



Finding Common Ground: International Students in UPO and their Academic Experiences

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Abstract

The article aims to reflect on the international migratory movements in Italian Universities. This important phenomenon resulting from globalisation has increased the number of interchanges of foreign students in our educational system. The study explores university perspectives from the point of view of the strengths and challenges of international activities in Italy, as well as the immigrant students' role in social and human capital of a foreign society.

This paper calls for a rethinking of education across borders by examining the University of Piemonte Orientale's (UPO) student academic experiences, with particular focus on achieving internationalisation, within an increasingly challenging political and socio-economic context.

Within this framework and thanks to the collection, storage and processing of data, the article offers an overview of the relationships between UPO and foreign students. In particular, the methodological approach sets out to link the quantitative data, analyse the student migration dynamics and pay attention to the territorial approach in order to understand both the social inclusion and migrant identity dimensions.

Keywords: International Students, Migrant Inclusion, University of Piemonte Orientale

1. Introduction

Trends in international student mobility suggest an increase in the number of students studying in different countries all over the world. In the OECD countries the number of international students enrolled has reached 4.4 million, accounting for 7% of all tertiary students. The share of international students is higher in advanced levels of education, in fact they make up 5% of the students enrolled in

bachelor's, 14% in master's, and 24% in the PhD courses for foreign students in the 2020 academic year (OECD, 2022).

The number of international students being educated in Italian universities is increasing every year. With the growing number of such students, the issue of their inclusion becomes relevant. Their adaptation not only determines the success of their education, but also measures the relevant role of universities in the global

educational system, which in the initial stages should be aimed at accelerating the adaptation of international students to everyday life. However, while increased student enrolment has several benefits for university education, the non-Italian students could be subject to a series of social and mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety and other. These problems are due to different factors such as language barriers, being in a new environment, different socio-cultural norms, difficulties in making local friends, work restrictions, cultural knowledge and low social support.

During the Coronavirus Pandemic/Covid-19, many studies have shown that the epidemic led to major traumas in people's lives (Badar et al., 2023; Chirikov et al., 2020; Mellillo, 2021; Wang et al., 2020) and especially some groups such as the elderly, disabled, homeless and young people. This is not the first pandemic, but it is the first in times of globalisation, in which the world network of spatial connection is linked to a rapid circulation of information, goods and persons, greater by far than in the past (De Vecchis, 2021, p. 47).

Foreign students are an often ignored cluster however, and were socially and economically affected by the pandemic because of their immigrant status (Angeloni et al., 2020; Firang, 2020; Guadagni, 2021). In fact, many international students experienced a number of problems related to the administrative procedures required to leave the country in order to take up studies (Erasmus students) or to go back to their family. In 2020 most EU and OECD countries closed their national borders in an effort to limit the coronavirus epidemic, and many universities temporarily stopped their activities. While the majority of the students returned to their hometowns or found safe accommodation with close friends or extended families, the international students remained in campus residence because of travel restrictions and limited financial resources. Students had to use online learning and to adapt to the limited social support caused by the isolation. While these students faced difficult personal and educational conditions, they nevertheless also demonstrated resilience.

This work analyses the mobility of foreign

students and aims to provide information on the student data at enrolment, in terms of the student flows enrolled at universities, according to some socio-demographic characteristics, such as gender, citizenship and type of course attended.

The work is divided into different parts. The first section is dedicated to presenting the national data, the second examines the student academic experience of the University del Piemonte Orientale (UPO), with particular focus on the data (such as the number of student enrolment, their academic career, the number of students receiving a scholarship). The final part is dedicated to the relationships between UPO and foreign students.

2. Methodology

This study uses a mixed-method approach and is based on the analysis of official statistical data. The first part is dedicated to the theoretical framework, in particular a geographical literature review of human capital and student mobility.

The second part is divided into two steps of analysis. In the first step the work examines the data of the Statistical Bureau of the Italian Ministry of University and the EDISU Piemonte that show the present situation in Italy and at UPO. The second is dedicated to the analysis of specific data by UPO of the enrolments divided into type of courses, citizenship and gender.

The qualitative study concerns the students who do not have Italian citizenship and who have decided to study at UPO without Erasmus agreements.

The data involve many factors such as the number of international students (total number, female and male), the origin of the students by citizenship, the type of master's or bachelor's degree chosen and the overview of scholarships.

