THE ITALIAN ADMISSION SYSTEM TO HIGHER EDUCATION: QUALITY, EQUITY AND MOBILITY ISSUES

Niccolo Durazzi

1. INTRODUCTION

The Italian higher education system has gone through substantial changes over the last decades, with admission systems being considerably affected by various reforms. A focus on widening participation marked in 1969 by a reform granting ‘free’ access to university to all students who had completed any secondary school, was coupled in the 1990s with an increased focus on the quality of the system, which entailed, among others, more selectivity at the point of entry to university. In this framework, universities gained more authority and decision-making in various fields, including that of admissions, albeit the system retains a considerable degree of centralisation through the Ministry of Education, which sets the framework conditions for the whole education sector at national level. The powers retained by the Ministry and those progressively devolved to universities shaped a tri-partite system of admissions to university which brings together traditional features of the Italian system (e.g. free access degrees and selected degrees regulated at the national level, such as Medicine) and innovative aspects (e.g. degrees with access regulated at the local level by universities).

This policy brief analyses the Italian admission system to higher education along three analytical dimensions, namely quality, equity and mobility. Quality refers to ability of a system to act as a reliable predictor of students’ future academic success; equity refers to the capacity of the system to cater for the needs of a diverse group of learners (e.g. disabled students; mature students) as well as students from different socio-economic backgrounds; and mobility refers to the ability of an admission system to favour inbound and outbound mobility of students.

These three dimensions are analysed respectively in sections 2, 3, and 4 of this brief. Section 5 summarises the main findings and section 6 provides a set of policy recommendations based on the analysis carried out in the preceding sections.

1.1 A snapshot of the Italian system

The different steps that lead a student to enter higher education in Italy vary according to the university that a student is applying for and to the degree he / she is applying for. The first step, common to all applicants, is to be notified by their high schools of the outcome of their secondary school leaving exam.

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1 This brief builds on a forthcoming research study funded by the European Parliament, which is gratefully acknowledged. The research study is titled Higher Education Entrance Qualification and Exams in Europe: A Comparison (ref: IP/B/CULT/IC/2013-007) and it is being jointly implemented by LSE Enterprise and RAND Europe.

2 Deputy Director, LSE Enterprise, London School of Economics and Political Science. Correspondence: niccolo.durazzi@lse.ac.uk
After a student has been notified of his / her grade, and if he / she has successfully completed secondary school, the application process may develop in three alternative ways, reflecting the composition of the Italian higher education system which is built around: (i) degrees with open access upon successful completion of secondary school; (ii) degrees with access regulated at national level and therefore that can be accessed upon successful completion of secondary school and of a standardized national entry test; (iii) degrees with access regulated at the local level and therefore that can be accessed upon successful completion of secondary school and of a test set by the university. While the first two paths to higher education are part of the ‘traditional’ Italian system of admission to university, the third path is the outcome of more recent developments that follow the 1999 reform, which granted more autonomy to universities in regulating entry to higher education. The 1999 reform aims to give universities more control over admissions in order: (i) to counteract the potential shortcomings stemming from over-crowded courses (which may lower the quality of the teaching and learning experience) and (ii) to facilitate a smooth transition of graduates into the labour market (since number of available places can be modulated taking into account labour market demands) (Gubbiotti 2011: 84).

Degrees with free entry upon successful completion of secondary school

The only requirement to be fulfilled in order to access a degree with free access is to have successfully completed secondary school. After students have received their secondary school leaving certificate, they can enrol to any free access degree at the university that they have selected. In some instances universities may run non-selective entry tests. These aim at providing the students with an assessment of their knowledge prior to starting the degree and ‘nudge’ them to consider applying for a different degree if they fail or if they achieve a low score. However a fail or a low score on these tests do not prevent students from enrolling in the degree. Rather they are assigned an additional educational obligation (obbligo formativo aggiuntivo), which means that students that receive a low score on the non-selective entry tests must take additional courses in the first year (besides those in the regular curriculum) in order to fill the knowledge gap that emerged from the non-selective entry tests. Some universities may decide to run non-selective entry tests only for students whose secondary school examination grade is below a certain threshold.

Degrees with access regulated at national level

Admission to the following degrees is regulated at the national level through a standardized entry test: medicine and surgery; veterinary medicine; dentistry; nursery; architecture. The main actor in regulating admission to these degrees is the Ministry of Education, University and Research (Ministero dell’Istruzione, dell’Università e della Ricerca, MIUR), which is in charge of designing the test, setting the ceiling to the number of students for each degree each year, distributing the test in the various universities and supervising on the tests being run in a transparent and fair way.

