrol in HE and to continue to study and a negative effect on probability not to enrol; effect of parents falls if we consider then the kind of high school (Checchi, Flabbi 2006). As a consequence, the choice of the secondary school is crucial for the probability of access to HE: educational level of parents affects the choice of high school, and the latter is determinant for continuing the studies. In conclusion, as Cappellari (2006) highlights, the level of education of parents has a direct effect, that originates from bigger attention and importance given by highly educated parents to the education of sons and daughters, and an indirect effect, given by the scholastic results of offspring by a richer cultural capital. Goldthorpe (1996) assumed the same outline, saying that class differentials are generated by two levels of effects: primary effects are those linked to abilities demonstrated at school through tests and examinations (offspring of highly educated parents in average perform better than those from lower educated parents), secondary effects are linked to choices of educational career that usually children take, consensually with their parents and on the bases of their expectations.

Some notes about Italian higher education system

In last decades many changes occurred in Italian higher education system. First one was in 1969, when access to Faculty was liberalized, generating the conditions for “mass University”. Before 1969 only students coming from *liceo* had the possibility to choose any Faculty, with few exceptions¹. After the reform of 1969, independently from their diploma, students could choose freely the favourite Faculty and Degree Course. This was the end of the University as a place only for sons and daughters of elites, and the beginning of the mass-University: meaning an enormous

¹ The diploma of surveyor permitted to study Architecture or Engineering; the diploma of accountant allowed to study Economics.

growth in number of students, facing problems of great heterogeneity in social status, age, expectations and problems of crowding. As a consequence, during the period 1975-1985 many new Universities were settle down, particularly in southern regions of Italy.

The expansion of higher education supply in Italy continued to all the '90s, pushed by both logistical and political reasons. Universities of big cities grew too much and showed many problems in management, logistics and internal disputes for sharing power. Furthermore, entered in the matter requests by local politicians and institutions for opening university sites in their territory in order to give new competitiveness to local economy and gaining in prestige for these medium-small cities (Bagnasco, 2004).

So, by means of new laws², government encouraged autonomy of University and forced the biggest ones (>40.000 students) to open new smaller sites in neighbouring cities (Bratti et al. 2008). This was the birth of what we are talking about: “decentralized university” or “local sites”.

Generally the spread of decentralized universities started around 1992/1995, and their supply was made up mainly by “twin courses”, identical to ones taught in the main site’ University. It was with the reform occurred in 1999 that supply grew remarkably. The reform set up by D.M. 509/1999 marked a great shift generally in the HE organization: the whole architecture of university curricula changed in order to near the Italian higher education system to European standards (see Bologna process³), to solve problems of low participation and low “productivity” rates, and also for bringing closer to labour market the university degrees.

With respect to decentralized universities, the 1999 reform generated a great number of new courses, some because of the split up of 5 years courses, some for offering a better market-oriented supply and some other for marketing reasons. The reform was the occasion for enlarging their range, try to gain more autonomy and set up a well-framed supply. The trend was to put together with “twin courses” some specific courses oriented to peculiarity of local economy or territory.

Recently, due to the ongoing reform of University run by the present government (Minister M. Gelmini), attention has been paid again to decentralized sites. The political debate is focused about a cost-reduction strategy, not considering positive implications for economy and society but also the importance of spread of higher education institutions on the national country. Some authors indeed (Pigliaru 2008), highlighted the relationship between number of universities and number of graduates: in most advanced economies (like for example USA, Canada, Australia, Sweden, Finland) an high rate of graduates are linked to the spread of many institutions for HE across the country. Referring to the case of University of Cagliari and recent governmental reforms (see Gelmini reform) Pigliaru (2008) says that decentralized site of Universities can only help the country to increase the rate of young graduates, though they need a change in the governance and a new organization.

Review of literature about decentralized or regional universities

There is still little of literature available about role of regional and decentralized sites, mainly because they are a pretty new entity. However some authors recently highlighted a positive role of decentralized sites (Bertolini, Melis, 2009; Cassone, 2008; Goglio, 2008, 2009; Pigliaru 2008).