The conclusions are reviewed in the light of the theoretical approach of the link between international students and human capital. The article concludes with a proposal for future research to study the experiences of international students in Italian universities.

3. Theoretical framework and development of hypotheses

Migration studies have received great attention and been investigated through theoretical and empirical analysis (Brusa, 1999, 2004, 2006, 2012; Cristaldi and Morri, 2014; Cristaldi, 2020, 2021; De Vecchis, 2014; Meini, 2008, 2012), while the other forms of mobility, such as student flows, have received much less attention. International student mobility is a peculiar form of temporary movement (Staniscia, 2012) with important effects for the original and host countries.

The university student's mobility is now a relevant phenomenon in many countries. Migration flows towards foreign universities have increased considerably and this has affected Italy too.

The international students' movements have been dominated by flows from Asia, North Africa and the Middle East to the USA, Australia, United Kingdom and the European Union and reflect the uneven development of the global education and economic system (Holloway et al., 2012).

The link between the role of migrants and the increase of human capital regards their innovative contribution to the dynamism of the host economies. In many countries, the admission of foreign students to some university courses requires the passing of national entrance exams. The exams aim to verify that these students are well prepared to successfully pursue university education in the host country (Arenas, 2021).

Current migrations are characterised by relational, territorial and cultural components and are conditioned by the new means of communication (Magistri, 2017). In order to understand student mobility, it is necessary to adopt a holistic approach (Turco, 2018). This tool allows an integrated analysis of the different spaces: the departure areas where the decision to study abroad matures, and the arrival ones where new forms of interaction take place between the cultural models of family of origin and the values and languages of the host community (Lazzeroni and Meini, 2021, p. 66).

Students are encouraged to attend their studies abroad by push and pull factors. The first operate within the country of origin and initiate

the students' decision to go abroad. The push factors are driven by the limited study possibilities in the home country, leading to the desire to live in a different place, to acquire the knowledge of a different culture and the possible future opportunities to study or work in a developed region. For example, by studying in the European Union countries, it is possible to get a diploma which might offer more opportunities to work in other European countries like Germany or France.

The mobility of international students is strictly linked to the concepts of human and social capital (Trigilia, 1999). The availability of qualified human capital allows the communities to produce innovation processes and manage activities with a higher scientific and technological topic. The quality of human capital depends on many factors, such as a higher education system and a good level of research.

Social capital is the tool whereby to facilitate cooperation within a group and brings great benefits (Ostrom, 2009, p. 17) for the people involved. It always includes human capital and it's possible to have more types of social capital related to the different human capital (Ostrom and Ahn, 2007, p. 4).

In particular, being linked to foreign mobility it has the important role of creating familiar social networks, forming formal and informal relationships, promoting inclusion and building identity in a multicultural society.

International student mobility is an opportunity to increase the quality of human capital, as "high profile" immigration could develop an innovative environment within the universities and help to increase the competitiveness of the country's system. According to Lachmann (1978), capital in its most basic sense is a set of assets capable of generating common benefits. To link migratory phenomena, these resources are represented by territorial factors, and in particular the relationship between migration dynamics and the existing physical and social capital in a specific space.

From a geographical point of view, it is important to highlight how the actions of international students and their connection to colleagues and the institutions take place in a

specific territorial context. Their actions thus influence the development models and local processes. However, they are greatly conditioned by the characteristics of the place. This is the general concept of territorial capital (Dematteis and Governa, 2005), in which the social and human capital represents parts of the context, together with material goods.

In the light of these considerations, when the international students enter the local educational system, they create a conceptual and empirical link with the space and they become one of the resources of the territorial capital. They could be the key drivers in upgrading the quality of local economies and political systems, to create knowledge and to improve current human capital. Universities must foster the processes of social and cultural integration, in order to capitalise on the advantages deriving from cultural diversity (Amin, 2012).

4. Overview of foreign students in Italian universities

The data used in this paragraph come from the MIUR database (<http://ustat.miur.it/dati/didattica/italia/atenei>) and contain the careers of all the students enrolled in Italy from the academic year 2010/2011 to date.

