

PROCEEDINGS

Cultures, Practices,
and Change 02



third international conference
of the journal *Scuola Democratica*

education
and/
social justice
University of Cagliari
June 3-6, 2024

Education never stands still—it moves, adapts, and transform in response to new realities, while reshaping society in turn. This collection explores some forces defining learning today: digital tools, intercultural dialogue, artistic expression, and the call for ecological responsibility. At its core, education remains a space for negotiation and reinvention.

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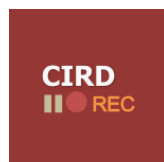
3-6 June 2024, Cagliari (Italy)

PROCEEDINGS

Vol. 2

**Cultures,
Practices,
and Change**

Organizers and partners



QUALITY OF TEACHING: DEVELOPING TEACHERS' SKILLS TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' LEARNING AND PARTICIPATION

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This contribution presents two intersecting and complementary lines of research carried out by the T&LC of the University of Florence. The first concerns a survey aimed at investigating the opinions of academic staff with respect to perceived areas of and the design of teaching courses, teaching methodologies and the assessment of learning outcomes. The second is at a preliminary stage, and aims to investigate the role of students as agents of change, investing in their active, responsible and conscious participation in academic processes.

Faculty development; Quantitative research; Teaching methodologies; Competencies of academic staff; Student Voice.

INTRODUCTION

The adoption of the principles of the Bologna Process (EHEA, 1999) represented a milestone in transforming higher education in Europe, promoting a series of reforms to improve the quality and coherence of national education systems. These reforms, documented in various publications in Europe, emphasized the importance of placing the student at the center of the educational process, stressing key aspects such as the importance of active citizenship, professionalization, and career skills development (ESG, 2015). The paradigm introduced by Faculty Development concerns the shift from teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning (Sursock & Smidt, 2010; Warming & Frydensberg, 2017; Gover Loukkola, 2018). This important change places the student at the center of the teaching process, learning through the transmission of knowledge and direct experience. It recognizes students as the main actors in the education system, brings out the need to detect and respond to their personal and professional training needs, and recognizes students as active players in their learning process. The concept of Student Voice (Grion, Cook-Sather, 2013) represents a crucial challenge for educational innovation in higher education, promoting a cultural change that places students at the center of the educational process as active, listening stakeholders. This approach challenges teachers to refresh their teaching practices, adopting methods that are

more interactive, inclusive, and oriented towards personalized learning. Listening to students' opinions, needs, and experiences allows them to identify strengths and areas for improvement in their teaching, creating learning paths that not only improve the quality of learning but also respond to the needs of an ever-changing professional world. Teachers are called upon to transform their role, from transmitters of knowledge to facilitators of knowledge, capable of co-designing educational experiences that stimulate critical thinking, creativity, and adaptability. This renewal, guided by active listening and collaboration with students, helps future professionals to acquire transversal skills and a sense of shared responsibility, essential for facing up to the complexities of global challenges.

1. RESEARCH BY THE TEACHING AND LEARNING CENTER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORENCE

The Teaching and Learning Centre at the University (T&LC) is an institution established to promote, recognize, and improve the skills of academic staff. In addition to supporting the members of a higher education institution with the acquisition and development of multiple skills to make the institution more dynamic and vital, faculty development actions are closely linked to the concept of didactic innovation. This concept emerges, on the one hand, from growing pedagogical knowledge and, on the other, from the idea of raising the quality and effectiveness of university education in response to the multiple and varied transformations taking place (Lotti & Lampugnani, 2020).

Starting out from the national and international guidelines supporting teacher training, given the T&LC's aim of offering support to teachers in their professional practice by fostering innovative teaching processes, two lines of research will be presented in this contribution. The first concerns a survey aimed at sounding out the opinions of academic staff concerning the design of teaching courses, teaching methodologies, and the assessment of learning outcomes. The second line of research is at a preliminary stage, and aims to investigate the role of students as agents of change, investing in their active, responsible, and conscious participation in academic processes. Acting through teacher training on the areas investigated can have a dual impact on i) the quality of teaching and ii) student learning, and can stimulate the activation of students as change agents. Students and teachers thus develop a sense of equal responsibility for the quality of teaching and learning in the broader university and training environment.

1.1 The survey

The survey promoted by the T&LC was carried out in collaboration with the Planning Support, Quality Assurance, and Evaluation Unit of the University of Florence, to analyze the quality of teaching in today's classrooms and construct reasoned pathways to develop the concepts of knowledge, learning, and teaching. The questionnaire was administered in 2023. The distribution of the sample of 882 respondents reflects that of the reference population in terms of Age, Gender, Role, Area, and

Seniority in teaching activity. The research sample consisted of full and associate professors, as well as researchers active when the questionnaire was administered. The questionnaire was voluntary.

