

## **The international PhD experience in urban studies in Italy**

**Joanne Ahern**

Urban Studies PhD Researcher, Gran Sasso Science Institute  
Viale Francesco Crispi 7, 67100, L'Aquila, Italy  
joanne.ahern@gssi.infn.it

**David Gogishvili**

Urban Studies PhD Researcher, Gran Sasso Science Institute  
Viale Francesco Crispi 7, 67100, L'Aquila, Italy  
david.gogishvili@gssi.infn.it

**Dicle Kizildere**

Urban Studies PhD Researcher, Gran Sasso Science Institute  
Viale Francesco Crispi 7, 67100, L'Aquila, Italy  
dicle.kizildere@gssi.infn.it

**ABSTRACT**

*Internationalization in graduate education has created diverse trends in different regions. Higher mobility of international students and increased variety of university programmes on offer has resulted in new challenges for the management of Italian university doctoral programmes. A reflection of the experiences of PhD students is useful at this time as they are the ones that this system will affect most and who will shape its future. This paper discusses the internationalization of PhD programmes focusing on urban studies and draws a general picture of the current state of PhD education in Italy for non-Italian students by examining their motives, expectations, programme environment, infrastructure and quality of teaching. With this aim in mind, we distributed a questionnaire to foreign students who studied or are currently pursuing a PhD in urban studies in Italy and also conducted a focus group with a group of foreign students attending a PhD programme in urban studies. We thus present a partial reflection on the current situation of doctoral education in Italy.*

*Keywords: PhD, Doctoral Education, International Students, Internationalization, Urban Studies, Italy*

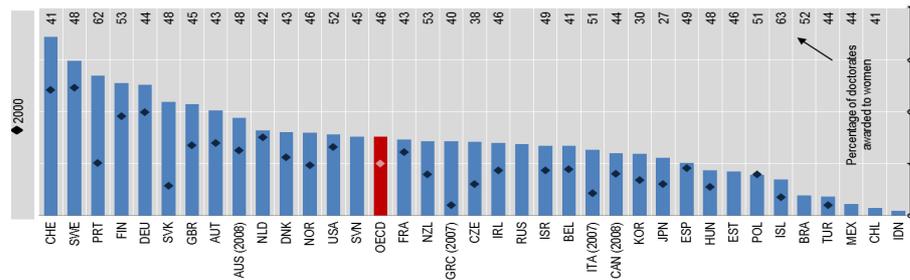
## **INTRODUCTION**

The growing number of doctoral graduates has become a common trend across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries in the last two decades (Figure 1). Moreover, PhD education is continuously evolving, and at present, an increasing number of PhD students are no longer confined to knowledge-intensive countries (Pedersen, 2014). Within Italy, most PhD programmes are relatively small with just a few students and of these international non-Italian students make up a relatively small niche (Table 1). Thus, those studied for this research are a small but growing community. This growth in the number of non-Italian students suggests that it is time to reflect on the system for doctoral education in Italy. This paper is intended to provide a reflection on the current internationalization process of PhD education in Italy through the experiences of non-Italian PhD students pursuing their degree in the urban studies and related programme<sup>1</sup> (referred to as ‘the programmes’ elsewhere in this text).

---

<sup>1</sup> *Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II - Programme in Urban Design and Planning; Gran Sasso Science - Institute Programme in Urban Studies; Politecnico di Milano - Programme in Urban Planning, Design, and Policy; Spatial Planning and Urban Development; Territorial Design and Government; Politecnico di Torino & Università degli Studi di Torino - Programme in Urban and Regional Development; Sapienza - Università di Roma - Programme in Urban Planning; Università degli Studi Mediterranea - Programme in Urban Regeneration and Economic Development (URED); Università Iuav di Venezia - Programme in Regional Planning and Public Policies; Università degli Studi di Ferrara - Programme in Architecture and urban planning; Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca - Programme in Urban and Local European Studies (URBEUR); Università degli Studi di Palermo - Programme in Urban and Regional Planning. See Table 1.*

Figure 1. Graduation rates at doctorate level, 2000 and 2009. Source: (OECD, 2013).



In recent years the number of international or non-Italian PhD students has grown in Italy, this growth mirrors the growing numbers of PhD students around the world. The number of non-Italian students studying in Italy has been growing year by year from 2 in the 19th cycle to 18 in the 27th cycle from 2% of all PhD students in the field to 33% (Table 1)<sup>2</sup>.

