



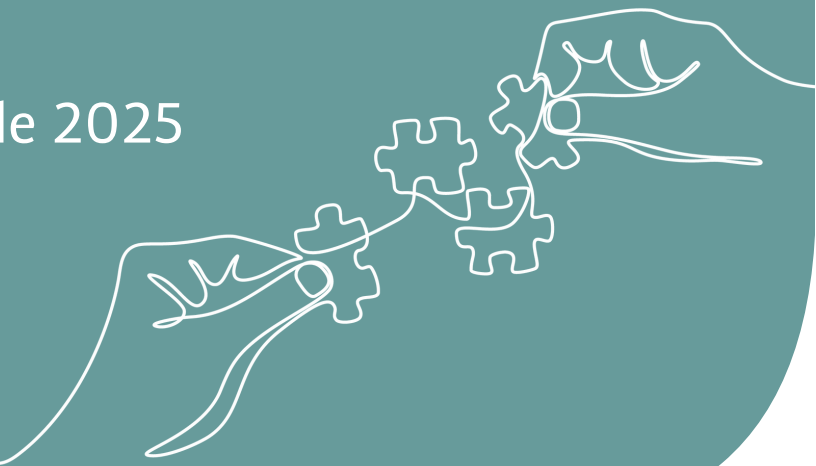
Universitat
de les Illes Balears

El compromiso social de la historia de la educación

Libro de actas.
XXIII Coloquio Internacional de
Historia de la Educación (SEDHE)

Palma, 5-7 de noviembre de 2025

Gabriel Barceló Bauzà
Sara González Gómez
Sergi Moll Bagur
(Coords).



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Coordinado por:
Gabriel Barceló Bauzà
Sara González Gómez
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Social and Public Engagement of Historiographical Research on the University and Higher Education in Italy: New Paradigms and Perspectives

Sofia MONTECCHIANI
University of Chieti-Pescara (Italy)
sofia.montecchiani@unich.it

Luigiaurelio POMANTE
University of Macerata (Italy)
luigiaurelio.pomante@unimc.it

ABSTRACT: Research into the history of the university and higher education in Italy has undergone several phases since the late 20th century. Particularly noteworthy is the shift from traditional studies focusing on the Medieval and Modern periods to those addressing the Contemporary era. This evolution has been driven by the intense activity of specialized research centers and groups, alongside the development of new sources and methods of analysis. Moreover, in line with one of the university's most current and socially engaged roles, the so-called *Third Mission*, historiographical research has increasingly sought to define its core function within a broader societal context. This contribution therefore aims to highlight how, in recent years, universities have been analyzed not only for their historical development, but primarily in terms of their cultural, social, political and economic significance, and their relationships with local communities and frameworks. Recent studies have expanded the field beyond the traditional history of universities, addressing a range of significant educational topics, including gender issues, the history of youth associations, changes in teaching methodologies and teacher training. The latest phase of Italian university historiography, marked by strong social engagement, is also reflected in efforts to promote the historical, cultural and educational heritage of universities. Notably, growing attention has recently been paid to the heritage and activities of university museums. This has resulted in an increasing demand for workshops and events with an educational and outreach focus, capable of actively engaging not only the academic community but, more importantly, the wider public.

KEYWORDS: History of the University; Higher Education; Social And Public Engagement; Research Perspectives; Italy.

1. Introduction: The History of the University and its roots in Italy

In the Italian context, the first efforts to organize research in the field of the history of the university and higher education can be traced back to the early 20th century. It was the University of Bologna that led the way. Beginning in 1907, on the occasion of the 8th centenary of the *Studium*, the foundations were laid for the establishment of an Institute for the History of the University of Bologna. In addition to collecting and preserving archival and printed sources, the Institute was intended to reconstruct the history of the *Studium* by tracing the development of its disciplines and its various academic chairs.¹

¹ For further insights into the history of the University of Bologna and the role of the Institute, see: Albano Sorbelli, «L'opera dell'Istituto per la storia dell'Università di Bologna», *Studi e memorie per la storia*

