

The Italian Collegi Universitari di Merito and the Spanish Colegios Mayores Universitarios: A comparative analysis

María José Ibáñez Ayuso

Universidad Complutense de Madrid

Cristina Ruiz-Alberdi

Universidad Francisco de Vitoria

Abstract

University collegiate residence halls are closely linked to the birth of the great European universities and played a crucial role in forming the cultural, political, and ecclesiastical elite for centuries. However, the evolution of these institutions in Europe has been diverse, varying their importance in the different educational systems. This research compares two institutions: the Italian *Collegi di Merito* and the Spanish *Colegios Mayores Universitarios*. Through analyzing primary and secondary documentary sources, a comparison is made around four dimensions: legislative, demographic, formative, and differential value. The results affirm the relevance and pertinence of these institutions in the European context of Higher Education, enrich the educational practices of these institutions, and offer new study prospects for research on the academic potential of university accommodation. In conclusion, Italian and Spanish university colleges provide a space for resistance to the excessive professionalization of Higher Education.

I collegi universitari sono legati alla nascita delle grandi università europee e per secoli hanno svolto un ruolo chiave nella formazione delle élite culturali, politiche ed ecclesiastiche. Tuttavia, l'evoluzione di queste istituzioni in Europa è stata diversa, variando la loro importanza nei diversi sistemi educativi. L'obiettivo di questa ricerca è quello di condurre un'analisi comparativa tra due istituzioni: i *Collegi di Merito* italiani e i *Colegios Mayores Universitarios* spagnoli. Attraverso l'analisi di fonti documentarie primarie e secondarie, viene effettuato un confronto su quattro dimensioni: legislativa, demografica, formativa e di valore differenziale. I risultati affermano la rilevanza e la pertinenza di queste istituzioni nel contesto europeo dell'istruzione superiore, arricchiscono le pratiche educative di queste istituzioni e offrono nuove prospettive di studio per la ricerca sul potenziale educativo degli alloggi universitari. Pertanto, i collegi universitari italiani e spagnoli offrono uno spazio di resistenza all'eccessiva professionalizzazione dell'istruzione superiore.

Keywords: hall of residence; university; youth; humanities; soft skills

Parole chiave: residenza; università; giovani; materie umanistiche; soft skills

1. Introduction

University collegiate residence halls are closely linked to the birth of the great European universities. Emblematic institutions such as the Sorbonne, Bologna, Oxford, or Salamanca had university collegiate residence halls in their surroundings almost from their very foundation. Since the university collegiate residence halls appeared, they have been more than a housing solution. They were authentic centers of culture and the cradle of numerous university students who would later swell the ranks of their respective countries' political, social, and cultural elite. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the collegiate movement in Europe was very notable, and it is possible to find relationships and substantial similarities between the collegiate models of the different countries (Lascaris, 1952). However, with the passing of the centuries, the evolution of the university collegiate residence halls in Europe varied greatly (Cinque, 2012). Thus, while in some countries these institutions gradually lost their importance, in others, as in the case of the United Kingdom, university collegiate halls of residence are such an integrated part of the central university that it is impossible to understand institutions such as the famous Oxford or Cambridge without their university collegiate residence halls (Lario, 2019).

Despite this heterogeneous historical development, Italian and Spanish university collegiate residence halls have evolved into two institutions with many points in common: the Italian *Collegi di Merito* and the Spanish *Colegios Mayores Universitarios*. Today the value of both institutions does not merely rely on their historical legacy but amid an educational landscape in which different voices denounce the excessive professionalizing function of the University to the detriment of its educational role (Barrio, 2022; Esteban, 2022; Fulford, 2022), these institutions present themselves as a unique formative environment for the comprehensive training of university students (Cinque, 2016; Martín & Jutard, 2019). Even though both institutions enjoy legislative protection, annually house a significant number of university students, and have proven to be effective for the development of soft skills, they both have received little attention from the scientific community, having research on these centers focused mainly on a historical approach (Avalle, 2007; Carabias, 1986; Eguía, 1957; Mattone & Brizzi, 2010; Monti & Lorenzelli, 2018; Nieto, 2016; Pennati, 1964; Pérez, 1973; Pototschnig, 1965), without there existing a considerable scientific interest in delving into these institutions' formative value. Something different from what happens in countries such as the United States, where student housing's educational potential has become in the past decades a prolific line of research (Brown, Volk, & Spratto, 2019; Chu et al., 2019; Graham, Hurtado, & Gonyea, 2018; Konyar & Nguyen, 2022; López Turley & Wodtke, 2010). However, interest in these centers seems to be resurgent in Italy and Spain. Thus, different publications related to the pedagogical potential of these institutions to enhance soft skills, provide character education, and foster service learning can be found in recent research works in both Italian and Spanish (Avezú, 2019; Cinque, 2016; Mazalu, 2019; Naval, 2022; Garay, Romero, & González, 2017; Renuncio & González, 2017; Torralba, 2022; Villar, 2018; Vincenzo, 2022).