Table 1. A number of Italian and non-Italian students in urban studies programmes in Italy. Source: (MIUR, 2015).<sup>3</sup>

Year	Italian PhD students	Foreign PhD students	Percentage of foreign PhD students
19th Cycle	85	2	2%
20th Cycle	72	3	4%
21st Cycle	86	3	3%
22nd Cycle	64	4	6%
23rd Cycle	79	6	8%

<sup>2</sup> With the exception of the 28th cycle. We were unable to determine why this drop occurred but a number of factors are thought to play a role.

<sup>3</sup> The universities whose programmes we are taking into account here are: Università Iuav di Venezia, Politecnico di Torino, Politecnico di Milano, Sapienza - Università di Roma, Università degli Studi Roma, Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II, Università degli Studi di Firenze, University of Catania, Università degli Studi di Palermo

24th Cycle	53	10	19%
25th Cycle	67	15	22%
26th Cycle	55	16	29%
27th Cycle	54	18	33%
28th Cycle	52	9	17%

We have carried out an investigation into content and structure of each PhD programme using the English language in order to better understand the opportunities that currently are being offered within the system of higher education in Italy in the field of urban studies for non-Italians. This process was mainly carried out by studying the websites of the universities as well as through individual communication with the programme representatives or graduate students.

The paper consists of the following parts; we start by outlining the increasing importance of doctoral education. We then briefly discuss internationalization of higher education and the career options available for the students as well as one of the key challenges foreign students face. After discussing our methodology, we provide a summary of the PhD programmes to present the current situation. Next we demonstrate the main points and results from the focus group and survey we conducted. Lastly, we will reflect and discuss these key findings.

### **IMPORTANCE OF DOCTORAL EDUCATION**

During the past decade, policymakers have highlighted the increasing importance of knowledge-intensive industries in sustaining economic growth and prosperity. With the Barcelona Target, set in 2002, the European Union emphasised the need to increase investments in research and development (CORDIS, 2003). European economic policies and the OECD member state policies have consistently encouraged an increase in the number of PhD graduates recognising

that knowledge-intensive labour is desirable for sustaining competitiveness. The past decade has witnessed a steady increase in the number of doctoral degrees being awarded across the OECD, rising by 38% from 154,000 new doctoral graduates in 2000 to 213,000 in 2009 (Auriol & Freeman, 2013, p. 6). The increasing presence of women in doctoral programmes partly explains the overall increase in doctorates awarded over the past decade. Women were awarded on average almost half (46%) of OECD's new doctorate degrees (Auriol & Freeman, 2013, p. 8). This rise has strong grounds as the human capital accumulations, which definitely includes PhD education, are indications of individuals' capacity for innovation, and thus productivity. The return on investment of PhD degrees can thus be argued to be largely positive. In the current context, there appears to be valid argumentation for increasing the size of the PhD labour force (Pedersen, 2014).

This is a period of change in the system of PhD scholarship in Italy, with the Bologna process, slowly increasing internationalisation of the existing schools, for example, Venice, Turin and Milan, and the opening of the Gran Sasso Science Institute Urban Studies Programme in L'Aquila. Thus, it is useful not only for students such as those in this issue to take stock but for the wider academic community to assess where we are and where we want to be in the future. Speaking of doctoral education in the USA, Wei Lin has noted that

“[h]istorically, mobility among academics often followed colonial routes so that exchanges were among countries and universities sharing languages, colonial and/or imperial histories. Contemporary academic exchange and mobility are broader. In the past decade, academic interactions in terms of exchange programmes, degree-seeking international students, and research scholars, have grown” (Li and Yu, 2015).

The evolution of these traditional routes towards internationalisation can be observed in both the USA and Italy. In Italy this can be seen in the move towards using English with Italian academics publishing in English, Italian students completing their PhDs in English, Italian Universities running PhD programmes in English and last but not least the publishing of journals such as this in English. In addition, the increasing usage of English in academia brings both pros and cons. While it dominates the explanatory frames and methods, it also affects the accessibility. To tackle down this domination, it is also important to emphasize the local context and content depended differentiation in addition to disseminating the produced knowledge in both English and the non-English speaking world.

## **UNDERSTANDING INTERNATIONALISATION**

### ***Internalisation***

Internationalisation is one of the most significant developments in the field of higher education in the twenty-first century. It involves increasing the range of international activities within and between universities as well as other educational institutions along with increased numbers of international students and academic staff (Robson, 2011). This process is driven by a wide variety of social, cultural, economic and political forces which are pursued by various actors. However, the most constant and profound drive of internationalisation continues to be globalisation which has been discussed by a number of scholars (de Wit, 2011, Foskett and Maringe, 2010). It has both national and institutional rationales as was clearly outlined by Knight (Knight, 2006) (Table 2).

