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TRIVENTI, Moris

**Title**

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**Abstract**

Using data from the five waves of the Italian Longitudinal Household Survey, this paper examines the dynamics of Italian higher education in the twentieth century. The main goals are to study changes in participation in higher education (enrolment, transition, and graduation rates), in performance (drop out and delayed graduation rates, average delay duration), and how these have changed in different social classes. The main results are as follows. Enrolment growth has not been followed by a proportional increase in graduation rates. The drop out rate, the number of delayed graduations and the average delay duration were already high before the 1969 reform, and subsequently increased over time. Delayed graduations increased among students from both upper-middle and lower-middle classes, whereas the drop out rate rose only among the latter, and stayed steady for the former. As a whole, absolute inequalities persisted over time, with any slight reduction that took place resulting from declining performance of the upper classes, and not from an improvement of the lower classes.

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(HRK / Abstract übernommen) Triventi, Moris, E-Mail: m.triventi@campus.unimib.it