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Transition after the technical professional degree in Southern Switzerland

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Abstract

In the area of Cantone Ticino (CH), lots of students obtain a degree in upper secondary technical-professional education (MPT) every year; for them, a number of different options exists.

Research questions have been formulated as follows:

- Which paths do young students from Ticino undertake after technical-professional degree?
- Which are the most relevant influencing factors and motivations in students' decision making process?

The purpose of the study is identifying and understanding itineraries, motivations and influencing factors of young Italian-speaking Suisse students with an MPT degree in the process of choice.

Preliminary interviews with clients and analysis of statistical data have been conducted. Subsequently, 83 face-to-face semi-structured interviews have been administered to students and adults. Students have been asked about their education, choices, advices and counselling; adults have been asked about their perspective on students' decision making process. Data have been treated according to the principle of triangulation (Denzin, 1970).

Interviews showed different motivations for those students who decide to continue studying in a tertiary education institution: while some are guided by specific projection on their own future, others make a choice under the pressure of automatism and inertia. A second issue involved in the decision making process, is whether to stay in the region of origin or to leave.

Self-representation, representation of the experience and the weight of socio-cultural aspects, play a crucial role in the decision making process. A relevant role is taken by informal networks and word of mouth, confirming the hypothesis that, beyond choice rationality, interpersonal relationships and informal ties define the direction of the choice.

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1. Introduction

The Technical and Professional Degree Certificate (Maturità Professionale Tecnica - MPT) was introduced in Ticino (the Italian-speaking Swiss canton) in 1994. After a remarkable rise in the number of certificates awarded in the first ten years after its introduction, there was a slight decrease from 2005; in the last four years, the numbers have remained stable at approximately 200 units.

The MPT certificate currently allows access to a number of options, ranging from direct access to the labour market, to continuing to study in tertiary education facilities, be they universities or not[†]. More specifically, students with an MPT certificate generally choose courses relating to technical/engineering subjects, constructions, architecture and design.

Since the first Professional University School was founded in 1997, the number of students who choose this type of training has more than doubled, rising from 7% to 16% and similar trends are recorded nation-wide. According to the Federal Statistics Office, this percentage includes students who have enrolled in a Professional University School for the first time, compared to their peers in the permanent resident population.

This shows that amongst the different options available to MPT certificate holders, the Professional University Schools have been chosen more frequently as the years passed.

This study refers to a research commissioned by the Directorate of the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI), that was interested in finding out the potential attractiveness of a training option specifically dedicated to Technical and Professional Maturity Certificate holders, namely the Department of Innovative Technologies (DTI), which includes studies on mechanical engineering, electronic engineering, computer engineering and management sciences. The research was conducted by comparing the courses currently offered in Canton Ticino and the options available at national level.

2. Theoretical framework

Several studies have been conducted on the issue of transition in educational systems (inter alia: Behrens, 2007; Bonica & Cardano, 2008; TREE, 2003, 2007), emphasising that it is a non-linear (Donati, 1999; Perriard, 2005) and complex process, linked to a number of different factors that contribute to the final outcome. Issues highlighted include school performance, identity issues, tendency to emulate, availability of information and social/cultural background (Donati & Lafranchi, 2007).

Transition can be considered as a “rite of passage” (Van Gennep, 2002; Turner, 1976, 1972) where both identity issues, associated with the individual's self, and social issues, associated with the ability to relate to others and with others in the reference group, play a role.

The concept that each person elaborates of her/his individual self is characterised, at the same time, by flexibility and stability. People try to face changing circumstances by adapting their behaviours and choices while, at the same time, keeping and protecting at best the representation they have of their self (Emiliani & Zani, 1998).

There is a need to keep and confirm the concept one has of oneself and to believe that certain personal qualities are relatively stable. The need for stability is strong, especially in reference to circumstances that are considered to add value; at the same time, the process of growth forces individuals to face the need to adapt to changing individual and social conditions, demanding flexibility in behaviour and perception.