Table 2. National and institutional rationales of internationalization of higher education. Source:(Knight, 2006).

National	Institutional
----------	---------------

Human resources development	International branding and profile
Strategic alliances	Quality enhancement/international standards
Income generation/commercial trade	Alternative income generation
Nation and institution building	Student and staff development
Social/cultural development and mutual understanding	Networks and strategic alliances
	Knowledge production

The scope and complexity of this development in internationalisation expanded at an unprecedented pace over the past decade. It is fuelled by the processes of economic, social-cultural globalisation and localisation. Internationalisation is not a new phenomenon for universities. However, the concepts, forms, focus and movement of the internationalisation agenda have changed. From aid in the 1970s, cooperation and exchange in the 1980s to trade by the end of the twentieth century. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the competition for international students has intensified on a global scale and the study destinations for internationally mobile students have become increasingly diversified (Gu and Schweisfurth, 2011).

Many higher educational institutions are currently developing internationalisation policies and strategies which vary from solely increasing recruitment of international students, to more complex attempts of ‘mainstreaming’ an internationalised approach within the institution as a whole and thus addressing the implications for all

students (not only international) and staff in terms of curriculum, attitudes and practices. Another aspect that brought changes within the higher education system and is currently growing is the development of new forms of cross-border education which are most often manifested in double PhD degree programmes. The programmes investigated within this research project provide such examples - Università degli Studi di Ferrara Programme in Architecture and Urban Planning in cooperation with Polis University in Tirana or Università degli Studi Mediterranea Programme in Urban Regeneration, Economic Development in cooperation with Northeastern University of Boston etc. The unprecedented development in distance and e-learning education also means that the offering of education programmes across national borders has become virtual as well as physical (Gu and Schweisfurth, 2011).

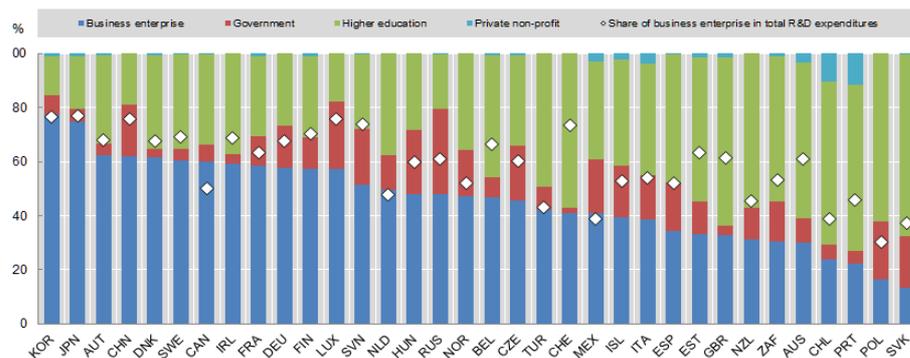
### ***Careers of PhD holders***

With increased mobility, a rise in the focus on knowledge-based economy, specialization and rapid growth in scientific production, PhDs are ‘considered as the best qualified for creation, implementation and diffusion of knowledge and innovation’ (Auriol, 2008). Although there has been a steady increase in the number of PhD graduates in the labour market, they are still a small proportion of the workforce (OECD, 2011). In 2000, 1% of students of OECD countries were studying for doctoral degrees, while in Italy the rate was 0.4%. There is an upward trend of 1.5% in all OECD countries with a rate of 1.6 % in Italy (Figure 1).

According to Auriol et al (2013), increasing graduation rates are consistent with rising demand for skilled individuals. Graduates face a number of uncertainties in the labour market such as short-term or part-time contracts. As reported by ISTAT (2015), 91.5% of the doctorate holders were employed in different sectors while 7% were looking for a job. Among employed graduates, over 90% percent

work in professional or managerial areas. While higher education is often thought of as an obvious employer, as a result of increasing collaboration between universities and industry, government and business sectors are also employing PhD graduates. In particular countries with strong Research and Development oriented businesses, like Belgium, Germany, United States, more than one-third of PhD graduates work in business sectors (Auriol, 2008) (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Doctorate holders by sector of employment, 2013. Source: (OECD, 2013).



