

Max Weber Programme & Academic Careers Observatory Conference

“University autonomy and the Globalisation of Academic Careers” San Domenico di Fiesole, 11-12 November 2008

Autonomy, accountability and academic freedom: toward a good balance?

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1. Objective and aims

Autonomy is a long-standing challenging concept of the higher education policy. From the eighties, the State used autonomy as a mean for enhancing the HEIs evolution toward becoming organizations able to set their own strategies and objectives, and to pursue them through concrete actions, choosing between different possibilities the most suitable one. Autonomy is associated to the growth of the HEIs capability to attract income from the market, with a reduction of the State support. More autonomy is supposed to lead to better performance of HEIs as well as to favour a large differentiation and competitiveness between HEIs at national and international level. Autonomy is a basic component of the move toward the managerial paradigm, ideally linked to the enhancing of quality, efficiency and effectiveness.

On the other side, autonomy is considered an intrinsic characteristic of the HEIs, due to the main functions they perform, teaching and research. It allows relaxing the constraints linked to the rules and norms settled by the State, and make possible for HEIs to decide activities and priorities in the short and long period. It is autonomy, which allows the free setting of the University mission and strategies, with the sole view of the accomplishment of objectives coherent with the institutional norms and values.

Autonomy is a flexible concept, subject to changes according to the different configurations between the State and the HEIs across time in different countries. It is an institutional characteristic which ought to shape the HEIs relationships with the external world (state, stakeholders, society as a whole), and impact on the institutions accountability and on the academic freedom.

As recently Huisman underlined, “perceptions and views on institutional autonomy might differ considerably from country to country” (Huisman 2007). These differences can explain also the different ways through which autonomy was implemented in European countries, with different rate and pace of constraints settled from the State though, for instance, funding mechanisms, norms and standards, trying to circumscribe the room of manoeuvre of HEIs.

In most European country, autonomy is also characterised by different relationships with academic freedom and accountability. The relationships of autonomy with these issues are not the same. From a managerial perspective, accountability directly affects autonomy: the more HEIs are supplied of autonomy, the more they should be accountable toward society, the more they are responsible for their performance and should undergo evaluation processes. On the contrary, academic freedom tends to be reduced with the enlargement of institutional autonomy. The new internal level of government reduced the power of the academics, rectors’ leadership is enhanced, and decision-making process was hardly affected by managers.

The paper addresses the issue of the relationships between autonomy, academic freedom and accountability. It assumes that path dependency affects the balance between these three factors contributing to shape different HEIs configuration (Musselin, 2004). The reform process did not

change the traditional characteristics of the Italian continental model (state control and bureaucracies vis a vis a strong power handled by professors) thus path dependency continued to affect the implementation of reforms and produced a distort outcome.

We deal with the problem of autonomy in a diachronic perspective, looking at the changes of the national configuration of autonomy over the last 15 years (1990 – 2005), and how they are related to the modifications in accountability and academic freedom.

We take Italy as an example in order to analyse the changes across time. Italy is a particular case, extreme within the European context, of long-time unchanged organisational assets of universities, where the implementation of reforms has been constrained by policy legacy and academic prominence, despite the Government attempts to steer the system (Reale and Potì, 2008). Recent developments in Government policies are supposed to impact Universities (HEIs) deeply, by using both the funding lever and research evaluation, and maintaining a strong emphasis on University autonomy, which grounded on the national basic laws, and was definitely implemented by a national law at the end of eighties. The Italian HE system has been classified as one example of “continental” model, and more recent analyses confirmed the resistance to change, mainly linked to the intrinsic characteristic of the system, dominated by the academic oligarchy (Moscato, 2001, Capano, 2008, Woolf, 2003). It was also recognized that the prevalence of academics is strictly linked to the absence of strong persistent political will to modify the system, and to ambiguities that affected the university reforms (Reale and Potì, 2008).

2. Theoretical background and methodology

Autonomy is a relative concept, which is finalized to promote the role of University (Thorens, 1998; Felt, 1998). It can vary according to the different views and expectations of society, and to the role that society itself assigns to university. Autonomy is a “shifting notion” (Felt, 1998), historically dated and never permanent, that “must be established time to time” (Bigli, 1993). Autonomy shapes the relationships between HEIs and the State in terms of responsibility, power, and co-ordination.

Different types of autonomy (substantive or procedural, Berdal 1990) can be recognized to the universities. In many European countries, the movement was from the absence of institutional autonomy (backed by a particular status of the professors, with little control exercised over them) to a substantive autonomy, which is accompanied by the permanence of some rules circumscribing to some extent the space of manoeuvre left to HEIs in order to guarantee the pursuing of public aims.

Autonomy affects the State – university relationships, changing the distribution of power among them. According to the Clark’s model (Clark, 1983; Becher and Kogan, 1992), the authority can be attributed to basic units, (professors or the collective representatives of professors’ peers such as departments or faculties), to university bureaucratic apparatus and trusteeships, and to Government political and administrative authorities. Different combinations in the distribution of the authority, within the described levels, shape the model of university. If the State plays a central role, we can face centralised systems, where Universities are conceived as homogeneous bodies without any autonomy, or, alternatively, the State can play a role of supervisor, by fixing the general principles for the functioning of the system, letting the institutions free of self regulate themselves (Van Vught, 1993). When the market is the dominant force for co-ordinating the system, the universities tend to assume quasi-market behaviours and the internal structure tends towards getting high levels of flexibility and adaptability to the external clients’ needs. Finally, the co-ordination of the system is played by individual professors or by their disciplinary networks (Clark, 1983).

