

EMPLOYMENT: ANALYSIS OF PROBLEMS AND CONSOLIDATION OF GOOD PRACTICES IN THE EU. ITALIAN “CAMPUS MENTIS” PROJECT AS A SOURCE OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG GRADUATES

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Abstract

An innovative idea which started out with few resources, from Sapienza University of Rome, has turned out to be a good practice. Now, in its fifth year, and having involved over 10,000 recent graduates from all over Italy, the Italian Campus Mentis project for career guidance and training, establishes itself as a point of reference for those who wish to develop their career and has begun to be appreciated by other nations and other European organisms.

Campus Mentis is a project financed by the Italian Department of Youth and Civil Service, and aims to involve the best young graduates in order to provide them with basic knowledge related to their access on the job market. Campus Mentis is a residential formula consisting in a three days per participant of full immersion during which youngsters are involved in several activities such as company workshops, company interviews and sport activities.

The main objective of those who approach this project is to secure a job, but in fact the main priority of the program is to offer tools and support for an efficient process of career guidance. The numbers achieved so far are relevant and important. There has been also an appreciable number of partnerships, more than fifty, signed with mayor local bodies and national public institutions, as well as partner companies, which have long surpassed 300 units which were originally participating in the project.

Keywords:

Placement; Job; Career guidance.

1. The current economic climate

As far as the current economic scenario in Italy and Europe over the last two years is concerned, it should be said that it has been particularly negative for businesses and employment. Unemployment, which has now reached

record levels, was at 11.2% in the latest survey, and has not been this high since 1999, which essentially means in just one year (2012) half a million more are out of work.

The official data relative to December 2012 – provisional and seasonally adjusted –

increased by 0.1 points with regards to November and 1.8 compared to 2011. In twelve months, unemployment rose by 19.7%, 474 thousand units. In the last month of the survey, 100,000 positions were lost in total and the only slightly positive note was a minor improvement registered among young people.

A new record for the unemployment rate in Italy was confirmed by the Institute of Statistics. According to the data released in 2014 by ISTAT (Italian Institute for Statistics), the rate rose by 11.2% for December, a rise of 0.1 percentage points compared to November and 1.8 points on an annual basis. The figure is the highest since January 2004, when ISTAT began the monthly series. In the last month of last year, the number of unemployed reached 2,875,000 people, 4000 more compared with November. On an annual basis, unemployment has grown by 19.7% (474 thousand units more), and the increase applies to both the male and female segment.

The young, on the other hand, are in a slightly better position. There are 606,000 people looking for work between 15 and 24 years of age and this age band represents 10% of the population. The youth unemployment rate, namely the rate of unemployed out of the total employed and looking for work, is 36.6%, down by 0.2 points with regards to November. The phenomenon of those not even looking for work remains troubling: the number of inactive individuals between 15 and 64 years of age increased at a monthly rate of 0.6 in December and the growth rate of the total population is recorded at 36.4%, a growth of 0.2 points in economic terms. That is to say, nearly four out of ten Italians are not working or looking for work.

In regards to gender differences, the recent past has seen a trend whereby women come off “less unfavorably”. In fact, compared to November, unemployment in December increased by 0.8% for men and fell by 0.7% for women. In annual terms, unemployment has increased both among men (+22.0%), and women (+17.1%), but at a slower rhythm for the latter.

On the other end of the spectrum, namely employment, at the end of last year there were 22,723,000 employed, a decrease of 0.5% with regards to November (-104,000) and 1.2%

annually (-278,000). The fall in employment affects both men and women and brings the employment rate to 56.4%: the lowest figure since January 2004 (start of historical monthly series) and the first quarter of 2001, if we consider the quarterly historical series. Male unemployment rate (66%) decreased by 0.2 points in comparison to November and 1 point on an annual basis. The female rate, at 46.8%, fell by 0.3 points in economic terms and 0.2 points compared to twelve months earlier.

