

17th AlmaLaurea Graduates' Profile Report

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The 17th AlmaLaurea Graduates' Profile Report and the Conference organized at the Milan Bicocca University to present its outcomes featured some important news this year. First of all, **the Graduates' Profile was presented together with the Report on Graduates' Employment Conditions**, to sketch out a more comprehensive view of Italian graduate outcomes. This year's Graduates' Profile involved approximately 230,000 graduates from 64 universities, and yielded a thorough understanding of graduates' main characteristics, including academic performances, study conditions at university, satisfaction with the recently completed degree course, and internship/work/study abroad experiences carried out during the university years. The survey on Graduates' Employment Conditions involved nearly 490,000 graduates from 65 member universities to the AlmaLaurea Consortium; it analysed the employment conditions of graduates from the classes of 2013, 2011 and 2009 interviewed one, three and five years on from degree completion¹. The two Reports together are essential tools for evaluating the internal and external effectiveness of the academic system, as well as for assessing the labour market's attitude towards graduates and its ability to capitalize on them, both in Italy and abroad.

Secondly, more universities have become members to the AlmaLaurea Interuniversity Consortium: **Milan Bicocca, Milan La**

¹ The results of the 17th AlmaLaurea survey on Graduates' Employment Conditions are available at: www.alma laurea.it/universita/occupazione.

Statale, Palermo, Pisa, Brescia, Bergamo, Pavia and the Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna in Pisa. Almost all of them were already participating in an initiative called Stella-Statistiche sul Tema Laureati e Lavoro in Archivio On-Line. The Consortium now includes as many as **72 universities** and represents over 90% of the Italian university system in terms of annual number of graduates; the Report and its Presentation Conference allow for celebrating this important accomplishment for the Italian university system. This further enlargement is obviously a great opportunity as it enables a more thorough analysis of the human capital produced by Italian universities; at the same time, it is a challenge because it implies coordinating an increasingly wide network of academic institutions. Statistical data from the new member universities will be included in future Reports; in the meanwhile, the data collected over the past years are being reviewed and integrated to enrich the scope, effectiveness and comparability of existing databases.

This challenge is all the more important because the Italian academic system is currently engaged in crucial initiatives concerning the evaluation of its quality performance. At the end of 2014, two years had passed since the introduction of the National Scientific Qualification (ASN, Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale). Pursuant to the reform launched by former minister Gelmini, the ASN is a necessary, preliminary step to certify whether researchers and academics meet the eligibility criteria to apply for the roles of full and associate professors, with a view to making the most of young (and less young) talents in academia. In these first two years there was much controversy on many items which, however, had the effect of highlighting issues, challenges and deficiencies in the assessment of the Italian university and research system. Educational institutions and their (existing and potential) staff are now waiting for recruiting procedures to be revised and redefined, and for a new round of teacher qualification assessment to be announced.

Until a few weeks ago, Italian universities and their departments have been busy with completing the first annual report on department research (SUA-RD, Scheda Unica Annuale della Ricerca Dipartimentale). This document helps collecting and systematizing useful information for the evaluation of research, the periodic accreditation of universities and the assessment of the Academic Quality Assurance system. This work is part of the Self-evaluation, Periodic Evaluation and Accreditation system (AVA, Autovalutazione, Valutazione periodica e Accreditamento) coordinated by the National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes (ANVUR, Agenzia Nazionale di Valutazione del Sistema Universitario e della Ricerca). In addition to the above, the annual evaluation forms of the various degree courses (SUA-CDS, Schede Uniche Annuali dei Corsi di Studio) are now available on-line². This allows undergraduates, their parents and other stakeholders such as employers to analyse the main characteristics of all first- and second-level degree courses in Italy. ANVUR is also engaged in the evaluation and accreditation of PhD courses.

Furthermore, the second round of the Research Quality Assessment (VQR, Valutazione della Qualità della Ricerca) relating to the 2011-2014 period is about to start. Under this project, ANVUR will once again evaluate the scientific research work performed by state and privately owned universities, public research institutes and other public or private entities committed to research activities. Pending the publication of the new ANVUR *Report on the State of the Academic and Research System*, which is released every two years, disputes have arisen over the creation of the Groups of Experts in Evaluation (GEV, Gruppi di Esperti Valutativi) for the various degree subject groupings, as well as over the review of assessment criteria and the renewal of appointments in the ANVUR Executive Council. These continue to feed public debate on the performance of the university system and on the ways to assess

2 www.universitaly.it/index.php/offerta/cercaUniv

it³.

Therefore, the Graduates' Profile Report should be set in this context of greater sensitivity towards the need to boost evidence-based decision-making and reporting processes on the use of public resources. With its comprehensive and up-to-date information, the document is an important tool to assess education opportunities in Italian universities and their outcomes, with the aim of improving universities and providing better guidance to students who are completing their upper secondary studies. Now that ANVUR has stepped in, and following the decision to allocate part of the ordinary public funding according to merit-based criteria and renovate the accreditation systems for degree programmes, assessment will play an increasingly important role in decision-making processes within universities.

This is especially crucial if one considers that Italy's graduate shares is one of the lowest among developed countries in the 55-64 and 25-34 age brackets. In the latter, the country's traditionally low educational attainment persists in spite of the improvements recorded among new generations. Namely, in this age group the share of graduates is still only 22%, well below the EU-21 average (37%) and the OECD average (39%). What's more, as the AlmaLaurea Reports have repeatedly pointed out, the share of Italian people holding an upper secondary school-leaving certificate is modest too, and this low educational level is significantly reflected in the country's managers and ruling class.

After an increase in university enrolments in the years 2000-2003 (+19%), mainly attributable to older populations of students who enrolled after the start of the reform, a sharp decline was observed in recent years. Between 2003 (when the peak was

3 The current reflections on the measures rewriting some important features of the schooling system, which were sponsored by the Italian Government and approved by the Parliament (the so-called "La Buona Scuola" (Good School) reform bill), as well as the harsh criticism on the activities carried out by the National Institute for Evaluation of Education Systems INVALSI, fall within the same framework.

reached with 338,000 enrolments) and 2013 (270,000), a 20% fall was seen, which is a consequence of several factors including the demographic decline (in Italy, between 1984 and 2013, the number of 19-year-olds dropped by 40%, i.e. almost 390,000 people), the decline in older-student enrolment in university, the deterioration of graduates' employment prospects, the growing difficulties experienced by many families with bearing the costs of university education, the increasing incidence of second-generation immigrants who tend not to pursue tertiary education, and lacking student support policies. As a result of all the above, only 3 out of 10 youths aged 19 enrol in university nowadays.

The so-called NEETs (youths aged 15-29 who are not in education, employment or training) reflect the hardship and disillusionment felt by Italian young people when approaching a labour market that offers them few access opportunities. The share of Italian NEETs remained virtually unchanged compared to last year at 26.2%, but this figure is considerably higher than the EU-27 average (15.8%).

