



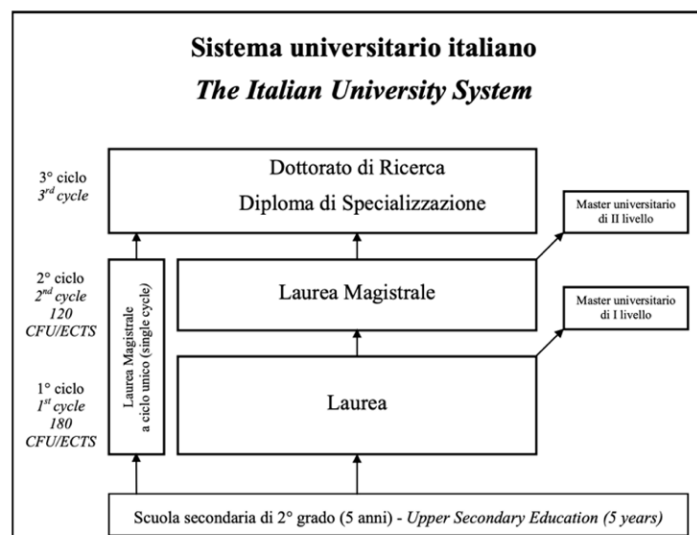
The Italian University System and its Commitment towards Inclusive Education

The Italian university system

The Italian university system comprises 67 state universities, 29 legally recognised non-state universities, 11 telematic universities, and 9 schools or higher institutes with a particular organisation. University education is divided into three cycles: Degree courses, Master's degree programs, and PhD programs. Each cycle corresponds to specific academic qualifications, which allow students to continue their studies or enter the job market (Fig.1). Each cycle is divided into different courses of study, with different subjects and contains a certain number of courses relating to the subject. These courses are structured in formative university credits (CFU/ECTS). One CFU corresponds to 25 hours of work done by the student, including individual study. In one academic year, the student achieves 60 CFU/ECTS.

Like other universities across the world, Italian universities too, have been increasingly committed to promoting the participation of groups traditionally excluded or marginalised from higher education because of cultural, socio-economic, migratory, gender differences and/or disabilities, playing a decisive role in the processes of social change occurring across Western societies in the second half of the last century. Italian universities have been called to face transformations of a structural, organisational, and cultural nature to ensure the best conditions for learning and participation of the entire community of students.

Fig.1



Defining and fostering inclusive education

Inclusive education does not simply imply providing equal access to all students. More radically, it requires a general reconfiguration of the entire education system so that it can promote participation, integration, and mutual recognition. As such, inclusive education has a strong social connotation.

The notion of inclusion is often paired with that of integration. Although the difference between the two is still under debate, there seems to be a general consensus on the fact that both activate a two-way opposite process:

- *inclusion* implies the idea of a move *from society to individuals* within a process of recognition by which society welcomes them providing equal opportunities regardless of any possible discriminating factor (disability, religion, ethnicity, gender, etc.)
- vice versa, *integration* mainly recalls the idea of a move *from individuals to society* (again, within a process of recognition) by which individuals "embrace" society in a way that, while their diversity is respected, it is also possible to create some structural and functional unity and subsistence.

These two "moves" are not mutually exclusive, as they both concur to achieve a society where equal opportunities and fair living conditions are guaranteed to everyone. Policies and legislative acts can be considered the expression of the efforts done at the institutional level (i.e., HEIs) to create the conditions that make these moves possible.

Recently, a number of education ministries and some world development agencies have signed the Incheon Declaration "Education 2030: Towards inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all," whose top priority is to contrast exclusion recognising that "inclusion and equity in and through education is the cornerstone of a transformative education agenda, and we therefore commit to addressing all forms of exclusion and marginalisation, disparities and inequalities in access, participation and learning outcomes. No education target should be considered met unless met by all. We, therefore, commit to making the necessary changes in education policies and focusing our efforts on the most disadvantaged, especially those with disabilities, to ensure that no one is left behind" (UNESCO <https://bit.ly/3UPTDQu>).

The efforts recalled in the Declaration should be developed at the level of cultures and values, governance policies and pedagogical practices adopted within the educational institution (school or university). An interesting and valuable resource is the Index for Inclusion (<https://bit.ly/3ftbU5X>), which is a set of materials to guide education institutions through a process of inclusive development. Thanks to the Index, they can:

- adopt a self-review approach to analyse their cultures, policies and practices and identify the barriers to learning and participation that may occur within each area.
- decide their own priorities for change and evaluate their progress.
- use it as an integral part of existing development policies, encouraging broad and deep scrutiny of everything that makes up schools' or universities' activities.

