

# THE UNIVERSITY IN ITALY: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CHANGING TRENDS

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## Introduction

**I** have known Italian universities from the 'inside' for forty years, first when starting out as a student in 1959, and then through direct experience as an academic, both through teaching but also through a focus on comparative education research. I have been privileged in working in universities in several countries. That heightens my awareness of the challenging task of effectively and accurately describing the strange, contradictory, and complex reality that Italian higher education represents, and of minimising the risks of perpetrating misunderstandings which, in this area of study, are particularly plentiful.

To write a full and sound analysis of higher education in Italy today would require analysing a large amount of contradictory documentation, relating to a process of transformation that has been on for at least a decade, a process which has not produced a comprehensive and coherent pattern of reform, even if it has introduced a few innovations. The latter, infused into a traditional and virtually unchangeable context, have elicited a variety of confused – and confusing – contradictory reactions.

A foreigner coming to Italy aiming at understanding its university system would face a very hard task and would be easily disconcerted. That was indeed the case when twenty years ago, Burton Clark, in his ponderous study *Academic Power in Italy*, made the brilliant 'discovery' that the university in Italy is based on guilds and on what he calls 'the Guild System'. This raises at least two questions, namely: (1) how could one possibly announce such a 'discovery', when the notion is universal and conventional wisdom in Italy? And (2) How could one support the thesis this aspect of universities is a specific and differential feature, as if it is not characteristic of other universities world-wide, the United States included? A much more useful, if challenging, exercise would have been to try and explain why the University as an institution is so resistant to change and why at the tertiary level there is virtually nothing left outside it. That well-known adage that 'Those who ignore history will be condemned to live it again' is very relevant here. How could we possibly understand the contemporary situation without looking backwards?

## The nature and function of the university

Some words are tricky and misleading; and among these is the word 'university'. Many would have us think that the word has to do with the 'universality' of knowledge. If this is true for the Greek name of the institution (*Panepistimion*), it does not hold true for the Latin name, whose original meaning was 'Guild' (and in fact the structural pattern of the guilds of craftsmen was the model of the original institution, the oldest of which started in Italy in the 11th century), when the name of the institution was *Studium*.

Along with the name (that soon, from *Universitas Studiorum...Bononiensis, Parisiensis, Oxoniensis...*, became University of...), the structure changed and what is now left of the medieval origins is possibly just the titles of its degrees: *Baccalaureus/Bachelor, Magister/Master, Doctor*.

What makes comparative education a worthwhile exercise is the detection and the interpretation of differences rather than similarities. However, as experience suggests, there must be some difficulty in preventing oneself (virtually anyone) from projecting, if implicitly, one's view of the world (as well as one's empirical experience) upon foreign realities. This is particularly frequent *vis-à-vis* socio-political customs, rules, and institutions. Among societal institutions, those dealing with formal education are considered, only too often, to have a sort of 'objective' nature and are expected to share some common and universal features... which they actually do, if at all, only to a very limited extent. It should be clear that the exercise of detecting differences, overt or covert, can be more important than simply appreciating analogies. Failure to recognise this could result, as it often does, in misunderstanding and equivocation.

Aware of the problem, and knowing how plentiful the peculiarities of Italy are, it might be appropriate to give some background information before sketching changes currently under discussion.

### *This strange 'animal' we call 'university'*

We all know that centaurs and sirens - mixes of human and animal - do not exist in the real world and belong to mythology. 'Chimera', another mythical animal, has become a synonym of illusion, or something that has no concrete existence. Yet we may encounter among living animals very strange mixes, like the Australian duckbilled platypus (watermole, duck-mole), whose scholarly name has the peculiar Greek form of *ornitorhynchus* (bird's beak).

As a metaphor, that peculiar animal has been chosen by somebody having a strong and profound experience of what a University is - indeed of what universities around the world are - to define the University in Italy.

'A he-goat-stag (*hircocervus*, Lat., *tragelaphos*, Gr.). A centaur. A hippogriff. In a word, a monster. A jigsaw puzzle of different species, just like his' *ornithorinchus*. This is what is, for Umberto Eco, the Italian University. A massive and mass-oriented big-bellied body with an élite heart, with impervious lectures open to everybody, overcrowded lecture halls, Rwanda-like flights and a scanty vanguard of excellent graduates. A sterile *ornitorynchus* therefore, laying valuable eggs with a dropping tube.'