Although entry into the labour market is more difficult for Italian youths (graduates included) than it is in other countries, having a university degree still proves to be a worthwhile investment against unemployment. Graduates' employment conditions are at an advantage vis-à-vis secondary school-leaving certificate holders throughout their working life, and even more so during crisis periods. In the years of the economic downturn (2007-2014), the unemployment rate increased by 8.2 percentage points among recent graduates (aged 25-34), from 9.5 to 17.7%, whereas it grew by a whopping 16.9 points among recent secondary school certificate holders (aged 18-29), from 13.1 to 30%. Hence, the gap between recent graduates' and recent secondary school certificate holders' unemployment rate soared from 3.6 to 12.3 percentage points, thus confirming the better employment opportunities enjoyed by the former.

Despite the persistent recession-induced employment

difficulties affecting those who graduated in the years straddling the crisis, the 17th AlmaLaurea Report on Graduates' Employment Conditions - which was published in April 2015 - detected some weak signs of recovery within the labour market along with a slight decline in the unemployment rate, in particular among first- and second-level graduates. During the crisis period, job security levels had significantly shrunk among first-level graduates (12 percentage points) and second-level ones (6 points), and they had remained unchanged among single-cycle second-level degree holders. Over the same period, real salaries had fallen sharply among graduates one year on from degree completion - namely, by 22% among first-level graduates, 18% among their second-level colleagues, and 17% among single-cycle second-level degree holders. On the contrary, over the past year remunerations one year on from degree completion were seen to increase a little.

Five years on from graduation, employment was found to be close to 90% but was nevertheless lower than in the previous survey. 86% of first- and second-level graduates were seen to be in employment (-2 and -1 percentage points respectively compared to one year earlier), whereas 87% of single-cycle second-level graduates were in jobs (-3 points over one year before). Remuneration too was lower than in the previous survey by 1% among first-level graduates, 2% among their second-level colleagues, and by 4% among their single-cycle second-level peers.

The Conference for the presentation of the 2014 Graduates' Profile outcomes featured some in-depth analysis on **graduate social and geographical mobility**. These play a crucial role in topics such as the quality of academic training, the university's ability to bring out merit (not only among students, but also among those who avail themselves of the academic system's resources), and the possibility for the university system to work according to equity and efficiency criteria and to be evaluated against these criteria.

Any analysis of young people's school and university

experience should take into consideration the different types of resources that they can draw from. These are mostly to be found within their families and in their educational institutes. The family is the environment in which every individual's socialization processes are typically shaped, therefore its role within the skills and motivation that students bring with them to formal education institutions, albeit often underestimated by institutional policies, is paramount.

In particular, families provide children with an endowment of cultural and material capital that makes up a crucial resource for one's cognitive and educational performance. As for the *material* capital, thanks to the job and remuneration enjoyed by the parents, some families can afford supporting their children's studies more than others by paying for books and educational tools, providing a house with suitable places to study in, actively searching for the most effective educational institutions, positively interacting with teachers, owning culturally relevant objects, promoting their children's participation in cultural and educational extracurricular activities, financially supporting long studies after compulsory schooling, bearing the opportunity cost of a deferred entry into the labour market, and so forth. As regards the *cultural* capital, on the other hand, more cultivated families (because of aspects such as, but not limited to, the parents' educational attainment) can provide their children with an ethic that attaches an intrinsic value to studying, push them to pursue career expectations that require having a high schooling level, have the knowledge needed to help their children out with their homework, and (sometimes for social status reasons alone) demand that their offspring reach certain goals. The parents' employment situation too can contribute to shaping their children's value-related orientations concerning the importance of education or their professional aspirations. In addition to that, material and cultural capital resources are typically associated with *social* capital elements, i.e. being part of social relations and contact networks which might lead to the creation of

new resources or opportunities to tap, thus proving extremely helpful. In some cases, professional statuses are even passed on to the next generation within the same family.

The influence of the family environment becomes clearly visible since the beginning of one's educational career, that is, well before youths approach upper secondary education, and typically translates into better educational performance. In turn, previous educational performance plays a pivotal role in the choice of which upper secondary school to attend, as well as on the pupils' likeliness to succeed or drop out. It is no coincidence that different social compositions are found in different secondary schools: in those focusing on humanities or sciences, which are commonly conducive to tertiary education, a large proportion of students come from well-off families, whereas only a few come from less advantaged ones.

As it happens in all societies, albeit to different extents, young people's social origins might end up impinging considerably on their own life course, and education, far from being a means to produce culture, appreciation and capitalisation of skills (thus promoting social advancement), risks turning into a mere tool to reproduce inequalities from one generation to the next (thus leading to **social immobility**). "Fortuitous" advantages related to one's birth (which typically include also *gender* and *geographical environment*) result in better skills and exposure to opportunities of different kinds, and therefore bring about better living conditions not only in terms of educational level and labour market position, but also in terms of health, relationship with one's partner, friendship, living conditions, and self-fulfilment. To top it all, these better outcomes in life are **legitimised by the ideology of merit**. The largely shared principles underlying the protection of equal opportunities (see Art. 3 of the Italian Constitution) and the acknowledgement of merit (Art. 34: "Capable and deserving pupils, including those lacking financial resources, have the right to attain the highest levels of education") are thus formally complied with, or they seem to be so, in a relatively affluent, democratic and widely educated society, in

spite of severe inequality.

AlmaLaurea reports have repeatedly highlighted the differences among graduates' learning experiences, performance and outcomes based on their social origins. Some of these differences have traditionally been analysed in AlmaLaurea's Reports. For instance, features such as graduates' school background, type of degree, time-to-graduation, and experiences abroad are usually set against their parents' attainment level and social class. Some aspects were more thoroughly examined in the in-depth analysis works presented during the Milan Bicocca Conference (May 2015). Some other aspects, on the contrary, break through in ways that the AlmaLaurea surveys cannot investigate; this is the case, for example, with the number of university dropouts, or, on a broader perspective, with the partly unfulfilled promise (at least *so far*) of the spread of MOOCs - Massive Open Online Courses - technology (Krause & Lowe, 2014). These courses are held by some of the world's most prestigious universities and should have provided training opportunities at affordable costs to segments of the global population that cannot normally have access to them, but instead tend to be chosen by people with an already "qualified" profile (i.e. male students with a high schooling level, living in western, economically developed countries) (Selingo, 2014).

In addition, the long, ongoing crisis increased poverty incidence and weakened the social status of the middle class people, i.e. those holding clerical or self-employed positions. As a consequence, the material resources that might have been used by these population groups to support their children's education have been eroded.