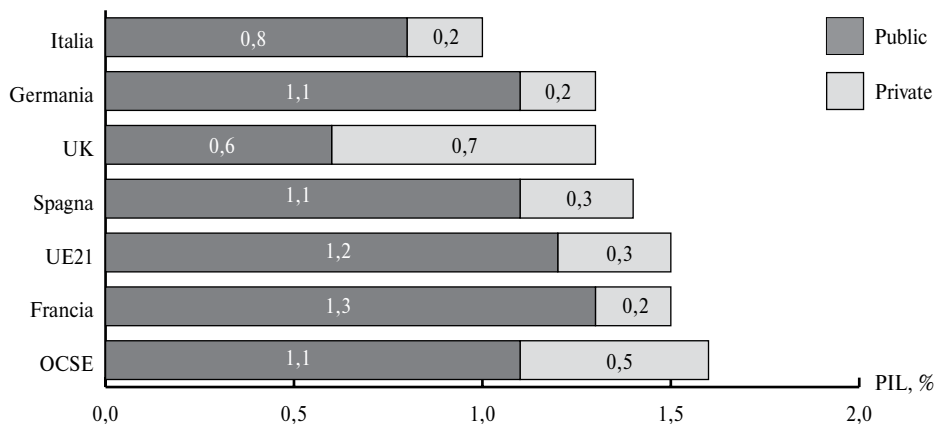
Things do not seem to be going better at EU level. In fact, Eurozone unemployment in December was stable at 11.7% compared to November (Eurostat 2012). The EU is also stable at 10.7% as highlighted by Eurostat, which underlines how in the two zones, however, unemployment rates have increased with respect to December 2011: +10.7% and +10% respectively. Eurostat estimates that the number of unemployed in the Eurozone reached 18.715 million, 25.926 million in the EU. Compared to December 2011, youth unemployment has increased by 237,000 in the EU and 303,000 in the Eurozone. In December, the youth unemployment rate was 23.4% in the EU and 24% in the Eurozone compared to 22.2% and 21.7% a year earlier. The lowest rates are in Germany (8%), Austria (8.5%) and The Netherlands (10%). The highest rates are in Greece (57.6%) in October) and Spain (55.6%). In Italy, youth unemployment has reached its highest level at 33.6%.

As if general unemployment and youth unemployment in particular was not enough to worry about, the “*Comitato Nazionale Universitario*” (CUN – National University Council) raised a cry of alarm about universities and specifically a decline in the number of those who enrolled in the last five years. In a country like Italy where expenditure on university education (Figure 1) is at minimum EU levels (an estimated 1% overall) there is an inevitable connection to a downward trend of those enrolling in universities.

2. Flight from university

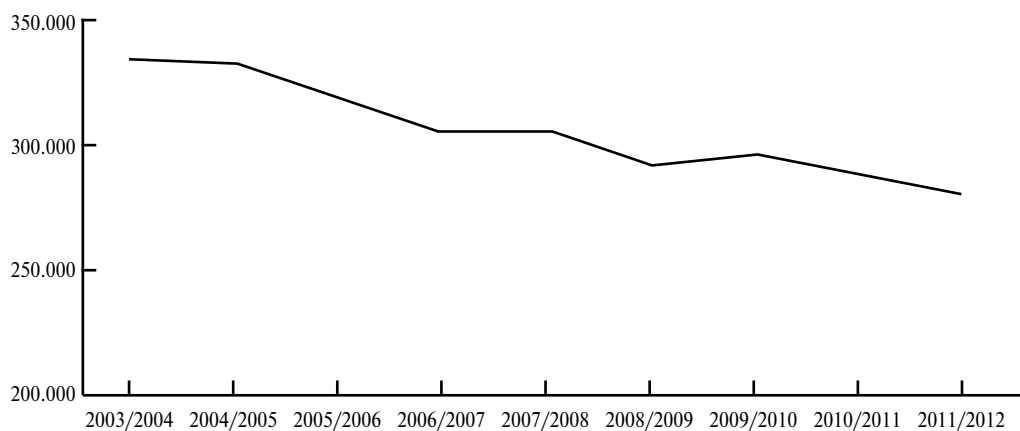
The number of enrolled graduates, PhD holders, academic staff, funds, all these “voices” is going down: Italian universities are facing a real flight. This was revealed by the CUN

Figure 1
Expense for University Education in percentage on GDP 2009



Fonte: OCSE, education at a glance 2012

Figure 2
Number of enrolled students



Fonte: MIUR – anagrafe nazionale degli studenti

in a document addressed to the current government and parliament, the political forces in the electoral competition and above all the entire country. The document (Declaration for the universities and research, system emergencies) underlines that since 2009, the *Fondo di finanziamento ordinario* (FFO – Italian Standard Financing Fund) has fallen by 5% every year.