### Communication & Research Culture

For a student studying in a foreign country (in this case Italy) through a language that is not the official language (for example English) there can be many challenges, for example, difficulties in communication or gaining access to the research culture both inside and outside of their institution. We refer to this issue in general as communication. From both the questionnaire and focus group, it is clear that communication for non-Italian students is a serious challenge in Italy. Deem and Brehonys (2000, p. 163) research in the UK has argued that “we cannot eradicate the value differences, and power relations on which differential treatment of students according to nationality, mode of study, gender, ethnicity, age and disability

depend”. Studying through English in Italy brings both opportunities and challenges. The language barrier still remains a difficulty and this has been clearly indicated by our study participants. While the official language may be English the working language is also often Italian. However, in addition, to the language barrier, there is also a communication barrier. The nature of communication refers not only to language but also encompasses the cultural norms and assumptions, standards or “common sense” practices which are assumed to be understood by everyone. However, in Italy for the non-Italian student coming from a different background, this is not always correct. Currently, the increased availability of courses and scholarships for English speaking students in Italy is facilitating the arrival of more non-Italian PhD students (the authors of this paper would be unable to study here without this). Yet it must be acknowledged that these students can face a difficulty in communication and, as a result, communication must be managed effectively by the institutions to ensure the access to research cultures within a programme. In addition, gaining access to research cultures can be difficult (Deem & Brehony, 2000) outside of the institution within which the student is staying, (for instance the majority of conferences, debates and open talks are held mainly in Italian). However, it is also a barrier within the institution as “much of academic life is flexible and informal, relationships are very important for success” (Mitchell, 2007). Thus constraints in communication during the PhD can pose a serious challenge. In addition, all other factors pointed out by Deem and Brehony (2000) play a role in the difficulties experienced by students.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper follows a mixed methodology approach combining a literature review, focus group, questionnaire and data analysis. The

authors also compiled a database of characteristics of the (doctorate) programmes in urban studies in Italy.

The focus group was conducted with a group of six non-Italian PhD students at one of the institutions offering an English language option in Italy<sup>4</sup>. The questions were semi-structured and allowed the students to lead the answers and discussion where they preferred allowing them to discuss shared and individual experiences. As students come from vastly different educational backgrounds it is to be expected that they have varying expectations, methods of evaluation and interpret their experiences differently. The conversation lasted for 120 minutes and was transcribed using the software Express Scribe Transcription. The issues raised by these students helped to determine the questions used in the questionnaire. It was primarily used to gain a wider understanding of the current personal and group experience.

For the questionnaire, a series of open and closed questions were used to aggregate information about the feelings and experiences concerning PhD education for non-Italian students (in English speaking programmes) in Italy in the field of urban studies. Considering that the numbers of international students in these programmes are quite low, the survey also provided an opportunity for more anonymized response in comparison to the focus group. It was distributed in August 2015 to both the programme co-ordinators and their students directly where the email addresses were available. Reminder emails were sent in September and October and the survey was closed on the 15th of October 2015.

The survey form was organized in four sections. The first section focused on the education aspect of the programmes as well as the career goals and the confidence of the students. The second section aimed to explore the attractive features that lead students to choose

---

<sup>4</sup> For anonymity reasons the programme is not identified.

Italy as a study option and the particular institution as well as the funding opportunities available. The third section tried to gain the understanding of the experience in terms of infrastructure, quality of teaching and the output by students themselves in the programmes that they are part of currently. The last section aimed to build a general profile based on age, sex, citizenship and language proficiency.

In order to gain a detailed understanding of the PhD programmes in urban studies in Italy, a basic database was created which was based on the data sources aggregated using various methods. Websites and information materials of each PhD programme and the department were studied to get a comprehensive understanding of the aims of the programme as well as the methods applied within the teaching and research process. Further information, such as the international aspects of the programme like the composition of the academic board and the teaching staff, was aggregated via web survey and the email correspondence with the programme coordinators or the secretaries as well as with current and former students.

### **SUMMARY OF PHD PROGRAMMES**

The higher education system in Italy consists of the university sector (state and private universities, polytechnics, universities for foreigners, schools of advanced studies and online/distance learning universities) and a non-university sector (inter alia national academies in the Fine Arts, Cinema, Dance and Drama, Music Conservatories, schools and institutes for the education and training of professionals in various fields, such as language mediation, design, etc.). Universities act autonomously within a national regulatory framework. In terms of research, the majority of research produced is done in public universities with the exception of a few private not-for-profit universities such as Bocconi University in Milan (Education and Culture DG, 2010). Doctorate level of education

within university system was created as a result of the Law of 1980 and has evolved from this.

