

# Between public service and market: Portraying the bifront university in a platformized world

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## Abstract

This paper contributes to the international debate on the changes affecting recruitment and orientation processes toward higher education. Based on qualitative research involving 19 Italian public universities, the study analyses the transformations in communication, recruitment and orientation activities within platformization and increasing institutional competition. Drawing on Bourdieusian conceptual categories, the analysis highlights how platformization and the changes triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic have opened new opportunities, which universities have interpreted and leveraged in diverse ways according to the evolving nature of the Italian university field as a space of material and symbolic differences. The primary outcome of these transformations is the reinforcement and crystallization of preexisting social and territorial inequalities, which is a historical characteristic of the Italian university system.

## KEYWORDS

higher education, orientation and guidance, platformization, social and territorial inequalities

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## Key insights

### What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

The paper examines how university recruitment and orientation are reshaped by competition and platformisation, blurring guidance and marketing and transforming public universities' missions.

### What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Drawing on Bourdieusian concepts, the study shows that platformisation reinforces existing social and territorial inequalities, producing a 'bifront' university where service-oriented guidance coexists and intertwines with market-driven branding.

## INTRODUCTION

Drawing on qualitative and documentary research focused on the segment of 19 'medium-large-scale' Italian public universities (with student bodies ranging from 20,000 to 40,000 students), this article aims to contribute to the international debate on the changes affecting the practices and processes of school-to-university recruitment and orientation (Pitzalis & van Zanten, 2017) in the light of the converging transformations within university systems and technological and digital changes. Specifically, the article analyses how universities are modifying their recruitment practices to respond to the imperatives arising from educational policies and internal and external governance models, which, in the context of globalization, have turned national and international universities into arenas of visibility and competition (Austin & Jones, 2015; Cantwell & Kauppinen, 2014; Kwiek, 2018).

This article will focus, altogether, on the organizational and institutional changes, as well as the contradictions, induced by the competition for attracting students and the impact of platformization on society and organizations (Poell et al., 2019; van Dijck et al., 2018).

In the Italian educational system, secondary education is divided into three main branches: liceums, technical schools and vocational schools, giving students very different skills and competencies. Nevertheless, upon graduation, students have the autonomy to select the tertiary institution and the field of study in which they wish to enrol. Effective recruitment strategies should guide young people in making informed decisions about their educational paths, aligning their choices with their personal interests and future ambitions. However, the high dropout rates during the first year of university and the low percentage of graduates in Italy have, over the past 20 years, increased emphasis on the importance of orientation provided by schools and universities.

In a comparative perspective, Italy displays structurally low levels of participation in and completion of higher education. According to OECD and ISTAT data, only around 20% of the adult population aged 25–64 holds a tertiary degree, compared with over 40% across the OECD and more than one-third in the EU. Among young adults aged 30–34, tertiary attainment remains below 30%, compared with more than 40% in the EU (EUROSTAT, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c; ISTAT, 2022; OECD, 2022). These patterns coexist with relatively high upper-secondary completion rates, suggesting that structural difficulties in the transition to, and persistence within, higher education may be at play, rather than barriers to access alone (see Table A1).

These aggregate patterns provide the structural backdrop against which recent reforms and institutional responses must be understood. They should also be situated within broader education policy trends that have reshaped the Italian university system over the past two decades. National reforms inspired by the Bologna Process (1999) and by principles of New Public Management (NPM) have strengthened institutional autonomy while simultaneously intensifying evaluation, accountability and competition for resources and students (Capano et al., 2017). At the same time, demographic decline and the increasing reliance on digital platforms have heightened pressures on universities to actively manage visibility, recruitment and student flows. Taken together, these developments constitute the structural conditions under which universities reconfigure their recruitment and orientation practices.

While these transformations are primarily driven by national-level policies—such as performance-based funding mechanisms, evaluation systems and the implementation of the Bologna Process—their effects are mediated at the local level. Universities retain significant room for manoeuvre in interpreting and implementing national regulations, depending on their governance arrangements, territorial positioning and relationships with local schools and other stakeholders. This combination of centralized policy frameworks and localized institutional responses contributes to the differentiated recruitment and orientation strategies observed across the Italian university field.

Guidance for students transitioning from secondary school to university has become institutionalized in Italian universities over the past 20 years, gaining increasing importance, mainly due to national reforms following the Lisbon strategy (2000) and the European policy framework on lifelong learning that followed (Vaira, 2011).

