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# EDUCATION AS COMMONS

SELECTED PAPERS FROM  
AIS EDUCATION  
INTERNATIONAL  
MID-TERM CONFERENCE

UNIVERSITY OF PALERMO, 13-14-15 APRIL 2023



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## Organizers and partners

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# EDUCATION AS AN INDIVIDUAL AND COMMON GOOD: THE EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS OF GENERATION X IN A DIACHRONIC COMPARISON

Matteo Bonanni (University "Sapienza", Rome)

Orazio Giancola (University "Sapienza", Rome)

*Abstract* The analysis of inequalities over time, especially those related to education, has been a relevant topic in the social sciences. This study proposes a diachronic approach based on cohorts-generations from the postwar era to the contemporary period. It highlights the expansion of educational level but also how persistent gaps between social classes remain stable despite this expansion. In the article we then focus on the pivotal role of "Generation X" as a turning point in relation to the slowdown of a development deemed infinite and inevitable, seeking to open a reflection on the educational destination of future generations.

## INTRODUCTION: EDUCATION AS INDIVIDUAL AND COMMON GOOD IN THE ITALIAN CONTEXT

As well known in literature (Behrman, 1997; Schuller et al., 2004), education plays a crucial role both personal and aggregate level. On a personal level, education shapes the individual's knowledge, skills, and abilities. It contributes to personal growth, intellectual development, and the acquisition of competencies that can enhance life's opportunities for social mobility. Simultaneously, education contributes to the overall well-being and development of society (Fägerlind & Saha, 2016). Well-educated individuals tend to adopt healthier lifestyles, have access to superior healthcare (Marmot & Wilkinson, 2005). In this sense we can consider the education as a common good and a fundamental pillar of the democracy. A well-educated population tends to have better health outcomes (Giancola & Colarusso, 2020), an overall higher quality of life (Edgerton, 2011) and Improves and strengthens participation in civic and democratic life (Assirelli, 2014). Informed citizens, fostered by education, are more likely to contribute to community development and engage in civic responsibilities. These benefits are shared by the entire community, making education a common good. From an economic perspective, a well-educated population contributes to

economic growth and innovation (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2010). Individuals with higher education levels are better equipped to navigate the workforce, adapt to technological advancements, and contribute to the development of new ideas and industries (Oecd, 2019). Historically, education is a potential key driver of social mobility, offering individuals from diverse backgrounds the opportunity to improve their socio-economic status and break the cycle of poverty. It also plays a crucial role in promoting equal opportunities and reducing social and economic inequality. At the same time, we have to be careful because social systems are characterized by persistent inequalities (Pfeffer, 2008; Ball 2010). This contradiction is evident if we look at the Italian case in a diachronical perspective (Ballarino & Checchi, 2006; Giancola, 2010; Triventi, 2014; Gremigni, 2020). The increasing in the participation and achievement on education tells us nothing about social class differentials. The hypothesis of this paper is that the expansion of the participation in education and the decrease of social inequality in educational achievements do not go hand in hand. Starting from a theoretical approach that attempts to balance the concepts of cohort and generation, on the INAPP PLUS 2018 database, we propose an analysis that on the one hand shows how and how much the shares of the population with an upper secondary degree and a tertiary degree have increased, and on the other, we record class gaps that remain stable as the educational qualification above the educational threshold saturated in the previous cohort-generation transition increases. Therefore, we consider whether and how much the effects of ascriptive variables (first and foremost social origin) affected the identified cohorts-generations in a context of increasing participation. We then focus our attention on generation defined as “X,” caught between the economic boom of the 1960s and the first global crises, the saturation of lower educational levels, and the transformation of public and labor policies.

## **COHORT OR GENERATION? THE CASE OF THE X-ERS**

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in the concept of generation in Italy (Istat, 2016; Casavecchia, 2021). Following the sociological heritage of Mannheim (1952), we define a generation as a group of individuals linked by generational unity, living in a well-known historical period. However, this concept has historically posed challenges, particularly in standard-type analyses, due to its lack of clear boundaries. Norman Ryder proposed a solution by introducing the concept of a cohort (1965). In his vision, a cohort refers to a group of individuals who experience the

same event at the same time with distinct boundaries. Although these two concepts may seem like rivals, the cohort concept aims to address the historical problem of generations, the lack of clear boundaries and unknown duration (Berger, 1960; Spitzer, 1973).

