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

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Introductory remarks

- Autonomy is a basic component of the move toward the managerial paradigm in HE
- Autonomy is an intrinsic characteristic of the Universities. It allows the free setting of the University mission and strategies,
- Autonomy is a flexible concept, subject to changes across time in different countries. It shapes the HEIs relationships with the external world (state, stakeholders, society as a whole), and impact on the institutions accountability and on the academic freedom.
- Accountability is strictly related to autonomy and directly affects it
- Academic freedom tends to be reduced with the enlargement of institutional autonomy

Aim of the paper

- 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 distribution of 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 shaped.

Theoretical framework

- Autonomy influence the State – university relationships, changing the distribution of power among them.
 - Clark’s triangle
 - State control model, State supervising model (van Vught)
 - Braun Merrien three dimensional cube on governance
 - Musselin “university configurations” a frame where interdependencies between universities, professors and the overseeing authorities are inscribed, that circumscribe the actors’ behaviours without prescribing the possible behaviours.
- We focus on Italy, a particular case of long-time unchanged organisational assets of universities, where the implementation of reforms has been constrained by path dependence
- The paper assumes that path dependence affected the balance between these three factors, influencing the evolution of the Italian configuration.

Theoretical framework

- According to our hypothesis, we expect that in Italy the introduction of autonomy:
 - reinforced the distribution of power in favour of academics rather than modify it,
 - did not contribute to the move toward the managerial paradigm, ideally linked to enhance quality, efficiency and effectiveness,
 - did not reinforce Universities as organizations.
- 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

The autonomy-accountability principle

- The emergence of the autonomy/accountability principle in Italy is linked to the more general reforming process of the Public Administration, starting from the beginning of the nineties
- Law 168/1989 and law 537/93 established new rules for University funding and settled a dedicated agency for evaluation
- L. 59/1997 realised the decentralisation of the administrative action, and introduced criteria for the management of the public institutions, largely inspired by NPM principles
- The State abandon many administrative and managerial tasks and reinforce its position of evaluator; Universities received a large space of manoeuvre for defining functions, organisation, and policies

The autonomy-accountability principle

- Two periods in the policy implementation of autonomy and accountability:
 - 1989 to 2001, led by centre-left coalitions, was characterized by the decentralization of many competences and powers, and by the definition of the institutional framework for evaluation of universities (CNVSU, CIVR and NUVs);
 - 2001 to 2006, led by a centre-right coalition, Government tried to circumscribe the space of manoeuvre of universities in order to repair shortcomings and drawbacks produced by the perverse use HEIs made of autonomy
 - reducing the Universities core funding,
 - introducing a funding formula,
 - reinforcing the linkages between performance and resource allocation

How large is autonomy in Italy?

- Universities are responsible for
 - defining their own institutional strategy,
 - their internal academic and administrative structure,
 - the structure of their decision making bodies and academic profile.

Universities:

own most of their real estate,

are entitled to buy and sell their real estate independently,

are entitled 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

the number of students per discipline,

to admit special categories of students

to decide on the criteria for student admission (EUA, 2007).

How large is autonomy in Italy?

- Limitation of the power to (EUA, 2007):
 - decide on structure and content of the degree programs, as well as for opening and closing down study programs
 - recruit permanent academic staff (recruitment rules and authorization for hiring new personnel),
 - 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
- Taking into account a few characteristics of governance of a sample of universities in Europe, Aghiou and colleagues (2007) showed that Italian universities are significantly older than the others, they have a very high level of budget autonomy, but limitations in hiring people and setting the wage, comparing with the average result of the sample surveyed (10 European countries).

How large is autonomy in Italy?

- Bonaccorsi and Daraio (2007) checked autonomy of Universities on the basis of their habit to procure financial resources
- 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:
 - autonomy granted to the Italian HEIs allows in principle a space of manoeuvre similar to other European countries
 - differences are mainly related to hiring, wage setting autonomy, capability to attract external resources

The implementation of autonomy

- The State provided substantial autonomy to universities but:
 - Universities remained the sole providers of tertiary education
 - Academic qualifications have the same legal value because the quality of educational programs offered by Italian universities is supposed to be equal throughout the national territory
 - University professors are civil servant, whose rules, workload and salaries are equal for all, and are determined by the Government
- Each university in Italy was entitled of substantive autonomy, but continue to work in a context characterized by a monopoly within the local and national market of higher education.

The implementation of autonomy

- The implementation of autonomy by the universities was largely affected by a conservative and corporative behaviour of Universities, that emerged from:
 - Reform of statutes (academics still play a major role)
 - Absence of managerial competences
 - Reform of bachelor and master degree
 - Use of the new rules for recruitment (localism and seniority)
 - Use of the turn over (mainly for career development)
 - Proliferation of degree courses
 - Fragmentation of teaching
 - Use of the credit system
- Tensions come in some cases from:
 - Stakeholders
 - International research groups
 - Internal competition

The implementation of accountability

- Evaluation is the mean that should realize the accountability of the academic research
 - *1995 Osservatorio* and University Units (overall assessment of university system)
 - Rectors (through CRUI) played a leading role in defining evaluation procedures using expertise to influence decisions and methods elaborated by the university evaluation
 - *1999 CNVSU* (education, funding rules and doctorates), CIVR (research) and NUVs
 - Rectors acted more for lobbying purposes than as intermediaries between the Government and the academic institutions
 - *2004 Three-Year Evaluation Exercise VTR* (ranking of universities)
 - Rectors and HEIs recognize differences in the quality of research outputs, and highlight the weakness of the University governance
- Impact on resource allocation and on regulation was negligible

Academic freedom

- Academic freedom is a fundamental principle of academic life, but it is different between countries and it is more and more threatened by the transformation of HE in recent decades
- Karran (2007) selected five parameters in order to measure academic freedom across 23 countries by observing national legislation:
 - the constitutional protection,
 - the existence of a specific legislation on it,
 - the legislation on university governance (self-governance)
 - the method of appointment of the university Rectors (chosen by the academics and from the professors)
 - the existence of academic tenure.
- Italy scored high in almost all the parameters, and presents similarities with France and Germany, and rather an opposite situation with Netherlands and UK

Academic freedom

- Karran's observations 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 Italy 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

Conclusions

- The Italian case shows that the balance between autonomy, accountability and academic freedom is hardly affected by path dependency
- Government policies did not pursue with a strong and persistent political will the harmonisation of the three factors, thus reinforcing the power of academics
- 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
- Most Italian universities did not strengthen the role of institutional management, thus weakening the possibility to cope with complexity and competition
- Autonomy, accountability and academic freedom are crucial factors in order to understand interdependencies between different actors and the evolution of the University configuration