These are the opening lines of one of a recent series of interviews with eminent scholars and professionals first hosted by a leading Italian newspaper, and then reprinted as a book carrying the ambitious title and subtitle *Surfers of knowledge: Ten proposals for the year 2000*.<sup>2</sup>

It would be interesting to explore Eco's analysis and proposals, but it would take us further than we can go in this short article. Suffice it to remark that the metaphor is a quite effective synthesis/diagnosis of the current situation of higher education in Italy. We are referring here to the whole of HE rather than the University alone, given that in Italy the two notions are virtually synonymous. Why is this so? To understand it we cannot confine ourselves to the present and we need to look backwards, to find explanations in history.

### *The past as a mirror to the present*

Saying that Italy is an old country may sound a truism - hence a waste of time. Yet truisms - by and through their triviality - may be of help, arresting one's attention: 'Sounds obvious. But... is it really so?' Saying that Italy is an ancient land would raise no perplexity. But now, is it true that 'Italy is an old country'?

Yes and no. It is not an old country because it only knows its beginning as a nation-state since the second half of the 19th century, when, after a millennium, Italy regained unity and political independence. In that sense, it is much younger than the US - the eponym for 'young country' - let alone, therefore, when compared to France or Spain.

And yet Italy *is* an old country. And this is where we come to the tricky point, one that is easy to make, but all but easy to explain in a satisfactory manner. If Italy, as a nation, is lively, active, fast-changing, and can be labelled 'modern' and/or 'young', as a state it is not. 'Italians do it better', but the institutions of Italy are ossified. After 85 years of monarchy, Italy has been a republic for more than fifty years. Though the change implied a new constitution, modernisation and the innovation of the legal system (laws, byelaws, rules, regulations, circulars... and so on), the country did not, in fact, change in any really significant manner.

Now coming to educational structures and policies. The backbone of the formal education structure, from primary through university, is older than the nation-state itself. What is constantly referred to as *Legge Casati* was issued in 1859 as an act of the Kingdom of Sardinia, the official name of the Savoy kingdom that had set in motion the process of political unification of the land and whose king, Victor Emmanuel II, became the first monarch of Italy (even though it was not yet a fully unified Italy then). The same *Legge Casati* was extended to all the regions that were later incorporated in the Kingdom.

If in 1859 the Act was modern and - relatively speaking - progressive,<sup>3</sup> it cannot but reflect the social structure of the time, when the idea of universal education, if at all present, was limited to the three Rs, i.e. to the primary school.

For centuries the *raison d'être* of secular higher education had been to educate the upper class and essentially to open the way to liberal professions. Apart from military schools, all secular HE at the time was within the University. More than half the articles of the very lengthy *Legge Casati* concern the universities of the Kingdom of Sardinia and their rules were later expanded to include the whole of Italy.

Not that since 1859 there has been no legislation at all concerning HE/university in Italy: far from that! Legislative bodies in Italy are inordinately over-productive. Yet the skeleton of post-secondary education did not know significant changes for more than a century, ignoring social change and the consequent state of siege to elitist institutions resulting from social pressure put on them.

In most countries, the response to increasing social pressure has been diversification. Far from throwing elitist institutions away, new institutions were set up alongside older ones in order to host an increasingly wider section of the population - and opening the way to what has eloquently been christened in some countries as 'the credential society' (an issue that cannot obviously be dealt with here). To quote just an example, think of the evolution in the UK from Oxbridge through the Red Brick universities, through the polytechnics, to a virtually general universitisation of HE.

### *Massification, 'democratisation', and access*

This has not been the case in Italy. Figures are revealing: while during the 1950s the overall enrolment in all Italian universities was around 250,000, i.e. 0.5% of the total population, it had reached 500,000 in the sixties - one among the many profound consequences of the industrial boom that has been referred to as the 'economic miracle'. Italy knew its 1968 as well, and the sudden explosion in student numbers contributes to an understanding of that phenomenon. Until quite recently, however, while the overall matriculation rate (i.e. the % of students entering the HE system on the overall population) had increased by more than 5 times, no radical reform was initiated.

In the absence of structural change, an act was voted in 1969 by which the doors of universities were opened wide to let virtually everybody in. A unique feature of the Italian case is that, while, as everywhere else in the world, a formal certificate (of a post-compulsory long - quinquennial - school) is required to give access to a third level institution, the same is also (with minor exceptions) considered a sufficient condition. Rules and criteria may vary, but everywhere in the world access is regulated: that the number of places made available be related to existing facilities is a minimum condition that nobody would ever think of objecting to - with the exception of Italy! Quality-wise, detailed specifications for access may result in tough and very selective competitions. This is, once again, not the case with Italy, where anybody holding an upper secondary school certificate (*maturità*, the equivalent of *Baccalaureat* or *Abitur*) is entitled to claim entry to any course programme of the university of his/her choice, in any university, irrespective of the number of applicants, let alone of available resources.