This emphasis on learning and guidance and on their link has to be read under the institutional change that has interested the Italian university system, which has been reframed by the NPM. As in other countries (Deem et al., 2007; Meek & Wood, 1998), these reforms have transformed the national university system into a competitive arena, both for securing state resources (based on evaluation criteria) and for attracting students (Musselin, 2018; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

In this article, we aim to show how this transformation has influenced universities' approaches in balancing their goals by appealing to a broader segment of potential students/customers, while at the same time fulfilling their responsibility to provide practical guidance for incoming students. Following De Feo and Pitzalis (2017), we hypothesize that the imperatives of evaluation and competition have reshaped Italian recruitment and orientation activities, leading to a decline of the 'service logic' in favour of a 'market logic'. The former refers to the institutional goal of equality and covering students' interests and needs (we can call it the student-centred logic). This conception of recruitment aligns with a vision of the university as an institution that supports students as individuals and citizens, fostering their development and social integration.

On the other hand, market logic refers to mechanisms through which universities adopt a business-like approach, treating students as customers to whom they sell a product or offer a brand (the market-centred logic). In this case, universities adopt recruitment strategies that follow the model of promotional campaigns, using advertising and marketing logics (Lehner et al., 2023; Pitzalis, 2012; van Zanten, 2019; van Zanten & Legavre, 2014). From our perspective, these two logics are conflicting, even though they coexist within the same organization, creating internal oppositions, inconsistencies and inefficiencies. In this context, we hypothesize that public universities are forced to adopt a bifront approach, responding simultaneously to institutional imperatives of student inclusion and empowerment (orientation and guidance) and to the competitive and economic imperatives imposed by market logic and NPM (recruitment). However, these logics often overlap in practice, producing hybrid recruitment and orientation strategies rather than clear-cut

opposition. This hybridity can generate both tensions and innovative adaptations within universities.

Recruitment activities for students typically take three forms: formative recruitment, informational recruitment and marketing (Calidoni & Cataldi, 2016; Cangiano, 2025), targeting either families and students or high schools (Vaira, 2011). Against this background, the article examines how Italian public universities, differently positioned within the national academic field, reconfigure their recruitment practices along three analytically distinct yet empirically overlapping dimensions—formative guidance, informational orientation and market-oriented promotion—under conditions of increasing competition and platformization of society.

The article investigates how Italian universities combine, confuse or overlap these three dimensions in their recruitment practices, with particular attention to the role of digital technologies and the related platformization process (UNESCO, 2021; van Dijck et al., 2018) in shifting recruitment from being an orientation service for students to a market device.

The analysis considers, on the one hand, the structure of the Italian university field as a space of material and symbolic differences (Bourdieu, 1994; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and, on the other, the transformative dynamics occurring within it. Furthermore, the study aims to empirically investigate how the platformization of higher education, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, contributes to reshaping recruitment practices and transforming the Italian academic field and its structure, exacerbating social imbalances and territorial inequalities that have historically characterized the country (Columbu et al., 2021; Pitzalis & Porcu, 2015).

Empirically, the study draws on 32 in-depth interviews (15 with communication managers and 17 orientation officers) and content analysis of institutional websites and social media channels of 19 universities.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Recruiting students: The evolution of higher education market

To grasp the new political economy of universities and the transformative processes affecting Western education systems, it is crucial to analyse higher education both as a field and as a market. As a field, it constitutes an institutionalized social space with relative autonomy, where public and private actors compete to define the 'rules of the game' and to control the main stakes in pursuit of their interests. In this perspective, the field is understood in relational rather than material terms (Bourdieu, 1984; Pitzalis, 2010; Rawolle & Lingard, 2008).

At the same time, higher education functions as a market, operating as a globalized space of national and international competition (de Saint-Martin, 2008; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), where public interests, commercial purposes and private interests converge (De Feo & Pitzalis, 2017; Levin, 2006). This model was implemented first by the Education Reform Act of 1988 in England and Wales, since a vast literature has increasingly analysed this transformation using market (Ball, 2003; Brown, 2010) and quasi-market frameworks (Agasisti & Catalano, 2006; Enders et al., 2014).

Considering higher education as both a field and a market requires examining the emergence of a new discursive, institutional and relational order that shapes the academic world. This transformation does not occur in a vacuum but results from long-term dynamics reshaping the role and hierarchy of individual and collective actors in educational processes. On an institutional level, universities have been significantly influenced by NPM principles, replacing traditional government structures with governance models (Lapsley, 2003). This shift primarily denotes the gradual consolidation of prescriptive and performance-oriented

logic in educational decision-making (McNay, 1995). A key consequence of these processes has been transforming public universities into corporate-like structures, where institutional tasks intersect with commercial objectives (Charle & Soulié, 2015).

