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# Between Training and Work Experience: the Effectiveness of Post-graduate Internships and Placement Services

Davide Arcidiacono \*

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## 1. The Analytical Framework

The interaction between the educational system and the economic and productive system is the cornerstone of the reform process of the Italian university system which started in 1999. This is a particularly controversial issue in our country as the Italian academy has long been accused of being a self-referential institution, far removed from the needs of the economic and productive system and the labour market, as well as for its poor ability to produce graduates, high drop-out levels and chronic delays in qualifications being obtained<sup>1</sup>. This issue is one of the leitmotifs of the debate regarding the renewal of Italian education and training systems in general. It has led to reorganization designed to favour more open and potentially customizable educational pathways and to integrate classroom learning (learning by absorbing) with job training. The reference model in Europe continues to be the German 'dualistic system', which is very expensive and difficult to replicate in other contexts, but which does permit the creation of cooperative relations and exchanges with the business system in order to provide students with more specialized and suitable skills.<sup>2</sup> The theme of bringing together education systems and

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<sup>1</sup> R. Moscati, M. Vaira, 2008. *L'Università di fronte al cambiamento*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2008. See also R. Moscati, M. Regini, M. Rostan, *Torri d'avorio in frantumi? Dove vanno le università europee*. Il Mulino, Bologna, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> M. Regini, *Modelli di Capitalismo. Le risposte europee alle sfide della globalizzazione*. Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2000.

economic and productive systems was also one of the priorities identified by the European Conference in Bologna in 1999 and features in the growing debate on the employability of graduates in the euro zone. This process began with the reform of course planning, new curricula and a more accurate means of identifying 'learning outcomes' and 'employment and professional results'; at the same time, greater focus was placed on strengthening the role of placement services in each university with internships available both during and after degree courses.<sup>3</sup> In this sense the reform empowered university placement offices which took on a leading role in the job placement of a skilled labour force, above all in local markets facing problems such as over-education and the brain drain phenomena.

This reform meant a significant change in the strategies and functions of the national Academy, inspired by a market logic which considers students, families and businesses as relevant stakeholders in the reorganization and evaluation of teaching and research activities. In this sense, considering Decree 509/99, there was a transition to a 3 + 2 year system (bachelor-master), inspired by the Anglo-Saxon model, with more vocational undergraduate courses designed to increase employability in the labour market. Furthermore, the new rules introduced additional elements of integration between universities and the labour market through a series of measures that help to increase the involvement of employers' organizations in the definition of learning outcomes and in the achievement of these targets (the participation of company representatives in the management bodies of universities, the recognition of credits for vocational skills acquired in the workplace, etc.). This new structure was strengthened by the new Decree 270/04 which came a few years after the previous reform and aimed to rationalize training and avoid its fragmentation. However, the outcomes of this institutional innovation are not being used to their full advantage and many critical issues remain worthy of study.<sup>4</sup> In particular, the value of curricular experience, including in undergraduate courses and postgraduate courses as well as postgraduate internships activated by academic placement services, have never been evaluated in depth, either in terms of the quality of the skills

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<sup>3</sup> M. Regini, *Malata e denigrata. L'Università italiana a confronto con l'Europa*, Donzelli, Rome, 2009

<sup>4</sup> AlmaLaurea. 2012. *Condizione occupazionale dei laureati. XIV Indagine 2011*, Bologna; E. Reyneri, *Sociologia del mercato del lavoro. Vol. I. Il mercato del lavoro tra famiglia e welfare*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2011; M. Estevez-Abe, T. Iversen T., D. Soskice, Social Protection and Formation of Skills: A Reinterpretation of Welfare State, in P.A. Hall, D. Soskice (eds.), *Varieties of Capitalism. The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011, 145-183.

acquired or in terms of graduate employability. It could also be said that the process of university reform, in addition to the reform of employment services, started in 1997 and is still not fully applied effectively in many regions including Sicily. In this new scenario, internships could become a valuable tool in the exchange between the business world and the educational system, playing an important role both in the employability of graduates and, above all, in the construction of graduates as professionals and in finding a job, especially in the local market.

The Fornero Reform, however, placed certain limitations on the use of internships in order to avoid companies abusing this tool. A number of recent regulatory developments regarding internships in Italy should also be noted: art. 11 of Decree 138/2011 - subsequently declared illegal by the Constitutional Court judgment no. 287 of 19<sup>th</sup> December 2012 as it did not respect regional competences - introduced several changes to the rules governing this type of work experience after the conclusion of the course of study in an attempt to establish a basic level of protection (setting a maximum duration of six months and a time frame of the first 12 months after graduation within which this type of training can be activated). These provisions were intended to limit the risks of insecurity and instability linked to the excessive continuation of the status of intern for young graduates.

The law refers to subsequent guidelines which have recently been approved in an agreement between Government, Regions and the Autonomous Provinces of Trento and Bolzano for the precise identification of the ways in which interns should work and for the salient characteristics of internships.<sup>5</sup> These guidelines also establish a compulsory appropriate remuneration for interns. This last point sparked an intense debate between those who advocated intervention in this direction, considering the needs of the young people involved in these work experiences, and many others who believe that the provision of compensation distorts the very essence of the internship, encouraging firms to misuse the instrument in order to replace other forms of job contract, transforming internships into a competitor of apprenticeships or other regular forms of employment that the recent reform of the labour market intended to promote.<sup>6</sup> However, the internship is an

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<sup>5</sup> In particular, in Sicily the Guidelines drawn up by the State-Regions of 24 January 2013 have been transposed by the Directive of 25 July 2013 of *the Regional Department for work, employment, guidance, services and training activities*. For more details, see L. Casano, *Sicilia: le nuove linee guida sui tirocini*, in [www.bollettinoadapt.it](http://www.bollettinoadapt.it), 2013.

<sup>6</sup> M. Tiraboschi, *Il testo unico dell'apprendistato e le nuove regole sui tirocini*, Giuffrè, Milano, 2011.

essential step, not only on the training path of graduates but also in their transition to the labor market, as stated in the guidelines and, specifically, in the Sicilian directive which defines internships as being “*finalizzati a facilitare le scelte professionali e l'occupabilità nel periodo di transito scuola lavoro attraverso una prima esperienza nel mondo del lavoro*”.

Prior to the reform of the university system, students who took part in internships recognized by their course of study did not exceed 20% of the total and, above all, focused only on a few specific subjects (courses of teaching, pharmacy, agriculture and architecture, etc.).<sup>7</sup> Subsequently, however, the training activities available began to rise, strongly encouraged by the university reform: among the graduates in 2011, 56% of first-level graduates had been involved in this type of activity, 51% of specialist courses and 37% of students on a single-cycle course.<sup>8</sup>

According to available data, already in the first year post-graduation study an internship experience produces a significant increase in employability: in fact, those who have done an internship have 12% more chance of finding a job.<sup>9</sup> This benefit, which affects both men and women, is confirmed in the majority of degree courses, although it appears greater for second-level graduates. Moreover, taking into account data of the XI Survey GIDP/HRDA conducted on a sample of large companies operating on the Italian market, it can be seen that university placement offices are one of the channels used the most by companies to get in contact with graduates: as much as 58% of companies believe that it represents the most efficient means to search for qualified human capital compared to other channels such as, for example, company websites.<sup>10</sup>

From 2010 to the present day about 300 companies have been affiliated with the University of Catania, with a total of approximately 636 postgraduate internships having been undertaken in the last three years. This figure, which has increased in the last two years (78% were started in 2011), is therefore rather small if you consider that, according to Ministry, the university produces around 7,000 graduates every year. Therefore, each year only 3% of the graduates of the University of Catania turn to the university placement office (the COF) to find an internship. This data demonstrates the necessity to reflect on the effectiveness of internships and the efficacy of university placement services in Catania as this

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<sup>7</sup> Almalaurea. 2012. Op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> Unioncamere, Ministero del Lavoro, *Gli sbocchi professionali dei laureati nelle imprese italiane per il 2012*, Sistema informativo Excelsior, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Almalaurea. 2012. Op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> Gidp, *XI Indagine G.I.D.P./H.R.D.A. Neilaureati & Stage*, Milano, 2010.

analysis, despite being conducted locally, could prove to be a useful instrument for reconsidering national regulation regarding internships, highlighting above all the constraints that may exist at the local level, especially in countries such as Italy, characterized by strong disparities both in terms of the efficiency of services and the dynamism of the productive sectors and their labour markets. At the same time, this research aims to demonstrate the links between the reform of placements in tertiary education systems which have affected European countries since the Bologna Declaration, Italy in particular. The local dimension of the survey once again appears to be a privileged observatory to consider the process of coercive isomorphism and convergence at a European level compared with the characteristics and the socio-institutional environment of a certain territory.

