

Executive summary

Universities' entrepreneurship and innovative practices are burgeoning all over Italy. Some of these practices resonate at the international level, while others have a strong local dimension. Recent policy initiatives, including outside the higher education domain, have helped promote the “entrepreneurial and innovation agenda” in higher education. Strategic support from the central government could catalyse these engagement practices, with an impact on Italy's innovation capacity, human capital endowment and sustainable growth.

Italian higher education (HE) faces some crucial challenges and actions need to be taken to unleash its full potential. Italy's expenditure on tertiary education is about 30% lower than the OECD average. The share of 25-34 year-old Italians holding a tertiary degree is much lower than in most OECD countries. Italy's national economy suffers from large skills mismatch. Significant regional disparities in household income represent an additional factor of complexity that policy actions must take into account. Promoting an entrepreneurial and innovation agenda can help Italy improve the overall performance of the HE system and individual higher education institutions (HEIs) in all regions.

Within this context, some successful practices, mirroring international approaches, have emerged. A good example is the 3-year strategic plan, through which the Ministry of Education, Universities and Research of Italy agrees with HEIs on the main priorities and goals of the system, including actions to generate economic and societal value. To leverage on new practices, it will be important to improve strategic co-ordination between policy objectives and funding, and to give HEIs a new status recognising their specific function and role within the public administration, thus reducing red tape and bureaucratic requirements. Properly equipped HEIs can engage with the private sector to promote innovation capacity in all firms, including small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which dominate the economic landscape in most Italian regions. In addition, HEIs promoting students' entrepreneurial capabilities may contribute to reduce skills mismatches in labour markets and, ultimately, positively affect productivity.

Exchanging knowledge and collaborating with businesses and communities is an emblematic way in which HEIs can generate societal and economic value and improve their research and teaching activities. All Italian HEIs have been networking with new stakeholders, yet regional disparities affect the scope of these collaborations. Universities active in territories hosting business clusters and urban hubs have an advantage in engaging with firms, over HEIs located in regions where there are fewer resources and research and development-intensive firms. However, by assessing academic engagement from an ecosystemic point of view, one can see that Italian HEIs have developed a broad understanding of knowledge exchange, which goes beyond the traditional emphasis on technology and research linkages with the business sector, start-ups and spin-offs. Several case-study HEIs have put emphasis on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and initiatives training refugees to facilitate their social inclusion, and have developed collaborations and partnerships with museums, theatres, opera houses, archaeological sites and other cultural institutions, capitalising on Italy's outstanding cultural heritage.

Policies to promote knowledge exchange and collaboration in HE could operate both at the systemic level and at the level of individual HEIs. There is a need for generating complementarities between HE policy and other portfolios such as industrial policy, regional development and regional accessibility. The experience of *Impresa 4.0*, which aims to boost the investment in new technologies, research and development and revitalise the competitiveness of Italian companies, and, in particular, of the upcoming “competence centres” illustrates that it is possible to create new opportunities for collaboration between universities and firms. HEIs, including universities and professional/vocational tertiary education institutions – the *Istituti Tecnici Superiori* – need to mobilise all their potential to provide students with disciplinary and transversal skills that can help them be active citizens, perform on the labour market and promote the competitiveness of the Italian economy as a whole. Finally, Italian authorities could capitalise on the well-developed efforts in monitoring and evaluating knowledge exchange, led by the national evaluation agency, ANVUR, to provide strategic resources for knowledge exchange and collaboration activities. Going forward, the evaluation of the “third mission” could involve international experts promoting pilot evaluations and experiments featuring leading best practices at the international level.

“Internationalisation” and “digital technologies and capabilities” are important factors to enhance the quality of HE’s and HEIs’ capacity to engage with society. International collaborations can support research and teaching, and magnify the capacity of HEIs to generate ecosystems encompassing local and global networks. Digital transformation affects all HEI missions and activities; it can enable new services, such as online learning, and provide new opportunities for innovation and entrepreneurship. HEIs embracing digital technologies can disseminate innovations within their own ecosystems and networks.

