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Accreditation in Higher Education:
the Italian Shyness

(Paper presented at the international conference
“Accreditation of Higher Education: Comparative Policies in Europe”
Vienna, 27th April 2001

1. The framework

In a country like Italy, the word "accreditation" engenders - even in experts of higher education - confusion and difficulties of interpretation as to the subject it refers to.

The very history of the university system in this country points at the ambiguity of a word, that in other countries' systems has come to be meaningful especially as concerns the need of the State to protect citizens with regard to the quality of different higher education institutions in a differentiated higher education system, and therefore to validate non-State institutions and programmes. In fact, the Italian university system traditionally was based on only one programme (the laurea degree, four to six years, following the different disciplines) and consisted in State-owned universities, which until few years ago represented over 90% of all higher education institutions and absorbed a similar percentage of all post-secondary students.

As a consequence, the only accreditation used was the very act of creation of a new university or study programme, which used to happen by means, respectively, of a law or of a decree, according to a procedure that changed through time with the changes in the system's shape that we shall discuss later.

We should clarify now that this situation has changed significantly in recent years, both because of the relevant developments that have affected the post-secondary education system in the last 10 years and because of the structural change in the system's traditional
public nature: in 2001, of the 77 universities comprising the system, 63 are State-owned (of these, 8 were born as "free" - i.e. private - institutions and were later upgraded to State-owned status) while non-State institutions amount to 14 and account for 18% of the total number of universities. Moreover, half of all non-State establishments existing today were recognized by the State in the last decade.

As we deal with accreditation, in the rest of this paper we shall distinguish between two different perspectives: accreditation of university institutions and accreditation of university programmes.

2. Institutional accreditation

In the history of Italian universities, accreditation procedures have changed as a consequence of the changes that have affected the system.

In the system in place since the post-war period until the eighties, the institutional accreditation process resulted in a piece of legislation by which one of the following was established: (i) the creation of an altogether new university institution, or (ii) the so-called "gemmation", i.e. the upgrading of the secondary branch of an existing university to a new institution in its own right, or (iii) the transformation of "free" (i.e. private) universities into State-owned ones.

Given that Italy is traditionally over regulated, the definition of higher education policies took place through acts passed by Parliament, while a relevant role in their drafting was given to the two Parliament commissions on education (in the Chamber of Deputies and in the Senate, respectively).

In these legislative activities on accreditation one can also see implicit measures aimed at somehow ensuring quality, that - although only partially and inadequately, if compared to contemporary quality assurance techniques - were present in the very procedures adopted. This is visible in two steps of the procedure:

The institution had to comply with minimum requirements in terms of resources available (essentially the minimum number of tenured professors - which was very small - that must be present in the new university institution);

the CUN, or National University Council, was requested to give its opinion on the creation of the new university; the Council is a national assembly of representatives of all different
university domains, and can be considered as a sort of "mega-group" of peer reviewers *sui generis*.

While altogether new institutions had to go through these procedures *before* being established, for private institutions requesting State-owned status this happened necessarily *ex post*, i.e. accreditation in their case concerned what already existed. Along with the institution requesting accreditation, up to this point the subjects involved in the process were only the Parliament, the Government, the Ministry of Education and the National University Council.

The accreditation system changed with the development of the so-called "university planning" policy, introduced with the first Four-year university development plan (for the years 1986-1990). This plan was actually implemented only at the end of the period it referred to. With the introduction of the university planning policy, an additional step was established for accreditation: all applications for establishment of new universities or for upgrading of private institutions to State-owned status should be included in the four-year Plan. This innovation mobilized new actors, namely the regional coordination committees (composed of university rectors and faculty deans of the institutions existing in each region) and CRUI, the Italian Rectors' Conference. These actors were required to express an opinion -- the regional committees on the individual proposals and CRUI on the overall draft of the whole Plan. In this phase, a further step was represented by the establishment of the National Observatory for the Evaluation of the University System: according to the three-year Plan 1994-1996, this structure was in charge of developing a report on the proposals of establishment of new universities, once they had obtained a positive opinion by the relevant regional coordination committee. In the implementation of these provisions, the Observatory evaluated a set of parameters concerning the adequacy of the new institutions as to their financial resources, equipment, buildings, faculty positions, etc.

The current phase was opened by the new Regulation on university planning, which resulted from the general simplification reform affecting the whole public administration sector. This

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1 Previously National Education Council, a similar but wider body. On the topic see also Law no. 590 of Aug. 14, 1982, "Establishment of new universities", which explains in detail the different steps envisaged for the creation of new universities.

