DOC CIMEA 132

MOBILITY AND RECOGNITION DURING THE COVID-19 EPIDEMIC

PROSPECTS FOR ITALIAN UNIVERSITIES

Luca Lantero, Chiara Finocchietti, Elisa Petrucci

Translated by Allan Garner

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1. The context of the study: the course for credential evaluators

The study was developed within the [specialisation course for Credential Evaluators](#)[1], held by CIMEA, in collaboration with the European University of Rome, during the period June-September 2020. The course is dedicated to the training of credential evaluators, the professional figures that in higher education institutions deal with the recognition of qualifications, going into depth on topics such as the legislation of reference at national and international level, the different models of education and training systems, recognition procedures, internationalisation policies of higher education and the latest developments about the subject. The course is the first of its kind in Italy both for the topics addressed and and for the qualification issued. Participants will in fact receive the Certificate of Specialisation Course for Credential Evaluators (12 CFU) and the first Micro-Credential certified by CIMEA in the higher education sector, i.e. the Professional Certificate on Credential Evaluation, issued through the digital platform based on blockchain technology [Diplo*me*](#)[2].

37 professionals are attending the course, mainly working in student admissions departments and in offices dedicated to international mobility. The higher education institutions represented are 23, including 22 universities and one institution in the sector of higher artistic, musical and dance education (AFAM) and, upon observing the geographical distribution, they are mainly located in central and northern Italy.

The data collected, having submitted an online questionnaire to the course participants, is presented below.

2. The data

20 institutions participated in the survey, equal to a quarter of Italian universities (counting only the universities that normally carry out classroom activities, and which are therefore directly affected by any changes in mobility flows), constituting a first "core sample" on the impact of the COVID-19 virus on mobility seen from the point of view of higher education institutions in Italy. Thanks to the analysis of the data from the sample, the study compares mobility flows in the academic years 2019/20 and 2020/21 of international students who apply to follow complete study courses (so-called *degree seeking*) in Italy, and students in structured mobility who want to carry out a study period in Italy (so-called *credit seeking*).

For *degree seeking* students, data relating to international students who submitted applications for pre-enrolment in the Bachelor, Master and University Master courses was collected. For these cases, the institution was also asked to specify any request for pre-enrolment fees and the window of opportunity for submitting the application. As regards information relating to structured mobility applications, data was collected both on the number of applications for Erasmus and for other mobility programs offered by the universities. For the cases described, the total number of pre-enrolment and mobility applications structured by country of origin was also noted. Finally, the

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[1] For further information on the specialisation course, please consult the following link: http://www.cimea.it/en/servizi/cimea-academy/corso-di-perfezionamento.aspx.

[2] For further information on the Diplome platform, please consult the following link: http://www.cimea.it/en/progetti-in-evidenza/diplome-blockchain4people/home-page-blockchain.aspx.

participants shared actions and best practices undertaken by institutions to attract international students in response to COVID-19

The study also includes information received from course participants with whom the results of the questionnaire were discussed.

Here are some preliminary considerations:

- the data is not to be considered definitive for all universities, since in some the time window for accepting applications from international students is still open. It is therefore, by default, approximate.
- the definition of an international student varies from university to university. Some institutions consider students with non-Italian citizenship international, others students with foreign qualifications. In other words, the definition of "international" can refer both to the citizenship of the qualification and to the citizenship of the person.

2.1 Pre-enrolment requests for study courses (*degree seeking* students)

In order to assess whether and how much the spread of COVID-19 has impacted the flow of international students intending to complete entire study courses in Italy, the participants provided data relating to pre-enrolment requests for Bachelor and Master degrees and University Masters for the academic years 2019/20 and 2020/21.

