

IRMI (INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH UNIT ON MIGRATION): SHORT INTERDISCIPLINARY PROGRAMME INTRODUCING MIGRATION STUDIES

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Abstract

This contribution analyses the interdisciplinary educational programme on migration developed by the Interdisciplinary Research Unit on Migration (IRMI) at the University of Florence, aimed at first-year Political Science students. The programme conceives migration as a structural and long-term social phenomenon, integrating sociological, historical, political, legal and media perspectives. Introduced in 2019 as an early intervention in the curriculum, it combines research-based teaching, active learning and ethical reflection, making use of narrative materials, audiovisual sources and collaborations with third sector organisations. Particular attention is paid to the ethics of testimony and the critical analysis of public narratives on migration. Qualitative results indicate a strengthening of students' analytical and critical skills and a greater awareness of the ethical and political dimensions of the migration phenomenon. The programme represents a replicable model of interdisciplinary teaching, capable of linking research, teaching and public engagement.

Keywords: Research unit, Interdisciplinarity, Migration, Workshop.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Interdisciplinary Research Unit on Migration (IRMI) at the University of Florence has developed a short interdisciplinary educational programme aimed at introducing first-year university students to migration studies. The programme addresses migration as a complex and structural social phenomenon, integrating perspectives from sociology, history, political science, law and media studies.

Founded in 2014, IRMI is an interdisciplinary research unit dedicated to the study of migration processes, characterised by a strong multidisciplinary approach. It mainly brings together professors and researchers from the Department of Political and Social Sciences, but also involves scholars from other departments of the University of Florence, such as the Department of Law, and a wide network of researchers and collaborators from numerous Italian universities. In addition, IRMI maintains extensive collaborations with third sector organisations, including Oxfam, Caritas Italiana and COSPE, as well as with institutions engaged in the collection and archiving of primary narrative sources, such as the DIMMI (Diari dei Migranti) archive. These collaborations significantly strengthen both the research and teaching activities of the unit.

Starting in the 2018/2019 academic year, first-year Political Science workshops offer students a broad interdisciplinary overview of topics ranging from key political ideas and theories (such as liberalism, democracy and political thought doctrines) to a practical understanding of contemporary social and political phenomena (migration, the third sector, social movements), from reading and interpreting statistical data to reflecting on current issues (digitalisation, the environment, work, peace and the European Union). Some courses focus on transferable skills, such as writing, personal communication and career planning, while others offer innovative approaches, for example using game design to understand economic processes or analysing cinema and religion as cultural forms of meaning. The variety of seminars allows students, from their first year onwards, to explore different aspects of political and social knowledge, develop critical, methodological and communication skills, and experiment with forms of active learning that go beyond traditional lessons.

In this context, since the inception of these workshops, a special programme has been offered focusing on the theme of migration, with titles that have shifted from an initial emphasis on 'immigration' to 'migration', culminating in the promotion of the theme of 'human mobility'.

Adopting an active and participatory teaching approach, the programme combines lectures, guided discussions, narrative materials and audiovisual resources to promote critical thinking and student involvement. Particular emphasis is placed on ethical issues related to research and communication on migration. Drawing on IRMI's broader research experience and its network of applied projects, the

programme explicitly links research-based knowledge, teaching practices and public engagement with the aim of developing critical literacy on migration.

Migration is often framed in public and political discourse as an emergency or security issue. However, critical studies on migration have shown that migration is a structural and long-term phenomenon linked to global inequalities, labour markets, welfare regimes, political transformations and historical processes. This perspective highlights how migration is part of broader dynamics of social change rather than representing a temporary deviation from the social order.

For this reason, higher education plays a crucial role in providing students with analytical tools that enable them to look beyond simplified narratives. Universities can serve as spaces where complex phenomena such as migration are addressed through critical reflection, interdisciplinary dialogue and data-driven discussion.

In response to this challenge, in 2019 IRMI introduced a short interdisciplinary programme for first-year Political Science students. The programme is designed as an early intervention within the academic curriculum, providing students with a conceptual framework prior to disciplinary specialisation. Over the years, the programme has seen the participation of approximately 300-350 students, with an average of 50-70 students per academic year, reflecting continued student interest and institutional consolidation.

2 EDUCATIONAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The programme draws on critical studies of migration, particularly approaches that conceptualise migration as a constitutive feature of contemporary societies rather than as an exception. Authors such as Castles, de Haas and Sassen emphasise the relationship between migration, globalisation and social transformation, offering a theoretical lens that informs the programme's content.

