

Higher Ed-spresso. The Joys and Woes of an Italian College Student

Walter De Marco (September 03, 2008)



Inefficient services and unaffordable housing may result in academic delays and financial distress for students.

Studying in Florence may sound tremendously alluring to ambitious students from elsewhere, enthused by the thought of living in a city that has bred some of the world's foremost artists and thinkers of all time. Yet not everyone is aware of the challenges faced by University of Florence students.

In spite of the city's many amenities and the highly affordable academic fees, students must deal with the high cost of housing in the cradle of the Renaissance. For the nearly 60,000 students at the



University of Florence, tuition costs between 1,000 and 2,000 euro per year; therefore the heaviest financial burden is the astronomical living expenses.

The official length of a standard degree program—or laurea—is three years. A laurea specialistica (specialized degree) should take five years. One can obtain the specialized degree at the end of the laurea, or by combining the two programs together. However, here in Florence it is not unusual to run into university students who are already in their late twenties, if not well into their thirties. Monica, a fine arts major who is originally from Puglia, admits that she has passed her thirtieth birthday, and she does not expect to graduate until next year. 'I have to work for a living and help my aging mother with her housekeeping', she explains with a sigh.

But Italy is not the only place where a student's career is affected by jobs or family matters, one may argue. So, what's causing such big delays in graduation around here? The answer lies in the way services are run in the Bel Paese. Imagine a system where most services are highly institutional, and where you have to stand in line for virtually everything. Basically half of your time is spent in a queue, from buying your books to eating at the student cafeteria, from meeting with one of your professors to requesting a transcript.

Your living situation can also greatly affect the time it will take you to complete your degree. Because the university is spread across the city, if you can't afford to live fairly close to your department, you are penalized by the long commute to your classes. Even small delays like this can add up and affect on the number of years it takes for you to get the highly valued degree.

Then why don't the students just live in student residences? Different from most English-speaking countries, living in a dormitory in Italy is not the norm, but an exception.. Only one in 50 students at the University of Florence manages to live in one of its nine residence halls. Every year, the university administers a highly competitive ranking process, called a concorso, to assign the 1300 available spaces. Successful candidates are rewarded with a free living space since students who apply are selected on the basis of both academic standing and financial need. All the others have to settle for a room or a shared room in a private apartment, unless they are lucky to have parents who live close enough so that they can live at home.

The Regional Office for the Right to University Education (ARSDU) manages the yearly competition for student housing at the University of Florence. 'Students fill out an application form meant to assess both their academic merit and financial needs', said ARSDU official Enrico Andreini, 'Their answers are verified by a professional committee and [those] qualified are subsequently offered free accommodation in a university residence'. Alternatively, the winners can opt for a monetary grant, which helps reduce the cost of living away from home.

One way or another, nothing comes without a heavy price tag for students in this romantic city, but to those who do manage to graduate amidst so many hurdles and pitfalls, success must surely taste sweeter than anything.

Bio

Walter De Marco is an Italian-Canadian teacher and freelance journalist. He has an MA from the University of Buffalo, NY, and has published articles on education and culture in various American, Canadian and Italian newspapers.



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