

EDUKACJA / EDUCATION

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UNIVERSITY, REFORM, EVALUATION: THE ITALIAN CASE

1. The origins of the University reform

At the end of the 20th century Italy had been progressively drafting and starting a radical reform of its university system. At the root of so an important legal act there was a very detrimental phenomenon: the Italian university was decidedly inefficient. Not only was the number of *drop-outs* very high (just three out of ten students got the degree), but it was also associated with the quality of training, which was neither advanced nor usable in the students' professional careers. To be fair, Italian University seemed old and heavy, unable to take up the challenges and the changes imposed by the fast social and economic development. Hence the idea of a reform, which since 1999 has been changing dramatically the traditional framework of university studies in the country. The main aim was reducing all the negative points through the setting up of an institutional system based on two study levels, following the framework already used in the Anglo-American context and drawing inspiration from the European consultation provided in the declarations of Bologna and Lisbon. The underpinning philosophy was very easy and innovative: instead of the old 'ciclo lungo' ('long course') keeping together many educational and vocational demands, education had to be improved, varied, rationalized and put close to the requirements of the business world.

With hindsight, the Italian university had been involved in a proper reforming movement, a real revolution that has affected universities in every aspect involving didactics, management, administration, identity, tasks and recruitment of professors and researchers, as well as assessment methods. Thus university has been at the centre of a conflict of situations and interpretations about its role in the third millennium. This conflict was generated by a variety of factors and favoured by the chaos characterizing the reform bills of higher education; moreover, the whole present society has been more and more involved into the difficulties in asserting responsibly its educating action towards all its citizens: children, young people and adults.

Despite the many legislative regulations intended to reform and define didactics and academic research, what has been perceived within institutions and by academics is rather a cruel policy aimed to find and apply punitive rules and methods towards universities. So in what follows some considerations will be illustrated, and at least two perspectives on the question will be outlined.

The first perspective originates from the remarks of those working in the academia. From this point of view, a sense of separation is felt between the level of the scientific research and the level of political decisions about higher education. One wonders why there is so obvious a difficulty when the level of the scientific research and the level of political decisions about higher education are called to meet and interact when decisions concern the future of university. The answer is easy: those who observe and study from the inside the educational issues, the teaching practices, the pedagogical plans, those who analyse the cognitive baggage and, aware of the university students' progressive demotivation and of the worrying data concerning their future condition¹, are committed to creating innovative courses that answer the real needs for stable educational investments, are rarely listened to. Academics who still work without choice in halls, laboratories and libraries, realize they cannot 'do much' and for their part they make an effort to resist to the tendency to simplify the complexity and the uniqueness of their teaching profession reducing it to manuals and purely factual knowledge (at the expense of the professorial aspect and the educational relationship with the student). Moreover, they must avoid feeling as victims on account of their exclusion from a reforming process managed in distant ministerial spheres, and because forced to carry out more and more difficult tasks well beyond their original and traditional function.

The second perspective is the political action that fostered the new reform season. Since 1997, by the issuing of Bassanini's acts n. 59 and 127, the main ambition has been to align the Italian university system with those of other European countries. The need to shorten the years of study and to professionalise higher education, the difficulty in spending the degree in the job market, the limited mobility of the Italian students, became crucial elements that led governments to redesign the educational courses (Ministerial Decree 509/99 later amended by Ministerial Decree 270/04) and, more generally, to carry out an organic reform that included the establishment of new governance rules, a different recruitment system for academics, a rationalization of the courses, as well as a new clearer and less expensive assessment culture.

¹ *L'università per un sistema formativo integrato: fondamenti, connessioni, esperienze, prospettive*, a cura di G. Allulli, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2001; *Giovani, lavoro e società: valori e orientamenti tra continuità e discontinuità: secondo rapporto sulla popolazione giovanile nella provincia di Bologna*, a cura di M. La Rosa, G. Gosetti, Franco Angeli, Milano 2005; A. Alberici, C. Catarsi, V. Colapietro, I. Loidice, *Adulti e università. Sfide e innovazioni nella formazione universitaria e continua*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2007; C.R. Alfonsi, P. Dilorenzo, *L'evoluzione nei rapporti tra università, territorio, e mondo del lavoro in Italia: Un riepilogo delle principali trasformazioni degli ultimi venti anni*, Fondazione CRUI, Roma 2012.

