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**The Music That Makes Me Move:  
Perceptions of Italian Regional Disparities among  
Music Students and Aspiring Cultural and Creative Workers**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores how music students and aspiring cultural and creative workers from Southern Italy perceive and negotiate Italian regional inequalities through educational mobility towards Centre-Northern regions. The aim of the present study is to delve deeply into the ways Italian regional disparities shape students' decisions to move, their experiences within music higher education and their early career trajectories in the cultural and creative sector. The research is framed through core-periphery theory and the aspirations and capabilities model, which help explain mobility as both structurally constrained and personally aspired to; Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital, used to explain the "rules of game" of the field of the cultural and creative workers; and McRobbie's work on passionate labour and self-entrepreneurship, which situates creative labour within neoliberal forms of flexibility and precariousness. Using a qualitative research design, the thesis is based on fourteen semi-structured interviews with Southern Italian students, graduates, teachers and early-career musicians. The findings show that mobility is often perceived as a necessary strategy to access better educational and professional opportunities, while music education itself can reproduce insecurity and vulnerability through bureaucratic constraints and consequent reinforcement of resource inequalities.

**Key words:** Interregional student mobility; Southern Italy; regional inequalities; cultural and creative work; music higher education

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## 1. Introduction, research questions and delimitations

“Oh, so you’re an artist... but what do you do for a living?”. Anyone working in the arts in Italy and identifiable as a cultural and creative worker has likely encountered this question at least once. The phrase reflects a widespread perception of artistic labour as unstable, economically unsustainable, or not entirely recognisable as “real work”. Yet, over the last two decades, both academic literature and policymakers have increasingly emphasised the role of cultural and creative industries as drivers of economic growth, innovation, and employment. At the same time, however, cultural and creative work continues to be characterised by significantly higher levels of precariousness compared to other areas of employment (OECD, 2022). Employment in the field remains strongly associated with temporary and unstable contracts, irregular income, weak labour protections, high levels of self-employment, and the need to engage in parallel forms of work in pursuit of financial stability (Alacovska, 2022; Comunian & Conor, 2017; Naclerio, 2023; Pasikowska-Schnaas, 2019). Despite these atypical conditions, the cultural and creative sector continues to exert a strong attraction, particularly among younger creatives who pursue artistic education and careers in search of professional fulfilment and symbolic recognition within the field. In this context, higher education acquires a central role as a source of legitimacy and institutionalised cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

In Italy, these contradictions intersect with long-standing territorial inequalities between the more developed Centre-North and the historically disadvantaged South, which continues to experience lower levels of economic development and employment, as well as infrastructural and institutional limitations (Fratesi & Percoco, 2009; Etzo, 2025). In recent decades, students and graduates have become essential actors in interregional mobility in Italy (Ciriaci, 2014), making educational migration one of the mechanisms through which broader territorial inequalities are reproduced.

By situating the challenges and constraints of cultural and creative labour within the context of Italy’s North-South divide, this thesis addresses the following research question:

*How do regional inequalities shape the educational mobility and early career trajectories of aspiring musicians from Southern Italy, and how are these processes perceived and negotiated by the students themselves?*

Drawing on fourteen semi-structured interviews with Southern Italian music students, graduates and emerging musicians enrolled in AFAM institutions in the Centre-North, the thesis examines how participants perceive opportunities and limitations across core and peripheral regions of Italy, how they negotiate the social hierarchies of the cultural and creative field through different forms of capital, and how they experience music education and career transitions within this precarious sector. With this aim in mind, the study engages with both macro and micro-level migration theories, Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of field and capital and Angela McRobbie's (2016) work on self entrepreneurship in the creative industries. By bringing together literature on interregional student mobility and cultural and creative work, this study aims to contribute to a field that, in the Italian context, has often been approached mainly through quantitative methods. Therefore, this research adopts a qualitative, bottom-up approach that places participants' experiences, perceptions and subjective realities at the centre of the analysis.

Given the relatively small and specific sample, the findings are not intended to be representative of all Southern Italian musicians who relocate to the Centre-North, nor of all aspiring CCWs in Italy more broadly. Instead, this study prioritises depth of understanding over broad generalisation, offering purely explanatory insights into the ways territorial inequality intersect in the trajectories of students and early-career musicians.

## **2. Background and context**

### **2.1. Student mobility**

The mobility of students and graduates has significant implications for the economic trajectories and development of destination regions and countries. Building on Solow's (1956) classic growth model - which emphasised capital, labour and exogenous technological process - new growth theories developed in the 1980s introduced a major shift by highlighting the endogenous role of knowledge accumulation (Romer, 1986) and human capital (Lucas, 1988) as drivers of economic growth. Unlike traditional production inputs, knowledge and human capital are not subject to the law of diminishing returns and can therefore be accumulated and reused almost indefinitely (Faggian, 2014). Within this framework, the concentration of highly skilled individuals in specific geographical areas contributes to the emergence of spatial patterns of development (Faggian, 2014; Gambacurta, 2026). Consequently, student mobility has attracted growing attention from both scholars and policymakers, particularly because of its potential effects on regional disparities and

economic development. In this respect, the Italian context offers a particularly relevant case for examining student mobility at the regional level and its relationship with development.

## **2.2. The Southern Question**

Interregional mobility in Italy is closely linked to long-lasting socio-economic disparities between the two macro-regions of the disadvantaged South and the developed Centre-North. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as the “Southern Question”, has deep historical roots dating back to the unification of Italy in 1861 (Barbagallo, 2013). As Fernández-Villaverde et al. (2023) show, this territorial heterogeneity widened further up to the Second World War, narrowed temporarily during the post-war decades, and began to increase again from the 1970s onwards, reaching today levels comparable to those of the 1930s.

Overall, Italy is characterised by marked territorial disparities in terms of development and economic performance (Brida, 2014; Etzo, 2011). These differences are particularly evident in real GDP per capita, with recent data for the 2022-2024 period showing that GDP per capita in Southern Italy is approximately 55% lower than in the Centre-North (ISTAT, 2025). The situation in the South is further exacerbated by the large informal sector - almost twice the size of that in the North - and by the asymmetries in interregional fiscal redistribution (Barra & Papaccio, 2024; Fernández-Villaverde et al, 2023). These structural weaknesses result in persistent deficits in terms of infrastructure, institutional capacity and broader socio-economic outcomes (Barra & Papaccio, 2024). Unsurprisingly, such disparities have long fuelled internal migration flows. Large-scale movements peaked between the 1950s and the 1970s, when over nine million people relocated from the South to the Centre-North (Impicciatore & Strozza, 2016). In more recent decades, however, interregional mobility has increasingly involved students and graduates (Ciriaci, 2014). Data from the 2024/2025 academic year indicate that around 13% of students from Southern Italy choose to pursue a bachelor’s degree in the Centre-North in order to access labour markets with stronger employment prospects (Svimez, 2026). Moreover, between 2002 and 2024, approximately 154,000 graduates left the Centre-North for destinations abroad; however, these outflows were offset by migration flows from the South, resulting in a net loss of 270,000 graduates for Southern Italy over the same period (Svimez, 2026).

Rather than functioning as a mechanism of territorial rebalancing, these skilled migration flows have instead intensified cumulative economic advantages in already developed regions, contributing to a loss of human capital in the South while benefiting the Centre-North (Fratesi & Percoco, 2009; Etzo et al., 2025).