The principle of accountability—the necessity of justifying actions and outcomes not only internally but also to external actors (Epstein, 1993)—has become the foundation of policy-making in higher education. This has led to:

- A shift from a centralized state to an evaluative state, which supervises universities' abilities to attract resources and funding while monitoring their implemented processes and outputs (Lumino et al., 2017).
- The global expansion of agencies producing university rankings and ratings further fuels competition among institutions (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012; Gonzales & Núñez, 2021; Pusser & Marginson, 2013).

In conclusion, as emphasized by multiple scholars (De Feo & Pitzalis, 2017, 2018; van Zanten & Legavre, 2014), recruitment activities—such as student fairs, open days and online promotional events—serve to perpetuate symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1997) within academic institutions. These initiatives do not merely function as marketing strategies to attract students and funding; they also reshape the representation of universities and their institutional missions, often using targeted communication and strategic management (Lovari et al., 2015).

## The Italian university field in the European scenario

Since the late 1990s, the issue of recruiting students has gained prominence in the European context. According to the recommendations of the European Union, lifelong learning and lifelong guidance have become indispensable for adapting to a mutable, flexible, knowledge-based economic system (Ball, 2003).

Schools and universities—tasked with enhancing young people's ability to choose their educational and professional destiny effectively (UNESCO, 2005)—have thus undergone profound reform processes aimed at achieving four main objectives: increasing the number of graduates, fostering student mobility, pursuing 'excellence' and internal diversification of academic institutions and participating in a globalized higher education market. In other words, European universities have had to respond to the demands of stakeholders, local territories, the labour market and the broader market economy (Colarusso & Giancola, 2020; Moscati et al., 2010; Rostan, 2019).

Like other countries, Italy has initiated a restructuring of its university system inspired by the NPM paradigm, effectively replicating the English model (Capano et al., 2017; Colombo & Salmieri, 2022). This restructuring has been articulated into four steps.

- Implementing the Bologna Process has aligned the structure of study programmes and their evaluation criteria with European standards and produced a more significant differentiation and variability in educational offerings.
- The university market has been opened by developing a private higher education sector, represented by prevalent online colleges seeking to compete with the traditional university system.
- The evaluation principle became central in the funding allocation as universities began to be funded based on their performance.
- The proliferation of university ratings is designed to recruit interested audiences and attract media visibility (Lumino & Gambardella, 2020). These ratings are intended to guide

students' choices but also to convey the idea of choice as a necessity and as a rational investment concerning the reputation of universities, often obtained through variables that may be contradictory with the traditional missions of universities (Borrelli, 2015; Turri, 2014).

The concatenation of organizational, social and institutional transformation processes reviewed here has turned the Italian university into a sort of education market where marketing and communication have assumed a strategic role, often hybridizing or overlapping with other functions such as students' recruitment (Lovari et al., 2015). Regarding recruitment practices specifically, Italian literature on school transitions (Calidoni & Cataldi, 2016; Romito, 2016) has shown that, despite the ideological promises of lifelong guidance, most of the outgoing orientation activities carried out by high schools consist of gathering information (via websites, fairs, brochures, open days and welcome sessions) about the educational offerings of universities. In this sense, orientation constitutes a symbolic effort to produce and guarantee the value of services offered by academic institutions, with the primary intent of shaping the perceptual frameworks of students and their families (De Feo & Pitzalis, 2018; Donnelly, 2015; Molesworth et al., 2010; van Zanten & Legavre, 2014).

At the university level, it is worth highlighting that the structural characteristic of the Italian academic field is a constant flow of student mobility from the South to the North of the country (Columbu et al., 2021; Santelli et al., 2022). Following a Bourdieusian perspective, we consider that Southern regions' middle and upper classes invest their economic capital to secure symbolic and financial advantages for their children (Pitzalis & Porcu, 2015). The imbalance in regional student mobility in Italy is translated into the different recruitment strategies adopted by Northern and Southern universities. De Feo and Pitzalis (2017) demonstrate that while the majority of student fairs take place in Southern Italy, they predominantly serve the interests of Northern universities. Private and commercial institutions from the North strategically participate in these events to expand their student base, whereas Southern universities largely engage in defensive strategies aimed at retaining their regional catchment. This asymmetry reflects broader patterns of economic, cultural and symbolic dominance exercised by Northern regions within the Italian higher education field.