As was mentioned above, one of the key factors analysed during the Conference for the presentation of the Report's outcomes was **geographical mobility**. Some students, together with their families, decide to pursue academic training (and can afford to do so) in geographical areas that are far from their hometown. Geographical mobility is a prerequisite for real competition among

universities at national and international level; if mobility did not exist, universities would not be pushed to improve their own training offering and become more attractive. Poor *study-related* geographical mobility (unless it is caused by an unlikely uniformity of contents and training offerings throughout the academic system) means that neither students nor universities make the most of their potential. In particular, the most capable secondary school-leaving diploma holders risk having to settle for a less-than-optimal academic offering.

Besides, there are obvious links between geographical and social mobility, since the decision to study away from one's hometown implies - at least in theory - fewer obstacles relating to the lack of material and cultural resources within one's family. In Italy, geographical mobility is of particular significance because of the deep social and economic gap between northern and southern areas of the country; indeed, much more people move northwards than southwards.

Work-related geographical mobility raises further questions concerning the different employment opportunities found in Italian regions, as well as the graduates' willingness to accept business travels or to move to another city (this aspect has traditionally been analysed by AlmaLaurea). One peculiar aspect of study- and work-related geographical mobility is the decision to move abroad. This is partly linked to the *brain drain* phenomenon and poses a dilemma: on the one hand, the internationalization of studies and the free movement of students and workers are seen as positive goals to go after, as they improve cross-cultural understanding and labour market mechanisms. European programmes aimed at fostering mobility are clearly based on this assumption. On the other hand, though, the outflow of students and workers might impoverish their countries of origin and the educational system that trained them, especially in the absence of equivalent measures to foster the return of expatriates (the so-called *brain circulation*) (Galeazzi, *Studiare all'estero: le esperienze dei laureati italiani*, 2014)

(Gasperoni & Binassi, *I laureati che lavorano all'estero*, 2014). Then, mobility abroad is typically a feature of graduates with better academic performance (and generally higher social origins), thus exacerbating the consequences of the drain and reaffirming the close link between social and geographical mobility.

Graduates' features – an overview

As is customary in the AlmaLaurea Graduates' Profile Reports, the following chapters will focus on the features of the human capital that left the Italian university system in 2014⁴, irrespective of the degree type and level of studies attended within the pre-reform or the post-reform system.

The 2014 graduates' portrait sums up the performance of three different subgroups – first level, second-level and single-cycle second-level graduates⁵. Pre-reform graduates (who currently make up only 1.5% of the total) and graduates from the non-reformed 4-year degree course in Primary Schooling Sciences (who account for 1.6% of the total), will not be included in the analysis. More in-depth considerations on each one of the cohorts of post-reform graduates will follow.

Among graduates, **young people from socially and culturally advantaged backgrounds are overrepresented**, with no particular geographical differences. This result will be explained

4 No distinction is made based on whether the degree course they attended was established under Ministerial Decree 509/1999 or under Ministerial Decree 270/2004. Unlike previous Reports, this one will not start with a detailed comparison of current outcomes with the results achieved by the pre-reform cohort of graduates from the class of 2004. Since the 2010 Graduates' Profile Report, this cohort had been used as a benchmark to compare the outcomes of pre-reform and post-"3 plus 2"-reform graduates, but this comparison is no longer of interest.

5 In this Report, single-cycle degree courses and 2-year degree courses which can only be accessed after a first-level degree are described as 'second-level' degrees. The same adjective is used for these programmes' graduates.

with greater detail in the paragraph on **social mobility**. Yet, 73% of first-level graduates from the class of 2014 were the **first to achieve a university degree in their families of origin**, although this rate dropped to 69% among second-level graduates and 54% among single-cycle second-level ones. In 2014, the percentage of young people from **less advantaged social backgrounds** (that is, the sons and daughters of working class people) was 26% on average (28% among first-level graduates, 26% among second-level ones, and only 18% among single-cycle second-level degree holders). Conversely, the percentage of youths from privileged social backgrounds (that is, whose parents hold relatively prestigious job positions such as entrepreneurs, professional freelancers or managers) was 22% overall (20% among first-level graduates, 21.5% among second-level ones, and a good 35% among single-cycle second-level degree holders). Although perhaps too simplistic, the above data effectively reflect the **importance of undergraduates' social origins** on their chances to complete a university degree programme. The fact that different types of degree courses are chosen by socially different students and the need to boost access to tertiary education for youths from less advantaged families are crucial aspects to be taken into account when choosing criteria for the assessment of the university system and the allocation of resources.

As in the past, **geographical mobility** for study reasons was seen to remain low. While this is partly attributable to a more widespread presence of universities, it is also probably linked to the need for less well-off families to reduce the costs of education in a period of intense economic uncertainty. In 2014, almost half of graduates – 48% – obtained their degrees from a university which was located in the province of their upper secondary school. This share was slightly lower among second-level graduates at 43%. Conversely, only 26% of graduates completed their degree within a province other than – and not adjacent to – the one where they completed their secondary education. This figure was 22.5% among

first-level graduates, 25% among their second-level colleagues, and 32% among their single-cycle peers; see also Chapter 2.

Not to be neglected, within Italian universities, is the presence of young **graduates with foreign citizenship** – over 7,700 in AlmaLaurea member universities in 2014. More and more often, these are young people from immigrant families residing in Italy, as is shown by the fact that as many as 34% of graduates with non-Italian citizenship achieved their secondary school-leaving certificate in Italy. Foreign students were seen to make up 3.4% of all graduates, with a peak value of 4.1% in second-level degree courses. 55% of foreign graduates came from a EU member state. Over two-thirds of graduates with foreign citizenship came from Albania (country of origin for 15% of them), China, Romania, Cameroon, Greece, Germany, Ukraine, Iran, Moldova, Poland, Croatia, Russia, Morocco, Israel, Peru, Colombia, and France. The number of Chinese students has been surging over the last few years, turning them into the second largest foreign cohort (9.6% of the total, up from 2.9% in 2009). One-eighth of graduates with foreign citizenship came from Africa – particularly from Cameroon (4.7%) and the Maghreb. Foreign students were observed to prefer certain degree subject areas – namely languages, architecture, and economics-statistics among first-level degree courses; engineering, architecture, and sciences among second-level courses, and medicine or chemistry-pharmacology among and single-cycle second-level degree programmes. In terms of its ability to attract foreign students, Italy is still lagging well behind other countries⁶.

6 In 2012, students with foreign citizenship accounted for 4.0% of the total in the Italian university system. In France they were 11.8%. A similar “International students” indicator, defining those students who crossed a border for study-related reasons irrespective of their citizenship, reached 17.1% in the United Kingdom and 8.4% overall in OECD countries (OECD, 2014).

For a comparative framework of first-level graduates’ mobility in 10 European countries, see the following comparisons at international (Schomburg & Teichler, 2011) and Italian (Cammelli, Antonelli, di Francia, Gasperoni, & Sgarzi, 2010) level.

But some optimism is probably allowed, if one considers the impact that language barriers, red tape and the lack of resources – accommodation facilities in particular – still have on universities which make positive efforts on this front.