The information collected shows that the total number of applications received by the institutions involved fell to 24,436 in 2020/21 compared to 26,902 in 2019/20, thus recording a decrease of 9%. Looking at the data relative to the individual study courses, 7,194 applications were received for the Degree courses in 2020/21 and 9,531 in the previous academic year. There was also a drop in requests for university Masters, which dropped to 1,125 compared to the previous 1,254. On the contrary, it emerges that the number is growing if you look at the Master of Science programs for which a total of 16,117 applications were received this year compared to the 13,969 of the previous academic year
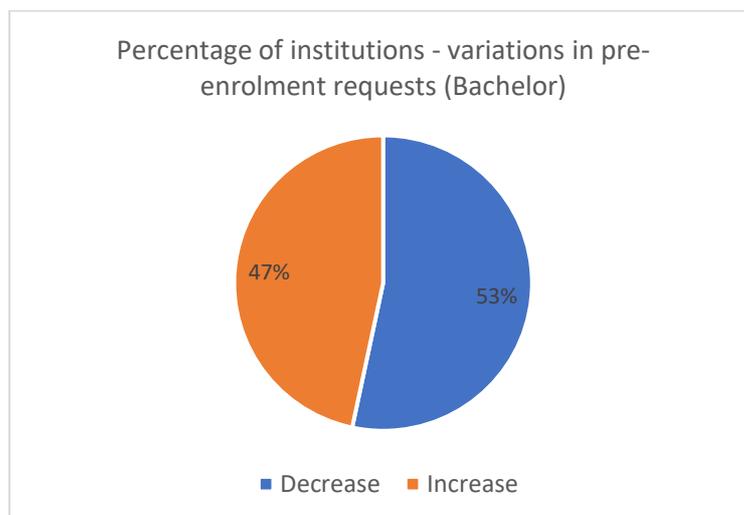
Chart 1: Institutions that signalled an increase/decrease in requests for Bachelor level courses

Analysing in more detail the data relating to the **Bachelor degree courses** (chart 1), it is interesting to note that, although the trend is decreasing, 47% of the institutions nevertheless recorded an increase in the number of pre-enrolment requests.

As for the **Master degree courses** (chart 2), 63% of institutions received a greater number of requests while 37% declared a slight drop.
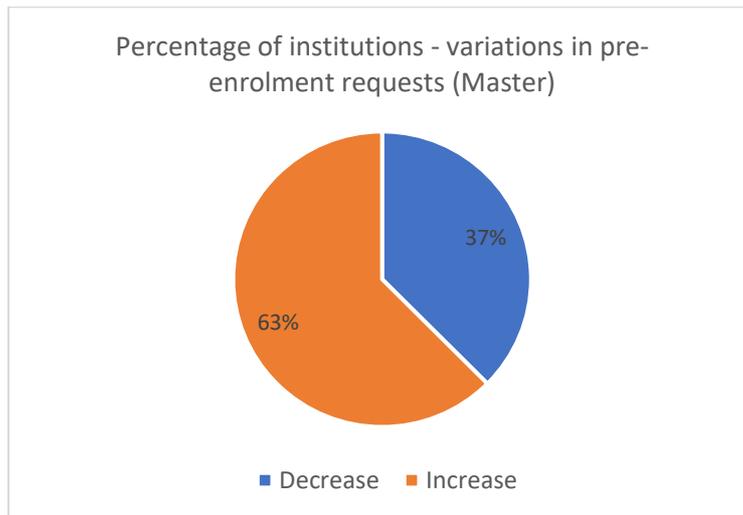
Chart 2: Institutions that signalled an increase/decrease in requests for Master level courses

The data relating to University Masters shows a drop in requests from international students in most of the institutions involved (chart 3). In this case, however, it should be borne in mind that only 50% of the respondents were able to provide the requested information since for the other half of the institutions such data was not yet available at the date of filling in the questionnaire.
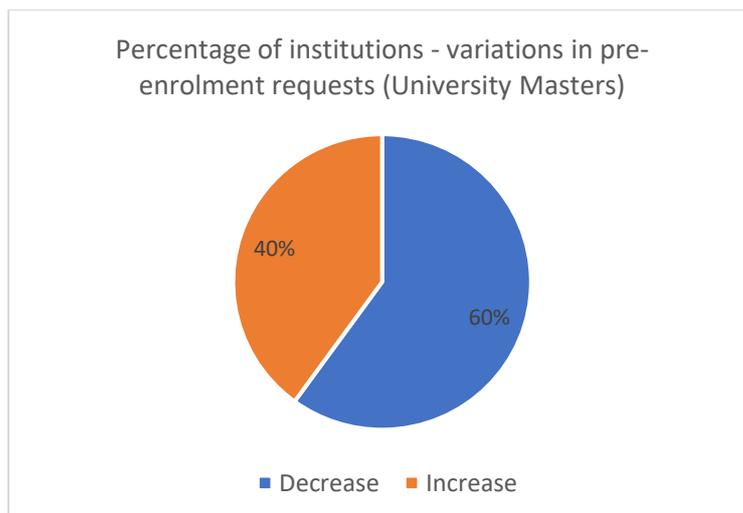
Chart 3: Institutions that signalled an increase/decrease in requests for University Masters courses