Cassone (2008) made his considerations observing Almalaurea dataset about graduates of Eastern Piedmont University: it is a small and recently opened University (around 9.000 students), where there is an amount of students coming from families with a lower educational level than the degree of +13 point percentage in comparison with the national average. Only 11% of graduates of Eastern Piedmont University has at least one parent with an academic degree, against the national average of 23%, and a percent around 30%-25% of most ancient Italian universities (for example Bologna,

² Law n° 537 of 24/12/1993; Law n° 662 of 23/12/1996; DPR n° 25 of 27/1/1998

³ In 1998 at University of Sorbone-Paris, Minister for Education of Germany, France, UK and Italy made an agreement for promoting harmonization of HE architecture in Europe, based upon a system of two cycles. In June 1999 this agreement has been reinforced and signed by 29 European countries for promoting an European higher Education Area, usually named “Bologna Process” (Luzzatto, 2008).

Roma La Sapienza, Parma, Firenze...). He observed this relation in almost all of the recently opened universities in small-medium towns (for example Universities of Catanzaro, Sassari, Foggia...). On the contrary, urban bourgeoisie tends to enrol here their sons and daughters, where probably they studied in the past, or because of a lack of perceived reputation of the new university or because they seek external experiences and a richer cultural panorama for their offspring.

The conclusion he draws is that these new universities in smaller towns (or in old rural areas now interested by increasing urbanization and a shift toward services-based economy) can give a chance to fight the persistent transmission of same levels of education and social position from one generation to the other, as it is quite common in Italy. Further, the attraction and improvement of human resources coming from families with low educational level backgrounds imply a following enrichment for all the community and represent the most important challenge for local development.

At the same time regional universities have the task to fill the gap in terms of perceived reputation by putting in practice policies for acknowledge of quality of didactic and research and for attraction of students from abroad and outside the region, jointly coordinated by University and local stakeholders (municipality, regional administration,...).

Bertolini (2009) investigated graduates from Faculty of Political Sciences of Cuneo (decentralized site of University of Turin). From the qualitative interviews emerged that for most of them the fact of having a “next-door” university has been a crucial point in the choice to enter in higher education or not. The educational background and the economical resources of the family of origin were the main issues that influenced the choice: many of them would not have enrolled if it there was not. Sometimes also the choice of the course of study was influenced by the availability of the course in the next-door university.

Pigliaru (2008) thesis is based on the relationship between number of universities and number of graduates: in most advanced economies (like for example USA, Canada, Australia, Sweden, Finland) an high rate of graduates are linked to the spread of many institutions for HE across the country. Referring to the case of University of Cagliari and recent governmental reforms (see Gelmini reform) he says that decentralized site of Universities can only help the country to increase the rate of young graduates, but they need a change in the governance and a new organization.

Topics of the paper

In this paper we would like to bring attention to the particular situation of decentralized sites of Italian main Universities. They are a pretty new phenomenon, still little has been said about them, but they show an important potential. We focused the attention just on a little part of organization of higher education system in Italy: regional and decentralized universities. We do not claim to fully explain problems and challenges of HE in Italy and we do not believe to have solutions or policies “ready to go” but our aim is to raise discuss about it, bringing new arguments for the debate.

In this study we will show some results coming out from two researches conducted on decentralized sites of bigger universities in Piedmont (Goglio 2008, 2009), from which we argue an important key point that is worthy to be discussed: it seems that regional universities can play a specific role for increasing access to HE also for less favourite -in terms of economic and cultural resources of origin- people.

Origin of data

The research investigates the composition of students of decentralized sites in province of Cuneo of the University of Turin and of the Polytechnic of Turin.

In the case of University of Turin we analyzed data referring to personal information of students enrolled. We compared data about students resident in Cuneo province enrolled in the decentralized sites for the period since 2001/02 to 2006/07, to those who studied in the same courses and in the same period at the main university’ site (Turin).

