

## ARTICLE

## YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT IN ITALY: CAN “ALTERNANZA SCUOLA LAVORO” MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

1. Introduction

The idea for the project I am going to talk about in this article, was suggested to me for the first time while reading about the Italian Youth unemployment rate. Differently from the rest of Europe, where around 15,6% of people between 15 and 24 of age are unemployed, in Italy the percentage is much higher, around 31,7%. What struck me the most was that, on average, the Italian youth can't find a stable job for at least 3 years after they finish their Bachelor. In my opinion, this seemed to indicate that, on the contrary to what happens in other countries, the transit between school/ university and the job market does not work properly. Thus, the focus of my work on “alternanza scuola lavoro” (school-work alternation) scheme, introduced by the Italian legislation in 2015. Since then Italian students in their last three years of high school were obligated to work a total of 200 to 400 hours in institutions selected by their schools. The declared goals of this reform were to enhance in students, abilities which they could employ in the work market; to help them discover their talents and therefore which type of career path was most suited for them; and finally, to establish a direct connection between school and businesses, so as to increase future job opportunities. Furthermore, the inspiration for the “alternanza scuola lavoro” was the German education system, where a similar model had been active for a few years and was already stabilized.

In my project, I decided to first interview Italian students, to establish if the “alternanza scuola lavoro” fulfilled the promise of making it easier for students to enter the job market. Then, I asked German students the same questions, to see if the same goal was achieved in their country. Finally, I compared the German and Italian results, to see if there are any characteristics of the original German model which could help improve the Italian experience. This whole process will be described in the article below.

2. How the alternanza scuola-lavoro works and differences to the German role model cos a vuol dire role model?

At the outset, to clarify the context, it is important to briefly describe how “alternanza scuola lavoro” works and what the main differences from the German model are. The law n.107/2015 introduced in every school of Italy “l'alternanza scuola-lavoro” (school-job switch). Students of professional schools must work at least 400 hours during the last three years of high school and students of humanistic and scientific schools have to work 200 hours during the same period. All private and public institutions and enterprises that wish to host students have to register to a list, which is visible for all. (Possible institutions are museums, universities etc). The schools' principals have to choose from the list the institutions that suit their school the best. The students are then randomly assigned to a specific job they must attend for two weeks or more. After they have finished their task they get evaluated by their employer and they can move on to their next job. From 2019 onwards “alternanza scuola lavoro” will be also evaluated in the maturità, the Italian high school diploma. In Germany the experience is conducted in a similar way. The main difference however is that the students can choose their workplace themselves. They have to send a cv, a cover letter and sometimes they are also interviewed by their employer. Another important distinction between the Italian and German model is that for German students it is only obligatory to work up to three weeks when they are in their first or second year of high school. This means that they work less hours than Italian schools.

3. The survey

The survey I conducted among German and Italian students was designed to establish if the three goals of the “alternanza scuola lavoro”, - i.e. to develop new skills, find the right university degree and career path for you, create new jobs opportunities - , were met by the students’ experiences.

The first three questions were focused on the first goal:

I asked them if the work experience allowed them to apply practically what had been learned in class before; if it had helped them understand their talents and if they had acquired new abilities. Through an open question the students could also describe what kind of skills they had learned.

The next four questions inquired more specifically about the two other aims of “alternanza scuola lavoro”. Therefore, by means of the 4<sup>th</sup> question I asked them if their work experience helped them understand different paths they could choose for the future; with the fifth, if their experience showed them what kind of degree they wanted to do; in the 6<sup>th</sup> if “alternanza scuola lavoro” guided them towards a specific job; in the 7<sup>th</sup> is they felt it was easier for them to access the job market.

Finally, since I was also interested to know what they thought the problems of “alternanza scuola lavoro” were and how they would change their experience I asked them both these things in the second open question.