## 2. Objectives and Methodology

This research, which is currently being carried out and can therefore only provide provisional data, is a descriptive analysis intending to contribute to the debate on the conditions and regulatory forms of internships, providing empirical evidence for the case of post-graduate internships activated by the Placement Office of the University of Catania (COF). The analytical work should fulfill the following aims:

- assess the quality of the learning environment where the interns worked, the conditions in which they worked and how the company supported the learning process of these graduates;
- discover the level of satisfaction with the value of this training experience in relation to the practical application of theoretical study and practice on the job;
- assess the effectiveness of internships in aiding and promoting the employability of graduates;
- define the role of the University Placement Office and discover the opinions and proposals of companies and interns for a more effective placement service.

These objectives have been pursued through a survey of a sample of graduates between 2011 and 2012 (N = 1000) and a survey of firms that have hosted at least one intern (N = 210) in the last two years using the CAWI (*Computer Assisted Web Interviewing*) method.

### 3. The Learning Environment: Content and Conditions of the Internship

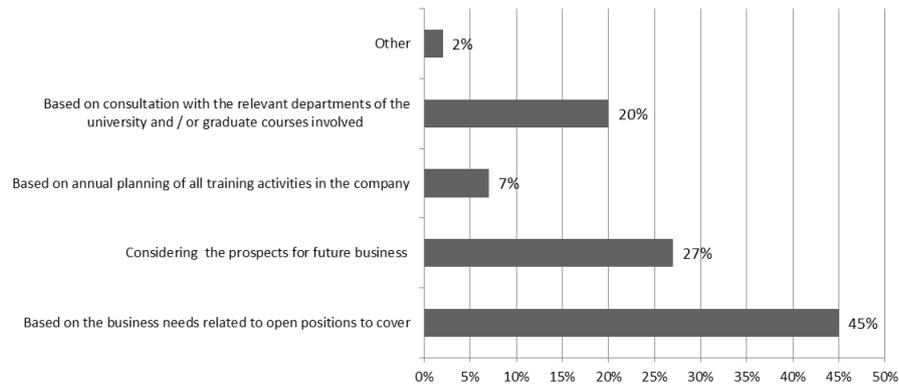
The first result of the study is that graduates in Catania do not tend to participate in internships: 78% of respondents claimed not to have done any kind of internship after their graduation. This result is lower than that of the national level in Almalaurea reports and it poses a serious question as to why the real importance for their CV of conducting a postgraduate internship is still poorly understood and perceived by these graduates. This data also appears to be an indicator of the failure of the 3+2 model, especially considering the ‘usability’ of the bachelor’s degree. As we also know from national data, the percentage of graduates who continue their university studies with a master’s course is huge: one year after graduation, 43% of first-level graduates are engaged a master’s course, a figure to which we must add a significant proportion of graduates (16.4%) who have the ambitious goal of combining work and study. The main motivation behind continuing one’s studies with a master’s degree appears to be the desire to complete and enrich one’s education (66%), while nearly a third of graduates (31%) see it as being almost compulsory in order to access the labour market. This is even more true in a city of southern Italy such as Catania, where scarce employment opportunities can encourage students to continue their investment in training and to ‘park’ themselves at university in order to delay the confrontation with the labour market. In our sample, in fact, about 60% chose to continue studying and less than 27% are working one year after graduation. The lack participation in internships, however, also highlights the weakness of the University of Catania’s placement service: approximately 76% of those who said they had taken part in a postgraduate internship did so through other agencies and not through the COF, while 69% of the graduates surveyed have never even been to the university’s placement office. To this we can add another 7% who, despite having turned to the COF, started an internship through other channels such as employment agencies, public employment centres, etc.). At the same time, however, 80% of firms surveyed turn to the COF Office when they are looking for a highly skilled person for an internship, so this could well be considered an evident case of matching ‘failure’.

The assessment of conditions and the content of activities are essential to understanding the quality of the learning experience during the internship. The training programme, the main document which provides a detailed description of the personalized learning path and the operating conditions of the intern, is the starting point of this analysis. As we can see in figure

1, the contents of the training programme are, for the most part (45%), defined from a static perspective linked to the business's short term requirements and considering job vacancies. This confirms the prevalent tendency of firms to take an instrumental approach to the internship tool which can in turn augment the risk of it being misused. Training programmes are rarely the result of an annual planning activity performed in order to promote the efficient monitoring of corporate needs, nor are they based on the construction of innovative projects which take into account potential future investments of the company (only in 27% of cases) in areas where the inclusion of a new skilled labour force could play an important role. In addition, only in 20% of cases was there co-construction and real collaboration between firms and the promoter of the internship, as might be expected and desirable considering the provision of the recent university reform and the new guidelines on internships.

This could encourage the perception of interns as normal human resources to be used in the management of routine activities rather than for challenging tasks which could make full use of the human capital but risk losing sight of the aims of training which must characterize internships. This risk appears to be magnified by the fact that in almost half of cases, according to the declarations made by the companies in this survey, interns are not supported in concrete terms by a company tutor specified in the training programme (only in 35% of cases), but rather they are supported by the head of the office with whom they work (39%) or the person who manages the relationships between companies and universities (14%) or even by the HR Manager (1%), all figures with a high risk of functional overload or who may not be able to provide adequate support to interns in operational terms.

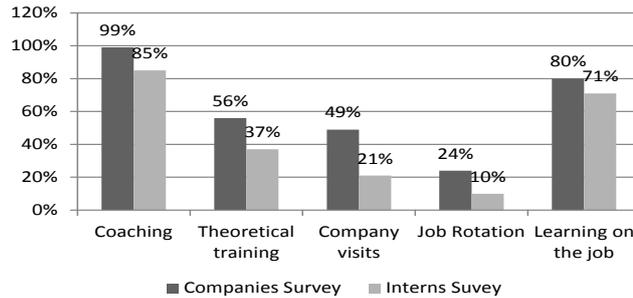
**Fig. 1 – Firms Survey - “How are the contents of the training project processed?”.**



Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration.

Firms' investment in training activities for interns (fig 2) appear to confirm the existence of such a risk: as well as the significant discrepancies between what is declared by companies and trainees in the two surveys, which in some cases is as much as 30 percentage points, 50% of interns declared that they did not do any training activities during their experience and it is clear that the space for theoretical training, company visits or other forms of job rotation in liminal or complementary functional areas, are vastly under-utilized compared to more traditional and cheaper (not only economically speaking) forms such as direct coaching or practice on the job. The acknowledged superiority of such forms of learning is certainly justifiable considering the practical meaning attributed to this working experience but this may also confirm the low amount of investment a company is prepared to make in interns and thus gives poor recognition to and evaluation of the training purposes of this experience. In addition, almost half of the trainees had never been subjected to any periodic evaluations of their activities during the internship by a superior or a more experienced colleague.

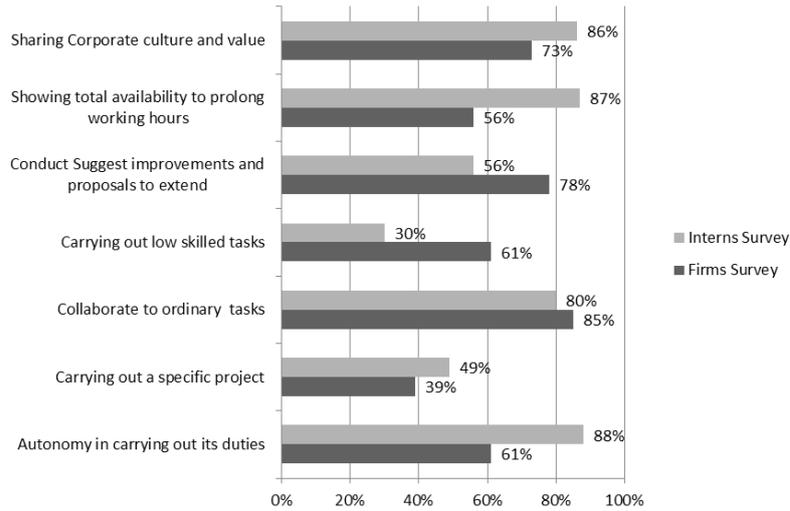
**Fig. 2 – Training activities during the internship**



Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration.