The data on the requests for *degree seeking* students for the three study courses should also be analysed in the light of two relevant indications that emerged from the survey. The first is that 60% of the universities surveyed said they asked for a fee to be paid at the time of pre-enrolment, an element that indicates the determination of the choice of candidates with respect to the institution

of choice and confirms the accuracy of the collected data. The second indication is that 90% of institutions opened pre-enrolments in the period prior to the spread of COVID-19 in Italy but continued to receive applications during the period of maximum alert for the virus, and continue to receive applications on the date of publication of this study (July 2020). This highlights, on the one hand, that the data relating to the applications for the academic year 2020/21 is approximate by default, on the other that the flow of requests has not suffered a sharp decrease despite the uncertainty due to the spread of the virus.

2.2 Requests for structured mobility (*credit seeking* students)

The impact of COVID-19, in this case, was analysed by looking at changes in the number of applications received to follow a period of study in Italy exclusively in Erasmus mobility, or by participating in other mobility programs (including Erasmus) offered by universities. In this case, information was requested relating to *credit seeking* students for Bachelor and Master degree courses. Taking into consideration that several universities had only aggregate data available for participation in the two study courses, the analysis was carried out on the total number of applications received.

The trend is negative for Erasmus students and the universities have received a total of 2,306 applications compared to 3,290 in the previous academic year. Looking at the data shown in Chart 4, as well, the majority of institutions (85%) reported a drop in requests.
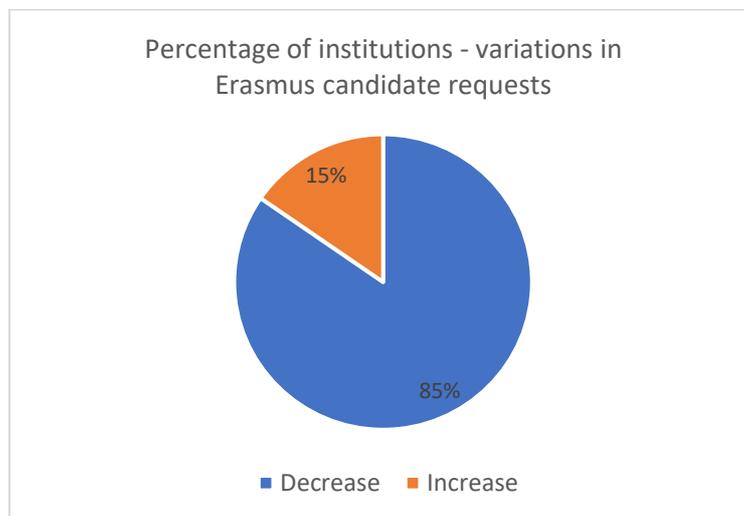
Chart 4: Institutions that signalled an increase/decrease in Erasmus candidate requests

The negative trend is confirmed if you look at the data that includes, in addition to Erasmus, also other mobility programs. The number of requests is 2,712 compared to 5,992 in 2019/20 and 90% of the institutions registered fewer candidates than in the previous year.

As mentioned, the data reported refers to the aggregate number of applications received to participate in Bachelor and Master degree courses, it is, however, relevant to mention that the number of students who intend to participate in mobility programs for Master degree programmes is growing. In fact, there are 790 applications received in 2020/21 compared to 606 in 2019/20.

This figure is in line with what has been seen for *degree seeking* students and seems to suggest that for courses in which a higher level of specialisation is envisaged, students continue to want to invest in mobility by aiming for higher standards.