Van Vught (van Vught, 1993) proposed a reduction of the types of coordination in two models: the state control model (the one of the continental Europe) and the state supervising model (the one of the Anglo-Saxon countries). In the former the authority is handled by the State and the academic oligarchy, while in the latter the power is shared by academics and university managers. The State supervises the system, adopting a style of steering at the distance.

Other authors (Braun and Merrien, 2003) proposed to include other two dimensions, as the type of autonomy (procedural and substantial) and “the kind of belief system of governments concerning universities (universities as cultural or as service institutions) to accentuate the dynamics of governance”. In this way, Braun and Merrien designed a “three dimensional cube on governance,

which integrates Clark's former governance model and the new managerialism model".

The Clark's triangle was also criticised for its incapability to represent the interdependencies between the three worlds, which are generally explored in research on higher education, namely the academics, the universities, and the national system. In Clark's representation each vertex of the triangle is an ideal-type of integration, but it was claimed that this explanation appears, at the same time, too hierarchical (the macro-level organises the intermediate level, and the coordination modes –State, Academics, Market- structure the organisational level), and too narrow, because it does not allow to understand how the macro-level impacts the micro, and it is not possible "to grasp the impact that coordination modalities may have in each of them" (Musselin, 2004).

Musselin proposed a different approach based on "university configurations" in order to analyse "how the three types of collective action – those of universities, the overseeing authorities, and the academic professor – fit and function together". Configurations are a frame where interdependencies are inscribed, but they are not a deterministic structure, which control the actors' behaviour, nor imply a substantive content: they only circumscribe the behaviours without prescribing the possible behaviours. This approach assumes the possibility to have high heterogeneity in the roles, purposes and functions played by academics, universities and the State. The university configurations are objects of research, which must be based on empirical evidences, in order to disclose the nature and the content of interdependencies that structure a certain configuration (Musselin, 2004). The advantage of this approach is that it enables to understand why countries which share some basic characteristics in the three collective actions, are so different in coordination practices (i.e. there are strong differences between Germany and Italy, although the professors in Germany have a position as strong as in Italy).

In this paper we want to explore how autonomy, accountability and academic freedom are factors able to describe and qualify the interdependencies between the State, the universities and the academics, thus shaping the national configuration.

The hypothesis is that autonomy, accountability and academic freedom are means for coordinating the power between state, university and academic oligarchy, guaranteeing the respective space of action. The different balance between these factors let us understand the evolution of the state-university relationships. The implementation of any reform processes is suitable to modify the existing balance, and the outcome largely depends by the way in which the equilibrium between the three factors will be reshaped. In countries, such as Italy, where path dependency strongly affect the implementation of reforms, the introduction of autonomy can be used as a mean to reinforce the existing distribution of power rather than to contribute to modify it, if interdependencies are not taken into account. According to our hypothesis, we expect that in Italy the introduction of autonomy: i) reinforced the existing distribution of power rather than contributing to modify it, ii) did not contribute to the move toward the managerial paradigm, ideally linked to the enhancing of quality, efficiency and effectiveness, iii) did not reinforce Universities as organizations.

The analysis is carried out through the Government official documents, and through the documentation of the agencies or intermediate bodies in charge of evaluation. The results are thus controlled and discussed along some empirical results of the recent literature, highlighting the rise of autonomy in Italy (rationales and policy design), its implementation, the capability to drive the Universities toward uniformity or differentiation, the effect of path dependency.

The autonomy-accountability principle: rationale and expectations

Italy is a country characterised for a long time by a combination of academic corporatism and Government bureaucracy, where the role of the university institutional level was weak, for the absence of trustees and the substantial role played by the academic corporations (Giglioli, 1979). This model was progressively eroded, because of the influence of both external and internal factors: massification of HE, growing up of the number of the academic staff, influence of the Bologna process and European research policies (i.e. European Framework Programs), and a general shift toward enhancing the social and economic role of Universities. Although some modifications of the legal framework were introduced, the core structure was maintained until the nineties. In 1980, the law 80 and the decree n. 382 established some important novelties to university organisation, aimed

at giving a certain level of procedural autonomy, but they were again unable to define structural changes in the higher education system (Capano 2008; Moscati, 1991).

The emergence of the autonomy/accountability principle in Italy should be linked to the more general reforming process of the Public Administration, starting from the beginning of the nineties and aimed at introducing subsidiarity into the public action, with the decentralisation of functions and tasks from the State to the agents (vertical subsidiarity) and the distribution of power among different agents on the basis of their missions and responsiveness (horizontal subsidiarity). Moreover, the international and European policies at that time strongly pushed toward the reinforcement of the university autonomy, and largely influenced the Italian reform process.¹

A first step was the Law 168/1989, delivered by the centre-left coalition, which produced some important reforms. Firstly, the Ministry for the University and the Research (MURST, then transformed in MIUR), was constituted as main State authority for governing the national research system. Second, law acknowledged substantial autonomy to the universities. As in many other countries, evaluation was associated to the introduction of the institutions' autonomy, which gave them larger spaces of manoeuvre for pursuing their own objectives and for prioritisation (Clark, 1983). At the same time, according to the accountability principle, institutions are supposed to enhance their capability to answer to the external demand coming from the society as well as to become transparent and responsible actors.

Autonomy was put in place from mid nineties, with the budget law 537/93, which established new rules for University funding and settled a dedicated agency for evaluation, the *Osservatorio* of the University. The Italian delay is strictly connected with the characteristics of the national political context and administrative culture. As outlined by the literature, in Italy "instead of programs connected with specific interventions, to date, we have had a framework laws, major reform laws and by-laws, which establish principles but hardly lead action. Most of the time, instead of seeking to achieve results, we have been content to observe norms, if not simply reiterate procedures. This is aggravated by the fact that public interventions are heavily burdened by our administrative law." (Stame, 1998).