In ten years, the number of those enrolling (Figure 2) has fallen from 338,482 (2003-2004) to 280,144 (2011-2012), with a decrease of

58,000 students (-17%). This is equivalent to the disappearance of a university such as the University of Milan over a decade. The drop in enrolment applies to all the territory and the majority of universities. For 19-year-olds there has been a lower decline: the number has remained stable in the last five years, as far as enrolment fell by 4% in three years (from 51% in 2007-2008 to 47% in 2010-2011). This in itself is a further crisis considering the low level of graduates compared to the EU average.

The official studies from Almalaurea, the Italian graduates observatory, also turn the spotlight to the phenomenon of school drop-outs, which may partially help to explain the new data. The pre-university selection is now so strong that today only 29 nineteen-year olds out of 100 enroll in a University study course (ALMALAUREA 2013). If we take into account the population that finish high school, the drop was 10%: from 74% in the early 2000 s to 64% today.

In terms of graduates, Italy is considerably below the OECD average: in 34th place out of 36 countries. Only 19% of 30-34 year-olds has a degree compared with the European average of 30%. And finally, 33.6% of those enrolled are ongoing students who have not completed the course in the set time whilst 17.3% do not sit exams. The number of graduates in our country is destined to fall further as over the last three years, the national fund which finances scholarships has been reduced. In 2009, national funds covered 84% of eligible students, in 2011 the figure was 75%.

Furthermore, it should be stated that in six years 1,195 degree courses have been scrapped (MIUR 2013). This year, 84 bachelor courses and 28 specialist/master courses have disappeared. Whilst this reduction was initially due

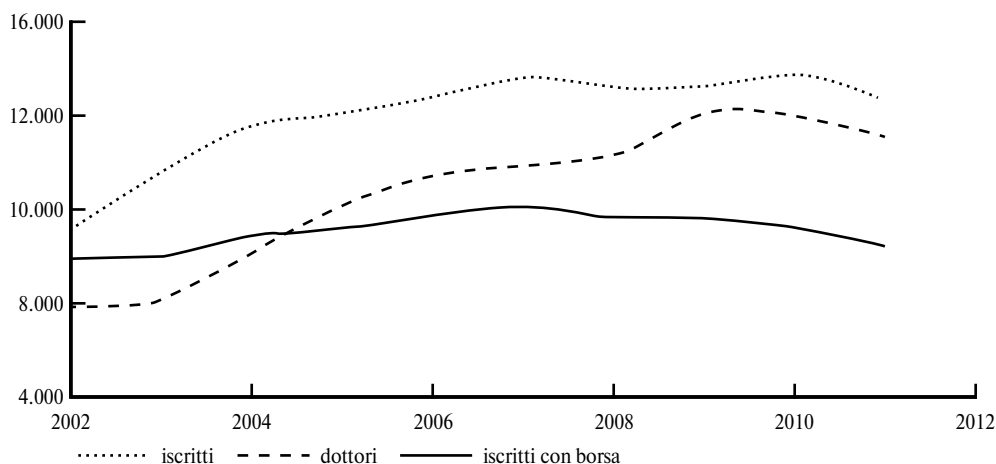
to rationalization measures, it now stems to a large extent from the heavy reduction in teaching staff.

Research is also not in a good position if compared to the EU average; in Italy there are 6,000 doctoral candidates (Figure 3) less enrolling on PhD programs in 2012 compared to 2002. The implementation of the PhD reform laid down by the 2010 University reform is still at the starting point and 50% of graduates pursue PhD programs without scholarships.

If we analyze instead the teaching body, the figures are even more dramatic as in only six years (2006-2012) the number of staff was reduced by 22%. A further drop is predicted over the next three years. Italy has an average 18.7 students per teacher compared with the OECD average of 15.5 per teacher. Whilst considering the decline in enrolment, the staff/student ratio is set to widen further due to a consistent hemorrhage of teachers no longer being employed. The fall is also due to the strong limitations imposed in teaching contracts, which each university may stipulate.

From 2001 to 2009, the State financing for Universities, calculated in real terms adjusted to inflation, remained stable, then after that dropped by 5% each year, with an overall drop for 2013 declared at about 20%. On this basis

Figure 3
PhD students



Fonte: MIUR – ufficio statistica

and in the absence of any multi-annual plan for financing, many universities are at risk of collapse, as observed by CUN, and neither teaching nor research can be planned.