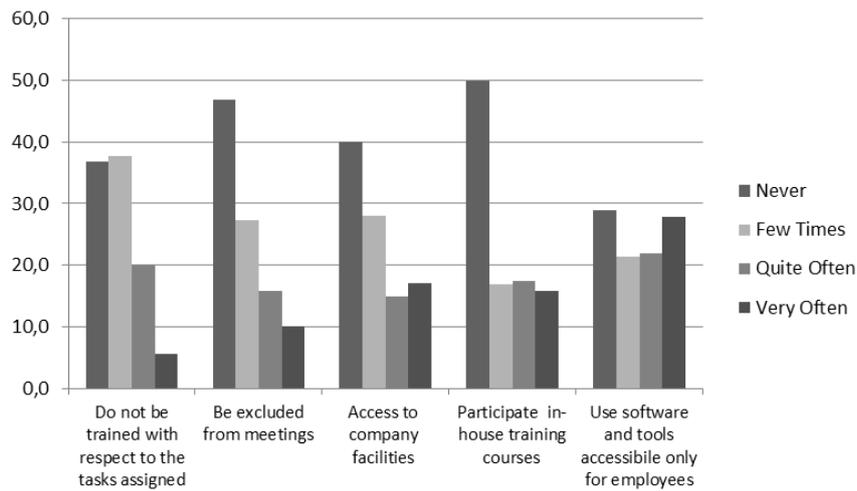
The comparative analysis between the companies' expectations of the interns and the real experience described by interns (fig. 6), shows that companies' expectations are very high. Firms expect graduates to be very autonomous, that they share company values, show a high level of availability, also to carry out low-skilled tasks. This high level of expectation, however, is not rewarded by companies in the real involvement of interns: 50% are not involved in any internal courses, 40% have no access to company facilities and more than one third are excluded from company meetings. As many labour psychologists have said, we can speak of an evident case of 'role conflict', a sort of mismatch between the expectations of company, which considers interns like all other human resources in terms of duties, but at the same time considers them as external subjects without the benefits of regular employees. This ambiguity seem to have its roots in the regulations as the legal framework for internships in Italy is ambiguous in its definition of whether an internship is training or work experience; in comparison the French model strictly links internships to a training path, and the Anglo-Saxon 'open market' model considers internships as an entry-level job. This ambiguity could affect the level of discomfort of Italian interns, in turn influencing their motivation and satisfaction during the experience (fig 7).

**Fig. 6 – Interns’ expectations of tasks and real conditions during the internship**



Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration.

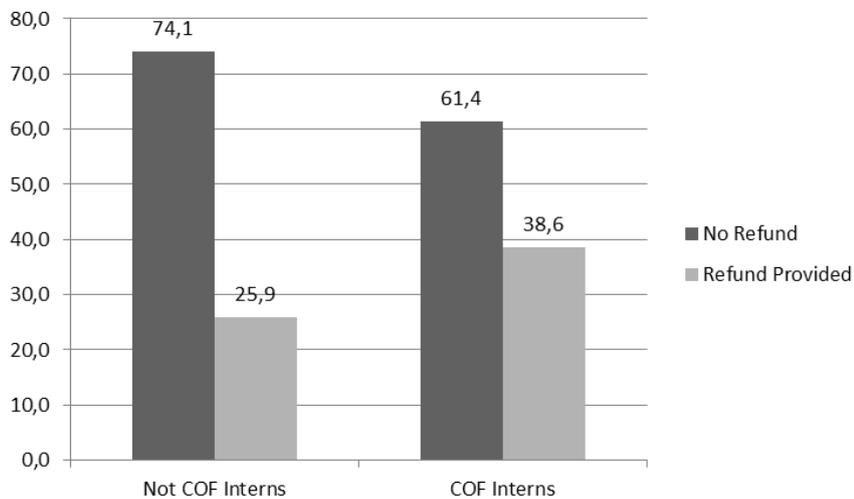
**Fig.7- Intern’s Survey-“During your internship how many times did you ...?”**



Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration.

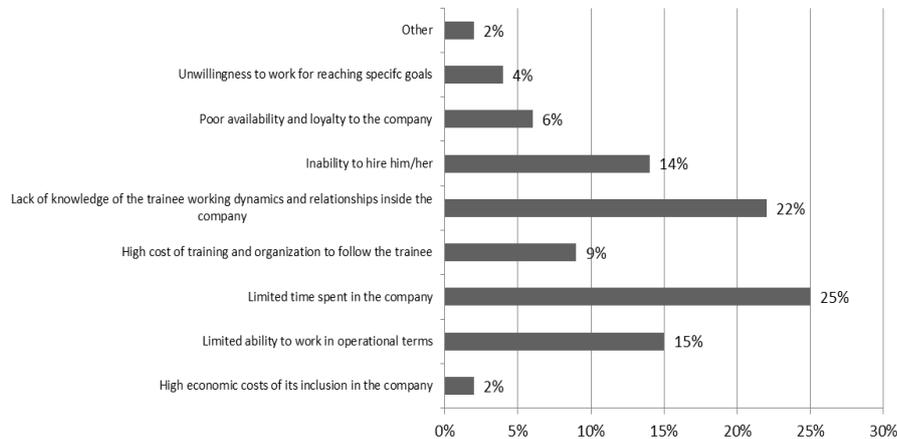
Finally, 71% were not entitled to any reimbursement of expenses for the activities carried out, although this percentage decreases when the training was found by the placement office of the university (fig. 8) where there are no significant differences considering the scale of this reimbursement which is 60% of €300, the current minimum stipulated by law. This is not a surprising result considering that these results relate to internships which were carried out before the Fornero Reform. Only 28% of companies surveyed stated that the imposition of a mandatory refund will limit their ability to host interns in the future. In addition, half of those interviewed said that they carried out an internship of more than six months which is now the legal limit of the internship period according to the Fornero Reform; almost 20% say state that they have done an internship for a period exceeding twelve months, with the addition of another 23% who did an internship for between seven and twelve months. These data are confirmed by companies who see the main disadvantage of having an intern as the limited period in which he or she is present in the company rather than the organizational and economic costs involved in having them there (fig. 9).

**Fig. 8 – Interns’ Survey - Remuneration for interns**



Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration

**Fig. 9 – Firms’ Survey - “What are the main disadvantages of hosting an intern?”**



Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration

#### **4. The Effects on Employability: Job Research and Career Opportunities after an Internship**

Despite the problems identified in the previous paragraph, interns say they are generally satisfied with their experience (81%). They consider it to be very useful (fig. 10), both in terms of training and guidance for the construction of their professional path, although major problems are identified in terms of how useful an internship is in actually finding a job. On the other hand, 75% of companies state that less than 10% of interns receive a hiring proposal. This result cannot be principally attributed to the economic crisis as only 36% said that they had had to make staff reductions due to the current economic phase.

The propensity to hire interns found in our survey is lower than that which has been found in national surveys, such as those carried out by GIDP / HRDA where companies declared the chance of hiring interns was around 30%. The data from our firms’ survey, however, are confirmed by the interns surveyed, 85% of whom did not receive a hiring proposal at the end of their experience. The remaining 15% is composed of 12% who accepted a proposal and a 3% who refused it because it was for a less-skilled job respect to their educational credentials or because they were offered a job without a contract. The limited chances of an internship becoming a job are undoubtedly dependent on the fact that almost 50% of internships are done at small businesses (those with fewer

than 15 employees) which mainly operate in the local market, and where nearly one third are public or non-profit organizations. The low return in terms of employability is therefore strongly linked to the vulnerability and the constraints of the specific socio-economic context, characterized by small firms with low margins and projection on national or international markets and where most internships are done in public organizations which cannot pursue the recruitment of interns, or in non-profit organizations which depend largely on public resources and where the terms of employment and career opportunities do not always satisfy highly educated people.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the possibility for an internship to be the gateway to the world of work is hindered by the lack of dynamism of local labour markets which often fail to value the skills and expectations of the youngest and most educated workforce.<sup>12</sup>