## **2.3. Cultural and creative sector**

### **2.3.1. Precarious work in the cultural and creative sector**

The cultural and creative sector (CCS) is widely recognized as a highly precarious field of employment, characterised by a strong incidence of irregular short-term, project-by-project contractual employment, part-time or seasonal employment, or parallel jobs for people with university degrees (Alacovska, 2022; Pasikowska-Schnaas, 2019). The clash between the romanticization of artistic work - as related to creativity, identity, self-expression, and collectivity - and the risk-sharing business model to which it is subjected makes this economic sector attractive and in steady growth, while at the same time being increasingly unstable and uncertain (Abbing, 2008; Pasikowska-Schnaas, 2019). The precariousness of the sector itself intersects with the paradigm shift of work in the 21st-century neoliberal turn: the decline in welfare protection for workers' rights and wellbeing, along with the implement of policies of flexibilisation and deregulation of the labour market, contributed to the creation of atypical working patterns (Dent et al., 2020; Kreshpaj et al., 2019; Naclerio, 2023). The term "gig economy" is emblematic of this transformation. It refers to labour that is flexible, temporary, and often digitised (think of Airbnb or Fiverr), characterised by transactional and unequal employment relations (De Ruyter & Brown, 2019, p. 7). Although this method of labour contracting has been exploited by platform firms in the transport, food, and labor hire sectors (Eltham et al, 2025), it is thought that the term itself originally refers to the performing arts sector, to the bohemian musician who lives day by day, gig by gig.

Especially in the South of Europe, the combination of vulnerability in the CCS, neoliberal policies and low salaries contributes to further precariousness (Armano et al. 2017, cited in Naclerio, 2019). The Italian case remains particularly illustrative, especially for its dualistic economic structure and high levels of informal economic activity in the South, as mentioned above. This condition creates space for precariousness to emerge and intensify across the sector.

### **2.3.2. A new star of economy**

Over the last two decades, the cultural and creative industries have received increasing attention from both researchers and policymakers. As previously discussed in relation to trends in international mobility, the imperatives of the knowledge economy have profoundly reshaped the cultural sector, transforming it into a fully-fledged industry aimed at maximizing the economic value of arts and culture. In this framework, the creative economy becomes an integral component of global development agendas, and the creative industries on which it is based constitute an important resource of cultural and commercial value (UNCTAD, n.d.). UNESCO (n.d.) identifies the cultural and creative industries as among the fastest-growing sectors of the global economy; statistical data confirms their expanding contribution to economic development and employment both in Europe and worldwide (Pasikowska-Schnaas, 2019), with 3.8% of total employment being people working in the cultural sector in 2024 (Eurostat, 2024). Consequently, the attraction of the cultural and creative sector does not depend solely on passion, personal fulfilment, or opportunities for artistic expression, but also on the perception that it may offer employment prospects. For many young aspiring creative workers, artistic education is therefore imagined as a way of transforming personal passion into a sustainable career. This aspect is particularly significant as it reflects one of the sector's main paradoxes: cultural and creative industries are nowadays celebrated as drivers of employment and growth, yet their economic value continues to rely on workers whose careers remain precarious, individualised, and weakly protected.

## **3. Literature Review**

### **3.1. Student mobility in Italy**

Extensive literature has focused on the North–South divide, particularly in terms of industrial and economic development (Gaddi et al., 2022; Gambacurta, 2026). Within this broader framework, disparities in higher education and student mobility have also received increasing scholarly attention.

A substantial body of research investigates the main drivers behind students' mobility choices, as well as the determinants of regional attractiveness within the context of student migration. García-Pereiro et al., (2025), for instance, adopt a policy-oriented perspective to analyse the factors influencing university attractiveness, focusing on institutional support mechanisms such as grants, scholarships, and housing provisions. Their findings suggest that

a denser supply of higher education institutions, together with merit-based subsidies, contributes to enhancing regional competitiveness and attracting students, while income-based measures such as scholarships and loans do not necessarily increase mobility (ibid). These findings are partly confirmed by Priulla et al. (2025), who examine which individuals are more likely to become mobile students. Their research argues that inequalities in access to higher education are reinforced through processes of cumulative advantage; three main factors are associated with higher mobility: family support and economic resources, academic performance (which helps explain the effectiveness of merit-based subsidies), and the selection of prestigious and selective educational pathways.

Several studies support these conclusions, highlighting the positive relationship between student mobility and parental background (Impicciatore & Tosi, 2019), individual academic skills (Tosi et al., 2019) and universities' quality, specifically in terms of quality of research and teaching (Ciriaci et al., 2014), as well as institutional centrality and reputation (Columbu et al., 2021; De Angelis et al., 2017).

In contrast, Addeo et al. (2023) challenge these more structural interpretations by suggesting a shift in the determinants of student mobility. While in the past social capital played a more prominent role, the authors argue that contemporary mobility decisions are increasingly driven by factors such as openness to new experiences, the search for self-realisation and previous mobility experiences.

Dotti et al. (2013) introduce an additional perspective by emphasising the mutually reinforcing relationship between university attractiveness and regional economic development. Their findings show that universities can attract high-achieving students from economically lagging regions, while their attractiveness is itself strongly dependent on the dynamism of local labour markets. This opens a broader strand of literature that interprets student migration as a mechanism reinforcing regional inequalities, as mobile students remain in destination regions, strengthening centre-northern economies while promoting brain drain in the southern ones (Capuano, 2011; Etzo, 2025). Zurru (2020) offers an additional and slightly alternative perspective by examining policies aimed at fostering human capital investment and promoting brain circulation in Southern regions (Sardinia, in the case of his research). The study shows that poorly designed and implemented policies can have unintended consequences, ultimately exacerbating brain drain rather than mitigating it.

### **3.2. Cultural and creative workers**

A first strand of the literature examines creative graduates and creative workers as a specific form of human capital, with particular attention to their mobility patterns and spatial distribution. This discussion is connected to broader debates on the role of creative workers in local economic development, which gained prominence after the publication of “The Rise of the Creative Class” by Richard Florida (2002). The book argues that places with higher concentration of creativity and diversity (captured through the so-called “bohemian index”) are more likely to attract innovation and foster economic growth. Despite the controversies surrounding his argument, Florida’s contribution renewed attention to the spatial dimension of creative labour and to the relevance of CCWs in shaping regional labour markets, urban development and skilled mobility. Subsequent European empirical research has partly supported these arguments. For instance, Boschma & Fritsch (2009) confirm the positive effect of a regional climate of openness and tolerance on the concentration of creative workers across European regions. Similarly, in the Dutch context, Marlet & van Woerkens (2007) find that Florida’s concept of the creative class is a stronger predictor of urban growth than more conventional measures of human capital. By contrast, Faggian et al. (2014) investigate the mobility patterns of “bohemian graduates”, defined as individuals who combine formal higher education qualifications with artistic or creative orientations. Their findings show that among English students, graduates in business, management, engineering, and technology are generally more geographically mobile, whereas bohemian graduates tend to display lower mobility levels and earn lower wages on average (ibid).

A second strand of literature focuses on the tension between creative higher education and the realities of employment within the creative sector. In this context, Allen et al. (2013), for instance, show that vocational practices can function as filtering sites, where students are judged as more or less employable according to ideals that tend to privilege resource-rich, middle-class students. This argument connects with broader critiques of creative labour markets. Ruth Eikhof & Warhurst (2013) confirm that creative work often relies on precarious conditions, including project-based employment, informal recruitment, unpaid or low-paid entry routes, long working hours and mobility. As a result, these labour-market conditions tend to advantage individuals who are already able to absorb risk, thereby favouring individuals from more privileged backgrounds. Similarly, Friedman et al. (2017) argue that class origin continues to influence access to creative careers, since success depends

not only on talent but also on the economic, cultural and social capital needed to survive instability.