Tab. 1. The sample questionnaire. Source: (T&LC, going to press)

	Response	%	Submitted	%	Response rate
Role					
Full professor	203	23.0%	394	21.0%	51.5%
Associate professor	435	49.3%	860	45.9%	50.6%
Permanent re- searcher	56	6.4%	123	6.6%	45.5%
Researcher (RTD-B)	77	8.7%	187	10.0%	41.2%
Researcher (RTD-A)	111	12.6%	308	16.5%	36.0%
Age					
< 30	1	0.1%	6	0.3%	16.7%
30 – 40	124	14.1%	337	18.0%	36.8%
41 – 50	210	23.8%	472	25.2%	44.5%
51 – 60	318	36.0%	605	32.3%	52.6%
61 – 70	229	26.0%	452	24.1%	50.7%
Gender					
Female	389	44.1%	775	41.4%	50.2 %
Masculine	468	53.1%	1,097	58.6%	42.7 %
Neutral	25	2.8%			
Area					
Biomedical	170	19.3%	460	24.6%	37%
Scientific	249	28.2%	447	23.9%	55.7%
Social Science	141	16.0%	275	14.7%	51.3%
Technology	197	22.3%	448	23.9%	44%
Humanities and Ed- ucation	125	14.2%	242	12.9%	51.7%

The questionnaire was structured in five sections, and consisted of 40 closed-ended questions and 1 open-ended question (Table 1). The closed-ended answers are on an ordinal scale with two positive and two negative modes. The structure of the questionnaire was divided into sections, as follows:

- section 0 – profile: the purpose of section 0 is to collect information on the sample (no. questions – 7).
- section 1 – opinions on use of teaching practices: survey of teachers’ opinions on the relevance of certain teaching practices indicative of a learning process-oriented approach to teaching and on the level of their application (no. questions – 9).
- section 2 – opinions of teachers (sub-sections: teaching methodologies;

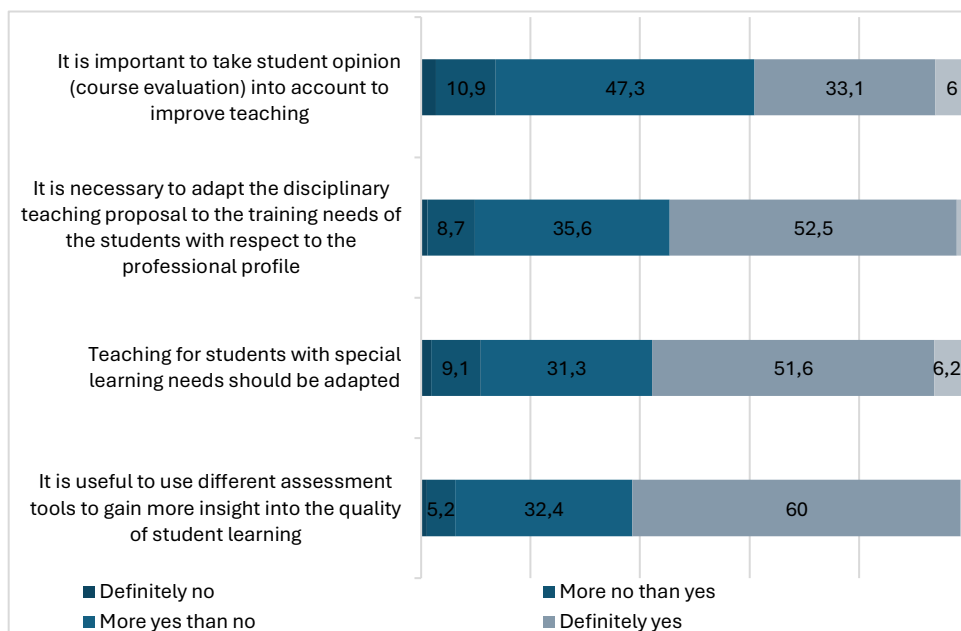
assessment methodologies; focus on teaching; focus on students' needs): survey of teachers' opinions on some relevant aspects of the teaching-learning process (no. questions – 16).

- section 4 – support and training needs (sub-sections: reflection and improvement): survey to detect support needs and sound out the willingness of teachers to undertake improvement actions (no. questions – 6).
- section 5 – knowledge of educational services offered by the university: the final section looked into the level of knowledge of support services offered by the university and participation in proposed training activities (no. questions – 3).

In particular, we will analyze some aspects highlighted by the survey that are considered relevant to teachers' teaching practices.