Numerous solutions have been proposed in the debate to resolve questions, such as the cohort generation (Elder, 1978) or social/sociological generations (Woodman & Wyn, 2015). In this case, we will use the term “cohort-generations” because the cohort is a fundamental instrument for our standard-type analysis, and the concept of generation allows us to approach the analysis, interpretation, and construction of groups that share similarities in terms of time and socio-historical cultural ties.

Our focus is on the cohort-generation X in comparison with the preceding generation, the Baby Boomers, and the subsequent one, Generation Y. This generation is named after Douglas Coupland’s novel (1991), which describes the youth situation in the 1980s and 1990s. The cohort-generation X and its successors experience changes in the social system’s political and economic complexity (Cassina et al., 2015), particularly in government and welfare (France, 2016), education and labor (Breen & Muller, 2020), and family and relationships. Of interest to us, embedded in this broader process undergone by Generation X, is the paradox of the expansion of upper secondary education and the liberalization of access to university (Giancola & Benadusi, 2015), alongside a reduction in opportunities due to extensive labor market deregulation that seems to have increased the climate of uncertainty, particularly in employment.

Examining cohort-generation X within this framework of change, we observe how it has been labeled over time as “transitional” (Istat, 2016) and “invisible” (Merico, 2004). In the contemporary age, this generation is the first to experience significantly worse living conditions than its predecessors, despite generally improved social conditions and expanding education. While living, educational, and working conditions were improving in some respects, the mobility that characterized the decades before the advent of Generation X, along with the associated opportunities, was diminishing (Schizzerotto, 2002). The conditions of younger generations increasingly resembled those of the early 20th century (Schizzerotto et al., 2011).

## **HYPOTHESIS, DATA, AND METHODOLOGY**

To understand the dynamics of the expansion of education and the persistence of inequality during the early years of the young age of cohort-generation X, we utilized the INAPP PLUS 2018 (Participation, Labor, Unemployment, Survey) database. The survey is based on a large sample of Italians, focusing specifically on individuals' education, including their educational path, and family background.

In alignment with previous literature, the age groups representing the cohorts are defined as follows:

- 30-39 years old (born between 1989/1988 and 1980/1979), approximating Generation Y.
- 40-49 years old (1979/1978 and 1969/1970), approximating Generation X.
- 50-64 years old (1968/1969 and 1953/1954), approximating the first Baby Boomers.
- 65-74 years old (1953/1952 and 1944/1945), approximating the second.

In the two youngest age groups, individuals still in education were excluded, resulting in a marginal reduction in the sample that remains statistically significant. The sample includes 36'944 cases, weighted to 36'035'280.

The primary objective is to illustrate the dual dynamics of the democratization of access and participation in the educational system, juxtaposed with the persistence of inequalities related to social origin and structural elements inherent to the Italian educational system (e.g., the tripartite structure of school tracks at the upper secondary level; Benadusi & Giancola 2014).

We hypothesize that, in line with the principles of maximally maintained inequality (MMI) (Raftery & Hout, 1993), participation in education increases while class inequality among education levels remains unchanged. This analytical approach aligns well with Randall Collins' (2019) fundamental observations regarding the inflation of educational credentials over time. The Italian case is paradigmatic in this sense, as the democratization of access to a given level of education (as seen with the 1962 reform of lower secondary education) is linked, after a few years, to inflation in terms of the attainment of that educational credential. This shift steadily elevates the distinctive level of education concerning entry into the labor market or the achievement of more prestigious social positions.

To address questions related to the expansion of education, education differentials, determinants of it, and the probability of graduating, we employed single and bivariate analyses initially, followed by multivariate linear (Marzadro & Schizzerotto, 2014) and multinomial models.