2.3 Candidates by country of origin

2.3.1 Degree seeking students

As for *degree seeking* students, the analysis of the total number of pre-enrolment applications (Bachelor, Master and University Masters) by country of origin shows that the flow of applications for 2019/20 comes mainly from India, Pakistan and Iran. Compared to the changes recorded in 2020/21, it should be noted that the number of applications from the three countries is increasing compared to the previous academic year, particularly as regards Iran. The tables below show in detail the top 5 countries from which the applications come.

2019/20			2020/21	
Country	**# of requests**		**Country**	**# of requests**
India	2371		Iran	2871
Pakistan	1968		Pakistan	2770
Iran	1752		India	2713
Azerbaijan	542		Nigeria	465
Turkey	512		Turkey	436

Table 1: Top 5 countries ranked by number of candidates.

If you look at the frequency with which the countries have been cited by the institutions as the top 5 from which they receive pre-enrolment applications, India appears in first place for both academic years and the People's Republic of China replaces Azerbaijan among the most cited for 2019/20. Overall, albeit with some variation in position, the countries remain the same.

2019/20			2020/21	
Country	**# of institutions**		**Country**	**# of institutions**
India	16		India	16
Iran	10		Pakistan	12
Pakistan	8		Turkey	9
Turkey	8		Iran	8
People's Republic of China	7		People's Republic of China	8

Table 2: Institutions which have indicated the top-ranked 5 countries from which they receive pre-enrolment requests.

According to the data collected, the information on the flow of applications by country confirms that for the academic year 2020/21, despite the crisis period due to COVID-19, there have been no strong variations compared to the previous academic year.

2.3.2 Credit seeking students

For Erasmus students, as well, there are no major variations either as regards the number of applications or the country of origin. It should be noted that as regards France, Poland and Portugal, the number of applications is increasing as detailed in table 3.

2019/20		2020/21	
Country	**# of requests**	**Country**	**# of requests**
Spain	882	Spain	863
Germany	340	Germany	288
France	206	France	226
Poland	76	Portugal	128
Portugal	64	Poland	103

Table 3: Top 5 countries by number of requests for Erasmus mobility

The calculation of the frequency with which the countries are cited by the institutions involved as the main countries of origin of the students in mobility confirms the figure on the number of applications received (table 4).

2019/20		2020/21	
Country	**# of institutions**	**Country**	**# of institutions**
Spain	12	Spain	15
Germany	10	Germany	14
Portugal	8	France	13
France	8	Portugal	9
Poland	5	Poland	4

Table 4: Institutions which have indicated the top 5 countries from which they receive Erasmus mobility requests.

As for students participating in the structured mobility programmes offered by universities (including Erasmus), it should be noted that in 2019/20 a large number of applications were registered from the United States and Mexico. Looking at the data, the high number of requests from these two countries is connected to the strong influx of students in one of the universities surveyed.

2019/20		2020/21	
Country	**# of requests**	**Country**	**# of requests**
Spain	1120	Spain	680
USA	915	Germany	270
France	494	France	243
Germany	380	Portugal	106
Mexico	170	Poland	83

Table 5: Top 5 countries by number of requests received for structured mobility (including Erasmus).

Considering the data relating to the frequency with which the countries are cited by the institutions, the same countries are present and in the same order: the most cited is Spain, followed in order by France, Germany, Portugal and Poland.

2019/20		2020/21	
Country	**# of institutions**	**Country**	**# of institutions**
Spain	17	Spain	13
France	16	France	13
Germany	11	Germany	10
Portugal	10	Portugal	6
Poland	5	Poland	3

Table 6: Institutions that have listed the top 5 countries from which they receive requests for structured mobility (including Erasmus).

2.4 Actions and best practices

Another element noted is that relating to the actions taken by the institutions involved to attract international students and to allow structured mobility reactions in response to COVID-19.

As can be seen in table 7 below, 60% of institutions responded to the period of uncertainty due to the pandemic by improving online assistance for students. The qualitative data allows us to identify different ways in which assistance has been guaranteed, from the transition to the online mode of orientation activities to the enhancement of FAQ and telephone support services, via the web and newsletters, thereby providing updated information on the changes made to lectures and procedures in response to COVID-19. In addition, the institutions have increased the use of digital platforms to monitor the enrolment process of international students.

