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Building Global Perspectives: Thirty Years of ASERI

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Abstract

Founded in 1995 as a pioneering response to the challenges of globalization, the Graduate School of Economics and International Relations (ASERI) of Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore has evolved over three decades into a leading center for advanced education, research, and international dialogue. Conceived as a bridge between academic reflection and institutional practice, ASERI has combined interdisciplinary training, high-level faculty, and strategic partnerships with international organizations and businesses. From its early programs and the involvement of world-renowned scholars, through the launch of innovative master's degrees and the creation of influential research series, the School has built a distinctive identity at the intersection of politics, economics, and global governance. Today, with five specialized master's programs, a vibrant network of alumni from more than 80 countries, and strong connections to institutions and enterprises worldwide, ASERI continues to fulfill its founding mission: to provide the analytical tools, professional skills, and ethical grounding required to understand and shape the complexities of an interconnected world.

Abstract (Italiano)

Fondata nel 1995 come risposta pionieristica alle sfide della globalizzazione, la Graduate School of Economics and International Relations (ASERI) dell'Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore si è affermata, in tre decenni, come un centro di riferimento per la formazione avanzata, la ricerca e il dialogo internazionale. Concepite come un ponte tra la riflessione accademica e la prassi istituzionale, le attività di ASERI hanno combinato formazione interdisciplinare, docenti di alto livello e partnership strategiche con organizzazioni internazionali e realtà del mondo economico. Dai primi programmi e dal coinvolgimento di studiosi di fama mondiale, fino al lancio di innovativi percorsi di master e alla creazione di collane di ricerca influenti, la Scuola ha costruito un'identità distintiva all'incrocio tra politica, economia e governance globale. Oggi, con cinque master specialistici, una rete vivace di alumni provenienti da oltre 80 Paesi e solidi legami con

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istituzioni e imprese in tutto il mondo, ASERI continua a perseguire la sua missione originaria: fornire strumenti analitici, competenze professionali e fondamenta etiche per comprendere e orientare le complessità di un mondo interconnesso.

Keywords: *ASERI, globalization, international relations, postgraduate education, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore*

Introduction

Retracing the history of ASERI means revisiting the evolution of a visionary project that, since the mid-1990s, has sought to combine academic rigor, international openness, and a deep commitment to understanding global transformations. Established within the intellectual and institutional framework of Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, ASERI quickly emerged as a bold and pioneering response to the challenges of globalization – an interdisciplinary school dedicated to training professionals able to navigate an increasingly complex world. This article offers a structured overview of ASERI's thirty-year journey, and is articulated in three: "Envisioning ASERI (1995–1996)", "Building the Institution (1996–2000)", and "Expanding Horizons (2001–2025)". Each section highlights key milestones in the School's development: the initial vision and foundational choices, the design and consolidation of its academic programmes, the expansion of its international presence, and its contribution to the advancement of international studies in Italy and beyond.

1. Envisioning ASERI (1995–1996)

In the mid-1990s, the concept of globalization remained ambiguous, surrounded by an "aura of abstraction" (Fumagalli, 2025: 22). Few fully grasped its scope, and even fewer anticipated its capacity to reshape the economic, political, and social structures of the contemporary world. As Piero Bassetti would later note, "its meaning was unclear, and there was certainly no perception that it was

a phenomenon that would radically change the world" (Bassetti, 2006: 11-13).

It was precisely in this climate of uncertainty that the idea took shape to create a forum where academic communities – universities, scholars, research institutes – could engage with institutional actors such as chambers of commerce, businesses, and political bodies. The intention was to establish a bridge between intellectual reflection and decision-making power, between theoretical elaboration and practical governance, so as to decode the transformations already underway and provide tools to guide them.

What at first appeared as an ambitious experiment soon proved essential: globalization quickly revealed itself as an unstoppable force, capable of undermining long-established equilibria and opening entirely new scenarios. The collapse of the bipolar order at the end of the Cold War added urgency to this vision. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union produced a phase of deep transition, in which power balances, institutions, and global economic relations were redefined.