Degrees with access regulated at local level by the universities

Law 264/1999, part of the 1999 reform, introduced a third type of admission to university where a more central role and discretion is assigned to individual institutions (Gubbiotti 2011: 83). According

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3 Already in 1989 (Law 168/1989), steps were taken towards more autonomy of the universities, although the focus was not on admissions procedures, but rather on universities having more autonomy in setting up degrees and establishing new branches. While not directly affecting admissions, this law should be seen as a first step of a process towards more decentralisation and institutional autonomy which led to the 1999 reform
to Law 264/1999, universities have the authority to set ceilings to the number of students and to autonomously design admission tests to degrees that foresee intensive use of labs, IT equipment and, more broadly, a personalized approach to teaching and learning which would not benefit from a large number of students. In these instances, universities seek authorization from the MIUR to set a ceiling for a given degree and, if the MIUR grants such authorization, they are then responsible to design and run the entry tests. The MIUR, when assessing whether a degree in a specific university should have restrictions to admissions, takes into account the following seven criteria: (i) capacity of teaching rooms; (ii) availability of equipment and labs; (iii) number of faculty; (iv) number of technicians; (v) availability of tutoring services; (vi) if internships or traineeships are part of the curriculum, the number of available internships or traineeships; (vii) the modalities of students participation to the teaching and learning activities. While the system is still overall open, the number of universities setting ceilings for specific degrees has grown considerably overtime; in 2001, 242 degrees had access regulated at the local level through admission tests run by universities, while in 2006 the number of courses reached 1,060, representing an increase of 330% (Gubbiotti 2011: 82).

2. QUALITY

The entry requirements to higher education are partly set at the national level and partly at the level of the university. High schools and universities are responsible for the implementation of the relevant examinations and tests. At the national level, the MIUR intervenes in three ways: (i) it designs the secondary school leaving exam, which is then implemented by the various schools (and co-designed as far as the 3rd written examination and the oral examinations are concerned; (ii) it designs the standardised national tests for the degrees that require such tests; (iii) it gives authorisation to universities to restrict admissions to certain degrees at the local level.

Universities have a central role in the third item mentioned above, since once MIUR has authorised them to restrict the admission to certain degrees, they are then responsible for designing and running the entry tests.

When it comes to the reliability of the admissions procedures, a distinction shall be made across the three basic routes of access to university. Free entry degrees are based upon successful completion of secondary school. Since there are no studies or datasets available that specifically relate admission procedures to future academic success for Italy, the best proxy for academic (un-)success seems to be dropout rates after the first year of university. In this respect, it is found that previous educational attainment explains only to some extent the future academic success of a student and that the main determinant for dropout is socio-economic background of the students (Cingano and Cipollone, 2003). In this respect, secondary school diploma is not a strong predictor of future academic success.

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4 Interviewee Donatella Marsiglia from MIUR noted how the introduction of degrees with access regulated at the local level by universities was also influenced by the restructuring of the higher education sector following the Bologna Process. The establishment of 3-year first cycle degrees with a more specialized and practical curriculum than before made it necessary to change the teaching and learning approach (e.g. by introducing internships and more practical experiences through the use of labs and technical equipment) which required more limited cohorts of students to be successfully achieved.
If however we examine degrees where entry is regulated at national level via standardised tests, we see how these tests are very reliable in predicting academic success. Against an average rate of dropout after the first year of over 18% at national level, students who enrol in degrees with a national test have a dramatically lower probability to dropout (ranging from 9% in architecture to basically 0% in medicine in the academic year 2009/2010) (MIUR 2011: 53). Thus, being successful in the standardised national test seems to be a good predictor of a student’s future academic success5.

Information on the admission system is rather comprehensive and easily accessible. Universities typically have a webpage dedicated to this where the various steps that need to be taken in order to enrol to university are laid out clearly6. The MIUR has a webpage dedicated to the degrees with access regulated at national level with information on the tests as well as copy of previous years’ examination7. Information is usually available both in Italian and English.

As it has been noted in several points earlier in the document, the main item of novelty in admission policy in recent years has been a decentralisation of the system to give more power to universities. A potential downside to this is excessive reliance on the administrative and managerial capacity of universities. In this respect, during the latest round of entry tests in September 2012, there have been several administrative and procedural problems against which, in some instances, applicants have appealed, for instance through the national students’ union8. Such problems ranged from applicants for a given degree receiving the wrong entry test (e.g. applicants in Psychology receiving the test for Biology at the University la Sapienza in Rome) to questions of the test presenting mistakes (e.g. the Nursery test at the University of Parma).