A further step was represented by the general reform of the Public Administration in Italy, the so-called "Bassanini Law" (L. 59/1997). This law realised the decentralisation of the administrative action, as consequence of the subsidiary principle. It also introduced criteria for the management of the public institutions, university included, largely inspired by NPM principles. The provision implies a revision of the traditional bureaucratic action, by enlarging the sphere of actions transferred by the State to the universities. The Bassanini Law envisaged the autonomy-accountability principle, as means for assuring the responsibility and transparency of administrative actions. The drivers of Government strategy were efficiency, accountability, decentralisation of functions, increasing autonomy of institutions and responsibility of the managers (OECD, 1995; Id. 1997b). As to Universities and research, Government goals were to eliminate some disadvantages such as the absence of long-term planning, the weak co-ordination of functions and players, the absence of separation of the direction-evaluation phase from the management of the research efforts, the lack of satisfactory evaluation processes linked to funding activities and the introduction of a competitive climate among research performers for funding (Bassanini, 2000).

Prospect 1 describes the chronological setting of the main regulations relevant for autonomy and accountability, and the subjects addressed. The reform process was carried out by different government coalitions.² Laws envisaged that the State abandon many administrative and managerial tasks as well as modified the general funding scheme according to the substantial autonomy acknowledged to Universities. At the same time, the State should reinforce its position of evaluator, forcing Universities toward accountability for results. Universities received a large space of manoeuvre for defining functions, organisation, and policies. Decision rights on curricula, doctoral

¹ The OECD Review of the Science and Technology Policy for Italy underlined, at the beginning of the nineties, the lack of University autonomy and evaluation culture as strong weaknesses of the national research system, (OECD, 1992). The OECD analysis had a large impact on the political debate about the reform of the research system, which led to significant consequences a few years later (MURST, 1992).

² Italy had centre-left coalitions from 1987 to 1994 (Andreotti, Amato, Ciampi), then a short period with a centre right coalition (Berlusconi from 1994-1995), again a centre-left coalitions from 1995 to 2001 (Dini, Prodi, D'Alema, Amato), and a new centre-right one (led from Berlusconi) from 2001 to 2006.

courses, masters and other courses, personnel recruitment, distribution of powers between the governing bodies, scientific activities and research agenda were all transferred to Universities. The State maintained the rights to determine rules for the professor recruitment, accreditation of new universities, limits for accessing the courses, ceiling on student fees.

Year	New regulation	Subject
1989	l. 168/1989	Institution of the MURST as main Government authority for R&D policies Acknowledgment of autonomy (substantial) for Universities.
1994	l. 537/1993	Financial responsibility of the university for the allocation of resources Transition from line-item budgeting to lump-sum budgeting Constitution of the <i>Osservatorio</i> for the University in charge of evaluation
1997	l. 57/1997	Decentralisation from Government to the University of administrative and managerial tasks Subsidiary is envisaged as inspiring principle for the balance of powers between the State and the academic institutions
1997	l.127/1997	The discipline of the University curricula and educational functions is transferred to the University.
1998-1999	l. 204/1998 and decree 381/1999	MURST become MIUR with a greater centralisation of competences on R&D policies. National Research Plan (PNR) is the instrument for establishing rationale, goals, priorities, funding instruments and resources for the HE and R&D policy. Constitution of the CIVR, as body in charge for the evaluation of research, with competences on PROs and on public funded research programmes New regulation for the recruitment of the professors, combining the need of national control on validity of the process with the autonomy of the universities to select the candidate among those that have been declared suitable for the position. Universities were also autonomous determining position and field of competitions
1999	l. 370/1999	Transformation of the <i>Osservatorio</i> in CNVSU. Evaluation becomes a compulsory task for University. NUV replaced the Units for the internal evaluation of education and research. Universities that do not introduce an evaluation system do not receive the Government funding. Determination of a ratio of the block grant funding which is distributed on the basis of the results of evaluation (incentives) New rules for Phd courses which enlarge the autonomy of universities
2001	Decree 115/2001	Linkages between the performance assessment and the resource allocation for the three-year plan of the Universities. Mainly results for educational activities are taken into account
2001	Decree 165/2001	Competences on administrative and technical staff are decentralised to Universities
2003	Decree n. 2206/2003	MIUR launched the first Three-Year Evaluation Exercise (VTR) based on the model designed in the CIVR Guidelines. All the academic institutions joined the VTR on a voluntary basis
2005	Decree 15/2005	Revision of the minimal standard requirements for university courses with stricter compulsory rules than before to be complied
2005	Law 43/2005	New Three-Year Plan regulation. The level of core funding and the number of personnel to be recruited are subject to the positive evaluation of the Plan
2005	Decree 139/2005	Introduction of a new input-output formula elaborated by the CNVSU for the distribution of the general university funding, with a percentage of fund determined on the basis of the research results assessment. The formula was applied as experimental tool.
2005	Law 230/2005	Modification of the recruitment system with the re-

Prospect 1.

