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Pride, Prejudice and Challenges in Italian Higher Education

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Introduction

Universities have a thousand-year tradition in the lands of Italy. Many established in the Middle Ages, still exist today. First created as places of study and debate, the purposes and functions of universities have changed greatly and continually through time. For a while, some universities became ‘temples of pure knowledge’ neither wanting nor needing any connexion to real life or the visible world. At other times, or in other places, many universities aligned with the political and economic domination of the landed classes which, for centuries, included the Church. During the 1840s, 50s, 60s, many universities served as willing instruments for the nation building begun by the northern Kingdom of Savoy, and its educated upper class and bourgeoisie. With Unification complete in 1870, every university in Italy found itself under the rule of the same, single government for the first time ever. With
so many old, distinguished and independent universities fighting under one tent to protect their place and reputation, the governing rules of the Italian University System developed a Byzantine complexity with deliberately unclear rules. In each university, a few powerful people controlled recruitment and promotion of faculty while old, local families controlled enrolment giving favour to their favourites with limited outside monitoring or external control (Perotti 2002; Sylos Labini and Zapperi 2010). Influenced by the economic crisis, the reforms of 1999 and 2010 (Vaira 2004; Brunello and Cappellari 2008) have attempted to manage Italian university according to the Bologna Process (Ehlers and Schneckenberg 2010; Neave and Veiga 2013). The Quality Assurance (QA) system has a pivotal role to play in the new processes for governance (Blasi et al. 2016).

The newly created National Agency for University System Evaluation and Research (ANVUR) and a series of new evaluation procedures (AVA), concerning study course degrees, university institutions, research and professorial activity, have traced a new direction in the Italian Higher Education System in which the quality is considered as the main requirement to promote the most productive and capable institutions (Baccini 2010). However, oppositions, resistance, debates, and public demonstrations of disagreement have clearly characterised the introduction of QA system because bureaucracy’s purpose seems much more clearly focused on making itself larger instead of creating simple paths to assuring universities of greater quality.

**History of Italian University**

The oldest university in the Western World sits in Bologna, though two important schools did exist on the Italian peninsula prior to the birth of Bologna’s universitas. To the south, the Schola Medica was active in Salerno from the ninth century. Medical texts by Hippocrates, Galen, and Avicenna were studied and discussed. For 300 years Salerno’s Schola Medica was the most important medical school in Europe. Graduates went out to both practice and teach. But, in the 14th century, after newer schools developed better reputations, the Schola Medica Salernitana closed its doors. In 825, Emperor Lothario built a school of rhetoric and law in the northern city of Pavia but the school’s operations were interrupted for several centuries.

The year 1088 A.D. has become the accepted date of the founding of Bologna’s Alma Mater Studiorum but that date comes from writings of the Italian poet Carducci in the nineteenth century. Arguments for an earlier founding date are possible. What is certain is that in the High Middle Ages, in cities of what the world now calls central Italy, groups of students began to meet publicly with teachers to pursue knowledge. The University of Bologna was born as a free and secular organisation of students studying codes of Roman Law. All study and debate took place in Latin.
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Italian university in becoming a provider of low-level generic knowledge (Piussi and Arnaus 2011; Pigini and Staffolani 2016).

Many fear that the QA system could create a self-reinforcing mechanism by which the money received by high-ranking universities decreases distributions to smaller, or lower-ranking universities until the lower distributions disappear.

Currently, ANVUR is engaged in the review of the indicators on which each Degree Course has to set the Annual Degree Course Report (RdR). Some aspects of QA system will probably be reviewed: the visit of Evaluation Experts Committees to the degree courses, the lexicon not always clear or too detailed, with too much acronyms and abbreviations, the whole quality assessment ‘machinery’ perceived as too complicated and fragmented (ANVUR 2016). The issues are not the Bologna Process and Quality Standards but the bureaucracy that the Italian state created to implement them.

Will QA really improve Italian Higher Education System? Will QA split Italy’s Universities into the upper and lower class? Could QA split Italy’s universities into good universities and bad universities according to some party’s political ideology or to some business groups? The risks are real. How things go forward will be closely watched.

Endnotes

2 http://www.roars.it

References


Capano, Gilberto and Marino Regini. 2015. Come cambia la governance. Università italiane e europee a confronto. Roma: Fondazione CRUI.