There is strong risk of laboratory equipment becoming obsolete due to the curtailment of funds: also National Interest Research Programs financing, namely funds destined for free basic research for universities and CNR (National Research Council), suffered constant cuts, passing from an average 50 to 13 million per year in 2012.

In this framework we can imagine how difficult it can be for young people to find a good occupation in order to invert the trend of unemployment we analyzed with the previous data. Nevertheless, interesting initiatives have been conducted at the national level in order to give a chance to proficient young graduates.

3. Relaunching employment and work guidance: Campus Mentis as a good practice

It is clearly very difficult to talk about the young and new generations in this scenario considering that investment is decreasing and there are ever increasing cuts in culture and research, especially university-based. However, there have always been good practices, which despite the crisis and the lack of confidence of the young in the institutions and in their future, leave a very positive note.

Campus Mentis is a very creative idea which appeared with few resources and became a good practice. Now, in its fifth year, and having involved over 10,000 recent graduates from all over Italy, the Italian Campus Mentis project for career guidance and training establishes itself as a point of reference for those who wish to deepen their professional pathway and have begun to be appreciated by other nations and other European organisms.

Campus Mentis is a project financed by the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers, namely by the Department of Youth and Civil Service, aiming to involve the best young graduates in order to provide them with some basic information related to their access on the job market. Campus Mentis is a residential formula consisting in a three days per participant of full immersion in the job market during

which youngsters are involved in several activities including company workshops, company interviews and sport activities.

The main objective of those who participate in this project is to secure a job, but in reality the main priority is to offer tools and support for an efficient process of career guidance. The numbers achieved so far are relevant and important. There has been also an appreciable number of partnerships, more than fifty, signed with mayor local bodies and national public institutions, as well as partner companies, which have long surpassed the 300 units actively participating in the project and various residential and non-residential events.

Fifteen residential campuses have toured Italy from North to South, including the islands. Thousands of hours of training, career guidance and interviews have been carried out by the participants all with a single goal: making Campus Mentis the most important national community where young people, companies and institutions can find, communicate and interact with each other, in line with their own expectations.

Last but not least, the web portal campusmentis. It has now become a reference point for those searching and offering services related to employment and career guidance, whether they are employment agencies, university consortia or individual operators. Users can easily access information even if they are not registered.

Mentis Arena is an innovative database that not only selects the best profiles of recent graduates (top talent) which apply for it, but also handles the various incoming requests from public and private entities regarding the potential offered by Campus Mentis.

Actually, on the contrary to what may be implied, Campus Mentis does not act as an employment agency, although often matching demand/work supply occurs spontaneously but as a physical (during the residential campus) and virtual (within Mentis Arena) top talents and companies meeting site. There the various users look for each other, meet and orientate themselves in line with the best precepts of the Lifelong Learning program, which is the European program for lifelong learning.

Free participation for young graduates and for companies therefore enables the creation of a system where many intellectual and professional exchanges can take place, leading to a mutual enrichment for all the various participating stakeholders.

New generations, which are often disoriented by the economic and “values” crisis offered to them by society, find in Campus Mentis not only an aggregator of skills and knowledge but also a “driver” where they can develop their own career and future profession.

It does not only apply to young people looking for their first job but also to recent graduates with high potential who are looking for their own path, which may paradoxically get involved in an entrepreneurial experience or start-up for future “self-employment”.

If we analyze some data concerning the population that has taken part in Campus Mentis over the last year we can state, first of all, that it is young, but not that young. In fact, the average participant is around 26.5 years of age, which, compared to their European cousins and colleagues, seems significantly high for those using the guidance tools and career guidance at Campus Mentis.

Out of the total 10,177 registered (Figure 4), 1,828 are 26 years old, accounting for 17.96% of the sample, whilst 1,796 who account for 17.64% are 27 years old. 11.56%, which counts