Documentation on the Italian reform process (parliamentary discussion on the law, proceeding of national conferences, newspapers) and the Italian literature on HE (Moscati, 2001; Capano, 1998, Merloni, 2003), showed that the expectations linked to autonomy and accountability were different for government, HEIs and academics. The former's will was to improve the University performance. Autonomy is associated to a modification of the funding, with a growing amount of money coming from the market and the reduction of the presence of the State. More autonomy is supposed to favour a larger differentiation between HEIs and a stronger competitiveness. Accountability was a mean to reinforce the government steering toward quality of performance, efficiency and effectiveness, reducing the dependency from public funding, and enhancing the internationalization and the territorial embedding of universities, improving transparency and responsibility of the HE system. The Universities consider autonomy as an intrinsic characteristic of higher education, due to the functions they perform (teaching and research), and the social role they play in generation and transmission of knowledge. Academics think at autonomy as a precondition of their freedom, but they were/are not in favour of a strong reinforcement of the University government level, which could limit to some (maybe large) extent individual behaviours. Both HEIs and academics were hesitant toward accountability and the setting of evaluation systems, because of the absence of any experience of external performance evaluation, and the cultural association they made between evaluation and sanction.³

In the following paragraph we will consider how autonomy and accountability were implemented and how HEIs reacted to the reform process.

3. The implementation of autonomy-accountability principle

How large is autonomy in Italy in comparison with other European countries? How effective autonomy is in term of compliance with government and HEIs expectations? Was the linkage between autonomy and evaluation really put in place? We tried to answer these questions in order to understand how the reform process was implemented.

Substantial autonomy

Few indicators can be outlined from recent literature, which allow us to know the level of University autonomy in Italy, in comparison with other countries. Italian HEIs are responsible, as many other European countries, for defining their own institutional strategy, their internal academic and administrative structure, the structure of their decision making bodies and academic profile (EUA, 2007). They own most of their real estate, are entitled to buy and sell their real estate independently, as well as to buy and sell other financial assets, with no restriction on how money can be spent. Universities have the power to decide the overall number of students and the number of students per discipline, to admit special categories of students and to decide on the criteria for student admission (EUA, 2007).

Autonomy is always limited, because Universities are subject to the law and depend on public funding, thus enabling the state to circumscribe their space of manoeuvre in order to allow the pursuing of public goals. In Italy universities have partial autonomy for deciding on structure and content of the degree programs, as well as for opening and closing down study programs. Autonomy on the aforementioned items was very large at the beginning of the reform process (from mid nineties until 2000). Government intervention from 2001 tended to restrict the space of manoeuvre of HEIs in order to limit the enormous growth of courses and curricula.

³ Stame outlined that “the origin of this confusion is no doubt to be found in our legal culture: the idea that a public intervention aimed at solving a problem can be judged on the basis of the results it has achieved is totally alien to that culture, because it holds the deep-routed conviction that an action can only be judged by its compliance or non-compliance with norms” (Stame, 1998).

HEIs suffer also limitations in the power to recruit permanent academic staff (recruitment rules and authorization for hiring new personnel), as well as to establish the salary levels, but gained the power to select researchers directly and to decide positions to be opened using the resources made available through the turn over (EUA, 2007). In all these items the State still has strong competences. Nevertheless, if we look at limitations, we can note great similarities of Italy with France, in coherence with the Napoleonic tradition, which characterised both countries.

Taking into account a few characteristics of governance of a sample of universities in Europe, Aghiou and colleagues (Aghiou et al., 2007) showed that the size of the budget per student, budget autonomy, hiring and wage-setting autonomy are positively correlated with the research performance (measured through the Shanghai rankings), while public ownership and the tendency to hire their own graduates as faculty are negatively correlated with research performance. Funding and autonomy are positively correlated: the availability of more financial resources produced a positive impact on research performance that is doubled if university has budget autonomy. Italian universities are significantly older than the others, they are all public institutions, have a very high level of budget autonomy, but a very low autonomy in hiring people and setting the wage, comparing with the average result of the sample surveyed (Table 1).⁴

Table 1

	Age (years)	Public status *	Budget autono my**	Building ownersh ip**	Hiring autono my**	Wage- setting autono my**
Italy	444	1,0	0,9	1,0	0,4	0,0
Total***	290	0,75	0,55	0,76	0,8	0,3

*1 if public, 0 if private **1 if yes, 0 if no ***Sample average

Source: Aghiou et al. (2007), p. 36

Finally, Bonaccorsi and Daraio (Bonaccorsi and Daraio, 2007) checked autonomy of Universities on the basis of their habit to procure financial resources (discretionary power on resources and expenses). They founded a lower position of the Italian HEIs in comparison with other European countries as to capability to attract funding from industry and other public sources, but a similar position as to their dependence from central government and other public sources.

Summing up, law 168/1989 and subsequent legal provisions were aimed to build a system based on a steering at the distance model, where universities have substantive autonomy and the state would reduce/change its role, thus modifying deeply their relationships. According to the evidences collected, the autonomy granted to the Italian HEIs allows in principle a space of manoeuvre similar to other European countries. Differences are mainly related to hiring and wage setting autonomy.

The effectiveness of autonomy

As in other countries, in Italy the push toward more University autonomy was justified in order to enhance accountability, efficiency and market behaviour. Kogan outlined that “the ability of institutions to respond to these requirements is strongly conditioned by the legal framework, the political culture and resources” (Kogan, 1998).

As to the first condition (legal framework), we can remind that the Italian configuration maintained at least three distinctive features that reforms did not affect. Universities remained the sole providers of tertiary education: no vocational universities were created, and no differentiation of actors in charge for tertiary education could emerge. The training for research Phd courses can be carried out

⁴ The analysis was developed on national samples of Universities from Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and UK.

by other research organization only on the basis of an agreement with the university, which maintained a strict control and supervision on Phd students. The justification lies on the assumption that only universities can guarantee quality of educational programs and of training for research, because of the formal recognition they have from the State.⁵ The second feature is the attribution of a legal value to university academic qualifications, based on the assumption that the quality of educational programs offered by Italian universities should be considered as equal throughout the national territory. The third characteristic is the status of university professors, which are civil servant, whose rules, workload and salaries are equal for all, and are determined by the Government, differently from the other sectors of the Public Administration where the personnel working conditions were determined on the basis of a collective agreement. The justification of such a different discipline is related to the intrinsic character of the academic work, devoted to transmit and develop new knowledge, which need a special status in order to preserve academic freedom.

