



Centro di Ricerca sugli Enti Pubblici Società di Fondazione Etica

STRUCTURAL SIZE AND ATTRACTIVENESS DYNAMICS IN ITALIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

Introduction

The Italian university system consists of a complex set of public and private institutions that play a central role in the production and dissemination of knowledge, the development of human capital, and the support of the country's economic and social growth. Within this system, public universities represent the core of higher education provision, both in terms of size and territorial distribution. Their role is embedded in an institutional framework defined by the Italian Constitution, particularly Articles 33 and 34, which assign the State the responsibility to ensure higher education and to promote access to the highest levels of study for capable and deserving students, even if they lack financial means.

Alongside the principle of access to higher education, increasing attention has also been paid in recent years to the quality and sustainability of the university system. Public policies have introduced monitoring and evaluation tools for teaching, research, and university governance activities, with the aim of ensuring consistent standards across institutions and improving the overall transparency and effectiveness of the system.

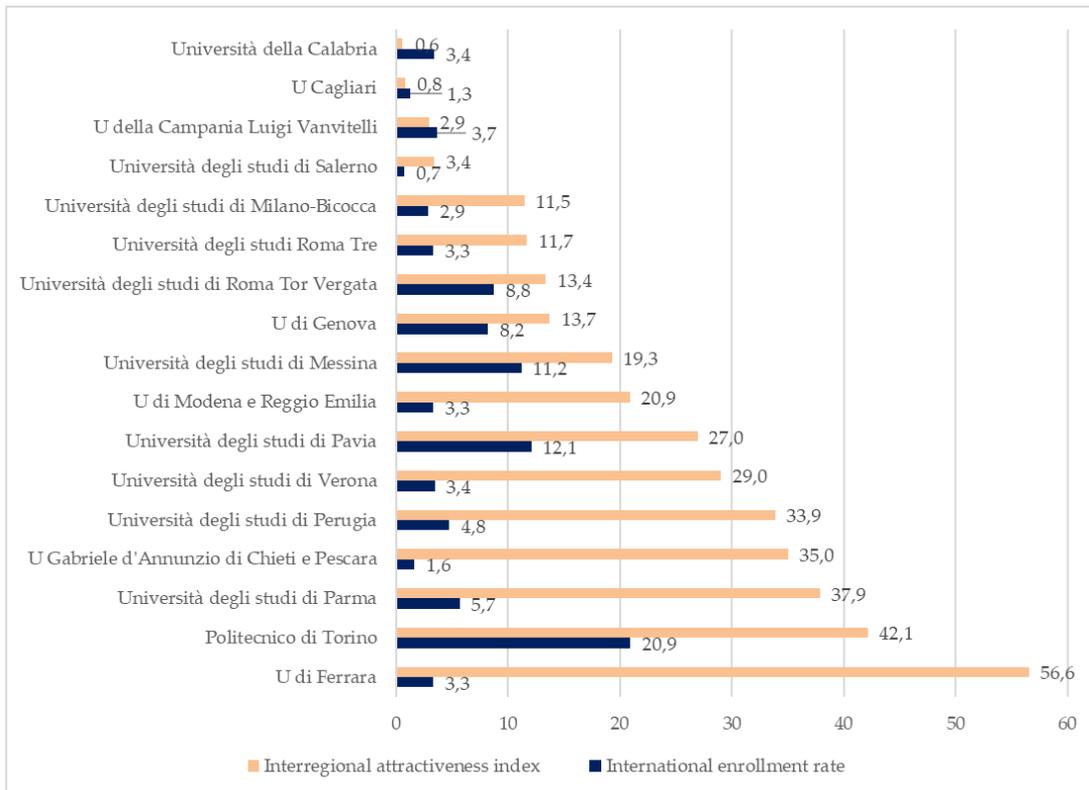
In this context, the analysis conducted by the REP Center is situated, focusing on Italian public universities and also including public polytechnic institutions. The scope considered comprises **61 universities distributed across the entire national territory**, characterized by significant differences in terms of size, number of students, organizational structure, and attractiveness. To make these institutions more comparable and to better interpret the dynamics of the university system, the analysis adopts a set of size-based classifications, enabling comparisons among universities with similar characteristics.

Within this multidimensional framework, **this article places particular emphasis on universities' attractiveness**, which is now considered a key factor in understanding their positioning at both the

national and international levels. Specifically, two indicators from the performance macro-area are examined.