The importance of postgraduate education has experienced a considerable growth in the two most recent decades as also happened within other higher education systems across Europe (Figure 1). Currently, there are 10 universities offering 12 PhD programmes in the field of urban and regional planning in English (Table 3). However, not all the programmes have had regular admission on a yearly basis, and restructuring is common. Some have been either reformed by merging two or three programmes into one in order to increase efficiency or have been closed<sup>5</sup>. This growth is a reflection of the increasing importance of knowledge-intensive industries. The Italian academic system is also undergoing a process of internationalization. This is visible in the number of postgraduate programmes in urban planning/studies or related fields offered in English. At the moment, there are 12 programmes where English is the official working language. The increase in such programmes is especially evident in recent years, starting in 2011.

Table 3. University and PhD Programmes. Source: (Aggregated by authors, 2015).

University/Department	Name of the Programme
Gran Sasso Science Institute	Urban Studies
Politecnico di Milano	Urban Planning, Design, and Policy; Spatial Planning and Urban Development; Territorial Design and Government.

---

<sup>5</sup> This process made it challenging to gather information on some of the programmes.

Politecnico di Torino & Università degli Studi di Torino	Urban and Regional Development
Sapienza - Università di Roma	Urban Planning
Università degli Studi di Ferrara	Architecture and urban planning
Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca	Urban and Local European Studies (URBEUR)
Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II	Urban Design and Planning
Università degli Studi di Palermo	Urban and Regional Planning
Università degli Studi Mediterranea	Urban Regeneration and Economic Development (URED)
Università Iuav di Venezia	Regional Planning and Public Policies

The programmes offered in English mostly focus on topics that are common for most of them such as urban policies, spatial planning strategies, urban and regional development, urban management, urban economics and in some limited cases design and architecture. According to the descriptions of these postgraduate programmes their focus of studies is directed towards producing high-profile scholars and professionals that could aspire to both an academic career and management positions in public or private structures. Even though the admission process is open to all students without any restriction to the European Union citizenship, quite often the departments highlight European cities as the primary focus of their PhD programmes, which might be a limiting factor for the development of PhD student's research. However, in some cases, the programme descriptions state

that although there is a particular geographic focus students studying Non-European areas are also encouraged to apply.

The majority of the programmes combine coursework with doctoral research projects. These courses either aim to deepen the knowledge in a specific area or to develop and strengthen research skills. Considering the multi/ interdisciplinary aspect of the PhD programmes and the variety of professional backgrounds of PhD students, such courses seem useful. However, it is argued by some scholars studying the importance of coursework at this level that extra courses at this stage of university life lack efficiency and on the contrary, seems reasonable to promote research skills through supervised research as it is performed in some research-oriented master's studies (Drennan and Clarke, 2009). The programmes studied are often run in partnership with other Non-Italian institutes or universities (Science Po, Humboldt University of Berlin, and Polis University of Tirana etc.), aiming to enhance academic and research skills of PhD students while also contributing to the knowledge exchange at the international level.

Internationalization has been positively presented as a means to increase the range of international activities within academia (Knight, 2008). The process of internationalisation consists of various aspects, for example, the openness of the programme, participation in international academic debates, internationalisation of academic and administrative staff etc (Gu and Schweisfurth, 2011). However very often it is only limited to the appropriation of English language as the official one. Internationalisation of each programme among the programmes in Italy is very often highlighted in various aspects by the universities and departments. In the case of the Italian programmes in urban studies often internationalisation concerns the exchange year or an opportunity to do a study/research abroad or the fact that programmes are open to international students as well. Furthermore, as already mentioned, a considerable share of urban

studies postgraduate degrees are run in partnership with international actors such as institutes and universities. However, the scope of involvement of these actors is not always clear. The programmes sometimes include foreign scholars and researchers in the teaching process or in the supervision and examining roles, albeit often in a limited role.

### **RESULTS OF SURVEY**

Twenty-two responses were received from the online survey (ten female and twelve male PhD students). Twelve were from Non-EU member states and ten from EU member states. The PhD students that filled in the questionnaire represent five programmes from five different institutions (Table 4). Unfortunately, the results do not represent a full spectrum of English speaking PhD programmes in the field of urban studies in Italy even though the questionnaire was distributed to all the key contacts.