The consequence of the three aforementioned characteristics of the legal framework is that each university in Italy has substantive autonomy, but works in a context characterized by a monopoly within the local and national market of higher education. No differentiation between graduation according to teaching/research performance are in place, and no actors, apart from other universities but to a very limited extent, can become competitors (Reale and Potì, 2009).

Hereafter we try to present some evidences/measures of the unbalanced implementation of autonomy, which gave rise to a large space of manoeuvre for HEIs without pairing it with accountability mechanisms.

The implementation of autonomy by the universities was largely affected by the need to maintain and possibly to enlarge their decision making, taking the occasion of the relaxation of the central bureaucratic control, without introducing substantial transformation of the internal balance of power. This conservative and corporative behaviour can be detected by looking at the way in which HEIs modified their statutes and the internal governance in order to improve the self-governance capability. The majority of universities did not introduce substantive reform of their governance. The evidences collected (Finocchi, 2000, Fassari 2004, Paletta, 2004, Capano, 2008) revealed the prevalence of a position of compromise by universities in their relationship with the state, together with a limited capacity or, in some cases, willingness to assume a central and proactive role in the market of knowledge production, and the tendency to keep the decision making largely in the hands of academics.

At the same time, external pressures for changes toward more accountable behaviours coming from economy and society, and the growing internationalisation of the academic work, induced internal tensions and conflicts, which reinforced the role of the rectors and their leadership (Turri, 2005; Capano, 2008). This change is common in many European countries (Paradise et al, 2009), but in Italy went on in a context characterized by rigidities of the legal framework and by the dominance of the academics over other components of the universities (i.e. the non-academic management), thus constraining (and often impeding) the emergence of universities as strong institutions able to set objectives and priorities and to design instruments and strategies to pursue them.

The distort implementation of autonomy by the university is also proved by the way in which the bachelor and master degree reform as well as the doctoral course reform were put in place (Capano, 2008, Luzzatto and Moscati, 2007), and the functioning of the new academic recruitment system (Bonaccorsi and Daraio, 2007, Capano, 2008). As far as the former is concerned, unforeseen effects sprang up from opportunistic behaviours of HEIs: proliferation of the degree and Phd courses, distort use of the credit system, fragmentation of teaching due to the absence of a substantial revision of the old curricula and course contents.

Different factors negatively affected the reform of teaching courses. Capano (2008) stressed the linkage between the poor performance of HEIs and the democratic-corporatist character of the governance. Luzzatto and Moscati indicated three basic reasons, that are the “elitist attitude” of the academic staff with respect to tertiary education, which impeded genuine transformation of the courses; the lack of experience of academics in the collective design of curricula; the lack of co-

⁵ This assumption gave rise to a hard defence of existing universities, that strongly adversed other players entered the HE system, even when formally recognized by the Ministry. One example was the claim against the advent of the telematic universities for distance learning, that would not assure a good quality of education supplied.

operation between disciplinary fields; the continuance of a professional comportment based on “reciprocal non-interference”; and, last but not least, the absence of an institutional framework able to support the reform process.

The implementation of the new recruitment system produced a set of perverse effects such as localism (favour for hiring the local candidate), promotion of mediocre candidates “in order to cope with academic coalition requests” (Bonaccorsi and Daraio 2007), absence of a true competition aimed to select the best participants, strong tendency to use the turn over for career advancement than for recruit young researchers, justified by the fact that advancement in career costs less than new entry (Moscati 2001, Boffo and Dubois 2006).⁶ Different behaviours of HEIs emerged only in cases where a combination of external factors (international and national competition, external target-setting, favourable economic context) and internal circumstances (individual leadership, determination, commitment, clear incremental and communicative strategy inside the University) acted as facilitators of changes (Ferlie et al, 2007) toward a governance compatible with the autonomy and accountability principles.

As far as resources are concerned, Universities in Italy, as in most European countries, are heavily dependent on Government funding (through competitive and non competitive mechanisms of allocation) which represented 67% of total University budget in 2001, and 62,6% in 2004. The aim of the new funding system settled in 1994 was to enhance university competition, by guaranteeing to all institutions the same initial opportunities. Evaluation was the means to guarantee quality. It should produce internal feedback (in terms of self-evaluation capacity and moral suasion) and an external feedback (in terms of resource allocation, rewards and penalties).

An initial assessment of the effects produced by this reform, carried out by the CNVSU in 2003 identified some weak points. First of all, adequate financial resources were lacking. The introduction of evaluation procedures to be linked with resource allocation required the availability of growing funds to sustain both the physiological enlargement of the higher education system, and the introduction of incentives schemes. On the contrary, FFO remained stable in nominal terms (CNVSU, 2003), and this circumstance influenced the effects produced by the new funding system. Second, the national objectives linked to special incentives changed too frequently, and institutions did not have enough time to adapt their behaviour to the new priorities.

The revision of the State funding model and the introduction of a funding formula was one step forward the quasi-market goal (CNVSU, 2004).⁷ But the ‘formula’ drove the allocation of a small quota of FFO, the amount exceeding the historical financial transfer from the state. Thus, a low transparency affected the overall reform aims, and universities were unable to understand how the system will effectively evolve. As an unintended consequence, HEIs tended to assume adaptive behaviour to avoid cuts in their resources. This means that accomplishing the model requirements was no more than a bureaucratic fulfilment, with no need for substantial changes in the universities decision-making (Reale and Poti, 2009).