International Enrollment Rate and Interregional Attractiveness Index

Source 1 – Interregional Attractiveness Index (%) and International Enrollment Rate (%) of medium-sized public universities. Academic year 2024–2025.



As previously mentioned, the analysis focuses on two indicators that are useful for describing the attractiveness of public universities. On the one hand, the **rate of international enrollment** measures the share of foreign students out of the total number of students enrolled in degree programs and provides an indication of the universities' level of international openness. On the other hand, the **interregional attractiveness index** considers the percentage of students coming from other Italian regions—relative to the geographical location of the university under analysis—out of the total number of enrolled students (excluding international students). This indicator makes it possible to assess the ability of universities to attract students beyond their local catchment area, thereby highlighting their positioning within the national context.

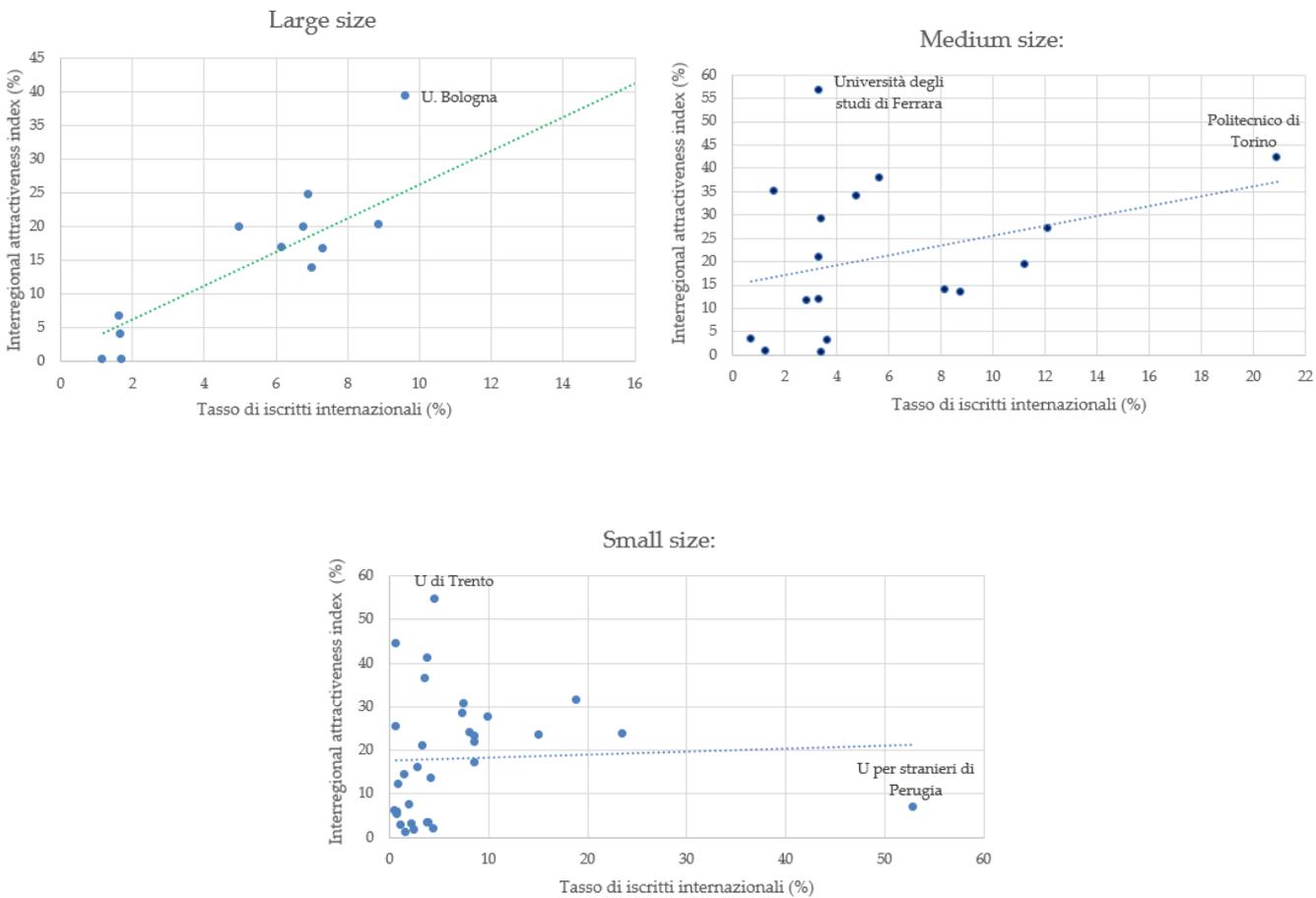
The most recent data available for these indicators refer to the 2024/2025 academic year. In general, one might expect that a university capable of attracting students from other Italian regions would also demonstrate a strong capacity to attract students at the international level. In other words, high interregional mobility should often be accompanied by a relatively significant presence of international students, as both dimensions partly reflect the visibility and attractiveness of the educational offer.