Table 4. Respondents by the university.

University	Number of respondents
Università degli Studi di Ferrara	6
Gran Sasso Science Institute	7
Politecnico di Milano	4
Sapienza - Università di Roma	2
Università degli Studi Mediterranea	3

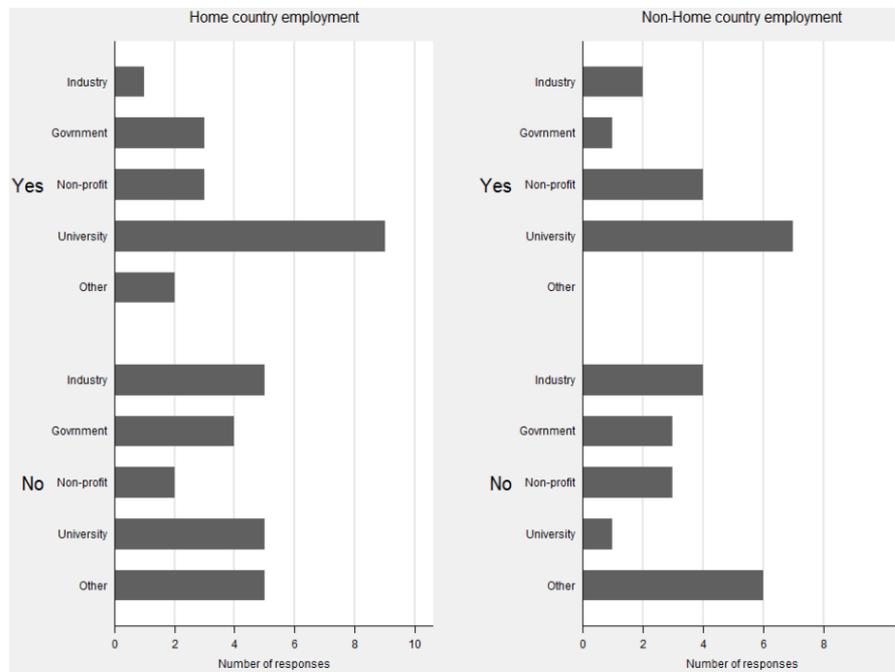
### ***The Choice of Educational Program***

Besides collecting some basic information, the first two sections of the questionnaire were aimed to aggregate data on the motivations before starting a doctorate programme as well as expectations for post-PhD. Almost all of the respondents who consider a doctoral degree as a prerequisite to finding employment in their anticipated area(s) consider academia (university) as the most desired place for finding employment both in their home country as well as abroad. While on the other hand only a handful of those who do not look at PhD degree as something that is required in order to get a job in their area considers employment in academic fields. The majority of such replies prefer to find employment in the industry or government sector while the location (home country or not) of the job does not appear to make any considerable difference. These attitudes are clearly illustrated in the figure below (Figure 3) where yes/ no indicates the attitude towards the requirement of a PhD for working in the desired field. The results are also separated between home country and non-home country employment aspirations.

Figure 3. Career Goals Post-PhD<sup>6</sup>.

---

<sup>6</sup> *This figure combines the answers to the following questions; do you think a PhD is a prerequisite to work in your desired area? What were your career goals at the time you entered graduate school (home country employment)? What were your career goals at the time you entered graduate school (non-home country employment)?*



When it comes to the degree of confidence of obtaining a job within their chosen field there seems to be no correlation between the career goals and the confidence. The majority of the respondents feel confident about finding a job after they receive a PhD degree. More research is needed to understand if this confidence is justified.

The choice of particular educational institution for obtaining a doctoral degree as well as the decision to study in Italy is tightly linked with two main motivations that are repeated in the answers of most of the respondents. While the reasons such as school rankings and the academic staff at an institution tend to be crucial while making a decision it is always accompanied by the funding opportunities that are offered within all PhD programmes analysed. For sixteen out of twenty-two respondents, the main source of financial support is scholarship sometimes combined with personal/family funds and income generated from being a teaching

assistant. Funding opportunities and schemes are vital while making a decision in favour of a particular programme, but it is expected that the programme will have an appropriate follow-up in terms of teaching and research programme as well as the environment.