These tensions become particularly visible in music education and music careers. López-Íñiguez & Bennett (2021), in their study of learner identity among music graduates, show that students expect institutions to prepare them for the practical and emotional realities of professional life, including issues related to work-life balance. Similarly, Chen & De Leon (2025) find that music students believe higher education should prepare them to become adaptable professionals capable of navigating diverse and non-linear career trajectories. Their study highlights concerns that music programmes often focus too heavily on theoretical approaches, while offering limited opportunities for realistic career preparation. The mismatch between educational models and actual music careers is further discussed by Teague & Smith (2015), who argue that music education often continues to privilege the image of the “high-profile, full-time performer”, despite the fact that many musicians work across multiple roles. This has consequences for work-life balance, health and family life. Similarly, Creech et al. (2008) emphasise the difficulties associated with the transition from higher education to music careers, identifying challenges such as time pressure, competition, self-doubt and financial hardship.

This literature connects to studies on occupational outcomes and career diversification in music and the arts. Brook & Fostaty Young (2019) show that music graduates follow varied employment trajectories, ranging from work entirely outside music to careers fully based in music. Similar trends are observed in other artistic fields. England (2023), for example, shows how craft professionals develop differentiated career paths based on personal preferences in the prioritization of creative identity, market conditions and the extent to which they prioritise creative identity over business sustainability.

### **3.3. Research gap**

This study aims to bring together the two fields of research discussed above. Existing literature on student mobility has paid limited attention to students pursuing cultural and creative careers, often treating students as a broad and relatively homogeneous category. Furthermore, research in this field has largely relied on quantitative and statistical approaches, frequently overlooking students’ subjective experiences and lived daily world (Datko, 2015). At the same time, there remains limited research on creative workers and

creative graduates within the Italian context, where structural precariousness and territorial inequalities significantly shape educational and professional opportunities.

This thesis addresses these gaps by focusing on aspiring musicians from Southern Italy who moved to Centre-North regions in pursuit of music education and early career development. In doing so, it contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, it introduces a qualitative and bottom-up perspective to the study of interregional mobility, prioritising participants' perceptions, narratives, and interpretations. Second, it conceptualises creative educational mobility as a process shaped simultaneously by aspiration and constraint, showing how the pursuit of artistic self-realisation is embedded within unequal regional opportunity structures. Third, it connects the transition into creative work with the educational experience itself, highlighting how precarity may emerge even before full entry into the labour market.

## **4. Theoretical framework**

### **4.1. Core-periphery framework**

Historical-structural approaches developed during the 1970s and 1980s challenged the idea of migration as a rational process driven primarily by individual cost-benefit calculations. Instead, they reconceptualised migration as a phenomenon shaped by structural inequalities and mechanisms of exploitation (De Haas et al., 2019, p. 48). Within this perspective, core-periphery theories have been particularly influential. Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory (1974; 1980), for instance, argues that peripheral regions - often associated with the Global South - have historically been integrated into a global economy structured around the dominance of core countries in the Global North (De Haas et al., 2019, p. 50).

In the context of the present research, a more regionally focused analytical approach is required. Accordingly, John Friedmann's (1967) regional core-periphery framework is adopted. This framework conceptualises core areas as regions characterised by higher levels of urbanisation and a strong concentration of innovation, infrastructure, economic activity, and decision-making functions, whereas peripheral areas are associated with depopulation, limited services, and reduced employment opportunities (Oppido et al., 2023).

Building on this macro-meso level perspective, this research frames Italian regional disparities and patterns of internal migration through a core-periphery lens, where the relative core and periphery is represented respectively by the more developed Centre-North and the

underdeveloped South. This approach makes it possible to situate the perceptions and narratives of students and aspiring CCWs from the South who have relocated to the North within the broader structural inequalities underpinning Italy's regional divide.

#### **4.2. The aspirations and capabilities model**

Since analysing migration solely at the macro or meso-level risks overlooking the role of human agency, a micro-level perspective is necessary to conceptualise migrants as individuals capable of acting beyond structural constraints, not merely as passive subjects of capitalism, but as active agents who make decisions and move of their own accord (De Haas, 2021). However, migration can only occur when enabling conditions are present, such as awareness of opportunities elsewhere, access to education, and efficient communication and transport systems (ibid). As noted by Alcaraz (2026), while intentions refer to future-oriented plans for action, aspirations are more closely linked to desires, hopes, and expectations; expectations, in turn, incorporate an assessment of the likelihood of achieving these goals. Unlike traditional “push and pull” approaches (Lee, 1966), which explain migration through external economic, social, and political factors, the aspirations-capabilities framework places greater emphasis on individual agency, recognising both the capacity to migrate and the choice to remain in one's place of origin.

In this respect, the present research seeks to highlight the non-linearity of mobility choices and the blurred boundary between necessary and voluntary migration (De Haas et al., 2019). The decisions of creative students are not always guided by rational calculations of economic, professional, or social advantage. Rather, family structures, cultural norms, and personal expectations can both constrain and enable young people in the pursuit of their migration aspirations, particularly during the transition to adulthood (Alcaraz, 2026).

#### **4.3. Bourdieu's field and capital theory**

Pierre Bourdieu's (1985) concept of field refers to a structured space within the social world dedicated to a specific type of activity, governed by its own rules and institutions (Hilgers & Mangez, 2014, p.5). Within a field, agents are defined by their positions in this relational space, which are determined by the possession of forms of capital and power that are specifically valued within that field (Bathmaker, 2015). Bourdieu uses the metaphor of the “market” to describe the field as a site of tension and contestation, in which social interactions revolve around the exchange and accumulation of capital (ibid). In this regard,

the distinction between the three main forms of capital - economic, cultural, and social - introduced by the French sociologist becomes fundamental.

Cultural capital is pivotal within the field of cultural and creative workers. It exists in three forms: the embodied state, in which capital is acquired over time through a long process of assimilation involving both mind and body; the objectified state, represented by material cultural goods such as books or musical instruments; and the institutionalised state, which involves the objectification of cultural capital into academic qualifications and certificates of competence (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital can be exchanged, converted, or complemented by economic capital, in the form of money or property rights, and by social capital, namely the social connections and networks available to agents (ibid). The number of connections individuals possess, as well as the relative importance of these connections within the hierarchy of the field, may provide formal or informal access to opportunities capable of enhancing one's stock of capital (Dillon, 2014, pp. 430-432). In addition, some social groups "exist twice": agents' positions within a field are defined not only by the distribution of their material properties, but also by the perceptions they and others hold of them (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2013). This dimension defines what Bourdieu defines symbolic capital, commonly associated with prestige, authority, and status (ibid).

The field of cultural and creative workers operates according to its own logic, as it is characterised by a constant tension between economic and symbolic capital. Through this theoretical lens, the precarious nature of the sector is exemplified by the creative worker who accepts unstable and insecure conditions - primarily in economic terms - because artistic recognition and reputation carry greater meaning and value. Cultural legitimacy thus becomes a key instrument for climbing the hierarchy within the field. This is reflected in the motivation, and at times the necessity, to access education in order to institutionalise one's cultural capital and make it exchangeable, particularly at the intersection of different institutional fields, such as the educational and labour market fields during the transition from student to worker. Education therefore becomes a fundamental mechanism of legitimation within the cultural and creative field, enabling the transformation of skills into recognised and marketable credentials, thereby reinforcing one's symbolic capital while simultaneously restructuring the hierarchy and distribution of power within the field.

#### **4.4. Self-Entrepreneurship and the Neoliberalisation of Creative Work**

While Bourdieu's theory of field and capital is useful for explaining how aspiring musicians accumulate and convert different forms of capital in order to navigate hierarchies within the CCW field, it does not fully account for the neoliberal conditions that shape and constrain its "rules of the game". For this reason, McRobbie's (2016) post-structural theory of self-entrepreneurship is particularly useful for understanding how the neoliberal system increasingly requires workers to become mobile, flexible, self-managing, and individually responsible for their professional survival.