However, a comparison between the two indicators shows that this relationship is not always linear, particularly in the case of medium-sized universities (see Figure 1). Within this group, heterogeneous

patterns emerge: some universities display a strong capacity for interregional attraction but a more limited presence of international students, while in other cases the opposite phenomenon can be observed. Some examples clearly illustrate this dynamic. **University of Ferrara** shows the highest level of interregional attractiveness among the universities considered (56.6%), but a relatively low share of international students (3.3%). By contrast, **Polytechnic University of Turin** combines strong national attractiveness (42.1%) with the highest proportion of international students (20.9%), representing a case in which the two dimensions are more closely aligned. In other cases, such as **University of Chieti-Pescara** or **University of Perugia**, relatively high levels of interregional mobility (35.0% and 33.9%, respectively) are accompanied by more limited shares of international students. These examples suggest that, for medium-sized universities, the ability to attract students within the national context does not automatically translate into a comparable level of attractiveness at the international level.

Correlation

The joint analysis of **the rate of international student enrollment** and the **interregional attractiveness index** provides a less linear picture than one might intuitively expect. Considering the Italian public university system as a whole, and with reference to data from the 2024–2025 academic year, the two dimensions are only weakly correlated, with a Pearson coefficient of 0.17. In other words, there is no automatic relationship whereby a more international university is necessarily also more capable of attracting students from other regions of the country.



However, the picture changes significantly when **the size of universities** is taken into account. The relationship between internationalization and interregional mobility is not uniform, but varies markedly across large, medium, and small universities, as shown by the correlations reported in the table below:

<i>Size</i>	<i>Rank</i>	N public universities	Pearson correlation	Spearman correlation
<i>Large</i>	> 40 thousand enrollees	12	0.87	0.83
<i>Medium</i>	between 20,000 and 40,000 students	17	0.34	0.35
<i>Small</i>	< 20,000 enrollees	32	0.05	0.34

Within the **group of large universities**, a strongly positive and almost linear relationship emerges between internationalization and interregional attractiveness, with a Pearson coefficient of 0.87. The data points are arranged along an upward diagonal, suggesting that universities with a higher share of international students are also those that attract more students from other Italian regions.

This pattern points to a mechanism of cumulative reinforcement: universities that successfully position themselves at the international level also tend to strengthen their attractiveness within the national context. Several factors are likely to play a role, including the breadth of the educational offer, the availability of programs taught in English, the quality of student services, and the strength of academic and scientific networks.

From this perspective, university size is not merely a numerical attribute, but an organizational condition that enables institutions to operate effectively at multiple levels—local, national, and international. Attractiveness thus emerges as a structural characteristic of the institution, rooted in its overall configuration, rather than as the outcome of isolated initiatives.

Within the **cluster of medium-sized universities**, the relationship between the two indicators remains positive but significantly weaker, with a Pearson coefficient of 0.34. The dispersion of data points is wider, indicating greater diversity in positioning: some universities exhibit high interregional attractiveness alongside a limited rate of internationalization, while others show the opposite pattern.

A more heterogeneous model appears to emerge in this group. Some universities may have a strong disciplinary specialization that makes them attractive at the interregional level, but are not yet firmly integrated into international networks. This is the case, for example, of University of Ferrara, which records an international student rate of 3.3% for the 2024–2025 academic year, but an interregional attractiveness index of 56.6%, the highest value within the medium-sized cluster. In this case, competitiveness appears to be rooted primarily in the national context, supported by a favorable combination of territorial accessibility—the proximity to several cities in the Veneto region and its location along the Bologna–Padua–Venice railway axis—and a recognized educational offering in certain disciplinary fields. More broadly, these cases suggest that, for a portion of medium-sized universities, the ability to attract students from other regions can represent an autonomous form of competitiveness, not necessarily accompanied by a comparable level of international projection.