The linkages between autonomy and accountability

We can distinguish two periods in the policy implementation of autonomy and accountability. A first period, from 1989 to 2001, led by centre-left coalitions, was characterized by a reinforcement of university autonomy through the decentralization of many competences and powers. The second period, from 2001 on, led by a centre-right coalition, Government tried to circumscribe the space of manoeuvre of universities, by reinforcing the linkages between performance and resource allocation, in order to repair shortcomings and drawbacks produced by the perverse use HEIs made of

⁶ Some figures can describe how the turn over was used. In 2000 there were 18.982 researchers, 16.535 associate professors and 14.341 full professors in the Italian Universities. In 2007 researchers account for 22.924, associate professors for 17.860 and full professors for 18.696. A further effect was the increasing cost of scientific paper produced per units, due to a decrease in the scientific productivity of the universities, and the existence of an inverse relation between the growth of full professors (due to the HEIs favour for career advancement more than for the recruitment of young researchers) and the average scientific productivity “with higher growth rate of full professors seem to be less productive”(Bonaccorsi and Daraio, 2007).

⁷ The funding “formula” for the FFO allocation foreseen that: 30% of the FFO should be transferred on the basis of existing educational demand (students enrolled and their characteristics); 30% depends on the results of the educational process (credits acquired); 30% is linked to the evaluation of university research results; 10% is linked to special incentives.

autonomy. But the effectiveness of this attempt was really low.

Evaluation is the mean that should realize the accountability of the academic research to the taxpayers and address resource allocation, enhancing the competition between the institutions at national and international level. This result should be ensured by the help of a new entity, the *Osservatorio* of the University, in charge for the evaluation of both teaching and research functions (Biggieri and Scarpitti, 1998, Boffo and Moscati, 1998), and by the constitution of “Units of Internal Evaluation” within each University, with the aim of providing cost-benefit analyses for assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of the university teaching and research expenditures. Thus, the institutionalisation of evaluation implied a limitation of the organisational autonomy of Universities. Nevertheless, Universities remained free to determine the composition (which competences, which members and how many) and the positioning of the Units within the internal organisation. *Osservatorio* tried to develop the assessment of the Universities by applying quantitative parameters for measuring the functions performed. Some limitations affected its activity (Finocchi, 2000). It was in charge for evaluating the whole University system, without a commitment for the evaluation of each institution. Moreover, evaluation was not implemented in this phase as a mean for enhancing the competition among Universities, or as instrument for putting autonomy into action, but as a way for improve the awareness and knowledge about the results obtained.

In parallel with this process, another entity played a relevant role in controlling the organisation and application of research evaluation within the higher education sector. The Italian Standing Conference of Rectors (CRUI) had a key position in the institutionalisation of the evaluation of research from the beginning of the process, and to some respect it also tended to substitute the *Osservatorio* in many functions. In 1992 CRUI launched a special survey aiming to collect data and indicators on the University performance and infrastructures for both teaching and research activities. After the approval of Law 537/93, CRUI supplied suggestions about the criteria for organising the work of the “Units of Internal Evaluation”, and formulated the first proposal for the research evaluation (CRUI, 1998). Then other initiatives followed,⁸ aiming to stimulate "reflection and dialogue on issues related to the establishment with the universities of periodical evaluation practices. CRUI provided assistance to the universities in setting up an internal evaluation system, as well as proposing and testing possible procedure and operations. ... Thus, CRUI played a leading role in defining evaluation procedures and methods and in diffusing the culture of evaluation among universities" (Boffo and Moscati, 1998). The Committee action was mainly devoted to maintain the sphere of autonomy attributed to the universities, using its expertise to influence decisions and methods elaborated by the university evaluation. While its actions often overlapped with the activity of the *Osservatorio*, the coherence of the proposals coming from the different bodies was not always assured. The interactions between MIUR, CRUI and *Osservatorio* were characterised by tensions, which derived by the incomplete definitions of the *Osservatorio* position and commitment. This reduced “the role and duties of external evaluation and this seems to endanger its effectiveness and image as intermediate body” (Boffo, Moscati, 1998)

The transformation of the *Osservatorio* for the evaluation of university in a National Committee for the Evaluation of University (CNVSU) was a step toward the institutionalisation of evaluation *vis a vis* the decentralisation of administrative functions and responsibilities on curricula. The change was substantial. The Government rationale led on evaluation should? become a compulsory duty for Universities, which must adopt internal schemes for assessing efficiency of both teaching and research activities and results. CNVSU mission was clarified in many respects, and it has been configured as technical entity belonging to the MIUR, in charge for the assessment of the higher education system.

In each university a *Nucleo di Valutazione* (NUV) was constituted, replacing the Units for the Internal Evaluation, for the overall performance assessment as well for supply data, information and analysis to the CNVSU. Universities were committed to modify their Statutes for complying with the need to introduce this new body into their organisation. Thus, the Government action for the

⁸ For instance, CRUI stressed the need to have periodical evaluation practices within the Universities, supported the *Osservatorio* effort toward the organisation of a common set of information among all the Universities, and guaranteed the Italian participation to European projects aimed to improve evaluation practices of the higher education systems (European Social Fund programme, European Rectors Conference Project, Boffo and Moscati, 1998).

institutionalisation of evaluation tended to enhance the limitations of the organisational space of manoeuvre of Universities; nevertheless Government initiative did not affect the autonomy of Universities to decide upon the structure of the NUV, the powers transferred and the use of the evaluation results.⁹

Changes in number and composition of the NUVs are good indicators of the implementation of the university evaluation system. In 1996 only 51 universities activated a Unit of Internal Evaluation (then NUVs), in 2002 all the Universities had a NUV and all the University Statutes provided a discipline for the NUV. In 2002 half of the NUVs' members (258 on a total of 496 at national level) belonged to the same university and the 70,6% are university professors. The same indicators in 1996 show higher level of components from the same university as well as a stronger presence of academics.