The overall result of such a distorted idea of 'democratisation', with a rash policy of uncontrolled access, is essentially twofold: monstrous overcrowding of less than ten mega-universities, while other institutions are underutilised; and less than one third of students who start a course actually finish it successfully and obtain their degree.

This is a well known and scandalous pathology of Italian universities that raises, among others, the issue of regulating access to HE in general and to individual institutions in particular, as it is common practice the world over.

### *Certification*

Rules that govern access and formal accreditation should be connected: outside Italy, those institutions whose degrees are granted legal recognition and accreditation set very selective access criteria; entrance competitions are so challenging that it may be more difficult to get in than to complete the course, as is often the case in French *Grandes Écoles*. In spite of the stubborn persistence of the fetish, the really important credentials have less and less to do with formal degrees: the same degree issued by two different institutions - both public - may differ in weight. In terms of future income, social prestige, and job-placement after studies, some Italian institutions have a standing that has nothing to do with formal certification: if a Nobel-prize factory (from Enrico Fermi to Carlo Rubbia) has ever existed in Italy, that is the *Scuola Normale Superiore* of Pisa, whose graduates hold degrees (granted by the University of Pisa) that are entirely equivalent to those of other students leaving 'standard' universities.

## *Pathways in higher education*

Yet this issue of regulating access leaves another structural peculiarity that deserves more attention: namely that kind of articulation that one could refer to as 'horizontal', where progress towards a particular goal is attained through the following of a set of clearly defined steps. Access to the liberal professions, or to academic and scholarly activities, has always required everywhere the highest academic degrees, what can be referred to as 'postgraduate' (UK) or 'graduate' (US) studies. If the Casati university was meant to prepare for such social functions, producing graduates in medicine, engineering, architecture, law and so on, it focused primarily on the postgraduate/graduate track, totally ignoring the undergraduate level. This can be seen clearly when one considers that all those who reach the academic degree called *laurea* are entitled to be called - as they are indeed called - *Dottore*.

It would be reasonable to suppose that if the higher education path was structured in a modular fashion, i.e. in tiers, with each tier leading to a formal certification, then a significant number of those 75% of matriculated students who drop out along the way would have obtained a formal qualification - thus reducing individual frustration and social waste. The lack of this tiered structure has led to a number of bizarre situations. Thus, when individual universities established postgraduate courses in such areas as management, they made no effort to find a suitable name for the degree they conferred, and called it, in Italian (!), *Master in...* (for instance) *gestione aziendale* (i.e. management), given that the Master's degree in the English speaking countries is a second level degree. But this is confusing, since *Laurea* is - wrongly - considered to be a first level degree solely because the first cycle does not presently exist in Italian universities. In Rome located pontifical universities such as the Gregoriana, for instance, there is the Baccalaureate before the Licence, the latter being equivalent to the Italian *laurea*.<sup>4</sup>

## **The winds of change?**

As a starting point of the difficult and slow process of changing tertiary education in Italy we can take the Act/Legge 168/1989, through which the competence regarding university affairs was taken away from the Ministry of Education (MPI - *Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione*) and transferred to that of research, thus creating the Ministry of University and Research on Science and Technology (or MURST - *Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca Scientifica e Tecnologica*). A first step in the direction of autonomy was made by those articles concerning new statutes that individual institutions were invited to produce and

implement. No institution introduced revolutionary innovations in its statutes. If the main reason was the highly conservative attitude of the powerful oligarchy of full professors, attention should be also paid to the rigidity of the overall structure, stating autonomy on the one side but keeping national compulsory *Tabelle* (what at primary and secondary level would be called 'syllabi') on the other. In this perspective, Burton Clark had a point when he perceived Italian public universities as local articulations of a single national structure; at the secondary level there are thousands of individual schools, but they can altogether be considered as a body.

An effort aimed at changing the architecture of the University was made by an Act of 1990 (*Legge 341/90, Ordinamenti didattici*). While the doctorate in the full sense of most countries ('Ph.D.' in the English-speaking countries) had been formalised in 1980, leading to the title of *Dottore di ricerca*, the explicit formalisation of three cycles/steps (roughly equivalent to BA/BSc, MA/MSc, and Doctorate of the Anglo-Saxon structures) came only with that act and the three final certificates are *Diploma Universitario, Laurea*, and *Dottorato di Ricerca*.