The historical series 2010/2011-2020/2021 of foreign students enrolled in Italian universities increased by 62%. In the reference period, the female gender registers a minor growth trend, but the total number of first enrolled students between 2011/2012 and 2015/2016 decreased (Caritas and Migrantes, 2022). According to Cimea, the COVID 19 pandemic led to a 9% reduction in international student flows (enrolled in bachelor's and master's degree courses, and post-graduate degrees). From the data on courses of study, it is interesting to note that despite the downward trend, 47% of Italian universities recorded an increase in the number of pre-registration applications (on the University web site). In the case of master's degrees, 63% of institutions received a higher number of applications, while 37% registered a slight decrease (Lantero et al., 2002, pp. 5-6).

The first step of the analysis is to explain the difference between “real” foreigners, i.e.

those who have attended high school abroad (the International Students “IS”), and “Italian foreigners”, i.e. those who have attended high school in Italy but do not possess Italian citizenship (second-generation youth, “SG”).

Table 1 shows the distribution of students by origin in the last academic year.

Academic Year	Students	Total	SG	IS	% of SG	% of IS
2021/2022	First enrollment	323,852	18,798	21,348	5.8	6.6
2021/2022	Enrollment	1,822,141	109,681	62,841	6.0	4.3
2021	Graduates	370,758	17,224	10,383	4.6	2.8

Table 1. Number of students¹ and graduates by country of origin in Italy, academic years 2021/2022. Elaboration on data MIUR (2022).

Figure 1 confirms that the number of foreign students enrolled in Italy has grown in the last years. In fact, the average share in a tertiary qualification has increased from 72% in ten years (from 2010/2011 to 2021/2022). On average, tertiary education is high among women. Female students now make up a clear majority of young adults with a bachelor's or master's degree. The female rate increased during the period considered. The representation of women in tertiary education grew between 2010 and 2021, the average share is higher by 4 percentage points (from 3% to 7%).

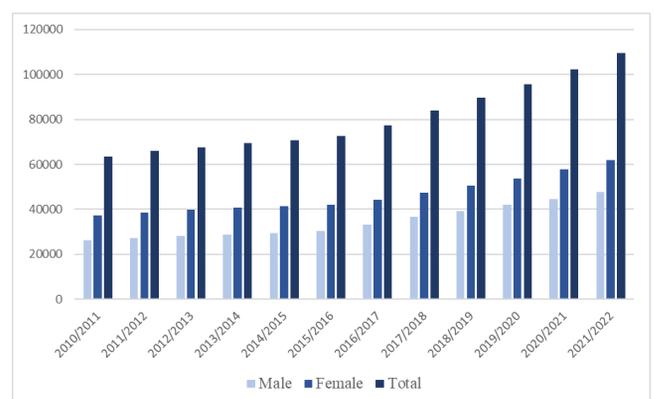


Figure 1. Number of foreign students (on the vertical axis) in Italy from 2010/2011 to 2021/2022 academic years (on the horizontal axis). Elaboration on MIUR data (2022).

¹ Total enrolments include first-time enrolled students. Total enrolments are shown of students of three-year and single-cycle degree courses.

Figure 2 shows the two groups of foreign students enrolled at an Italian university. The first group should include students who have grown up and studied in Italy and who decided to continue their tertiary education in the same country: these could be immigrants in Italy with their families or second generation migrants, still awaiting citizenship. The second group represents students who come to Italy to enrol at a university and this group (International Students) has grown in number along with the SG group. This fact indicates that the children of immigrants and second generations have more access to university than in the past. This means that a greater number of students attend secondary school and that their families invest in education in order to assure high-quality and well-paying jobs in the future. This is an important factor to help the original communities to integrate into the host country.

Therefore, the number of foreign students has grown in the last ten years and this is due more to the growth of SG students than to IS. In fact, the first group grew by 81% from the academic year 2010/2011 to 2021/2022, while instead the international students increased by 68%.

The distribution of International Students, by the first 10 citizenships for the academic year 2021/2022, are shown in Figure 3.

On average about 50% of the total international students come from these ten countries, the most representative being Iran, China, India, and Turkey. As some OECD countries, Asia is the most represented continent in Italy, thanks to the weight of Iran, China and India. Almost half of foreign students come from Asia. The monitoring of international students by country of origin seems crucial in order to develop targeted services of guidance and to evaluate the effectiveness of current cooperation policies (OECD, 2022).