In 1991, for the first time in Italy, the number of **female** university students exceeded that of their male counterparts. Their proportion hit 60% of all graduates in 2014, peaking at 63% in single-cycle second-level degree courses. The breakdown of graduates by gender is remarkably different according to the subject grouping. Women were seen to far outnumber men in the teaching (94%), languages (85%), psychology (83.5%) and humanities (71%) subject groupings, while they made up a minority of graduates in the engineering (25%), sciences (34%), physical education (39%) and agriculture-veterinary medicine groups (in this latter group women were a minority by only a handful of people, their share being 49%).

As is known, **academic performance** depends on many variables which *partly* have to do with the students' social and cultural backgrounds (previous school performance, parents' educational level and employment status, the need to work while studying and so on). This report looks at academic performance as the result of a combination of different factors, including enrolment age, prescribed and actual time to graduation, age at graduation and final grade (see also Chapter 6).

Age at graduation among the graduates from the class of 2014 overall was 26.5 years, with substantial differences based on the type of degree course chosen: 25.3 years among first-level graduates, 27.7 among post-reform second-level ones, and 26.9 among their single-cycle colleagues. Previous AlmaLaurea Graduates' Profile Reports showed that **age at graduation** decreased significantly compared to the pre-reform situation, especially if one considers that the "3 plus 2" reform allowed new population segments to access university studies, and at the same time it raised the average enrolment age (for a more detailed

analysis see Chapter 6). Among graduates from the class of 2014, almost one out of five (23%) enrolled 2 or more years above standard enrolment age. This share was 16% among first-level graduates (see also Chapter 13).

The percentage of **graduates aged below 23** was 33% among first-level degree holders, with an additional 35% who achieved their bachelor's degree at the age of 23 or 24.

Time to graduation is linked to the actual length of the degree course rather than to graduate age; this is another indicator where a remarkable improvement was observed, as was shown in previous Reports. 45% of all graduates from the class of 2014 graduated within the prescribed time frame, and a further 25% did so building up a delay of only one year. Only 12.5% of graduates obtained their degree 4 or more years behind schedule. The **delay in degree completion time** – i.e. the extra time students take to graduate – was seen to continue dropping and was only 40% in 2014 (see Chapter 6).

Final degree grades remained pretty much unchanged in terms of overall average value (102.2 out of 110 in 2014), although they were observed to vary significantly according to the degree course type – 99.4 for first-level, 103.7 for single-cycle second-level and 107.5 for second-level degrees – and, to a greater extent, according to different subject areas and universities. As is better explained in Chapter 7, good grades were seen to partly depend on factors such as previous studies (type of school and upper secondary school-leaving certificate grade), strong cultural motivation, and not working during one's studies. In addition, the generally high grades awarded in post-reform second-level degree courses make it more difficult to differentiate students and their respective proficiency level.

The **variability in academic grades** also results from a combination of several temporary institutional factors, including: standards adopted for examination grades, criteria applied for final degree grades and any additional acknowledgements, assessment

criteria and complexity of examinations, etc. The significant academic grade variability justifies some doubts about the idea that degree grades should play a role in the admission to open competitions or be seen as reliable recruitment selection criteria. Such high variability in examination and degree grades, both between different degree courses and different universities – for the same field of study – will necessarily require further consideration (Gasperoni & Mignoli, *Votazioni agli esami e pratica della valutazione nei percorsi di studio universitari*, 2010) (Mignoli, 2012).

With regards to **student support services**, it is important to note that the Italian legislative decree no. 68 of 2012 (“Revision of the Basic Legislation relating to the Right to Education and the Enhancement of Legally Recognized University Colleges”) significantly renovated the relevant legislative framework and set up a National Observatory on the Right to Higher Education, which is to monitor the implementation of student support policies. Among the services provided by the institute for student support, those which were used at least once by the largest shares of graduates were meals/canteen services (54%), library loans (40% on average, 45% in southern Italian universities and in those located on the islands), scholarships (22%, 27% in the southern regions of Italy and on the islands); transport allowances (14%), and international mobility contributions (12%) (See also Chapter 9). Graduates who benefited from accommodation facilities during their studies were 4% of the total number, whereas 6% obtained rent subsidies. Graduates were generally satisfied with the student support services they received; however, some weak points remained as almost half of those who used services such as vouchers to buy books or IT tools, services for disabled students or rent/transport subsidies gave a negative feedback.

One would expect that the above services were mostly used by students coming from disadvantaged family backgrounds, but this was not always the case, as graduates from well-off families were

those who most benefited from international mobility contributions, vouchers to buy books and IT tools, and library loans (Mondin & Nardoni, 2015).

Overall, 68% of graduates from the class of 2014 **regularly attended** at least three quarters of the prescribed classes. This figure can be broken down to 61% among single-cycle second-level graduates, 68% among first-level ones, and 73% among second-level degree holders. The higher-than-usual attendance rates recorded after the start of the university reform appear to have stabilized over the past few years (see Chapter 3).

After having previously increased, the share of graduates who had some **work experience** during their studies has recently dropped. This is likely to be due both to the economic crisis and to the end of a trend which saw adults returning to university, after the introduction of the “3 plus 2” reform. In 2014, 8 graduates out of 100 **had worked regularly** during their studies. These were mainly concentrated in the teaching subject grouping (19%). Conversely, the proportion of graduates who never worked during their studies hit 32% in 2014 (+8 percentage points vis-à-vis the graduates from the 2008 class), thus leading to a further decrease in the work experience indicator (see also Chapter 3).

Traineeships and internships accredited for the purposes of degree completion are another strategic goal which saw a step forward in the collaboration between universities and the professional world (public and private sector) in recent times. More in-depth analyses on the impact of traineeships showed that, all other things being equal, traineeships boost the likelihood of finding a job by 10% one year on from graduation. Among first-level graduates, traineeships were remarkably more widespread among those who were not interested in pursuing further studies (see Chapter 4). The proportion of graduates who carried out these important work experiences has significantly increased, up to 57% of graduates in 2014. Such progress is just as positive when the quality of the experience is considered.

Based on the feedback that new graduates of all levels provided over time, recent graduates are now more satisfied with their **study experience** in its different aspects. In 2014, 20 graduates out of a hundred stated that they were *definitely satisfied* with the relationship they had with the **academic staff**. An even higher level of satisfaction was recorded with regards to **classrooms**, which were considered *always or almost always adequate* by 24% of graduates, and *often adequate* by an additional 45%. 30% of recent graduates of the 2014 class thought that **library** services (loans/consultation, opening hours, etc.) deserved a *definitely positive* feedback, and 35% of them stated that **IT workstation facilities** were *available in adequate number*. With regards to the **overall university experience**, 33% of graduates said that they were fully satisfied, and another 53% replied that they were more satisfied than not; the total proportion of satisfied students was 86% (see Chapter 8).