3. EQUITY

The overall competitiveness or openness of the system is hard to assess, since there are remarkable and obvious differences in this respect according to the degree a student is applying for, and therefore according to the specific entry route leading to that degree.

By definition, degrees with free access are not competitive and are fully open. Students simply need to enrol following successful completion of secondary school. Soft instruments are in place to ‘nudge’ students towards the best choice by means of non-selective entry tests which provide students with an understanding of their own background knowledge. However, as discussed at length earlier in this report, a fail (or a low score) on these tests does not prevent students from enrolling.

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5 In this respect, a potential self-selection bias should be considered. Further, the MIUR has recognised the need for a more systematic analysis of the relationship between admission system and future academic success and has just initiated a longitudinal study which will shed light in the coming years on such relationship.

6 As an example, the admission page of the University of Bologna, one of the largest public universities in the country looks as follows: http://www.eng.unibo.it/PortaleEn/Students/Admission/Admission.htm

7 This MIUR’s webpage dedicated to degrees with access regulated at national level is the following: http://www.accessoprogrammato.miur.it/2013/index.html

When it comes to courses with access regulated at the national level, the system becomes far more competitive, as shown in the following table, which reveals how the average rate of admission across the degrees with access regulated at the national level has been slightly above 20% in recent years.

**Table 1: Intake rate for degrees regulated at national level**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2012/2013</th>
<th>2013/2014</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Degree</strong></td>
<td>Applicants</td>
<td>Available places</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine and surgery; dentistry</td>
<td>68,426</td>
<td>10,714</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterinary medicine</td>
<td>7,811</td>
<td>918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architecture</td>
<td>20,193</td>
<td>8,720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>96,430</td>
<td>20,352</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Marsiglia, 2013

The application process is rather swift, tests are usually taken in September, and students know their results in the same month. While the speed of the process is certainly a positive feature, the fact that tests are run just before the start of the academic year creates a problem in terms of re-orientation in the event that a student fails the test, since he / she will have little time to decide what alternative degree to enrol to.

Looking at the demographic composition of students, it emerges that the vast majority of students (i.e. around 65%) enrol to university straight after completion of secondary school, i.e. at the age of 19 (MIUR, 2011).

Turning to the socio-economic background of students, while the system overall reflects the varied socio-economic composition of Italian society, some groups are over-represented and, conversely, some others are under-represented. An analysis of the Eurostudent survey shows how students whose parents have white collar jobs are considerably more likely to go to university than students whose parents have a blue collar occupation (Fondazione RUI, 2008: 6–7). Similarly, parents educated at university level are more likely to see their children enrolling to university than parents with lower levels of education (Fondazione RUI, 2008: 6–7). Further, figures from the academic year 2009/2010 show that almost every student who attended a gymnasium went to university (around 97%), while the figure is much lower for technical and professional schools (around 45% and 23% respectively) (MIUR, 2011: 43), however it is found that socio-economic background is the main determinant of such choice, with better-off students tending to enrol to gymnasiums and students from poorer backgrounds attending technical and professional schools (Caroleo and Pastore, 2012).

The Italian legislation has taken steps to promote an equitable access to higher education. If we analyse the measures taken at the point of entry, it emerges that students with disabilities and students from worse-off background are exempted from paying the enrolment fee (which was just below 200 EUR for the academic year 2012-2013). This is laid out in Ministerial Decree of 9th April 2001, which updates the framework conditions for access to university, following on article 4 of Law
390/1991. However, although entry fees are waived for students from poorer background (and therefore the system is very equitable if we strictly look at it at the point of entry), financial support available for poorer students throughout their studies only covers approximately 60% of the available requests which may partly explain the unbalanced socio-economic composition of the student population.

Equity in the admission system does not only refer to the instruments deployed to ease the access of students from disadvantaged backgrounds; it also refers to how an admission system caters for groups such as non-traditional students and students with disabilities, as briefly discussed below.

Students from non-traditional backgrounds do not have alternative routes to access higher education. While some initiatives to grant credits to students with prior professional experience have been taken (e.g. the initiative Laureare l’esperienza, mentioned above), there is no alternative to the basic requirement of having a secondary school leaving certificate, as such the inclusion of non-traditional students through special provisions does not appear to be an item on the agenda.