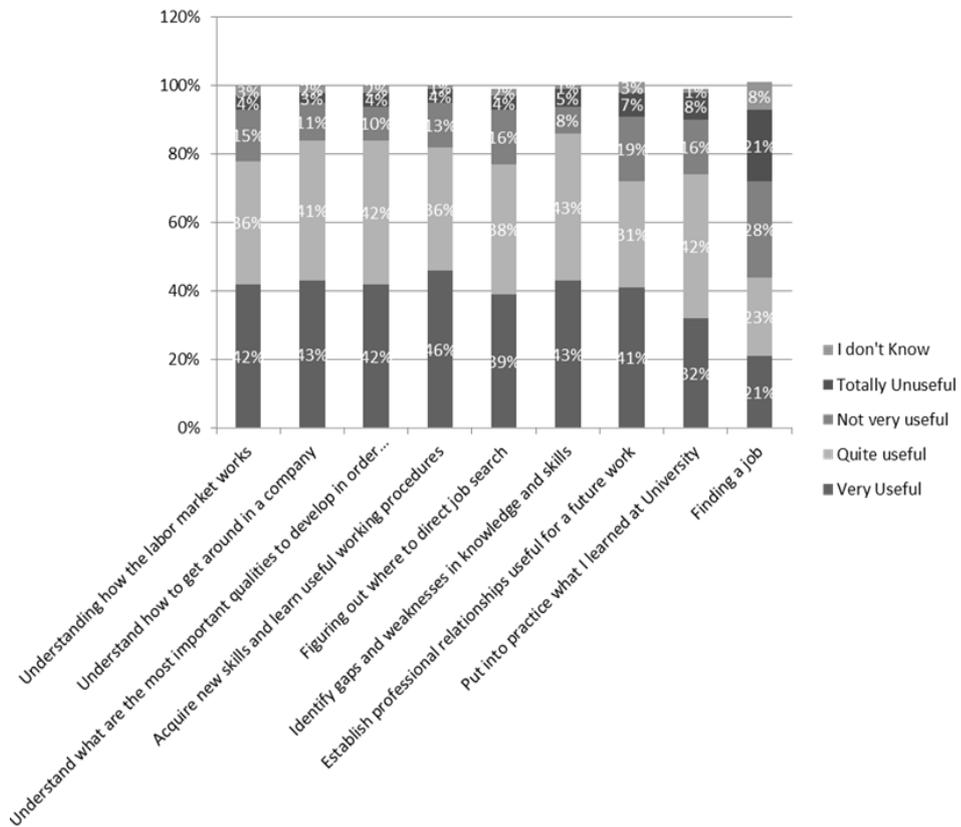
Moreover, only 11% of the interns surveyed have gone on to work in the industry of their internship while 4% of them work in an industry and a company which is completely different, with the addition of 2% who have chosen the path of self-employment (fig. 11). Considering the weak influence on employability, the majority of respondents chose to continue their studies, although when we compare the choices of those who carried out a post-graduate internship and those who did not, we find that the former seem to show a greater desire to get involved in the labour market than the latter, and for this reason they would be less likely to continue their studies (54.3% versus 62.3%) (fig. 12).

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<sup>11</sup> R. Musumeci, *Tempi e traiettorie delle transizioni al lavoro nei servizi socio-assistenziali*, in A. Cortese (ed.) *Carriere Mobili. Percorsi lavorativi di giovani istruiti nel Mezzogiorno*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2012, 173-202.

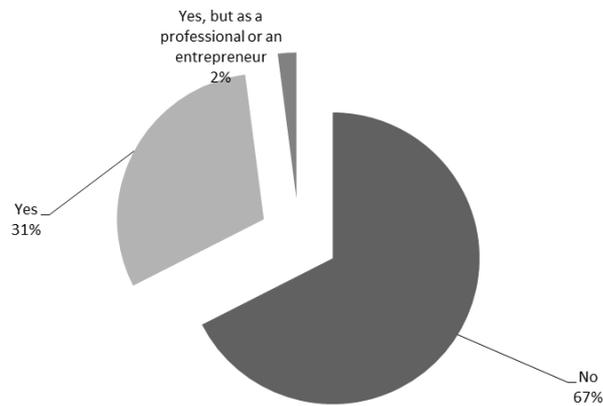
<sup>12</sup> M. Avola, *Percorsi di lavoro e rischi occupazionali in un mercato affittivo*, in A. Cortese (ed.) *Carriere Mobili. Percorsi lavorativi di giovani istruiti nel Mezzogiorno*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2012, 57-89.

**Fig. 10- Interns' Survey - "How useful was the experience of the training by considering the following aspects?"**



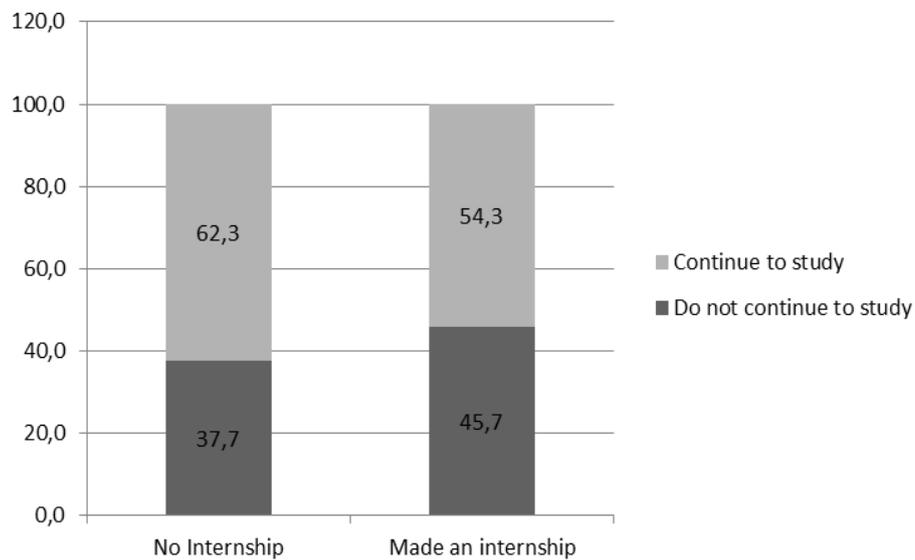
Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration

**Fig. 11 – Interns’ Survey - “Did you actually get a job?”**



Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration

**Fig. 12 – Interns’ Survey - Continue to study and do internships**



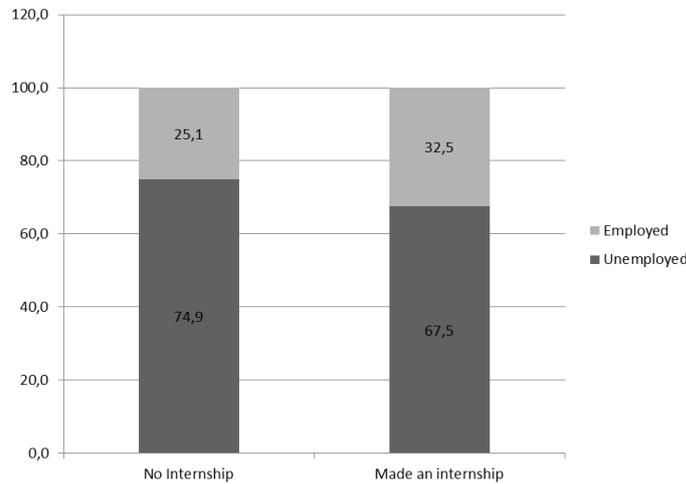
Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration

Nonetheless, former interns do have a small but significant advantage in their chances of finding employment over those who did do any type of internship: 32.5% of those who have taken part in a traineeship are currently employed compared to 25.1% of those who did no traineeship, a difference of 7.4 percentage points (fig. 13). This confirms what has already been shown at a national level by Almalaurea data regarding a potential link between internships and the employability of graduates. These results therefore confirm the value of an internship as an indication of competence that companies do not seem to ignore during recruitment.<sup>13</sup> However, if we compare data concerning the quality of ex-interns' current jobs we notice some striking differences (fig. 14): if almost half of those who claim to work today, however, admit to working without a regular contract, this percentage is even higher in those who have done a post-graduate internship. This result is linked to the importance of moonlighting jobs and the informal economy also for skilled jobs in the local market. According to the data analyzed, these graduates also work with much more precarious and unstable labour contracts than those who have never done an internship. This would seem to confirm the idea that despite increasing one's employability, those who have done an internship face a greater risk of job precariousness, while those who have not done an internship enjoy much more stable and protected jobs.

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<sup>13</sup> M. Spence, *Job Market Signaling*, in *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 1973, n. 87, vol. 3, 355-374.