Italian HEIs are well aware of these potentials, which need to be fully developed. The internationalisation of the HE system has been significantly encouraged by both external (European) and internal (systemic and institutional) drivers for change. Some case-study HEIs have become visible hubs in the global arena. However, such efforts and initiatives for internationalisation often face a context of economic and political instability and internal resistance from the academic community. As a result, a systematic and comprehensive approach to internationalisation is often lacking. Furthermore, as is common in most OECD countries, including Italy, there is a strong dynamism in terms of actions and initiatives promoting the digital agenda. Some HEIs are investing in digital infrastructure, some are leaders in the development of new digital services for students and staff, and others are devoting efforts to the development of online learning through massive open online courses (MOOCs). However, some “building blocks” of the digital transformation in HEIs, such as open science and open data, and the skills required to maximise the benefits of digital transformation are not embedded in digitalisation strategies.

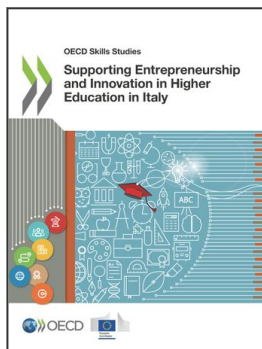
Going forward, Italy’s HE system, including university leaders, needs to elaborate strategies and synergies to promote internationalisation and digital transformation. With the support of systematic benchmarking, stakeholders need to develop a realistic view of the current positioning of Italian institutions within international networks and rankings. In addition, to go beyond the current bottom-up dynamic supporting internationalisation, ministries, national agencies and the Association of Italian Universities (CRUI) need to develop a greater capacity to steer and co-ordinate the system. Italian universities should integrate internationalisation in various activities across the different missions, disciplines, levels of decision-making. A similar co-ordination effort is needed to implement a broad digitalisation programme and go beyond the current emphasis on MOOCs, digital

infrastructure and digital services to develop a common strategy for open science and open data. A first step would be to map and monitor recent developments to identify good practices of digital technologies supporting internationalisation and collaboration with the business sector, through academic entrepreneurship. The following step would be to define overarching strategic goals vis-à-vis the digitalisation of the HEI system, considering that, despite being part of the public administration, HEIs nevertheless represent a specific typology of public actors, requiring more flexibility and ad hoc approaches.

All efforts to promote the capacity of HE to generate societal and economic value will be lost without improving the organisational capacity of the Italian HE system and of the individual HEIs. Recent reforms targeting the governance of the HE sector and its funding mechanisms have positively affected the entrepreneurial and innovation agenda in HE, but there is room for further improvements. Italian authorities need to define a long-term national strategy that uses a broad definition of “engagement” and “third mission”, and focuses on the quality of research and on the capacity to generate societal and economic value: excellence and impact should become two sides of the same coin. Based on this strategy, national and institutional stakeholders would set their strategic objectives and activities, as well as a coherent and innovative evaluation and funding system, broadening the emphasis on bibliometric indicators with other indicators capturing different activities. Importantly, the overarching strategy would represent an enabling condition, supporting other sectoral strategies concerning engagement, internationalisation and digital transformation, for example.

Improved organisational capacity would also reduce the current fragmentation of the incentive structure for entrepreneurship and innovation by better aligning initiatives co-ordinated by different ministries. As a result, HE could interact with other policy sectors supporting innovation in the business sector, internationalisation, regional development and sustainable growth. In turn, policy synergies may help reduce the heterogeneity that characterises the system, for instance by developing policy initiatives to improve the absorptive capacity of the business sector surrounding HEIs, as well as partnerships with local and regional authorities.

HEIs could actively participate in this reform effort by improving their internal organisational capacity and generating a student-centred system. For instance, they could innovate the process for the selection of the university leadership and consider opening it to external stakeholders. This may benefit the innovation capacity of new leaders. In addition, stakeholders could consider gender aspects as criteria for the appointment process. Italian HEIs should be involved in the development of a regulatory framework that is conducive to academic entrepreneurship by tackling specific aspects, such as the so called “professor’s privilege”, in transferring innovation actions. These institutional innovations would dramatically improve HEIs’ capacity to generate economic and societal value for their own ecosystems and networks.



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