2 With Law no. 245 of August 7, 1990, entitled "Provisions on the three-year university development plan and on the implementation of the four-year plan for the period 1986-1990.

3 Law no. 537 of December 24, 1993. The same Law also introduced for the first time wide financial autonomy for higher education institutions.

4 Presidential Decree no. 25 of January 27, 1998, entitled "Regulation and provisions on the procedures concerning university development and planning as well as regional coordination committees, as per art. 20, par. 8, letters a) and b), of Law no. 59 of March 15, 1997. See in particular paragraphs 5 a) and 5c).
reform was introduced by the so-called "Bassanini Law" of 1997\textsuperscript{5}, which also gave the Ministry for the Universities much wider jurisdiction by entrusting it with the power to issue many provisions that formerly could only be issued by Parliament. The Decree established that the creation of new universities, or the upgrading of private universities to State-owned status, should not take place through an \textit{ad hoc} law, but through a simple decree of the Ministry. The actors involved in the accreditation process remained the same: the regional coordination committees (although the same Regulation\textsuperscript{6} changed their composition -- every committee is now made up of the rectors of the region's universities, the President of the \textit{Regione} and a number of student representatives which varies with the number of universities), the Observatory for the evaluation of the university system\textsuperscript{7}, the National University Council, the Rectors' Conference, the Ministry and the Parliament commissions.

The current procedure for accreditation is the following: the actor or actors promoting the creation of a new university\textsuperscript{8} submit a proposal to the Ministry for the universities and forward it to the regional coordination committee, which must give its opinion. Once the Ministry receives this opinion, the proposal goes to the National committee (formerly, Observatory) for the evaluation of the university system, where a report is drafted on the institution to be established or to be upgraded to State-owned status. The National committee carries out an evaluation of the adequacy of the resources available for the new institution, assessing in particular the consistency, the characteristics and the equipment of the teaching and research structures as well as of the buildings, the availability of resources as concerns both the teaching staff and the administrative-technical personnel, and finally the availability of financial resources and its financial plan.

The Ministry can now proceed to include the new institution in the provisional draft of the future three-year university development Plan, which is then submitted to the Rectors' Conference and the National University Council, and subsequently to the final decision of the relevant Parliament commissions. After its Parliament examination, the Plan is finalized and enacted, and will be followed by a series of single decrees of the Ministry laying out provisions for the creation of the new institution.

\textsuperscript{5} Law no. 59 of March 15, 1997, entitled "Delegating to Government the transfer of functions and tasks to regional and local authorities, the reform of the Public Administration and the simplification of administrative procedures".

\textsuperscript{6} See note 4.

\textsuperscript{7} The name of this structure was changed in 2000 into "National committee for the evaluation of the university system"

\textsuperscript{8} i.e. the promoting committee in the case of an altogether new institution; the Faculty council(s) of the detached branch(es) in the case of "gemmation"; the single private institution aspiring to State-owned status.
3. Accreditation of university programmes and degrees

In its final report, the working group established in 1997 by the Ministry for the Universities on the implementation of autonomy in teaching, indicated ten basic organizational principles for this important component of institutional autonomy: one of these supported the "gradual replacement of the formal value of degrees - conferred a priori, once and for all, drawing upon a list of programme titles - with a system based upon ex post certification or accreditation, according to three criteria: cultural value of the degree proposed, consistency with social or economic needs and adequacy of the resources that universities make available. The report also said that national accreditation is necessary inasmuch as the higher education system makes use of public resources, on the one hand, and is accountable for the quality of the education offered, on the other. Nevertheless, in a framework of autonomy it is indispensable that common requisites be actually minimal, but also - and more importantly - that the procedures for the launching of new programmes or of variations on traditional programmes can happen in a faster and more flexible way than the current one"\(^9\).

For the first time, thus, a statement was made acknowledging the possibility for individual university institutions to decide autonomously on a large part of the content of its study programmes. The Ministry accepted most of the recommendations made in the report; as a result, a decree was issued, containing the new programmes and general architecture of the curricula. Up to then, curricula content for each university programmes were analytically determined at national level. They were part of a Ministry decree featuring the decisions made by the National University Council as to their content and leaving but little space for integrations and modifications by individual universities or programmes.

As an effect of the Sorbonne and Bologna agreements, with a Ministry decree a new shape was given to university education, according to which universities should autonomously decide on their programmes' name, training objectives, general framework of training activities included in the curricula, credits granted for each training activity and details about the final test through which the degree is awarded.

A new overall structure of university cycles is also envisaged, consisting in three phases: a basic, bachelor-like, 3-year one; a specialized, master-like, 2-years one and a Ph.D. cycle of three years.

