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Why universities in southern Italy are losing thousands of students

The future of higher education in the southern region is at risk, as students increasingly migrate north or give up on enrolling. Can the exodus be stopped?

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A university candidate waiting to take the entrance test for the medical school of Università Vanvitelli at the Palapartenope complex, in Naples, in September 2019. Credit: Ciro Fusco/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock.

Having just completed her bachelor's degree in 2017, 21-year-old Francesca Vita left her home town, Messina in Sicily, and moved 1,000 kilometres north to pursue a master's in biotechnology at Università di Torino.

According to a recent [report](#) by the Italian National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities (ANVUR), Vita is only one among thousands of students lost to southern Italian universities in the last few years. In 2011, more than 600,000 students were registered in a southern university, out of 1.7 million students across Italy's 68 public and 31 private universities. Ten years later, the national total has risen to almost 2 million, thanks to increases in northern universities and in online ones, that have grown five-fold to about 200,000 students. But the quota at southern public universities has fallen by 100,000, with big universities like Palermo, Bari and Naples losing between 9,000 and 15,000 students each.

This exodus adds to other gaps between northern and southern Italy and between the country as a whole and other industrialised countries. Italy spends about 1% of its GDP on tertiary education, less than most OECD countries (for which the average is 1.45%), and has a very low rate of young university graduates (29%) compared to most OECD countries (47%).

The causes of the low enrolment include a more pronounced demographic decline in the south, fewer people continuing education after high school, and increased brain drain to the north. "Mine was a forced choice to have access to more and better opportunities for my future," says Vita.

The future of the university system in the south has been forecast by another [report](#) by SVIMEZ, a private think-tank that studies the economy of the southern Italy. Without policy interventions, the group says, there could be a further 27% drop in registered students in the south by 2041. The impact will be bigger for medium-small universities in the peripheral regions, where population depletion will hit harder,

while universities in the centre-north will be affected less and at a later stage. “Either we can compensate for depopulation, or it will become difficult for some universities to operate,” says Daniele Livon, director of ANVUR.

Italy’s population is set to fall by almost 3 million by 2041, according to the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), due to a low fertility rate (the average number of children per woman) of 1.24. Since the end of the 2000s, the rate in the south has dropped below the national median. The effects are already felt. “In our region, we have 30% fewer potential students than 20 years ago, and we are worried,” says Patrizia Falabella, deputy rector in charge of teaching activities at the University of Basilicata. Founded in 1982, this regional university is one of the smallest in the country, with about 5,800 students. It has lost 2,500 of them since 2011 and could lose another 2,000 by 2041.

Adding to the reduced pool of potential students is the lower rate at which school graduates from the south enrol in university, now below 60%. That fraction rose for a while at the beginning of the 2000s, but the economic crisis in 2008 reversed the trend, because “the crisis had a bigger impact on the families of the south,” says Gaetano Vecchione, an economist at the University of Naples Federico II and co-author of the SVIMEZ report.

The 2008 crisis also prompted the one-way migration toward universities of the centre-north. Today, around 1 in 4 students in the south leaves their home region for the bachelor’s degree, and more than 1 out of 3 leaves after the bachelor, like Vita did. Students look for better job opportunities after the degree, but also for better education programs and services such as housing, career services, and economic support, says Alessia Polisini, representative of the students’ association UDU (Unione degli Universitari). Southern universities tend to perform worse than northern ones in international rankings and in the ANVUR assessment, which is used to allocate a bonus part of the governmental funding for universities. “Since the overall budget is low, the current system practically transfers money from the poorer and peripheral universities to the richer and central ones,” says Vecchione.

Some universities manage to absorb the shock. The University of Naples, the fourth biggest in Italy, hosts more than 73,000 students, a number that has stabilized in the last five years. “We lose students to the centre-north, but we acquire students from other universities in the south,” says its rector, Matteo Lorito. He is convinced that “besides increasing the number of students, it's even more important to provide more services and opportunities to them”. In San Giovanni a Teduccio, a suburb of Naples, the university offers 12 student programmes in partnership with industry.

But other institutions in the south are scrambling for solutions to attract and keep more students. “Our universities need to open synergies with the business world and the surrounding territories,” says Massimo Midiri, rector of the University of Palermo. In the coastal campus of Trapani, the university has introduced new courses on biodiversity and local agriculture: “That way we have doubled our registrations there,” says Midiri. The rector aims also to attract students from Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, and Egypt by introducing courses in English and French, and developing partnerships with target institutions.

Small and peripheric universities don't always have the capacity to implement solutions. The University of Basilicata struggles to increase research collaborations with local enterprises that are either too small or not interested, says Falabella. To counter those dynamics, it would be important to increase collaborations among institutions, experts from SVIMEZ suggest. Stefano Bronzini, the rector of the University of Bari, recently proposed to federate all universities in the Puglia region to consolidate resources and have a more rational educational offer. The idea was met with scepticism by other universities and regional politicians. “In 10 years, we will be obliged to federate, but with fewer resources and freedom,” he says.

SVIMEZ proposes adding an extra 20% to the ordinary fund for universities to support those suffering from plummeting registrations and avoid “educational deserts”, a lack of education that results in social and industrial decline. “I am for supporting excellence, but not at the expense of poorer and smaller universities”, says Vecchione.

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