## The platformization of higher education

The advent of digital platforms has amplified these processes, transforming numerous university services under the impetus of both Italian and European regulations. With Web 2.0 and social media, the relational interface of universities has further evolved: their visibility now extends across digital platforms such as social media, blogs, instant messaging tools and applications. These channels provide new ways for university audiences to access information and have stimulated the development of digital marketing techniques and social media communication practices targeting prospective students and their families (Houssemand & Loarer, 2023; Lovari et al., 2015).

In recent years, scholars have increasingly adopted the concept of platformization to describe the processes and effects of digital platforms on society and on both public and private organizations (Helmond, 2015; Sorice, 2020; van Dijck et al., 2018). Platformization is defined as 'the penetration of infrastructures, economic processes, and governmental frameworks of platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life' (van Dijck et al., 2019, pp. 5–6). Platforms are thus technically embedded into the fabric of society, reshaping economic dynamics and affecting entire sectors such as media, culture, urban transportation, healthcare, communication and education (Ducci & Lovari, 2021; Locatelli & Lovari, 2021; Nieborg & Poell, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018). Initially welcomed within techno-enthusiastic

narratives, the impact of platforms has since been critically examined, particularly with respect to algorithmic opacity and the neoliberal logic of digital capitalism (Srnicsek, 2017). van Dijck (2020), for instance, warns that platformization poses risks for the public sector, as common goods like health and education risk being reframed as privatized services within ecosystems governed by commercial values, private infrastructures and market logics.

In the field of education, scholars have shown how digital platforms are reshaping both public and private systems (Kerssens & van Dijck, 2021; Perrotta et al., 2021; Williamson, 2017; Zayed, 2024), emphasizing processes of datafication and the dominant role of major American tech companies, whose platforms now mediate the relationship between institutions, students and society. UNESCO (2021) report similarly stresses the entry of digital platforms into education as a rapidly expanding business sector. The report highlights their influence in redefining curricula and pedagogical forms, with profound consequences for fragile and dynamic cultural contexts, while also raising concerns over data management and the ethical challenges facing increasingly platformized institutions. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated these trends, acting as a catalyst for the privatization of services, infrastructures and communication in education (Williamson et al., 2020).

Despite this growing literature, limited attention has been devoted to one crucial domain: university recruitment. In the Italian case, studies reveal that digital devices in recruitment are not neutral tools but embody symbolic and political dimensions, materializing policy priorities (De Feo et al., 2019). They also shape teachers' professional cultures and education governance (Romito et al., 2020). Recruitment activities in Italian universities, initially disrupted during the pandemic's acute phase, were soon reorganized through platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Webex and Google Meet. Subsequently, many institutions institutionalized these tools as cost-saving interfaces with schools and prospective students. While such digitalization created new opportunities during the crisis, it also underscored the structural challenges facing recruitment and, more broadly, the university field, increasingly marked by the hybridization of recruitment, communication and marketing practices.

The following section outlines the methodology adopted to empirically address these issues.

## METHODOLOGY

This study is part of a broader research project funded by the Ministry of Higher Education, aimed at investigating the communicative resilience of Italian universities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and identifying the measures implemented in crisis and emergency communication. Specifically, the research focused on universities with a size between 20,000 and 40,000 students, which, in the Italian system, are classified as 'large universities'. In total, the sample included 19 public universities (9 are in the North, 3 in the Centre and 7 in the South); because mega-universities like Sapienza (Rome) follow different dynamics, they are not considered here.

One of the project activities was related to investigating the impact of the pandemic on recruitment activities and their relationship with communication and orientation functions. This empirical phase of the research was conducted through two interconnected steps. The first involved a desk analysis of the content of universities' recruitment activities and their promotion through websites and official social media channels (when available). The second step included 32 in-depth interviews conducted remotely between November 2021 and March 2022 with communication managers and orientation officers.

The participant recruitment process followed a multi-phase approach. Initially, a list of potential participants was compiled based on professional roles and communications and recruitment offices, which were publicly available on university websites. Subsequently, email

invitations to participate in the study were sent. Without responses, follow-up messages and/or phone calls were made to the offices to identify appropriate interview interlocutors. Before conducting the interviews, informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring respondent anonymity. In total, 42 participants were involved: five rector delegates for recruitment, two rector delegates for communication and 35 technical-administrative staff members. Interviewees hold intermediary positions between strategic decision-making and operational implementation, roles that shape both their discourses and their scope for action. The interview guide was structured around questions addressing: (a) representations of students and educational choice; (b) organizational logics of recruitment and orientation; and (c) uses of digital platforms.