Another widespread move is the implementation of online teaching (30%) and forms of mixed teaching, online and classroom (20%). The mixed teaching option has been reported by the institutions as a useful tool to postpone physical mobility, while allowing students to start courses remotely. It is interesting to note that the possibility of accessing some lessons for practical subjects in virtual classrooms and the creation of new virtual platforms to access micro-courses remotely have been reported.

In some cases, institutions have allowed for fee cuts for international students (20%) and have extended the period for submitting applications (10%).

A series of actions undertaken by the institutions involved more specifically the evaluation and recognition procedures for academic qualifications. On this issue, the institutions mentioned greater flexibility in the timespan for receipt of documents, as well as the acceptance of digital transcripts and documents.

Other data that has emerged from the analysis is that some institutions have indicated the implementation of structured promotional strategies for the attraction of international students as good practice, including participation in international fairs, the involvement of agents and the creation of agreements with institutions that provide Italian courses in countries of greater interest. It is interesting to note in this regard that the number of applications received by these institutions is growing significantly.

Actions and best practices to attract international students (*degree seeking*) in the face of COVID-19	Percentage of institutions that have declared actions/best practices
Improve online assistance and information on COVID-19 for students	60%
Introduce online teaching	30%
Activate mixed teaching (online-classroom)	20%
Activate transfer from offer of classroom education mode to online	20%
Apply reduction in fees	20%
Implement online skills verification tests	15%
Extend timeline for presentation of entry requests	10%
Increase flexibility for documentation and time available for document sourcing for recognition of qualifications	10%
Activate tools to inform staff on the evolution of COVID-19	5%
Activate specific services for the finalisation of thesis projects	5%
Create virtual student network	5%
Increase scholarships	5%
Launch ad hoc marketing strategies	5%
Allow for asynchronous mode access to lessons	5%
Provide for reimbursement for exceptional force majeure costs borne by students	5%
Simplify and improve digital services	5%
Utilise digital platforms to allow access to and profit from new micro-courses	5%
Use online platforms to enrol students	5%
None	20%

Table 7: Main actions and best practices to attract international students in the face of COVID-19.

With regard to the actions taken to promote structured mobility in response to the pandemic, the most widespread practices coincide with those implemented for the attraction of international students. As shown in table 8, in this case as well the largest percentage of institutions indicated the improvement of online assistance for students (50%) and the implementation of online teaching/virtual mobility (55%) as the main tools to respond to the crisis.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that a small percentage of institutions has recognised the usefulness of creating networks between students and local associations to offer the possibility of participating in socio-cultural activities in virtual mode and thereby keeping the relationship with students active.

Actions and best practices to allow for activities of structured mobility (*credit seeking* students) in the face of COVID-19	Percentage of institutions that have declared actions/best practices
Implement online teaching	55%
Improve online assistance for students	50%
Activate mechanisms to reimburse force majeure costs	10%
Implement forms of mixed teaching (online – onsite)	10%
Implement procedures to recognise online exams	10%
Increase use of testimonials	10%
Collaborate with associations to involve students in online socio-cultural activities	5%
Implement COVID-19-specific assistance tools for students	5%
Incentivate short mobility	5%
Increase use of virtual communication tools	5%
Launch Italian language courses	5%
Launch ad hoc marketing strategies	5%
Participate in bilateral exchange projects	5%
None	15%

Table 8: Main actions and best practices to allow for mobility activities in the face of COVID-19.

3. Conclusions

The results of the study, albeit in pilot form and on a sample of institutions, highlight some elements of interest on the topic of the impact of COVID-19 on mobility and recognition. This is information that can contribute to reflection on this issue, and that can provide some indications for the future and for the management of periods in which, similar to the current crisis situation, classroom mobility could be severely restricted.

As a first point, it should be noted that **there is no single definition of the term "international student"**. In some institutions the term "international" expresses the citizenship of the title, while

in other cases it is used to indicate the citizenship of the person. This is an important topic, which falls outside the scope of this study but which could be the subject of a more in-depth reflection also on the internationalisation policies of the higher education system. Defining the meaning of this term means delineating the direction of the relative strategies of attraction, promotion and mobility of higher education institutions.

