



Motivations of the Tarantelli Prize – Year 2013 – given to the paper “The Effectiveness of Remedial Courses in Italy: A Fuzzy Regression Discontinuity Design” by Maria De Paola and Vincenzo Scoppa.

The paper written by De Paola and Scoppa concerns the impact of remedial courses provided by an Italian University on various measures of academic performance: the number of credits acquired by the students; the probability of dropping out; the average grades obtained at passed exams.

Remedial courses are a particularly sensitive policy given that Italian universities are still facing a rapid increase in the number of enrolments following the Bologna process or 3+2 reform. From the policy point of view this paper helps understanding the crucial question of whether the increase in the quantity of enrolled students can be effectively accompanied by a better activity of mentoring and training of students designed to improve the quality of education. This is one of the very few studies on this important topic and the first study providing empirical evidence on these programmes in Italy, therefore the policy interest of this paper is very high.

To identify the causal effect of remedial courses the authors use a Fuzzy Regression Discontinuity Design, relying on the fact that students whose performance at a placement test was below a certain cutoff were offered a remedial course (meaning that they were assigned to the treatment group). The authors use the RDD technique with rigour and accuracy, dealing, for instance, with partial compliance using the assignment rule as an instrumental variable for the effective attendance to remedial courses. The results show that students that get remedial courses acquire a higher number of credits, have a reduced probability of dropping out from academic career but do not have significantly different average grades at passed exams.

Last but not least the authors show that it is possible to address important research questions designing experiments with little resources and a lot of creativity.

The AIEL executive board feels that the paper is highly deserving of the Tarantelli Prize because of its skilful utilisation of the econometric techniques and the creative identification strategy for the purpose of addressing a question of high policy relevance.

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