1.1. Italian and Spanish university collegiate residence halls: A history of deep imbrications

The history of the Italian and Spanish collegiate residence halls is a shared one, not only in terms of parallelisms but also in terms of their close ties that have lasted up to the present day.

In the first place, the birth of the Spanish *Colegios Mayores* can only be understood by the Italian nation because it was precisely in an Italian city, the emblematic Bologna, where the first Spanish *Colegio Mayor* was established. In this historical regard, it should be noted that the fourteenth century was a defining moment for the collegiate movement in both countries. While this century in Spain marked the inauguration of the Hispanic

collegiate movement with the establishment of the Colegio Mayor San Clemente in 1367, it was also when the Italian collegiate movement gained significant importance with the founding of 12 institutions throughout the Italian geography. Secondly, it is equally remarkable the crucial role played by the Church in creating the first collegiate residence halls in both nations, many of which were founded by the highest representatives of the Roman Curia. In the Italian case, for instance, it is enough to observe the history of the *Collegio Carlo Borromeo* founded by Cardinal Carlo Borromeo or the *Collegio Ghisleri* promoted directly by the then Pope Pius V. Likewise, in Spain cardinals such as Cisneros or Mendoza founded some of the oldest *Colegios Mayores* in the Spanish territory (Lario, 2019).

Thirdly, during the Modern Age, the collegiate residence halls played a decisive role in training those who filled high political, cultural, and ecclesiastical positions. Many were the cardinals, bishops, ambassadors, general inquisitors, rectors, state councilors, governors, canons, or professors of both countries who, for several centuries, shared a common characteristic: they were collegiate alums (Eguía, 1957). As evidence of this historical trend, some illustrious names of alums from these Italian and Spanish institutions are now quoted: literary figures such as Carlo Goldoni (famous playwright and precursor of Italian comedy - 18th century) or Federico García Lorca (poet of the Generation of 1927 - 20th century); politicians such as José Agustín de Los Ríos (Senior Prosecutor of the Council of the Indies - 17th century), Giorgio Clerenci (Regent of the Supreme Council of Italy - 18th century) or Giuseppe Zanardelli (President of the Council of Ministers of Italy - 19th century); academics like Francesco Brioschi (Founder of the Polytechnic of Milan - XIX century) or Francisco Giner de los Ríos (Founder of the famous Institución Libre de Enseñanza - XIX century) both outstanding for their work in the promotion of education; or members of the curia like Cardinal Luis de Belluga (XVII century). These are just a few examples of the phenomena but works such as those of Professors Carabias Torres (1986) or Torremocha Hernando (2001) in Spain or Italian studies such as those of Mattone and Brizzi (2010) or Monti and Lorenzelli (2018), provide a detailed picture of what it meant in the Modern Age to be a resident in one of these institutions.

However, these parallelisms are not just a matter of historical commonalities, as they can also be traced in the present day, for example, in the legislative protection enjoyed by both institutions. Thus, Italian and Spanish legislation recognizes the essential educational work performed in these institutions' hearts. This training is characterized by complementing the university education students receive in the classroom with a cultural and human formation lived in a community that allows students to obtain a comprehensive preparation. As such, the Italian Ministry of Instruction establishes, in addition to providing housing for students, three primary purposes for the *Collegi di Merito*: to promote maximum performance in their studies, to create an educational environment that fosters different soft skills, and to provide the students with a comprehensive formation (Conferenza Collegi Universitari de Merito, n.d.). These goals are also observed in the definition of the Spanish Colegio Mayor, where the aims of these centers are underlined as promoting the cultural, sports, scientific and social training of students, as well as generating opportunities for interculturality and personal growth in values such as responsibility, freedom or democracy (Meneses, 2022). Therefore, both institutions offer a unique context amid the technification that plagues Higher Education to promote a university education that genuinely cultivates oneself (Esteban & Fuentes, 2020).

Finally, these institutions not only have many historical and educational features in common, but they also continue to share spaces for cooperation thanks, for example, to the agreements signed between the *Conferenza Collegi di Merito Universitari* and the *Consejo de Colegios Mayores Universitarios de España* (Ecoaula, 2018). These agreements allow the international mobility of collegiate students from any of the institutions in this network, the exchange of good practices, and the generation of synergies for further mutual collaboration. Other international networks also exist, of which numerous *Collegi di Merito* and *Colegios Mayores* are

members, such as the European university college Association (EucA), where spaces and opportunities for mutual enrichment and growth are provided.

