
STUDENTS SPEAK

Internationalization of the University System and the Future of Forlì

The conference "**Students speak. Internationalization of the University System and the Future of Forlì**" was held on May 10th in the "Sala Garzanti" of the Hotel della Città. The topic of the conference, which was organized by the Garzanti Foundation in close collaboration with the University of Bologna and the Institute for East-Central Europe and the Balkans, was the university's internationalization and students' mobility. The conference was well attended and provided a forum for extensive student participation.

Numerous students from the Forlì branch of the university participated in the event, most of them from the "R. Ruffilli" Faculty of Political Science and the Advanced School of Interpreters and Translators. **Ronald Schenkel**, journalist with the Swiss newspaper *Neuer Züricher Zeitung*, skillfully chaired the debate, managing to thoroughly examine the many aspects of the process of internationalization by actively involving students and the audience at large.

In his introduction Schenkel invited the audience to reflect on the competition between universities to attract students from other countries. Starting with the direct experiences of students in the hall, the discussion first focused on understanding how the experience of studying abroad is perceived: is it just an experience to put on your CV, or is it specifically useful in itself. For students it is actually a way to combine these two aspects: the experience of studying abroad has the potential of enriching a person both personally and professionally due to the multicultural context, thus improving students' global competitiveness.

Following comments by **Gioele Fabbri**, a student of International Relations and Diplomatic Affairs, and **Gianluca Bagnara**, Councillor for Agro-food Policies of the Province of Forlì-Cesena, the discussion centered on how and to what extent local businesses can absorb the competencies of an increasingly international student body, and how this could contribute to creating inputs to the province's industry and commerce. An example of how this can work was given by **Maria Pitukhina**, who is currently doing post-doctoral research in Forlì: in Karelia, the region she is from in the Russian Federation, universities have focused intensively on internationalization; the positive results of these efforts have attracted international funding to finance exchange programs abroad and upon returning home many of these students have found work in local companies looking to compete on a global level.

The university authorities attending the conference acknowledged that the process of internationalization is continuously evolving. Much has been done, but there is still much to be done. Professor **Stefano Bianchini**, Chairman of the MIREES Master's degree program, called the audience's attention to the three dimensions of the university's international activities: (1) student mobility following graduation, which allows students to continue their education abroad in higher degree programs; (2) mobility prior to graduation with Erasmus or overseas exchange programs; and (3) enrolling in courses offered by universities in other countries – which can be national or international (with the possibility of double or joint degrees).

As several MIREES students confirmed, this program offers great opportunities: those coming from abroad are already experiencing mobility by studying in Forlì; in addition all MIREES undertake a second period of mobility when they study at one of the program's partner universities for an entire semester, required as part of the study program. For many Italian students enrolled in the program, this is their first opportunity to go abroad: all agreed that without these types of university-sponsored programs it would be much more difficult to study and live in another country.

A hot topic in the debate was **bureaucracy** and **administrative procedures**: fortunately those in attendance had not had negative experiences with Italian bureaucracy, but the point was made that if one wants to study abroad, the institutions should allow students to do so. Dr. **Massimo Vetrò**, manager of the Office of International Relations, explained how his

office tries to facilitate the bureaucracy for international students trying to find places to live, and helps them not only with university-related documentation but also with residency permits and visas, for example.

The **language barrier** was another hot topic at the conference, mainly with regard to filling out the forms – too often still on paper – that international students have to compile once they have arrived in Forlì. But the difficulties go beyond this: students often encounter the language barrier even before they apply for a program. Thus the discussion revealed the need for more complete information in English and at the same time the need for more intensive Italian language courses for foreign students.

A final point of discussion was the topic of **scholarships** for students' mobility programs: many students have been able to benefit from scholarships offered by their home countries to attend programs of their choice – including MIREES – while others have opted to work while studying in order to support themselves. Here again the language barrier poses a problem, in that it is difficult to find work in a country where one does not know the language well. However, some students in attendance had still had positive experiences in this sense. In regard to scholarships offered by Italian organizations in support of international students' mobility, while many students appreciated the broad range of opportunities, it was also mentioned that at times the official announcements in Italian do not exactly correspond to the information put out in English.

To conclude the conference Professor **Carla Salvaterra**, pro-rector for International Relations for the University of Bologna, thanked students for having expressed their opinions and points of view. In the pro-rector's words: "In a university in which students sometimes see themselves as mere numbers, the opportunity to discuss directly with them, listen to them and understand the issues that are important to them has been extremely useful. We have talked about many aspects of internationalization and we will definitely take into consideration the points that have emerged from this meeting."

Aurora Domeniconi,
Institute for East-Central Europe and the Balkans,
Faenza, Italy