

European Journal of Higher Education – Transparent Peer Review

Title: Between short-term and medium-to-long-term responses: Mapping the impact of COVID-19 on Italian universities.

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Submitted: 5-April-2023

First revision submitted: 4-October-2023

Accepted: 15-November-2023

Article DOI: 10.1080/21568235.2023.2287461

Handling Editor: Michele Meoli

Reviewer 1

Reviewer Conflict of Interest: None declared.

1st Review

19-May-2023

Recommendation: minor revision

Methodological aspects and research design robustness

In the paper under review, the types of short and medium-long term responses to the impact of COVID-19 were mapped in a sample of 18 Italian universities. The research design appears well constructed and firmly anchored in the reference literature. In particular, the two research questions hinge on a classification into three types of medium-long term responses (rebound, proactive and innovative) and draw on a consolidated literature on organizational change and adaptation. Even the research hypothesis appears to be well formulated and well founded on the existing literature, distinguishing between large universities and medium-small universities and envisaging a different behavior according to the complexity of the institution. From this initial framework derives a correct operationalization of the concepts in variables. As regards the choice of the survey tool, albeit very articulated, the reason why the short term is investigated through documentary activities, the medium term through strategic plans and the long term through interviews with university pro-rectors is not sufficiently motivated. In the specific case, the sampling procedure was carried out through two specific dimensions: the number of universities calculated in terms of enrolled students and the geographical location in Northern, Central or Southern Italy; if the first dimension is adequate for the purposes of the research, the second dimension does not represent a valid criterion both for the research question and for the hypotheses formulated. In particular, it would have been more useful to use the level of digitization and e-learning offer existing at the time of the outbreak of the pandemic as a sampling criterion for universities (as well as that of digital literacy of teachers, researchers and administrators) because clearly the being more or less ready to face the situation had a notable impact on the reactions of the various institutions.

Results validity and research importance

The results show that all the institutions analyzed reacted in the same way to the need to continue teaching activities, while there are significant differences when planning is taken into account. With respect to the results, the part relating to short-term responses represents a snapshot of the emergency situation experienced by the institutions which surprisingly reacted to change in an agile way, demonstrating a spirit of adaptation and resilience. This first analysis appears argumentative, following a line of studies of research confirmatory theory already extensively developed and lacking anchorage to the research hypotheses. The section relating to medium-long term answers are well argued and result in a modeling that recalls the research question and the related hypotheses developed. Specifically, the modeling describes the type of reaction of the universities according to the size in terms of enrolled students, thus denying the research hypothesis. In fact, the universities' medium-term strategies were not similar, with a clear gap between small and medium-sized universities and their larger counterparts; contrary to expectations based on the literature, the former reacted slowly to the challenge of innovation since only in two cases (Macerata and Insubria) were timid changes in the long-term strategy observed while the other universities returned to traditional face-to-face teaching. In contrast to this style of rebound, all large and mega universities show a clear willingness to capitalize on the experience they had in the first year of the pandemic to plan the redesign of teaching activities by including and/or constantly expanding the use of information technologies in its delivery as well as the various activities needed to support this development.

Overall, the research represents a study of considerable importance as it investigates an exceptional phenomenon such as the pandemic, which exploded suddenly by analyzing the methods of response to an immediate event for some institutions, such as universities, which considered themselves hostile to change and adaptation. The pandemic is a phenomenon which, although concluded, has acted as an accelerator for processes still in place but also as an activator of changing institutional arrangements and teaching practices, phenomena that will also deserve attention in the future.

- The sampling was done according to the geographical location of the universities (North, Center and South) but this aspect is not considered in the development of the conclusions. More than the North, Center and South division, it seems to be the concentration of universities in a given territorial context and their mutual proximity that prevails over the geographical location (some fear losing students to the advantage of others closer).
- With reference to the choice of the investigative tool, albeit very articulated, the methodological reason for which the short-term is investigated through documentary activities, the medium-term through strategic plans and the long-term through interviews with university pro-rectors should be further motivated.
- The first part of the analysis relating to short-term responses should be linked more to a research hypothesis. Furthermore, it is necessary to further investigate the impact that the emergency legislation adopted by the national government has had in terms of university organizational responses.
- From the analysis of the results, a specific taxonomy of the institutions examined emerges in reference to the size and type of response, but the aetiological link between this classification and the type of institution is not explored: in addition to emphasizing that universities have reacted

differently according to their size, here it is proposed to analyse more specifically the reasons why this happened.

2nd Review

13-October-2023

Recommendation: accept

The paper has been revised and improved based on comments and suggestions made.

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