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At the central level (through a decree of the Ministry\textsuperscript{10}) only some very general elements are defined that must be respected by all universities and programmes. The most important of these is the adoption of credits to measure the student's overall work, and the definition of the number of credits for each cycle (180 for the first, 300 for the second, 480 for the third). Besides, the training objectives and consequently the minimum training activities required to achieve them are defined nationally for each class of study programmes. These minimum activities will be complemented by individual institutions with activities defined autonomously, and each institution will identify the activities it deems adequate and characteristic for each of the courses it intends to implement.

In the new design, the first cycle is also intended as a professionally oriented cycle for students who do not wish to continue their studies further. Individual universities are therefore expected to conduct consultations with local social partners about the new courses they intend to launch, with a view to ensuring that the courses match the real needs of the local labour market. The new proposals should also follow a procedure that is similar in part to the one described above about the creation of new institutions: this involves obtaining approval from the regional coordination committee, from CUN and from the Ministry, although - by virtue of the new simplification in public administration procedures - the proposals of new programmes are waived examination by the Parliament commissions.

The reform introduced by the Ministry Decree no. 509 of 1999 had a significant problem to solve: the reconciliation between the conflicting needs of university autonomy to define programmes' curricula and to ensure the legal value of the degrees and therefore their relation to a nationally-defined set of degrees.

The solution adopted, as already mentioned, and was the introduction of nationally defined "classes", by which both the general and the specialist laurea programmes are grouped. Whatever the name they are given by individual universities, study programmes of the same level, with the same training objectives and consequently with the same indispensable training activities, are grouped in classes whose objectives and minimum activities necessary to achieve them are identified at the central level\textsuperscript{11}.

\textsuperscript{10} Decree of the Ministry for the Universities n. 509 of November 3, 1999, entitled "Regulation concerning universities' autonomy in teaching"

\textsuperscript{11} For each "class", activities are grouped into six typologies, as follows:
  a) training activities in one or more domains concerning basic education. Here and below, "domain" is used to mean a set of culturally and professionally similar discipline sectors;
  b) training activities in one or more domains characteristic of the class;
  c) training activities in one or more domains that are similar to or that integrate the ones characteristic of the class, particularly as concerns context cultures and inter-disciplinary training;
This solution is not oriented towards a complete autonomy of institutions and does not exempt neither the three-year (i.e. first cycle) nor the specialized (i.e. second cycle) laurea degree programmes proposed by each university from being subject to some accreditation procedures. Still, the verification required in all the steps of the accreditation procedure mainly concerns the formal level and not the content of the proposals. Thus, the first step (i.e. the feedback that the social partners in the regional community should give to the type of programme proposed) is largely formal; the submission of the proposal to the regional coordination committee is essentially an exercise to evaluate the mutual compatibility between the different programmes proposed by the region's universities and, in principle, aims only towards a rationalization of the supply of high-level training in the region; the submission of the proposal to the Ministry is essentially a verification of legitimacy with regard to the procedures followed up to that point; and, finally, the opinion given by the National University Council mainly intends to ensure that the programmes proposed comply with the constraints contained in the provisions of the decrees we mentioned before. In general, therefore, all these exams seem to leave the proposals' contents largely untouched, with a view to a wide autonomy in teaching for the institutions. Still, the very choice to build up the new architecture of the training system by means of decrees issued by the relevant authority at the national level (decrees that are quite analytical and prescriptive with regard to the contents of the new system and of its classes of programmes) could appear as constraining, if we were to adopt the Anglo-Saxon perspective of autonomy.

4. The role of external actors in accreditation

In this final section we focus on the role of external actors and stakeholders in the accreditation process. We will consider three main experiences, the Diploma Universitario.

d) training activities autonomously chosen by the student;
e) training activities related to the preparation for the final exam that will award the diploma and related to the assessment of the knowledge of at least one foreign language;
f) other training activities aiming at teaching advanced linguistic knowledge, computer and multimedia skills, relational skills, or more generally abilities useful for placement in the labour market; also, training activities focusing on career orientation, through the direct knowledge of the labour market sector that will be accessible by diploma holders - specifically, practical training periods geared to orientation. For each of the above-mentioned training activities, the decrees on study programme classes (Decree of the Ministry for the Universities of August 2, 2000: “Definition of classes for university laurea programmes”; Decree of the Ministry for the Universities of November 28, 2000: “Definition of classes for specialistic laurea programmes”) identify a minimum number of compulsory credits that individual institutions cannot neglect.
the IFTS-Istruzione e Formazione Tecnica Superiore programmes and eventually the new programmes established in 1999 through the university reform.