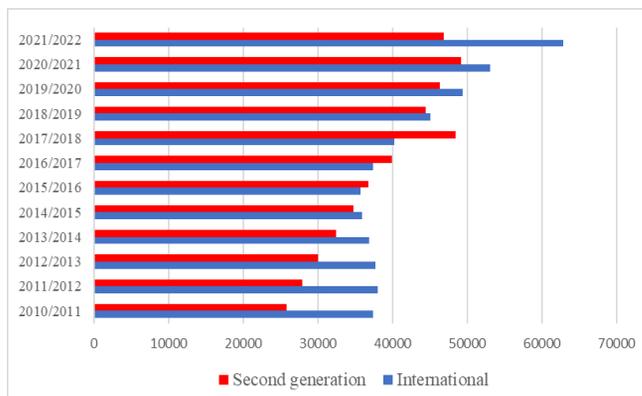


Figure 2. Number of second-generation students and international students (x-axis) in Italy for the academic years 2010/2011 to 2021/2022 (y-axis). Elaboration on MIUR data (2022).

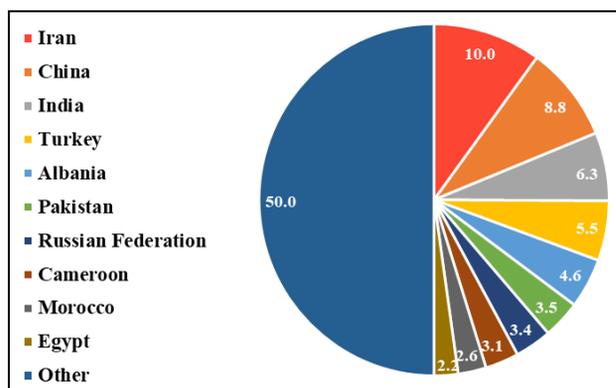


Figure 3. Percentage of international students enrolled by country of origin, academic year 2020/2021. Elaboration on MIUR data (2022).

For example, the number of Chinese students enrolled in Italian universities has increased in the last few years thanks to the “Marco Polo” programme, passing from over 50 in the past century to over 5,000 in the 2011/2012 academic year. This programme aims to attract Chinese students by giving them a number of facilitations such as reserved places and various measures to help with the issue of visas. The considerable presence of Chinese students in Italy is the demonstration of the success of international cooperation in the education sector, despite the obvious linguistic difficulties. Since 2009 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI) has offered scholarships to foreign citizens and Italian citizens living abroad, in order to promote international

cooperation in cultural, scientific and technological fields and to spread the Italian language and culture in the world (According to Law 288/55 and its subsequent changes and additions) (MAECI, 2022).

Male foreign students in the STEM² field represent 21.3%, a considerably higher percentage than women, who represent only 12.3%. Female international students have a low share of STEM degrees. There are many possible factors contributing to the discrepancy between women and men including: a lack of female role models, gender stereotyping and less family-friendly flexibility in the STEM fields. However, the number of foreign female students in STEM fields compared to 10 years ago has increased (from 9% to 12.6%) (MIUR, 2022). To encourage and support women in this field many countries have increased opportunities, through benefits and scholarships

The number of graduates i.e., the number of students who completed the programme within the reporting calendar year, has improved over time (Figure 4), and the increase is in line with the number of enrolled students and the rate reaches 16% in the current years.

At present, few Italian universities offer English courses, especially bachelor's degrees. This would represent a fundamental first step to attract foreign students, who rarely decide to add the learning of a new language like Italian, only spoken by a limited number of people in the world. The internationalization rate of Italian universities is an important condition to evaluate the quality of the national educational system. In this regard, in contrast with the OECD average, Italy shows negative numbers and a considerable "brain drain" abroad, which is not balanced by the arrivals of foreign students in our country.

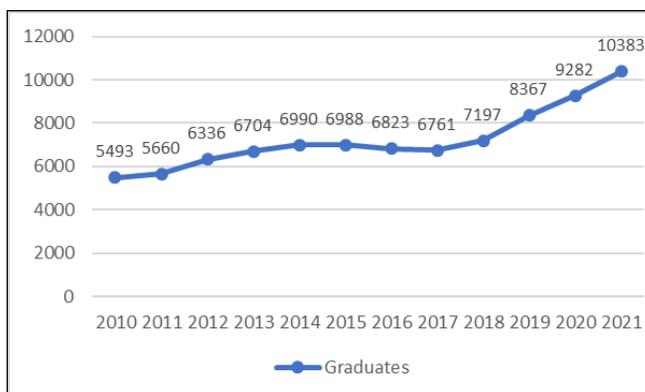


Figure 4. Number of international students (y-axis) graduated from years 2011 to 2021 (x-axis). Elaboration on MIUR data (2022).