Despite the many similarities that can be established between these two institutions and the relevance of their work for the fulfillment of the objectives of the European Higher Education Area and the 2030 Agenda (Salvatore, 2022), the study of these institutions from a comparative perspective has been very scarce (Cinque, 2012; de Vivo *et al.*, 1999; González & Calvo, 2007), thus losing the richness that this type of analysis entails. Therefore, this research aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the Spanish *Colegios Mayores* and the Italian *Collegi di Merito* to compare these centers' evolution and current relevance. Therefore, this analysis intends to enlighten the pertinence of these centers in the European Higher Education Area and generate mutual learning that enriches the educational practices carried out in each center and other pedagogical practices of non-formal education institutions within Higher Education.

2. Methodology

2.1. Objective and sample

This study follows a comparative education approach using primary and secondary documentary sources (Caballero *et al.*, 2016; Ruiz, 2021). The purpose of this research was to explore the contemporary Italian and Spanish university collegiate residence halls through the analysis of the two institutions in which they have evolved over the centuries: the *Collegi di Merito* (Italy) and the *Colegios Mayores Universitarios* (Spain). As pointed out in the introduction, the choice of these two institutions was motivated mainly by three reasons: first, the many parallelisms that exist between these two institutions since their birth in the Middle Ages; second, the similarity in their current educational activities; and finally, the synergies that nowadays exist between the two institutions thanks to the various national and international networks mentioned above. Therefore, the research questions that were posed are:

- What relevance do these institutions have within their national university environment? Is the university population living in them similar in both countries? Is there a similar offer concerning the number of institutions available?
- What legal protection do these institutions receive in their respective countries? What similarities and differences exist?
- What is the type of training offered to the students? What are the admission criteria for the two types of institutions? Is there any certification of the training received?
- What differential value do they confer on their students? Does the labor market recognize this differential value?

2.2. Research design

The following phases were followed to conduct this research: (i) descriptive phase, during which the different data necessary for the study was collected from primary and secondary sources; (ii) interpretative phase, during which the data was analyzed from multidisciplinary approaches using both quantitative and qualitative techniques; (iii) juxtapositional phase, during which the data were contrasted with the dimensions, parameters, and

indicators defined in the research design; (iv) comparative phase, a comparison of the data between the two units of analysis contrasted was made. The categories of the comparative structure established were as follows:

- Legislative dimension: this dimension seeks to identify and compare the data from the perspective of the two units of analysis being compared.
- Demographic dimension: This dimension attempts to provide data on the collegiate population, its characteristics, and the representativeness of the total number of the national university population. It also seeks to know the number of existing centers in each country, their geographical dispersion, and their relationship with the total number of national universities.
- Educational dimension: This dimension explores the educational offer of the two institutions. To this end, variables such as the type of activities organized, the requirements for admission and permanence in the center, or the accreditation of the training obtained are considered.
- Differential value dimension: This dimension attempts to determine the differentiating value these institutions provide to their students. Therefore, aspects such as the placement rate after university studies, the successes achieved by alums enrolled in these institutions, and the internationalization activities they facilitate are explored.

The following chart (Table 1) shows the relationship between the dimensions, parameters, and indicators.

Table 1

Dimensions, parameters, and indicators used in the study.

Dimension	Parameter	Indicator
Legislative	Education laws	Number, dates, scope of the regulation (aspects it addresses), conditions for collegiate halls' foundation, requirements for maintenance, provisions regarding its staff, and other considerations.
	Other regulations	Number, the scope of application (national, regional...), subscribing entities.
Demographic	Collegiate halls of residence population	Number of students, demographic data on students (percentage of international students, type of studies, etc.).
	Institutions	Number of centers, geographical location, number of universities to which they are attached, and representativeness compared to other types of accommodation.
Formative	Educational project	Types of activities organized, rules of permanence, accreditation of training, and educational resources in the collegiate halls of residence.
	Admission	Method of admission organization, requirements for candidates, places available, degree of difficulty in access.
Differential value	Alumni	Placement rate of graduates in the labor market, socially outstanding alums.
	Professional training	Training activities in soft skills, employment counseling, and internationalization.

2.3. Analysis of the results

The results were analyzed in two successive phases. First, a detailed interpretative analysis of the primary and secondary documentary sources was conducted. A synthesis of the most important information collected during this phase can be found in the first part of the subsequent section. Next, the juxtaposition-comparative phase was performed using the previously selected dimensions, parameters, and indicators. The second part of the following section presents the most important results of this comparison.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive phase