To recapitulate, the university proper (state, or 'recognised' non-state, i.e. following rules and guidelines of the National Ministry for University and Research), after Act 341 of 1990 (*Ordinamenti didattici*) thus far makes provision for the following:

- courses leading to *diploma universitario* (three years);
- courses leading to *laurea* (four years in most cases, five for some lines, six years for medical studies);
- programmes leading to *dottorato di ricerca* (inter-university programmes, three years, entrance by competitive selection);
- schools of specialisation (postgraduate, parallel to doctorate, certificate not equivalent to doctorate, two to five years, according to the sector; mostly in the field of medicine);
- the university sector comprises, so far, the intermediate sector of the 'para-university schools', with a variety of courses of the average duration of two years, most of which should become diploma courses.

### *University structures*

50 odd towns host 70-odd institutions (some of which have more than one location: UCSC, *Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore*, for instance, has four). 93% of the universities (all but ten) are state universities. The only American-style university with an autonomous campus, situated in a suburban or extra-urban location, and residential for students and teaching staff, is the *Università della*

*Calabria*, outside Cosenza (see below: G. Berto). A few others (some of the oldest) are located in very small towns (e.g. Urbino, Camerino) where they become a sort of pivot of social and economic life of the town. Most are located within the urban texture, which raises a number of problems in terms of housing and other services for non-resident students.

With University students totalling some 1,570,000, each institution should have an average student population of around 22,000, which most countries would consider as large universities. But the figure is misleading: free access policy results in such an irrational distribution that the total number of registered students at the first State University of Rome (La Sapienza) is 157,000 as against the 18,000 of the second (Tor Vergata); Bologna has 91,000, while Ferrara, 30 miles away, has 14,000 (data from the statistical service of the Ministry, July 1999). Half the student population comes from outside the *provincia* ('county') where the university is located. This is a national average but the figure can rise to 80%. There are several reasons to that: free access, together with a severe lack of information and guidance leads would-be students to make their choice on their own. Mobility is made necessary to some extent because not all universities have the same structure of schools and faculties. None offers in full the entire range of *corsi di laurea* (programmes) which are officially recognised. It should be noted that, despite the alleged autonomy of universities, programmes have to be authorised by the Ministry: presently they amount to 88, together with another 79 *corsi di diploma universitario*.

Virtually all attempts at regulating the intake and flow of students in and through individual institutions have been countered by verdicts of the courts – generally on the ground of lack of national legislation on the matter. This leads to the institution being obliged to enrol those whom it would have left out on the basis of qualitative selection. The high level of centralisation makes organisational patterns and output profiles so homogeneous, that the Italian university can be seen as a single, large multi-plant enterprise. While crucial decision-making takes place at two different levels – Ministry, and individual universities – such decisions, at whichever level they are made, fail to take into account indicators of need or of product.

### *Resources*

The burgeoning enrollment rates of some universities would suggest a parallel growth of physical facilities (lecture rooms, laboratories, libraries, staff rooms, etc.). Far from that: in most cases, the intake of students has been faster than physical growth. The obvious consequence is overcrowding, which would be infinitely more horrendous had the majority of registered students to attend in a



full-time capacity. Many students, however, take on part-time jobs to support themselves, and others simply take examinations and do not attend lectures and other activities, not because they do not want to, but rather because it would be physically impossible for them to do otherwise.

The main features outlined so far (rigidity, lack of articulation with societal needs, no regulation of access resulting in overcrowding and shortage of all sorts of facilities in the bigger universities, and under-utilisation in the smaller ones), combine together to give a very low rate of productivity, as seen earlier, although the total number of graduates has increased over the past five years, reaching 40% at the *laurea* level (long programme), and 75% at the diploma level (short programme).

### Who's afraid of academic autonomy?

There is plenty of evidence that artists can have a deeper insight than academic researchers (let alone politicians). Possibly some of the most effective keys to understanding contemporary Italy are to be found in the literary works of writers. Topping the list, in my view, are three Sicilian authors, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, Leonardo Sciascia, and Andrea Camilleri. Probably better known worldwide (thanks to movies) is another contemporary journalist author most effectively interpreting postwar rural Italy, Giovannino Guareschi, of the Don Camillo and Peppone fame. Another novelist, Giuseppe Berto, writing around the end of the sixties, gave his reflections on Italy through a series of perceptive articles later collected in a small book carrying the ironical title *Conversations with my Dog*. The third of these articles is titled 'The Calabrian university'. Here - in a dialogue with his dog Cocai - Berto comments about the recent governmental decision to create a university in Calabria, the southernmost Italian region on the continent, opposite Sicily. That new university had been conceived in a form that would have been strongly innovative: suburban campus, fully residential for both student and teaching staff, with regulated and limited access and other features that would have been a revolutionary change from the prevailing pattern of traditional universities. At one point he writes:

'The Italian university is maggoty, and the Calabrian university will be an Italian university; when one links a living thing to a corpse, it is generally the living thing that loses. A remedy could be: make the Calabrian university a non-Italian one. To avoid misunderstanding, what this means is to give it the largest degree of autonomy, leaving it as much as possible free from the bureaucratic apparatus of national education and of the political forces standing

on it. My god, then the terrible problem will be that of finding - and daring to engage (from outside the university environment perhaps) - those capable of running a new university; but this would be a minor problem compared to the crucial one - that of autonomy.'