From this initial experience –which also led to a series of periodical publications– a network gradually developed among scholars working on the history of universities in Italy. Inspired by the Bolognese model, they launched similar initiatives, such as the Institute for the History of the University of Padua² and the Permanent Committee for the History of the University of Modena.³

However, a significant breakthrough in the promotion of this type of study came only in 1939. At the time, the then Minister of National Education, Giuseppe Bottai, launched a national project aimed at enhancing Italian universities through the collection of a series of institutional monographs. Bottai sought to emphasize Italy's academic primacy in terms of tradition, scholarly rigor, and cultural distinction. University rectors received a circular with precise instructions: using modern historical methods, the project was to explore not only key historiographical developments but also the distinct social and cultural roles each university played within its local context.

For this reason, it was important to highlight factors such as the institution's ability to engage with its region, to attract eminent scholars and professors, and to support patterns of academic mobility among students and staff. The project aimed to produce comprehensive and accessible works, designed to make the «autobiographies» of Italian universities known at both national and international levels. Each volume was to be overseen by a dedicated committee composed of representatives from all faculties, in order to promote an interdisciplinary approach.⁴

This initiative reflected Minister Bottai's and the Fascist regime's broader interest in universities, seen as key institutions for the development of science and culture and as pivotal to the political and social renewal of the era. This heightened attention to university matters culminated in 1940 with the organization, in Bologna, of the First National Conference on the History of Italian Universities, followed by a proposal for the First International Congress on the History of Universities, scheduled to take place in Rome in 1942. Due to the outbreak of war, however, the event never took place.⁵

2. The Transformation of Italian Historiography on Universities from the Late 20th to the Early 21st Century

At the end of the Second World War, the Italian school and university system was basically in a state of profound crisis. The destruction of buildings and teaching

dell'Università di Bologna 15 (1942): 177-204; Sorbelli, Albano and Simeoni, Luigi (Eds.). *Storia della Università di Bologna* (Bologna: Nicola Zanichelli Editore, 1944-1947); Giorgio Tabarroni, «Origine e attività dell'ISTUB, Istituto per la storia dell'Università di Bologna», *Strenna storica bolognese* 37 (1987): 383-406; Andrea Giorgi and Leonardo Mineo, «Archivi per la storia dell'Alma Mater Studiorum: un centro memoriale per l'Università di Bologna», *Annali di Storia delle università italiane* 1 (2021): 155-161.

² <<https://mostre.cab.unipd.it/settecentenario/it/32/l-eredita-l-istituto-per-la-storia-dell-universita-di-padova>>.

³ Royal University of Modena. *Della istituzione di un Comitato permanente per la storia della Università di Modena* (Modena: Società tipografica modenese, 1928).

⁴ Ministry of National Education, General Directorate of Higher Education. Circular no. 233, 26 January 1939, «Collezione di monografie sulle Università d'Italia», annex: «Norme per la esecuzione della Collezione di monografie sulle Università d'Italia», *Bollettino Ufficiale del Ministero dell'Educazione Nazionale* 66, no. 6 (7 February 1939): 295-301; Pomante, Luigiaurelio. *Giuseppe Bottai e il rinnovamento fascista dell'Università italiana (1936-1942)* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2018).

⁵ Albano Sorbelli, «Il primo Convegno Nazionale per la Storia delle Università italiane, Bologna, 5-7 aprile 1940-XVIII», *L'Archiginnasio. Bollettino della Biblioteca comunale di Bologna* 35, no. 1 (1940): 73-86.

equipments, the loss of cultural and scholarly assets, the stagnation of research, the collapse of organizational and administrative structures, and – above all – the material and moral distress experienced by professors and students after the horrors of the regime and the war were among the major challenges that the system had to confront.

The democratic reconstruction of the national education system – initiated in 1946 by Minister Guido Gonella – was long and arduous. Periods of significant tension were not lacking, culminating, at the end of the 1960s, in the well-known student protests of 1968, which also strongly impacted Italian universities.

