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Transition after the technical professional degree in Southern Switzerland

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Abstract

In the area of Cantone Ticino (CH), lots of students obtain a degree in upper secondary technical-professional education (MPT) every year; for them, a number of different options exists.

Research questions have been formulated as follows:

- Which paths do young students from Ticino undertake after technical-professional degree?
- Which are the most relevant influencing factors and motivations in students' decision making process?

The purpose of the study is identifying and understanding itineraries, motivations and influencing factors of young Italian-speaking Suisse students with an MPT degree in the process of choice.

Preliminary interviews with clients and analysis of statistical data have been conducted. Subsequently, 83 face-to-face semi-structured interviews have been administered to students and adults. Students have been asked about their education, choices, advices and counselling; adults have been asked about their perspective on students' decision making process. Data have been treated according to the principle of triangulation (Denzin, 1970).

Interviews showed different motivations for those students who decide to continue studying in a tertiary education institution: while some are guided by specific projection on their own future, others make a choice under the pressure of automatism and inertia. A second issue involved in the decision making process, is whether to stay in the region of origin or to leave.

Self-representation, representation of the experience and the weight of socio-cultural aspects, play a crucial role in the decision making process. A relevant role is taken by informal networks and word of mouth, confirming the hypothesis that, beyond choice rationality, interpersonal relationships and informal ties define the direction of the choice.

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1. Introduction

The Technical and Professional Degree Certificate (Maturità Professionale Tecnica - MPT) was introduced in Ticino (the Italian-speaking Swiss canton) in 1994. After a remarkable rise in the number of certificates awarded in the first ten years after its introduction, there was a slight decrease from 2005; in the last four years, the numbers have remained stable at approximately 200 units.

The MPT certificate currently allows access to a number of options, ranging from direct access to the labour market, to continuing to study in tertiary education facilities, be they universities or not[†]. More specifically, students with an MPT certificate generally choose courses relating to technical/engineering subjects, constructions, architecture and design.

Since the first Professional University School was founded in 1997, the number of students who choose this type of training has more than doubled, rising from 7% to 16% and similar trends are recorded nation-wide. According to the Federal Statistics Office, this percentage includes students who have enrolled in a Professional University School for the first time, compared to their peers in the permanent resident population.

This shows that amongst the different options available to MPT certificate holders, the Professional University Schools have been chosen more frequently as the years passed.

This study refers to a research commissioned by the Directorate of the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI), that was interested in finding out the potential attractiveness of a training option specifically dedicated to Technical and Professional Maturity Certificate holders, namely the Department of Innovative Technologies (DTI), which includes studies on mechanical engineering, electronic engineering, computer engineering and management sciences. The research was conducted by comparing the courses currently offered in Canton Ticino and the options available at national level.

2. Theoretical framework

Several studies have been conducted on the issue of transition in educational systems (inter alia: Behrens, 2007; Bonica & Cardano, 2008; TREE, 2003, 2007), emphasising that it is a non-linear (Donati, 1999; Perriard, 2005) and complex process, linked to a number of different factors that contribute to the final outcome. Issues highlighted include school performance, identity issues, tendency to emulate, availability of information and social/cultural background (Donati & Lafranchi, 2007).

Transition can be considered as a “rite of passage” (Van Gennep, 2002; Turner, 1976, 1972) where both identity issues, associated with the individual's self, and social issues, associated with the ability to relate to others and with others in the reference group, play a role.

The concept that each person elaborates of her/his individual self is characterised, at the same time, by flexibility and stability. People try to face changing circumstances by adapting their behaviours and choices while, at the same time, keeping and protecting at best the representation they have of their self (Emiliani & Zani, 1998).

There is a need to keep and confirm the concept one has of oneself and to believe that certain personal qualities are relatively stable. The need for stability is strong, especially in reference to circumstances that are considered to add value; at the same time, the process of growth forces individuals to face the need to adapt to changing individual and social conditions, demanding flexibility in behaviour and perception.

According to Codol's definition (1980), identity allows each individual to feel unique and identical to her/himself in space and time; it is built in the framework of the relations that the individual establishes with

[†] In Switzerland, the facilities that provide further education at university level are called *Scuole Universitarie Professionali* (SUP) and combine academic training and vocational training.

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