In addition, the programme draws on sociological theories of citizenship and welfare, which analyse how migration redefines access to rights, social protection and belonging. These perspectives enable students to link migration to broader debates on democracy, inequality and social cohesion.

From an educational perspective, the programme adopts an interdisciplinary pedagogy understood not as a simple juxtaposition of disciplines, but as their systematic integration around shared analytical problems. Migration is used as an exemplary field through which students can understand how legal frameworks, political decision-making processes, historical trajectories, economic structures and symbolic representations intertwine. This integrative approach is in line with theories of higher education that emphasise the value of problem-based and issue-centred learning.

Starting in the 2022–2023 academic year, some IRMI members have coordinated additional seminars for first-year students. These seminars have addressed the topic of migration both as a central analytical axis and through complementary perspectives, such as climate migration and human rights in Europe and Africa.

3 METHODOLOGY AND TEACHING APPROACH

The programme uses an active learning methodology that promotes interpretation, discussion and reflection rather than passive knowledge acquisition. Teaching activities include case studies, analysis of policy documents, media monitoring exercises and discussion of narrative sources.

A distinctive feature of the programme is the systematic integration of research results produced within IRMI into teaching activities. Ongoing research projects provide empirical material, comparative perspectives and methodological tools that enrich classroom discussion and expose students to the research process.

Audiovisual materials play a key role in the methodology. Documentaries developed as part of IRMI research projects, such as "Shqipëri" and "A city suits my eyes", are used as analytical tools to engage students in the narration, memory and representation of migrants (including in courses related to the Jean Monnet module). These materials allow students to explore how research findings can be translated into narrative forms and disseminated beyond the academic audience.

A central component of the programme concerns the ethics of testimony and narrative sources. Students are encouraged to critically reflect on the conditions under which migrants' testimonies are collected, mediated and disseminated, paying attention to issues such as consent, power asymmetries, the protection of vulnerable people and the risks of reification or stereotyping. Testimonies are therefore not

considered neutral data, but situated narratives produced within specific social, political and relational contexts. This perspective allows students to understand testimonies both as epistemic resources and as ethical responsibilities.

The programme is structured into thematic modules that have remained relatively stable over time, allowing for cumulative refinement based on teaching experience and ongoing research developments. The main topics include migration data and indicators, structural causes of mobility, European and Italian migration and asylum policies, media narratives and autobiographical accounts of migrants.

The main programme comprises the following modules:

- Migration routes and mobility
- Numbers and narratives
- Mobility, migration and politicisation
- Mobility, migration and the media

Open round table (with informed witnesses) and collective reflection on the topics and issues raised during the course; interest was shown, for example, in the discussion on the referendum on Italian citizenship (2025).

Three geographical areas were the focus of particular attention in research and teaching: sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and the Balkans. These geographical areas were not only used to understand the migratory flows originating there, but also the states and territories through which mobility passes. In particular, the Balkan case (less well known in Italy) led to a shift in attention towards the countries of the former Yugoslavia and Albania, where the role of social workers in the migration process (both in transit and outbound) was also studied.

This structure is reviewed annually to introduce new analytical perspectives. A recurring example is the focus on the renewed large-scale emigration of Italians abroad over the last decade, addressed through a deliberate change of perspective. In these cases, in addition to the constant use of personal testimonies, the programme integrates reflections developed in collaboration with NGOs working in the field, role-playing activities (e.g. on political discourse) and active analysis of public communication, both institutional and non-institutional. These activities are complemented by more traditional formats, such as book presentations or research reports discussed directly with their authors.

The research-based, practice-oriented case studies are regularly updated to reflect current developments in migration governance and public debate. This dynamic structure ensures that the teaching content remains closely linked to ongoing academic and political discussions.

Informal feedback gathered through classroom discussions and course evaluations indicates that students particularly appreciate the combination of theoretical contributions and concrete examples based on research. Many reports have increased confidence in addressing migration-related debates in both academic and public contexts. At the same time, there have been requests for the opportunity to hear 'political or administrative voices' opposed to immigration, an attempt that has not yet been successful as local administrators do not consider it appropriate to speak publicly about their work, let alone engage in a debate with other administrators/politicians who do not belong to their political camp.