On the other hand, some universities exhibit a relatively higher share of international students without this translating into an equally high level of interregional mobility. An example is the University of Parma, which shows an internationalization rate above the cluster average (5.7%) but a more limited interregional attractiveness index compared to the best-performing cases (37.9%). In this instance, international openness does not yet appear to be accompanied by a comparable ability to attract students from other Italian regions.

In the cluster of **small-sized universities**, the linear relationship is weak. The scatter of points is highly dispersed and the trend line appears almost flat. Consistently, the Pearson coefficient is very low (0.05), while the Spearman correlation is higher (0.34). This difference—more pronounced than in the other size clusters, where the two values tend to be similar—indicates that there is no linear relationship between the two variables, although a certain monotonic tendency can still be observed: as the rate of internationalization increases, interregional attractiveness tends in some cases to grow as well, albeit in a non-proportional manner and with significant discontinuities. However, a closer examination of the distribution reveals some emblematic cases that help better interpret this fragmentation.

A first outlier is the University for Foreigners of Perugia, which records an international student rate of 53%, the highest not only within the group of small-sized universities but across the entire university system. However, this figure must be interpreted in light of the institution's very nature. The university was in fact established with a distinct mission compared to traditional universities: to teach Italian language and culture to non-Italian students. For this institutional function, the international component represents its natural pool of reference and therefore tends to be structurally very high. In this sense, the University for Foreigners of Perugia is a special case within its cluster: rather than indicating an exceptional level of international attractiveness comparable to that of other universities, the value reflects a different dynamic linked to the institution's specific specialization.

A different case is the University of Cassino and Southern Lazio, which, with 23.6% international students, ranks second among small-sized universities. Unlike the University for Foreigners of Perugia, this figure does not stem from an institutional mission specifically oriented toward international students, but rather appears to reflect a more active internationalization strategy, supported by English-taught courses, double degree programs, and scientific collaborations with international partners¹.

This strategy does not appear to be isolated, but rather consistent with a model adopted by several small-sized universities. In contexts characterized by limited economies of scale and more intense competition with large metropolitan universities, expanding the range of English-taught programs and building international academic networks represent relatively effective tools for strengthening visibility and attracting students in the global education market. Internationalization thus becomes not only an indicator of openness, but also a strategic lever for competitive positioning.

A more structured example of this approach is represented by Ca' Foscari University of Venice. In recent years, the university has developed a strong international orientation, offering numerous bachelor's and master's degree programs taught in English, along with an extensive network of double degree and joint degree programs in collaboration with European and international partner universities².

¹ https://www.unicas.it/notizie/offerta-didattica-2024-2025/?utm_source

² <https://www.unive.it/pag/12860/>

This strategy is also reflected at the doctoral level: several PhD programs are open to international participation and can be conducted in English, often within the framework of scientific collaborations with foreign academic institutions.

At the opposite end of the spectrum of the two indicators analyzed are universities that exhibit a strong capacity to attract students at the national level despite a very limited share of international students. This is the case, for example, of the University of Molise, which shows an internationalization rate of less than 1% but an interregional attractiveness index exceeding 40%. In this case, attractiveness appears to be rooted in the domestic scale, likely linked to specific program niches or a distinctive geographical position.

Between these two poles are universities that combine intermediate levels of both dimensions, but without a clearly identifiable or stable pattern. Notably, the University of Cassino and Southern Lazio stands out for both its international and interregional projection, with the share of international students and of students coming from other regions both around 20%. Overall, the group of small-sized universities is characterized by strong heterogeneity: no dominant model emerges, but rather a plurality of institutional trajectories, often linked to specializations, territorial contexts, or specific missions.

Overall, the analysis by size shows that the relationship between internationalization and interregional attractiveness is not homogeneous within the Italian public university system, but instead takes different forms depending on the number of enrolled students. In **large universities**, the two dimensions tend to evolve jointly, outlining a model of integrated attractiveness in which international projection and national competitiveness mutually reinforce each other. Among **medium-sized universities**, a more variegated picture emerges, where different strategies and positions coexist without a systematic convergence between the two drivers. Finally, among **small universities**, strong heterogeneity prevails: the linear relationship is weak and cases are distributed along trajectories that are often specialized or shaped by territorial factors. University size thus confirms itself as a structural factor that deeply influences attractiveness dynamics, making it necessary to adopt an analytical and policy approach that is attentive to the specific characteristics of the different segments of the system.