In 1990 a new university programme, called DU-Diploma Universitario was established by law.

The new programme was conceived as shorter (only three years) and parallel to the traditional one, the laurea programme (four to six years).

Compared with laurea degree programmes, DU’s had a clear practical orientation, reducing as much as possible the theoretic parts of the training. In DU’s, the freedom of choice for students was quite much more limited than in laurea degree courses and the reduced alternatives, together with the numerus clausus\textsuperscript{12}, allowed most of the students to finish their studies within the foreseen span of time. While some of the personnel working in the DU sector were university permanent staff, universities were given the innovative opportunity of recruiting temporary teaching staff, mostly coming from professions and firms, within their own budget limits and on a private contract base.

In implementing the new programmes, universities were supposed (by law) to cooperate closely with public and private bodies, both by setting up ad hoc consortia for the establishment of the programmes, and by signing agreements on practical training periods (co-op programmes) and student placement. The interaction with external actors (enterprises, local authorities, professional associations) was thus considered as an important element both of the teaching content and of the financing of DU programmes. At the same time, this interaction was also considered a fundamental step for the accreditation of the new programmes. In fact, the procedure contained the same general steps above described for accreditation of programmes, but in addition the presence of external actors both in the projecting and in the implementing phase was taken into consideration. Moreover, an analysis of the labour market demand of the proposed professional profiles was compulsory for each degree programme applying for accreditation.

The role attributed to the regional coordination committee, formed by rectors, deans and representatives of regional government, in the accreditation process of new DU's can also be read in the light of the need to stress the importance of local actors. As a result of their vocational orientation and of the indicators stated by the accreditation procedure, the new programmes sought much more contact to external stakeholders than universities did. Co-op

\textsuperscript{12} Differently than in laurea degree courses, were there is open access (except for the areas were a numerus clausus is forced by E.U. regulations, as for medicine, veterinary, architecture) DU courses regulate student’s access through entrance examinations.
education emerged as a standard for the curriculum of the new programmes and the providing institutions had to co-operate with enterprises to receive places for internships, external lecturer, and tutoring and research co-operations. External actors were given the opportunity to hold a share of the new programmes or at least become members of consultative bodies. The financial support was also closely linked to a privileged model of interaction between universities and external actors. Despite not forming part of the accreditation procedure *stricto sensu*, the ability to raise external (non-ministerial) funds was seen as an important element for accepting the proposed new programmes. A reward was granted to those universities capable to start very clearly professional-oriented courses, in line with the needs of the labour market and implemented through a close collaboration with enterprises and public or private bodies operating in the same territorial district. On the other hand, the consortia established for DU course implementation were supposed to additionally raise and attract external financial support. Some additional funding came through the years from national special programmes like the *Campus* project, launched in 1995\(^\text{13}\) and referred to DU’s in the area of engineering and advanced tertiary services under the co-funding with European Social Fund. The Campus project rewarded different aspects of quality in the programmes. Among these, a period of practical training by external productive or service bodies emerged as an important *de facto* element of quality (Modica et al., 1997).

In recent years, as a consequence of different agreements\(^\text{14}\) between the Government and the social partners, another innovation was adopted, through the establishment of a new non-university post-secondary sector called IFTS (*Istruzione e Formazione Tecnica Superiore*\(^\text{15}\)). This sector comprises programmes promoted by regional government authorities, which avail themselves of the joint participation of different actors, such as secondary schools, vocational training organizations, universities, enterprises, professional associations and trade unions. The decision to create the new sector appears to have drawn upon two separate clusters of motivations: on the one hand, the recognition that knowledge and an up-to-date set of skills play an increasingly important role in the work processes; on the other hand, an aspect of no minor relevance, i.e. the growing urgency of employability problem and of the personal set of capabilities and skills of all actors on the labour market scene. In such a context, by explicit acknowledgment of all the social partners and of the Government itself, the supply of

\(^{13}\) The promoters were: CRUI (Italian Rectors’ Conference), Unioncamere, Confindustria, Enea (National Body for new technologies, energy and the environment), the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry for the Universities.