Hence, on the limits drawn by new regulations, the reform brought in the spotlight a set of questions concerning educational practices, competencies and their transferability to different socio-economic contexts, and, in particular, the administration of academic bodies. From the political side until Gelmini's reform, the diverse interventions in the Italian universities had been aimed to improve the educational, executive and managerial autonomy in the hope of eradicating the academic bad habit, especially evident in competitions and in the proliferation of 'individualised' positions, of courses similarly designed *ad hoc*, even if expensive and useless from the educational and employment point of view². The unemployment rate of the Italian graduates even in the professional fields not traditionally affected by the crisis provides a backdrop and logically motivated the political choices (particularly the ones inspiring the Law n. 240 of 2010). Then one needs to consider the number of university students who failed to complete their course in the prescribed time, which the former Minister of Education Profumo considered as the major problem of the Italian universities, a particular Italian evil, a 'cultural problem': during the academic year 2010/2011 those who had not completed the course in the set time accounted for 34% of the enrolments, 1,782,000 in all. In addition, at national level, with different figures for different institutions, the percentage of dropouts after the first year was 17%, a number which led the then minister to claim that «in Italy there is no observance of rules and time. I think that school must give a strong signal concerning the observance of rules» because «the students who failed to complete their course in the prescribed time even cost in social terms»³. So, according to the ex minister, the reasons have to be found firstly in the choice to enrol to a particular graduation course by hearsay, that is by not well-considered choices, secondly in an inadequate regulation.

The solutions proposed through the Ministerial Decree 16th April 2012 n. 71, which worried all the university Rectors, were the rise of the taxes for the students who failed to complete their course in the prescribed time, to be seen as a way to spur them not to waste time, the establishment of a «part-time» system dedicated to the working students in order to extend the course time and, last but not least, the cut of ordinary functioning funds (Ffo) shortened in 2013 by 4,9%, 300,000 Euros less compared to the previous year, which represented the spectre of bankruptcy for many universities. In order to synthesize these two aspects – students who failed to complete their course in the prescribed time and ordinary functioning funds – it is important to remember that the revenue from those students and non-EU students cannot be computed in the 20% calculation

² To be reminded, among the others, the open letter written by Simona Melani, a graduate in Sciences of Communication, in 2011 asking the Minister of Education in office, Mariastella Gelmini, a refund for the years spent to study. The letter became very popular, not only among young people, because it lamented the lack of connection between education and the world of work, a gap emphasized by the proliferation of degree courses that made it difficult for graduates to enter the job market.

³ Minister Profumo's speech reported in *Università quei 600 mila fuori corso. Il ministro Profumo: manca il rispetto delle regole e dei tempi*, „Corriere della Sera”, 15 luglio 2012.

of the universities revenue coming from the students' fees. So universities have effectively the right to increase the fees of these two categories of enrolments. This higher education system seems to be very attentive to a market logic and to economy, rather than satisfying the cognitive, psychological and cultural needs of students who, like academics, have not been involved in the process of innovating and redesigning the educational courses⁴.

2. The university education plan

As anticipated, a strong need for reform emerged when the national and political classes become aware of the urgent need for a development strategy based on competitive skills, on advanced research, on technological innovation and on the definition of intellectual manpower, and on a real improvement of the higher education system. Only in this way, was the nation deemed to guarantee a socio-economic and political stability. The former since the growth of new jobs would be encouraged by the scientific, technological, organizational and educational competitiveness. The latter since the democratic, liberal and pluralist set-ups, as well as the distributive justice level of a little or not-conflictual society would depend on a real, wider chance of access to university education considered now as the *sine qua non* for taking part in the processes of civil and social transformation and, more precisely, of economic wealth production.

It should be underscored that the two pillars of the higher education reform were the Ministerial Decree 509/1999 and the following Ministerial Decree 270/2004⁵. Therefore, it is necessary to start from both, from the fundamental inspiring principles in order to assess the current state of the Italian universities and advance ameliorative proposals. The two decrees, whose background was a national and international lively debate⁶, were passed as solutions for a deep-seated crisis, felt by the academia as a failure of previous expectations.