It was within this new context that globalization – long present in the vocabulary of academics – began to be recognized as a multidimensional and structural phenomenon, marked by the intensification of transnational networks and the growing interdependence between states and non-state actors. From its earliest steps, the Graduate School of Economics and International Relations (ASERI) presented itself as a pioneering institution, committed to educating professionals capable of critically interpreting the emerging order. Its vocation was to adopt an interdisciplinary approach, combining political science, economics, and the social sciences, while offering students not only theoretical frameworks but also methodological rigor and practical skills for operating in a rapidly changing world. At Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, the Faculty of Political Science had already developed a strong tradition of international studies. The scholarship of Gianfranco Miglio – student of Giorgio Balladore Pallieri and Dean for three decades – had kept constant attention on the evolution of global politics and international institutions, providing analytical depth and a rigorous method. Already in the 1980s, the idea of creating a postgraduate school dedicated to economics and international relations had circulated. However,

it was only in the changed atmosphere of the post-Cold War years that the need for such an institution became pressing. As recalled by Professor Lorenzo Ornaghi, the objective was to establish an "authentic" and "innovative" *schola*, designed to combine academic rigor with professional preparation suited to the new challenges of global governance, and to move beyond the boundaries of a purely political science perspective (Ornaghi, 2006, 7-8). Outside the university, Piero Bassetti, President of the Milan Chamber of Commerce, clearly perceived the demand for new professional figures able to operate in an increasingly interconnected environment. Alongside him stood Alberto Quadrio Curzio, an internationally respected economist and Dean of the Faculty since 1989, who encouraged the integration of economics and politics within a single framework. Together with Ornaghi, who from the early 1990s became the main architect of the project, they laid the intellectual and institutional groundwork for what would become ASERI.

A preliminary step was taken in the 1991–92 academic year, when Bassetti promoted a seminar series on globalization and the transformations of the state. Organized over three years, the seminars offered one of the first systematic explorations of globalization's economic and institutional dimensions, anticipating an educational model capable of linking theoretical insight with empirical analysis. The real turning point came on 21 June 1995, when Università Cattolica – represented by Rector Adriano Bausola – and the Milan Chamber of Commerce – represented by Bassetti – signed an agreement formally establishing the Graduate School of Economics and International Relations. Important contributions were provided by Pier Daniele Melegari, Secretary General of the Chamber of Commerce, and Giuseppino Molinari, Administrative Director of Università Cattolica. Leadership was entrusted to Lorenzo Ornaghi, with operational direction by Tina Giordano, formerly of the Institut Théseus in Sophia Antipolis, Nice. Located in Via San Vittore 18, close to the main university campus, the School was conceived as "an interdisciplinary and international space designed to foster interaction between theoretical education and practical experience" (Avaro, Brambilla and Ferrari, 2006).

ASERI began its academic activities in 1995–96 with two postgraduate programmes: a two-year Specialization School in

Economics and International Relations and a one-year Advanced Programme-Master in the same field. Both were inspired by the model of the French *Grandes Écoles* and by the leading Anglo-American postgraduate institutions, aiming to combine rigorous academic training with professional preparation. Teaching integrated traditional lectures with seminars held by international experts and internships at major institutions and companies. This structure provided students with solid interdisciplinary foundations and advanced analytical skills, enabling them to engage effectively with the challenges of global governance.

As Ornaghi underlined in 2006, ASERI was "conceived, envisioned, and jointly built step by step," and from the outset established itself as a significant reference point in the education of specialists in economics and international relations (Ornaghi, 2006, 7-8).

2. Building the Institution (1996–2000)

From the outset, the creation of ASERI was accompanied by complex challenges, among them the need to design a curriculum that broke away from conventional models and to select a student body aligned with the institution's ambitious goals. The intention was not merely to replicate the teaching of international relations but to establish an authentic and interdisciplinary *schola*, able to confront globalization with an advanced and multidimensional methodology. As Piero Bassetti remarked, "the real question was to understand to what extent changes were taking place, and just how vast they were," underlining that globalization could not be explained solely through the categories of classical political science but required broader analytical tools from economics, law, and the social sciences (Bassetti, 2006: 11-13).

One of the initial hurdles was linguistic. As Bassetti himself recalled, "the presence of both Italian and English represented an obstacle to the full 'globalization' of the first student cohorts" (Bassetti, 2006: 11-13).