Data derive from two databases given by Didactic and Students Division of University of Turin. For each student we have information about: date of birth, date of enrolment, date of end career (degree, drop out or status at November 2007), kind, mark and final year of diploma, final mark of degree course, passage to next level of education (master degree).

A first database counts 4.427 students, who have the following characteristics:

- resident in province of Cuneo
- enrolled in sites in province of Cuneo between academic years 2001/02 and 2006/07.

In order to make comparisons we used a second database, set up by 836 students:

- resident in province of Cuneo,
- enrolled in main site of University (i.e. Turin)
- enrolled at the same Degree Courses already resident in local site of Cuneo, i.e. “twin courses” (comparisons are made only among students enrolled in “twin courses”, since many variables influence the choice of a Degree Course and consequently could bias our observations).

In the case of Polytechnic of Turin we refer to a survey implemented in 2009 about students enrolled in the decentralized site of Polytechnic of Turin in Mondovì. The survey was based on a on-line questionnaire to which only students had access⁴, build up by 35 multiple-choice questions. The questionnaire has been send to 845 students, the rate of answer was 33,5% for a total amount of 283 cases. The questionnaire was build up using “LimeSurvey”⁵, a free software, data coming from student’s answers were automatically registered in an electronic database.

The survey has been implemented in cooperation with the Administration of Mondovì site (CESMO) of Polytechnic of Turin, that helped us with human and informational resources.

Results of research

University of Turin

Referring first to University of Turin, we analyzed variables about “kind of high school diploma” and “age at the moment of enrolment”. Data supplied by Didactic and Students Division of University of Turin do not include direct information about social origin and educational background of students, but the former indicator permits us to have an idea about social status of the student. We are aware that this indicator is not fully representative, but it’s widely accepted (Ballarino, Checchi 2006; Checchi, Flabbi 2006; Verzicco 2003) that in case of lack of further information it can be considered as a proxy for social and educational background of family. We have seen before as literature shows that educational level and class position of parents influences the choice of high school for their sons or daughters, so that students coming from families with low-medium educational level (high school diploma or lower), traditionally go to technical or professional schools. On the contrary students coming from families with high educational level (at least one of the parents has a degree) and consequently higher class position, tend to attend *liceo*.

Thus, we considered the kind of high school diploma as a proxy for identify the social background of students.

Comparing data of students enrolled in university sites in Cuneo and their colleagues, resident in Cuneo province that decided to enrol at same course but in Turin, we noticed that in decentralized sites there is an higher rate of students coming from technical or vocational high schools. On the contrary, students coming from *liceo* (academic oriented high schools) are dominant among the other group (Table 1). The rate of students coming from technical or vocational high schools is

⁴ Students regularly enrolled at Polytechnic in Mondovì have been invited by e-mail to answer the questionnaire, the access was regulated by filling in the usual username and password that students have for access to academic services.

⁵ *LimeSurvey* (formerly PHPSurveyor) is an Open Source PHP web application to develop, publish and collect responses to online & offline surveys (www.limesurvey.org).

+14,3 point percent in decentralized sites rather than in Turin. At the same time rate of students coming from *liceo* is +14 point percent among students in Turin rather than in decentralized sites in Cuneo province.

Furthermore we noticed another phenomenon, linked to age of students: in decentralized sites in Cuneo province the number of older-aged students is higher rather than among the group of students in Turin. In decentralized sites of Cuneo the rate of students that enrolled at university when 25 or more years old is +8 points percent rather than in Turin main site (Table 2).

Data used for the analysis do not supply direct information about working condition of students, but given the structure of labour market in Cuneo province, we can assume that most of students aged >25 years-old are to be considered with the status of “working-student”, i.e. a person that is already employed and enrolled at University several years after the diploma.

Table 1 Students’ diploma for each university site

	Main site (Turin)	Decentralized sites (Cuneo, Alba, Savigliano)
Liceo (Gymnasium)	62.8%	48.5%
Technical, professional schools	37.2%	51.5%
	100%	100%

Table 2 Age of students for each university site

	Main site (Turin)	Decentralized sites (Cuneo, Alba, Savigliano)
18-24 years old	80%	72%
≥ 25 years old	20%	28%
	100%	100%

Polytechnic of Turin

With regard to decentralized site of Polytechnic of Turin in Cuneo province, we have more detailed information about personal data of students.