Asked to **evaluate the experience** they were about to conclude – partly through the question *Would you enrol again in the same programme?* – over two thirds of the whole graduate pool (67%) gave a fully positive answer, i.e. they would enrol again in the same degree course and in the same university. This proportion proved rather stable over time. Overall, all satisfaction indicators related to specific aspects of the degree programme were higher among post-reform second-level graduates.

Preparing their dissertation/final examination required on average 5.4 months, with unsurprising differences based on the type of degree course: from less than 4 months among first-level graduates, whose final assignment may consist of writing a paper or a traineeship report, to over 7 months among second-level and single-cycle second-level graduates, who are required to write a proper dissertation.

New graduates can boast considerable **foreign language and IT skills**. The percentage of graduates with an “at least good” knowledge of written English was approximately 73%. Over half of

graduates stated having “at least good” skills concerning Internet and network communication, word processors, spreadsheets, presentation tools and operative systems.

Study experiences abroad were seen to involve 12% of Italian graduates from the 2014 class. The majority of these experiences were related to EU programmes (mainly, Erasmus) or other programmes accredited by universities (Overseas and others), or else were carried out on a personal initiative. Fewer first-level graduates (10%) carried out an experience abroad than second-level ones (16%) or single-cycle second-level degree holders (18%), with the latter coming close to the EU objective for 2020. 7% of graduates took exams abroad which were then validated for their degree course programme (see Chapter 5). 4.5% of graduates (with a 8.5% peak among second-level ones) prepared a significant part of their dissertation/final examination abroad (Galeazzi, *Studiare all'estero: le esperienze dei laureati italiani*, 2014). It is worth pointing out that almost 3% of graduates who studied abroad did so on a personal initiative, and their experience was not accredited by their degree course.

63.5% of graduates from the class of 2014 intended to (or needed to) **pursue further training** after obtaining their degree (see Chapter 11). This percentage ascended to 77% among first-level graduates, who mainly enrolled in a second-level degree course (60%), and reached 66% among single-cycle second-level graduates, who tended to choose postgraduate specialization schools (29%) or traineeships/apprenticeships (12.5%). Although second-level graduates were the least inclined to pursue further studies (only 38% did so), many of them (14%) chose to undertake a PhD (Bonafé, Pollenzo-Bra, 2014). At the usual May conference this year, a specific, in-depth paper called “La mobilità sociale e territoriale dei dottori di ricerca” was presented on graduates who completed a PhD.

The available data partly contradict the predominant idea that almost all first-level graduates continue their studies on a second-

level degree programme, potentially because first-level degrees are perceived as less valuable. Moreover, many first or second-level graduates who continue their education take up professionally-oriented forms of training aimed at facilitating access into the labour market, such as first- or second-level postgraduate courses (8% of graduates).

While the traditional study or work-related South-North **mobility** was seen to continue characterizing the Italian system, a new form of mobility **towards foreign countries** has become an increasingly significant trend, attracting more and more recent graduates (who consider studying or seeking employment abroad). Struggling to find an adequate employment in their country, Italian post-reform graduates are likely to be willing to cross the Alps and even the ocean: 48% of graduates said that they would like to work abroad, and 36% would be ready to move to another continent (Gasperoni & Binassi, *I laureati che lavorano all'estero*, 2014).

Among the **main aspects recent graduates look at when seeking employment**, the **opportunity to acquire professional skills** was still the most sought-after (as stated by 76% of graduates). Other important factors include job security (66% deemed this aspect important), career prospects (62%), good remuneration (56.5%) and consistency with one's university studies (50%). Half of graduates did not express any preference with regards to working within the private or the public sector; 20% would rather work in the public sector, while a bit less than that proportion stated a preference for the private one. Only a few graduates (one out of ten) aimed at being self-employed (see Chapter 12) (Ghiselli & Sobrero, 2014).

Mention has already been made of the willingness to move abroad in search for a job. Contrary to what is commonly believed, many new graduates (27%) said that they would accept frequent business trips and as many as 52% were even willing to move their permanent address for work. Only 3% of graduates stated they would rather not travel. Work flexibility was seen to be more widely

accepted by graduates, as reflected by the considerable willingness to accept part-time jobs (42%) and fixed-term contracts (38%).

In short, the available data confirmed an extremely diverse Profile for Italian graduates involved in the AlmaLaurea survey. This is an important point from a methodological perspective, which should be taken into account both when discussing performance issues within the Italian university system – which is often considered as something uniform – and when assessing single universities. For these reasons, readers are encouraged to consult the AlmaLaurea interactive databank to see how the overall results described in these pages can vary significantly according to different universities or degree subject groupings.

First-level graduates

First-level graduates were seen to come from a wider range of **school backgrounds** compared to second-level and single-cycle second-level graduates. Although half of them (54%) earned their secondary school-leaving certificate from secondary schools focusing on humanities or sciences, this share was even higher within the other two cohorts. 26% of first-level graduates attended technical or vocational secondary schools.

Unsurprisingly, a strong connection was observed between the kind of upper secondary school that students attended and the degree subject they chose. While first-level graduates who attended a secondary school focusing on sciences were 40.5% of the total number, they accounted for the majority within the engineering (64%), geo-biology (60%), sciences (59%) and chemistry-pharmacology (53%) subject groups. Conversely, former sciences students accounted for less than one graduate out of four in the teaching (17%), languages (23%) and law (24%) groupings. The association between school background and university degree course was also witnessed by the diverse presence of graduates

with a technical secondary school-leaving certificate – who made up 26% of the total – in different subject areas. They accounted for a larger proportion in the law (43%), agriculture (40%) and economics-statistics (38%) groupings, whereas their number was smaller within the psychology (12%), humanities (13%), and geobiology (14.5%) groups. Traditionally, it was thought that all graduates came from secondary schools focusing on humanities, but this was actually the case for “only” 14% of first-level graduates (less than half the share reached among single-cycle graduates, where they made up as many as 30%). Among first-level graduates, former humanities school students were more likely to be found within the letters (34%) and psychology (22%) subject groupings, and much less within the physical education (6%), engineering (7%), sciences (7%) and teaching (8%) groupings. Overall, the relation between school background and choice of degree subject seems to remain constant over time.

The **average final grades** that first-level graduates **achieved at the end of their upper secondary school** were seen to vary quite sensitively in different degree subject groupings, for the most part consistently with the school types that the students of each grouping mostly attended. In 2014, the final secondary school-leaving grade was 80.0 out of 100 among first-level graduates as a whole. It was, however, significantly lower within the physical education degree grouping (73.2) as well as in the teaching (75.6), law (76.9), political and social sciences (77.1), and healthcare professions (77.6), while it peaked in others, such as the sciences (85.5) and engineering (86.0) groupings – both characterized by a high number of students holding a sciences secondary school-leaving certificate.