Try and find anybody in Italy (as most probably in any other country) who would explicitly object to the principle of autonomy. Looking closer you realise that it is virtually always a sort of liturgical lip service shrewdly used as a shield against one (the dark one, probably...) of the two faces of autonomy, namely accountability.

In recent years significant steps have been taken in that direction. The government has been engaged in a tightrope walking act: dismantling the heavy and ever-prevalent bureaucratic mentality - one that allows no local initiative without prior scrutiny by the ministry and its *entourage*, and at the same time keenly avoiding the risk of a centrifugal dispersion of a myriad initiatives falling outside the purview of 'objective' evaluation.

What is really new and starts to show interesting consequences is the concrete implementation of an autonomy which, in the Italian case, has given rise to a puzzling anomaly, where it is oft asserted but not practiced.

If most countries - including those whose institutional structure is strongly centralist (France, Spain until 1975, and so on) - show a high level of real autonomy for the academic body as a whole, and for individual universities and their units, this is not the case with Italian universities, where until quite recently no critical decision could be made unless it had the nod from the Ministry. The lack of substantial autonomy has long been justified as a consequence of the need to guarantee the *valore legale* (accreditation by the law, government control) of degrees.

A more than nominal autonomy appears to be only possible when third level institutions enter into competition with one another, especially if a substantial portion of their resources is submitted to social evaluation and quality assessment (by governmental structures, of course - as in the case of the French Committee for academic evaluation - but more importantly by professional and scientific associations, unions, and so on).

In a comparative perspective the crucial point comes out clearly. As long as academic degrees are expected to carry a legal value,<sup>5</sup> with a public support, backing and guarantee, their 'autonomy' is constrained into very narrow guidelines. If and when the social and market value of a certificate is linked to the public prestige of the issuing body or institution, these should be in full mastery of their own procedures. A paradigmatic case is that of Belgium, with job-oriented (short) higher education institutions acting within the guidelines set by national

ministries, and universities with a high level of autonomy concerning all matters. Access to professions is subject – everywhere – to selective assessments. Academic degrees may be (or may even not be) necessary conditions but they are not sufficient by themselves. Professions (in the English sense) may well be socially controlled, but they would not be considered professions, were they not self-regulated: is the academic profession fully a profession?

In a 'simpler' country, the goal of true autonomy for each individual university would have been attained if the legislative and administrative bodies would have taken the straight-forward way of producing a single comprehensive framework act and the relevant set of rules and regulations needed to support its implementation (interesting comparative examples could be the British Education Acts, one of which – that of 1944 – has lived almost fifty years, or the French *Loi d'Orientation* of 1968, or the Spanish LOGSE), giving to individual institutions the necessary amount of responsibilities and accountabilities. This has not been the case in Italy. The legislative production has been complex and some of the rules affecting academic institutions were formulated within budgetary laws, within much broader acts aimed to bring about deep bureaucratic reforms. Such is the case of the Bassanini laws, a series of Acts that are known by the name of the minister of the *Funzione pubblica*/civil service, charged with the Herculean task of modernising Italian red-tape.

## Reforming Italian universities

The coming academic years 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 may well lead to a real turning point in Italian higher education as a result of the funambolic and often contradictory governmental exercises.

### *1999-2000: Going corporate*

A brand new phenomenon which became visible during the summer of 1999 is the invasion of elaborate advertisements - placed by individual, mostly state universities - in the press and the internet.

This is a visible result of new rules of what is called 'autonomy' and should be more appropriately referred to as 'going corporate', since they are related rather more to the financial than the scholarly side of autonomy. It is worth looking a little bit closer at this aspect.