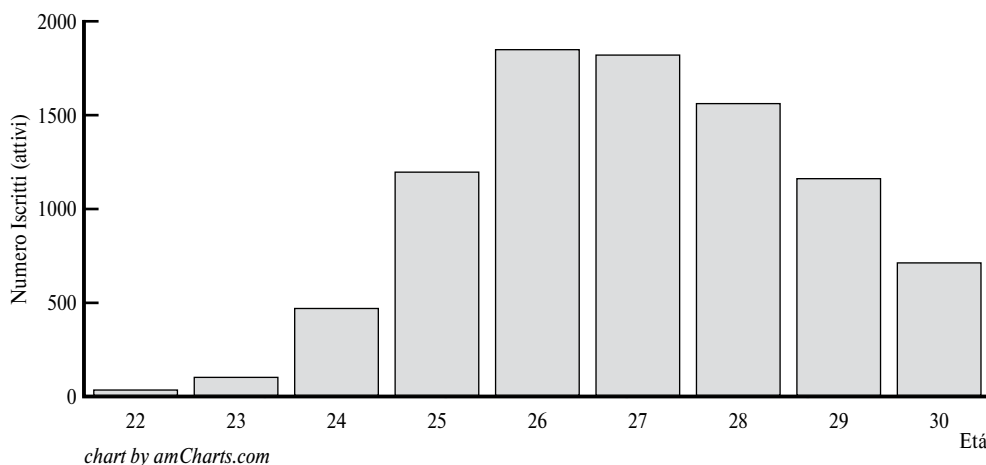
with 1,177 users are 25, but only 460, which account for 4.52% of the total sample, are 24; this last data only is fully embedded within the European parameters for the use of this type of service.

However, in support of the quality of the population participating in Campus Mentis, it should be mentioned that the ratio of registered/suitable applicants is 3 to 1, namely that for every three that register only one is selected to participate in Campus Mentis events. It should be stated that nearly half of the sample, 47%, are currently working or have worked over the past three months and therefore make use of vocational guidance service whilst not looking for their first job.

It is very useful to simultaneously analyze the university preparation of these young people, interpreted as their final degree classification, which is often far above the national average for this type of activity. In fact, if we only focus on Master degrees, which hold greater appeal for companies, 857 users have graduated with a score of 110/110, but even more, 2,958 with 110 and summa cum laude for 29.06 percent of the total participants. That is to say, that one of every three registered on the Campus Mentis database has graduated with a top classification and summa cum laude.

The element of classification is not a parameter in itself for the preparation of young

Figure 4
Inscriptions per age



graduates due to the significant discrepancy that exists in the criteria used for assessment by different Universities. However, it does reveal that in general we are talking about a sample of good quality.

Nevertheless, we have to point out that, normally, the average age of Italian graduates is pretty high if compared to the age of their competitors all over Europe. As of the information provided by AlmaLaurea, the average age of a graduate in Italy is almost 27 years old, and the main conclusion we can reach is that a

system of career guidance to the job market is definitely needed.

The following are some data extracted from the global report on Campus Mentis project based on the answers coming from the participants of three years of Campuses from 2011 until 2013.

The age of the young participants to Campus Mentis project, reported in figure 5, certainly confirms the data of AlmaLaurea.

The second set of important information comes from the level of satisfaction of the participants. As of the information reported in figure 6, we can say that the level of satisfaction about the experience was high.

The third element that it is worthy pointing out is the working condition of participants a year after the conclusion of their Campus experience. It is important to note that, in Italy, working conditions are very peculiar and it is not easy to find a good job or even a job at all. Moreover, it is interesting to make a comparison with the information given by AlmaLaurea related to the working condition a year after graduation.

In figure 7 we can see the information given by former participants to Campus Mentis a year after their participation in the project.