### *3.1 The Italian experience*

I conducted a survey in my high school, Liceo Classico T.Tasso. I interviewed three classes in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> year of high school (second last, and last year). (For more detail look at appendix)

The replies to the first three questions were rather encouraging. Although students did not feel like they applied practically what learned in class and they were not sure if they had enhanced their talents, many of them were positive about having acquired new skills. This was confirmed by the open question, in which the most common answers that I got were that “alternanza scuola lavoro” helped them learning new soft skills they could apply in every work field as well as competences which were specific to the field they were working in

On the other hand, Italian students were negative regarding the next four questions. Most of them didn’t feel like they were more enlightened about possible future careers and almost all of them answered that their experience didn’t help them at all, or almost never helped them finding the right university degree or job for them. Finally, to the question if they felt that it was easier for them to get a job, only a very small percentage answered that “alternanza scuola lavoro” actually helped them in this aspect.

Very interesting was also the explanation of why the work experience had not worked the way it was supposed to. Most students answered that the process through which they were assigned to a specific job was unjust. Since there was only a limited number of places in the hosting institutions, and there were no official criteria to establish who should go where it was decided by drawing lots. This meant that students often ended up in work fields they were not even vaguely interested in, doing jobs they had no intention of pursuing in the future. In this environment it was difficult for them to understand anything about their talents or future aspirations, since they were already sure they would not do that type of job. Another consequence of this randomized process was that there was no logical link between the different experiences: normally students would have been able to choose jobs based on their preferences, which would sum up to a coherent set of experiences. In this case, they had no way to do so. Finally, students often told me that there was a huge discrepancy between the jobs different schools had to offer, since it was up to the school to choose the institutions they wanted to collaborate with. Not all schools were able to establish good connections, for geographical reasons (they are far away from central institutions) or because the principals and teachers were not as good willed. Thus, if you were lucky and went to a “good connected” school you were more likely to work for a good employer if not, you couldn’t do much about it.

This brings us to the last very important problem brought up by students, an organization problem. Students told me how they were often assigned to institutions that did not really know what to do with them. They would end up photocopying documents, cleaning the offices or simply doing nothing, waiting for their employer to give them a job to carry out .

To sum up, we can see regarding Italy that, as this survey shows, students don't perceive the transaction from school to the work market or from school to university as easier after the "alternanza scuola lavoro" experience. Thus, two of the goals originally set by the law (help students understand the right career path for them and increase future job opportunities) weren't met by "alternanza scuola lavoro". On the bright side, what I found very interesting is that most students learned very important skills, which will be useful, not only when applying for a job, but that are also employable in every field they will be working in. It could be said that on a first look the "alternanza scuola lavoro" does not seem to have improved the students' awareness of the job market, but on the long run the skills learned through it will be helpful. Finally the problems pointed out by students in the second open question seem to indicate that there are some issues with the way students are assigned to specific jobs.

### *3.2 The German experience*

In Germany, the sample of students I could interview, asking the same set of questions which were posed to Italian students, was restricted. However, from the answers I got, I could establish that the experience was perceived very differently by German students. The most interesting differences were noticeable in the answers given to the second part of the survey, question 4-7 (see above). All students replied that the work experience had helped them understand their future opportunities and show them what kind of university degree and job was right for them. Finally, almost everyone answered that they were not sure that the experience would help them to gain a better access the work market

Thus, German students' replies to the survey were more positive as compared to the answers given by Italians . The formers believed that the project really helped them find the career most suitable to them and that it also fostered a more complete understanding of all the possible ways to reach their ideal job.

These results are very interesting and prompted me to think that the differences between the Italian and German model of "alternanza scuola lavoro" may provide an answer of why Italian students perceive their experience so negatively and German students so positively.

## 4. Comparing the Italian and the German model

To understand why the problems identified by Italian students in their "alternanza scuola lavoro", were not reported by German students, I started by comparing the two models. As we have seen, Italian students criticized a number of things, which for now could be summed up in: the randomized allocation of students was inefficient and unjust and the institutions they were allocated to were not prepared to receive them. Both these problems were the cause of the "alternanza scuola-lavoro" being considered for most cases useless as a tool to discover future work opportunities. What about Germany? They seemed to have solved both these problems: the first by letting students rather than the school apply to work for a specific employer. The organization problem was also indirectly solved through the application process. Indeed, if employers were willing to accept a student after a selection process, this implied that they had something for him to do and that he was the most suited for that job. Let us analyse more in depth both these arguments.