Nevertheless, these upheavals, along with the advent of the so-called «mass university», helped to inaugurate a renewed and meaningful phase in the study of university history. Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, new research centers devoted specifically to the history of higher education were established in Italy, modeled on those created in the early 20th century. Notable examples include the centers in Pavia, Rome, Turin, Messina, Sassari, Pisa, and Ferrara.⁶

The intense scholarly activity promoted by these centers, along with the emergence of specialized research groups in the final decades of the century, laid the foundations for a genuine renewal of the field. From the 1990s onward, a decisive expansion of research topics took place, driven by the discovery and critical use of previously neglected sources and the adoption of more rigorous and contemporary methodological approaches.

In this context – and in contrast to the traditional focus on the Medieval and early Modern periods – scholarly attention gradually shifted toward the Contemporary age, with particular interest in the evolution of university policies and institutional frameworks.

Another significant indicator of the historiographical transformation was the changing profile of scholars in the field. Increasingly, researchers came from both the humanities and the sciences, reflecting the necessarily intersectoral and interdisciplinary nature of contemporary university studies.

Moreover, the 1990s marked the peak of this process of renewal, with the establishment of two important institutions: the Inter-University Research Center for the History of Universities, the Unistoria, promoted by the University of Naples «Federico II», the University of Siena, and the Italo-German Historical Institute in Trento; and, most notably, CISUI-Centro *Interuniversitario per la Storia delle Università Italiane*. Founded in 1996 through a joint initiative of scholars from the universities of Bologna, Padua, Messina, Sassari, and Turin, CISUI quickly became a national and European reference point for research on the history of universities.⁷

In Italy, it served – and continues to serve – as a hub for scholars who have revitalized the field, including, among others, Gian Paolo Brizzi, Ilaria Porciani, Andrea Romano, Piero Del Negro, Ester De Fort, Giuseppina Fois, Angelo Massafra, Elisa Signori, and Mauro Moretti. Today, CISUI coordinates the work of researchers from 27 Italian universities and organizes academic conferences, seminars, and a variety of scholarly and pedagogical initiatives. Based in Bologna, the Center also sponsors two publication series and the prominent international journal *Annali di Storia delle Università italiane* [*Annals*

⁶ Luigiaurelio Pomante, *L'Università italiana nel Novecento* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2020); Luigiaurelio Pomante, *L'Università della Repubblica (1946-1980). Quarant'anni di Storia dell'istruzione superiore in Italia* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2022).

⁷ Sofia Montecchiani, «Studies on the History of the University and Higher Education in Italy: between Historiographical Review and New Research Perspectives», *History of Education & Children's Literature* XIX, no. 2 (2024): 467-486.

of the History of Italian Universities]. It functions as a central platform for discussion on heuristic, methodological, cultural, social, and political issues related to university history.⁸

Finally, with the advent of the 21st century, a new phase of innovation in historical research on higher education has taken shape, characterized by increasingly international collaborations. In this regard, special mention must be made of the Heloïse Project – European Workshop on Historical Academic Databases, launched in 2012 –.⁹ Today, the project involves approximately 60 European universities and around 120 scholars. Within this framework, some of the most innovative research of recent years has emerged, such as studies on university obituaries, academic memory, and the social and demographic characteristics of academic populations, all of which reflect broader advances in the field of historical-educational research.¹⁰

3. Historiography of the Italian University: Between Engagement and Commitment

The transformations undergone by the university system over the past two centuries, along with historiographical and educational analyses of the paradigms that have shaped Italian universities to date, provide a solid foundation for reflection on the current role of the university, scientifically, as well as culturally, politically, economically, and socially.

It is no coincidence that the research lines promoted since the late 1990s in the field of university history have addressed topics that are markedly innovative compared to earlier studies. These include investigations into the role of universities in nation-building processes, the protection and enhancement of university cultural heritage and historical archives, the study of so-called «minor» universities, the analysis of student associations, gender issues and the slow path toward the integration of women into academic life, as well as the evolution of university autonomy and teaching freedom. More recently, scholars have focused on the development of educational and technological innovation in universities, which intersects with broader issues such as the dematerialization of sources, the rise of e-learning and online universities, and new academic publishing policies, particularly the spread of open access.