Italian HEIs and inclusive education

The notion of inclusive education has its roots in articles 2 and 3 of the Italian Constitution (1947). It can be summed up with the sentence "a school open to all students", whatever their starting position, economic, linguistic, socio-cultural and personal differences. Inclusive education stems from two constitutional principles:

- the *personalistic principle* places the person at the centre of the legal system (art. 2)
- the *egalitarian principle* requires the State to take action to protect personal situations of disadvantage and remove any obstacle that may prevent the full development of the person and his/her participation in the political, economic and social life of the country (art.3).

Building on these principles and under the pressure of EU and national normative recommendations and dictates, Italian HEIs have introduced a series of services, strategies and practices aimed at reducing the burden of those circumstances not directly controllable by individuals (such as gender, ethnicity, place of birth, family economic status, disabilities, etc.) that may hamper not only their access to university but also their full and active participation in all sorts of University activities.

Italian HEIs for students with a migration background

Italian educational policies in the field of the inclusion of students with a migration background (third-country nationals in possession of a residence permit for work, family reasons, humanitarian reasons or for international protection) are scattered in a myriad of documents (ministerial notes, directives, guidelines, decrees, recommendations, etc.) issued mainly by the Ministry of education from the late 1980s when the phenomenon of incoming migrants started to raise public attention. The expression "foreign students" has been recently replaced by more neutral expressions such as "students with a migration background" or "students with non-Italian citizenship".

University education for these students is governed by Article 39 of the 1998 "Law on Immigration", stating that they are guaranteed equal treatment with Italian citizens.

Each year each university reserves a certain number of places for each single degree course for international students residing abroad. On the other hand, EU and non-EU citizens legally residing in Italy access the University without numerical limitations under the same conditions as Italian citizens.

On the website <http://www.studiare-in-italia.it/studentistranieri/> it is possible to find out the number of places reserved for international students, as well as whether or not it is necessary to translate the documentation to be attached to the application (except for the qualification whose translation is always compulsory).

Italian HEIs for refugees

Refugees legally residing in Italy can apply for access to any university course without numerical limitations. In order to enrol, however, the refugee must take both an

Italian language test and an admission test to the specific course (Article 39 bis of the Law on Immigration). The final secondary school qualification (obtained with at least 12 years of schooling) or a replacement certificate for all legal purposes must be attached to the application.

In addition to the right to education, refugee students can access work and educational guidance experiences before, during, and after university. To carry out these interventions, the Italian Ministry of Universities and Research uses the SPRAR (Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees), a network of different local authorities that implement integrated reception projects, which have as their primary objective the conquest of the individual autonomy of the migrant.

Unfortunately, although Italy is one of the countries with the highest percentage of young refugees, and many of them have had previous training, which could be sufficient to continue their studies in our country, they cannot directly access Italian universities. As said, their previous training experiences must be recognised as suitable by the Ministry of Universities and Research.

The problem is that refugees fleeing from their Home Countries do not have documents or certificates that certify their previous experiences and prove the acquisition of skills related to higher education. For this reason, in some cases, refugees cannot access universities due to the absence of an appropriate and standardised national validation system.

In other cases, although they have the certification, the diplomas issued in the country of origin are not considered equivalent to the Italian ones.

A fundamental step in the process of inclusion of students with a migratory/refugee background is the establishment of CIMEA – Information Centre on Academic Mobility and Equivalence – in 1984. Since then, CIMEA has carried out a specific activity of information and counselling on the procedures of qualifications recognition and themes linked to Italian and international higher education and training. The main objective of CIMEA is to further academic mobility in all aspects, facilitating the understanding of the elements of Italian HEIs based on the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention on qualifications recognition. In 1986 CIMEA was appointed by the Ministry of Education as the official Italian centre dealing with the NARIC - National Academic Recognition Information Centres network of the European Union and the ENIC - European National Information Centres network of the Council of Europe and UNESCO. In addition, since 2012 CIMEA has participated in the Group of National Correspondents for Qualifications Frameworks (QF-EHEA), founded at the Council of Europe, representing Italy, and created and manages the Italian Qualifications Framework – QTI. Finally, CIMEA participates in the work of the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Space, both on a national level collaborating with the national group of the Bologna Process Experts, and on an international level participating in work groups and initiatives sponsored by the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) (for further information see, <https://www.cimea.it/EN/pagina-homepage>)

Italian HEIs for disabled students

The right to HEIs benefits for disabled students is enshrined in Law no. 104/92. In order to guarantee the right to study and reduce the difficulties of disabled students, Italian HEIs offer some solutions and facilities, although with differences across the national territory. To ensure equal opportunities for students with disabilities, Italian universities usually implement solutions both of an educational nature, such as the assistance of a tutor, and for accessing facilities by removing architectural barriers in university spaces. They also offer economic support depending on the level of disability and regardless of personal/family income.

