

**LUCIA BONTEMPI**

# **STUDENT SUPPORT PROGRAM FOR FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS: A CAUSAL EVALUATION IN THE CONTEXT OF OPEN ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION**

Despite growing institutional efforts to foster inclusion in higher education, student success rates remain low, particularly among first-year students. This issue carries significant academic, social, and economic implications for students, institutions and society as a whole. In response, universities have progressively implemented a range of programs designed to support student success. The effectiveness of such initiatives has been well documented in Anglo-Saxon systems where high entry barriers and substantial tuition fees result in a relatively homogeneous student population. Yet, their impact remains less established in systems characterized by low entry barriers and low fees where student profiles are far more heterogeneous. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the effectiveness of support programs in the context of French-speaking Belgium. Using a causal evaluation approach based on propensity score matching, we estimate the impact of participation in a disciplinary support program on academic achievement. Preliminary findings indicate that students attending the program have significantly higher exam scores due to the support program, offering empirical evidence to guide institutional strategies.