## THE CONTRADICTIONARY EFFECTS OF THE EXPANSION OF PARTICIPATION

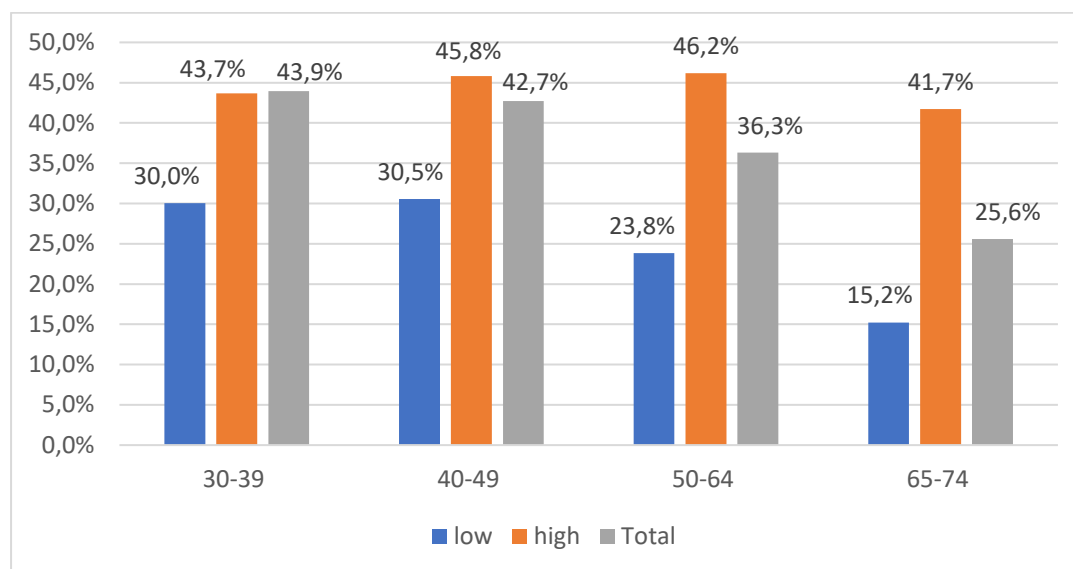
Supported by evidence, the level of education of Italians is increasing over time. The most commonly attained educational level for the oldest generation (65-74 years old) and Baby Boomers (50-64) is lower secondary, at 43,6% and 47,1%, respectively. For the X-ers cohort-generation (40-49 years old) and Y-ers (30-39), the most achieved level is upper secondary, with rates of 42.8% for the former and 44% for the latter.

		Cohort-generation				Total
		30-39 y.o.	40-49 y.o.	50-64 y.o.	65-74 y.o.	
Level of Education	Primary	0,6%	1,0%	3,8%	20,0%	5,3%
	Lower Secondary	29,7%	37,9%	47,1%	43,6%	40,5%
	Upper Secondary	44,0%	42,8%	36,4%	25,7%	37,7%
	Tertiary	25,7%	18,3%	12,7%	10,7%	16,4%
Total		100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

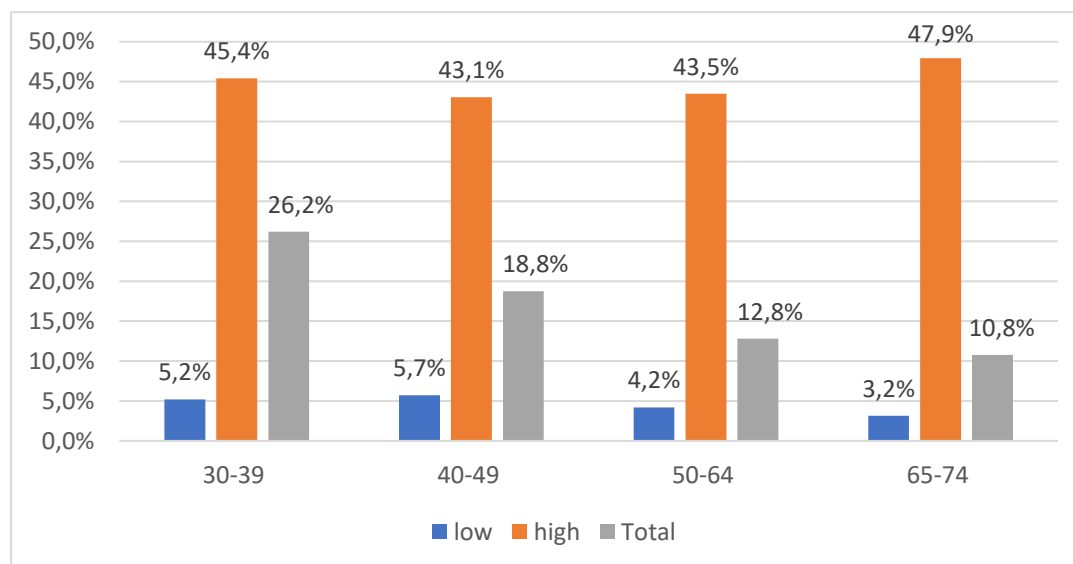
Table 1. Expansion of education among cohort-generation. Source: Authors elaboration on INAPP PLUS 2018