In comparative terms, the amount of public resources invested in HE is lower than the average in EC countries. In spite of that, due to severe difficulties of public finances, a significant increase of resources is unlikely to come from the

(central) state through the Treasury. If two-thirds of students do not attain their degree, the cost per graduate - despite a relatively low cost per enrolled student - is high. The Italian university as an industry mobilises an amount of resources that is disproportionate to the results attained, particularly if one considers instructional services. Moreover, international comparison clearly shows that one of the main anomalies of our system - in spite of relatively low fees - is to put most of the overall burden (i.e. the costs of living) on students. Lack of productivity of the system can reasonably be attributed, to some extent, to this peculiarity. An objection however can be made to an increase of public resources: individual benefits accruing from higher education militate against the principle of offering (virtually) free instructional services. This effectively means that the state gives a bonus to each student - irrespective of his or her income or financial standing. The regressive effect is clear: taxpayers, whose average socio-economic distribution is lower-middle class, pay instructional costs to students, whose average condition is still upper-middle class. The government is acting in fact as a counter-Robin Hood: drawing fiscal resources from the less well-off to finance the education of the more well-to-do.

An increased cost-effectiveness of available resources could only come through their functional reallocation.

As a matter of fact, the first step of a concrete implementation of the principle of autonomy has been on financial matters. Instead of earmarked streams of contribution to each one of the many items of a rigid budget, the Ministry allocates a lump sum to each individual institution according to size and a set of assessment criteria. This implies that fees paid by students, if almost nominal (far as they are from actual costs), are an essential part of the income of universities. Students' fees in actual fact contribute nearly 15% of expenses; contributions differ among universities: matriculation and registration fees - determined by the government - are common all over the country and are almost nominal; tuition fees can be defined locally by Administrative councils and vary according to institution, programme, and family income level.

The issue of costs vs. prices calls for a remark. Vocally appealing to an undefined 'right to study', there are frequent protests among students about tuition fees. The most radical advocate an unrestricted right to absolutely free studies: free of charge, free of obligations, free of assessment... Meanwhile private providers of auxiliary services flourish, promising accurate and effective support in preparing examinations in planning, organising and writing final dissertations, and son on. These are not philanthropic institutions, of course. Quite the opposite! These are strong and flourishing businesses and they charge for one single exam (to be taken in public universities, of course) the same amount that universities charge - on average and for all services - for a full academic year. Overseas

businesses - such as a fancifully named 'New Yorker University' - pay for advertising spots on TV claiming to offer 'Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral degrees (a title that they can be used, even though it is not recognised in Italy) in six months'. Unbelievable, yet unfortunately true.

### *1999-2000: Walking the tightrope between autonomy and national guidelines*

The general architecture of university programmes is about to face radical changes after the formal reorganisation planned by Act 341 of 1990 (*diploma universitario, laurea, dottorato di ricerca; diploma di specialità*):

- The universe of programmes, based so far on the traditional structure of centuries-old and/or more recent faculties, each one hosting a variable number of degree lines (*corsi di laurea*) shall be reorganised in five broad areas (humanities, health, engineering and architecture, social and political sciences and law, science and technology).
- Access will be filtered: immediate for students coming from a secondary school stream that is matching the university area chosen, subject to entrance examinations in case of mismatch.
- The path of HE will be structured in three steps for all, (according to the organisation set up in 1990, a newly matriculated student chooses at the entrance point either the three years diploma programme, or the *laurea* programme, which lasts four to six years: the two types of programme did not necessarily fit into a sequence).

The wording of an official ministerial paper (*Schema di Regolamento in Materia di Autonomia Didattica degli Atenei*, submitted on 19/3/99 to the National University Council to solicit evaluation) is bureau-baroque-byzantine, and therefore much in the spirit of what Italy has been accustomed to, and which will take ages to change. The result is somewhat puzzling. While the structure has three layers, or steps, plus postgraduate specialities that are a parallel alternative to doctorate (3+2+3), the text reads on as follows:<sup>6</sup>

1. Universities deliver first and second level degrees. The first level university degree is the *laurea* diploma (DL). Second level university degree is the doctorate diploma (DD).
2. Universities also deliver a specialist diploma (DS) and the diploma of research doctorate (DR)

Doesn't sound consistent, does it?

Be it as it may, the significant innovation is to let the first cycle of HE eventually emerge explicitly as it has long been in most countries. So far, so good.

What raises perplexities and some skepticism is the a-critical adoption of a mythicised and misunderstood 'credit system', here formulated in a bureau-baroque-byzantine way by which academic paths will be arithmetised (or rather kabbalized, alas!): 60 credit per academic year, each credit 25hrs student work, totalling 1500 work hours per year...