The use of in-depth interviews (Johnson, 2001) provided flexibility, enabling interviewers to follow respondents' narratives and capture the specific features of recruitment and communication activities within individual universities and their organizational structures. All interviews were manually transcribed by a researcher and then jointly analysed by the study's authors using an inductive approach. Through thematic analysis, the codes were discussed, refined and grouped into macro-categories to identify coherent patterns in relation to the research questions. The interviews were complemented by an analysis of universities' websites and social media channels, treated as organizational artefacts reflecting recruitment strategies.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The paradox of student recruitment

This section explores the paradox of the university student recruitment process in Italy, which is divided into two distinct goals. On one side, it is considered a guidance process aimed at supporting students in their choice and orientation. On the other, it serves as a self-promotional and strategic positioning leverage for universities to attract resources. Our hypothesis suggests that the convergence of competition and demographic dynamics may shift the focus of recruitment activities from prioritizing students' empowerment to pursuing organizational goals. In this way, the service-oriented logic may become subordinate to the imperatives of market-driven competition, fostered by platformization processes.

In analysing empirical data, our inquiry was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. How do the orientation strategies of Italian public universities vary based on their relative position within the national academic field (which structure is determined by symbolical, geographical and economical distances and positions) and the specific constraints they face?

RQ2. How does the process of platformization influence Italian university strategies for communication, student orientation and enrollment?

The analysis allowed us to identify four key dimensions that contribute to constructing a typology of universities, focusing on how institutions design and implement their activities to attract and enrol students. The typology is built up considering the following questions and related dimensions (see [Table 1](#)).

- What image is offered of the academic path by the orientation staff? (Academic path as a personal investment or a component of the student's biographical project).

TABLE 1 Typology of universities from a recruitment perspective.

Clusters (ideal types)	The purpose of digital platforms in orientation process	Conceptualization of the academic path by the orientation staff	Criteria and rules that guide the orientation activity	Communication style in online orientation activity
<i>Dominated Universities</i>	To gain visibility	Personal investment	Bureaucratic criteria and rules	Informative, descriptive, documentary
<i>Dominating Universities</i>	To strengthen quantitatively and qualitatively the incoming student population	Component of one's biographical project	Managerial criteria and rules	Reassuring, gratifying, positive

- How does the university structure its orientation activity? (Orientation activity guided by bureaucratic or managerial rules and criteria).
- What is the purpose of using digital platforms in orientation activity? (Digital platforms used to gain visibility or to shape and refine the incoming student population).
- What communication strategies are adopted in the orientation activity carried out through the university official digital channel? (The communication strategy follows an informative-descriptive-documentary style or a reassuring-gratifying-positive style, as introduced by Gadotti & Bernocchi, 2010).

As Table 1 illustrates, the intersection of these dimensions has led to the identification of two clusters of universities, conceptualized as 'ideal types' (Weber, 1949): *Dominated Universities* and *Dominating Universities*. The two clusters are employed as analytical tools to capture differentiated positions within the Italian academic field, rather than as exhaustive empirical categories.

In the following sections, these clusters will be analysed through three key aspects:

- The balancing of formative, informational and marketing strategies in student recruitment and orientation practices.
- Ways of using digital platforms for communication, recruitment and orientation activities.
- The impact of structural constraints and available resources on institutional communication, recruitment and orientation strategies.

The differentiation between these two clusters becomes particularly evident in their responses to the platformization process. Their reactions are shaped by their positioning within the national academic hierarchy and by variations in the amount and composition of their global capital—whether economic, social, cultural or symbolic. While *Dominated Universities* may struggle to assert their presence in a competitive higher education landscape, *Dominating Universities* leverage their resources and prestige to reinforce their influence.

### The cluster of *Dominated Universities*

In our definition, *Dominated Universities* are higher education institutions located in regions with lower economic development, where financial constraints, limited infrastructure and weaker institutional networks place them in a subordinate position relative to more powerful

public universities. These institutions often operate under the strong influence of wealthier universities, government policies or private entities, which can limit their autonomy in academic decision-making, resource allocation and research opportunities. As a result, they face structural challenges in competing on equal terms within the global higher education landscape. Platformization has fundamentally transformed practices and strategies related to university recruitment, amplifying the competitive pressures on institutions to attract and retain students. This transformation is particularly significant for *Dominated Universities*, which operate with limited economic and symbolic capital and are more marginal in the national academic arena. Thus, how do these institutions respond to the platformization of higher education? The data collected shows that the shift to digital platforms has enabled *Dominated Universities* to expand their reach to new stakeholders, particularly at the national level, while maintaining a predominantly informational approach.