The Colegios Mayores Universitarios: The case of Spain

The *Colegios Mayores* had their golden age in Spain during the Modern Age when they contributed to the founding of numerous universities both in Spain and in Latin America, and from their walls emerged relevant personalities from the political, social, ecclesiastical, and cultural spheres (Eguía, 1957; Lario, 2019). Special mention had these institutions in forming the political class that occupied relevant positions in the Spanish colonies, such as viceroys, presidents of the Council of the Indies, inquisitors of the Courts of the Indies, or ambassadors. However, the university reform undertaken by Charles III began a period of great difficulties for these institutions, which underwent significant reforms for years, ending with the closure of these centers for a short period. Nevertheless, from the second quarter of the twentieth century, the *Colegios Mayores* began to reappear in the Spanish university scene, thanks to the protection of legislative regulations of different ranks that recognized their pedagogical and social value. In this regard, the following rules should be highlighted: the Royal Decrees of May 17, 1922, August 25, 1926, and April 26, 1927; the Law of Regulation of the Spanish University of 1943; the Organic Decree of *Colegios Mayores* of 1956, the Law of Protection of *Colegios Mayores* of 1959 and, significantly, the Royal Decree 2780/1973 on the regulation of the *Colegios Mayores*, which established as educational purposes of the *Colegios Mayores*: the integral formation of students and the cultivation of university social responsibility (Pérez, 1973). Although the successive laws devoted much less legal protection to the *Colegios Mayores*, it should be remarked that all further regulations have always emphasized two points: the non-profit nature of the *Colegios Mayores* that makes them have to be legally constituted as foundations, as well as the need to be integrated within a University (public or private), being the universities themselves in- charged of establishing the regulations for the operation of these centers. Even though in the latest legislation on Higher Education, the *Colegios Mayores* have been present, they have been neglected compared to other types of accommodation. Thus, the fifth additional provision of the Organic Law 6/2001, of December 21, 2001, on Universities, included university residences within the section referring to *Colegios Mayores* without clarifying the differences between the two centers. This confusion between *Colegios Mayores* and university residences became even more evident in the 2007 reform of the law. The proliferation of numerous university residences in the Spanish territory, given their high economic profitability but lacking an eminently educational character as the *Colegios Mayores*, caused a claim both by the *Colegios Mayores* and the Universities themselves by the publication of different documents where the uniqueness of these centers was claimed, being especially relevant the Declaration of Santiago in 2022 (Consejo de Colegios Mayores Universitarios de España, 2022). However, the preliminary draft of the latest Spanish Law of Higher Education, the LOSU (Organic Law of the

University System), seems to have recovered the recognition of the unique value of the *Colegios Mayores* (Cortes Generales, 2022).

Looking at some demographic data, it should be noted that the *Colegios Mayores* annually house around 20,000 university students (DBK, 2023). There is a growing demand for university accommodation in Spain, as the trend of students moving away from their places of origin to pursue higher education studies gradually increases year by year, accounting for around 30% of the total number of Spanish students (Ministerio de Universidades, 2022). In Spain, there are a total of 135 *Colegios Mayores* spread over 24 cities and belonging to 33 different universities. There are also collaboration and joint representation networks. At the national level, there is the *Consejo de Colegios Mayores Universitarios de España*, of which 120 *Colegios Mayores* are members, and at the regional level, the *Asociación de Colegios Mayores de Madrid*. Some *Colegios Mayores* are part of the international network EucA.

Delving into the characteristics of students residing in *Colegios Mayores*, it is worth noting that most students are in their first two years of university studies. Also, concerning the areas of study, 32% of the students are studying Social Sciences, 31% are studying careers related to the field of Health Sciences, and 28% are studying jobs related to STEM, with the lowest percentage for students of Arts and Humanities (Agencia, 2022). Regarding the educational offer, the *Colegios Mayores* have a broad cultural, social, and sports offer, where the Humanities, university debate, theater, cooperation, and music are of great importance. Likewise, these centers attach great significance to the leading role of students in the governance of the centers and in the dynamization of the university life that takes place within them, with the existence of structures such as the College Council or the figure of the college dean (Linares & Muñoz, 2022; Naval, 2022; Renuncio & González, 2017). The internal regulations establish admission to the *Colegio Mayor* and, in many cases, have a personal selection interview.

The Collegi di Merito: The case of Italy

In the Italian case, the twentieth century was also a crucial moment for the endowment of legislative protection for these institutions, whose origin can be traced to the "*Regio Decreto del 31 Agosto 1933 (n° 1592) testo unico delle leggi sull'istruzione superiore*", which in its article 191 laid the foundations for the existence of the *Collegi* (Monti & Lorenzelli, 2018). Subsequent legislative regulations have been strengthening this legal framework and establishing different guidelines that govern the functioning of these institutions today. Thus, the *Collegi di Merito* report directly to the Ministry, specifically to the *Ministerio dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca* (MIUR), something that was especially emphasized in Article 25 of Law 390 of December 2, 1991. This recognition of the importance of the *Collegi di Merito* is also reflected in their conversion into entities eligible for public funding as guaranteed by Decree 338 of November 14, 2000, "*Disposizioni in materia di alloggi e residenze per studenti universitari*." Special mention deserves in this recognition of the pedagogical importance of the *Collegi di Merito* the Law 30 December 2010 n.240, whose article 5 describes these centers as institutions of high cultural qualification. Finally, it is worth noting that various ministerial decrees occurred in the light of the regulation Legislative Decree 29 March 2012, n. 68 "*Revisione della normativa di principio in materia di diritto allo studio e valorizzazione dei collegi universitari legalmente riconosciuti*", which established the mechanisms for the accreditation of the *Collegi di Merito* both in the category of legally recognized and legally accredited *Collegi*. In this regard, it should be noted that for the accreditation of the *Collegi*, very demanding criteria are established, such as those contained in Article 16 of the Decreto ministeriale 8 settembre 2016, n 672 in which, among others, it is pointed out that the accredited *Collegi* must possess collaboration agreements with public bodies and companies, guarantee the training of their employees at least 20 hours per year (having to be