University libraries offer ad hoc services for disabled students, although these may vary from university to university. For example, some services for the disabled are: the possibility of receiving books at home, without going to the library or obtaining them in a digital format, workstations equipped with technological aids, such as optical magnifiers or special software for the visually impaired, etc.

Help for students with disabilities is also offered for exams and study. Some of the most common forms of support for exams are: oral exam instead of written (or vice versa); additional time for the performance of the test; a subdivision of the exam into partial tests; compensatory instruments based on the type of disability; tutoring for writing/reading.

As for study support, it can be technical, through tools that offer compensation, such as computers with speech synthesis for dyslexic and Braille printers for blind or visually impaired students. These aids also include equipment for students with motor disabilities, such as ramps for the disabled or equipped study stations. In addition, tutors are available to assist in tasks such as taking notes during lessons, researching in the library or studying for an exam.

Italian HEIs for gender issues

Quite recently, the EU has stated that all European universities that want to access Horizon Europe funds (2021-2027) - the EU program that funds research and innovation - must have adopted a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) at the institutional level in order to ensure gender balance in top positions, equality in recruitment and career progress, and integration of the gender dimension in research and teaching programs. The actions envisaged in the GEP are closely linked with the Gender Budget, both in the forecasting and in the reporting phase: a set of activities, not isolated but integrated into a single strategic vision, to identify gender distortions and inequalities, implement innovative strategies, define objectives and monitor their achievement through suitable indicators. Many Italian HEIs have adopted the GEP and Gender Budget.

A EU project recently funded to foster and experiment with these processes is LeTSGEPs - Leading Towards Sustainable Gender Equality Plans in HEIs. Coordinated by the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (Unimore), this project aims to design and implement Gender Equality Plans in HEIs. In addition to Unimore, other universities are involved: University of Messina, RWTH Aachen University (Germany), Mathematical

Institute of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts in Belgrade (Serbia), University of Tirana (Albania), Max Planck Society for the Advancement of Science of Munich (Germany), Spanish National Research Council and in particular the Institute of Marine Sciences of Barcelona (Spain) and Cergy-Paris Université (France). For further information, see: <https://letsgeps.eu/>

Author: Gianna Cappello

Bibliography

- Bencivenga R., Siri A., Leone C., Taramasso A.C. (2021), GenderEqualityPlansunderHorizon Europe: fromdifficulties of interpretationtoprospects. *AboutGender. International Journal of GenderStudies*, 10(19) pp. 378-397.
- Colombo, M., Scardigno, F. (2019) (eds), *La formazione dei rifugiati e dei minori stranieri non accompagnati. Una realtà necessaria*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano
- Colombo, M. (2019),La necessità di formare le persone migranti La dimensione internazionale, gli attori in gioco e il ruolo dell'università, in Colombo, M., Scardigno, F. (eds), *La formazione dei rifugiati e dei minori stranieri non accompagnati. Una realtà necessaria*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano
- De Anna, L. (2016), *Le esperienze di integrazione e inclusione nelle università trapassato e presente*, FrancoAngeli, Milano
- De Masi, D. e Santi, M. (2017) (eds), *InDeEP. University Un progetto di ricerca partecipata per una Università inclusiva* a cura di Marina Santi, Diego Di Masi
Padova University Press, Padova
- Dovigo, F. (2017), *Pedagogia e didattica per realizzare l'inclusione. Guida all'index*, Carocci, Roma
- Pulejo L., Vermiglio C., Noto G., Naciti V. (2020),
LeadingTowardsSustainableGenderEqualityPlans in researchperformingorganisations (LeTSGEPs). State of the art on Gender Budget experiencesreport (available at: <https://letsgeps.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/D2.1-State-of-the-Art-analysis-of-GB-experiences.pdf>)
- Vaccarelli,A. (2015) (ed.), *Studiare in Italia. Intercultura e inclusione all'Università*, FrancoAngeli, Milano