This cluster includes institutions where activities related to students' recruitment are primarily informational and illustrative, focusing on the description of the university organization, course offerings and student services. *Dominated Universities* are mainly located in Central and Southern Italy. In these institutions, student admission activities—while not fully adopting marketing or commercial promotion strategies—are aimed primarily at increasing visibility and overcoming the marginality historically associated with their position in the national academic field (De Feo & Pitzalis, 2018).

The strategy adopted couples traditional guidance activities, such as the open days and recruitment fairs, with emerging digital communication practices. In both cases, the main goal is to gain broader visibility in the students' choice/attention:

As a university, we aim... to understand whether attending events in Rome brings us more enrollments from that area. Returning for the third or fourth time, students who pass by now say ... 'Oh yes, the university X [name]!' In the first year, they would ask, 'Who are you? Is that a private university?' That does not happen anymore; they recognize our name. [...] With online events we do more or less the same thing, we try to make ourselves known, we try to target a national audience

(male, deputy head of student activities, South).

Whether, in the excerpt above, the interviewee points out the work that needs to be done in presence and online to sort the name of his university from the dark, increasing the visibility, other respondents underline the centrality of digital platforms in recruitment processes. As a rector's delegate for recruitment explains, the main problem is expanding the area of student recruitment beyond regional boundaries:

Territorially, we have a more natural base, students who naturally consider enrolling with us. [...] However, we also have target regions we actively pursue. Specific courses have their natural audience, and we know which regions are more likely to send students our way. For those areas, we focus our attention. With its shift to fully online recruitment, the pandemic made it easier to target a national audience for events

(male, rector's delegate for recruitment, Centre).

From the interviews, it emerges that *Dominated Universities* conceive students' educational paths as a form of personal investment, as a problem that students have inevitably have to face. The message conveyed in the communication and orientation activities is that students must make a choice and do so thoughtfully. These universities adopt a bureaucratic approach (Weber, 1978) to their institutional operations, with admission

activities becoming a routinized task. Consequently, the language used on their websites and social media channels tends to be descriptive and documentary, reflecting the rhetoric of increasing diversification and complexity in higher education systems (Olivier et al., 2018), as well as the need to be informative and precise for enhancing students' choices.

*Dominated Universities* have taken advantage of the platformization process to extend their reach and increase their visibility beyond regional borders. However, their efforts remain constrained by structural inequalities in the Italian academic field (Cangiano, 2025; Pitzalis, 2012), such as reduced economic and symbolic capital, which hinder their ability to fully compete with better-resourced institutions in attracting students. In this context, these institutions have responded reactively to the platformization of higher education, adapting under external pressures rather than through proactive strategic planning.

Digital platforms have contributed to confusion and overlap between orientation and communication functions, leading to fragmented strategies that struggle to articulate a cohesive institutional identity. As one rector's delegate for communication notes:

The other important communication activity we did was related to orientation. [...] We have supported all the orientation activities with a strategic communication activity and worked with the orientation office to rearrange and strengthen all the planned activities. I mean that orientation has also been redefined thanks to our work

(male, rector's delegate for communication, South).

This quote illustrates how platformization has reshaped internal university structures, leading to a redefinition of orientation under the influence of communication strategies. It also confirms the institutional ambiguity in task allocation and the challenge of clearly distinguishing between outreach, guidance and branding efforts.

Similarly, another delegate reflects on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the necessity—but also the emergency nature—of integration between departments:

Relations with the guidance office intensified especially in the year of the Covid-19 pandemic. We had to reorganize all orientation activities with the help of digital tools. In this phase the communication staff and the orientation staff had to work closely together and share objectives and their views

(female, rector's delegate for communication, South).

Taken together, the interview excerpts highlight that *Dominated Universities'* engagement with platformization remains constrained, fragmented and largely reactive: shaped as much by external constraints as by internal strategies.

## The cluster of *Dominating Universities*

*Dominating Universities*, located mainly in Northern and Central Italy, use their economic and symbolic capital to attract students and consolidate their leading position. Regarding student recruitment, *Dominating Universities* employ comprehensive marketing strategies designed not only to attract students but also to commercialize their academic offerings and solidify their institutional brand in the higher education market. These universities actively promote their economic advantages upon graduation, high employability rates and strategic geographical location as key assets for attracting prospective students.