Nevertheless, ASERI rapidly distinguished itself through the quality of its faculty. Internationally renowned scholars such as Richard Baldwin (University of Geneva), Michael Cox (London

School of Economics), Joseph Grieco (Duke University), John Ikenberry (then University of Pennsylvania), Robert Keohane (Duke University), Stephen Krasner (Stanford University), Wilhelm Krelle (University of Bonn), and Ludger Kühnhardt (University of Bonn) were among the first professors to teach at the School. This network of collaborations gave ASERI a decidedly international profile and exposed students to the most current debates on global transformations. The capacity to involve faculty of such standing played a decisive role in consolidating ASERI's reputation as a centre of excellence in postgraduate education. The enthusiasm of these scholars, combined with their readiness to engage in an innovative educational experiment, translated into a program of study that combined high academic standards with practical skills, preparing students to operate in increasingly complex international contexts. From its earliest years, ASERI attracted a diverse student population, reinforcing its role as a forward-looking institution at the forefront of the study of globalization.

Curriculum design soon became another crucial field of experimentation. In the 1998–99 academic year, ASERI launched a new program that anticipated the principles of the university reform later introduced in the early 2000s, with its focus on credits and internships: the "Master in Markets and Institutions of the Global System". This program represented a turning point, reinforcing the School's international vocation and strengthening its ties with institutions and businesses. Structured as a three-year seminar cycle, it explored the implications of globalization for enterprises and state structures, laying the epistemological and methodological groundwork for a new approach to international studies. The program's emphasis on "globalized enterprises" and on the long-term impact of economic globalization on political and legal institutions reflected ASERI's commitment to innovation.

By 1999, the School had reached an unprecedented level of recognition, establishing partnerships with leading international institutions such as the European Parliament, the European Investment Bank, NATO, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. This dynamic and outward-looking environment also attracted major Italian and multinational companies – among them Kraft, Pirelli, HP, Fiera Milano, and Mediaset – that became active

partners in student training through internships and applied research projects. Such cooperation benefited not only the institution but also its students, many of whom were able to launch professional careers within these organizations. The School's growing reputation was confirmed in the 2003–2004 academic year, when the "Master in European Studies and Global Affairs" enrolled students from twelve countries, including the United States, Hungary, Germany, France, and Spain.

3. Expanding Horizons (2001–2025)

A decade after its foundation, ASERI had already secured a prominent place within the international academic landscape. Reflecting on that achievement, Professor Lorenzo Ornaghi captured the spirit of the School:

> If, in the brief span of ten years, a farsighted intuition and a bold idea have succeeded in taking shape and becoming a well-defined and authoritative academic institution, if today the fruits of a formative and scientific endeavor that once seemed like a daring and almost revolutionary gamble are so evident and widely recognized, this is thanks to the many individuals who, united by their enthusiasm and the desire to create a truly new space for knowledge, both for themselves and for those who would follow, contributed with commitment and intelligence to the daily life of ASERI and to the many large and small activities that have secured its national and international prestige (Ornaghi, 2006).

The years that followed were characterized by the consolidation of ASERI's educational model and by the steady expansion of its programs and partnerships. The interplay between *Universitas studiorum* and *Universitas mercatorum*, as Bassetti described in *Scenari e visioni per il XXI secolo* (2006), was not simply a stroke of intuition, but the very key to educating professionals able to confront the new global environment with both awareness and agility. This integration of theory and practice found concrete form in initiatives such as the "Leading Scholars Program", which brought distinguished academics and policy experts to Milan for lectures on geopolitics,

security, and global governance, and the "ASERI Events" series, designed to connect students directly with executives, diplomats, and representatives of international organizations.

ASERI's mission was not confined to teaching and training. It soon became a producer of original scholarship, with the creation of the book series *Relazioni Internazionali e Scienza Politica*, directed by Professor Vittorio Emanuele Parsi and published by Vita e Pensiero. The first volume, *Che differenza può fare un giorno. Guerra, pace e sicurezza dopo l'11 settembre* (2003), edited by Parsi, brought together leading voices such as Luigi Bonanate, Robert Gilpin, G. John Ikenberry, and Matthew Evangelista. The collection reflected both intellectual rigor and a clear interdisciplinary vision, while the translations of works by John Ikenberry, Charles Kupchan, Hedley Bull, and Michael Ignatieff signaled the School's determination to connect Italian debate with the wider international conversation.