The main object of the assessment processes carried out by the CNVSU was the education function (i.e. setting up of minimum requirements for courses, internationalisation of doctorates, analyses of students satisfaction, professional attainment of doctoral recipients) and not the research activity, and the central aim of the proposed methods was the definition of rules, standards, and incentives, which would assure the efficiency and effectiveness in the allocation and in the use of the resources. CNVSU proposals become the background where MIUR interventions were built upon. The most significant outcome of the CNVSU was the development of the new model for funding, which included also the results of research activity as an element of the formula. The method proposed for research, is based on the definition of the research potential for each university (quantitative estimation of the "active research personnel"¹⁰) to be weighted with the success of the applicants to the special competitive Fund for University Research - PRIN (number of PRIN applicants funded/number of applicants)¹¹. As just said, the effectiveness of funding formula as well as the impact of standards and minimal requirements on allocation were really limited.

In the new phase, the position of the CRUI was more and more as the leading edge of the CNVSU initiative, as external body in charge for evaluation. CRUI expertise was exploited through many activities¹², but its buffer role was questioned by the CNVSU. Moreover, MIUR did not assume the position of evaluator; instead it showed a tendency toward the reinforcement of the control on the participants' behaviours. The major tension derived from the fact that, on the one hand, CRUI is an institution more acting for lobbying purposes than an institution performing an intermediary role between the Government and the academic institutions. On the other hand, CNVSU is seen by the academics as a sort of *longa manus* of the Government and, to some extent, a potential threat for their autonomy.¹³

University accountability was further pursued from 2001 when government launched a new overall assessment system, with consequences for the governance of academic research, aimed to develop an overall evaluation of the quality of each disciplinary area as well as ranking the institutions according to an overall scale of international excellence, following the example of other European research assessment systems experienced in Europe. In 2004 the first three-year evaluation exercise (VTR) started, and it ended in 2006.

⁹ The NUVs' members are generally appointed by the Rectors, who also determine how many external members could be included. The NUVs' tasks include the evaluation of both the management of the resources and the productivity levels of educational and research activities. Their outcome consists of data, information, reports, advisor activity and proposals, which are transmitted to the CNVSU, and could also be used for the internal policy-making. In this case the effectiveness of the NUV' results are autonomously decided by the University. University management bodies could give diverse levels of recognition to the NUVs results, by considering them as unavoidable means for determining the final decisions on internal resource allocation and on prioritisation, or by considering them as documents, which merely certify the formal correctness of the University actions with respect to the Government directives.

¹⁰ The research potential is the sum of the weights attributed to the research personnel on the basis of the different career levels.

¹¹ The index of success is calculated at the national level ($Knaz = \text{PRIN applicants with positive evaluation} / \text{Total PRIN applicants}$), and at university level ($Kat = \text{PRIN applicants with positive evaluation} / \text{Total PRIN applicants}$) for scientific area (14). Thus, it is possible to calculate for each university and each scientific area the difference with the average national values for the same area ($\Delta_i = (Kat - Knaz)_i$, where $i = 1, 14$ indicates one of the 14 scientific areas).

¹² One example for the research evaluation is the initiative for analysing the universities' scientific production, by using bibliometric indicators (Breno *et alii*, 2002), another example is the Yearly Report on the University in Italy (CRUI, 2004).

¹³ The CNVSU' members are appointed by the MIUR, and this fact is supposed to impede its capability to represent the interests of the Universities.

The main characteristic of the VTR implementation was the extended assistance of the National Committee for the Evaluation of Research (CIVR), in charge for the exercise. The Committee conducted site visits at almost all the universities and audited public research agencies in the course of discussing the rules and conditions of the assessment, thereby guaranteeing a broadly based consensus and awareness. CIVR acted as a mediator between the State and the academic institutions. The wide interaction with CRUI assured a high level of trust and legitimacy to the assessment exercise, that were reinforced by the reliability of the peer reviewing exercise and of the consequent ranking of academic institutions. MIUR did not intervene in the interactions between the Committee and the academic institutions, and assumed a position of steering at the distance (Reale, 2003). Interestingly enough, CIVR behaved according to the content of the Government delegation, abandoning any top-down approach and adopting a participatory scheme of relationships, which was considered as best suited for managing its intermediary position between the State and the Universities.

VTR impacted the institutional levels, by forcing the academic institutions toward a stronger commitment on research evaluation than before, pushing them to explicitly discuss and recognize differences in the quality of research outputs, and questioning about the need of internal strategies and the role of their internal evaluation units. NUVs were in charge for transmitting both products and data to the Panels and to the CIVR, as well as for validating all the information supplied. Moreover, monitoring activities within the academic institutions have been developed for collecting input and output indicators requested by the CIVR.

VTR concurred to definitely highlight the weakness of the University governance. Evaluation of research gave rise to the questioning about values and power relationships of the State, the Universities and the buffers, but its strength and effectiveness as tool for the governance of the academic institutions would largely depended on the presence of rewards and penalties as a consequence of the judgement. Despite its cultural impact, VTR outcome did not produce consequences in Government decision-making and funding allocation. A coefficient based on research evaluation results was introduced in the funding formula, but the effects were negligible.

