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Does working during higher education affect students' academic progression?



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the effect of working during higher education on academic progression, in terms of number of credits acquired by first-year university students in Italy. We discuss different contrasting hypotheses on the role of employment during university on academic outcomes: the zero-sum perspective, the reconciliation thesis, the positive and the negative selection to work hypotheses. In the empirical part we analyze data from the Eurostudent survey, which collected data on a representative sample of university students who were enrolled in the academic year 2002/03, after the implementation of the 'Bologna Process'. We use a negative binomial regression model considering work experience as an endogenous multinomial treatment. Results indicate that, conditional on observed covariates (socio-demographic variables, school-related and university-related variables), there is a positive self-selection into employment, especially for low-intensity work. Traditional multivariate regressions show a penalty in academic progression only for high-intensity workers, but once accounted for unobserved heterogeneity also the low-intensity work experience appears to negatively affect academic progression.

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1. Introduction

The relationship between higher education and work has been extensively studied by economists and sociologists. While most of this research focuses on employment *after* higher education, less attention has been devoted to the experience of employment *during* higher education. Interest in this topic is growing because of the rising costs of attending higher education and a significant increase in student employment (Ehrenberg & Sherman, 1987; Horn & Malizio, 1998; NCES, 1994). As suggested by Riggert, Boyle, Petrosko, Ash, and Rude-Parkins (2006), colleges and

universities can no longer assume that the majority of students will be able to give their full-time attention to academic studies.

On the one hand, working during higher education¹ could be viewed as a way to achieve independence from their family, to develop early knowledge about the 'labour market world' and to be socialized to job-related values (Davies, 1999; Stephenson, 1982). However, on the other hand, working during university studies may negatively affect academic results, increasing the risk of dropping-out, having a delayed graduation or achieving lower grades. In this respect, we will discuss several competing

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¹ Even if studying can be seen as a specific form of work, in this article we use the term 'work' to indicate paid employment during higher education.

theories about the role of student employment on academic outcomes, and we will test them using a recently developed method, which allows us to control for selection into employment based on both observed and unobserved variables.

The outcome we consider is academic progression, expressed in terms of number of credits acquired by first year university students. Academic progression in the early stages of university study programme is likely to affect students' motivation, increasing their subsequent probability of graduation (Attewell, Heil, & Reisler et al., 2012). In turn, university dropping-out and delay in graduation negatively affect several occupational outcomes, such as income and occupational prestige (Bernardi, 2003; Brodaty, Gary-Bobo, & Prieto, 2009)

Existing research focuses mainly on the United States and Great Britain, while empirical evidence from Europe is lacking, to a certain extent because the proportion of working students has been smaller than in Anglo-Saxon countries. In this work we focus on Italy, which we believe could be an interesting case for several reasons. First, Italian higher education has long been characterized by a very high proportion of drop-outs and graduates behind schedule (Triventi & Trivellato, 2009). Thus, it could be interesting to understand the relationship between student employment and these phenomena. Second, in the last decade, Italian higher education has undergone considerable transformations in its degree structure within the broader framework of the 'Bologna Process', and this has increased the proportion of non-traditional students entering university education (Cappellari & Lucifora, 2009). Moreover, at the same time, a rise in tuition fees and a reduction of public financial support to students occurred. It is possible that some of those who entered university education under the 'new regime' need to work to finance their studies and living expenses, and this may be harmful to their academic outcomes. Third, in recent years, several types of fixed-term job contracts have been introduced to the labour market (Schindler, 2009), representing a convenient and flexible way for employers to hire students for temporary jobs. The main aim of our work is to assess whether student employment affects academic progression using a representative sample of first-year university students in Italy in 2002/03, just after the implementation of the 'Bologna Process'.

The article is organized as follows. In the next section we briefly discuss existing empirical evidence on the effect of student employment on academic performance, while in the third section we present the main characteristics of the Italian higher education system, in order to put the analysis in context. Then, in the fourth section, we discuss several competing hypotheses on the effect of student employment on their academic outcomes. In the fifth section we present the data, variables and methods, while in the sixth section we present the empirical results. The last section discusses the main findings and conclusions.

2. Existing empirical evidence

While there is a vast literature on the determinants and effects of employment during high school – especially in

the United States – relatively little attention has been devoted to examining the experience of working during higher education. Most of the contributions in this field aim to assess whether working during higher education affects several indicators of student performance, such as risks of drop-out, grade point average (GPA), or the time required to graduate. There is great variation in the type of independent variables used in the empirical analyses. Most studies focus on the simple distinction between working and non-working students, while others also consider the intensity of work (weekly hours of employment).

Empirical research has reached mixed and contradictory results so far, and most reviews of the literature have not been able to identify a clear pattern regarding the impact of student employment on academic outcomes (Lyons, Krachenberg, & Henke, 1986; Riggert et al., 2006). Some studies conclude that employment is not detrimental to various educational outcomes, while others suggest the opposite. For example, several studies find no significant effect of student employment on grades among American students (Canabal, 1998; Gleason, 1993), while other studies find a negative effect in the United States (Astin, 1993; Furr & Elling, 2000; Wenz & Yu, 2010), the United Kingdom (Callender, 2008; Humphrey, 2006) and Northern Ireland (McVicar & McKee, 2002). The few studies that have investigated delay in graduation find that, overall, working during higher education increases the time taken to graduate (Callender, 2008), while on-campus work does not impair timely graduation (Desjardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002). Looking at retention, several researchers have found a U-shaped relationship between the risk of drop-out and the number of hours worked outside campus: students who work a moderate amount of hours have better performance compared both to non-working students and to those who work above a given threshold of hours per week (between 15 and 20). This finding has been reported for the United States (Dundes & Marx, 2006; Horn & Malizio, 1998), the United Kingdom (McKechnie et al., 2010), France (Befly, Fougère, & Maurel, 2009), and Canada (see review in Moulin, Doray, Laplante, & Street, 2013).

The literature on student employment in Italy is relatively scarce and limited to students enrolled before the implementation of the 'Bologna Process'. Most studies find that full-time workers have a higher risk of drop-out and need longer time to graduate, while the effect on grades is smaller, or limited to some fields of study (Argentin, 2010; de Francesco & Trivellato's, 1985; Martinotti, 1969; Triventi & Trivellato, 2008). As has been found in other countries, low-intensity work seems not to be detrimental to academic performance, since students who devote a moderate amount of time to their job have lower drop-out rates and higher grades (at least in the humanities) compared to non-working students (Argentin, 2010; Triventi & Trivellato, 2008).

3. Italian higher education: a sketched picture

In this section we describe the main features of the Italian higher education system, with a focus on the

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