According to Codol's definition (1980), identity allows each individual to feel unique and identical to her/himself in space and time; it is built in the framework of the relations that the individual establishes with

[†] In Switzerland, the facilities that provide further education at university level are called *Scuole Universitarie Professionali* (SUP) and combine academic training and vocational training.

significant others. According to Tajfel (1981), identity can be represented along a continuous, the two ends of which are the personal and the social dimension: on the personal end, the feelings of identity are associated with thoughts on one's self and on one's history; the social end is associated with individuals' awareness of belonging to a specific group and the fact that they live in a close and involving relationship with its members. As recalled by Emiliani and Zani (1998), depending on which aspect of identity is prevailing (either personal or social), individuals are more focused on their personal differences or on the characteristics of the group they belong to.

The decision to enrol in a specific education or training course can be described as a two-step process: first the individual becomes aware of a potential opportunity and "decides" that it is possible to take a training course that meets one's expressive and/or instrumental needs; the second step is represented by the follow up on that potential selection and ensuing implementation.

Gottfredson (1996, 1981) – as mentioned by Guichard and Huteau (2003) - provides a theory that explains this consideration. He suggests that during childhood and adolescence the individual develops a cognitive map of available professions organised in two main lines: masculinity/femininity and level of prestige of the profession. Within this map, individuals will try to limit and select the professions they consider more acceptable and that better relate to their vision of the position that suits them best. This process allows the individual to include, in the range of possible options, all the training options with traits that meet their needs, inclination and, basically, their individual features. The next step occurs when individuals move from a positive inclination towards one or several choices available to them, to the collection of relevant information, so as to reduce the number of options and create a shortlist, finally reaching a good "compromise" between their aspirations and the opportunities available.

If individuals are unable to find an acceptable compromise, they will do all they can to avoid or procrastinate the choice. It is based on this consideration that Erikson (1968) described adolescence as a moratorium period, a time for reflection that varies in length and that economically developed societies grant to their youth to have more time to test themselves and their skills, and to make a decision about which path has to be followed for their life (Gisfredi, 2006). In the contemporary society of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2002), the option of excessively extending the moratorium is supported by the concrete difficulty in identifying clear results and predictable directions. To choose a final direction in life implies decisions and the elimination of desirable possible alternatives. In addition to variables associated with identity, the literature suggests the importance of the contexts with which individuals interact. In this sense, Perret-Clermont and Zittoun (2002) distinguish between "interactions and relationships amongst peers" on the one hand, that mainly act as emotional props while also encouraging the exchange of experiences and opinions and, on the other hand, the "inter-generational interactions and relationships" that, in addition to disseminating knowledge and skills, can contribute to transmitting symbolic resources (Perret-Clermont & Zittoun, 2002).

Moving in the same direction, Bill Law (1981) studied the role of community interaction in building specific inclinations, expectations and perceptions. He suggests that social class is not alone in influencing individual choices. On the contrary: they are influenced by the weight of the entire community. Bill Law distinguishes five types of community influence:

- expectations regarding the individual, mainly passed on by family or by peers;
- feedback received by the individual on the suitability of a specific role;
- the support of the entourage;
- models, namely the existence of "models" that youngsters can identify with;
- information, which is partly dependent on the environment in which the individual is born and raised and that can influence perceptions through opinions, impressions and facts.

Furthermore, Law identifies six influential sources (parents, extended family, neighbourly relations, peers, ethnic groups and teachers) who, in addition to the types of community influence listed, can affect the representation of one's self and of the situations which the individual can shape.

2. Objectives and methodology

This research mainly aims at identifying the paths chosen by youngsters in Ticino once they have their MPT certificate: how did the transition take place; what reasons encouraged them to make certain choices; which elements affected their path.

These aims were achieved by adopting a research method capable of providing information to integrate the quantitative data already available.