5. International Students at UPO and their Academic Experiences

According to data provided by the Italian Ministry of University (MIUR, 2021) 1,226 foreign students were attending university courses in UPO in the 2021/2022 academic year. In other large and important Italian universities, in the same year the numbers of non-Italian citizen students were higher than in UPO: 9,165 at La Sapienza Rome, 7,477 at the University of Bologna and 8,371 at the Politecnico of Milan, but among the medium-sized universities UPO is second only after the University of Siena³ (1,517 students).

These data confirm the importance of analysing the presence of international students in a medium size university like UPO.

In the year 2021, there were 349 tertiary education international students and 877 second-generation students at the University of Piemonte Orientale (UPO, 2022).

In the 2021/2022 academic year there are 346 IS, and in 2011/2012 there were 76, with a 357% increase over a ten years period. According to data provided by UPO (2011), today students attending bachelor's and master's degree courses come from more seventy different countries, compared with 46 nationalities in 2011.

² STEM are Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.

³ Both provinces have a similar number of immigrants as a percentage of population in 2021: 10.27% Novara and 10.8% Siena (ISTAT, 2022)

Most of the international students in UPO originated from Africa (30.9% of the total) and Asia (34%), and these rates are aligned to the national trends (section 4). When moving to an analysis by country, Tunisia, India and Iran, (respectively 11.7%, 6.6% and 6.3%) were the most represented ones; Cameroon, Morocco, and Syria followed (Figure 5).

At the University of Piemonte Orientale, international students are particularly numerous in the School of Medicine (150), with values recorded in the Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences (63), the Department of Humanities (39), the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (40) and the Department of Economics (29). Not all fields of study are equally popular among international students and during the a. y. 2021/2022 the three most common fields of study were: the master's degree in Medical Biotechnology (66 enrolled), followed by Modern Foreign Languages (27) and Medicine and Surgery (24). The number of foreigners doing a PhD programme and post-graduate degree courses has increased over time, so the international students have the opportunity to complete their higher education in UPO. Graduate students, whose bachelor's degree had already been earned in their own country of origin, contributed to the growth of the international students' group. Now they are enrolled in a master's, postgraduate or PhD programme (Table 2).

The most represented nationalities in the School of Medicine are from South Asia (India, Pakistan and Iran) and West Asia (Syria and Israel). In particular, the first Syrian students arrived through a cooperative project. In 2015, the European Parliament called on the Commission and member states to establish educational corridors to receive students from Syria, Iraq, and Eritrea (UPO, 2022). Educational corridors for Syrian students aim to help young Syrians pursue their studies in a country not at war. The representation of Syrian students in the UPO has grown over time, from 1 to 27 between 2018 and 2021, thanks to the project and the now primarily transnational ties. In fact, now most of Syrian students arrive through the creation of ad hoc social networks.

UPO is also a partner in University Corridors

for Refugees⁴ (UNICORE 4.0), coordinated by the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). The project aims to promote refugee access to tertiary education (in the a. y. 2022/2023 the application was reserved to Niger, Nigeria and Cameroon students). The winners enrolled in the Master's Degree in Medical Biotechnologies and received grants and other benefits (UPO, 2022).

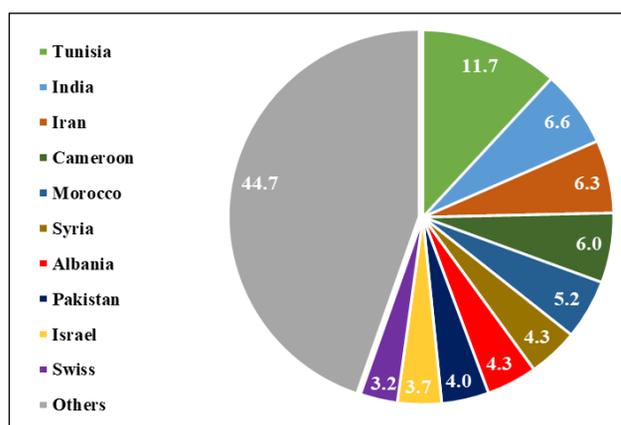


Figure 5. Percentage of international students enrolled by country of origin, academic years 2021/2022. Elaboration on UPO data (2023).