The results of section 2 'opinion of teachers', focus on the fourth sub-category, students' needs (Tab. 2.) and lecturers' views about this topic. More than half of the respondents agree (60%=definitely yes) on the importance of taking into consideration "students' opinions (course evaluation) to improve teaching"; 52.5% (definitely yes) agree on the "need to adapt didactic proposals to students' needs concerning their post-course profile"; 51.6% (definitely yes) consider it "appropriate to adapt didactics for students to specific learning needs". Finally, a lower 33.1% of the sample gave a "definitely yes" score about the statement "it is useful to make more use of assessment tools to acquire more information on the quality of student learning".

Tab. 2. The opinions of lecturers on issues related to students' needs. Source: (T&LC, going to press)



Area number 5 concerns teachers' opinions about their training needs. This area, called *support and training needs*, is key to identifying areas where teachers feel they need additional support or training. This section of the questionnaire helps to

create a targeted professional development plan, and provides the support needed to address specific challenges that teachers may encounter in their professional practice. Increasingly high percentage values are found in the intermediate answers ‘more no than yes’ and ‘more yes than no’, revealing a substantial area of uncertainty concerning teachers’ training needs:

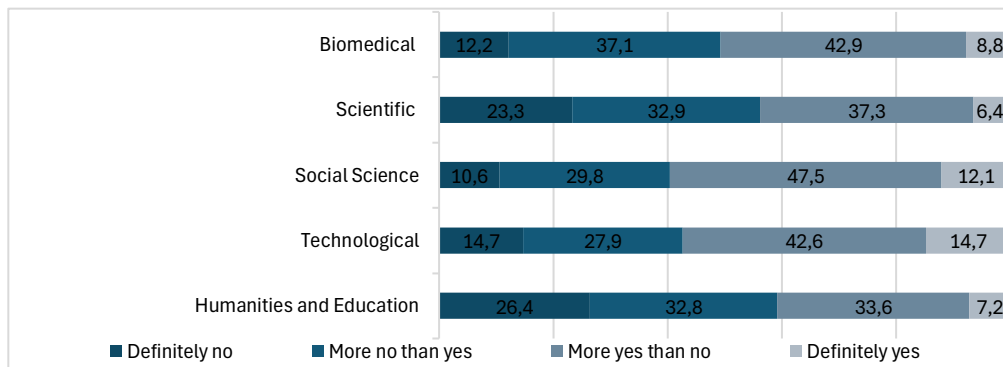
- Sometimes polarized in a positive sense (more yes than no and definitely yes), as regards methodological support to meet the needs of students with specific learning needs (62.2%);
- interest in participating in meetings with colleagues, also from other disciplines, to share ideas on effective teaching methods (61.4%)
- interest in participating in in-depth seminars on teaching topics (in this case a minimal difference emerges (50.5%).

Other times polarized in a negative sense (more no than yes, and definitely no), as regards

- the need to have didactic experts at one’s disposal for the design of teaching courses (68.1%)
- methodological support for didactics oriented towards the development of work-oriented transversal skills (62.1%)
- methodological support for learning assessment tools (62%).

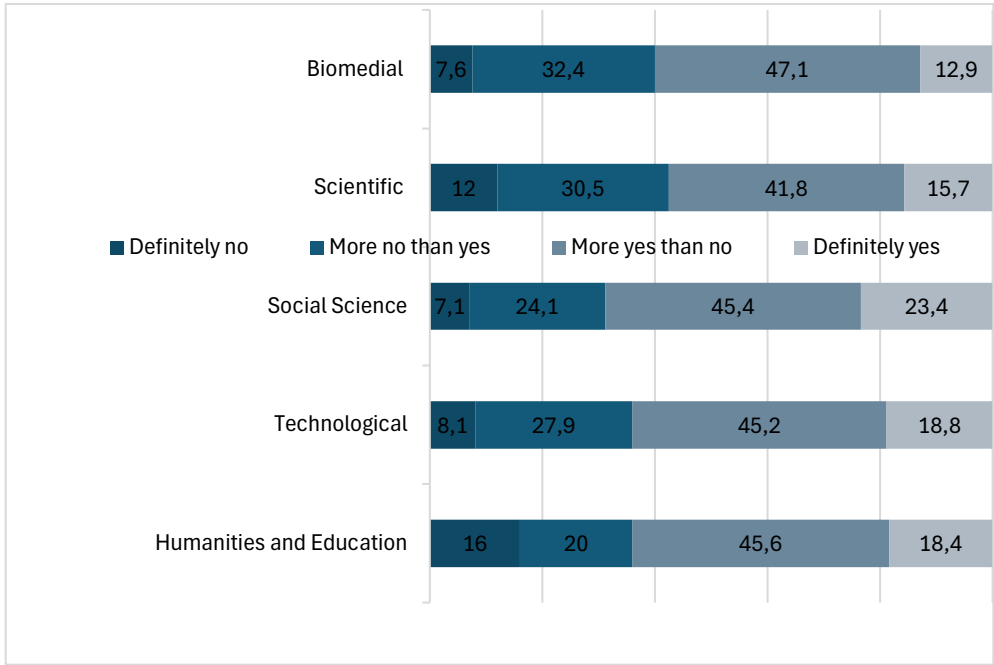
In light of survey results, further profiling was investigated according to the disciplinary area of respondents. There were statistically significant differences (Chi-Square test) ($p < .05$) between the subgroups of survey participants, specifically with regard to the variable “disciplinary area”. As we can see from the data, analyzing single answers and breaking down by subject area, differences can be found that highlight the need to construct targeted training actions for the different profiles of teaching staff. The tables below show the frequency distribution with respect to the subject area, for the items “*I would be interested in participating in in-depth seminars on educational topics*” and “*I feel the need for methodological support to prepare appropriate tools for learning assessment*”.