40% of international context), invest at least 30% of the profits in collegiate scholarships, guarantee that each student subscribes to a personalized training project of at least 70 hours during the first three academic years and 25 hours in the following academic years and that at least 10% of the students must participate in international activities (Governo Italiano, n.d.).

The total number of students attending these institutions is 4000, 54 *Collegi di Merito*, located in 17 Italian cities. The different *Collegi di Merito* belong to 17 various associations or foundations, with the Fondazione Rui and the Fondazione CEUR standing out for the large number of *collegi* they have. It is worth noting that 47% of the *Collegi di Merito* students' population are enrolled in careers related to STEM disciplines (U2BRedazione, 2022). In 1995, the *Collegi di Merito* founded a representative body, the *Conferenza permanente dei Collegi Universitari* (CCU), which, in 2011, became an Association under the name of CCUM - *Conferenza dei Collegi Universitari di Merito*. This network allows the joint representation of these institutions, leads the defense of their interests at the national level, ensures the unification of the strategy of these centers, and promotes the exchange of educational practices. Many *Collegi di Merito* are also part of the international EucA network. Admission to the *Collegi di Merito* is made, as the name of this institution claims, by merit. To this end, students must pass a highly demanding selection process. In addition to considering their academic school trajectory, applicants must undergo tests and interviews on general culture and motivation. During these interviews, *Collegio's* training model is often presented, and students must submit a draft of the personalized training project they would like to carry out in case they are admitted. The importance given in these institutions to the concept of merit offers an interesting field to debate the meaning of this term in the educational field. Regarding the educational offer of the *Collegi di Merito*, it is important to highlight their courses accredited by universities and their conferences and seminars on various topics. Each student must build a personal training project, which they will follow to ensure maximum benefit from *Collegio's* experience. The *Collegi di Merito* rely on figures such as tutors, who monitor the students. In terms of training, the numerous internationalization opportunities that students at these centers have are also noteworthy, as reflected in the fact that, for example, 17% of the students have an international experience thanks to the opportunities provided by these institutions. Students' merit to enter the school must continue throughout their stay at the *Collegi*, with, for example, the achievement of a certain annual average being mandatory. Therefore, it is not surprising that 95.3% of the students in these centers graduate on time according to their curriculum or that 97.5% of the graduates in a *Collegi di Merito* find a job within the first year of graduation and 40% within the first month (Collegio Mazza, n.d.; U2BRedazione, 2022). At the end of their stay, each *Collegio* issues the University Diploma, which certifies the soft skills that the students have developed through their stay. These diplomas are highly valued in the professional world.

3.2. Juxtapositive-comparative phase

Legislative dimension

Since the second quarter of the twentieth century, it can be observed in both countries a significant concern in providing university collegiate residence halls with a legal framework that protects and regulates them. Thus, while in Spain, this first legislation was passed in 1922, in Italy, it was eleven years later, in 1933. From that time onwards and up to the present day, although both countries have generated ordinances of varying rank, the importance given to the collegiate residence halls and the scope of the regulations have been different.

Thus, in the case of Spain, the most remarkable legislative development was observed in the second third of the 20th century. The 1970 legislation was extensive as regards *Colegios Mayores*. Still, the successive higher

education legislations only outlined a brief legal framework for these institutions, which has even led to a lack of protection for these institutions from other types of university accommodation. On the contrary, in the case of Italy, successive legislations have developed and strengthened a legal framework for these institutions, recognizing their immense cultural contribution and establishing demanding conditions for the accreditation of the *Collegi* in terms of staff training, economic management, subscription of agreements, and the training of their students. A notable difference in this legal framework is that while the Italian colleges depend directly on the Ministry, in Spain, the legislation establishes a general framework and leaves the regulation of specific aspects in the hands of the Universities to which the colleges belong. Thus, more significant heterogeneity exists among the Spanish *Colegios*' particular rules.