4 RESULTS AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

Although the programme was not designed as a formal evaluation study using standardised assessment tools, its effectiveness was examined through a series of recurring qualitative indicators collected over several academic years. These indicators are derived from systematic classroom observation, analysis of student participation in discussions and group activities, feedback collected during and after workshops, and written reflections from students, when requested.

In particular, significant learning outcomes were identified through students' increased ability to critically interpret migration data and public narratives, their use of analytical categories introduced during the course, and their growing awareness of the ethical implications of migration research and communication. These elements emerged consistently in group discussions, in the way students reframed dominant narratives, and in their ability to articulate more nuanced and reflective positions over the course of the programme.

Additional indicators of effectiveness include students' stated confidence in participating in debates related to migration in academic and public contexts, as well as their explicit recognition of the value of interdisciplinary perspectives. The longitudinal replication of these findings across cohorts suggests that

the programme contributes to meaningful and lasting educational effects, particularly in promoting critical thinking, ethical sensitivity, and analytical literacy among first-year students.

The effectiveness of the course was further assessed through the systematic use of active learning methodologies, in particular role-playing activities and structured debates, which served both as pedagogical tools and key sources of qualitative assessment. During the simulations, students were asked to assume the roles of different actors involved in migration processes (e.g. migrants, policy-makers, civil society organisations and media actors). This allowed for the observation of the progressive development of their ability to adopt multiple perspectives, apply the analytical categories introduced during the course and articulate complex positions taking into account empirical constraints and ethical considerations.

The debates, conducted in a guided format and accompanied by collective debriefing sessions, allowed for the observation of a gradual improvement in the quality of the students' arguments, in their ability to critically engage with dominant narratives on migration, and in their conscious use of data and theoretical concepts. Particular attention was paid to the students' ability to engage constructively with divergent points of view and their growing awareness of the ethical implications of producing and communicating knowledge on migration issues.

A longitudinal analysis of the dynamics that emerged from role-playing activities and debates highlighted greater confidence among students in addressing complex and controversial topics, as well as a greater capacity for metacognitive reflection on their own argumentative processes. The recurrence of these results across multiple cohorts confirms the course's contribution to the development of critical, analytical and ethical skills, in line with the programme's educational objectives.

Between 2017 and 2025, the number of theses discussed at the Department of Political and Social Sciences of the University of Florence more than tripled, indicating a significant growth in academic interest in migration-related issues. The theses demonstrate a strong interdisciplinary scope, covering the entire range of the Department's study programmes. In addition to the sociology of migration, they deal in depth with history, the history of international relations, political science and related fields, highlighting the breadth and academic relevance of migration-focused research across disciplinary boundaries. In addition, approximately 100 students chose to carry out their curricular internships within NGOs, associations and research institutes dealing with migration issues, while several dozen completed their internships within the Research Unit, confirming the programme's strong applied orientation and its ability to promote ongoing engagement in migration-related research and practice. In the period 2017-2023, a significant number of bachelor's theses supervised within the social work, sociology and social intervention design and management programmes addressed topics closely related to migration, diversity, inclusion and social vulnerability. Although differing in focus, these works consistently addressed issues such as migrant families, unaccompanied minors, ethnic and religious minorities, social services for foreign populations, and local reception and integration practices.

Although comprehensive quantitative data on graduate employment outcomes are not available, the high number of theses, curricular internships and ongoing collaborations with NGOs, associations and research institutes (in particular Oxfam and COSPE) between 2017 and 2025 suggests that a significant proportion of Political Science graduates from the University of Florence have embarked on professional careers in the field of migration and reception.

Although no quantitative data broken down by territorial level is available, evidence gathered between 2017 and 2025 indicates substantial involvement of Political Science graduates from the University of Florence in migration-related activities at municipal, provincial and regional level. Former students are often involved in local authorities, NGOs and third sector organisations dealing with reception, inclusion and integration, particularly in the Florence metropolitan area, but also at provincial and regional level.

Every year, between 20 and 40 students support the jury of the DIMMI (Diari di Memorie Migranti) Award by contributing to the selection of the winners and, above all, by engaging directly with the works of migrant authors. This activity is a significant educational and public engagement experience, which promotes direct exposure to autobiographical narratives on migration and strengthens students' critical, ethical and interpretative skills.

A review of research areas, active projects and individual profiles suggests that numerous doctoral students and post-doctoral researchers are engaged in migration-related issues, both within national and international research frameworks and in collaboration with the Interdisciplinary Research Unit on Migration (IRMI) and institutional partners.