Types	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
PhD	6	8	5	17	17
Master's degree	37	45	91	110	142
Bachelor's degree	10	20	68	86	169
Single-cycle master's degree*	22	21	30	44	47
Post-graduate degree	55	64	34	64	72
Total	130	158	228	321	447

Table 2. Distribution of enrolled students by type of degree or master from academic years 2018 to 2022 (temporary data). Elaboration on UPO data (2023).

Table 3 shows the distribution of the first year students by citizenship from 2018/2019 to 2022/2023 (temporary data). In the academic year 2022/2023, the number of students from Iran has increased. At present, 41 Iranian students are attending their courses in UPO and in particular in the Department of Health Sciences (36 of them are enrolled in the

⁴ Caritas and Migrantes, 2022, pp. 94-98.

Master's Degree in Medical Biotechnologies). The table should be interpreted not only considering the growth trend but also according to the presence of bureaucratic obstacles, such as the modalities of issuing visas by the embassies that may change every year.

The case of Iran is representative because it highlights the role and importance of social ties and networks. Undoubtedly, the country's current political situation is a push factor to go abroad, but the networks of friends and relatives play an important role as drivers of attraction. Table 3 shows the top ten nationalities represented in the academic year 2022/2023 and, even though the values fluctuate over time (due to many factors such as national migration policies, the economic dynamics of international cooperation between countries, or the global health situation), the presences of some nationalities such as Iran, Tunisia, Morocco, Cameroon, and India are a constant. The existence of an established national community in the host country helps newcomers secure preferential access and maintain relations with the mother country. In 2022, Indian students had some problems with visa restrictions, thus the number did not increase. On the University website, the number of their applications for UPO courses was higher than the actual enrollments.

The remarkable link between university and cooperation projects and the existence of a national community represents the important factors to provide a significant support for good academic experience to international students. Other factors are the possibility of getting a scholarship and the low tuition fees. In general, many of the international students in UPO come from developing countries and a family that could not have afforded to fully pay for an overseas education. They come from families who approve of sending them to more developed countries to improve their future. International students in UPO may have to address many financial difficulties. Student visas have work restrictions, so they cannot work or can only do so for a limited number of hours. For this reason, many international students try to get a scholarship. Figure 6 compares the number of IS and the number of scholarships won during the period from 2013/2014 to 2022/2023. Both lines

increase over time, but after the 2019/2020 academic year there is a clear gap and the possibility to get an economic and housing benefit has decreased due to increasing competition.

Citizenship	2018/2019	2019/2020	2020/2021	2021/2022	2022/2023*
Iran	4	0	2	20	41
Tunisia	2	6	18	31	40
Cameroon	9	4	16	11	27
India	3	8	26	10	19
Syria	1	1	6	9	17
Morocco	18	24	7	10	9
Ethiopia	0	0	3	5	7
Albania	1	5	3	10	5
Bangladesh	0	2	0	4	5
Israel	3	2	4	4	5

Table 3. Distribution of students first enrolled by citizenship from academic year 2018/2019 to 2022/2023. *Temporary data. Elaboration on UPO data (2023).



Figure 6. Number of scholarships (on the vertical axis) by academic year from 2018/2019 to 2022/2023 (on the horizontal axis). Elaboration on EDISU Piemonte data (2023).

With regard to the “success” of their academic career, the number of international students at UPO who completed their degree in time is quite positive. In 2021 just under 50% of them graduated in two, three, five or six years from the first enrollment (according to the degree programme); in 2020, this rate was 54%.

International students at UPO often come across difficulties in getting familiar with the new social environment and thus they seek to establish relationships with other people with a similar cultural background. Their study and life

paths have some important effects on the construction of identity triggered by the host context. This aspect also emerged from a discursive analysis undertaken on (16) in-depth interviews (period November-December 2022⁵) among male and female students (aged 19-32) and from an ethnographic observation on the field. Foreign students are all non-EU citizens. Seven of them are enrolled in a master's degree course (four of whom in a course delivered in English), while nine are enrolled in a bachelor's degree course (three of them are enrolled). Coming from different backgrounds and enrolled in various study courses, the students interviewed were recruited through the *snowball* method, according to criteria of exemplarity and specificity (Norton and Fatigante, 2018, p. 34).