According to the British sociologist, creativity is framed as an inherent aspect of personhood that can be translated into marketable skills within the labour market (McRobbie, 2016, p. 15). Drawing on Foucault, she develops the concept of the "creative dispositif", namely a set of instruments, practices, educational frameworks, and cultural tools that encourage individuals to govern themselves through the imperative of being creative (p. 15). Although creativity is presented as a form of freedom and self-expression, it ultimately functions as a neoliberal mechanism that channels individuals' passions and capacities into market-oriented forms of labour while maintaining the illusion of autonomy and self-realisation (ibid).

This is particularly evident in what she defines as "passionate work", a term that resonates with Gill & Pratt (2008)'s discussion of cultural work as affectively charged labour, in which love, pleasure, and self-realisation, associated with the romanticisation of artistic labour, are in fact often accompanied by frustration, fear, or competitiveness. In this context, McRobbie (2016) shows how the genuine appeal of creative work can make insecurity more acceptable, as the neoliberal promise of autonomy, success, and self-expression while continuing to pursue self-expression and realisation helps sustain CCWs' commitment even under vulnerable conditions.

Education occupies a central position in this process. McRobbie argues that, for the system to function, it requires an entrepreneurial, self-regulated, and individualised young workforce, and that the most strategic site for cultivating this mindset is the public education system, where these individuals are already gathered (p. 61). Therefore, the value of creativity is maximised through the development of human capital, and schools become instruments for producing entrepreneurial and flexible subjects (p. 156). Educational institutions thus contribute to the formation of a highly educated but increasingly precarious workforce,

trained to survive in a labour market defined by self-direction, uncertainty, and limited institutional protection (p. 158).

In the context of this thesis, this perspective is useful for analysing how creative education is experienced both as a route to professional legitimacy and as an early encounter with the precariousness that characterises creative work.

## **5. Methodology**

### **5.1. Research Design**

This research will adopt a qualitative instrumental case study design and will be conducted through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This methodology is the most appropriate for this research as it enables an in-depth understanding of everyday life situations, typically ordinary and taken for granted, which reflect the lived experiences of individuals and social groups (Miles & Huberman, 1994, cited in Punch, 2005). Its aim is to capture data grounded in the perceptions of local actors through a process of deep attentiveness and empathetic understanding (ibid).

According to the definition provided by Stake (1994, cited in Punch, 2005), an instrumental case study is used when a particular case is examined to provide insight into a broader issue or to refine a theory. The selection of aspiring cultural and creative workers navigating educational mobility within the Italian socio-economic dualistic context is motivated by the strong relevance and timeliness of the issues under investigation and by the significance of their intersection, particularly within the context of development studies.

In order to access people's perceptions, meanings, and constructions of reality (Punch, 2005, p. 220), interviews represent the most suitable methodology for this research. Specifically, this study will rely on semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method to gather empirical data. The study will focus on the narratives, personal experiences, and perceptions of Italian creative students and aspiring CCWs in relation to their mobility experiences within Italy. Adopting a bottom-up perspective to better understand the viewpoints of the research participants offers relevant insights into aspects that might often be overlooked in academic literature and policymaking, while at the same time giving value to participants' voices and personal experiences (Kopec, 2023).

## 5.2. Sampling

In order to make the focus more specific and the sample more realistic, this research concentrates on a particular creative and artistic sector, namely the music field (this includes musicians, singers and songwriters, musical directors, composers and more professionals). More specifically, the study focuses mostly on students or graduates from the South who have moved to the Centre-North regions for their studies. Given the variety of educational pathways in the field, this study only considers music education institutions within the AFAM system (Higher Education in Art, Music and Choreutic Studies). This includes both public and legally recognised private bodies operating under the supervision and coordination of the Ministry of University and Research (MUR, n.d.).

Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling strategies. Purposive sampling represents the most suitable technique for this research, as the sample is intentionally designed to prioritize depth of understanding rather than breadth (Duan et al., 2015), and to reach respondents who are most likely to provide relevant and insightful information about the phenomenon within the constraints of limited resources (Campbell et al., 2020). Access to these participants was facilitated by my positionality, not only as an Italian, but also as someone actively involved in the cultural and creative sector of my hometown in Sardinia (see paragraph 5.5). After using my personal social network to establish initial contacts, additional participants were identified through recommendations, following a snowball sampling approach (Scott et al., 2020). Snowball sampling through social media was also employed to expand the pool of participants and reach individuals who met the research criteria but were outside my immediate network. This approach is particularly relevant in the contemporary higher education context, where universities increasingly operate within a globalised service industry and rely heavily on social media for visibility, promotion, and reputation (Tran et al., 2026).

The final sample consisted of individuals aged between 20 and 40, including students currently enrolled in AFAM institutions, graduates and/or cultural and creative workers (CCWs), two AFAM teachers, and one former student who has abandoned their studies. This cross-sectional composition enriched the research by providing a multiplicity of perspectives, allowing for a more diverse and nuanced analysis of experiences, opinions, and insights, and highlighting different viewpoints on the topics addressed. A complete list of the participants is included in the Appendix.

The gender imbalance in the sample was not intentional, but rather the result of differential response rates. Although the intrinsic relevance of gender in shaping the experiences of creative students in Italy is acknowledged, this study does not rely on gender as an analytical variable. Instead, the diversity of the sample, reflected in participants' varied regional origins and backgrounds, as well as diverse educational and occupational pathways, enriches the analysis with a wide range of experiences and perspectives. Nevertheless, caution is required when generalising the findings. Future research should, among other priorities, aim to achieve a more balanced gender representation.

### **5.3. Data Collection**

The thesis is based on empirical data collected through semi structured interviews conducted online between 12th of March and 11th of May 2026 using Google Calendar and Google Meet as digital platforms to plan and realise the online meetings. In practice, communication with participants in order to explain the research topics, provide the necessary information about the interviews, and arrange their scheduling took place via social networks such as WhatsApp or Instagram. The choice of online interviews and the mode of communication was determined by the researcher's geographical location in relation to the interviewees. However, during the data collection process, this approach proved to be effective and functional in accommodating the participants, who were often young students living away from home and independently, balancing their private lives with their studies and, for many of them, work, as can be observed in the presentation of the final sample.

The interviews were conducted in Italian, the native language of both the researcher and the interviewees. Linguistic and cultural matching contributed to establishing a more balanced interviewer-interviewee relationship, avoiding strong differences in terms of positionality and power relations. This further facilitated effective communication and helped prevent possible misunderstandings arising from linguistic expression.

Cultural and linguistic proximity, as well as similarities in age and lived experiences, contributed to conducting the interviews in the form of informal and friendly conversations, fostering an additional trust relationship between the researcher and the participants. Participants were aware that the interview was taking place, as they were informed of the beginning and end of the recording for ethical reasons; therefore, the interviews conducted cannot be defined as "informal conversations" according to their academic definition (Swain

& King, 2022), which refers to situations in which individuals are interviewed without being aware of it. Nevertheless, as Lambrou (2003) explains in relation to collaborative interviews within peer-group contexts, the interviews often took the form of narrative storytelling, characterized by the spontaneous inversion of the roles of researcher and participant in shaping questions and the structure of the interview itself. In addition, drawing on methodologies of informal conversation, some off-record exchanges were transcribed as field notes immediately after the end of the call and enrich the core findings by helping to reduce the potential performativity displayed by participants during recorded moments (Swain & King, 2022).

#### **5.4. Data analysis**

The material collected through the interviews was analysed using the thematic analysis (TA) approach developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006). This method is widely recognised as a flexible tool for identifying, analysing, and interpreting recurring themes within qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). This research adopts an abductive methodology, that is, an approach positioned between theory-driven and data-driven research. The theoretical framework guides the researcher in preventing the identification of abstract or unfounded findings; at the same time, however, the empirical data do not necessarily fit existing theoretical frameworks, as the researcher does not aim to identify a singular objective truth, but rather the most useful and logical explanation for the analysed phenomena (Thompson, 2022).

