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Persone, Educazione e Welfare  
nella società 5.0

Community Notebook  
People, Education, and Welfare in society 5.0

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POLICIES, PRACTICES AND QUALITY ACROSS  
EDUCATION, TRAINING AND LABOUR

*Edited by*  
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# 1. THE INVOLVEMENT OF STUDENT ASSOCIATIONS IN QUALITY ASSURANCE MECHANISMS OF EDUCATIONAL REFORMS IN ITALY

by Astrid Favella\*, Emiliane Rubat du Mérac\*\*

**Abstract:** Il presente contributo analizza il ruolo e l'incidenza del coinvolgimento delle associazioni studentesche a livello secondario nei processi di *policy making* e valutazione delle politiche educative e formative. Dal coinvolgimento sui temi del diritto allo studio, all'incidenza sul curriculum e la valutazione e certificazione delle competenze e dei titoli, il coinvolgimento degli attori di associazionismo studentesco rimane un ambito altamente inesplorato nel contesto politico-istituzionale italiano. Prendendo in considerazione l'ultimo decennio, dalla Buona Scuola alle riforme del Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza (PNRR), la voce studentesca a livello nazionale ha cercato uno spazio di interlocuzione istituzionale nei processi di *policy making*, valutazione e quality assurance delle riforme educative: quali condizioni possono integrare le voci studentesche nei processi di quality assurance? La presa in carico della voce studentesca da parte dei *policy-makers* a livello nazionale può essere vista sia attraverso le lenti di una legittimazione dell'agency dei destinatari delle politiche stesse, che di una ricerca di input ragionati da parte degli esperti del settore. Il presente contributo propone dunque una riflessione sul ruolo di un agente isolato che è sempre in qualche misura presente, pur essendo dispersivo nelle modalità d'azione, e difficilmente concettualizzabile e riducibile ad una sola voce.

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**Keywords:** riforme educative; quality assurance; associazioni studentesche; eventful analysis; agency studentesca

**Abstract:** This paper analyses the role and impact of the involvement of secondary-level student associations in the policy-making and evaluation processes of educational and training policies. From involvement in the issues of the right to education, to the impact on the curriculum and the evaluation and certification of skills and qualifications, the involvement of student association actors remains a highly unexplored area in the Italian political-institutional context. Considering the last decade, from the “Buona Scuola” reform to the NRRP (National Recovery and Resilience Plan) reforms, student’s voice at the national level has sought a space for institutional dialogue in the processes of policy-making, evaluation, and quality assurance of educational reforms: what conditions can facilitate feedback effects in quality assurance processes? The acknowledgement of student voice by national policy-makers can be viewed both through the lenses of legitimising the agency of the policies’ beneficiaries and as a search for reasoned input from sector experts. From a historical perspective, this paper therefore proposes a reflection on the role of an isolated agent who is always present to some extent, despite being dispersed in the modes of action and difficult to conceptualise and reduce to a single voice.

**Keywords:** educational reforms; quality assurance; student associations; student voice; students’ agency.

## *Introduction*

This piece explores how student associations constitute potential agents of policy change and quality assurance in the Italian policy-making panorama. In connection with the theme of this issue, in this informative piece, as the nature of rubrics require, we reflect upon the potential of students’ involvement in quality assurance mechanisms.

While during the “Buona Scuola” reform student influences primarily took the form of protests, with the more recent NRRP reforms<sup>1</sup>, university student associations have sought mediation and dialogue with political-institutional bodies for the formation of policies and the subsequent analysis of system impacts and quality. If a more participatory system is one that welcomes bottom-up policy-making processes, it is necessary to focus on how and to what extent this mechanism is implemented in the areas that immediately affect the involved actors themselves.

In the latest “Teen’s Voice” analysis by du Mérac and Lucisano (2019-2020) concerning the values and political participation of young people, authors signal the risk of having a “mute” generation. Indeed, out of 767 surveyed students in transition from secondary school to university, 52,3% bring up political/social topics with friends between never and less than once a week. In this panorama, the role and contribution of student associations represent an essential reserve of active citizenship and can serve as potential reservoirs of vigilant engagement and commitment.

Student associations are present both at school, university and at national level; some of them are more precisely referred to as “collectives”.

### *1. Student associations engagement, quality & policy-making*

The issue of what quality is and how challenging it is to define it, to capture and measure it, is brilliantly faced in a book selected by Pietro Lucisano, Emeritus Professor of Experimental

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<sup>1</sup> Per ulteriori dettagli si veda La tecnica della scuola: <https://www.tecnicadella.scuola.it/gli-studenti-contro-la-buona-scuola-manifestazioni-in-tutta-italia> (consultato il 31 marzo 2026).

Pedagogy at Sapienza University of Rome, across the years. The book is “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance” by the American author Robert M. Pirsig. Spoiler alert: one of the key takeaways of the book is that at the very minimum, quality resides in the act of caring about the object in question, which explains the word “maintenance”.

This reference is suggestive for the rubric theme as the very action of protesting and advocating can be understood as an approach to kick-start a “quality assurance mechanism” of overseeing, of supervision on the policy-making processes on the side of students’ agency.