The reformist attempts followed the example of what had been thought and done in other national and international situations. The results were further

⁴ L. Galliani, *Riscrivere i percorsi della formazione*, in: *I nuovi curricoli universitari*, a cura di C. Xodo, Padova 25-26-27 ottobre 2000, Atti della III Biennale Internazionale sulla Didattica Universitaria, Pensa Multimedia, Lecce 2002; and *Educazione versus formazione. Processi di riforma dei sistemi e innovazione universitaria*, ed. L. Galliani, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, Napoli 2003.

⁵ For a detailed and reasoned overview about university, innovation, reforms and perspectives see: A. Lombardinio, *Università: la sfida del cambiamento. Analisi delle riforme e società della conoscenza*, Rubettino, Soveria Mannelli 2010.

⁶ In short: Declaration of Sorbonne 25th May 1998 "L'armonizzazione dell'architettura dei sistemi di istruzione superiore in Europa"; Declaration of Bologna "Lo spazio europeo dell'istruzione superiore (SEIS)", signed on 19th June 1999 by the Ministers from 29 European countries; the following statements (Prague 2001, Bergen 2005); The Berlin Conference in 2003; the meeting of Lovanio in 2009; the Conferences in Budapest and Wien in 2010 that, beyond the wide adherence to the Declaration of Bologna by 47 countries, finally began the construction of a European space for higher education; the ministerial meeting of Bucharest in 2012 to verify the progresses made about the items in the agenda of Lovanio.

failures due to different reform attempts which would have had to lead us closer to the European criteria and to define the education of young graduates, making them fully fit to compete in the professional market. The Ministerial Decree 509 of 1999 issuing new educational regulations, the Ministerial Decree 270 of 2004 introducing some adjustments, and the decrees about the new university courses and the master's degree courses enforcing the Ministerial Decree 270 are regulations concerning a long-meditated reform that, to be fair, has suffered from the epochal transformation of the global village and the world society.

In fact, the reform of the higher education system started when the rulers became aware of the need for a development strategy based on high-level research, innovation, education and professionalism. The reform brought about a new idea of university and society whereby knowledge and skills become common goods, the driving forces behind development and welfare⁷. This need is encapsulated in the 3+2 formula in which also the essential motivations leading to this new system are summed up. A critical point can be surely identified in the curriculum, which is the main cause for students' inadequate qualifications. Hence the fundamental principles inspiring the reform of the educational and institutional framework of the University are the following: 1) the contractual quality changing the relationship between the institution and its students, aimed to overcome the issue of the dropouts; 2) the competitive diversification used by universities in order to perfect and differentiate the curricula; 3) the plurality of curricula devised for courses to be attended regularly and successfully; 4) the curricular flexibility as the ability to be renewed, experimenting new educational methods in order to optimize the educational processes; 5) the human resources mobility to make the employment of academics more efficient; 6) the crediting of courses that is the need to have courses with a guaranteed cultural value; 7) the course credits as a system of measurement of student's acquired knowledge; 8) the innovative character, that is the possibility for universities of providing courses linked to specific socio-cultural contexts; 9) the evaluation and self-evaluation of universities as a tool to guide and improve the service; 10) the new government tools planned to guarantee a more efficient management of the system⁸.

In the light of the present academic situation, those attempts at improving the Italian academia have been quite disappointing, as confirmed by figures. And, if one looks at it not sceptically, as an insider, it is clear that some educational paths have been very often the object of demands of scientific disciplinary sectors claiming wider spaces, justified by departmental reorganization. The painful effect could be seen in the more and more growing disjointedness of the curricula and in a faint emancipation of the traditional academic vision, which keeps distinct the educational disciplines framework and the general set of educational goals. It is necessary to stress that the most evident critical aspect

⁷ For a close examination of the topic, see: *L'Università e la sua riforma*, a cura di V. Cappelletti, G. Bertagna, Roma 2012.

⁸ E. Bruni, *La formazione universitaria nell'Europa della conoscenza*, Aracne, Roma 2008, pp. 13–109, where the examination focuses particularly on the humanities.

lies in the curriculum. After due consideration, this is the sign of a 'betrayed' reform, the very crux of the matter, given that the reforming process had precisely started fifteen-year ago with the aim of changing the curricula, of making them more flexible and of reconsidering input elements (corresponding to the increasing variety of enrolments types) and output elements (learning results in terms of competences)⁹.