The legislation of each country also reflects a different recognition of the pedagogical value granted by the government to these institutions. In the case of Spain, this recognition has yet to be made as diligently as in the Italian case, where the *Collegi* are defined as organizations of high cultural promotion. However, both countries coincide in identifying the social value of these centers by granting them a legal framework with tax benefits. While in Spain, the *Colegios Mayores* must be constituted as non-profit institutions, in the Italian case, this commitment to their non-profit character is more demanding, with the *Collegi* being required to return at least 30% of their income in scholarships for students. It should be noted that in recent years in Spain, there has been an effort by various parliamentary groups and universities to recognize and protect the *Colegios Mayores*. Nevertheless, in the case of Spain, legal controversies surrounding these institutions are more frequent than in Italy. While the acceptance of female students in traditionally male collegiate residence halls in both countries has generated resistance, in the case of Spain, in recent months, an intense debate has been opened about single-sex collegiate residence halls. The amendment presented by a political party in the framework of the Law for the Organization of the University System asking that the *Colegios Mayores* attached to public universities should be compulsorily coeducational has opened a new scenario for an interesting debate about differentiated education amid Higher Education institutions (Silió, 2022).

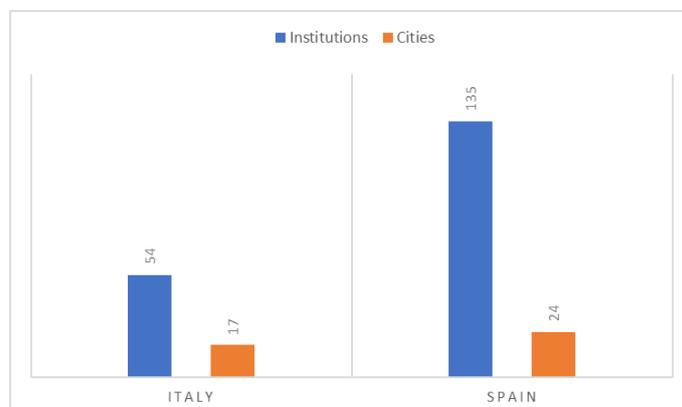
Finally, both countries have shown the importance of counting with national associations, which allow the joint representation of their interests, as well as the exchange of good practices, finding in Italy the *Conferenza Collegi Universitari di Merito* founded in 1991 and the case of Spain the *Consejo de Colegios Mayores Universitarios de España*. Although the Spanish association is eleven years older than the Italian one, the difference with the Italian body lies in the number of its members. While in Italy, all the *Collegi di Merito* belong to the Conferenza, in Spain, a small number of *Colegios* do not belong to the Consejo. Likewise, in the international organization EucA, we find a more significant presence of Italian colleges than Spanish ones. Thus, there are 16 Italian members (some foundations with more than one *Collegio*), while in Spanish, only five *Colegios Mayores* are part of this network.

Demographic dimension

Regarding the number of students and institutions in both countries, we find that Spain has more students and centers. Thus, 135 colleges in Spain annually house about 20,000 university students; in the Italian case, we find that 54 colleges accommodate 4000 students annually. Likewise, in Spain, there is a wider geographical dispersion of these centers, which can be found in 24 cities, while in Italy, the *Collegi* are distributed in 17, as shown in Figure 1. In this regard, it should be noted that while in the Spanish case, the capital of the country (Madrid) has the highest concentration of colleges, in the Italian case, the city that has more *Collegi* is not the capital (Rome), but the city of Milan, which has nine *Collegi*, one more than those in the Italian capital.

Figure 1

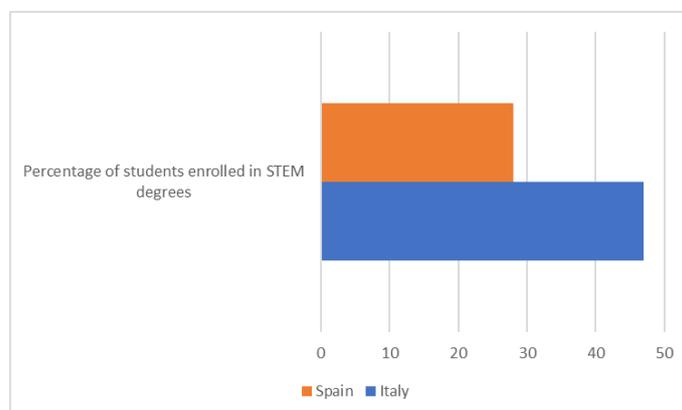
Comparison between the number of university collegiate residence halls and the number of cities with at least one college in each country.



Finally, for the student profile, it is striking to note the difference between students pursuing STEM-related degrees in each country, as shown in Figure 2. While in the Spanish case, they are not the majority of students and represent 28% of the total number of students belonging to CCUM *Colegios*, the vast majority are inclined to careers in the Social Sciences or Health Sciences. On the other hand, in Italy, most students are devoted to pursuing careers related to these sciences, representing almost half the total number of students living in *Collegi* (47%).

