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

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Reviewer 2

Reviewer Conflict of Interest: None declared.

1st Review

23-June-2023

Recommendation: reject

This paper is an exploratory investigation of how universities in Italy have adapted their teaching strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic, a theme that has been widely researched in the last few years and topical.

The research question is not clearly formulated. The Introduction is fairly unstructured and lacks clarity and focus. The theoretical contribution of the paper remains vague and uncertain, and I would recommend rewriting entirely the Introduction, which is very confusing. How about setting out clearly a sharp and focused research question, and then ground this question in the relevant literature? The Introduction does not present any clear propositions, nor hypothesis, other than the suggestion that there are variations of response strategies among universities. To what extent is this research question original, and surprising?

Having said that, I take the research question to be: are there variations in the institutional responses of Italian universities to the pandemic during the period 2020-2022?

The paper is a descriptive account of the responses of 18 universities in Italy. The descriptive purpose of the paper is more convincing than the theoretical contribution or originality (which I am sceptical about).

The authors show good knowledge of the relevant literature, and generally the higher education sector, though most of the theoretical part of the paper consists of citing references without discussing and engaging with them. What are the “novel organizational solutions” discussed by Baumgartner and Jones (2005)? Why is the “crisis” of Kingdon relevant and useful to the analysis? A minimum discussion of these works would be necessary.

I would suggest to formulate clear hypotheses in Section 2, in order to guide the literature review and tighten up the vague discussion of different strands of the literature. In addition to citing Kingdon (1984) in order to study the “crisis”, which is a good lead, why not engaging with the crisis management literature? The COVID-19 pandemic is a good example of the crisis, as conceptualised by Boin and others in his work.

I suggest to reconceptualise the framework taking into the account the policy studies on crisis management and developments (just to mention a few):

- Boin, A., McConnell, A., & 't Hart, P. (Eds.) (2008). *Governing after crisis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Posner, R. (2004). *Catastrophe: Risk and response*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rosenthal, U., Boin, A., & Comfort, L. K. (Eds.) (2001). *Managing crises: Threats, dilemmas, opportunities*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publishers.

The typologizing exercise in the paper of different responses (rebounding, proactive, innovative) is promising and interesting. It is a descriptive typology, and it would improve if connected to the concept of the crisis and its impact on the institutional level. Once again, these different types seem to be developed inductively, with no indication of a conceptual internal or external validity. Generally, in this typology three levels of analysis are overlapping and treated in a confusing way: policy change, institutional change, and organizational change. They are distinct aspects of change (see the work of Peter Hall, for instance). It would be better to differentiate the level of analysis and possibly avoid mixing everything together.

The paper uses a survey to collect information from a sample of 18 universities. How many people were targeted in the population? Each university normally has one (max 2) deputy rectors? Why were private universities excluded from the sampling?

What is the response rate? No information is provided.

I would like to have more information about the sampling strategies. Why not including all universities in the survey?

This is a sensible methodology, and it is supported by good triangulation efforts by analysing also text data, such as universities strategic plans and policies and performance indicators. In particular, the authors decide to analyse the strategic plans for the 2020-2021 period. This seems a good idea, in so far as studying the strategies, and objectives and targets are concerned. However, these data do not tell us much (if anything) about the implementation of the instruments (which is crucial to understand the degree of institutional change). It was a very good strategy to conduct interviews with 11 deputy rectors to establish “whether” and “how” the COVID experience can be considered an opportunity of change. When constructing the interview sample, why were administrative personnel excluded? Why not interviewing senior managers in the university administration (they are responsible for the performance indicators and implementation of the plans). Why not the director general? I wonder how the potential self-justificatory bias of deputy rectors was minimised and managed by the interviewers? Overall, I find the qualitative methodology sensible, well thought through and a strong part of the paper.

The paper concludes that the short-term responses were quite similar among the 18 universities, whereas they adopted different strategies in the medium-term. There are clear differences between the groups of proactive and innovative universities. This is an interesting finding.

The Conclusion of the paper, however, is problematic in two fundamental ways. First, I cannot find any engagement or discussion with the theoretical debates mentioned in Section 2. The descriptive account is interesting, but it remains disconnected from the literature and existing concepts of institutional change, crisis, institutional opportunities (all mentioned in Section 2 of the paper).

The second problem is more serious, namely the paper does not answer the central question: what type of institutional change has occurred in Italian universities (focusing on teaching) during the COVID-19 pandemic? What are the institutional conditions that could explain the variations among universities? The paper has poor explanatory leverage, as it is.

Unfortunately, the Discussion and Conclusion parts of the paper are somewhat inconclusive with regards to the wider questions and issues raised at the beginning of the paper. The authors identify key questions in the last two paragraphs of the Conclusions and identify factors that could explain the variations, but it is not clear why these independent variables were not discussed in the analysis of the paper. The discussion of the paper would improve if the authors addressed the questions they themselves raise (or some of them) in the Conclusions. In this way, the paper can be revised into an analytical account and analytical discussion of the findings.

2nd Review

13-November-2023

Recommendation: accept

The paper has improved significantly. It is well structured and theoretically grounded. The methodology is sensible and the argumentation is coherent and much more organized than the earlier version.

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