As stated above, in Italy the schools establish connections with different employers and randomly send students to work for them. In Germany on the other hand, it is the students who first contact the institution they are interested to work for. They have to send an official request to work there together

with all their application documents (cv, cover letter etc.). This process not only teaches them how to apply for a job in the future, but it also means that every student, independently from his school, has equal possibilities to get a good job. Of course, not even in Germany does every student get the position he wants to, but this does not depend on the school having good connections or being in a favourable place geographically, but on his ability to impress the employer. An application process also means that students don't have limited choice in the works they can do. If for instance they think they want to be doctors in the future and what to see what it means to work in a hospital they can do that. In short, I think an application process teaches students how to be independent, it makes the assignment of students to a specific job fairer by giving everyone the same chances to succeed and it makes the "alternanza scuola-lavoro" actually useful, by allowing students to see what type of career they want to undertake.

Let us now consider the second argument, that an application process would solve organizational issues. As I already described in the "Italian results" section, Italian students often end up doing a completely different job than what they were supposed to, or not working at all. In Germany this hardly ever happens. Indeed, I think that, once the employer has selected you to work with him and has seen that you are motivated for the job, he feels responsible to show you what his work consists in. This does not always mean that students will be able to work alongside professionals. In some cases, when the job requires many years of studying before you can actually start working (I am thinking for example at therapists who work with patients who suffer from a mental illness) students will only be able to watch the work of others. However, if this happens in a work field you are interested in, I think it is helpful anyways to see which kind of activities you might perform in the future. On the other hand, in Italy, it often happens that employers do not have time, or are not patient enough to show students what their work consists in. This, I think is partly caused by the fact that students are often not interested in that particular work field and professionals don't feel responsible towards them. Thus, I think that an application process is also a sign for an employer that you are actually interested in his work and that you were not just randomly allocated to it. This, in my opinion, results in a increased professionalism on both parts, which could solve the organizational problems criticised by Italian students and could establish a long-term relationship between employer and student.

## 5. Conclusion

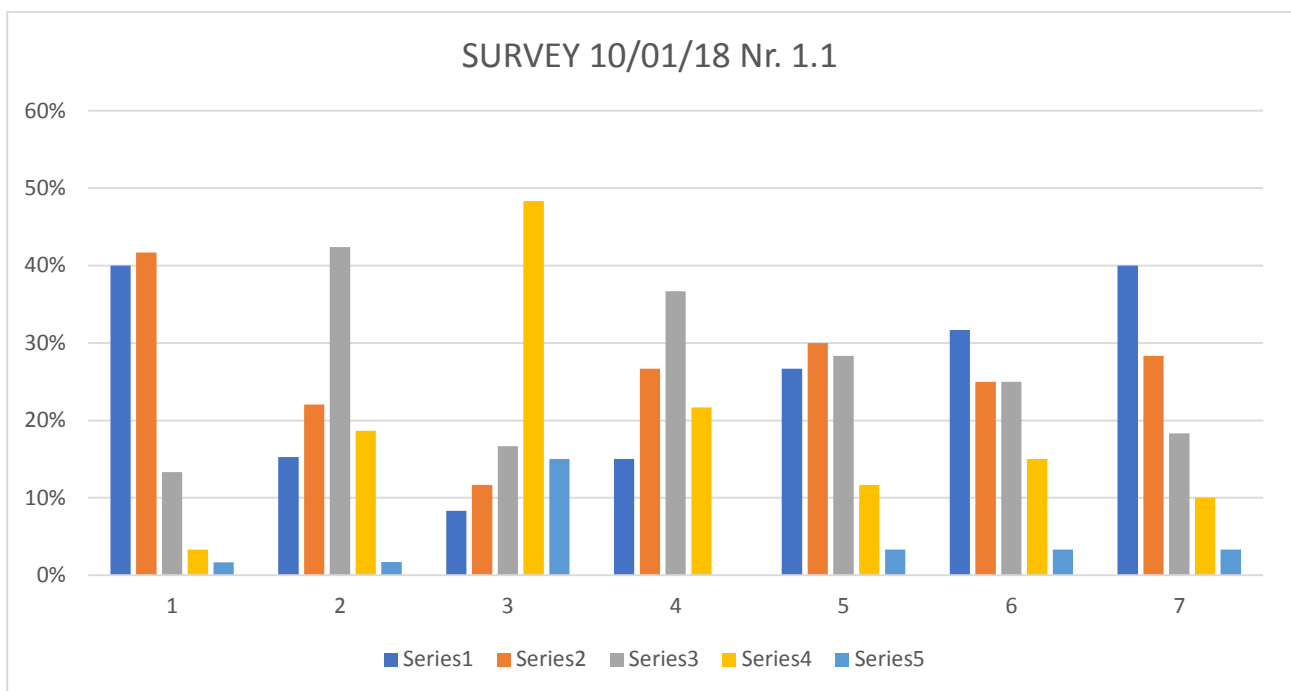
In conclusion, this article argues that it is necessary to improve the Italian alternanza scuola-lavoro scheme with the hope to establish closer links between educational institutions, such a school and university and the job market. Indeed, until now only one (new skills) of the three established goals of the "alternanza scuola lavoro" has met its target. By looking at the similar German experience in the field, the article seems to indicate that the "alternanza scuola-lavoro" experience would be more efficient if the supply and demand for students' placement would be free to meet, as it happens in Germany where an application process allows students to only work for the employers they are interested in and vice versa employers are free to only select the most suited students without interference by third parties, such as schools. This process would not only teach students how the actual work market works but it also address many of the organization and structural problems criticised by the Italian students I have interviewed.