**Fig. 13 – Interns’ Survey-Employment status and postgraduate internship**



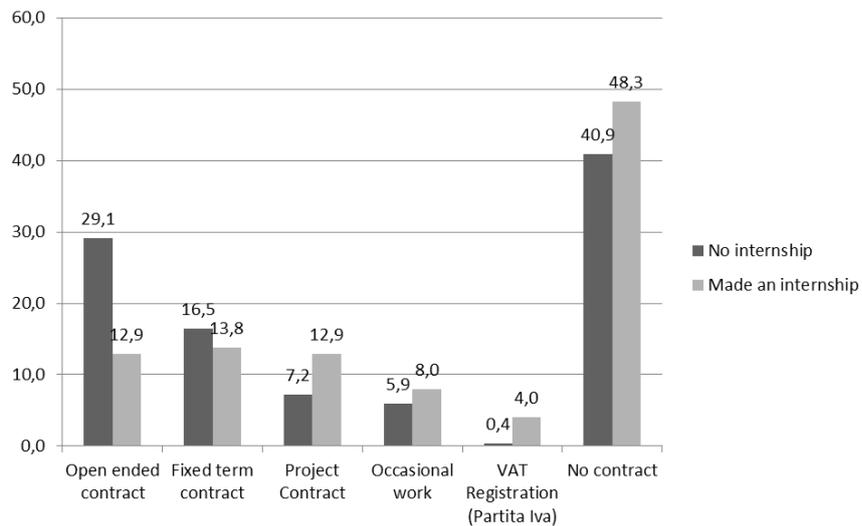
Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration

This entails obvious and important consequences on actual income per month (fig. 15). The vast majority of those who currently work appear to be in the lowest income classes (about 70%), declaring earnings of less than €1000 per month, which also confirms the Almalaurea data which sees graduates in southern Italy earning less than those in the centre and north of the country.<sup>14</sup> Those who have done a post-graduate internship outnumber those who have never done an internship in the lower income groups. However, this apparent paradox between the two types of graduates is explained only if, in addition to the conditions of their current jobs, we also focus on the content and quality of the job. In this way, all the differences between interns and non-interns can be revealed and explained (fig. 16): if the non-ex-interns enjoy better working conditions, the ex-interns have a higher level of congruence with their studies. In fact, 46.6% of those who have completed an internship believe that they do a job which is congruent with their studies versus 43% of those who have not carried out any internship. Almost 36% of those who claim that their work is obviously incongruent with their studies have never done an internship, compared to 26% of ex-interns. This appears to indicate that although those who have done an internship after graduation tend not to enjoy favourable working conditions, they have developed a less

<sup>14</sup> Almalaurea. 2012. Op. cit.

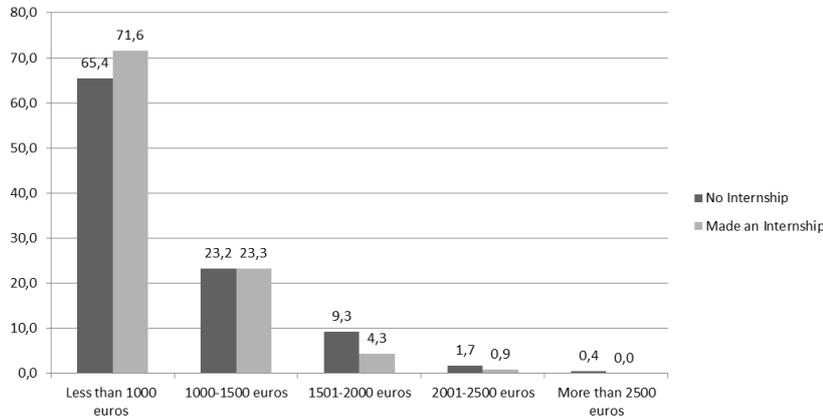
instrumental attitude towards work, and a more pronounced sense of their professional self and the value of their human capital, attaching more importance to the contents and profile of their future job than to the contract and income offered. Therefore, doing an internship does not have a positive influence on employability in the *strictu sensu* or on conditions of employment, but does help achieve a more targeted and proper allocation of the qualified workforce, with less risk of cases of over-education.

**Fig. 14 – Interns' Survey - Current Contract**



Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration

**Fig. 15 – Interns’ Survey – Current income (per month) and internship**



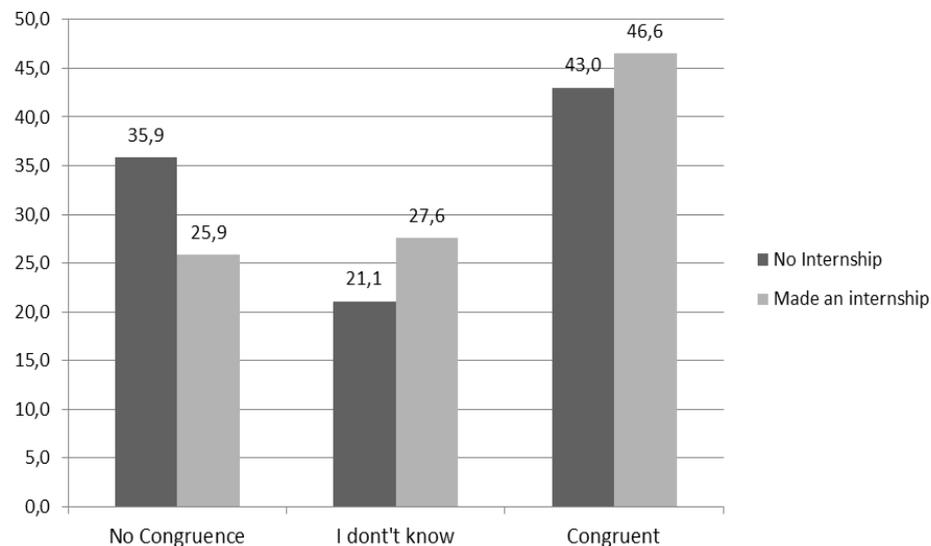
Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration

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**Fig. 16 – Interns’ Survey – “Do you think your present job is congruent with your university degree?”**



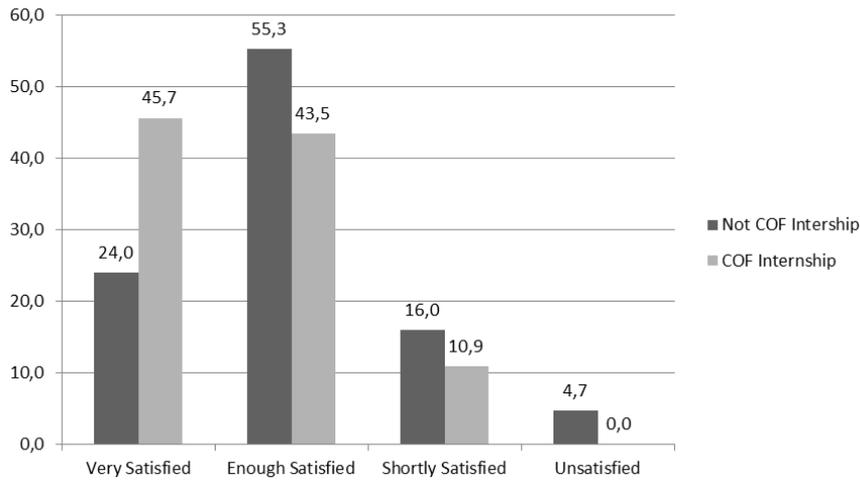
Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration

## 5. The Critical Role of the University Placement Office (COF) and Potential Improvements

In order to complete this analysis we need to determine whether internships found with the help of the University Placement Office (COF) are able to provide greater satisfaction and better employment opportunities than internships found with the support of other bodies. If we compare the levels of overall satisfaction of the internship experience, those who turned to the COF show a higher level of satisfaction than those who started an internship through alternative agencies/offices (fig.

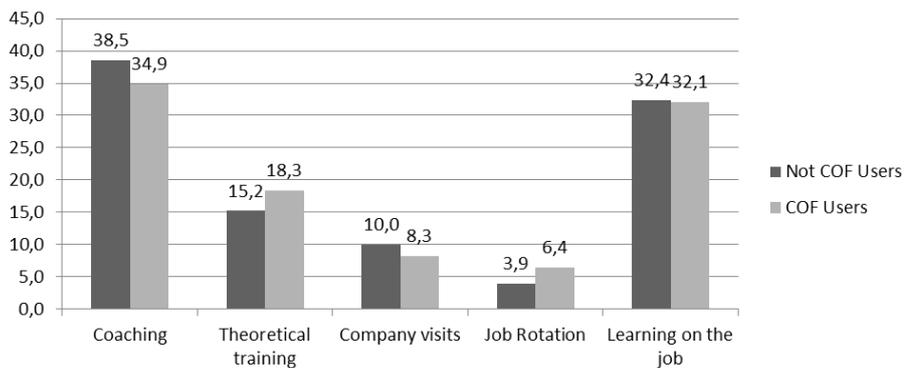
17). The advantages of doing an internship with the support of the COF is, in part, linked to a better learning environment.