\(^{14}\) The agreements, signed by Government and the social partners (i.e. different entrepreneurial associations, the crafts and trade association, unions), are: the “agreement on income policy”, July 23, 1994; the “agreement on employment”, September 24., 1996; and the so-called “Christmas agreement”, December 23, 1998.
education should relate more and more closely to the acquisition of these abilities and skills and, more generally, should increasingly comprise the training programmes that can best ensure employability in the new world of post-Fordist and knowledge-based production. It is exactly these challenges and problem issues that stimulated the long process of negotiation whose fundamental steps were represented by the three agreements between Government and the social partners we mentioned before. The initial inspiration of their overall logical framework was the idea of giving a role to all the different actors involved, in order to create a system of educational opportunities that would acknowledge the skills acquired by the students and also allow for the development of life-long vocational programmes. The funding of these programmes is completely public and is the result of co-funding between Regioni and European Social Fund. Teaching staff is recruited on the base of private contracts: they should be school teachers, university professors or instructors in the vocational training system, while half of the classes should be given by experts coming from the professional and productive world. Practical training periods must cover no less than 30% of the total amount of hours.

Accreditation procedure is formalized through the rules established by Regioni in the tender for funding, which reflect general Ministry’s guidelines. According to these guidelines, the programmes should be based on a need analysis conducted in each territorial district. In order for an organization to be able to propose a programme, the Regione must recognize it as a suitable institution, on the basis of its managerial and logistic structure, and of the availability of professional competences within the institution (e.g. in the fields of teaching, coordination, planning, management, needs analysis, etc.). As for external actors, their role is stated by definition in so far all IFTS programmes should be proposed by a quadri-partite pool formed by schools, vocational training institutions, universities and entrepreneurial associations.

Even in the procedure for the accreditation of the new university programmes introduced in 1999 with the establishment of first and second cycle there is some space devoted to external actors. This is not only true for the role attributed to regional coordination committee, but also for what the ministerial decree foresees when stating the need for university proposing the new programme to “consultate social partners” in order to establish how the proposed new professional profiles fit to labour market needs. Unfortunately, the experience up to now shows that these consultations are quite unusual and largely formal.

15. Another, less commonly used expression for this sector is: Formazione Tecnico- Professionale Integrata – FTPSI.
5. Conclusions

What we have discussed in the last two sections shows how accreditation, in the case of both institutions and programmes, continues to receive less attention in Italy than it does in other European countries.

On this matter, Italy has maintained an approach that could be defined as substantially "autarkic", or self-sufficient. Unlike many other innovations introduced in Italian university life (a good example is exactly the case of the autonomy in teaching we discussed above), accreditation practices, both old and new, show almost no echo of procedures implemented in other, more experienced, countries.

As for the accreditation of institutions, until very recently, large part of the procedures regulating accreditation in Italy were widely formal, and their significance was essentially political: the decision to accredit a new institution, or even a new programme, used to result from political lobbying activities\textsuperscript{16} rather than from choices based on an analysis of the real needs and opportunities of the local labour market and of the actual resources available. As a result, even until very recently, some of the institutions and programmes that were established had inadequate structural, financial and teaching resources, or were even lacking students, and in any case were never capable of offering effective training and placement to their users.

This situation partly changed when the Observatory/National Committee for the evaluation of the university system that we mentioned before was put in charge of evaluating the resources of the candidate new institutions or of the private universities applying for a status upgrade. Nevertheless, the suspicion appears founded that political pressure still continues in many cases to play a relevant role in the accreditation of new higher education institutions.

As concerns the accreditation of programmes and degrees, the new architecture introduced by the reform of the cycles that we described above seems to offer an opportunity to make some steps forward and away from the past. While it is true that this procedure, as defined by the Ministry's decrees, is still more constraining than it could be in a framework of complete

\textsuperscript{16} Lobbying activities were carried out mostly by political representatives of the cities interested to establish the new institution or programme in their territory.
autonomy, it is also true that it leaves some degree of autonomous freedom of choice to individual institutions. In the case of both institutions and programmes, though, it still seems there is a long way to go before Italy has a concept of accreditation and related procedures that are actually capable of protecting users with regard to the quality of the education offered, without infringing on the legitimate right of individual institutions to operate in a framework of real autonomy.

Finally, a comment on external actors in the accreditation process. It is quite reasonable to state that external actors might have an important role to play in accreditation processes of both institutions and programmes in so far as they offer realistic guarantees that proposed institutions and programmes have connections with local needs. In the last few years these actors had a growing – though not at all predominant- function in the accreditation processes, even if more through informal than formal activities. In this framework, the recent reform of university cycles (the so called “3 + 2”) represents a step backwards. The foreseen consultation of social partners by university institutions before proposing new programmes is, when practiced, only formal and the role of social partners, if any, is definitely marginal. This is quite a critical aspect of the ongoing reform of university cycles, in so far the aimed vocational aspect of the first cycle (the new laurea) might be seriously menaced by the lack of actual links with socio-economic environment.