For the purposes of the paper here we focus on the information about educational background⁶ of students’ families and the effects on the probability to enrol in a degree course. We will present also some comparison of the distribution of educational levels of parents and students’ high school diploma between main university’ site and decentralized site. However in this case, unlike the previous data about University of Turin, we could not compare two homogeneous groups of students with same characteristics (we used general statistics for the main university’ site) and as a consequence, the relation could be affected by some bias (for example the field of study and place of residence). In any case, keeping in mind these limits, we can observe them as indicative of some trends.

The distribution of the different kinds of high school diploma among students (Table 3) seems to confirm what hypothesized previously about University of Turin: there is a deep gap between main university site and decentralized site about rate of students coming from technical or professional schools (+21.6 points in favour of the latter).

The distribution of the educational levels of parents (Table 4) in the decentralized site and in the main university’ site seems to suggest, once again, that students coming from families with higher

⁶ We referred to the Methodology of AlmaLaurea Consortium (AlmaLaurea, 2008): the educational levels of father and mother declared by the student have been aggregated in one variable indicating the highest educational level between mother and father; with respect to the degree we distinguish the cases in which both parents are graduated from those in which only one is graduated.

educational level tend to choose the main university site (the gap is +7.5 points among students with at least one parent or both parents graduated). On the contrary, in the decentralized site there are more students coming from families with high school diploma or lower educational levels (the gap is +9.5 points)

Further, in order to investigate the relationship between cultural background and access to higher education we asked the students which alternatives they would have put in practice if the decentralized site was not available. The results are very interesting: about 14% of them would not have enrolled at all to a degree course (Table 5). This result is more relevant if we cross it with the educational background of the family, that shows that it seems to be there an association between educational level of parents and the probability to enrol (Table 6). Actually the probability to renounce to higher education increases as the educational level of parents decreases (with a particularly positive effect of “having both parents graduated”).

In conclusion, we could hypothesize that the decentralized sites of higher education institutions⁷ can play a crucial role in the access to higher education: they are not a fading copy of the main sites, or a comfortable “next-door” university that permits younger to stay longer at home. On the contrary, we can see them as a key actor for the spreading of higher education across the nation. This is a very important point if we consider that until now the debate in Italy about decentralized sites has been focused only on a cost reduction strategy and against nepotistic dynamics. In a context in which Italy is in the lower positions among EU-27 about number of graduates and the goal of a highly competitive knowledge’ economy, fixed by Lisbon Agenda, seems to be yet far away. If in some cases some critics can be shared, it is necessary to define clearly when a decentralized site answers only to lobbyist pressures and when it can be considered as a key element for development.

Table 3 High school diploma for each site – Polytechnic of Turin-

	Main site (Turin)	Decentralized site (Mondovì)
Liceo (Gymnasium)	65.3%	48.0%
Technical, professional schools	30.4%	52.0%
Others	3.6%	/
	100%	100%

Table 4 Educational attainment of parents for each site - Polytechnic of Turin-

	Main site (Turin)	Decentralized site (Mondovì)
Both graduates	12.0%	9.0%
At least one parent graduated	17.5%	13.0%
High school	46.7%	54.0%
Lower levels	21.8%	24.0%
	100%	100%

⁷ In Italy they are almost exclusively Universities and Polytechnics.

Table 5 If there were not the decentralized site in Mondovì...

	%
I would not have enrolled	13.8%
I would have enrolled at Polytechnic in another town	71.0%
I would have enrolled at University in province of Cuneo	11.7%
I would have enrolled at University in another town	8.5%

Table 6 Alternatives and cultural background of family

		%
I would not have enrolled	Both parents graduated	4.3%
	Only one parent graduated	11.8%
	High school	15.6%
	Lower education	17.5%

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