Figure 2

Percentage of students enrolled in STEM degrees in each country.



Formative dimension

Both institutions share, above all, their formative nature. Comparing the range of activities offered is similar in the institutions of the two countries. They offer courses recognized with ects, as well as colloquiums, conferences, and social or sports initiatives. Therefore, both countries' colleges, faithful to their original spirit, continue to be a hotbed of cultural activity. However, there are some differences in the training projects of the two

institutions, especially concerning the admissions process, student follow-up, the requirements for the establishment of agreements, and the training of their employees.

Regarding the admission process, it should be noted that the Italian process is more demanding as it always includes selection interviews in which aspects such as motivation, general culture, or even the degree to which the student would take advantage of the training opportunity are evaluated. Furthermore, although the Spanish *Colegios* have different resources to guarantee the monitoring of the student's use of the training experience, such as the college card, figures such as tutors, or requirements of compliance with a certain degree of participation to be able to renew the following year, in Italy this monitoring is much more structured. Students must prepare a personal training project, which a tutor accompanies, and there is a requirement to complete a certain number of hours (70 in the case of the first three years and 25 from the fourth year onwards). However, it should be noted that although Spanish *Colegios* have a less regulated process, students have an essential role to play in promoting the life of the centers by organizing and leading many of *Colegio's* activities. It is also necessary to remark on the contributions the *Colegios* make to the general Spanish university educational offer with activities open to all students, highlighting their significant contribution to fostering university debate by organizing various regional and national tournaments available to both collegiate and non-resident students. Likewise, in the case of Italy, there are higher requirements regarding the training standards to be met by the centers. Thus, for example, certain minimum hours of mandatory training employees of the *Collegi di Merito* must complete annually, almost half of which must be international, and the centers must also have agreements with companies. Although both institutions show an interest in fostering internationalization, both among the collegiate community (the two countries emphasize the importance of promoting interculturality among their students' population), again, in the case of Italy, the legislation reinforces this commitment to the international mobility of students.

Finally, in both countries, there is a growing interest in the academic research of these institutions. In the case of Italy, the investigation of these institutions has focused on the role of the *Collegi* in the promotion of soft skills (Avezzu, 2019; Salvatore, 2022). In contrast, in the case of Spain, research is related to issues derived from character education and, especially, the promotion of leadership (Renuncio & González, 2017; Naval, 2022). Despite the differences between the two institutions, the common interest in offering students a holistic and integral formation seems evident in the abovementioned areas. This formation acquires a significant value amid the current liquid context since it allows students to develop a cultural, historical, and social framework from which to resist relativism and the prevailing uprooting (Ibáñez Ayuso et al., 2023).

Differential value

The collegiate experience is a differential value for personal growth and professional training in both countries. Therefore, examples of alums who have stood out for their social, political, or cultural contribution can be found in Italy and Spain. That is the case of personalities such as architects Gianfranco Bettetini or Eduardo Chillida, politicians like Josep Borrell or Giuseppe Antonio Ghisalberty, or scientists such as Carlo Bernasconi or Juan José López Ibor.

Likewise, the development of soft skills that students obtain in these centers is highly valued by companies (Mazalu, 2019). Thus, showing the significant value of these institutions in integrating their graduates into the labor market. While in the case of Italy, there are statistics that support this claim, on the various websites of the *Colegios Mayores* in Spain, testimonials from students whose professional careers support this affirmation can be found. However, it should be noted that although in Spain there is some attempt to certify the soft skills training of students, such as the one carried out in collaboration with the *Escuela de Organización Industrial*,

in the case of Italy, the greater systematization of training is embodied in a system of accreditation through the *Collegios's* Diploma, which is highly valued both by private companies and among the public sectors. Furthermore, this differential value is also evident in the fact that these institutions allow students undergoing economic difficulties to access this tremendous formative experience due to the many scholarships institutions in both countries have available. If the first European collegiate halls of residence have often been regarded as a social elevator, today, the many funding opportunities students in these centers can access counteract the far-from-realistic image of possible elitism happening within these centers. Likewise, the alarming growth of mental health disorders, suicides, and addictions among new generations reinforce the urgency to explore the value of these institutions as preventive environments that contain different elements such as being actively involved in a community or establishing meaningful interpersonal relationships among others that accordingly to various studies promote a positive and healthy development of our youth (Lerner et al., 2021).

