

Risky university paths: dropping out and growing old in the changing university

Percorsi Universitari a Rischio: Misure di Dispersione e Invecchiamento nell'Università che Cambia

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Riassunto: Nel lavoro si presentano i risultati di un'analisi longitudinale sui fenomeni degli abbandoni universitari e dei fuori corso nelle università italiane. I dati si riferiscono a coorti di immatricolati - per anno accademico di prima immatricolazione - negli anni immediatamente precedenti e successivi all'entrata in vigore della riforma dei cicli universitari (a.a. 2000/01 in via sperimentale e a.a. 2001/02 in via definitiva), ossia tra il 1998 e il 2005. Le analisi effettuate permettono sia di esaminare i tempi di permanenza delle diverse coorti all'interno del sistema universitario sia di differenziare le uscite per abbandono degli studi da quelle per conseguimento del titolo. I risultati dell'analisi non evidenziano quelle significative riduzioni dei tempi di permanenza nel sistema né delle quote di abbandoni universitari che la riforma aveva fatto sperare.

Keywords: university, permanence, drop-out, graduation, cohort approach

1. Aim of the paper, data and methods

According to the Human Capital Theory, investments in education are related to a comparison between current expenses necessary to study and future higher earnings (Becker, 1975). In this context, dropping out and elderly students represent negative phenomena of human capital loss (Panella, 2002). On the other side, too long permanence in the university system produces negative effects also on the graduates' transition process to the labour market, as pointed out by the surveys carried out by Istat on "Inserimento professionale dei laureati" (Istat, 2006).

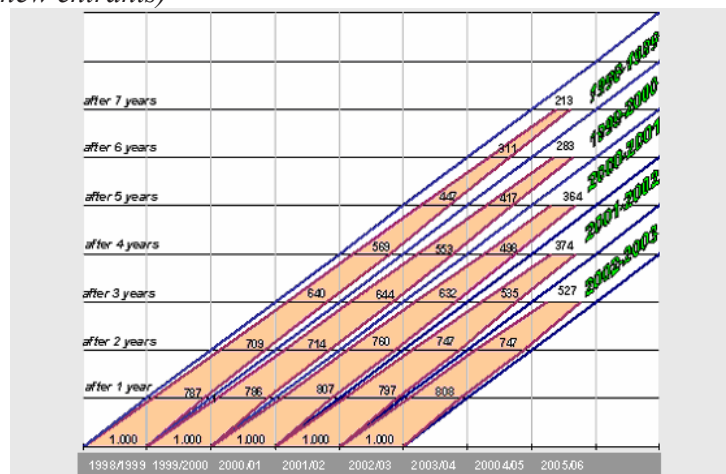
In Italy, since 2001 the university courses have been deeply changed – especially about the duration – due to the tertiary education reform process that has made more difficult analysing data, above all as regards to university irregular paths, such as drop-out and students who do not complete their programme within the legal time. For this reason, to study *risk conditions*, we have used a cohort approach, applied on data related to new entrants from 1998 to 2005. Such analyses are connected to the permanence process in the university system and to the going out process, for both graduation or dropping out.

2. Results

Figure 1 shows the longitudinal evolution of the permanence process in the first level courses university system; the analysis excludes those who gained another degree before and students enrolled in new second degree courses (Laurea specialistica).

Regarding to the cohort of the students who were new entrants in the 1998/99 academic year (N=278.934), after six years about 31% of them is still studying. Notably, for the 2001/02 cohort (N=319.251), that entered the system when the reform was taking place, after one year the percentage of permanence is similar to the one related to the previous cohorts; otherwise, after three years the percentage of permanence is strictly lower (54% vs 64%), likely due to the increase of graduations after shorter courses starting.

Figure 1: *Permanence in the university system (1st level). Cohorts 1998/99 - 2002/03 (per 1.000 new entrants)*



Source: Elaborations on data collected by the Italian Ministry of University

Further analysis on the going out process, in connection with permanence data, give information on graduation and drop out rates. The percentage of new entrants in 1998/99 who graduated before 2006 reaches about 39%. However, even if almost all of them entered a long old programme course, a lot of them, following the opportunities in changing course through the tertiary reform, ended a short new programme course. As regards to the 2001/02 cohort, 30% of students graduated before 2006, a significant higher rate in comparison with the other cohorts (e.g., the percentage is about 17% in the 2000/01 cohort). However, after four years, about the 37% of this cohort is still enrolled, which makes us suppose that a still long permanence has to be attended in the system.

Making a synthesis of the 1998/99 cohort, after six years the 31% is still enrolled, about the 32% graduated and the 37% dropped out.

In conclusion, the university reform seems not to have produced significant improvements about permanence and going out processes in the university system.

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