The qualitative analysis of the international mobility of students and their choice of the UPO suggested the following conclusions.

Firstly, most students expressed their difficulty in studying in a different country with a different language. The great majority of international students left their home country less than 48 months before the interview and moved directly to Italy and to Novara, without stopping in other countries and cities. They left their own country with the purpose of attending a university course and many of them do not have a family network but only compatriots that attend a UPO course. They stated that the Italian national migratory policy is not crucial in their decision to study in Italy. They actually chose Novara and UPO thanks to word-of-mouth.

Secondly, the language is perceived as an important barrier, as they are not fluent in Italian and this limits their possibility to establish a relationship with Italian colleagues and to get acquainted with the host culture. Their poor knowledge and understanding of the language negatively affect their approach to the academic and administrative staff. Some international students have trouble understanding the lecture and reading materials. People speak quickly and they cannot ask or feel embarrassed to ask them to repeat again.

Furthermore, during the SARS-Covid-19 pandemic isolation the students who remained

on campus suffered from emotional stress due to limited social relationships. Most of the students interviewed reported that the city of Novara offers few possibilities to meet fellows and to have cultural experiences.

On the other hand, the existence of a community and the presence of a network of friends and relatives are important driving factors. They are aware of the cultural differences of the new environment (such as food, clothing, behaviour) and find some aspects they like and others they do not. They generally express positive feedback about the host culture, campus life, and UPO courses and academic staff. Finally, they appreciate the relatively low university fees and the possibility of getting a scholarship.

In the end, for international students the experience in UPO represents an opportunity to promote their social mobility and to improve their skills in a multicultural environment. In particular, their experience is based on medical and biotechnology careers, since these are the most popular and attractive subjects with the many opportunities offered in terms of collaborations, networks and future work.

UPO offers the possibility of attending three master's degrees taught in English and to access the three-year degree it is necessary to have the Italian B2 certification, required by law. These aspects do not contribute to increasing the international enrolments.

The international students remaining abroad try to contribute with their remittances to support their own family and pay for their education on their own. Their academic university career also becomes a way to help their parents in their country of origin.

6. Conclusions

Nowadays, globalization encourages the international mobility of students and they move not only to obtain a qualification, but also to develop their cultural, linguistic and social skills. International students could bring positive contributions to host countries because they can be an important factor of human and social capital resources and the economic development countries overall may take this opportunity. According to Findlay (2010), the international

⁵ The qualitative research is ongoing and the publication sets forth the data of the preliminary results.

students could be a resource for the host communities rather than for their societies of origin. In particular, analysing the flows of international students to the UK from the host country perspective, the author stresses that the students' international mobility is composed of highly skilled individuals and the host countries have to understand in what way to attract the most talented and brightest minds to develop their knowledge-based national economies. Universities could play a direct and important role in attracting and training quality human capital but it is necessary to create a "good ground". The education system has made huge progress in seeking to attract international students to sustain (Findlay, 2010; Madge et al., 2009) and develop their academic career. The attractiveness of a university is due to some important elements such as the language (according to OCSE the English-speaking countries dominate in the destination of choice of foreign students); accessible tuition fees, friendly environment, low cost of living (Staniscia, 2012, p. 251). In addition, international students who are more immersed in the campus culture and share their experiences with peer groups have more opportunities to integrate with the new society. Just as some researchers have argued, integrating international students into university campus environments is essential (Aggarwal and Çiftçi, 2021, pp. 2264-2265), as they must go through a number of transitions and experience challenges such as new lifestyle, cultural and language issues.

For host countries the negative impact could be represented by the unreturned expenditure in terms of human and social capital increase, but the empirical evidence shows that it is more appropriate to consider a "brain circulation" and "not brain loss" (Staniscia, 2012, p. 250).

The International students' experience in UPO could be considered quite positive, demonstrated by the increasing number, the scholarships and international grants won, the quality of the research and the positive impact of the UPO international cooperation. They attend master's degrees in English and in particular STEM subjects where there are more English-speaking courses and more opportunities in terms of future work and academic careers.

This article is a first step in studying international student mobility, an understudied subject that has not been researched as much as it should be by geographers. Future research will carry on with qualitative studies, through other field surveys and a quantitative analysis, with a benchmark among Italian universities.

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