4. Autonomy and academic freedom

Academic freedom is a vague notion (Felt, 1998). It included several meanings, such as freedom of science, of scientific community, freedom of expression, of research methods as well as freedom from political control (van Vught, 1993). Academic freedom is a fundamental principle of academic life (EUA, 1988), but it is different between countries and it is more and more threatened by the transformation of HE in recent decades. The emerging of the managerial paradigm strongly affected the collegial model of university governance, with a shift to the corporate model that occurred in many European countries with different rate and pace. Some scholars claimed the fact that losing self-governance will negatively impact academic freedom (Turner, 1988, Lay, 2004). Altbach showed that the managerial paradigm reshaped the notion of academic freedom, and affected curricula and research agenda (Altbach, 2001). Thorens reminded that academic freedom is different from freedom of expression. It is specific to members of the academic community and it is “a way of enabling the members ... to carry out their mission” related to teaching and research, pursuing the free development of new knowledge and the transmission/dissemination of knowledge to the individuals and society (Thorens, 1998).

Karran selected five parameters in order to measure academic freedom across countries¹⁴, enlightening the debate with further empirical evidences (Karran, 2007). Taking into account the UNESCO recommendations on the status of HE teaching personnel (UNESCO, 1997), he indicated the constitutional protection of freedom of speech and academic freedom, the existence of a specific legislation on it, the legislation on university governance (with a focus on the level of self-governance rather than on institutional autonomy), the method of appointment of the university Rectors (chosen by the academics and from the professoriate *vs* appointed and chosen outside the academia), and the existence of academic tenure. The direct relationship between the aforementioned parameters and the protection of academic freedom is seldom questioned in literature. Moreover

¹⁴ Countries addressed are Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, UK

each parameter can be articulated into different degrees of protection, and differences emerged between countries in the level of protection guaranteed by law, which largely depend from their legal, political and academic traditions. Notwithstanding these limitations, the outcome of the Karran's study showed that Italy scored high in almost all the parameters, except for the presence of a specific legislative protection, and presents similarities with France and Germany, and rather an opposite situation with Netherlands and UK.

The results seem to confirm a direct relationship between the emergence of the managerial paradigm, the decentralization of decision-making power to universities and the threatening of academic freedom. In other words, the combination of substantial university autonomy, the reduction of self-governance and the steering at the distance relationship with the state should end in reinforcing HEIs as institutions, but reducing the individual academic freedom. It is true that legal framework provided limited understanding of the situation in place, and the effective interpretation of the legal provisions in everyday life could supply a stronger representation of the reality; nevertheless, several scholars outlined that a strong corporate governance of HEIs can challenge the tradition of academic freedom (Kogan, 2003).

Conversely, looking at the Italian situation, we can argue that such an extensive guaranty of academic freedom, joined with a large substantial autonomy, and weak accountability is suited to create a situation where reform processes necessarily tended to be implemented in order to pursue individual objectives rather than institutional aims, with a large unbalance between requests coming from academics, and demands coming from the external world, and with a strong favour in order to accomplish the former than the latter.

5. Conclusions

The implementation of autonomy in Italy follows different phases. In a first period (90s) the State assured Universities with a substantial and rather large autonomy, although it retained a number of prerogatives (salary level, recruitment rules, professional status, thresholds on tuition fees). Because of the prevalence of the continental model of governance, Italian Universities reacted by enlarging the spaces of academic freedom, instead of reinforcing their capability to act as organisations. Accountability issues did not emerge in order to counterweight the autonomy provided to Universities and this negatively affected the academic performance in both teaching and research.

In a second period (late 90s) a reverse process started. Government tried to constrain Universities through rules, standards to be pursued and reducing to the core funding, in order to achieve objectives linked to the introduction of the managerial paradigm. At the same time, interest on accountability issues rise, but it went with weak regulation, the absence of a reward system and a low impact on resource allocation. The changes introduced only slightly touched the existing academic freedom, which basically remained unchallenged.

Government policies did not pursue with a strong and persistent political will the harmonisation of the three factors considered, and this impacted on the capability of most Italian Universities to strengthen the role of institutional management, thus weakening the possibility to cope with complexity and competition in the new global HE environment. Moreover, reform processes did not affect some distinctive Italian features: universities remained the sole player of the higher education system, the graduation provided by universities had the same legal value, Government determined the status and working conditions of University professors, assuring to all professors the same economic treatment.

Wolff analysing the implementation of the reform cycle in Italy outlined that major reasons for failure are the governmental and parliamentary indifference towards the importance of universities, disinterest and disinvestment of the government and the tendency toward using technocratic methods (top down process with minor or without consultations). He concluded that without a reform of the university governance and "a genuine sense of collegial responsibility" the Italian system would not develop structural reforms (Wolff, 2003).

These remarks are certainly true. But our analysis based on the university configuration approach shows that the Italian university configuration did not evolve (or evolved toward further reinforcement of academic oligarchy) because it was affected by a distort balance between

autonomy, accountability and academic freedom. Thus, reforms should consider the interdependences between these factors in order to succeed. A reform of university governance is important, but how would it be really implemented if the problem of rigidities of the national context would not be modified?

Autonomy and academic freedom are “crucial concepts that are related to the way authority is structured in higher education” (van Vught, 1993). Accountability is the new value of the public administrative action. The Italian case shows that the balance between autonomy, accountability and academic freedom is hardly affected by path dependency. A great challenge for Government policies is to preserve all the three components, avoiding, at the same time, the prevalence of one on the others.

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