An abductive thematic analysis contributes to approaching the analysis with adaptability and creativity, linking findings to existing theories and previous literature while simultaneously allowing the researcher to be creative in their interpretation and, occasionally, in the construction of new theoretical understandings (Thompson, 2022).

The analysis of the interviews followed the six-step process suggested by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006). The approach began with familiarisation with the material. This consisted of repeatedly listening to the 14 recorded interviews, reviewing the notes taken during the interviews, and frequently reading the interview transcripts. The interview transcriptions were produced using the software SpeechPulse, powered by Whisper, an open-source speech recognition system capable of generating transcripts fully offline, thereby

avoiding the security concerns associated with cloud-based transcription platforms (Battaglia, 2024).

During the immersion phase, the first codes began to emerge. Coding was conducted manually and, despite time limitations, the process aimed to identify as many potential patterns as possible, in order not to focus solely on direct answers to the research questions, but also to take into account additional analytical dimensions. This approach sought to minimise bias and reduce the potential loss of relevant material.

The third phase consisted of grouping different codes into recurring themes and subthemes, which were then refined and defined in the following stage while remaining closely connected to the original material, since coding is understood as an ongoing process. The fifth phase concerned the final definition of the essence of each theme and the understanding of which aspects of the material each theme was capable of capturing. This process was particularly important in the selection of interview extracts, a stage that proved fundamental for carrying out the final phase: presenting the story of the data in a coherent, logical, and convincing manner for the reader.

Following this process enabled the development of an analysis that was structured and clear in its intentions, contributing to an effective and logical entanglement of the themes identified within the dataset, while also remaining flexible enough to support the development of a rich analysis within a relatively limited timeframe.

### **5.5. Ethical considerations and positionality**

The research design involved several ethical considerations. From the beginning of the research process, participants were informed about the topic of the study, its academic purpose, the interview format, and the ways in which the collected material would be used. Furthermore, participants were given the opportunity to decide whether the interview could be recorded. As a result, thirteen out of fourteen interviews were recorded, while one participant chose not to be recorded. Participants were also informed that the recordings would be used exclusively for the purposes of this research and securely deleted upon completion of the project.

Participation remained voluntary throughout the entire process and participants were informed that they could refuse to answer any question, interrupt the interview, or withdraw

from the study at any time. This was particularly important because some interview questions addressed potentially sensitive topics, including family background, economic support, personal feelings and experiences. Although participants were free to decide what information they wished to share, anonymity was maintained throughout the thesis in order to protect them, particularly because of some expressed concerns about discussing personal experiences, institutional criticism, or other potentially sensitive reflections.

Following Fujii's (2017, cited in Soedirgo & Glas, 2020) understanding of reflexivity as an awareness of the relational and power dynamics that shape the research encounter, I approached interviews not as neutral exchanges but as situated interactions strongly influenced by my positionality. I conducted this study with the awareness that I am not external to the topics under investigation, since I was born and raised in Southern Italy, specifically in Sardinia, and I am personally involved in the cultural and creative sector as a musician and performer.

This positionality shaped the research process in several ways. On the one hand, my regional background helped create familiarity with participants and contributed to a more informal and relaxed interview environment. In some cases, this shared geographical and cultural background appeared to reduce the distance between researcher and participant, making it easier to discuss experiences of mobility, attachment to place, and frustration with local opportunities. On the other hand, my involvement in the music field required careful reflexive attention. When relevant, I disclosed my position as a musician, but I generally avoided foregrounding it at the beginning of interviews in order not to influence participants' responses or create expectations of agreement. During the interviews, I also sought to avoid validating or reinforcing participants' judgments, particularly when they expressed critical opinions about institutions, territories, or professional experiences. Instead, I maintained a listening position and allowed participants to develop their narratives as freely as possible.

Finally, this study does not claim to represent the experiences of all music students, aspiring musicians, or cultural and creative workers in Italy. The sample is limited, and participants' trajectories are highly diverse, shaped by differences in region of origin, family background, educational pathway, musical genre, institution, and career stage. The aim is therefore not to generalise, but rather to identify recurring patterns and meanings within a specific group of mobile aspiring creative workers, and to offer insights into a phenomenon that requires further qualitative research.

## 6. Results and Discussion

### 6.1. Opportunities and limitations in core and peripheries

The most dominant theme emerging across the interviews is the perception of Centre-Northern Italy as a place of “opportunities” and “possibilities”, which are among the most frequent recurring words in the collected material.

*“I have always had this inclination to study elsewhere, to build a life that is strongly guided by that very famous beacon: “go away”. especially, you know, there is often this cliché, “Go to Northern Italy because that’s where you find opportunities””* (Participant 5).

As underlined by Addeo et al. (2023), the search for self realisation and the drive to study in Northern Italy or abroad appear to be defining elements in the experiences of many respondents. This emerges first and foremost in terms of a desire for change, a call towards independence, and an attraction to new experiences. For many participants, however, it was regional limitations that made mobility a concept shaping their lives from an early age; as a result, relocation was often not perceived as particularly challenging or emotionally burdensome, precisely because it was strongly desired.

A first insight emerging from the interviews concerns how disparities in higher education opportunities influence the mobility decisions of creative students. In line with García-Pereiro et al., (2025), the findings confirm that the availability of higher education institutions is positively associated with the attractiveness of certain regions and cities. Indeed, the pragmatism underlying the decision making process of creative students emerged particularly clearly when the perceived lack of adequate music institutions in their regions of origin, or the significant disparity in the quantity of educational opportunities between origin and destination regions, posed a limitation to their self-realisation. As Participant 2 notes: *“I don’t think there are many schools in Sardinia that offer this kind of training - or maybe there are none, I’m not sure - especially AFAM-level education”*. In this context, the scarcity or perceived inadequacy of equivalent pathways in Southern regions makes mobility a practical necessity for accessing educational opportunities.

In this regard, a closely related dimension concerns perceived regional disparities in cultural promotion between Southern and centre-Northern Italy, with the latter being presented not only as a hub for educational opportunities, but also as a context in which culture - and, in this case, music - is more actively promoted and emphasised. Participant 1, for instance,

describes the vibrancy of the music scene in Milan compared to Palermo, highlighting the limited number of concert seasons in the latter and the broader range of festivals in Milan, spanning genres from contemporary to Baroque. Similarly, Participant 8 states: *“In Turin I found a place where music and the arts are more appreciated and more visible [...], they are much more promoted”*, drawing a comparison with Cagliari, where cultural advertising is largely confined to areas around theatre or conservatoires. In addition, two participants positively emphasised the more “European” atmosphere of Northern cities (especially Milan) suggesting a more open and internationally oriented cultural environment.

Another point emerging from the collected material is the greater valorisation of music and arts is accompanied by increased access to employment opportunities offered directly by educational institutions. These opportunities take various forms, including workshops with music industry professionals, auditions or casting calls for tours with Italian artists, and paid positions within conservatoires, such as roles in production offices or as technical assistants. These dynamics appear to be particularly common in private institutions, where students may be gradually integrated into teaching activities, as illustrated by participants 9, 11 and 13.

Finally, moving from Southern Italy to the Centre-North to study music therefore often represents the possibility of leaving behind a context in which musicians do not feel fully valued or able to freely express their artistic identity. Within this sample, this perspective emerged particularly strongly among participants from Apulia and Campania, who repeatedly highlighted the limited availability of venues and opportunities to perform, as well as the lack of openness toward young people’s musical interests and creative proposals. For example, Participant 3 praises the open mindset of the CPM institute in responding to students’ needs and embracing a wider range of musical genres, contrasting with Lecce, where there are fewer institutions and a more traditional mindset that can discourage the study of contemporary genres such as pop and rock. Similarly, Participants 6,7 and 12 describe how musical work in Apulia is often tied to private events, weddings, and live performances centered on tribute bands, highlighting the constraints this places on artistic experimentation and self expression. As Participant 7 explains:

*“I obviously didn’t want to stay in Trani because I didn’t feel truly valued [...]; if I come to Milan, I want to make only original music or work on meaningful projects with people I choose”*.