Looking at the data on mobility, in general there is a drop in requests from international students, in particular for access to the first cycle and for Erasmus mobility both in the first and second cycle, as might be expected in a situation of uncertainty caused by the pandemic. However, it should be borne in mind that, as regards *degree seeking* students, the overall number of first and second cycle applications received in the academic year 2020-21 has undergone a slight decrease of 9%, a number that would be interesting to compare with those of other European countries. In this general context, however, a fact that catches the eye because it is in contrast to the trend is that of **an increase in enrolment requests from international *degree seeking* students for Master degree courses**. This figure is also confirmed for *credit seeking* students in non-Erasmus structured mobility, even if with statistically less relevant absolute numbers.

In part, this data can be justified by the fact that the time windows for enrolment began in some institutions before the COVID-19 emergency. The fact remains that the applications continued to arrive even in the most critical emergency stage in our country, and when, with several waves, the epidemic arrived in different countries of the world. The institutions that participated in the study are located in the areas of our country that were most affected by the spread of COVID-19. Another element to keep in mind when reading this data in contrast with the trend is that often the study courses offered in English are available principally in the Master degree programmes.

As emerges from the study, most institutions apply a pre-enrolment fee, the payment of which by the student expresses his intention to enrol in a specific course at a specific university, and would seem to discourage "carpet bombing" transmission of the request to multiple institutions. A first reading therefore that could be made of this data is that **higher-end mobility** in terms of the study cycle, which looks at more specialised paths, not only would seem not to have been affected by the crisis situation but rather **would appear to strengthen the priority given to the value of and interest in the study course and the university with respect to the possible uncertainty provoked by the diffusion of COVID-19**. Given the prospect of two-year mobility for Master degrees in Italy, it would seem that candidates are willing to face a period of uncertainty or online teaching, in order to still be able to enroll in the university and the chosen course. The other element to note is that **where some institutions have carried out specific actions in the context of a promotional and internationalisation strategy, the results are evident**. Some universities participating in the study have recorded a very significant increase in the number of enrolments compared to the previous year, despite the crisis. A figure therefore doubly in contrast with the trend, which not only does not decrease compared to the previous year due to the effect of COVID-19, but increases significantly. This data, certainly the most interesting that emerges from this study, would seem to highlight how an effective university promotional and internationalisation strategy can be of help and in some way also a response even to crisis situations. From the recognition point of view, this

data translates into a growing number of evaluations to be carried out, and certainly calls for flexibility in the procedures due to the exceptional nature of the situation[3].

This data leads us to outline some quick considerations. This is quantitative data relating to a sample of institutions and not definitive (approximate by default, given that the enrolment period is not yet over for some universities), therefore the conditional is a given, but we can still draw some lessons that can help us manage similar crisis situations, albeit in the hope that they will never recur.

The first, almost elementary, consideration is that **the quality of the institution and the course, and the positioning of this course by disciplinary specialisation in the panorama of educational offers**, **would seem to make the difference, even in emergency situations**. In other words, the investment in student education is positioned along a medium-long term line, and therefore, in order to be able to be included in the chosen study path, there is the will to manage a period of uncertainty in a short-medium term perspective.

The second consideration is that **high-end mobility suffers less from the impact of the crisis**, looking at the cycle of studies, and a range of international students who look at a specific specialisation, while first cycle courses suffer more in terms of the number of applications from international students, as they have a more generalist approach, albeit in their disciplinary characterisation.

Finally, the numbers of requests for international *degree seeking* students for the second cycle are increasing in almost all institutions, but in some the growth figure compared to the previous year is particularly high. Discussing with the course participants the reasons behind this quantitative leap which marks a decided "plus" in the number of applicants, a strong investment emerged in the institutions' promotional and internationalisation strategy. The third consideration is therefore also "elementary": **a clear and effective internationalisation strategy**, and of attracting international students, not only allows the institution to register an increase in applications, but also **represents part of the solution in addressing situations of crises** like the current one. Further interesting research work to be carried out would consist in analysing these internationalisation strategies and highlighting the elements of success that led to these results.