Another expanding field of investigation concerns issues related to academic memory and, more specifically, public history, together with the expansion of the so-called Third Mission of the university. This includes the analysis of knowledge transfer processes, public engagement, the promotion of active citizenship, and awareness-raising on key issues such as inclusion, sustainability, lifelong learning, and the cultural valorization of university heritage.¹¹

⁸ <https://centri.unibo.it/cisui/it>.

⁹ <https://heloise.hypotheses.org/>.

¹⁰ For example, see: Gian Paolo Brizzi and Andrea Romano (Eds.). *Studenti e dottori nelle università italiane (origini-XX secolo). Atti del Convegno di studi, Bologna 25-27 novembre 1999* (Bologna: Clueb, 2000); Luigiaurelio Pomante, «I necrologi dei professori universitari. Una fonte preziosa per lo studio della storia dell'università e dell'istruzione superiore», in *Fonti per la storia delle popolazioni accademiche in Europa. Atelier Héloïse*, eds. Gian Paolo Brizzi, Carla Frova and Ferdinando Treggiari (Bologna: il Mulino, 2022); and the parts devoted to university memory in: <https://www.memoriascolastica.it/>

¹¹ Notable publications include: Simonetta Polenghi. *La politica universitaria italiana nell'età della Destra storica 1848-1876* (Brescia: La Scuola, 1993); Ilaria Porciani (Ed.). *L'Università tra Otto e Novecento: i modelli europei e il caso italiano* (Naples: Jovine Editore, 1994); Floriana Colao. *La libertà d'insegnamento e l'autonomia nell'università liberale. Norme e progetti per l'istruzione superiore in Italia* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1995); Fien Danniau, Ruben Mantels and Christophe Verbruggen, «Towards a Renewed University History: UGentMemorie and the Merits of Public History, Academic Heritage and Digital

With regard to the latter, several significant initiatives have been promoted by scholars in the field of university history. Among them are the founding of the Museum for the History of the University of Pavia and the European Museum of Students (MEUS) in Bologna,¹² as well as the organization of exhibitions and academic seminars, often open to local communities, aimed at highlighting the educational, artistic, and cultural value of university institutions and their deep connections to the territories in which they are rooted.

4. Conclusions

Since the Bologna Process of 1999, efforts have been made to establish a common European Higher Education Area. However, each national system has largely retained its distinctive features, shaped by specific historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors. Universities have always been closely linked to their respective local and national contexts. However, in recent years there has been an increasing call for them to play a more active role in the social and economic development of the territories in which they carry out their activities.

As places for debate, scientific research and intellectual engagement, universities are now called upon to align their curricula more closely with professional and economic needs through meaningful dialogue with stakeholders. They are also being urged to embrace a more public-facing mission, beyond the scientific sphere, in order to respond to pressing social and cultural challenges.

This situation has prompted the academic system to undertake a critical reassessment of its institutional mission, with a view to enhancing its impact and expanding the areas of intervention within which it operates.¹³

The dimensions of public engagement and new forms of collaboration between universities, communities, and local actors are central to meeting today's challenges – and those of the future – and to restoring the university's central role in the processes of national and international development. This democratic reorientation must involve all actors within the academic ecosystem, as well as local communities.

History in Commemorating the University», *Studium* 5, no. 3 (2012): 179-192; Romano, Andrea. *Dalla lectura all'e-learning* (Bologna: Clueb, 2015).

¹² Luigiaurelio Pomante. *L'Università italiana nel Novecento* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2020), 181-196.

¹³ Associazione TreeLLLe. *Dopo la riforma: università italiana, università europea? Proposte per il miglioramento del sistema terziario* (Genova: TreeLLLe, 2017); Magni, Francesco. *L'Università e il rilancio della formazione terziaria* (Rome: Studium, 2023).