An important indication of this difficulty is the absence of any scientific literature about the university curricula while there are several studies about the school syllabi and, since the 1970s, particularly thanks to Nicholls, the traditional curriculum has been established and then replaced by the notion of a curriculum as an on-going process made up of learning experiences able to make students change¹⁰. What emerged afterwards was an idea of curriculum more based on learning processes than on contents (knowledge pre-arranged packages), more student-centred than teacher-centred, which highlighted the importance of the evaluation of learning and of the methods used to solve a problem. Consequently, knowledge is not deemed as something acquired once and for all, for competence is understood as the personal ability to mobilize resources in order to face different situations¹¹.

A revealing fact is that the absence in the scientific literature concerning the university curriculum corresponds to the absence of the term both in the higher education reform's documents and in the national and international debate. The pedagogical discussion about the university reform stresses principally three aspects: 'how' to organize the teaching, 'how' to favour the learning, 'how' to evaluate. In so doing, little emphasis has been put on the curriculum's second level, which grants quality to the university education not by aiming to organize a list of what is essential and specific knowledge for the different cultural and professional profiles, but which considers the students' socio-emotional and cognitive aspects. The quality of higher education depends directly on the quality of human relationships, on the capacity to build a community that favours and develops culture, critical exchanges and creative debates. The result is the need to intensify and enhance every aspect related to social relations.

⁹ SC. Zaggia, *L'università delle competenze. Progettazione e valutazione dei corsi di laurea nel processo di Bologna*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2008, pp. 17–82.

¹⁰ A. Nicholls, *Guida pratica all'elaborazione di un curriculum*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1983. On this topic, see also the seminal study by L. Stenhouse, *Dal programma al curriculum: politica, burocrazia e professionalità*, It. transl. Armando, Roma 1977.

¹¹ See, in particular, B. Vertecchi, *Formazione e curriculum*, La Nuova Italia, Scandicci 1994; F. Frabboni, *Il curriculum*, Laterza, Bari–Roma 2002; C. Pontecorvo, *Il curriculum: teoria e pratica dell'innovazione*, La Nuova Italia, Milano 2002; M. Baldacci, *Ripensare il curriculum*, Carocci, Roma 2006.

3. The reform between cultural and managerial models

What explained before shows that the Italian university has faced a particular situation, torn between the defence of its traditional principles of autonomy and academic freedom, and the testing of new options, characterized by a strong managerial drive, that redefine the social and cultural function of the university, and redeploy the authority roles¹².

The adoption of this new model forced universities to be challenged by procedures and parameters of the business world, completely foreign to the cultural tradition of the country. One has only to think about the evaluation tools applied to academia and the consequent difficulties suffered by the Italian universities concerning their quality evaluation. The attention is completely focused on attainable results, in terms both of scientific research and training offered. The principle of quality measurement, i.e., the companies' effectiveness, based on the material production rates, has been automatically applied to assess the university administration in all its aspects ranging from didactics to management.

The analysis of the contradictions of universities' development models, as have been often underscored, shows that the coexistence of two opposite logics, the cultural-traditional one on one side and the entrepreneurial one on the other, redefines roles and authorities in the university government and increases the power of external decision-makers¹³. Problems characterizing other fields affect universities too: phenomena of differentiation and continuous change, pluralism as the key element for the interpretation of all the social and existential dimensions, and the need for development and flexibility, have become the distinguishing features of the educational reform. The new spirit that pervades educational and higher education processes, along with the changes introduced in the curricula, are in line with a deep changing process aimed to the so-called University of Competences¹⁴.

The educational goals shall be redesigned in the general social framework. The real challenge is to reconsider research and education by aiming them

¹² J. Brennan, T. Shan, *Managing quality in higher education. An international perspective on institutional assessment and change*, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, Buckingham 2001. See, in particular, the volume by J. Derrida, P.A. Rovatti, *L'università senza condizione*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2002, where Rovatti takes a critical position towards the trend to modernize that instead hides the idea of university as a company, depending on the technical-business style of academic organization, management and life. As Rovatti claims, «il Nuovo è uno strano ibrido: con la bandiera della modernizzazione e dell'adeguamento europeo, un'Europa alquanto supposta, viene calata dall'alto dentro l'università un'idea di azienda che chiede un linguaggio, una gestione e ovviamente un prodotto, cioè una produttività» («the New is a strange hybrid: hosting the flag of modernization and European adjustment, a quite supposed Europe, the idea of a company asking for a language, a management and obviously a product and a productivity is imposed on the Italian university», pp. 9–10).