Another word that has become trendy and keeps hitting the headlines these months is 'flexibility'. When opposed to 'rigidity' it is all right, of course. But does the proposed way to implement the – quite reasonable – principle of accreditation really show flexibility? The rationale as declared by decision-makers should be to facilitate and promote transferability. In this connection it is nothing new, as Germany has known for at least three centuries a very high level of mobility across universities without arithmetising. Italian universities have always had procedures to allow transfer through accreditation of previous work, and the mythicised North American 'credit system' has never been mechanical and unrestricted. The name is a transparent metaphor. Anybody holding an account in a bank is entitled to close it, opening a new one elsewhere, and there will be no loss of money in transfer except technical charges. Now, even the various campuses of the biggest public universities in the US (like SUNY or the University of California) have such a level of autonomy that they do not guarantee *full* recognition of previous work in case of transfer. One may well suspect that such a ridiculous mimickry of engineering, or the transfer of a secondary school pattern to the tertiary level, is an indirect way to implicitly suggest that a fair assessment, evaluation and grading is to be considered impossible in other ways.

These legislative changes are about to set in motion an unprecedented reform process. Far from eliciting all expected results, however, the process may further entangle the situation. How much of the old structure will survive, and how far will the new deal be successful, is still unclear.

Not a reformist country, Italy is used to living great protest movements and simultaneously to endure, beyond any reasonable limit, the immobility of the political guild, lacking any experience of how to manage reform processes. The recent history of the Italian university is a history of legislative stagnation on the one side, and of violent (sometimes 'explosive') students' movements (1966, 1968, 1977, 1989) on the other. It is therefore extremely difficult to anticipate whether these reforms will remain on paper or will succeed.

It is not easy to identify the actors performing on the stage of higher education policy, nor to follow a debate that is all but lively and hot. Multiple subjects and parties are involved in this cycle of change: students, teaching staff, rectors and their Permanent Conference, unions, political parties, the National University Council (CUN). Public debates, however, have looked so far like brilliant monologues by ministers, all other actors appearing as dummies. There are many

reasons to that, some of which due to the difficulty of setting a process of change in motion. Students are promised a better instructional offer; at the same time they are being asked to submit themselves to more efficient controlling procedures: and that is what the student body seems to perceive most of all. Students cannot become an effective negotiable counterpart to the government, untrained as they are to set up and manage effective unions. In other words, they are unable to express their voice within the institutional debate. As a result, either government proposals are approved without even recording student opinion, or are hindered by the explosion of movements (as in 1989-90). The teaching staff, though obviously involved, is neither threatened by heavier obligations, nor solicited by new incentives. Despite the possibility of facing an increase in their responsibilities in administrative and instructional tasks, a change in the salary structure is not foreseen.

Consultative and self-governing bodies – particularly the *Conferenza Permanente dei Rettori* and the *Consiglio Universitario Nazionale*, almost entirely composed of full professors – did not take clear and overt positions. These bodies (whose competencies are limited, anyway) are more inclined to preserve the traditional caste order of the academy than supporting change. Unions, traditionally active when university policy is affecting salary and careers of their members, have been neutralised by the decision not to change the status of teaching and non-teaching staff. It should be remarked that staff has been the only sector concerned by the limited innovations introduced in the university system during the seventies and eighties.

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## Notes

1. The hint refers to *Umberto Eco, Kant e l'Ornitorinco*. Milano, Bompiani, 1997, especially to 2.5 and 4.5
2. 'Umberto Eco. Ornitorinchi laureati', in Riccardo Chiaberge *Navigatori del sapere. Dieci proposte per il 2000*. Milano, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 1999, first published as 'ECO, l'università? E' un ornitorinco' in *Corriere della Sera* 11/3/1998.
3. The minister of education of the Savoy cabinet, Casati, who had flown to Turin after the repression of insurgence in Milan, March 1848, had been deeply influenced by the Austrian school organization.

4. A remark in passing can be useful: the average quality of information about education and training at all levels is in Italy quite poor. No periodical comparable to the British *Times Educational Supplement* and *Times Higher Education Supplement* or the French *Le Monde de l'Education*, delivering qualified information to the general public, can be found in Italy. But also academic and/or professional journals do not seem to care much about accuracy: the epitomizing example is the universal statement that school leaving age is in Italy set at 14, while since 1962 it had been raised from 14 to 15. The minister himself, when referring to a recent parliamentary decision by which the number of years of compulsory schooling has been increased from 8 to 9, says in public and writes that the leaving age has now reached 15.

5. Whatever that may mean: the printed statement on a banknote that it is legal tender does not protect it from inflation and therefore gives no guarantee as to its real value.