## Appendix

This appendix describes in more detail the answers to the survey, given by Italian students of Liceo Classico T. Tasso. It is also a methodological section, which explains which parameters I have used to evaluate the answers.

Students could choose among 5 parameters to answer the 7 multiple choice questions

- 1=definitively not,
- 2= almost never,
- 3=neither yes nor no,
- 4=almost always,
- 5=definitively yes.



The same 5 parameters can be seen in graph 1.1 where 1(definitively not) is blue, 2(almost never) is orange, 3(neither yes nor no) is grey, 4(almost always) is yellow and 5(definitively yes) is light blue. The graph also shows the percentage of students who have answered with a specific parameter for each question. Starting from the left of the graph we can see the answers to the first question: more than 80% students replied “definitively not” or “almost never” to the first question. More than 40% answered “neither yes nor no” to question 2. Finally, with almost 50% “almost always” was the most frequent reply to question 3.

The next four questions are all dominated by a high percentage of students who answered through the parameters 1,2,3 (definitively not, almost never, neither yes nor no). Parameter three is especially present in question 4 where almost 40% students answered that their experience didn’t really make a difference in the understanding of their opportunities. Both in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> question more or less 60% subjects answered with “definitively not” or “almost never”. Finally, to question 7, 40% of the students answered “absolutely not”, almost 30% replied “almost never”. Only 10% thought that it almost always had helped them enter the job market and around 2% replied “definitively yes” to this last question.

In the survey there were also two open questions. Regarding the first question these are some of the answers I got: most students learned to use new computer programmes, like photoshop, videomaking, finalcut pro and power point. They also acquired new information that regarded their job. Some, for instance, learned more about the environment and environmental problems (SPECTRA 200), others about health problems (Istituto Superiore di Sanità), others again about ethnological and historical aspects of archaeological sites. (FAI). Not only that, 15 out of 61 students told me that this experience had enhanced their capacity for public speaking. 9 students told me that they had learned to work in teams. Other new abilities that they acquired, were: organisation skills (6 students), to be more responsible (4 students), to adapt to a work environment, interacting with professionals (5 students) and problem solving skills (4 students).

Regarding the second question, I will only mention the most frequently cited problems of the “alternanza scuola lavoro” and the ones, as we will see, that could maybe be solved by applying some of the characteristics of the German model.

1. Students wanted more freedom to choose the project they were interested in also through the addition of new projects (23 students)
2. The projects are not well organized (16 students)
3. The projects are not related to what they are learning in school (13 students)
4. The experience is not practical enough (12 students)
5. The experience doesn't help in the choice of a university degree (9 student)
6. The offer of projects should be equal in all schools (3 students)
7. There is no logical link between the different experiences (2 students)