Students with disabilities represent 1% of the total student population (Fondazione RUI, 2008: 24) and are entitled to a number of benefits that aim at easing their access into the system. These include the exemption from the application fee and tuition fees and access to financial support which is higher than the one available to other students and more extended in time. Further, Law 17/1999 established that each university had a delegate whose task was specifically to make the system more inclusive for disabled students. Universities also took some initiatives in this field and created in 2001 an organisation, called National University Conference of the Disability Delegates (Conferenza Nazionale Universitaria dei Delegati per la Disabilità, CNUDD), which brings together all the disability delegates to share information and best practices among universities.

4. MOBILITY

The degree of inward and outward openness of the Italian higher education system is rather limited in comparison to most OECD countries, despite a trend of progressive growth of foreign students in the Italian higher education system and of Italian students abroad.

The latest report published by the MIUR on the Italian university system reveals that the number of foreign students – both EU and non-EU – has been steadily increasing in absolute terms and as a percentage of the overall student population over the last decade. In the academic year 2000/2001, 5,509 foreign students – at both undergraduate and graduate levels – enrolled in Italian universities representing 1.9% of the students that enrolled to university. In that same year, there were overall 25,769 foreign students in the higher education system, accounting for 1.5% of the total student body. In 2009/2010, 12,188 foreign students enrolled to university (i.e. 4.2% of students enrolled) and the total population of foreign students amounted to 59,509 individuals (i.e. 3.3% of the total students population) (MIUR, 2011: 68).

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While a clear trend of growth can be observed, foreign students enrol considerably less to Italian universities than to universities in other OECD countries, where the average of foreign students as a percentage of the total population of students was in 2009/2010 at 8.5%, thus almost three times higher than in Italy.

Outward mobility is also limited: 1.3% of the total student population was studying abroad in 2009/2010, a data much lower than Germany and France (where the percentage of students abroad on the entire student body was of 3.4% and 2.3% respectively), but higher than Spain and the United Kingdom (0.9% and 0.8% respectively).

Foreign students in the Italian higher education system are representative of the main migratory flows, mostly entailing the Balkans (e.g. Albania), Eastern Europe (e.g. Romania), Northern Africa (e.g. Morocco) and Asia (e.g. China).

As far as international students – both EU and non-EU – are concerned, the Italian education system does not set different requirements. All foreign applicants need to have a secondary school leaving certificate released by a high school legally recognised in the issuing country. Foreign applicants must have at least 12 years of prior schooling and they are then subject to the same tests as the Italian applicants as well as same fees\(^\text{10}\).

Further, in recent years, some steps have been taken in order to make the system more open, both inward and outward. As far as inward mobility is concerned, two main items stand out: (i) the entry tests to Medicine have been run for the first time in 2012 in English language and simultaneously in Italy and abroad (in the Italian consulates). This is an example of an effort made to open up the system to foreign applicants, going beyond linguistic barriers and physical barriers, the latter being especially relevant for applicants from non-EU countries that would face visa issues to go to a foreign country to take the test; (ii) the Marco Polo programme\(^\text{11}\), developed within CRUI, and currently managed independently by individual universities, aimed to increase the inflow of Chinese students, as a part of a broader attempt to strengthen economic relations with China at the national level. The programme prompted universities to put in place policies to actively attract Chinese students, for instance by stepping up the offer of Italian language courses to Chinese students and streamlining the administrative procedures for visa and enrolment matters.

In terms of outward mobility, high schools have been required from the early 2000s to release high school diplomas in English, French, German and Spanish as well to ease the application process of Italian students to foreign universities.

Thus, the Italian system is in principle extremely open to foreign applicants. Within this general framework however, interviewees Marina Cavallini from CRUI and Luca Lantero from CIMEA flagged two items of concern: (i) while barriers to entry are formally non-existent, the design of entry tests may represent a *de facto* barrier in some instances, when notions specific to the educational offer of

\(^{10}\) Fees vary by university, by degree and by economic conditions of the students. A study by Federconsumatori, the consumers’ association, shows that for the academic year 2013/2014 fees varied between a national average of just above EUR 500 for students in the lowest income group, to just above EUR 2000 for students in the highest income bracket (Federconsumatori 2013).