As mentioned in the introduction, it was decided to adopt a system that could take into account two main dimensions: identity and interpersonal relationships. This has led us to restrict the scope of our investigation and focus on specific items, namely:

- the decision-making process, i.e. how the students earning a MPT certificate in Ticino decide which path to choose after school (the driver of the choice, the time of the choice, influences/suggestions);
- the criteria adopted (which criteria were used to choose a tertiary education course, which elements are considered most important).

Secondly, having selected identity as the main dimension to investigate, appropriate methods have been chosen.

The information required regarded different aspects of the path taken in life by youngsters, which finally led them to choose their post-secondary training. Currently, the most popular methods to explore processes that include fundamental choices for the interviewees on the one hand, and, on the other hand, an interpretational/descriptive aim, make use of what are known as “life stories” (Franceschi, 2012) and, more specifically, of training stories.

As a result, our aim was to explore individual stories to understand, as far as possible, the mechanisms and implications that can disclose a collective vision (Stringer, 1999; Malinowski, 1961). It was decided to focus on “why” and “how” rather than “what” and “how much”.

In preparing the research project, it was also decided to consider the dimension of interpersonal relationships as a major variable in the selection process involving young students.

Although the youngsters are regarded as the ones who actively make a choice (i.e. the agents of choice), it should be considered that any choice is made in a context where freedom of action is defined by tangible variables and also by social variables; it is also shaped by the expectations, desires and projections of close adults and peers.

As a result, the context in which information is retrieved cannot be restricted to the “protagonists”; on the contrary, it must include as many potential influencers as possible: it is in this sense that the interviews also included those who can be considered as a primary influence.

This led to the definition of the population to be considered in the information collection process, namely *young MPT holders*[‡] and *adults*.

The population of the *youngsters* was divided into the following sub-populations:

- youngsters currently enrolled in a university tertiary technical-education facility in Ticino;
- youngsters currently enrolled in a non-university tertiary technical education facility in Ticino;
- youngsters who have left a university tertiary technical education facility in Ticino;
- youngsters currently enrolled in a university tertiary technical-education facility in Switzerland (not including Ticino);
- young workers.

[‡] Initially, a sub-population had been identified in the students enrolled in courses leading to an MPT certificate in vocational schools in Ticino. Researchers were nevertheless forced to exclude this sub-population from the information collection process, as it was impossible to directly or indirectly access the data regarding these students through the schools.

The *adult* population was broken down into the following sub-populations:

- teaching staff and directors of vocational schools;
- employers;
- professional career coaches.

Investigations that primarily or mainly use qualitative methods are more likely to produce conclusions associated with the perceptions of individual researchers; the reflections made on the methods used and research practice have led to the development of strategies to monitor and reduce this risk (a detailed review on this topic is supplied by Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

This research aims to provide a survey of the given topic: as a result, the issue of validation is only partly relevant. Nevertheless, it was decided to resort to a double validation strategy: while collecting information, the interviews were conducted under constant supervision to monitor any possible divergence. In addition, the researcher in charge of assessing and processing the collected information was not the same researcher who had conducted the interviews; finally the summary report was checked by other interviewers. This strategy reduced the loss of information (that is always present in the processing stage) and ensured close monitoring of the interpretation of the results.

2.1 Sample

The adoption of the “theoretical saturation” principle (Glaser & Strauss, 2009, p. 91) enabled 84 interviews to be conducted in total.

The following subjects were interviewed in the population of the *youngsters*:

- 15 students currently enrolled at SUPSI (Department of Innovative Technologies – DTI), broken down by specific curriculum and year of enrolment;
- 11 students who were enrolled at SUPSI-DTI and left the course, broken down by specific curriculum, year of enrolment and semester in which they left the course;
- 14 students (from Ticino with an MPT certificate) currently enrolled in a Professional University School (SUP) in Switzerland outside Ticino, broken down by specific curriculum, year of achieving their MPT certificate, school by which it was awarded;
- 6 students (from Ticino with an MPT certificate) currently enrolled in a Specialised High School (SSS) in Ticino;
- 10 youngsters who chose work rather than further training after receiving their MPT certificate;

The following subjects were interviewed in the *adult* population[§]:

- 12 teaching staff and directors of the schools that award MPT certificates;
- 6 career counselors;
- 10 employers.