Tab. 3. I would be interested in participating in in-depth seminars on educational topics¹.¹ Source: (T&LC, going to press).



¹ Single item processing. Chi-square test $p < .001$. The table presents the frequency distribution by Area. Circled in red are the answers with an adjusted standardized residual value >2 , thus having a greater impact on overall results.

Tab. 4. I feel the need for methodological support to prepare appropriate tools for learning assessment.²
 Source: (T&LC, 2023).



The results highlight a significant willingness to address students’ needs, coupled with a clear demand for greater support and professional development for educators. Innovative pedagogical approaches must be adopted to foster active and engaged learning. Diverse teaching techniques can transform the learning process, making it more interactive and dynamic. Moreover, fostering collaborative environments – where students engage in teamwork on projects and problem-solving activities – effectively prepares them for real-world challenges. This practice underscores the importance of lifelong learning, for students and academic staff alike, highlighting the need for continuous professional growth. Educational institutions must embrace flexible and adaptive strategies to personalize learning pathways, catering to the diverse needs of their stakeholders. Such an approach not only supports personal and professional development but also enhances the overall quality of the university ecosystem. By promoting active citizenship and aligning with universities’ Third Mission, these efforts prepare students to become professionals that can make a meaningful contribution to their communities and to society at large.

STUDENT VOICE AND INVOLVEMENT

The second line of our research focuses on recognizing the critical importance of student perspectives as a foundational goal in improving the quality of teaching. Aligned with the principles of student-faculty partnership (Cook-Sather, Boville,

² Single item processing. Chi-square test $p < .011$. The tab presents the frequency distribution by Area. Circled in red are the answers with an adjusted standardized residual value > 2 , thus having a greater impact on overall results.

Felten, 2014), the T&LC program at the University of Florence emphasizes the creation of an environment where students act as creators, collaborators, agents of change, and even trainers. This initiative establishes a collaborative framework in which students work alongside faculty members, co-constructing and designing learning spaces while addressing critical topics, such as their representative role, institutional functions, active citizenship, and the broader university context (Cook-Sather, Alison, 2014). The program includes a participatory research approach that facilitates this partnership through workshops, mentoring sessions, and collaborative activities. Participants of a workgroup led by T&LC analyze and develop targeted educational strategies, fostering a culture of shared responsibility. Focus groups within the student working group identified specific educational needs, including:

- Establishing spaces for listening to students' needs.
- Enhancing connections and communication with the faculty.
- Providing clear information about students' rights and responsibilities.
- Developing effective communication methods, particularly with lecturers.
- Building foundational literacy on active citizenship, the university structure, and navigating the academic environment.

The notion of student-faculty partnership (Cook-Sather, Boville, Felten, 2014), as in all participatory co-design processes, is inherently complex and transformative. It requires continuous commitment and a willingness to change on the part of all involved, laying the foundations for a more inclusive and participatory higher education (Cook-Sather, Boville, Felten, 2014). The idea of setting up a working group with students arose from the need to train students in the sphere of organizational culture and provide them with the tools they need to best experience the university context, reinforcing the principle of the educational community and promoting agency.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The two proposed research lines emphasize the importance of continuous monitoring between faculty opinions on teaching practices and the views of students, the true protagonists of the university setting. The T&LC serves as a space for reflection on implemented practices and the development of training pathways based on the analysis of needs of both faculty and students. Supporting their perspectives also means ensuring that “individuals are not only capable of understanding the complex dynamic relationships characterizing the environment through their experiences, but also able to perceive themselves as a structurally connected element in a continuous process of action and transformation: not just as a component of the environment, but dynamically related to it” (Del Gobbo, 2022, p. 115).

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