In this way, destination cities in the Centre-North constitute, once again, central hubs where cultural production is more dynamic, opportunities are more diverse and artistic and personal fulfillment is more readily achievable, reinforcing their perception as the core spaces of musical innovation and professional development.

This illustrates how mobility becomes an extension of the artistic need to create and to fill fulfilled and represented through one's art. Participants also acknowledge that Southern Italy offers performance opportunities; however, these are often considered insufficient for the development of the artistic identities they aspire to, as music in these contexts is frequently experienced more as a form of work rather than as a space for creative expression.

Based on the material presented, it is therefore possible to observe how the Centre-North operates as a core within ecosystems compatible with the CCWs field. This centrality is particularly evident in cities that offer greater visibility for the arts and, above all, a more extensive and better-promoted network of educational institutions capable of generating cultural and symbolic capital. Such capital is expressed not only through formal education and institutional recognition, but also through the extent to which students feel heard, supported and professionally legitimised. Furthermore, in line with Klimczuk-Kochańska & Klimczuk (2023), institutions themselves, through their reputation, visibility and symbolic authority, contribute to reinforcing the centrality of the territories in which they are embedded, thereby reproducing and intensifying existing territorial inequalities within the Italian context.

#### **6.1.1. Transport**

The core-periphery system is also illustrated, in its most classical sense, by geographical constraints, particularly in the divide between mainland Italy and the islands. The peripheral status of Sardinia and Sicily is reproduced by infrastructural constraints, which play a decisive role in shaping the mobility decisions of creative workers. Several respondents highlighted the necessity of relocating due to limited connectivity and inadequate transport services. Participant 4, for instance, explained that leaving Sardinia was largely driven by insufficient air connections, which restricted opportunities to engage with broader musical networks beyond the island. Moreover, being a musician entails additional logistical and financial constraints, such as the need to purchase specialised tickets for transporting instruments.

The data also suggest that living on the Italian mainland offers greater flexibility for work-related mobility across regions, depending on the availability of projects and events, while also improving overall quality of life. As Participant 2 noted, living in Milan enables participation in cultural events such as concerts without the additional costs of flights and accommodation. This increased accessibility facilitates more direct and continuous engagement with cultural capital and, at the same time, contributes to the accumulation of social capital by providing greater social stimulation and enabling the expansion of professional and personal networks, particularly beyond one's place of origin. This reinforces previous literature, for instance by Crociata et al. (2019), according to whom the larger income of the Centre-North allows larger participation in cultural activities, therefore influencing the endowment of cultural capital in richer regions, creating a virtuous development circle.

Further perceptions of insularity are expressed by Participant 14, who argues that coming from Sardinia entails “a step more” in terms of effort, due to the sea, fewer funds and more hours of travel. According to her, being a mobile musician from Sardinia therefore demands greater determination in one's career choices. Similarly, Participant 9 describes the Strait of Messina as creating a “void,” with Sicily perceived as a self-contained ecosystem.

### **6.1.2. Relationship with the territory**

*“Put bluntly, I will probably never return to Sicily [...] because I feel that instinctive bond, but at the same time I also feel, in some way, betrayed by that place” (Participant 9).*

As highlighted above, the awareness of leaving one's region from an early age is often accompanied by deeply ambivalent feelings. A strong attachment to one's place of origin coexists with the perceived necessity to leave, based on the understanding that personal and professional fulfillment may not be achievable or sustainable locally. This tension is evident in Participant 9's account, particularly in the contrast between those who leave and those who stay. The participant describes a sense of betrayal, as the place that was expected to provide opportunities and support did not, in fact, meet these expectations. He further explains how this feeling is often mirrored at the local level, where departure can itself be perceived as an act of superiority or as “abandoning the territory in its moment of need”.

As discussed in the background section, migration from the South has not functioned as a tool of territorial rebalancing, but has instead reinforced cumulative advantage in the

Centre-North. The data clearly show how many participants relocated in search of greater opportunities and how mobility often leads to increased cultural, symbolic and economic capital. Nevertheless, attachment to one's homeland frequently persists, together with the desire to return, despite uncertainty about whether doing so will ever be economically sustainable. Many participants express a conditional desire to return, typically only after achieving stability elsewhere, recognising that remaining would often entail significant professional compromises. This generates conflicting narratives around agency and responsibility. Participant 4, for example, expresses the ambition to create a classical guitar festival for those who "cannot, do not want to, or do not know that they can go and study elsewhere". In this sense, mobility is sometimes imagined as a temporary strategy to later contribute to local development.

In other cases, however, the dominant feeling is one of discouragement. Participant 9 expresses guilt for being unable to contribute to the development of the territory, while also arguing that "*sacrificing an entire life to try to create something artistic and meaningful in Sicily, only to face repeated disappointment for having moved society forward by just a small step, is an enormous sacrifice*". He further suggests that this burden is often carried by younger generations in an almost "martyr-like" way, as efforts toward change are inadequately supported by institutions. Similarly, Participant 13 compares attempts to effect change to "emptying the ocean with a bucket", highlighting perceived institutional closure, limited responsiveness, and insufficient support within the local artistic ecosystem.

The South's reliance on migrants' desire to return is insufficient to counter the structural dynamics of a core-periphery system, in which the Centre-North continues to attract and accumulate human capital from the South through ongoing brain drain. Participants' relationships with their places of origin show how affective and irrational factors shape mobility decisions alongside structural constraints. In this sense, mobility becomes both a consequence and a mechanism of regional inequality, reinforcing the concentration of opportunities and resources in the core while further weakening the periphery.

### **6.1.3. "Keep Escaping Further North"**

Most participants expressed a desire to move abroad, often motivated by the stronger cultural connection between countries such as Germany, Austria, or Norway and the musical genres they pursue. Several participants had already undertaken international mobility after

relocating within Italy, either by pursuing master's degrees abroad or attempting to settle in other countries. International workshops and masterclasses also played an important role in shaping participants' musical aspirations and educational choices. At the same time, experiences abroad highlighted for many participants the structural limitations of the Italian context, particularly the lack of institutional support for the performing arts and the weak protection of cultural and creative workers, factors that encourage further mobility toward Northern Europe.

This illustrates the relativity of the core-periphery model and further demonstrates that peripheral spaces are not natural phenomena; rather, they emerge as a result of shifts in economic, political, and social factors operating at different scales (Urso et al., 2023). In this context, peripherality can be understood as something actively produced, even if not intentionally, through the ways in which policies and power structures are implemented (ibid). This form of marginalisation appears to be particularly significant in the field of CCWs, where certain conditions, such as institutional support for the CCS, are necessary for the field to function effectively.

## **6.2. Bureaucratic constraints in higher education**

AFAM institutions provide aspiring musicians with the institutionalised cultural capital needed to convert their education into other forms of capital - particularly symbolic capital - capable of legitimising their professional identity and increasing their opportunities within the field. At the same time, however, these institutions also reproduce forms of precariousness through bureaucratic constraints and often problematic educational experiences. This generates feelings of frustration, insecurity, and anxiety, especially among students who already face educational and economic uncertainty, such as students falling behind in their studies and relying on scholarships, or those forced to balance work alongside their education.

The vast majority of participants expressed strong criticism of the AFAM system, particularly with regard to conservatoires (public institutions). Several interviewees referred to the reforms introduced during the transition from the former to the current system, which placed conservatoires under the Ministry of University and Research and aligned their structure and standards more closely with those of traditional universities. According to Participants 4 and 5, the reform introduced numerous theoretical subjects perceived as “unnecessary,” as they

were seen to reduce time for instrumental practice. This shift is interpreted as a gradual weakening of performance practice and the centrality of the instrument within academic training, contributing to the “denaturalisation” of a system originally designed for the highly specialised vocational training of musicians.