As highlighted in the following interview excerpt, the economic environment surrounding these universities plays a fundamental role in their online recruitment strategies:

Let me add this. Given our entrepreneurial and productive environment, our strength lies in a highly economically advantageous area with historic and vital industries. Recently, we have noticed a trend where students complete their undergraduate degrees at home, even in South or Central Italy, and then come here for their master's. They hope to enter the job market afterwards easily, and they do because our graduates find jobs with minimal difficulty. That's one of our strengths, and we always tell prospective students this during recruitment

(female, head of study recruitment, career placement, and university office, North).

This quote exemplifies how *Dominating Universities* capitalize on their geographical advantages and professional networks to attract students, often highlighting the economic success of their alumni as a key selling point.

Some universities, constrained by urban limits or competition, focus on attracting fewer but higher-quality students aligned with their institutional identity. This strategy is evident in an interview with a rector's delegate for recruitment at a Northern university located in a rich metropolitan area known for its urban and territorial vulnerabilities:

We've worked a lot in recent years to make our university known in many areas of the country. Our goal wasn't so much to increase enrollment numbers because, as you know, [university name] is a medium-sized university in a fragile city that can't provide infrastructure to host many more students than we already have. So, our focus isn't on significant growth in that sense. We want well-educated and conscious students who come to us with a clear understanding and a defined life project

(female, rector's delegate for recruitment, North).

They strengthened their dominance by swiftly adopting platform-based recruitment. The increasing reliance on digital tools, accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, has enabled them to enhance their competitiveness and, when possible, expand their student base. Within this context, recruitment shifts from a student-centred service to a strategic mechanism for university branding and market positioning (Lehner et al., 2023).

In orientation activities, *Dominating Universities* conceptualize the academic path as a fundamental component of an individual's biographical project. The image conveyed is that of a student 'under construction', tasked with making decisions that significantly influence their present and future opportunities in the job market. In these institutions, the criteria and rules that guide orientation activities are characterized by a hybrid approach that, depending on institutional needs, takes on more managerial or more elitist traits (Darmon, 2013), treating recruitment as an instrument of distinction (Bourdieu, 1989).

The communication style adopted reflects this hybrid approach, which appears reassuring, gratifying and positive in highlighting the quality of the institution's offerings. In this way, digital platforms become new channels through which colleges in a dominant position can strengthen their visibility and increase their reputation.

The platformization of education has enabled *Dominating Universities* to innovate their recruitment practices, emphasizing their positioning and exclusivity. In fact, these institutions have responded proactively to platformization and seized the opportunity to expand their competitive advantage and compete more effectively with private and online universities. However, this market-driven approach raises different concerns. First, marketing strategies

may overshadow academic values, producing an over-commercialization of education. Secondly, students are expected to view their education primarily as an economic investment, which may increase pressure on students' choices and expectations (Pitzalis, 2012).

Like *Dominated Universities*, *Dominating Universities* present a significant overlap between the functions of orientation and communication, even in the naming of specific offices. Also in this case, platformization has produced unconscious forms of confusion and overlap between orientation practices, communication and institutional promotion activities:

The communications sector is called the orientation and events communication sector. During the pandemic emergency phase, we completely reorganized orientation. The staff members who usually deal with orientation and communication participate in these activities. Keeping these two functions separate is not useful, also because they have the same goals and the same attention towards students (female, rector's delegate for communication, North).

Evidence shows that guidance functions (within *Dominating Universities*) as an extension of branding and commercialization. By leveraging economic prosperity, industry connections and digital marketing, these institutions position themselves as leading academic brands rather than just educational providers (Austin & Jones, 2015).

## CONCLUSIONS

Our data identified two ideal types—*Dominated* and *Dominating Universities*—showing how platformization is interpreted differently within the unequal Italian higher education field. At the same time, this study presents some limitations. The study focused on large public universities, excluding smaller, mega and private institutions. Moreover, while the typology between *Dominated* and *Dominating Universities* has heuristic value, it may oversimplify complex, hybrid institutional realities. The lack of student voices in the analysis also limits our understanding of how these strategies are interpreted or experienced by their primary audience. Lastly, while this research focuses exclusively on the Italian case, future work will adopt a comparative perspective to broaden the scope of analysis.

Beyond these limitations, it is essential to highlight that Italian universities have shown a remarkable ability to adapt their recruitment and orientation strategies to external pressures stemming from educational policies (such as increased competition and external evaluation by national and international bodies), technological changes (such as platformization and, more recently, artificial intelligence's impact) and social shifts (such as demographic decline and social expectations).