### ***Professional Development***

Accessing an active and vibrant research environment, contact with other researchers and collaborating with them is a fundamental part of success. The survey investigated what efforts are made towards student's professional development, for instance, we asked if respondents had an opportunity to gain teaching experience. While 44% of the respondents have this opportunity through lecturing in undergraduate and graduate courses, and leading laboratory sections of undergraduate or graduate courses, two-thirds have gained experience by leading discussion sections of undergraduate or graduate courses. Furthermore, many PhD students stated preparing articles for publication as an important part of their professional development. Additionally, in slightly more than half of the cases respondents received instructions for the development of their oral communication and presentation skills.

### ***Program Environment***

Another question concerned the question of assessment and feedback. The majority of students declared that they receive an annual or more frequent assessment of their progress. When asked do they receive timely feedback, 61% said yes. A relatively small share (30%) have access to a career advice service. Those respondents who have benefited from this service are more confident about finding a job after obtaining a degree in their desired area. 60% of those who have access to a career advice service stated that they are not encouraged to use this service. The lack of a career advice service is a possible area for improvement across all institutions.

Students were asked to rate the quality of teaching by faculty in their programme and research experience, the curriculum of their PhD programme, the overall quality of their programme, the intellectual liveliness of their programme and the international academic connections of their programme. As table 5 indicates, most of the students are satisfied with the general quality of the programme and research experience (Table 5). Interestingly, the only subject that respondents were unhappy with is the intellectual liveliness of their programme. 23% of the respondents confirmed the existence of a language problem and attributed it equally among the inadequate English level of fellow students, school administrators, lecturers and using Italian as the main language of communication as sources of this issue.

Table 5. Satisfaction rate of respondents.

	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
How would you rate the quality of teaching by faculty in your programme?	13.6% (3)	18.2% (4)	54.5% (12)	13.6% (3)
How would you rate the quality of your research experience?	4.5% (1)	27.3% (6)	59.1% (13)	9.1% (2)
How would you rate the curriculum of your PhD programme?	4.5% (1)	36.4% (8)	45.5% (10)	13.6% (3)
How would you rate the overall quality of your programme?	9.1% (2)	13.6% (3)	63.6% (14)	13.6% (3)

How would you rate the intellectual liveliness of your programme?	9.1% (2)	45.5% (10)	36.4% (8)	9.1% (2)
How would you rate the international academic connections of your programme?	22.7% (5)	22.7% (5)	36.4% (8)	18.2% (4)

### ***Infrastructure***

We decided to explore the infrastructure available to students as a further measure to understand the support they receive. The results were quite interesting as 32% of respondents do not have access to a personal work space provided by their institution. While this is a small percentage it is surprising that some students do not have a place to work. Moreover, a quarter of PhD students are on programmes that do not provide computer facilities for their students. In addition, students also reported access to libraries, a laboratory and funding for visits to conferences and for research trips as additional facilities available to them. However, only half had access to library resources that they considered adequate to support their research. In terms of research output (presentations, articles, book chapters etc.) all students have been active in one way or another. In total between them, the respondents have given fifty-five presentations, produced thirty-two refereed articles, eleven book chapters, three reviews and five books or other edited volumes.

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

We wish to avoid generalising our findings as they are not intended to be comprehensive but instead the aim was to provide an insight into the ongoing process of internationalisation of the Italian higher education system with a focus on doctoral programmes in urban studies. As already outlined in the introduction we studied a small but

growing number of students whose impact on the system will only be seen after a period of time. However, as this trend is set to continue in the future it is the right moment to start reflecting on the current situation and its direction.

As outlined earlier, there have been a number of steps towards internationalisation within the programmes studied, including cross-border or double-degree programmes, growing diversity of nationalities and an increasing number of non-Italian students studying in Italy. With respect to our own doctoral studies and interaction with other international PhD students, it is clear that exploring our subject via interdisciplinary methods and the internationalization of the process is crucial for a successful PhD programme within Italy and beyond. This increases both the openness to change and awareness of new scientific concepts and approaches in the field. Opportunities to be part of the international PhD programme by studying abroad and gaining authentic real world learning experiences are considered to be crucial to the employment opportunities of PhD graduates.