All the interviews were (sound) recorded, a summary report was filled in for each interview and organised based on the topics of interest for the research.

[§] When defining the different populations to contact, the family - and therefore the parents – were not included in the scope of research. This choice was dictated by an institutional interpretation of the transition process; that will possibly need to be reviewed if similar surveys will be performed in the future.

3. Interview analysis**

3.1 Students currently enrolled in a university-level tertiary training facility outside Ticino

The decision to go into further education after the MPT certificate is made at different moments in time on a case by case basis. The interviewees followed heterogeneous paths: for some, direct contact with the labour market was decisive, although most interviewees made their decision during their apprenticeship. The reasons for moving into further education are varied and are mainly ascribable to the aspiration to better career prospects and to higher wages, to perform more satisfying tasks and to gain broader knowledge.

In the process of shaping their decision, the youngsters declare that they were directly or indirectly influenced by several parties. The main source of information are peers, namely friends, former school mates and other peers who had started a further education course outside the Canton.

Further influence is exerted by the interviewees' professional and school environment: employers, on-the-job trainers, work colleagues and also teaching staff are considered as reliable advisors and, as many have attended training courses outside Ticino, they also act as an example.

Families participated to a varied extent in the decision making process and mainly acted as a prop, providing support to their children or siblings, nevertheless without providing clear indications as to the direction to take. Career counselors are absent or scarcely considered: they are rarely consulted and are not considered decisive in the decision.

Taking part in visits or presentations on specific schools is not considered decisive by youngsters for selecting one facility rather than another. Nevertheless, this type of activity had an important role in confirming some specific elements that were often marginal in a decision making process that had already been completed. Direct contact with the organisation and with the people who work or study there, and direct contact with equipment and facilities were appreciated by many of the students interviewed and enabled them to confirm their decision.

Several criteria were considered when choosing to enrol in a professional university school outside the Canton. The most relevant were:

- the opportunity to improve a national language (or two in bilingual training courses);
- the chance of accessing a specific type of training that is not available in Ticino;
- the chance of a "life experience" leading to the acquisition of independence and responsibility;
- the reputation and history of the school;
- the school's facility and technical equipment;
- future career prospects.

When asked to rate their choice, most interviewees were satisfied with their decision and with the school attended. Despite some difficulties reported by some students regarding the language, course contents and some specific courses, they were satisfied with the organisation and the quality of the training, the equipment and the school's contacts in the surroundings. They also highlighted the life experience facilitated by studying outside their Canton of origin.

As to future projects, most interviewees hoped that they would find a job outside Ticino once their training course had finished. The perception is that there are more job opportunities and better salaries compared to Ticino. What often emerges, also explicitly, is that the decision to attend a SUP outside Ticino is a preliminary and strategic way to connect to a more attractive job market (in several aspects) compared to that in Southern Switzerland.

** The following section presents the analysis of the interviews conducted with the two sub-populations of young MPT holders, namely the students currently enrolled in a university-level tertiary training facility in Ticino and their peers from Ticino enrolled in a professional university school outside the Canton. The discussion will consider the results of the interviews conducted with the other sub-populations of subjects who have contributed, with the information supplied, to provide the general overview for this study.

3.2 Students currently enrolled in a university-level tertiary training facility in Ticino

This group of students mainly chose to continue their education after the MPT certificate to increase their work and pay opportunities and to access more interesting and varied jobs; some chose to continue their education expecting to have a better idea of which job to choose or while waiting for a job. The family of origin is quoted as a prop, providing support in the decision making. Teaching staff or employers do not appear to have been particularly influential on the choice. Friends, school mates and work colleagues also seem to have had little say in the decision; furthermore, only one interviewee declared that he had consulted a career counselor and did so solely to obtain “practical” information once the choice was made.