From the oldest to the youngest cohort-generation, tertiary attainment is increasing, although it remains a marginal percentage of the total. It increases by only 15 percentage points from with a clear rise between the X-ers and Boomers (by 5.6 percentage points) and between the X-ers and Y-ers (by 7.4 points). In Table 1, it is possible to observe that among X-ers, educational attainment substantially improves compared to the previous generation. For the Y-ers, the change seems to be consolidating, driven both by policies promoting openness and the reduction of barriers to entry, and the need for skills in the new knowledge market. The expansion of education appears to reduce the distance between the highest and the lowest social strata. The gap between “classes” in graduation attainment drops below 20% for the first time in cohort-generation X, and in Y this decreases again to below 15%. This effect can be defined as a democratic effect of education, as it demonstrates the potential for achieving equity through it (Benadusi & Giancola, 2021). While the

benefits of expansion are evident at the upper secondary level (Graph 1), the perverse effects of this phenomenon must be addressed at the tertiary level (Graph 2). At the tertiary level, degree attainment increases, however, when examined through the lens of social class or status, we observe that the distance between social strata remains constant.



Graph 1. Effect of expansion at upper secondary level. Source: Authors elaboration on IN-APP PLUS 2018.



Graph 2. Maximally Maintained Inequality at tertiary level. Source: Authors elaboration on INAPP PLUS 2018.



The gap, in our case, is most significant among those aged 65-74 (44.7 percentage points) and narrows to Generation X (37.4 points). For the youngest cohort-generation, this distance begins to grow again, reaching 40.2 percentage points gap between the highest and lowest strata. This result aligns with the principles of the MMI: if a level of education reaches saturation among members of the upper class, then the class distance, along with inequalities, is transferred to the next level, as visible in this specific case (Raftery & Hout, 1993).

## THE FACTORS AFFECTING THE EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

To observe some of the determinants of education, we developed a linear regression model in which we assign a pseudo-ordinal score ranging between 1 and 4 to educational levels (Marzadro & Schizzerotto, 2014). The model accounts 27% of the variance ( $R^2=0.270$ ). The independent variables considered are the gender, the family status, and the cohort generations age range described in the previous paragraph.

	Non-std. Coefficient		Std. Coefficient	
	B	Std. Error	Beta	Sign.
(Costant)	2,008	0,00		0,00
Male (vs. Female)	-0,043	0,00	-0,026	0,00
medium-low family status (vs. low)	0,162	0,00	0,077	0,00
medium family status (vs. low)	0,349	0,00	0,169	0,00
medium-high family status (vs. low)	0,581	0,00	0,283	0,00
high family status (vs. low)	1,078	0,00	0,537	0,00
cohort-generation 30-39 y.o (vs 65-74 y.o)	0,317	0,00	0,156	0,00
cohort-generation 40-49 y.o (vs 65-74 y.o)	0,303	0,00	0,163	0,00
cohort-generation 50-64 y.o (vs 65-74 y.o)	0,244	0,00	0,143	0,00

Table 2. Determinants of education. Source: Authors elaboration on INAPP PLUS 2018