However, this perspective was not shared by all participants. Participant 6, for instance, adopts a more positive view of the expanded curriculum, arguing that it provides students with a broader cultural foundation beyond narrowly instrumental training and opens up alternative career paths within the music field. This aligns with Chen and De Leon’s (2025) findings on the need for music students to be prepared for more flexible and diversified professional trajectories. Similarly, subjects such as music publishing and management can be understood as responses to the increasing pluralisation of musicians’ careers, while also reflecting McRobbie’s concept of the “creative business school,” in which creative education becomes a site for the production of human capital and the promotion of self-entrepreneurial skills (McRobbie, 2016, pp. 157–158). Participant 7 highlights a more critical perspective, referring to a conservatory course aimed at training stage managers. He points to a clear mismatch between educational content and professional reality, explaining:

*“I don’t know, it’s just that everything was focused on the giant scale, but in reality it’s as if everything were like San Siro, as if we were all performing at San Siro - okay, the reality is that probably one out of seventy of us will ever perform at San Siro”. He further adds: “At most, small and emerging artists need to learn how not to get ripped off by managers”.*

This critique reflects a broader concern about the gap between music higher education and labour market realities, echoing Bennett’s argument that vocational music education often fails to acknowledge the diversity of professional roles musicians actually occupy, including the fact that most do not work as high-profile or widely recognised performers (Bennett, 2008, cited in Teague & Smith, 2015).

Several interconnected consequences have been identified within the same thematic framework. Participant 5, for instance, argues that the increasing theorisation of an institution originally designed to be practice-oriented contributes to the development of an outdated university system, in which examinations become “a torture” and students end up studying solely to obtain a grade. In his view, this shift undermines the professionalising function of education, replacing it with a more bureaucratic logic that generates both personal and

economic difficulties. The latter arise in particular because, as the findings show, maintaining eligibility for scholarships - which constitute a crucial source of financial support for most interviewees - requires the fulfilment of specific credit requirements. This will be further investigated in the next sections.

Finally, the transfer of credits represents a further example of bureaucratic instability within public AFAM institutions. Several participants reported difficulties in having credits obtained in their region of origin recognised after moving to institutions in destination regions, a problem that appears to stem from the autonomy of individual institutions in structuring their curricula. Rather than functioning as a smooth mechanism of mobility within a unified national system, credit transfer was often described as fragmented and poorly coordinated, with limited administrative support from institutional offices, resulting in delays, the need to retake examinations, additional compulsory attendance requirements, and uncertainty regarding graduation timelines. Participant 8's experience is particularly illustrative: after moving from Cagliari to Turin in response to organisational difficulties in his previous institution, many of his credits were not recognised, forcing him to retake courses with compulsory attendance while also working for financial reasons. This situation generated significant anxiety and ultimately led him to withdraw from his studies and abandon the instrument altogether. This case highlights a broader structural issue, as the bureaucratisation of music education can intensify the precariousness already experienced by mobile students, particularly those reliant on scholarships and therefore compelled to work to finance their studies and relocation. This dimension will be further explored in the following sections.

### **6.3. Social capital in the field of CCWs**

The collected material highlights the relevance of social capital in both enabling and structuring mobility processes, as well as in navigating the field of CCWs. The data shows that participants' decision making was often shaped and made possible by networks of contacts that facilitated access to both social resources and financial support.

Firstly, the material indicates that many conservatoire students considered it decisive to follow a teacher with whom they had previously developed a strong artistic relationship. These student-teacher ties often acted as an initial trigger for mobility, providing both guidance and continuity in their training. In addition, social resources embedded within destination institutions themselves also played a significant role. Participants frequently

described these environments as open and stimulating ecosystems, populated by musicians with similar goals and aspirations, which in turn reinforces the reputation of these institutions, as discussed above.

The findings confirm the centrality of networking in creative labour markets. As McRobbie (2016, pp.23-25) argues, creative work increasingly depends on the so-called “network sociality”, where older career structures are replaced by more flexible and insecure forms of access to work. This is particularly visible in Participant 7’s emphasis on understanding the “social veneer” of the music world and actively engaging in social dynamics strategically, cultivating relationships in order to obtain work opportunities. In line with this, the broader literature on CCWs recognises social capital as an essential mechanism for accessing work while also highlighting how sociality can become instrumentalised. For instance, Participant 12 expresses dissatisfaction with the environment in Milan, arguing that social interaction is not experienced as leisure, but rather - as Gill & Pratt (2008) suggest - as a compulsory practice oriented towards securing future employment.

Insecure forms of access to work are further reflected in the finding that some employment opportunities, both in teaching and performing, were obtained through informal institutional contacts rather than through formal or transparent recruitment procedures. Participant 10 highlights this informality, stating that “if someone likes you, you have the possibility to perform in more contexts”. While such dynamics appear normalised in smaller professional environments, participants also point to more formal settings such as national competitions auditions, where concerns about nepotism and corruption were frequently raised.

Finally, family and friendship networks also emerged as important enablers of mobility, particularly through the provision of housing support and assistance with adaptation to new environments. More broadly, the interviews material confirms the relevance of both embodied and objectified dimensions of cultural capital alongside its institutionalised form. Participants reported highly uneven family backgrounds, especially in relation to economic and emotional support throughout their educational and mobility trajectories. Access to financial resources significantly influenced their ability to dedicate time and energy to artistic development, while those without such support often had to combine study with work to cover tuition and living expenses, resulting in increasing stress and instability. At the same time, the findings also show that the absence of financial or emotional support did not necessarily prevent participants from pursuing musical careers. Many described processes of

continuous adaptation and reinvention in order to remain within the field despite structural constraints and precariousness. The following section further develops this topic.

#### **6.4. Precariousness and passionate work**

Participants' responses regarding their perception of precariousness within the musical environment and their personal approaches to navigating it were almost unanimous. Most interviewees confirmed McRobbie (2016)'s notion of "passionate work" and the concept of "affect" discussed by Gill & Pratt (2008), in which attachment to ideals of self-expression and self-realisation through creative labour becomes a defining element of the CCS. Drawing from the material gathered, musical work was described as a means of self-discovery, an expression of one's identity and personality, and even as a personal mission.

The vulnerability and instability of the CCS are often perceived as an avoidable reality. However, this affective attachment enables the interviewed creatives to imagine their future positively, making them willing to tolerate uncertainty, low income prospects, as well as the absence of stable career pathways, as working in music is considered inherently rewarding. Participant 10, for example, described feeling fortunate to have obtained a permanent teaching position at a conservatoire, despite this requiring regular travel between Lombardy (North), where he lives and maintains his concert career, and Campania (South), where the conservatoire employing him is located.

In this context, a further consideration needs to be highlighted. More generally, as mentioned above, the findings suggest that a smoother transition from education to professional work may be more accessible to students attending private music academies. Although AFAM institutions formally belong to the same higher education framework, participants frequently framed their experiences through a public/ private divide. Private institutions, despite their higher economic barriers to access, were often perceived as offering stronger guarantees in terms of professional opportunities and career transitions compared to public conservatoires, which participants described as being more vulnerable to bureaucratic constraints operating at a national level. As a consequence, students with fewer economic resources may experience forms of cumulative disadvantage throughout their educational trajectories, therefore reflecting broader research on how creative higher education can reproduce inequalities (Allen et al., 2013). As previously noted, financially vulnerable students are more likely to depend on scholarships and therefore remain under pressure to comply with institutional requirements, including rigid examination timelines and increasingly theoretical curricula

perceived as detached from the vocational training that AFAM institutions are expected to provide. At the same time, limited financial resources often reduce students' leisure time and opportunities for artistic development, as many are required to undertake paid work to sustain relocation and living costs. This further demonstrates how those lacking financial support are less able to absorb risk and remain available for career-building chances (Friedman et al., 2017; Eikhof & Warhurst, 2013). In this sense, precariousness does not emerge solely as a condition of the labour market, but also as a stratifying factor already embedded within higher creative education itself (McRobbie, 2016).