Looking at first-level graduates’ **social and family background**, a significant number of them were seen to come from non-privileged contexts. A limited proportion of graduates (25%) were found to come from families in which at least one parent holds a degree, and an almost equal percentage of graduates (23%) were

born from parents who do not hold any upper secondary school-leaving certificate. 28% of first-level graduates came from working-class families. Both these indicators point to less advantaged social backgrounds among first-level graduates, compared to second-level or single-cycle second-level graduates.

67% of first-level graduates acquired some **work experience during their studies** – but only in 21% of cases was such experience consistent with their field of study – while 7% of them were studying workers. Graduates who acquired work experiences were particularly numerous in the physical education degree grouping (84%) as well as in the law (80%), teaching (78%) and political and social sciences (77%) groups. Conversely, their share was relatively lower in the medical-healthcare professions, geobiology, engineering, sciences and chemistry-pharmacology groupings (53-61%). The latter groups were also characterized by very few studying workers (3-6%)⁷, who were more numerous in the law (23%), teaching (14%) and political and social sciences (13%) groupings.

It is worth noting the two degree subject groupings in which work experiences were particularly consistent with the field of study – namely, the physical education and the teaching groupings, where, respectively, 58% and 47% of graduates who worked reported that their experience was highly consistent with the main subjects of their degree course. This is indeed an important aspect, which mitigates the potentially negative impact of students' work commitments on their academic performances.

Among first-level graduates from the class of 2014, the average **age at graduation** was found to be 25.3. It should not be forgotten that 16% of them enrolled at least 2 years later than the standard age of 19.

In terms of **time to graduation**, the proportion of students

⁷ For the purpose of AlmaLaurea surveys, studying workers are graduates who reported having had a continued full-time job throughout at least half of their studies, both during term and non-term time.

who graduated on time was seen to remain quite high among first-level graduates at 43%, and hit a whopping 67% in the healthcare professions subject grouping. At the other end of the spectrum, only 24% of law students graduated on time, with 1 out of 3 gaining their degrees at least 5 years later than scheduled.

Class attendance levels remained high. 68 graduates out of a hundred stated that they regularly attended more than 75% of prescribed classes. Here, too, differences between degree subject groupings were quite sharp. Attendance rates were seen to be particularly high – with over 80% of graduates attending three quarters of classes – within the healthcare professions grouping (94%) as well as the architecture and chemistry-pharmacology ones. Conversely, class attendance was lower in the law (38%), teaching (47%), and psychology (50%) groups.

Overall, 7% of first-level graduates from the 2014 class gained some **study experience abroad** which was accredited for the purposes of their degree course. Their percentage peaked within the languages degree grouping (33%) and reached a moderate value in the political and social sciences one (9%). Study experiences abroad involved less than 3% of graduates within the teaching, medicine-healthcare professions, chemistry-pharmacology, and physical education subject groupings. If students who went abroad to study under personal initiative were added, experiences abroad came to involve 10% of first-level graduates.

Traineeships and internships accredited for the purposes of degree completion involved 60% of first-level graduates, which testifies to the strong commitment taken by universities and to their collaboration with the professional world. Two thirds of all traineeships were carried out outside universities. Traineeships were performed by more than 80% of graduates within the teaching, healthcare professions and agriculture degree groupings, while they only involved a minority of graduates in the law, engineering, economics-statistics, humanities and sciences subject groupings. It is important to point out that traineeships and internships are

associated with a higher employment rate.

Graduates' **satisfaction with their university experience** remained stable on high levels. Out of a hundred graduates, 31 reported to be *definitely satisfied* with their degree course, and 54 more were still (although less fully) satisfied. The most *definitely* satisfied graduates could be found in the law, agriculture and teaching groupings (38-39%), while the least satisfied came from the architecture, languages and physical education groupings (21-24%). 18% of first-level graduates stated that they were *definitely satisfied* with their relationship with the academic staff, and another 65% were quite satisfied. In this respect, the highest satisfaction levels emerged from the medicine-healthcare professions, agriculture, law and chemistry-pharmacology groups, while the lowest levels were recorded among architecture and engineering graduates. A majority of positive feedbacks was given with regards to relationships with other students (92%), classrooms (67%), libraries (77%), and study workload (87%).

If they had the chance to go back in time, 64 graduates out of a hundred would be willing to **repeat the same study experience**, taking the same degree course in the same university. 11 more would choose a different degree course but within the same university, while 14 out of a hundred would do the opposite – same course, different university. Graduates who would change both course and university were 8% of the total, while only 3% would not enrol at all. The proportion of graduates who would repeat the same experience was 74% within the sciences subject grouping, 71% in the agriculture group and 70% among engineers. Those who were least satisfied and would not repeat the same choice were languages (51%) and architecture (58%) graduates.

As in the past, a vast majority of recent first-level graduates – 77% – intended to **pursue further studies**. This intention appeared particularly strong within the psychology (93%), geobiology sciences (90%) and engineering (87%) groupings. Conversely, a relatively high number of law (45%), teaching (42%),

healthcare professions (34%) and agriculture (31%) graduates stated that they had reached the end of their studies (Filippucci & Figari, 2013) (Galeazzi, *Prosecuzione degli studi dopo la laurea di primo livello*, 2012).

Among first-level graduates who intended to continue their studies, not everyone was planning to start a 2-year **second-level degree course** – although this was the most popular plan, chosen by 60 graduates out of a hundred. Aiming at this second degree were psychology (87%), engineering (84%) and geo-biology sciences (84%) graduates in particular. On the other hand, 8% of recent graduates were planning to take an academic postgraduate course, especially in the healthcare professions grouping (27%) and – in lower numbers – in the political and social sciences (10%) and languages (9%) subject groups.

Single-cycle second-level graduates

Single-cycle and first-level degree programmes are the only programmes which can be accessed immediately after upper secondary school completion. Single-cycle programmes last at least five years and can be found in few degree subject areas – namely, pharmacology, architecture, medicine and dentistry, veterinary medicine, law, preservation of cultural heritage and, more recently, primary education sciences⁸. In 2014, within the AlmaLaurea university system, single-cycle second-level graduates were more than 24 thousand, thus accounting for 10.7% of all graduates. In recent years, following some changes introduced by the Italian Ministerial Decree 270/2004, an increasingly large share of this number is taken by law graduates. In 2014, over 43% of single-cycle second-level degrees were obtained in law, 24% in medicine

⁸ There were only 35 graduates from the single-cycle second-level degree course in Preservation of cultural heritage in 2014, and still none from the Primary Education Sciences programme, which is why these two courses will not be considered in this Report.

and dentistry, 17% in the pharmacology grouping, 12% in architecture and 3% in veterinary medicine.

The single-cycle graduates' cohort was characterized by a clear majority of female graduates – 63% of the total number, more than the share recorded among first- or second-level graduates – in all subject areas (ranging from 73% in the pharmacology grouping to 58% in the medicine group).