\(^{11}\) Further information on the programme is available on CRUI’s website: http://www.crui.it/internazionalizzazione/homepage.aspx?ref=1245 (last accessed on 12th November, 10:59am) and on MIUR’s website http://www.studiare-in-italia.it/studentistranieri (last accessed on 31st March, 03:42pm)
Italian high schools are part of the tests (e.g. Italian literature) making it difficult for foreign students to be successful; (ii) while secondary school leaving certificates from European countries do not raise major problems, lack of reliable information on some non-EU countries makes it difficult for universities to assess the validity of such diplomas.

5. ASSESSMENT

The main strengths of the admission system lie in its tripartite way to access university which maintains the system open overall, while also ‘safeguarding’ quality of teaching in those areas where a more regulated access is needed. As has been noted earlier, this tripartite system is the outcome of the 1999 reform, which decentralised the admission system giving more decision-making power to universities. As noted by interviewee Marina Cavallini from CRUI, before 1999, the tradition of open access to university led to an ‘excessive massification’ of the system, which translated into university enrolment as an almost automatic step following completion of secondary school. However, this progressive opening of the system was accompanied by high dropout rates (especially after the first year) and low rates of completion of university in time. These issues were tackled by devolving more power to universities in managing access to their degrees through non-selective entry tests and through regulated access at the local level. The former, being non-selective, is a ‘soft’ instrument that allows applicants to have an ex-ante understanding of their fit for a specific degree, and therefore make a more informed decision as to whether to enrol or not to university or to a specific degree. The latter is a ‘hard’ instrument that restricts access at the level of the single institution to some degrees that had free access before 1999. Dropout rates after the first year – that used to be around 27% in the academic year 1999/2000 – have constantly decreased since then, and went down to 18% in the academic year 2009/2010 (MIUR, 2011: 52). While there are no studies that test the causality between the 1999 reform and the decrease in dropout rates, interviewees Donatella Marsiglia from MUIR and Marina Cavallini from CRUI agree that the decentralisation of the admission system and the increased power assigned to universities in this respect had a positive impact on decreasing dropout rates.

The use of non-selective entry test is particularly interesting because part of a broader trend adopted in the education system of strengthening the quality and quantity of information available to students. The idea of non-selective entry test is strictly related to that of entry orientation (orientamento in entrata) which aims at giving students an idea of their likelihood of success in a particular degree, without however constraining their choice if the test is failed.

On the other hand, increased decentralisation in the management and regulation of access to university inevitably leads to greater reliance on universities’ administrative and managerial capacity to run the admission processes. It is observed that this may cause issues as far as consistency across universities is concerned, since there have been cases of applicants filing complaints regarding the modalities adopted by universities to run the tests and that problems are encountered as far as fairness and transparency are concerned12.

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12 Examining the latest round of entry tests in September 2012, several press releases highlight how the implementation of entry tests has encountered technical problems across several universities, as flagged for instance by the National Students Union: http://www.unionedegliuniversitari.it/tante-irregolarita-durante-i-test-in-tutta-italia-unica-via-e-superamento-definitivo-numero-chiuso-al-via-con-i-ricorsi/. Last accessed on 12th November, 11:22am.
Table 2 below provides a more extensive overview of the strengths and weaknesses of the Italian admissions’ system.

Table 2: Overview of strengths and weaknesses of the system

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mobility 13</td>
<td>Inward mobility: full equivalence of any foreign secondary school leaving certificate, provided that the institution that releases the diploma is officially recognised in the issuing country. Outward mobility: the high school diploma certification is released in foreign languages to ease the enrolment into foreign higher education systems.</td>
<td>Inward mobility: Entry tests are sometimes based to a considerable extent on notions that are specific to the Italian context (e.g. Italian literature) and acquired mostly in Italian high schools that foreign students are unlikely to know. Outward mobility: N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>The analysis of dropout rates from degrees with national standardised tests (medicine and related areas, and architecture) are considerably below the national average (MIUR, 2011: 52), thus national entry tests seem to be valid and reliable, although a potential self-selection bias should be taken into account. Quality of admission systems for free access degrees has improved thanks to, among others, non-selective entry tests and strengthened orientation from secondary school to university.</td>
<td>Overall, dropout rates are more influenced by socioeconomic background of students’ families than by students’ previous education performance, thus the school leaving certificate does not seem to have great potential in predicting academic success. Tests are usually run very close to the beginning of the academic year, thus leaving little time to students for ‘re-orientation’ in case they fail to pass the test.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity 14</td>
<td>Application fees are waived for applicants from poorer backgrounds. Financial support as well as subsidised housing and subsistence are provided. The access of non-traditional students, in particular mature students, is encouraged through recognition of professional experience that is in some instances translated into university credits. Several measures ease the access of students with disabilities.</td>
<td>Financial support to students from poorer background only satisfies approximately 60% of the requests. No specific measures are taken at the point of entry to favour the inclusion of non-traditional applicants (i.e. a school leaving certificate as minimum requirement is needed anyway). The Italian system seems to reproduce existing social structures, rather than aiding social mobility.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: author

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13 The terms portability, comparability and transferability may also be used to cover aspects related to student mobility.