The results of this research and specifically the survey provide a broader picture of the present situation but it could also be used to start a discussion around the current state of doctoral education in Italy and its future direction, at least in the field of urban studies. As acquiring a PhD is a time period in which a researcher invests in their professional development this was an important area for us to examine. Our results indicate that the funding offered by most of the programmes in urban studies is one of the most important factors attracting foreign students to study for a PhD in Italy together with the general attractiveness of studying in the country. Moreover, this aspect contributes to the openness of the Italian system of higher education to international students as well as encouraging equality. Considering the unequal access to obtaining further knowledge and experience within doctoral programmes internationally this effort is

highly valuable. Thus, access to international activities at the individual level is becoming less unequal (Gu and Schweisfurth, 2011). Furthermore, the outcomes of our survey indicate that there is a high rate of satisfaction among the students that suggests that there are opportunities in terms of professional and academic development. However, most of the respondents still feel the lack of access to careers advice services which definitely is an aspect to be addressed and improved by most of the programmes. Our research shows doing a PhD is considered essential experience by those who consider or strive to be part of academia in the future, both at home and abroad, rather than work in industry or government sector. While on the contrary students who do not aim to have a job in the former look at doctorate degree just as an additional chance to further their knowledge and skills that will improve their employability in private companies or government.

As we already highlighted there is an increased interest in pursuing doctoral education both within Italy and beyond. Thus, the paper is a starting point for further research in this emerging area of study. Further research into the challenges facing doctoral students in terms of their future career as well as the challenges that PhD programmes themselves face to attract and facilitate students would be interesting.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Many thanks to those who gave their time to assist us with this research, including the respondents to our questionnaire, focus groups participants, IJPP editors, Antonio Calafati, Daniela Rozzi and the anonymous reviewer.

#### **REFERENCES**

AURIOL, L. (2008) *Doctoral graduates and the international labour market*. International Workshop on the Careers and Mobility of Doctorate Holders. Brussels.

- AURIOL, L., M. MISU & FREEMAN, R. A. (2013) *Careers of Doctorate Holders*, OECD Publishing.
- CORDIS. 2003. Working towards the Barcelona target [Online]. Brussels: Community Research and Development Information Service. Available: [http://cordis.europa.eu/news/rcn/20876\\_en.html](http://cordis.europa.eu/news/rcn/20876_en.html) [Accessed 20 Nov 2015].
- DE WIT, H. (2011) *Trends, Issues and Challenges in Internationalisation of Higher Education*, Amsterdam, Centre for Applied Research on Economics and management Hogeschool van Amsterdam.
- DEEM, R. & BREHONY, K. J. (2000) Doctoral Students' Access to Research Cultures-are some more unequal than others? *Studies in Higher Education*, 25, 149-165. Doi: 10.1080/713696138.
- DRENNAN, J. & CLARKE, M. (2009) Coursework master's programmes: the student's experience of research and research supervision. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34, 483-500. Doi: 10.1080/03075070802597150.
- EDUCATION AND CULTURE DG (2010) HE review – Country report about the Higher Education System. Country: Italy. Brussels: Education and Culture DG.
- FOSKETT, N. & MARINGE, F. (2010) Globalization and Internationalization in Higher Education. In: FOSKETT, N. & MARINGE, F. (eds.) *Theoretical, Strategic and Management Perspectives*. London: Continuum.
- GU, Q. & SCHWEISFURTH, M. (2011) Rethinking university internationalisation: towards transformative change. *Teachers and Teaching*, 17, 611-617. Doi: 10.1080/13540602.2011.625110.
- KNIGHT, J. (2006) Internationalisation: Concepts, complexities and challenges. In: FOREST, J. A., P.G. (ed.) *International handbook of higher education*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- KNIGHT, J. (2008) Internationalization: A decade of changes and challenges. *International Higher Education*, 1, 6-7.

- LI, W. & YU, W. (2015) Internationalization of doctoral education in geography: perspectives from the United States. *GeoJournal.*, 80, 231-238. Doi: 10.1007/s10708-014-9579-1.
- MITCHELL, T. R. (2007) The Academic Life: Realistic Changes Needed for Business School Students and Faculty. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 6, 236-251. Doi: 10.5465/AMLE.2007.25223462.
- MIUR (2015) Dottorati di ricerca: Accesso ai corsi In: MIUR - UFFICIO DI STATISTICA (ed.). Rome.
- OECD (2011) *Local Development Benefits from Staging Global Events: Achieving the Local Development Legacy from 2012.*
- OECD (2013) OECD Science, Technology and Industry Scoreboard. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- PEDERSEN, H. S. (2014) New doctoral graduates in the knowledge economy: trends and key issues. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 36, 632-645. Doi: 10.1080/1360080X.2014.957891.
- ROBSON, S. (2011) Internationalization: a transformative agenda for higher education? *Teachers and Teaching*, 17, 619-630. Doi: 10.1080/13540602.2011.625116.