

IS A COLLEGE DEGREE WORTH IT?

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Telos: A compelling question to the Rector and President of CRUI: do Italian universities do a good job preparing young people for the world of work and research? What would you like to improve?

Gaetano Manfredi: Young people in Italy today are experiencing the effects of an ongoing crisis that unfortunately hasn’t loosened its grip. It’s certainly more difficult for a young person to succeed today than it was 15 years ago, but a degree enhances the professionalism of those who graduate and still represents a winning investment. In fact, statistics confirm that people with a college degree rather than a high school diploma have a better chance at finding a job and earning more money. Despite all the many problems that beset Italian universities, they do provide good quality education, giving students access to both the world of work and research, in Italy and abroad. In addition, unlike many other countries, including the United States, the average quality of our universities is very good and fairly evenly distributed. In fact, even though no Italian university is amongst the top universities in international rankings, they are often high up on the list. In other words, none are in the top ten, whichever the list, but a fifth of Italian universities are in the top 1000, for example in ARWU or Webometrics, two of the most prestigious international rankings.

Undoubtedly, some things have to be improved, and the entire academic community is working on these issues. For example, internationalisation - increasingly important to enhance the value of the education provided by Italian universities - and the relationship with businesses. Italian universities and the Government are in fact trying to boost the link between businesses and the world of university research, thereby improving education, technological innovation and, in turn, access to the labour market.

Many students from the south continue to go and study in universities in the centre-north of Italy. Is there a real gap in terms of education and research between universities in the north and those in the south?

I don’t believe there’s a gap between universities in the north and south of the country, besides it’s something that happens only in certain regions in the south. Excellence exists in many scientific milieus both in the north and south, and outstanding universities studies are performed everywhere, be it Naples, Catania, Turin or Padua. Instead more universities in the south find it difficult to keep abreast of innovation, to ensure good quality research and hence provide high quality educational programmes; this is often because they are less dynamic, a situation dictated by the context and the economic difficulties of the productive fabric that doesn’t stimulate and prompt continuous cultural growth - a crucial factor in any academic milieu.

Everything can be tackled by encouraging more links with competitive businesses, by stimulating scientific and technological innovation, by introducing young, scholarly individuals into the academic communities that are struggling, and by using incentives to prompt quality policies.

We still have a lot to do.

Are institutions and the political world attentive to the requests made by universities? What would you ask them to do?

Politicians have to realise how important the university system is for the country. In fact, a discussion about the policies needed to manage the university system in Italy would require careful assessment of the role universities have played and could play in the future in Italy’s economic and social system. Universities focus on three main objectives: to impart high level education, perform research, and affect society by conveying culture and scientific knowledge. Leaving rhetoric aside, these are incredibly effective ways to influence the society of the future, to shape its characteristics, and impact not only on the economic interests of the areas where the universities are situated, but also on the whole country.

Starting with the ruling class, a good university system is capable of training skilled citizens for the next 40 years: it can create wealth by ensuring that businesses are technologically innovative; it can boost the culture of the communities and territory where universities are present; it can design the city, filling it with students and nourishing the spaces earmarked for culture. Universities are successful tools with which to impact on the country’s future, but they have to be properly funded if you really do have the country at heart.

When resources are limited one of the biggest mistakes you can make is to consider universities an optional tool, like a political opportunity you can decide not to exploit, especially if it doesn’t produce short-term results. This is what’s been happening in Italy for the last ten years. The universities’ system needs a long-term relaunch policy: in Italy this is absolutely crucial.

You’ve often been asked to stand for election, but have always said no. By any chance are you one of those very few people

who still consider politics a profession?

I don't know whether I'm one of the few, but I do believe that being in politics requires specific skills. When times are tough, the State and institutions quite rightly take advantage of qualified individuals from civil society and the academic and professional world. However, I believe that once the problems are solved institutions should be led by far-sighted people who can steer a long-term political course.

I'm one of those people who believes that politics is a noble and important activity, rather than something disgraceful; a full-time activity that should be performed enthusiastically and generously by competent, expert individuals. I'm not saying that someone who becomes involved in politics but comes from other walks of life doesn't have these gifts, but I respect and admire professional politicians when they work for the common good.