Compared to other graduates' cohorts, single-cycle second-level graduates tend to enrol at about the standard age – 92% of them enrolled on time or one year later at the most – despite the fact that access to single-cycle programmes is restricted and many candidates retake admission tests multiple times. In particular, within the medicine group, 23% of graduates reported they had gained previous incomplete university experiences, which suggests that they had enrolled in a different degree course while waiting to resit the admission test.

Single-cycle graduates were generally seen to come from relatively advantaged **social backgrounds**. In 44% of cases, at least one of their parents held a university degree – and actually, in 21% of cases *both* parents did – compared to 25% of first-level graduates. 35% of single-cycle graduates came from the middle class and only 18% of them came from working-class families, against 20% and 28% respectively among first-level graduates. Affluent social backgrounds were seen to characterize the medical degree grouping in particular (44%).

In terms of **previous school backgrounds** too, levels were relatively high. In the single-cycle cohort, 78% of graduates were observed to come from secondary schools specialising in humanities (30%) or sciences (48%), against 54% of first-level graduates (which is made up of 14% plus 40% from humanities and sciences schools respectively). Partly due to the selection involved in restricted access courses, this cohort was characterized by relatively high secondary school-leaving grades – an average of 85.7 out of 100, against 80.0 among first-level graduates.

The proportion of recent single-cycle graduates with **foreign citizenship** was 3.1%, not far from the 3.2% share recorded among first-level graduates. However, foreign graduates were found to be relatively numerous in the medicine (4.4%) and pharmacology groupings (5.9%), while they were pretty rare in the law grouping (1.4%).

Given that single-cycle degree programmes are usually quite demanding and that they attract young people from more well-off families, it is not surprising that fewer graduates **worked** during their studies – 59% of the total number, against 67% of first-level graduates. Out of a hundred recent single-cycle second-level graduates, only 2.7 were studying workers – almost two fifths of the share recorded among first-level graduates.

Overall, single-cycle graduates' **class attendance** rates were not higher than first-level graduates'. However, such rates were strongly affected by the relatively low attendance which characterizes the single-cycle law grouping, where only 36% of graduates attended at least three quarters of prescribed classes; in the other degree subject areas, class attendance rates ranged between 75% and 87%.

Academic performance appeared to be very good in this cohort, based on final graduation grades (104 out of 110 on average, against 99 among first-level graduates). Average final grades ranged from 100-101 in the pharmacology and law degree groupings to 109.5 among medicine and dentistry graduates⁹. Age at graduation was 26.9. Only 34% of single-cycle graduates obtained their degree within the prescribed time frame – although this rate went up to 46% within the medical group – but the majority graduated less than a year after scheduled, and almost 7 out of 10 earned their degree within 2 years from the scheduled deadline.

The **assessment of university experience** revealed good

⁹ Not to be forgotten is that, for the purposes of calculating average degree grades, AlmaLaurea considers 110 cum laude equal to 113.

satisfaction levels, as 65% of recent single-cycle graduates would choose the same course and university again. 19% of them would choose the same course but within a different university, while only 14% of first-level graduates would do this. The reason behind this higher rate might be that, due to admission restriction policies applied to single-cycle programmes, it is often the admission test which determines which university a student will attend. Yet, single-cycle graduates *did not* appear to be more prone to study-related mobility upon enrolment, compared to first-level graduates. Also compared to first-level graduates, single-cycle degree holders were less satisfied with the workload – although they still provided a widely positive feedback (77% of them were satisfied, against 87% of first-level graduates). The lowest rate of satisfied students was recorded among veterinary medicine graduates (60%). Another weak point was the poor feedback given by recent architecture graduates with regards to the suitability of classrooms – only 35% of them gave a positive feedback.

Two-thirds of single-cycle graduates stated that they intended to **pursue further studies**, against 77% of first-level graduates. This intention was seen to vary sensitively in different subject areas – it was stronger in the medical group (92%, with 81% intending to attend a postgraduate specialization school) and weaker among architects (43%, half of whom were considering a postgraduate course or a PhD) and pharmacology graduates (46%, with 12% considering a PhD, 11% a postgraduate course and 8% a postgraduate specialization school). A relatively high percentage of law graduates intended to start a period of apprenticeship (25%).

Second-level graduates

More than half of second-level graduates (who completed a 2-year course which they could access after achieving *at least* a 3-year first-level degree) were observed to belong to four degree

groupings, namely the economic-statistics (19%), engineering (18%), political and social sciences (11%) and humanities (11%) groupings. No other degree grouping was attended by more than 10% of graduates.

Social and family backgrounds were similar to those of first-level graduates, although the balance was slightly tipped, with a somewhat higher rate of graduates whose parents hold a degree and/or from the middle class.

Overall, second-level graduates' **previous school experiences** were similar to first-level graduates' ones, as they mostly came either from upper secondary schools specializing in humanities or sciences (15% and 42% respectively), or from technical schools (22%). However, second-level graduates could usually boast better school results, as witnessed by their average secondary school-leaving grade – 84 out of 100 on average, against 80 among first-level graduates. This suggests that it is the best students who continue their studies after their first-level degree.

Moreover, second-level graduates were found to be more inclined to **move to a different geographic area** to study, as 32% of them obtained this degree within a province other than – and not adjacent to – the one where they completed their secondary education (against 22.5% of first-level graduates and 25% of single-cycle degree holders).

Further proof of the quality and partial (self-) selection of these graduates is their particular likelihood of **graduating on time**. More than half of them (53%) graduated on time, or, in more than 8 cases out of 10, within a year after the deadline – although obviously, these courses are shorter, which contributes to this outcome. The **average age** at graduation was 27.7, with variations in different degree groupings. While the average age was 33.9 in the healthcare profession grouping, 31.4 in the teaching and 32.0 in the law grouping, it dropped down to 26.1 in the chemistry-pharmacology grouping, 26.6 in the economics-statistics group, 26.7 in the sciences group and 26.9 in the engineering grouping.

Contributing to the actual age at graduation was the significant number of graduates who started their second-level degree course at an older-than-standard age¹⁰, since as many as 42% of second-level graduates enrolled with a delay of at least 2 years.

Among second-level graduates, the average **final grade** was very high (107.5 out of 110), especially if compared to other graduates' cohorts. Such high grades suggest that the university system tends not to highlight the different levels of preparation and competence existing among second-level graduates. Only a few degree groupings recorded average grades below 107 – namely, the law (100), economics-statistics (106) and engineering (106) groupings.

Looking at second-level graduates' experiences, **class attendance** rates were found to be particularly high, as 73% of graduates stated they regularly attended more than three quarters of prescribed classes. These rates, however, did vary in different subject areas, ranging from 29% of graduates in the law grouping to 89% in the architecture and healthcare professions groups.

Traineeship experiences were fairly frequent, involving 57% of second-level graduates. Moreover, 13% of graduates carried out some traineeship during their first-level degree, which takes the overall rate of second-level degree holders who gained this kind of experience to 70%.

