

Academic Dynasties: Familism and Productivity in the Italian Academia

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ABSTRACT

Extensive anecdotal evidence suggests that practices related to familism and nepotism are widespread in Italian universities. However, systematic evidence is not available since information on family relations is generally unavailable or confidential. We explore the relevance of family connections in the Italian academia using a novel dataset on Italian university professors with a particular focus on the informative content of professors' last names. We construct an index of academic 'homonymity' by comparing the relative frequency of a last name in each academic unit and in the population of the area where the university is located using data from the Italian fiscal census. Our index provides an intuitive measure of how disproportionately common a certain last name is within a specific academic unit relative to the overall underlying population. We use this index to investigate differences across academic units in the relevance of family connections. Our results are highly consistent with the anecdotal evidence and show significant differences across regions, universities, and disciplines. We find that familism, as measured by our index, is also negatively correlated with standard measures of social trust. With regard to the relationship between familism and academic productivity, we find that universities with higher levels of familism tend to be characterized by poorer academic performance, especially in terms of research achievement.

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