Almost half the youngsters interviewed chose to enrol in a professional university school available in Ticino without any hesitation; being the only professional university facility available in the territory, they decided without considering other alternatives. The other half had considered other schools (beyond the Gotthard pass) and then decided to stay in Ticino. The criteria used by these youths to chose their further education facility are varied and refer to:

- courses offered in the students’ mother tongue: several interviewees stated that they were daunted by the idea of attending a professional university in a language other than Italian;
- family or sentimental relations, hobbies, jobs (especially part-time students);
- better economic conditions: studying in Ticino allowed the youngsters to stay at home, avoiding having to invest more money to finance their education, and to further weigh upon their parents.

As to their satisfaction for the further education path chosen, most interviewees were generally satisfied with their experience in the DTI.

Some of the positive aspects of training at DTI quoted by students included the fact that most teaching staff is approachable and competent, that the programme and the curriculum are interesting and the availability of tutors, if needed.

4. Discussion

4.1 A non-linear decision-making process

Based on the interviews, it can be stated that the decision-making process concerning access to further education is a non-linear process, which is evidently heterogeneous and subjective.

The duration of this process - from the time when it starts to the time when it finishes - varies remarkably. Some chose what to do in their future in their first year at professional school or even before then; others decide after obtaining their MPT certificate or after a period of reflection/transition. For some, this reflection/transition can last years, leading to long transition periods.

It is important to bear in mind that the process leading to this decision varies in time and lasts much longer than the actual decision, which can be seen as a turning point.

The interviews highlight that choices are made as a gradual process. As recalled above, it can be stated that what is considered as the “moment of choice” is in fact the result of a long process that envisages a stage prior to the “socialisation of the choice” when the foundations are built that will make one choice more likely than another: in other words, the subject gradually comes to a decision by creating the conditions that will allow it to be made when the time is ripe.

In brief, the process can be led back to four stages that usually occur in sequence but do not necessarily last the same amount of time: 1) I am available; 2) I receive information consistent with my interests; 3) I take an active part; 4) I enrol.

There are several trigger elements that prompt the choice of one option rather than another:

- prestige, reputation, tradition. A facility is chosen for its good reputation which is often enhanced by its long-standing tradition, and for
- a specific curriculum. A course is chosen as the training supplied is consistent with one's aims/training and professional aspiration, and for its
- link to the labour market. The constant link to the labour market is an important issue when choosing a university: this link ascertains its ability to offer not only theoretical, but also practical training.
- Market interest of the final certification. Information on this topic is often based on assumptions and is associated to:
 - the university's reputation amongst companies/potential employers;
 - the specific contents associated with the certification (what is learned in the courses).
- facilities and infrastructure: solidity, innovation, technology. University hosted in large buildings that are recognisable from outside and labs equipped with innovative and technologically advanced machinery are considered more attractive than others;
- ease of use from a practical and logistic point of view.

4.2 Identity and rite of passage

Finally, in addition to all the matters mentioned above, it is worth recalling that issues associated with identity self-esteem and self-perception play a role in the assessment of one's options.

Not everyone has the same driver in choice: while some are driven by the aspiration to reach specific aims for their future (profession, financial status, skills), others are driven by inertia and one decision leads to another, often determined by "external" and non-personal factors (family expectations, peer group pressure) and other use the path of least resistance to keep the moratorium stage active also in adulthood. When selecting a specific education facility, students will base their choice on the need to face suitable challenges, in the light of the following considerations: an excessively easy or difficult course will not be chosen to avoid being unmotivated or incurring in possible failure. Finally, self-esteem has a role to play once the choice has been made: at this point the choice will be corroborated by comparing the course selected with other potential courses, so as to ensure that the course chosen is in fact the best, or at least the most adequate option.