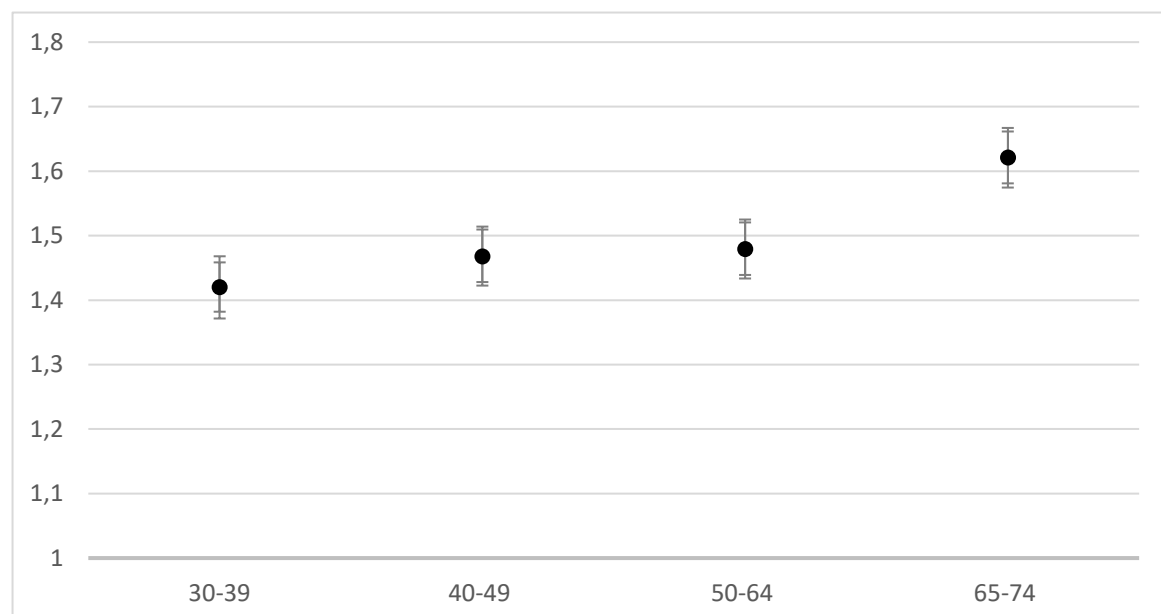
In Table 2 we can observe a slight disadvantage of males compared to females ( $\beta = -0.026$ ), probable due to the feminization of education (Giancola & Fornari, 2009; Decataldo & Giancola, 2014). Family status has an increasing effect among statuses: individuals with higher status are potentially more likely to attain a higher level of education compared to those with lower status. The  $\beta$  values are 0.537 for high family status, 0.283 for medium-high, 0.169 for medium, and 0.077 for medium-low status, with all categories compared to the low family status category.

Examining the last variable, we can infer that the cohort-generation effect is strong, especially for cohort-generation X (40-49 years old) where the  $\beta$  value is the highest (0.163, with the reference category being the oldest 65-74 years old). We can conclude that over time, compared to the older generation, all cohort-generations have had greater educational opportunities, especially X-ers, likely due to the effects of the expansion of compulsory schooling to age 16 (1962) and the liberalization of tertiary education access (1969).

### THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL BACKGROUND AND SCHOOL TRACK ON THE PROBABILITY OF ACHIEVE A TERTIARY DEGREE BY COHORT-GENERATION

In this step, we conducted a binomial logistic regression model to estimate the probability of obtaining a tertiary education degree by cohort-generation. The observed variables were gender, family status, and the upper secondary track choice (general school/liceo, technical/vocational or professional institute).

Examining gender, what was initially a disadvantage for the female gender in the probability of obtaining a tertiary degree turns into an advantage. From the cohort-generation of 50-64 and X onward, men are less likely than women to obtain a tertiary degree.



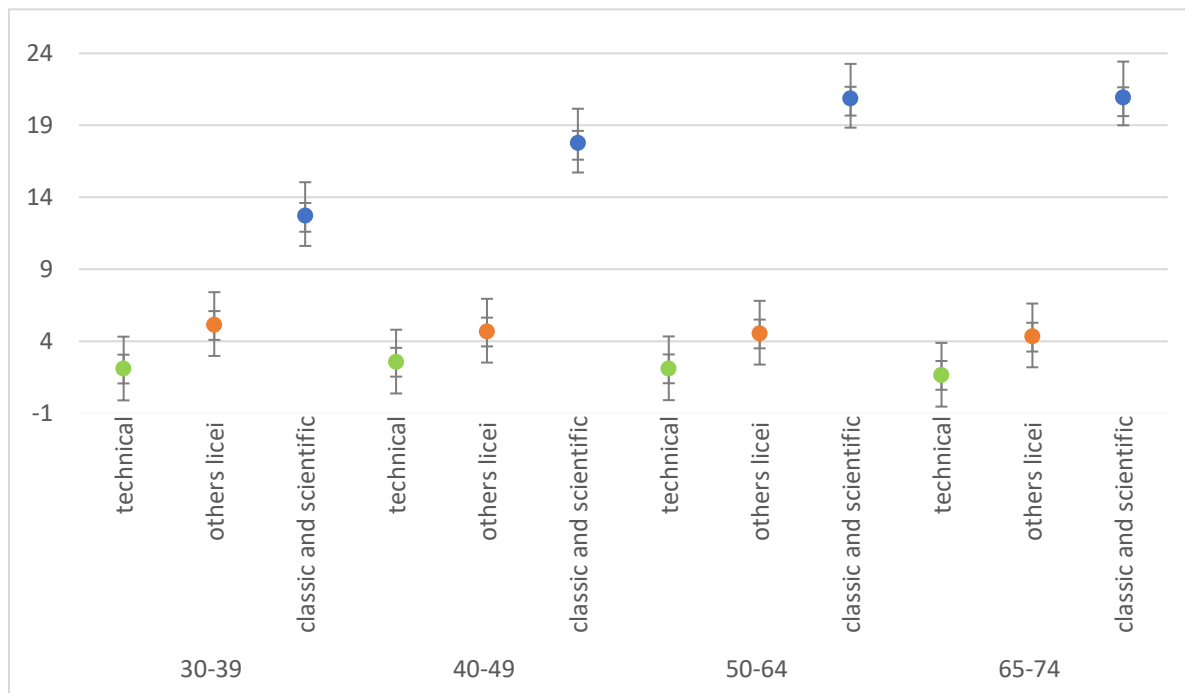
Graph 3. Effect of family background on tertiary education attainment by cohort-generation (see appendix for the full table). Source: Authors elaboration on INAPP PLUS 2018.