From this perspective, both secondary-level and tertiary-level students prove to be a present and persistent voice in the Italian educational reform context. As remarked in the call for this special issue:

*“Quality in training, labour market and inclusion policies cannot be understood solely in terms of the effectiveness of immediately measurable outcomes, such as success rates or employability. Rather, it requires a broader and more articulated analysis and must also be assessed in relation to the consistency between objectives, content, methodologies, and tools adopted”.*

This consideration of the potential intervening role that societal agents have in the policy-making process is true for the broader public opinion: as highlighted by the studies of Busemeyer *et al.* (2020), public opinion can actually have an impact upon education policies if it is “loud”, namely, if the issue obtains broad media coverage, and if it is not “noisy”, namely, if it is cohesive.

Student associations, in this respect, can intervene at different points in time and with different modalities in the policy-making process, either by immediately showing dissent with protests, or throughout the policy-making process, or in the ex-post phase.

Let us now turn to the two specific lenses through which students' participation in the policy making process can be viewed.

## *2. Legitimising students' agency*

Student agency can be understood as the action and change capacity within the process of students' self-formation (Marginson, 2018). Framing such agency as “voice” (du Méric and Lucisano, 2019) helps to emphasize the active role that students can take on, in a group dimension. In the last decade, two main secondary school and university reform have shaped and are shaping the educational system: “Buona Scuola” (2015) and the wave of NRRP reforms in the aftermath of the Covid 19 crisis.

The first lens through which understanding under what conditions student associations can have an impact on the policy-making process is to understand whether their agency is legitimised.

The minimal understanding of this point implies that their contributions where constructive and collaborative do not go unseen or, to keep using the powerful voice image, muted. In the latest protest wave in the Netherlands<sup>2</sup>, between 2024 and 2025, even university directors' voices have joined their students protesting against cuts in higher education funding.

Della Porta *et al.* (2020) point out how one of the main criticisms for the effectiveness of such movements in Italy is, in the protest context, the capacity of building a “unitary protest front” and, in the consultation context more broadly, that of building stable alliances with social and political actors. However, especially in the aftermath of the Covid-crisis, additional research could

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<sup>2</sup> Per ulteriori dettagli si veda Utrecht University: <https://students.uu.nl/en/news/new-protest-action-higher-education-cuts-come-to-dam-square-in-amsterdam-on-10-june> (consultato il 31 marzo 2026).

illuminate additional dynamics at local level, considering the heterogeneity of the right to study application<sup>3</sup> in the different Italian regions, both at secondary and tertiary level. Similarly, Genicot (2012) emphasised how both the Italian and the French political culture of student representation are characterized by a contentious culture in the context of an unstable system of interest intermediation with a “mimetic” relationship with conflictual party politics at national level.

As already remarked by a then MIUR fonctionnaire, Foroni (2011: 215), one of the aspects that could foster students associations engagement is “reliable follow-up to the political commitment at the national, institutional and sub-institutional levels, perhaps with the definition of national guidelines and consistent revision of the norms”.

### *3. Searching for experts’ inputs*

The second lens through which understanding under what conditions student associations can have an impact on the policy-making process is to assess whether their contribution is approached as that of an “expert” input.

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis, for example, UDU (Unione degli Universitari) prepared a national report on the housing conditions of university students in Italy “Senza casa senza futuro”,<sup>4</sup> through a national-level questionnaire that obtained 20.000 responses. The association provided the relevant Ministries with the document, in the face of the fact that the national level reform within

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<sup>3</sup> Per ulteriori dettagli si veda Disco Lazio: <https://laziodisco.it/> (consultato il 31 marzo 2026).

<sup>4</sup> Per ulteriori dettagli si veda: [https://www.nuoverigenerazioni.eu/images/emergenza\\_fuorisede\\_-\\_ricerca\\_udu\\_1.pdf](https://www.nuoverigenerazioni.eu/images/emergenza_fuorisede_-_ricerca_udu_1.pdf) (consultato il 31 marzo 2026).

the NRRP plan would concern student housing, to be completed within the 2021-2026 window of opportunity. Notably, students protested<sup>5</sup> against the hardship of housing conditions in the spring and autumn 2023 in the main Italian university cities and the outcomes of the NRRP reforms are under their scrutiny, specifically, reform “1.7 Student housing and reform of student housing legislation”.<sup>6</sup>

#### *4. Concluding remarks*

This informative contribution has proposed a reflection on what conditions can facilitate the student associations involvement in policy-making more broadly and quality assurance processes more specifically.

Bearing in mind the historical unfolding of students’ protests and consultations in the last decade of educational reforms in Italy, we suggest that the acknowledgement of students’ voices by national policy-makers can be viewed both through the lenses of legitimising their agency, and as a search for reasoned input from experts that exercise a representation function for the different student bodies.

Academia keeps directing its attention to the study of students’ and teachers’ wellbeing, as the development of the platform “Ricerca con la scuola”<sup>7</sup> demonstrates at secondary-level.

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<sup>5</sup> Per ulteriori dettagli si veda Il Sole 24 ore: <https://alleyoop.ilsole24ore.com/2023/05/15/studenti-tenda-protesta-emergenza-alloggi-va-ascoltata/> (consultato il 31 marzo 2026).

<sup>6</sup> Per ulteriori dettagli si veda: <https://www.mur.gov.it/it/pnrr/misure-e-componenti/m4c1/riforma-17-alloggi-gli-studenti-e-riforma-della> (consultato il 31 marzo 2026).

<sup>7</sup> Per ulteriori dettagli si veda: <https://ricercaconlascuola.it/> (consultato il 31 marzo 2026).

Students, both at secondary and at tertiary level, in their own right, are in turn exploring different avenues of incidence in the policymaking and quality assurance process.

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