Graduates who took the opportunity to **study abroad** under programmes accredited for the purposes of their second-level degree course accounted for 13% of the total number (16% when adding those who went on a personal initiative). Moreover, an additional 5% of graduates took part in EU study abroad programmes during their first-level degree programmes only. Not only were experiences abroad during second-level university studies particularly frequent within the foreign languages grouping (31%)

¹⁰ Standard enrolment age for second-level degree programmes is considered to be 22, which is respected if both pre-university and first-level studies were completed on time.

but they were also numerous in the engineering (21%), architecture (19%), sciences (17%), chemistry-pharmacology (17%), political and social sciences (16%) and agriculture (16%) degree groupings.

Compared to other graduates' cohorts, second-level graduates gained more **work experiences** during their studies (69%), with a considerable rate of studying workers (9%). Such experiences were more frequent among healthcare professions (50%), law (26%) and teaching (25%) graduates.

Out of a hundred second-level graduates, 36 were *definitely satisfied* with their degree course, while 51 more still expressed a positive feedback. The overall levels of satisfaction with their most recent university experience tended to be slightly higher than among other graduates. In particular, second-level graduates seemed to be more satisfied than the others with their relationship with the academic staff and the suitability of classrooms. Therefore, it might be partly because of these aspects that a high percentage of graduates would choose the same course and the same university again – 72%, a higher proportion than among first-level or single-cycle graduates.

Second-level graduates who intended to **pursue further studies** were relatively few, accounting for 38% of the total cohort only. In other words, the share of those who wish to attain more qualifications was nearly half the one recorded among first-level and single-cycle second-level graduates. With regards to the type of further qualifications, most graduates were looking at PhDs (14%) and postgraduate courses (9%). Most of those who were interested belonged to the psychology grouping (76%) as well as the geobiology (59%), healthcare professions (58%), sciences (51%) and humanities (50%) groupings.

Assessing higher education – a matter of methods

The plan to assess the university system and use the outcomes

of this assessment to strengthen a merit-based resource allocation system is indeed a step forward. Its success depends, on the one hand, on the access to a wide amount of up-to-date and reliable information. On the other, it requires adopting methods that are suitable for the Italian university context, as is shown by the AlmaLaurea documents.

The AlmaLaurea data gathered over almost twenty years of activities contribute to providing an information framework on Italian graduates, but they also suggest methodological guidelines that might prove useful when performing assessments and implementing merit-based mechanisms. This is particularly important in the light of recent trends in the assessment of the education system performance in Italy, which tends to mostly look at output measures: examination results, success rates, dropout rates, and so on.

But doing so means underestimating two fundamental issues. On the one hand, students are both the essential input and output of higher education processes. On the other hand, contextual factors cannot be neglected, as they influence both education processes and employment opportunities.

With regards to the quality of students who access tertiary education – which is obviously most affected by the quality of previous education – any approach which does not take it into account will necessarily lead to distortions. Clearly, the more diverse school backgrounds are and the more limited geographic mobility is, the more significant these distortions become. As mentioned before, AlmaLaurea data testify to the diversity of graduates' features upon enrolment and show how limited their study-related mobility is.

First of all, neglecting these aspects might lead to rewarding universities which enjoy more favourable conditions, compared to others located in less advantaged contexts, their educational ability being equal. Secondly, without effective tools to support the right to education and create equal access opportunities – including

scholarships and an adequate housing policy – the education system could become increasingly polarized. The brunt would be borne by students with the least mobility potential and the least advantaged social backgrounds, regardless of their talent, as well as by schools and universities located in less advantaged contexts, regardless of their staff's merit or lack of it¹¹.

Yet, assessing universities *on equal terms* clearly requires that graduates' features and performances be gathered and analysed across the university system and throughout their university career until they access the job market, as is currently being done for graduates from AlmaLaurea member universities.

This strengthened information framework not only contributes to ANVUR's assessments, but it can also be useful for a range of activities, including guidance programmes, job placement, internal monitoring, assessment and self-assessment of university programmes. In addition, it can improve the information framework that families and businesses need to make their choices or set their recruitment policies¹².

As is customary, the data provided by AlmaLaurea with its Reports on Graduates' Profile and Graduates' Employment Conditions also help future university students and their families to thoroughly analyse the training opportunities on offer. These Reports supplement the **guidance services** offered by **AlmaDiploma (www.almadiploma.it)** and **AlmaOrientati (www.almaorientati.it)**¹³ to upper secondary school students.

11 See Bound, M.F., & Turner, 2010: this paper shows that, in a high-mobility country such as the USA, the extension of the weakest population segments' time-to-graduation is largely attributable to the reduction of resources available for public education institutions.

12 As was pointed out by the AlmaLaurea director during the audition at the 11th Committee of the Italian Chamber of Deputies (Public and private employment, Indagine conoscitiva sul mercato del lavoro tra dinamiche di accesso e fattori di sviluppo - Survey on the Labour Market, its Access Mechanisms and Development Factors), on 22 June 2011.

13 See the AlmaDiploma and AlmaOrientati data at www.almadiploma.it/scuole/profilo/profilo2014/pdf/B_prima%20e%20do po%20il%20diploma%202014.pdf

Some final considerations

This Report devotes particular attention to a number of issues which characterize (or should do so) the debate on higher education. These include: graduates' features at the beginning of their university studies; work experience during university studies and class attendance; traineeships; study experiences abroad; degree completion times; exam and graduation grades; graduates' evaluation of their university experience; student support services; student living conditions in university towns; study and employment prospects after graduation; adults at university; graduates with foreign citizenship.

The scope and structure of the available documentation allow for more punctual and consistent conclusions and more useful indications on what could be rewarded or improved. Available online since the very day it was presented at the Conference held at the Milan Bicocca University, all the information is broken down by degree course type, university, faculty/department/school, degree subject area, degree grouping and specific programme, and it provides each member university with comprehensive, prompt and reliable data on their graduates' features. Such data can also successfully address the requirements that universities received from both the Education Ministry and ANVUR.

Besides, this kind of data has long been an important tool for Italian and foreign firms – both public and privately-owned – to assess potential candidates for recruitment, whether among new graduates or among graduates with work experience. It has also been supporting effective guidance programmes for students, whether at the end of their secondary school, during their university years or upon graduation.

The analysis provided in this Report shows how the overall outcomes from previous years have consolidated – confirming

improvement compared to pre-reform outcomes – and how graduates' features remain very diverse. In other words, there is no single graduates' profile, but rather, a variety of profiles. Differences are associated with a number of factors, which include: family background, geographical area of origin, secondary school background, degree subject area, range of degree programmes available, territorial features related to the dynamism of the local labour market. All this considered, analysis needs to go beyond aggregated data and take into account the extreme variability which characterizes all aspects under examination. It must also distinguish between programmes which have led to positive results and programmes which have not and take into account the students' different starting points in distinct university contexts, in order to appreciate their added value.

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