## **7. Conclusion**

This thesis examined the experiences and perceptions of music students, graduates and aspiring CCWs from Southern Italy who relocated to Centre-Northern regions in order to pursue music education in institutions belonging to the AFAM system. Drawing on fourteen semi-structured interviews with participants occupying different positions within the music field, the research explored how regional inequalities shape creative educational mobility and early creative career trajectories. More specifically, the study investigated how participants perceived opportunities and limitations across Italian regions; how they navigated their educational experience within AFAM institutions; how some of them approached the transition from education to work; and how they experienced the precarious prospects of the CCS.

The analysis was developed through a framework capable of connecting different levels of explanation. At the macro and meso level, core-periphery perspectives helped interpret the uneven distribution of educational, cultural, and professional opportunities between Southern and Centre-Northern regions. At the micro level, the aspirations-capabilities approach made it possible to understand mobility not only as a response to structural constraints, but also as a process shaped by expectations, emotional attachments, and drives for artistic and personal self-realisation. Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital were used to analyse how participants accumulate and convert cultural, social, and symbolic resources within the field of cultural and creative work. Finally, McRobbie's work on self-entrepreneurship in the creative industries provided a useful framework for understanding how insecurity becomes normalised within a sector where artistic labour remains strongly connected to passion while simultaneously embedded in neoliberal logics centred on self-management and entrepreneurial subjectivity.

The findings confirm that the distinction between Southern peripheral regions and Centre-Northern core regions remains highly relevant in the experiences of aspiring musicians. Many participants described the Centre-North as a space of greater educational opportunity, recognition, and accessibility to environments where the arts, and music in particular, were more visible, institutionally supported, and more easily convertible into social and symbolic capital. Mobility therefore emerged as a strategy for personal and artistic experimentation, professionalisation, and inclusion within broader artistic ecosystems concentrated in the core. Southern Italy, by contrast, was not perceived as devoid of opportunities; rather, such opportunities were often described as less sustainable, less institutionally supported, or less compatible with the artistic identities participants sought to develop. Participants' relationships with their places of origin further highlighted the importance of emotional and affective dimensions in shaping mobility decisions, demonstrating how aspirations for artistic fulfilment contribute to reinforcing core-periphery structures and their broader consequences, including the continued brain drain from the South to the Centre-North.

A second key finding concerns the ambivalent role of music education. AFAM institutions were often perceived as essential for acquiring artistic legitimacy and building networks within the field. At the same time, education also emerged as a site where instability and inequality may be reproduced, particularly within public conservatoires, due to bureaucratic constraints such as the increasing theorisation of training and difficulties surrounding credit transfer procedures. These dynamics frequently generated stress, anxiety, and economic pressure, especially for students dependent on scholarships or compelled to work alongside their studies. In this sense, precariousness did not appear solely as a future labour-market condition, but as something already embedded within higher education itself through bureaucratic and institutional structures.

The social and familial dimension strongly confirmed existing literature on CCWs, particularly regarding the centrality of informal networking and social capital in accessing opportunities within the field. Finally, the study shows that precariousness was widely recognised by participants as a defining feature of musical work. Most interviewees demonstrated a clear awareness of the uncertainty, instability, and economic fragility associated with artistic careers. Nevertheless, music was repeatedly described as a form of identity, self-expression, vocation, and personal fulfilment and, within the context of this

research, this helps explain why participants continued to pursue musical careers despite insecurity.

In conclusion, this study contributes to existing research through the intersection of interregional student mobility, cultural and creative work, and music education, enriching the Italian literature on student mobility through qualitative findings centred on the perceptions and lived experiences of participants. At the same time, some limitations must be acknowledged. The sample is relatively small and specific and, given the qualitative nature of the project and its reliance on semi-structured interviews, the perspectives of institutions, employers, and policymakers remain outside the scope of the research. Future studies could expand this work through larger and more diverse samples, as well as through mixed-method approaches integrating official documentation, national and regional policies, and institutional perspectives into the analysis.

11,278 words

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## Appendix

Brief presentation of each participant:

|                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Participant 1</i> | A 30-year-old man from Sicily. He studied piano and orchestral conducting in Milan (Lombardy), training in Conservatorio Giuseppe Verdi and the Scuola Civica di Musica Claudio Abbado. He is currently completing his final composition requirements in Milan while simultaneously studying orchestral conducting in Palermo (Sicily). Alongside his studies, he works part-time as a bus driver, commuting frequently between the two cities to attend lessons. |
| <i>Participant 2</i> | A 21-year-old woman from Sardinia. She is currently studying pop-rock singing bachelor at the private CPM Music Institute in Milan.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <i>Participant 3</i> | A 21-year-old woman from Apulia. She is also enrolled in pop-rock singing bachelor at the CPM Music Institute in Milan.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <i>Participant 4</i> | A 24-year-old man from Sardinia. He recently graduated in classical guitar from the Conservatorio Santa Cecilia in Rome (Lazio) and is currently living in Switzerland, where he is pursuing a Master's programme.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <i>Participant 5</i> | A 28-year-old man from Calabria. He is currently studying opera singing at the Conservatorio Giuseppe Verdi in Milan while also pursuing higher studies in work psychology.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <i>Participant 6</i> | A 21-year-old man from Apulia. He is currently studying in a bachelor programme in pop-rock drums at the Conservatorio Giuseppe Verdi in Milan.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <i>Participant 7</i> | A 28-year-old man from Apulia. He recently completed a postgraduate programme in pop-rock drums at the Conservatorio Giuseppe Verdi in Milan and is currently working as a freelance musician and a music teacher for children.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <i>Participant 8</i> | A 26-year-old man from Sardinia. He studied piano in Cagliari for around 10 years before enrolling in a degree in music education. He subsequently moved to Turin (Piedmont) to continue his studies in music education, which he eventually discontinued.                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <i>Participant 9</i> | A 27-year-old man from Sicily. He studied electric guitar at the private music academy Siena Jazz (Tuscany) and is currently teaching at the same institution.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

|                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Participant 10</i> | A 40-year-old man from Sardinia. He moved to Lombardy for a specialisation degree in musicology, then trained in harpsichord and chamber music in Emilia Romagna. He is based in Varese (Lombardy) and works as a harpsichordist and conservatory professor, teaching at the Conservatorio Domenico Cimarosa in Avellino (Campania) while maintaining an active concert career across Italy.                   |
| <i>Participant 11</i> | A 25-year-old man from Campania. He moved to Tuscany to study jazz piano at the Siena Jazz Academy. After completing his bachelor's degree in 2024, he was recruited into the teaching staff of the academy, where he currently teaches piano, ear training, and music theory while continuing his activity as a performer.                                                                                    |
| <i>Participant 12</i> | A 29-year-old man from Puglia. He studied jazz singing at the Conservatory of Monopoli before living two years in the United Kingdom. He relocated to Milan in 2021 to complete a master's degree at the Conservatorio Giuseppe Verdi. He currently lives in Milan, where he works as a singing teacher in private music schools while developing his own singer-songwriter project as a vocalist and pianist. |
| <i>Participant 13</i> | A 30-year-old man from Campania. He is currently based in Siena (Tuscany), where he works as a music teacher and jazz drummer, while preparing to begin a master's degree in musical composition in Norway.                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <i>Participant 14</i> | A 20-year-old woman from Sardinia. She completed her undergraduate studies in flute performance at the Conservatory of Cagliari, later continued her studies in Novara, and is currently pursuing advanced music studies abroad while training for a career in orchestral performance and teaching.                                                                                                            |