Considering family status, there are two dynamics. On the one hand, over time and due to the expansion of education, this variable remains fundamental for explaining the intergenerational reproduction of inequalities. On the other hand, the probability of obtaining a tertiary education qualification has decreased over time, from 62% for the older cohort-generation to 42% for the younger cohort-generation ( $1 - \exp(\beta) * 100$ ). What we can observe graphically is that the inequalities of origin are reduced but are not annulled from one cohort-generation to another, remaining marked. Although access to tertiary education has been liberalized, significant barriers still exist due to attributable factors.

The last and crucial variable considered is the track of upper secondary education chosen. This variable is the one that most influences the probability of achieving a tertiary degree (Benadusi & Giancola, 2014). The choice of the upper secondary track is one of the links of the chain effect studied by Giancola and Salmieri (2020; 2022). This choice is influenced by one's background and, in turn, affects the likelihood of reaching a tertiary education level.

It can be seen from Graph 4 that a general education diploma (classical and scientific *liceo*) has a stronger impact on the probability of graduation compared to a technical school and other *licei*, all considered with the vocational track as the reference category.

However, the effect of these *licei* diminishes over time due to the increased enrollment of students from every social class (In the past, these schools were attended primarily by the elite) (Ballarino & Panichella, 2014). While for individuals aged 65-74, the prestige of this curriculum significantly increased the probability of achieving a tertiary degree after obtaining the diploma, this is no longer the case for younger cohort-generations. What was once considered a disadvantage in obtaining a tertiary degree—namely, choosing a track other than the classical and scientific one—is still a discriminating factor today but not as pronounced as in the past.



Graph 4. Effect of school track on tertiary education attainment by cohort-generation generation (see appendix for the full table). Source: Authors elaboration on INAPP PLUS 2018.

In summary, the impact of different tracks has become more similar over time (with the vocational track as the reference category). The role of classical and scientific *liceo* has decreased, while the impact of technical and other *licei* has remained approximately relatively constant over time.

Several factors contribute to the attainment of a tertiary education degree; observing them across generations enables us to capture their trends over time. All observed variables continue to influence the probability of obtaining a tertiary degree, though less unevenly than in the past, but still significantly.

## CONCLUSION

The analyses in the paper reveal a positive trend in Italy spanning over 70 years regarding the acquisition of medium-high educational credentials across generations. The post-war push and reconstruction have mainly affected the 65-74 years old in the sample. On the other hand, the 50-64 age group, the Baby boomers, has benefited not only from educational reforms but also from economic development, leading to a growing demand for increasingly skilled labor and the progressive creation of employment in the tertiary and service sectors. The 40-49 age group has experienced