**Fig. 17- Interns' Survey- General satisfaction with the internship experience**



Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration

**Fig. 18 – Interns Survey -Training activities during the internship and use of the Placement Office (COF)**

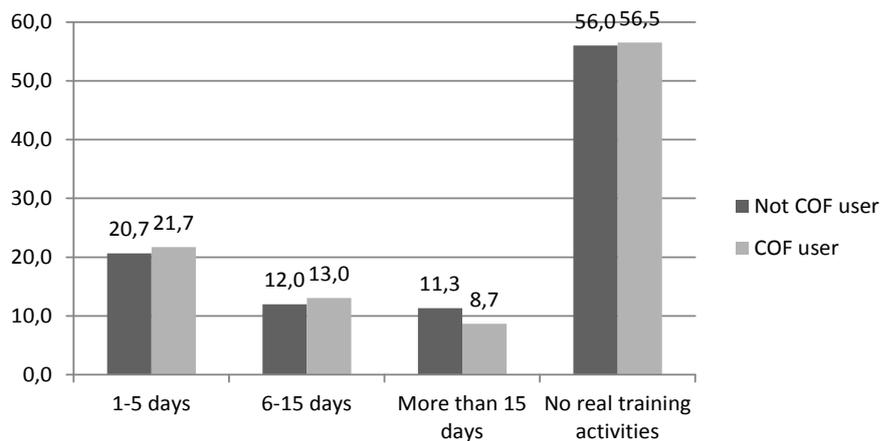


Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration

However, if we compare the internships found through the COF with those initiated through other channels (fig. 18), we can see that a total of 56% of trainees interviewed declared that there were no training activities

during their internship and here there are no significant differences between internships found with the COF and those found with other bodies.

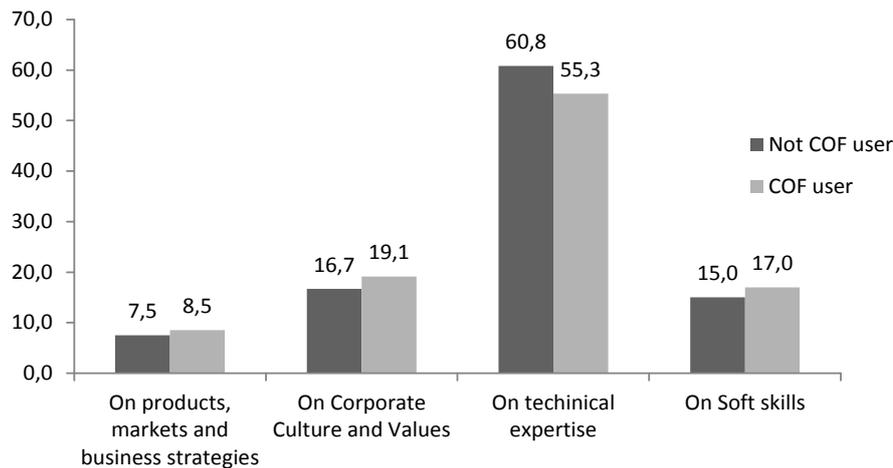
**Fig. 19 – Interns’ Survey - Time of training during the internship**



Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration

However, in COF internships there is a greater proportion of classroom training (18.3% compared to 15.2%) and a greater incidence of job rotation (6.4% compared to 3.9%). There do not appear to be significant differences regarding the amount of training activities during the internships (fig.19) and in both cases the contents (fig. 20) focused on learning technical skills strictly related to the tasks assigned, although those initiated through the COF have a slightly higher percentage of training activities aimed at increasing general knowledge of the business reality and about company culture and values. This may enable interns to work with greater security and efficacy during their internship, as it is also essential to help the interns understand the level of commitment expected by the company. Furthermore, training regarding skills and abilities which are useful outside the operational context of the internship or the company (soft or life skills) are more commonly found in COF internships.

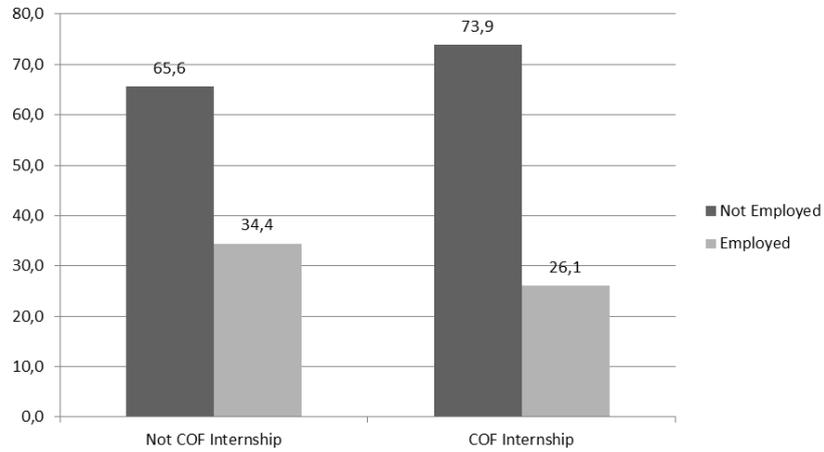
**Fig. 20– Interns’ Survey - Contents of training activities during the internship**



Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration

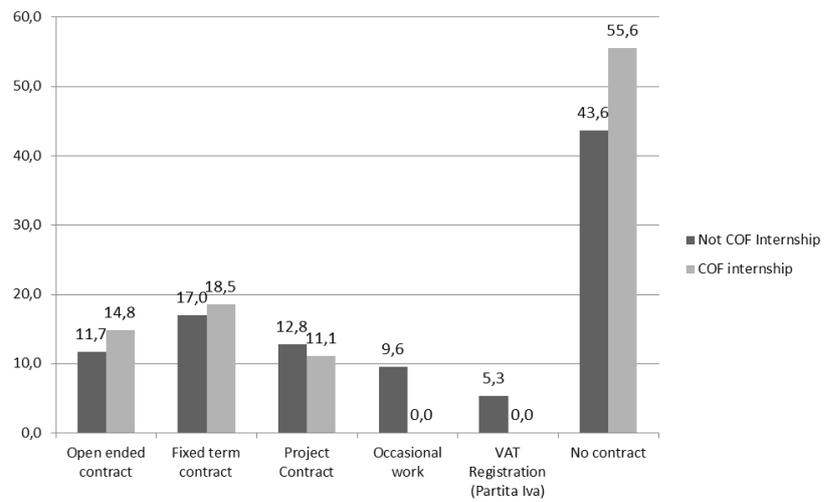
However, the higher levels of satisfaction recorded cannot be due to the greater chances of employability afforded by these internships (fig. 21) as only 26.1% of those who turned to the university placement office are currently working compared to the 34.4% of those who turned to other bodies. Nor can satisfaction be linked to better working conditions as the current occupations of COF interns are slightly more insecure and less stable than those jobs found by non-COF interns (fig. 22). Once again, the major advantages of using the university placement office is a greater congruence between the job and the interns’ studies (fig. 23). In fact, those who have done an internship with the COF claim to do a job more congruent with their internship and with their qualifications. In conclusion, it can be said that university placement offices play a vital role not so much in terms of employability as in terms of achieving a proper allocation of human capital, providing a better guide for graduates’ careers.

**Fig. 21 – Interns’ Survey - Employment status and type of internship**



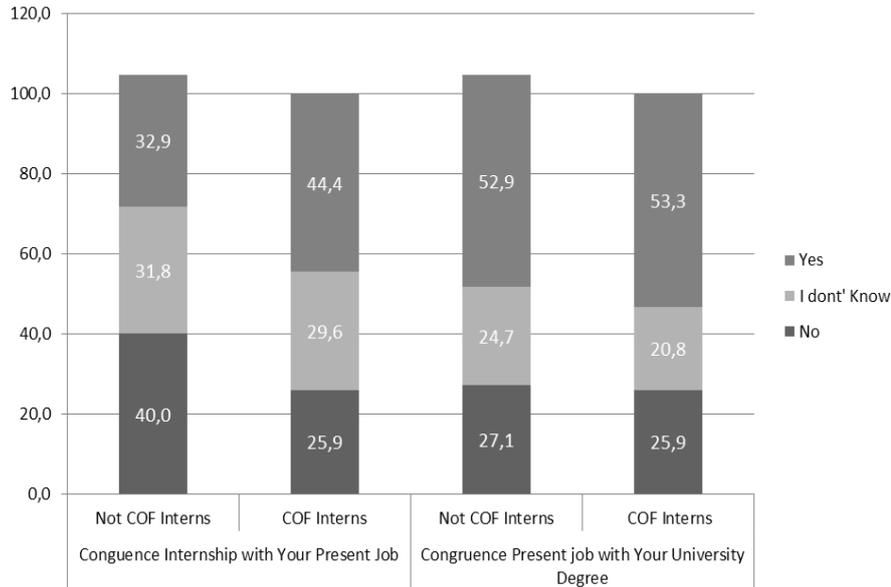
Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration

**Fig. 22 – Interns’ Survey - Actual Contract and Type of Internship**



Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration

**Fig. 23 – Interns' Survey - Congruence internship and present job**

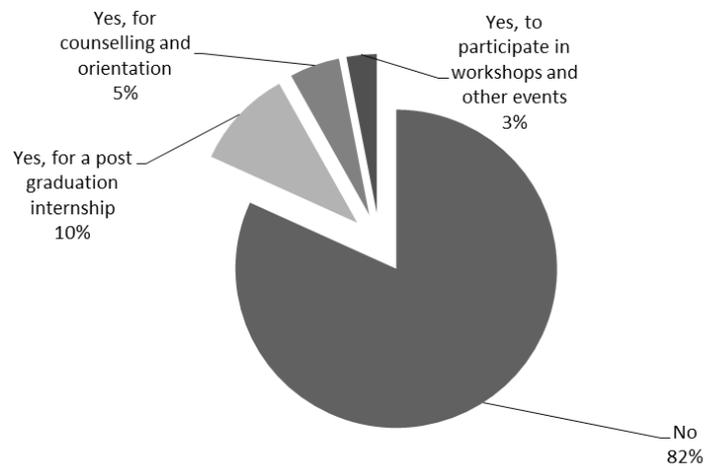


Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration

Notwithstanding the advantages of using the university placement services described above, their apparent under-utilization is still resounding, particularly in light of recent organizational efforts to extend their activities and promote the visibility of the service through a newsletter and social networks such as Facebook. Indeed, the data of the survey leave no room for doubt. As much as 80% of the graduates interviewed do not use the COF, and only 10% went there to find a post-graduate internship (fig. 24). This situation seems to be due to a lack of communication and educational activities regarding the important role that these placement offices can play in job-matching, considering that 69% of students say they were not even aware of the services offered (fig. 25). In addition, 76% of the companies contacted said that they are more than sufficiently satisfied with the services and support provided by the placement office of the University of Catania. Conversely, graduates tend to seek post-graduate internships mostly through spontaneous applications (46%) or through their friendships and personal relationships. This figure is not surprising in a southern context which is strongly characterized by a low use of, often ineffective, formal recruitment channels and a micro-entrepreneurship that bases its recruitment

strategies on its own social capital. It is also true that most of those who went to the COF office even just to ask questions or to ask for guidance had a better chance of finding a post-graduate internship: among those who did not carry out an internship, the percentage of those who went to the COF was about 15%, while for those who have carried out an internship the percentage was almost double, rising to 30.6%.

**Fig.24 - Interns' Survey –“At the end of your studies, did you turn to the placement office (COF) of your university?”**



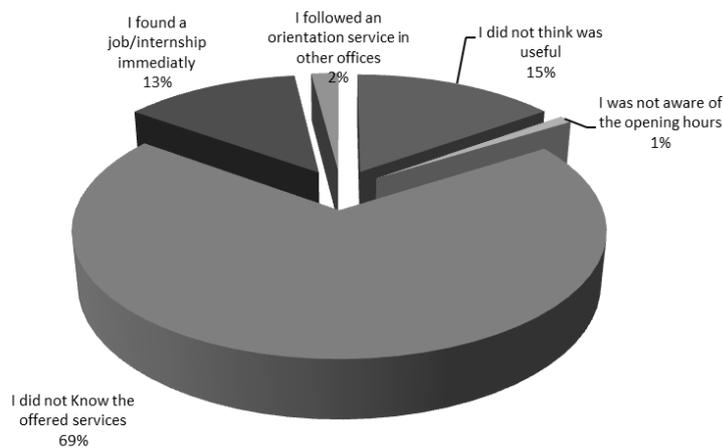
Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration

Comparing the opinions of COF users, both companies and trainees, (fig. 26 and 27) of the major difficulties in communicating with the office, we find similar problems. Excessive bureaucracy is considered to be the main problem by both graduates (26%) and companies (36%). This is a classic problem in the relationship between public administration and users which features notably in all international surveys on work and the economy in Italy.<sup>16</sup> Considering the issue of internships, this problem has already been noted in the wake of the Fornero Reform and the National Guidelines, as legislation appears fragmented in different regional provisions. In addition to this complexity one also encounters the further

<sup>16</sup> OECD, *Employment Outlook. Employment Protection Regulation and Labour Market Performance*, Paris, 2012; Banca D'Italia, *Concorrenza e regolamentazione in Italia. Occasional Papers 123*, Roma, 2012; World Bank, *Doing Business. Smarter regulation for small and medium size enterprises*. Washington, 2013.

fragmentation of the provisions and procedures in different universities, creating a confusing and barely intelligible framework.

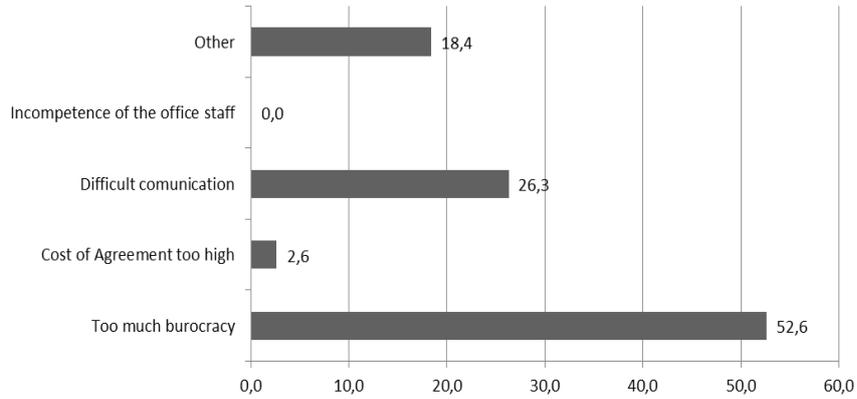
**Fig. 25 – Interns’ Survey – “Why did you not go to the COF?”**



Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration

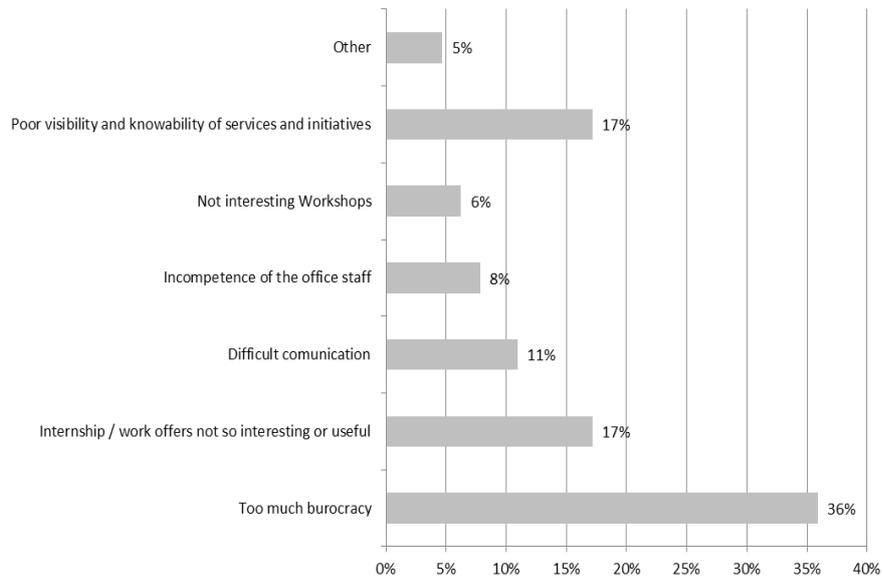
Other major problems are related to communication: companies find communication with the COF difficult (13%), especially regarding the procedures involved in setting up and managing placements, and the office’s limited opening hours (most afternoons the office is closed), while graduates (17%) complain once again of a lack of knowledge of internships available and services offered. In addition, graduates also complain of a lack of attractiveness of job/internship proposals, which suggests that placement offices ought to play a more active role in their relationship with the territory and with the business system as is indeed required by the university reform.