As mentioned above, the **number of requests from international students inbound to Italy appears to be decreasing for Erasmus mobility *credit seeking* students**. This is a significant drop, and it is understandable for short-term mobility, with the consequent risk of the mobility falling for its entire duration in the COVID emergency period, which may not even take place, given that the possibility of moving between countries has been seriously reduced when not completely blocked in the acute phase of the crisis. As already mentioned, looking instead at the requests for non-Erasmus mobility for the second cycle, the figure appears to be growing, in line with that of the *degree seeking* students for the second cycle.

As regards the **countries of origin**, both for *degree seeking* and for *credit seeking* students, **it would seem that COVID-19 did not have a particular impact on the geographic element of the flows**, which basically follow those of the previous year. In this case as well it is a relevant fact, because among the main countries of origin there are various countries that have been affected in turn by the spread of the virus. India, Pakistan, Iran and Turkey are the main countries of origin of the *degree*

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[3] Luca Lantro (et alia), *Effects of the COVID-19 virus on higher education and recognition of qualifications (informative note for HEIs)*, "Doc CIMEA", 130 (2020), consulted on 22 July 202, available at: http://www.cimea.it/files/fileusers/1553_ENG_COVID19_Information_note_April_2020.pdf.

seeking students both for the academic year 2020/21 and for the previous one, together with Azerbaijan for 2019/20 and Nigeria for 2020/21. Looking at *credit seeking* students, in this case as well the countries are the same for the two academic years: Spain, France, Germany, Portugal and Poland.

One of the points covered by the analysis is qualitative in nature, and concerns the actions and **best practices** put in place by the institutions to mitigate the impact of the virus on international mobility. A first group of best practices is that linked in general terms to **digitalisation**, meaning by this term the total or partial shift of activities carried out in the classroom onto digital platforms. These activities are primarily those related to teaching, but also those related to administrative services and more generally to student services. Among these we find, for example, the promotional activities of the educational offer, the creation of virtual networks with students, the implementation of remote skills verification tests and the simplification and optimisation of existing digital services. A second group of best practices is the one that can be included under the term **flexibility**, both in relation to the required documentation and the timing for the recognition of qualifications, and also in terms of the extension of the timeline for sending applications. A third category of actions is that relating to the **financial support** of students, through the increase in scholarships, fee cuts and the possibility of reimbursing any exceptional expenses incurred by students for reasons of force majeure.

Similar actions are also implemented for *credit seeking* students, with some differences such as the involvement of testimonials or local associations to involve students in online socio-cultural activities.

It should be noted that, in addition to what has been introduced by higher education institutions, initiatives have also been activated at the country system level to support the mobility and internationalisation of the Italian higher education system, in particular by facilitating the university pre-enrolment procedures for international students. The main action is the updating of the Universitaly[4] portal which is now a single access point for pre-enrolment applications for international students in digital mode. The initiative was led by the Ministry of University and Research, with the support of CRUI - Conference of Rectors of Italian Universities and CIMEA - Information Centre on Mobility and Academic Equivalences and in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and with the Ministry of the Interior.

The portal allows the student to fill in the "pre-enrolment application" digitally and offers different paths and information for different users: students, higher education institutions, diplomatic missions and police headquarters, allowing everyone to interact for their part, simplifying and dematerialising the registration procedures. As of the date of this study, the Universitaly portal has already received more than 18,000 pre-enrollment applications, 11,000 of which have already been validated by Italian institutions (updated to 20 July 2020). The Universitaly initiative is part of the broader national strategy overview in response to COVID-19, outlined by the Ministry of University and Research in the annex to the note of May 4, 2020 prot. 798, in which the guidelines for the higher education and research system after the emergency phase are outlined. In this strategic vision, the "Procedures for entry, residence and enrolment of students applying for visas, relating to higher education courses in Italy, at Italian higher education institutions for the academic year

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[4] Link here: https://www.universitaly.it/index.php/registration/firststep.

2020-21"[5] have been updated in the light of the current situation and offer an overview of the procedures for international students in Italy, including indications on the recognition of foreign qualifications and on the Universitaly portal itself.

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[5] The complete text of the Procedures is available at the following link: https://www.studiare-in-italia.it/studentistranieri/moduli/2020/Circolare_2020_2021_EN.pdf.