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# Introduction – Students-Faculty Partnership in Italy: Approaches, Practices, and Perspectives

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## **INTRODUCTION – STUDENTS-FACULTY PARTNERSHIP IN ITALY: APPROACHES, PRACTICES, AND PERSPECTIVES**

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This special issue did not arise because of a theoretical problem. About two years ago, we were working with some colleagues on a research project funded by the Italian Ministry of Education. The focus of this project was to study the conditions useful to promote innovative forms of teaching in our universities. We therefore designed interviews, reports and seminars. Initially, only a few students took part in these initiatives. But, as the research continued, we increasingly found ourselves asking each other why, whilst studying how to improve teaching methods, we were only partially prepared to allow students to take on an active role during our conferences, why we only thought up activities with a specified time for students and their ideas.

Some of these reasons were certainly connected to the feeling of losing power and to not having the tools to handle the informality generated by being in touch with the student community. We therefore learned first of all to ponder our outlook, trying to make this more permeable, flexible and comprehensive. This is where the possibility of changing the points of view with which to organise our activities as teachers and researchers opened up. Only then were we able to think about how to change the procedures in our universities. We therefore asked several groups of students to help us understand how to plan new ways of tutoring, collaboration and research together. This is why all the articles in this special issue are the result of a joint effort and address a few common issues:

1. As teachers, how should we encourage a “student voice and a student-faculty partnership” perspective in our teaching methods?
2. Which experiences should inspire us and which theoretical and methodological approaches should constitute our starting points?
3. And, as students, how can our voice be heard more?
4. How is the partnership perspective declined for one group and for the other?

Within the Italian Higher Education context, this special issue has represented an occasion for reflection and inspiration for those teachers and students who took part in preparing these contributions and, long before they were written, for the mixed students-and-faculty working group which took part in the experiences we describe here.

This collection of essays offers, first of all, the opportunity to address the strongly felt need for supplying a clear theoretical and methodological approach to those educational practices that are flourishing in Italy according to a “student voice” approach, oriented towards developing partnerships between students and teachers. In addition, it has allowed using a “student voice” lens to view other initiatives, not necessarily born according to the methodological criteria of this approach, but which soon became established as their supporters.

This is the case of the *Employability and Competences* project by Monica Fedeli, the author of the first essay, called “[Student-Faculty Partnership: the European Framework and the Experience of the Italian Project Employability & Competences](#)” Fedeli opens this special issue by providing a framework for the incentives offered by the agenda for the modernisation of Europe’s Higher Education system and of the actions undertaken within the project of which she

is the national coordinator, explaining the theoretical bases that support all the contributions of this special issue.

Next, to narrow down the field from a European to an Italian perspective, Valentina Grion continues with a reflection on “[Student Voice in Italy: The State of the Art](#)” in order to offer her colleagues of the international scientific community a point of reference for the foundations that the partnership and “student voice” perspective have been able to find in our country.

After these first two introductory essays, our contributions dedicated to “[Opening the Partnership to Students, Faculty and Organisations: The ‘Collaborative Research’ Experience](#)” and “[Transforming the University through the Students’ Voice](#)” intend to present two educational practices, implemented at the University of Padua and at the University of Siena, respectively, which, even though they were not begun according to a student voice approach, are now visibly linked to this orientation.

The two above mentioned contributions anticipate the partnership experience with students, which took place in April 2016 at the University of Padua, during the conference concerning *Transforming Teaching Methods and Assessment in Higher Education*. Our short introductory essay, “[Fostering “Students’ Voice” to Improve Teaching & Learning Methods in Higher Education](#),” passes the baton to the real protagonists of this special issue, the students, who narrate their reflection and discussion experiences in relation to some key issues concerning their student life, in a much more casual style.

Elisa Borgato, Valentina Fazzuoli and Claudia Lazzaro devoted themselves to “[Participation in Academic Life Inside and Outside the Walls](#),” followed by Erika Minnoni, Nicoletta Tomei and Martina Collini, who focused on “[The Value of Feedback in the Learning Process](#).” To conclude this special issue, Elena Bandiera, Sara Miccichè and Carlo Terzaroli bring their university experience on the subject of “[Listening to the Students’ Voice as a Governance Tool in Higher Education](#).”

We trust that these contributions may be as inspiring to readers as the students-faculty partnership experiences described here were for us, made even more stimulating by the opportunity to narrate these to an international audience.