Marco Sonsini

Editorial

The degree to which a society is dynamic can be judged by how successfully its scholastic and university system can help young students develop and exploit their talents in the labour market as in life, quite apart from the relative success of their own families. For many Italians having a son or daughter with a university degree has been a dream, if not the goal of a lifetime. But is a degree still useful? The Italian businessperson Briatore, and also Peter Thiel, co-founder of Paypal, believe perhaps it isn't. They both maintain that university is overvalued. Briatore advises young people to 'go to Africa or to an emerging country instead of wasting time trying to get a degree', while Thiel is convinced that university is overpriced and since 2014 has been saying that America's higher education system is based on a speculative bubble and that already indebted families incur even more debt just to send their children to university to get a degree that raises unrealistic expectations regarding real job opportunities. A third successful entrepreneur, Eric Schmidt, CEO at Google, says: "If all you care about is money, you should go to college. If all you care about is having fun, you should go to college. Go to college. I can't be any clearer". In Italy, holding a degree is still a winning hand in the world of work, but it's important not to consider it a guarantee or much less demonise it. What does Gaetano Manfredi, the *rector of rectors* think about this issue? That having a degree is important, and that Italy needs more university graduates. He says that of course Italian universities should not just be places where education is imparted and research is performed; they have to become social and economic agents, the engine behind territorial and social development and transformation. As President of the Conference of Italian University Rectors he tackles several challenges, one of which is to enhance the relational potential between universities and the economic world. And the other challenges? The Italian university system has only recently acknowledged internationalisation as a tool to boost the quality of Italian universities. For many years universities were considered as self-referential *ivory towers*, oblivious to stimuli from the outside world; in the eighties the timid steps towards internationalisation focused mostly on student mobility, in accordance with European rules. Apart from the presence of Italian students and researchers abroad, in the nineties Italy began to evaluate the presence of foreign students and researchers in our academic institutions. Compared to Europe and countries further afield, the situation in Italy was anything but rosy. Today Italian universities have to do more than just teach courses in English; they have to throw their net of initiatives further afield and primarily involve Asia and the Mediterranean.

Italy could attract bright students from these emerging countries, students who enrol, study and pay university fees, thereby injecting Italian universities with some new lifeblood. Without indulging in self-pity, Prof. Manfredi is extremely optimistic, even if he hopes that greater attention be paid to this issue and that politics adopt a long-term vision. He has often been approached with the flattering offer of a political post or institutional position, but has resisted and continues to resist this enticing proposal. The last of the Mohicans!

Mariella Palazzolo



Gaetano Manfredi has been the Rector of the **University of Naples 'Federico II'**, since 2014 and the President of the **Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI)** since 2015. He graduated in Engineering in 1988 at the "Federico II", obtained a research doctorate in Structural Engineering and was awarded a postdoctoral scholarship in 1994. Researcher in Construction Technique since 1995, in 2000 he became Full Professor in Construction Technique at the "Federico II" Faculty of Engineering and, in 2003, Director of the Dept. of Structural Analysis and Design. Manfredi is one of Italy's leading experts in seismic engineering and is President of the **Reluis Consortium**, a network of seismic engineering laboratories working closely with the Italian Civil Protection Department. Author or curator of nine books and over 400 works published in journals or presented at international congresses, his theoretical and experimental research focuses on the seismic behaviour of structures made with different materials as well as on the vulnerability and restoration of cultural heritage.

Manfredi coordinates numerous scientific projects sponsored either by Italian Institutions (National Centre for Scientific Research-CNR, National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology, *etc.*) or the European Union. He is a member of the National Council on Public Works and the **Major Risks Committee**.

He holds numerous prestigious posts in national and international institutes and research centres, for example he is the Expert for scientific research of the Italian

Ministry of Education, Universities and Research and also a member of the CNR Committee for the drafting of Guidelines regarding the use of composite materials for structural purposes. He belongs to numerous international organisations including

the Earthquake Engineering Research Institute (EERI), the Fédération Internationale du Béton (FIB), the American Society of Civil Engineering (ASCE), the American Concrete Institute (ACI), and the International Standard Organization (ISO). Humble and enthusiastic: ‘I’ve always been humble when I’ve had to deal with the important things in my life (and have always listened to others before deciding)’. Manfredi is 53, married, and has a daughter; he sees himself as a provincial, down-to-earth person. Born in Nola where he lives with his family, he is very attached to his roots and maintains that ‘the province gives me a feeling of concreteness that Naples is badly in need of’. And he couldn’t live with the Cilento sea.

Marco Sonsini

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