Regardless of the outcome, whether positive (achievement of the final certificate, a job) or negative (the student leaves the course), it seems that one same choice is the result of different paths.

The identity dimension in choice is highlighted by the comparison between students who decide to "leave home" and those who chose to continue their education in Ticino. Looking at the "training stories", there is an existential dimension present in the former group and not the latter. A major role is attributed to the person's engagement in the rite of passage and individual's evaluation on their own identity: not all options are considered possible. In fact the only options to be taken into account are those that meet the individual's aspirations and expectations, which are based both on tangible variables and on relative variables associated with the classification processes and the concept of self-esteem.

4.3 Information framework and influencers

It was highlighted above that identity is shaped by the relationships established by an individual with significant others. In addition to feelings of identity associated with a reflection on oneself, the individual develops an awareness associated with the group or community he or she is part of.

This is confirmed by the weight of significant subjects in the decision-making process: the socialisation of the choice and the final decision take place in the context of significant relations.

As regards the information framework, it is important to recall that the complex information network, in which the person who makes the decision is involved, exposes the individual to a high number of inputs of different weight and intensity from different sources.

Based on the results of the interviews, youngsters “absorb” information from the information channels available (school presentation events, open days, web sites, discussions with friends, acquaintances and teaching staff,...) and re-organise it depending on their needs. The latter are often associated with the will to fill in “information gaps” or to create an information network that is consistent with one's system of values, expectations, needs, often trying to confirm decisions that are about to be made. At the same time, youngsters are active interlocutors: they are led by individual motivation, search for the information they need either in the virtual world (web sites, fora) or the real world (visits to facilities, talking with teaching staff and friends).

The choice to further one's education after secondary school is associated, on the one hand, with the concept that each person elaborates of their self; yet, on the other hand, it cannot be considered as a single action by an individual. It is a process that takes place in a social environment by which it can be affected either voluntarily or not and in many different ways. The influencers are many and varied in nature: inter-generational relations (often represented by teaching staff, employers and family) and peer relations alike (siblings, friends, school mates, work colleagues) contribute to guiding the choices of young students and reveal their importance in the transition process. While rarely seeking advice from career coaches, youngsters express their desire to be guided by professionals and state they would seek their advice more happily if they knew they could receive positive feedback on their need for information and guidance.

The interviews confirm the theoretical assumptions made at the beginning: there are at least two types of influential relationships (peer relations and inter-generational relations). Each has a different and complementary function in the decision-making process, mainly associated with emotional support and the exchange of information on the one hand, and to the transmission of symbolic resources on the other. The categories of “community” influence suggested by Law (1981) and other sources of influence are confirmed by the results of this survey.

5. Conclusions

This research has enabled us to focus on a number of issues that characterise the transition paths followed by school leavers after receiving their technical and professional maturity certificate in Ticino.

The first issue highlighted shows the variability and the complexity of the choices made by individuals in the transition stage: each choice brings different expectations, needs (fulfilled/unfulfilled), degrees of availability and inclinations. As a result, each individual needs different types of guidance and information and requires “personalised” answers. Another issue is related to the institutional information system, whose influence seems to be “diluted” by the complex information background in which decisions are made. Indeed, in the information gathering process, all communication initiatives are important, but none is decisive: the decision maker “selects” information based on individual needs. Word of mouth is another issue: communication that takes place in informal exchanges and “hearsay” is often taken into consideration when building the information framework.

Third point: the system of influence has a decisive impact on the decision maker's choices. Inter-generational relationships (parents, teaching staff, employers,...) can supply indications based on personal experience and can act as props and support choices; nevertheless, peers relationships can provide emotional support and give vent to the need - specific to this stage of the process - to compare with others.

The identity dimension, as a means to interpret the situation described, is highlighted by the motivational aspects, by the existential value assigned to choices and by the system of relationships in which the choice is made.

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