4. Conclusions

First, this analysis has highlighted the relevance of both the Italian and Spanish Colleges to preserve the university experience as a formative stage that allows students to go beyond their mere technical formation to achieve the original University goal: the cultivation of themselves. In this sense, both institutions possess formative programs that contain the true essence of the university experience and that allow students to have a profound encounter with their culture, as well as to get a holistic view of the world by creating spaces of dialogue with different sciences and to foster maturation by living in intercultural and interdisciplinary communities. For all these reasons, both institutions constitute authentic spaces of resistance where many of the pressing objectives of the European Higher Education Area can be accomplished, especially those related to the promotion of democratic values in the face of the alarming political polarization occurring in Europe. By generating shared spaces of cultural roots and by promoting important democratic values such as servant leadership, interculturality, or critical thinking, these institutions are hugely contributing to the formation of active, critical, and caring citizens. Thus, showing the importance of supporting, defending, and promoting these institutions. Likewise, the different data on the immediate placement of graduates of these centers in the labor market, as well as the outstanding social, cultural, or political contributions of numerous alums, confirm the training potential of this type of institution. However, this analysis has shown that the *Collegi di Merito* have robust statistics to defend its educational value, whereas the Spanish centers need more statistics.

Secondly, this analysis has generated mutually enriching lessons for these two institutions. However, it is essential to take into account the following facts when trying to extrapolate these learnings from one country to another: the more excellent legislative protection that the *Collegi di Merito* enjoy, being recognized as organizations of high cultural promotion by their government; the fact that the Italian *Collegi* house less than 25% of the total Spanish *Colegios Mayores'* population, which difficulties the direct transference of the Italian educational practices to the Spanish reality; the difference in the legal dependence of each of the institutions that makes Spanish institutions have more significant heterogeneity in their regulations and which complicates the reproduction of the systematicity of some of the Italian pedagogical practices. Nevertheless, it seems interesting to point out that the Spanish model can take into consideration four significant aspects of the Italian model: one, the creation of a personal development plan for its students in which their commitment to the collegiate formation is with this declared, and which would help the students discover how the different formative experiences lived within the *Colegio Mayor* contribute to their personal development. Second, the Italian model generates numerous synergies, which are required by law, with private companies, thus providing its students

with more significant links with the real world. In this regard, although thanks to the autonomous and national networks of *Colegios Mayores*, Spanish institutions have some of these agreements, it seems very important to make the *Colegios Mayores* more aware of the importance of promoting this type of partnership with real-world actors. Third, Italian *Collegi* attaches great importance to the training of their staff, as required by their legislation. In this sense, it is considered essential to instill this training emphasis in the staff of the *Colegios Mayores*, which opens a line of action for the national networks to apply for public funding within the framework of state or European calls to support significant training opportunities. Fourth, the Italian model has managed to generate an efficient accreditation model for their education, which also impacts a greater social awareness of the formative value added by these centers. In this sense, the Italian model can offer a fascinating example from which Spanish *Colegios* can learn to accredit their collegiates' training. Likewise, the Italian *Collegi* can also learn from the Spanish *Colegios*' practices in two aspects: the critical role given to the students in the dynamization of the collegial life. The *Colegios Mayores* have generated effective educational methods for promoting leadership, responsibility, and service among their students. These three elements are necessary competencies for advancing democratic societies, so these non-formal educational practices where collegiate leadership becomes effective can be transferred to the Italian nation. Likewise, research on the training potential of the *Collegi di Merito* has focused in Italy on its study from the paradigm of soft-skills development. Although research on *Colegios Mayores* and soft skills has also been conducted in Spain, Spanish research has generated its studies from a broader paradigm: character education. This approach would enrich Italian investigation by providing a research framework that goes beyond professional formation to study the impact of the *Collegi di Merito* on relevant aspects of character formation. This framework would be very interesting, as research on character education and human flourishing in Higher Education is arousing growing interest (Lamb *et al.*, 2022).

In conclusion, it is necessary to foster research on these institutions with two main objectives: on the one hand, to value the training received in these institutions, which in the case of Spain will undoubtedly have an impact on a solid foundation that will enable more excellent legal protection for them; on the other hand, to improve the educational practices of these centers and transfer their practices to different contexts, both formal and non-formal, of Higher Education. Likewise, the existence of other residential institutions in Europe with a formative character offers the possibility of carrying out new transnational comparative analyses that will broaden the knowledge on youth development and the impact of the accommodation on it.

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María José Ibáñez Ayuso is currently Assistant director of the Colegio Mayor Universitario Francisco de Vitoria (Madrid) and a professor at the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria (UFV). She is writing her doctoral thesis in the Faculty of Education of the Universidad Complutense de Madrid (UCM). She holds a Master's in Memory and Criticism of Education at the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia. She graduated in Psychology from the UCM and in Education from the UFV. ORCID: 0000-0001-9055-5525
Contact: mibanez@ucm.es

Cristina Ruiz-Alberdi, PhD in Education with ANECA accreditation. Professor of Humanities at the Faculty of Education and Psychology at the University Francisco de Vitoria. Trainer of the Society of Teachers UFV. She has made numerous exchanges with prestigious European universities. ORCID: 0000-0003-4976-5971
Contact: c.ruiz.prof@ufv.es