mass education at both lower and upper educational levels, but with initial signs of stagnation in reducing inequalities related to obtaining the highest educational credentials. Generation X, in particular, has undergone the most significant changes compared to previous cohort-generation, as shown in Table 1. Most notably, they attain an upper secondary level of education, while the previous generation only reached a lower secondary level. Moreover, starting with Generation X, the reduction of inequalities with associated perverse effects becomes clearly evident (Graph 3 and 4). The expansion of participation in upper secondary education (and the subsequent tertiary level) demonstrates a reduction in the effect of the upper secondary track attended on the likelihood of achieving a tertiary level of education. Furthermore, as hypothesized, the influence of educational credentials acquired at the upper secondary level, overall, diminishes in its effect on the probability of attaining a tertiary level (according to Randall Collins' Credential Society thesis, 2019). This pattern is apparent at the  $\beta$  coefficient presented in the Table 3 in the appendix, showcasing a decline across cohort-generations, especially for the classical and scientific *liceo* (the academic track in the Italian educational system). Educational attainment differentials by social origin remain strong and stable in tertiary education, as stated by MMI. Adding to the interpretive complexity is the fact that the effect of differentiation by track at the upper secondary level has reduced the privilege associated with having attended a *liceo*. Nevertheless, at the same time, this advantage in comparison with other tracks (other *licei*, technical, and vocational) has stabilized. Overall, the upper secondary level remains strongly influenced by social background (through the choice of school track). From a diachronic perspective, the results clearly indicate that Generation X can be considered the breakthrough generation, bringing a relative advantage over previous cohorts-generations but also many contradictions, with non-linear and complex effects in the sphere of social mobility. The analysis then leaves open a question about the future: given that the last two cohorts-generations analyzed are characterized by a stabilization of educational inequality by social origin, predicting trends in inequality for future generations (Millennials, Gen Z, and so on) becomes challenging. These generations, even more than Gen-X, exist in a context of widespread educational expansion but with persistent and new forms of social inequality. Moreover, considering the highly deregulated labor market and the marketization of services and other areas of social life, the choices and expectations of young people will need careful consideration. In this sense, the field is open for new analyses and interpretations of long-term trends.

## APPENDIX

Cohort-generation	B	S.E.	Exp(B)	95% C.I. for		
				EXP(B)	Lower Upper	
30-39	Female (vs. Male)	0,559	0,002	1,75	1,742	1,758
	Family status	0,483	0,001	1,42	1,415	1,425
	Technical institute (vs. Vocational)	0,734	0,004	2,082	2,064	2,101
	Others Licei (vs. Vocational)	1,637	0,005	5,14	5,091	5,19
	Classic and Scientific Liceo (vs. Vocational)	2,543	0,005	12,718	12,604	12,832
	Costant	-2,637	0,004	0,072		
40-49	Female (vs. Male)	0,339	0,002	1,403	1,397	1,409
	Family status	0,384	0,001	1,468	1,466	1,471
	Technical institute (vs. Vocational)	0,94	0,004	2,559	2,537	2,582
	Others Licei (vs. Vocational)	1,544	0,005	4,683	4,638	4,729
	Classic and Scientific Liceo (vs. Vocational)	2,878	0,005	17,773	17,612	17,936
	Costant	-2,735	0,004	0,065		
50-64	Female (vs. Male)	0,035	0,002	1,036	1,031	1,04
	Family status	0,392	0,001	1,479	1,477	1,482
	Technical institute (vs. Vocational)	0,741	0,005	2,098	2,079	2,117
	Others Licei (vs. Vocational)	1,514	0,005	4,545	4,502	4,59
	Classic and Scientific Liceo (vs. Vocational)	3,038	0,005	20,863	20,676	21,052
	Costant	-2,708	0,004	0,067		
65-74	Female (vs. Male)	-0,181	0,004	0,835	0,829	0,841
	Family status	0,351	0,002	1,621	1,618	1,624
	Technical institute (vs. Vocational)	0,498	0,007	1,646	1,624	1,668
	Others Licei (vs. Vocational)	1,468	0,007	4,34	4,28	4,401
	Classic and Scientific Liceo (vs. Vocational)	3,041	0,007	20,925	20,64	21,214
	Costant	-2,2	0,006	0,111		

Table 3. Binomial logistic model on tertiary education attainment by cohort-generation.  
Source: Authors elaboration on INAPP PLUS 2018

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# EDUCATION AS COMMONS

## Selected Papers from AIS Education International Mid-Term Conference 2023

This volume stems from papers presented at the mid-term conference of the Education Section of the AIS (Italian Association of Sociology), held in Palermo, Italy, on April 12-14, 2023. Under the theme Education as Commons: Democratic Values, Social Justice, and Inclusion in Education, the conference inspired a call for extended contributions to capture key insights shared there. Reflecting the conference's pluralistic approach, the volume includes sociological and interdisciplinary perspectives, with both theoretical and empirical contributions that employ a range of methods—from qualitative to quantitative and mixed—and languages.

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