14 Specific issues around transferability/mobility, quality and equity of the system summarized in this table are discussed at length in section 2 of the case study.
6. CONCLUSIONS

The system of Italian university admissions underwent significant changes in recent years to accommodate internal pressures (e.g. the high rates of dropout and late completion) and external pressures (e.g. the different approach to teaching and learning introduced at universities following the Bologna Process and the consequent restructuring of the degree cycles). The combination of these pressures translated into a process of progressive devolution of powers to universities, as far as admission policies are concerned, leading to a far more decentralised system than it had previously ever been. Major items of novelty in this respect are: (i) the possibility for universities to regulate and restrict access to their degrees at the local level (following authorisation from the MIUR) and (ii) the widespread introduction of non-selective entry test for open access degrees aiming to provide students with an ex-ante assessment of their knowledge. These measures managed to keep the university system open (since many degrees still have free access) while introducing an element of selectivity and self-assessment that contributed quite successfully to tackling the long standing problem of dropout after the first year. Next to these measures, some courses remain regulated at the national level via standardised national entry tests, which seem to be reliable in predicting the academic success of students in these degrees. The Italian system of admission has also tried to become friendlier for foreign applicants by introducing some elements such as the Medicine test abroad and in English language. Outward and inward mobility, while remaining below OECD average, is constantly growing. The MIUR and single universities have also focussed on making the system more equitable, and some issues (such as access to university for disabled students) have become more central to universities’ activities than they used to be in the past. Notwithstanding the efforts, the socio-economic makeup of the student body still reveals a disproportionate participation of students from better-off background, which has not been substantially tackled, also due to the lack of sufficient financial resources to widen access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Based on the assessment of the system, the following recommendations and issues for consideration emerge, grouped according to the analytical dimensions of this brief.

On quality:

➔ With increasing decentralisation of the admission systems, universities’ administrative and managerial capacity becomes crucial to guarantee a fair process. It should be an important item on every university’s agenda having an administration properly staffed, quantity- and quality- wise, for the management of admission processes.

➔ Building on the positive effects of the entry (selective and non-selective) tests on first year dropout, cooperation between high schools and universities should be strengthened further to ensure that the choice made by students is the best informed possible, thus minimising the risk of change, delay or dropout.
On equity:

➢ The reasons for an unbalanced socio-economic composition of the student population in higher education should be examined in order to understand how and at which point of a students’ educational career socio-economic background intervenes and therefore understand what kind of policy should be devised to tackle socio-economic imbalances in higher education participation. It seems clear from the analysis above that an open admission system along cannot tackle the strong correlation between parental background and access to higher education. It is therefore of paramount importance to intervene earlier on in the education career of students to maximise genuine freedom of choice at the point of entry to university.

➢ The introduction of alternative routes to university should be considered, as Italy features among one of the few European countries that do not provide such route. This seems particularly important in the context of today’s knowledge economy, entailing discontinuous employment and education experiences, and heavily focused on life-long learning.

On mobility:

➢ Building on the positive experience of the Medicine test abroad and in English language, the same approach could be adopted for all the degrees regulated at national level, aiming to open up the Italian system to foreign students more and more.

➢ Entry tests should be more neutral as far as knowledge of notions specifically related to Italian high school curricula are concerned (unless those notions are crucial for succeeding in the degree).
7. REFERENCES


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Federconsumatori (2013), *IV Rapporto sui costi degli atenei italiani – 2013*

Fondazione RUI (2008), *Sintesi dell’Indagine*. Rome


Marsiglia, D. (2013), *E-mail correspondence with the author on 4th November 2013*


8. LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marina Cavallini</td>
<td>CRUI</td>
<td>Head of International Relations Office</td>
<td>9/10/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luca Lantero</td>
<td>CIMEA</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>8/10/2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donatella Marsiglia</td>
<td>MIUR</td>
<td>Director, General Directorate for University, Student, and access to Higher Education</td>
<td>16/10/2013</td>
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</tbody>
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