

Bella figura: Italian model sets trend with expert fitting service

A database that matches graduates to employers is proving a powerful tool, writes Matthew Reisz

Boundaries between national educational, professional and technical labour markets in Europe are becoming more permeable, according to Kate Purcell of the University of Warwick's Institute for Employment Research.

And that means the need for robust information about these highly dynamic markets – for aspiring university applicants, graduates, educational policymakers, the academic community and employers – has never been more acute.

A good example of what she has in mind is AlmaLaurea, the Italian “meeting point for graduates, universities and the business world”, which may eventually provide the basis for a much broader Europe-wide resource.

Some of the key issues are being debated at a conference on Human Capital and Employment in the European and Mediterranean Area, which is being held at the University of Bologna on 10-11 March.

AlmaLaurea was set up in 1994 by Bologna's Statistical Observatory and is now run by a consortium of 62 Italian universities – more than three-quarters of the total number – with the support of the Ministry of Education, University and Research.

It provides a vast database of information about graduates relating to more than 100 criteria. Universities supply details of faculties, courses and their duration, titles of theses and so on. Students then provide personal information about their military service, work experience, language and IT skills, and availability to work abroad.

Those who have graduated can update their CVs as their careers develop. This means that detailed and reliable information on close to 1.5 million individuals can now be accessed.

“Many countries do similar surveys,” said Gilberto Antonelli, coordinator of AlmaLaurea's scientific committee, “but I don't think there's such a systematic process of collection and certification of data elsewhere. Former students have an incentive to keep their information updated.”

A window on the world of work

Professor Purcell, who is also director of the Futuretrack longitudinal study of 2005-06 applicants to UK universities, was greatly impressed by the AlmaLaurea service on a recent visit to Bologna to prepare for the conference.

She described it as an excellent source of “accessible, relatively comprehensive and up-to-date [Italian] labour market information to inform policy and practice”.

Information gathering is much more fragmented in the UK, she observed.

“The Warwick and the AlmaLaurea teams are convinced that there is considerable scope for mutual collaboration and have begun discussions to take this forward,” she added.

Such a big data source can be used in a variety of ways.

Large companies are happy to pay to obtain the names, for example, of recent graduates in mechanical engineering with a working knowledge of Japanese.

Andrea Cammelli, director of AlmaLaurea, recently told the newspaper *Il Giorno* that a search through the CVs soon uncovered “3,700 [Italian graduates] who speak Chinese, over 4,000 who speak Japanese, 5,500 who speak Arabic, 8,600 Russian, and so on”.

It was precisely human capital such as this “that often escapes our country's system”, he said, citing the case of a fluent Japanese speaker

who had only managed to find a job as a receptionist in a hotel. “If she doesn't find anything better, it's unlikely she'll stay in Italy,” he suggested.

The database could become one of the essential tools that ensure that supply meets demand and that Italy flourishes internationally.

Given that graduate under-employment is often cited as one of the factors in the unrest that has swept across the Middle East, not to mention the increasing costs of higher education in many countries, anything that smoothes efficient progress into the job market is greatly to be welcomed.

The information collected by AlmaLaurea is also analysed and made available in two other formats.

One is the annual graduate profile survey, which provides every university, faculty and degree programme with reliable data on its own graduates.

Information recorded includes length of courses, age at graduation, marks, parental qualifications, social class, score in the school-leaving examination, use of laboratories and attendance records, sectors where they would prefer to work and qualities they are looking for in a job.

This enables institutions to monitor both their efficiency and their success in implementing the Bologna Process.

It also gives career-guidance staff, secondary-school pupils and their families some of the information they require to enable them to make informed choices about where to study.

Equally useful is AlmaLaurea's annual survey of graduate employment conditions, which reports on where they have got to one, three and five years after graduation, broken down by university and by faculty.

This can be seen as tracking the use that the labour market has been able to make of the human capital



Don't hide your skills The AlmaLaurea database holds information on graduates' expertise, achievements and abilities, and large companies are happy to pay to access the data

produced by the universities or, to put it the other way round, the success of universities in meeting the needs of society.

Information for everyone

Several different groups of people make extensive use of the information.

In evaluating how likely a particular course or institution is to enhance their job prospects, potential students often find the website a far more practical tool than visiting university recruitment exhibitions and picking up piles of prospectuses.

The results, notes AlmaLaurea, also provide “a direct comparison between different courses, faculties

and universities”, which secondary schools, local and regional governments and universities all make constant use of.

“With minor variations, the AlmaLaurea model could be adopted in many European countries and on the southern shores of the Mediterranean,” Professor Antonelli said.

“We are already collaborating with four Moroccan universities to set up something similar.”

Steps to extend AlmaLaurea coverage beyond Italy have so far been limited, although more than 2,000 graduate CVs from the Middle East and North Africa are stored on the database.

One of the aims of this week's conference, said Professor Antonelli, is to gather people from all the countries of the Mediterranean to show that better exchange of information between its northern and southern shores could improve the labour market for graduates.

In response to a call for papers, AlmaLaurea received submissions from 200 scholars in 40 countries from around the Mediterranean, Russia, Eastern Europe and even as far afield as Indonesia and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Topics under examination include all the key issues for graduates and their future prospects: skills needs, training, access to labour markets at

a time of economic crisis, gender equality, investment in human capital and international mobility.

Because statistics in these areas, although often used for policy-making, are notoriously unreliable and difficult to interpret, a number of sessions focus on methodological questions.

The conference should also allow delegates from many countries to assess the AlmaLaurea service and reflect on the lessons it might have for them.

Professor Purcell said that she and her colleagues at Warwick could learn a lot from the way in which the University of Bologna research team has been able to coordinate other

key players in the graduate labour market to produce such a rich source of data.

Since any educational policy that can truly claim to be evidence-based needs a wide range of robust statistics, tracked over many years, to build on, she welcomed the fact that the gathering is “essentially a research conference, based around empirical evidence”.

Although there is still a long way to go towards achieving what AlmaLaurea calls “the hypothesis of a European or transnational AlmaLaurea”, this week's conference could represent an important step in moving the process forward.

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