6. This structural change is often said to be a consequence of the so-called *Sorbonne Declaration* of 25 May 1998 by which ministers of education of four European countries agreed to 'harmonise' the architecture of the European HE system. What, then, about the so much beloved and praised 'Autonomy' of HE institutions? That statement is in fact the result of widespread misinformation and confusion reaching 'experts' and decision-makers, among others. In a working paper prepared for a Conference on the issue held in Bologna on 16 June 1999, entitled 'Project Report. Trends in Learning Structures in Higher Education', (a project supported by the EU Commission and undertaken by the Confederation of European Union Rectors' Conferences and the Association of European Universities) an appendix signed by Guy Haug ('The Sorbonne Declaration: What it does say, what it doesn't') discusses the issue and at point 2 ('The controversial proposal for a European-wide pattern of qualifications after 3,5,8 years in higher education'), Haug remarks that: 'The main confusion surrounding the Sorbonne Declaration stems from the nearly simultaneous release in May 1998, in the same city of Paris, of the Sorbonne Declaration and the Attali report. This report sets out a series of recommendations for key changes in the higher education system in FRANCE, but bears a surprising title ('For a European model of higher education'), one not warranted by its content - but maybe by the context in which it was chosen. This led to confusion between the two documents, which seems to be amalgamated in the mind of many players in the higher education community (...).' The Attali report, in spite of its title, should therefore be seen for what it is: a national report addressing national issues, within a perceived European and international context. Its pertinence and relevance for policy setting in France are clearly an issue that is totally outside of the scope of this paper. The main aspects relevant to the debate concerning post-Sorbonne developments are two: (a) the 3-5-8 'model' on which the recommendations are based is far from an established common feature, even though it is important to locate and measure convergence trends in Europe; (b) reactions, mainly negative ones, have affected the perception of the Sorbonne Declaration, albeit it does not even mention the 3-5-8 pattern. What the Sorbonne Declaration *does* mention is the need to have first cycle degrees which are 'internationally recognised' as 'an appropriate level of qualification', and a graduate cycle 'with a shorter master's degree and a longer doctor's degree' with possibilities to transfer from one to the other'. It also says that such a two-cycle system 'seems to emerge' and 'should be recognised for international comparison and equivalence'.



## Appendix

### STUDENT ENROLMENT (LAUREA PROGRAMMES)

Year	total enrolment	change	Academic staff	student/ staff	<i>Fuori corso*</i>	change
	number	%	number	ratio	number	%
1992-93	1518874	4.6	54570	27.8	479399	31.6
1993-94	1575358	3.7	56789	27.7	481508	30.6
1994-95	1601873	1.7	57445	27.8	526706	32.9
1995-96	1617140	1.0	58111	27.8	555460	34.3

\* Students that have gone through the legal duration of the programme (4 to 6 years according to areas) but did not complete the required exams and final dissertation can enrol until completion of all requirements.

### MATRICULATION (1ST YEAR) IN UNIVERSITY PROGRAMMES

Academic	Laurea (Long)	Degree	Diploma (Short)	Degree	Total	% on 19	
Year	number	change	number	change	number	change	Yrs
1993-94	336967	.8%	18069	8.9%	355036	1.2%	40.6
1994-95	317030	-5.9%	19465	7.7%	336495	-5.2%	40.9
1995-96	310890	-1.9%	24232	24.5%	335122	-0.4%	43.3
1996-97	304238	-2.1%	27980	15.5%	332218	-0.9%	45.1
1997-98	289724	-4.8%	30692	9.7%	320416	-3.6%	45.1
1998-99	275216	-5.0%	34828	13.5%	310044	-3.2%	43.7

### ACADEMIC YEAR 1998-99

Students Enrolled and Graduated	( <i>Laurea</i> )	%
Fuori Corso*	607844	38.6
1st Year	275216	—
Total of Regular Years	965208	61.4
Total Number (R+FC)	1573052	100.0
Graduates	129169	—
Of Which <i>Fuori Corso</i>	114244	88.4

\* Students that have gone through the legal duration of the programme (4 to 6 years according to areas) but did not complete the required exams and final dissertation can enrol until completion of all requirements.

### GRADUATIONS IN ALL UNIVERSITIES

Year	<i>Laurea</i>	(long)	Degree	Diploma	(short)	Degree	Total	
	Number	increase	of age range	number	increase	of age range	number	increase
1993	92057	2.7%	10.0%	6422	6.3%	0.7%	98961	2.9%
1994	98057	6.0%	10.5%	6897	7.1%	0.8%	104936	6.0%
1995	104877	7.0%	11.2%	7511	9.2%	0.8%	112388	7.1%
1996	115024	9.7%	12.3%	9433	25.6%	1.1%	124457	10.7%
1997	121785	5.9%	13.3%	10202	8.2%	1.2%	131987	6.1%
1998	129167	6.1%	13.8%	10959	7.4%	1.3%	140128	6.2%

Sources: MURST statistical service, ISTAT, CENSIS (from ISTAT)