Parallel to these academic initiatives, a vibrant network of students and alumni began to shape ASERI's identity. The ASERI Students' Association (ASA), founded in the School's early years, quickly became a hub for dialogue and collaboration, strengthening ties between graduates and institutions across the globe. Internationalization also advanced rapidly through academic agreements, including the 2003 double-degree program with Pázmány Péter Catholic University in Budapest, which further reinforced ASERI's European and international orientation.

As the first decade drew to a close, ASERI was not only consolidating its programs but also reflecting critically on the broader trajectory of world politics. For Alberto Quadrio Curzio, writing in 2006, the future of international relations seemed torn between two paths: the consolidation of an oligopolistic globalization dominated by the United States, Russia, and China, and the emergence of new global challenges – environmental crises, migration, and institutional transformations – that called for rethinking the very foundations of governance. For ASERI, this meant that education could not limit itself to analytical tools; it had to prepare students to interpret and respond to scenarios in constant evolution. By 2006, the School could already boast more than three hundred graduates from thirty-five countries and hundreds of internships in twenty-four nations. The following years only amplified that trajectory.

Today, thirty years after its foundation, ASERI counts more than one hundred faculty members and professionals: fifty-one based in Italian universities, twenty-four visiting professors from leading international institutions, and thirty-five senior practitioners drawn from business, government, and international organizations. The network of partners and collaborators has grown exponentially, reflecting the success of an original vision that sought, from the beginning, to combine academic rigor with practical engagement – offering students not only the tools to interpret the world, but also the capacity to shape it.

This mission is embodied today in five specialized master's programs. The Master in Economics and International Policies (MEPIN), developed in partnership with Università della Svizzera italiana and now in its XXII edition, combines training in economics, law, and politics with practical experience, including placements at European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN), The Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House), the European Commission, ONU, Banque Nationale de Paris Paribas (BNP Paribas), Ernst & Young (EY), and the Italian Department for European Policies. The Master in Advanced Global Studies (MAGS), now in its XX edition, provides multidisciplinary training in international relations, human security, sustainable development, and regional dynamics, with internships at United Nations Children's Fund Italy (UNICEF), the Court of Justice of the European Union (EU), the Office of the EU Special Representative in Bosnia, Italian humanitarian organization "Emergency", Trinomics, and WeWorld Onlus. The Master in International Cooperation and Development (MICAD), also in its XX edition, focuses on poverty reduction, food security, women's empowerment, resilience, and innovative finance, with placements at United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Rainforest Alliance, and Amnesty International. The Master in Middle Eastern Studies (MIMES), now in its XII edition, offers comparative and multidisciplinary analysis of the Middle East, complemented by project work, internships, and intensive language training in Arabic, Persian,

or Turkish. Finally, the Master in Advanced Public and Cultural Diplomacy for International Relations (MAPCD), based in Rome and currently in its VIII edition, stands out as the first program in Europe to integrate public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, communication, and business diplomacy, with internships at UNESCO, FAO, United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Intesa Sanpaolo, Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi (ENI), Radiotelevisione Italiana (RAI), European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), Teatro dell'Opera di Roma, and the Renewable Energy Solutions for Africa Foundation (Res4Africa). Marking its thirtieth anniversary, the Graduate School of Economics and International Relations (ASERI) stands as a testimony to the vitality of a project born out of the transformations of the early 1990s. Its interdisciplinary training, strong international orientation, and constant dialogue with institutions and businesses have made it a unique laboratory of research and advanced education.

What began as a bold intuition has become a consolidated reality: a community of more than 1,400 students from over eighty countries, an academic crossroads where knowledge and practice meet, and a school that has remained faithful to its mission of providing the analytical and ethical tools to engage with a globalized world.

In the words of Piero Bassetti, the enduring aspiration remains that "the quality and clarity of analysis cultivated at ASERI may always secure the primacy of thought over circumstances" (Bassetti 2006). Thirty years on, ASERI reaffirms its founding spirit: combining rigor with creativity, knowledge with responsibility, and analysis with vision.

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