In this context, a latent opposition emerges between institutional objectives – which are linked to social impact and an ideology of education as a common good or collective interest, corresponding to a service-oriented logic – and organizational goals, which are embedded in a market logic that prioritizes the university's interests as a 'corporate business' (see Table 2). The concept of institutional objectives refers to the roles that the university, as an

TABLE 2 Opposition between institutional goals and organizational goals.

Institutional goals	Organizational goals
Digital inclusion thanks to online platforms	Market expansion through platforms and digital tools
Knowledge as a common good	Branding and reputation strengthening
Student-centred support	Market-driven logic

institution, is expected to fulfil in contemporary society, related to the production and dissemination of knowledge. These objectives evoke the traditional missions of the university, namely academic freedom in research and teaching.

In contrast, organizational objectives refer to goals such as securing resources, strengthening the university's brand and increasing competitiveness within the academic field. In this sense, the aim of attracting students translates into a market-oriented approach, where students are treated as numbers and clients and education is seen as a product to be promoted across different markets.

The process of platformization can be interpreted within this polarity, revealing a contradictory use of digital platforms that shows the bifront nature of public universities in contemporary digitized society. When aligned with institutional objectives, platforms should democratize access to information, knowledge and guidance services, enabling students from disadvantaged areas to access educational resources. However, when used solely for organizational purposes, digital platforms are primarily exploited to increase enrollments and financial revenues, often targeting wealthier families or international students who can afford higher tuition fees. This process can be connected to the idea of the MacDonaldization of the university (Lapsley, 2003) and is soaked in the principles of platform capitalism (Gorwa, 2019; Srnicek, 2017), which are internalized, often unconsciously and uncritically.

Another key opposition concerns the meaning of content sharing on these online platforms. From an institutional perspective, universities should serve as platforms for knowledge production that benefit society, facilitate the dissemination of research results, promote scientific outreach and foster public engagement initiatives. In contrast, an organization-driven approach prioritizes the visibility and sharing of content that enhances the promotion of the university's brand, such as high rankings, renowned faculty members and Nobel laureates.

However, student-centred support and a market-driven orientation are the most defining oppositions within this polarity. Providing personalized guidance to help students make informed decisions based on their interests and potential is an institutional objective that can also be pursued through the strategic use of digital platforms, one-to-one sessions, personal orientation and empowering workshops. In contrast, using student guidance as a marketing tool can lead to misleading recruitment practices, steering students toward decisions based on institutional priorities or influenced by media-catching strategies often shaped by algorithm-driven mechanisms (van Dijck et al., 2018). These tensions are experienced in diverse ways by public universities operating in different socio-economic contexts.

In conclusion, each university must navigate a delicate balance between adapting to external pressures (such as competition and technological changes) and preserving a public service mission, within a frame of massive heteronomy (Casavecchia et al., 2025). In its ideal form, this mission should be expressed through a commitment to equitable and inclusive educational practices. However, in the Italian context, external pressures have increasingly driven universities to prioritize self-serving efficiency, focusing on institutional survival and expansion. The evidence suggests that universities operate in a hybrid zone where both orientations coexist rather than a rigid opposition between service and market logics. This hybridity can lead to contradictions and tensions, but it also opens space for innovative practices that combine guidance, communication and branding in new ways. So, the primary outcome of higher education platformization seems not only to increase the visibility of universities in digital arenas but also to reinforce preexisting social and territorial inequalities.

Ultimately, the Italian public university emerges as a bifront institution, compelled to reconcile its educational mission toward the common good with organizational strategies increasingly shaped by market logics and digital platform dynamics.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data cannot be made publicly available due to privacy concerns. However, interested researchers may submit a formal request to the corresponding author for access to the empirical materials, provided that any use complies with participant confidentiality requirements.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

All participants in the study provided written informed consent prior to participation. Participation was voluntary, and all data were anonymised to ensure confidentiality. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki for research involving human participants.

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## APPENDIX A

**TABLE A1** Tertiary education attainment and transition indicators (Italy, EU, OECD—approximate values).

Indicator	Italy	EU average	OECD average	Source
Population aged 25–64 with tertiary education (%)	Around 20	Around 33–34	Around 40	ISTAT (2022); OECD (2022)
Population aged 25–34 with tertiary education (%)	Around 20–21	Around 36–38	Around 45–48	OECD (2022)
Young adults aged 30–34 with tertiary education (%)	Around 27	Around 42	–	ISTAT (2022)
Early leavers from education and training (18–24, %)	Around 12–13	Around 9–10	–	ISTAT (2022); EUROSTAT (2023a, 2023b, 2023c)