Figure 5
Age of participants

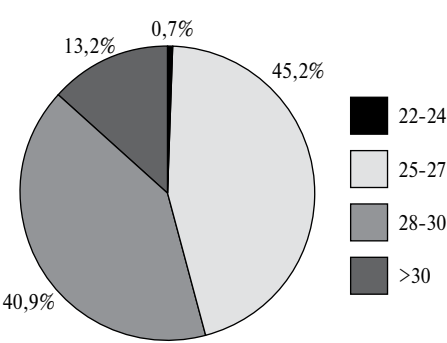


Figure 6
Satisfaction of participants

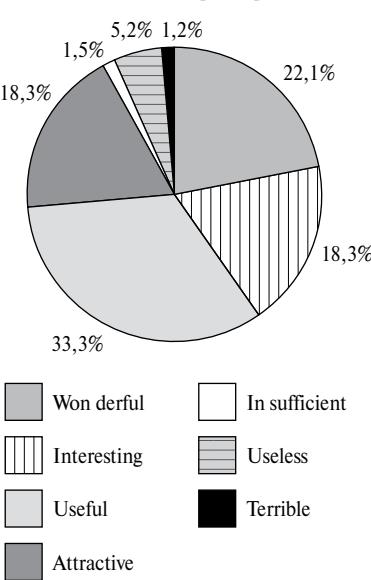


Figure 7
Working condition after a year

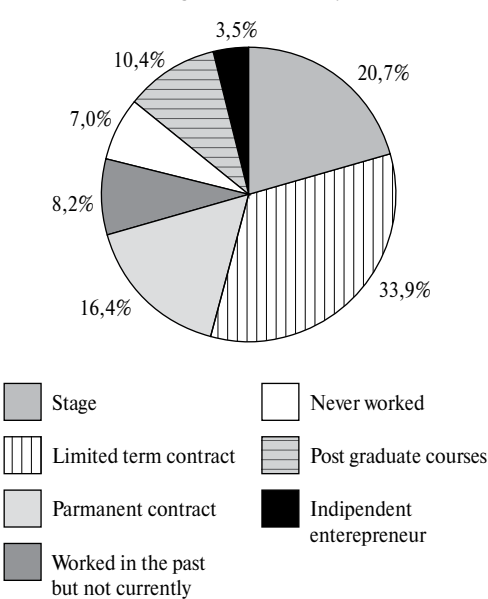
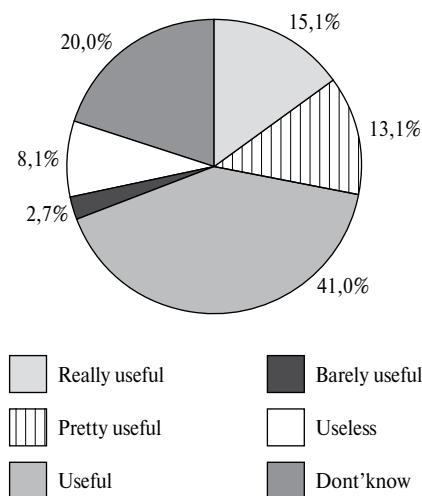


Figure 8
How do you judge your participation to Campus Mentis as regards to your working condition?



If we sum together all percentages related to a working condition, we obtain the appreciable number of 70,4% that is a very interesting information if compared to the average data of 53,8% of people working after a year from graduation coming from AlmaLaurea.

Last information that is interesting to report is the judgment of the participants concerning the utility of their participation in the project related to their current working condition. As we can see in figure 8, a large number of participants consider their participation to the project important for their work.

Clearly the system of Campus Mentis forecasts a series of tests and selection on and off-line, which further certifies the competence or not. What we are definitely sure of is that those who participate in Campus Mentis have talent to spare and considerable motivation to tackle future challenges.

Therefore, we are certain that having Campus Mentis tools, especially in periods of economic crisis, is not only an important service for the young and recent graduates but especially helps new generations to nurture their own talent and professional calling.

Naturally there are currently different systems of guidance in order to draw young people to the world of work, all of which are often complementary, such as, for example, the AlmaLaurea¹ system, which not only annually portrays graduate employment, but also facilitates the matching between the two worlds mentioned.

What we are definitely convinced of is that there is no “magic formula” in order to solve the problem of unemployment but a combination of different solutions can certainly be effective. What is probably currently missing is a series of coordinated government policies which, starting from the economic situation, may be able to create a fruitful dialogue between young graduates in search of work and companies offering job positions. In this framework Campus Mentis may certainly be considered a good practice to keep on investing in.

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¹Every year AlmaLaurea carries out an important survey on graduate employment. This year marks the fifteenth Survey (2013) – Graduate employment. *The AlmaLaurea Report monitors the employment of graduates, up to the first five years after obtaining the qualification.* The survey involved over 400,000 graduates from all 64 universities in the Consortium in 2012; 215,000 post-reform graduates were interviewed – both from first degree and second degree – one year after completing their studies, while all graduates from Master degrees in 2009 (nearly 65,000), were questioned three years after completing their studies. Starting from this year, graduates from specialist degrees are being surveyed (other 40,000) five years upon completing their studies; this has enabled assessments and reflections in the longer-term. Finally, for the third year in a row, two specific surveys have looked at graduates from first degrees between 2009 and 2007 who did not pursue university education (almost 51,000 and over 42,000), contacted respectively three and five years following graduation.

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