Several curricular courses have gradually become intertwined with the activities of IRMI's partner organisations, such as AMIR and the Festival dei Popoli, giving rise to shared learning experiences

involving both students – many of whom had already participated in IRMI activities – and lecturers affiliated with the Research Unit. These collaborations have strengthened the integration between teaching, research and third mission activities, promoting the exchange of knowledge and direct involvement in cultural and social practices related to migration.

Through feedback gathered in class and anonymous evaluations collected by the degree programme, it was possible to identify and progressively integrate elements that were missing or needed improvement in the approach to migration issues. In particular, in recent years, parallel to the rise of populist parties in Italy, there has been a growing demand to include pluralistic voices in the discussion on migration. In this context, a growing number of students have expressed appreciation for the opportunities to speak first-hand, sharing and recounting their own migration experiences or those of their families.

During the public debate and referendum on citizenship, particular emphasis was placed on amplifying the voices of students belonging to the so-called 'second generation', further reinforcing the programme's participatory, reflective and ethically grounded educational approach.

5 DISCUSSION

The IRMI programme demonstrates how interdisciplinary teaching can be made operational through an educational project based on research and networking. By integrating theoretical frameworks, empirical research, narrative archives, audiovisual methods and institutional collaborations, the programme strengthens the link between knowledge production and teaching practice.

Through a structured yet flexible educational project, the programme contributes to the development of critical citizenship by integrating research-based knowledge, narrative methods and ethical reflection. Projects such as Capacity T@sk and Horizon Global Answers, in which many IRMI affiliates have participated (including as leaders), together with collaborations involving universities, NGOs and local institutions, illustrate how academic research can influence professional practice and policy-making. These experiences expose students to the applied dimensions of migration research, including capacity building, comparative analysis and cooperation with local, national and international actors.

The focus on the ethics of testimony further consolidates the relationship between research, teaching and public engagement. Ethics is therefore not seen as an external constraint, but as an integral part of both research design and educational practice.

During the seminars, a particularly relevant aspect concerns the emotions expressed by students who have become Italian citizens or were born to foreign parents. For many of them, academic discussion of migration brings up personal experiences that are often left on the margins of their educational journey, generating ambivalent feelings of recognition, exposure and, at times, vulnerability. The opportunity to see their experiences reflected in analytical and non-stereotypical ways helps to legitimise these experiences as an integral part of knowledge. In this context, role-playing activities take on a central role: by simulating decision-making, discursive or institutional contexts related to migration, they facilitate empathy even among students without direct experience, making tangible the power asymmetries, moral dilemmas and conditions of uncertainty that characterise migratory paths. Role-playing thus becomes a pedagogical and emotional tool capable of transforming empathy into critical understanding.

The close link between research, teaching and institutional networks improves the transferability of the programme to other higher education contexts, particularly those seeking to address migration through interdisciplinary, research-based and socially engaged approaches.

IRMI is also actively working to strengthen academic networks through humanitarian corridors for scholars at risk, while engaging with other universities in a shared reflection on education and migration-related issues. In this context, IRMI contributes to discussions aimed at developing a 'charter of reflection' on migration education, in dialogue with institutions such as the University of Palermo, which has already issued its own formal declaration (Officia).

At the same time, maintaining a high level of international cooperation on key research areas remains a priority. IRMI is engaged in ongoing dialogue with the European University Institute (EUI) and with the RESPOND research network, reinforcing its role within transnational academic debates on migration.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The IRMI programme represents a replicable and adaptable interdisciplinary teaching model that links migration theory, empirical research, institutional collaboration and pedagogical innovation. By

combining critical migration theory, active learning methodologies, research-based materials and ethical awareness, it promotes critical thinking and socially responsible attitudes among students. The experience discussed in this paper suggests that integrating research activities and institutional networks into teaching can strengthen students' understanding of complex social phenomena while promoting a form of reflective and engaging learning.

The founding members of the IRMI research unit include:

Ivana Acocella (sociologist specialising in migration); Stefano Becucci (former sociologist specialising in migration); Giorgia Bulli (political scientist); Erika Cellini (visual sociologist); Sandro Landucci (methodologist); Letizia Materassi (sociologist of communication); Sheyla Moroni (contemporary historian); Silvia Pezzoli (sociologist of communication); Maria Stella Rognoni (African historian); Sorina Cristina Soare (political scientist); Alberto Tonini (historian of international relations). Among the 'new arrivals', we would like to give special thanks to: Veronica Federico (professor of comparative public law).

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