**Fig. 26–Firms’ Survey - “What is the main problem you had in dealing with the placement office (COF)?”**



Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration

**Fig. 27–Interns’ Survey - “What is the main problem you had in dealing with the placement office (COF)?”**



Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration

In order to identify possible strategies for improving university placement services we directly asked users what they think ought to be done. Once again the views of companies and trainees seem quite convergent: they both demand greater involvement in the drafting of training projects or a

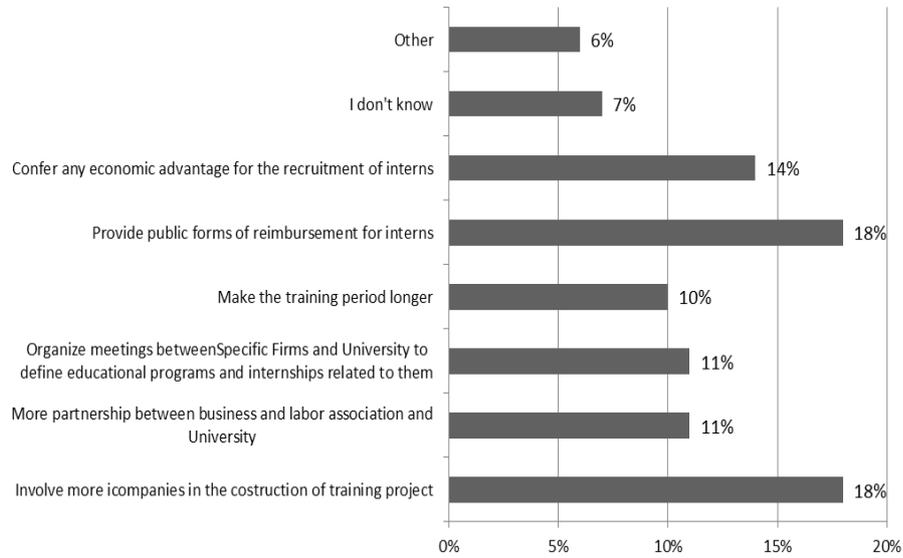
joint construction of the content of the internships which would increase the educational value of this experience for interns, who consider this a priority in 18% of cases, as well as for firms, who emphasize the importance of this aspect in 22% of cases. The need for a greater involvement of companies is also part of other answers to the question, such as the need to have more frequent meetings between the university and business associations as well as the need to strengthen possible partnerships between the two. Companies tend to agree with the spirit of the recent university reform which calls upon universities to achieve their full potential. University placement offices should take advantage of such openness and availability in order to strengthen their role in job matching. Following on from this, both users see the introduction of public forms of reimbursement for interns as a priority; 18% of graduates surveyed and 21% of firms. For companies this may appear to be at odds with the obligation to refund interns introduced by the Fornero Reform. This requirement may also represent a need for public recognition of the value and social utility of the decision to take charge of completing the training process of new graduates, thus helping to protect public investment in the creation of the country's human capital. Finally, such a requirement also represents a material incentive which is not only a mechanism useful for subsistence and hedging costs in the classical type of organizational analysis as Herzberg said, but is also a condition of health and job satisfaction which affects the motivational aspect of work.<sup>17</sup> Despite the risks expressed by Tiraboschi<sup>18</sup> on the transformation of internships in a new 'contractual' form, the recent decision of the Italian Minister of Labour, Giovannini, to set aside certain resources for the reimbursement of interns, although neither systemic nor strategic but motivated more by urgent reasons, will certainly find consensus among both companies and graduates.

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<sup>17</sup> F. I. Herzberg, *Work and the Nature of Man*, World Publishing Company, Cleveland, 1966.

<sup>18</sup> M. Tiraboschi, *Il testo unico dell'apprendistato e le nuove regole sui tirocini*, Giuffrè, Milano, 2011

**Fig. 28–Firms Survey –“What are your proposals for improving University Placement Services?”**



Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration

**Fig. 26– Interns Survey –“What are your proposals for improving University Placement Services?”**



Source: C.O.F. Survey 2013, Author's Own Elaboration

## 6. Final Discussion

It is important to remember that these analyses require further tests before confirming the hypothesis outlined above with a multivariate statistical model, capable of grasping the complexity of the variables examined in order to provide more concrete indications of policy. The data presented thus far, purely descriptive in the study of the phenomenon, however, suggest some points to consider.

Firstly, the data highlight that interns are in a condition of *role ambiguity* in which there is an evident mismatch between the conditions in which interns operate and the expectations of bosses and colleagues about the tasks they are there to perform.<sup>19</sup> On the one hand, interns are expected to behave in all aspects as an internal resource of the company but the conditions in which they operate seem to underline their status as an 'outsider', which consequently affects the quality of their experience and defines their limits. In particular, the data analyzed show that companies expect interns to be fully committed to the values and corporate culture of the company, a total willingness to extend the time or the content of their job as well as the ability to work independently. This appears similar in all aspects to what you would expect from an employee, according to a mutual exchange of obligations and prerogatives which are defined in the legal and 'psychological' contract.<sup>20</sup> In practice, however, interns do not receive adequate training, instead remaining confined to specific aspects of the job, and neither do they gain an overall knowledge of how the business operates which could, to a certain extent, limit their operational capacity and understanding of the 'production' processes in the company. This lack of training and supervision, combined with the exclusion from meetings, events or corporate training, as well as the lack of access to tools and facilities reserved for the staff, may well reinforce the discomfort of interns, weakening their commitment and their capacity to learn. Furthermore, the absence of any form of refund, though this may pose a problem in legal terms, is another sign of the weakness of interns which increases the ambiguity of their status. Even the companies seem to

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<sup>19</sup> R.L. Kahn, D.M. Wolfe, R.P. Quinn, J.D. Snoek, R.A., *Organizational Stress. Studies on Role Conflict and Ambiguity*, Wiley and Son, New York, 1994; G. Favretto, 1996. *Lo stress nelle organizzazioni*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1995.

<sup>20</sup> D. Rousseau, A. Snehalsky, *Assessing psychological contracts: issues, alternatives and measures*, in *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 1998, vol. 19, n. 2, 679-695.

be aware of this problem and both they and interns believe that this refund should be public as the firms involved cooperate with the education system in order to increase graduates' human capital.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the fact that operating conditions are not always easy, interns stress their overall satisfaction with the experience, both in itself and for its training contents, confirming the importance of this activity in learning both technical-operational skills and soft skills (understanding the relational dynamics of a working environment, the distinction between formal and informal, problem solving and the ability to work to targets).

More problematic, however, is the impact of internships on employability. Although it is difficult to make comparisons with national data, our survey confirms that those who have done an internship are more likely (about + 8%) to find a job, although only rarely in the company where they did their internship. This result is also linked to the critical aspects observed by many analysts regarding the lack of 'recognition' in the labour market of the bachelor degree which actually prompts most graduates to decide to continue their studies. Moreover, the weak capacity of post-graduate internships to improve employability, above all in Sicily, respect to the data gathered at the national level still has to be contextualized considering the peculiarities of the local labour market which is mostly characterized by micro- entrepreneurship, above all in the service sector, with low added value and with a high tendency to use informal work. In fact, more than half of former interns who are currently employed work without a regular contract. Considering the low number of interns who find employment with their host companies, it must be noted that in Catania these companies operate above all in the public or no-profit sector, with several, evident limitations in taking on this labour force, especially in this economic phase. However, internships seem to play a useful role in orientation and job matching; that is to say that those who have done an internship tend to have jobs which are more congruent with their qualifications compared to those who have never done an internship. Furthermore, this congruency increases if the internship was carried out with the support of the university placement office which seems to play a more effective role in job matching and in orientation for future job seekers rather than in the promotion of better quality working conditions in internships. Indeed, those who turn to the COF do not work more than others or have better current employment conditions, but they do

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<sup>21</sup> In this sense, it is necessary pointing out how in the anglo-saxon experience, paid internships are the majority but not mandatory, even it who made it will get a better salary when he get a job.

more frequently find work which is more congruent with their internship activities or their qualifications. Carrying out an internship, particularly with the mediation the university placement office, makes graduates more selective in searching their future job, with a lower risk of problems of over-education.

That said, the university placement offices is still under-used in Catania, and doing a post-graduate internship is not as common as one might expect (less than half of the graduates surveyed was an intern). The limits of the COF depend greatly on the lack of communication about and explanation of services provided, but also on the poor quality of placements offered. This suggests the need for these offices to communicate better with local socio-economic industries in order to aim for the co-construction with stakeholders of internships with more specific contents targeting the needs of the local labour market. This requires greater investment of universities in the field of placement services which are expected to carry out an extremely difficult and complex task, especially in a not very dynamic job market such as that in Catania. The strategic value of placement services in terms of employment policies and in the promotion of the development of a local area requires greater efforts in terms of communication, qualifications of personnel and the ability to dialogue with the socio-economic context also in an extra-local way. The new guidelines on internships may well pose a limitation in this regard for the willingness of companies to host interns due to restrictions on their duration or mandatory refunds, while aspects like training and monitoring internship activities are not addressed, also considering the greater involvement of the internship promoter as a guarantor of the quality of its learning value. In fact, the conditions of internships and their training value should be guaranteed both through an increased attention towards the choice and skills possessed by the company tutor to whom the intern is entrusted, providing guidelines on the choice of tutors as occurs in Ireland, but also through a greater power of inspection and monitoring by the promoter, which in cases of misuse may decide to suspend or not to renew the agreement with the company. The Italian legislator should intervene in this aspect, providing a detailed description of a quality standard for internships and a system for the evaluation of this experience (through, for example, a final interview or drafting a letter of reference, typical of the Anglo-Saxon model, or through the preparation of a certificate of competence, as in the French case, or a final exam that tests how much you really learned as a trainee, as in the German case).



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