

Title of the Doctoral Thesis: **Investigating Accessibility to Higher Education: Empirical Essays on Scholarships Eligibility and Commuting Behavior**

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Title: **Scholarship eligible criteria based on public transport related home – college distance**
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Abstract

Scholarships are widely established policies to allow university students accessing higher education programs. Financial aids may help disadvantaged students to enrol and complete undergraduate courses based on economic conditions and other eligibility criteria, such as the time-distance from home to university. Italian regions define own specific time-distance cut-offs, by labelling recipients as on-site, commuter or off-site scholarship recipient for cases below or above threshold values. Yet, recent studies emphasised that living in the university city has a positive effect on academic performances. As travel-based eligibility criteria might be a source of inequality, to the best of our knowledge, this research is the first attempt to assess Italian scholarship eligibility criteria based on the time-distance from home. By using panel administrative data (2015 – 2022) drawn from the University of Piemonte Orientale as a case study, in this paper 3,725 observations about scholarship recipients are used to test whether being labelled as on-site, commuter or off-site student – depending on expected times travelled by public transportation to reach the university – might have an effect on performance indicators, i.e., average grades, ECTS obtained, and drop-out rate. Since the probability of being included in such recipient types might be discontinuous, e.g., due to reclassification procedures or misallocations, in this study a *fuzzy regression discontinuity model* is used as empirical strategy. The main finding suggests that off-site recipients might sacrifice own weighted average grades in favour to a higher number of ECTS, compared to commuters, to maintain their recipient status. Besides confirming the importance of living in the university city for off-site students thanks to scholarships, this study put forward the idea for which a better balancing between ECTS requirements and higher education quality (captured by exam grades) could be advocated in the Italian context to ensure a more sounding equality among college students.

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