¹³ Ph.G. Altbach, *Tradition and Transition: The International Imperative in Higher Education*, Rotterdam, the Netherlands: SensePublishers 2007.

¹⁴ P. Zarifan, *Objective compétences: pour un nouvelle logique*, Editions Liaisons, Paris 1999 and *Qualità per l'Università*, a cura di E. Stefani, Franco Angeli, Milano 2006.

towards the acquisition of learning styles fit to a society that goes beyond the requirements of the *knowledge-based economy*, and at the same time to safeguard its cultural nature. This is a reference to the role of university as a cradle for the promotion of individualization and socialization processes. As Semeraro maintains, «there is the need to strengthen the perception of university as a community of academics and students that share an educational experience of cultural building and operating experimentation, as a place where the process of integration between diverse disciplinary practices and knowledge is tested, as a harbinger of cooperation among differences, which is the essential nourishment for a democratic growth»¹⁵.

The economic parameter, which is crucial in the managerial paradigm implemented in universities, conforms to the will to guide higher education towards the economy and market needs. When applied to the redesigning of the curricula and to the reorganization of the discipline framework, the entrepreneurial logic and its assessing methods become control tools; in any case, they let the unsuitability of assessment structures and quality measurement indicators emerge. In short, the curricula, based on this logic criteria, do not place proper emphasis on the second level, the one referring to 'abstract' learning, to the acquisition of habits of mind such as 'learning to learn' and, before this, the planning of contexts suitable and functional to the creation of abstract habits¹⁶. If the education of the person in his/her entirety¹⁷ becomes the main goal of higher education, meant as a cultural enrichment process¹⁸, if the cultural value of education is brought to the fore, it goes without saying that every proposal of university curriculum design shall aim to reconsider the disciplines and the relationships among the disciplines, contexts and strategies. Needless to say, the role of the university teacher becomes crucial, as a mediator of cultural products through an empathic process of participation and communication with students. Difficult questions, as the above-mentioned, reject the ABCs and the reductionist tools that consider education as an ordinary rational path and not as a very complex process causing greater effects, also from the social point of view. It is a big challenge but it is necessary; a challenge expressing the importance of giving education a new place in relationship with the social sphere, broadening the range of links among universities and the multiplied cultural contexts, and giving importance to the educational requests of students and *stakeholders*.

¹⁵ R. Semeraro, *La valutazione della didattica universitaria. Paradigmi scientifici, rivisitazioni metodologiche, approcci multidimensionali*, cit., p. 27.

¹⁶ Among the main sources, Dewey (in particular refer to his *Come pensiamo*, It. transl., La Nuova Italia, Firenze 1961 and *Le fonti di una scienza dell'educazione*, It. transl. Firenze, La Nuova Italia 1967) and Bateson (in particular for his theory of deuterio-learning see *Verso un'ecologia della mente*, trad. it., Adelphi, Milano 1977 and *Mente e natura. Un'unità necessaria*, Adelphi, Milano 1984). See also M. Baldacci, *Ripensare il curricolo*, Carocci, Roma 2006.

¹⁷ See, among others, U. Margiotta, *Comprendere il curricolo. Aggiornamenti per la ricerca sul curricolo in un contesto globale*, „Studium Educationis” 1998, n. 4, pp. 631–667 and *Riforma del curricolo e formazione dei talenti*, Armando, Roma 2004.

¹⁸ See in particular B. Martini, *Il modello dell'arricchimento culturale*, in: *I modelli della didattica*, Carocci, a cura di M. Baldacci, Roma 2004, pp. 155–180.

When planning curricula, it is essential for every proposal to aim to the acquisition of higher skills, such as open-mindedness, reflexivity, critical thinking, and creativity, that is building learning that goes beyond the proper domain of disciplines¹⁹.

It is important to affirm the promotion of new styles and new practices starting from the overcoming of the hierarchical didactic structure in order to create educational and relational forms suited to a specific learning community. First of all, it is necessary to change the relationship between teacher and student by making «the mutual sharing of intellectual resources the inspiring principle of every activity»²⁰.

This is the right direction to be followed by educational plans; university curricula must be designed on the basis of the awareness of knowledge dynamism, of its practices and of cognitive experience. It is not advisable to have a cumulative construction of knowledge; on the contrary, it is necessary a cooperative construction of disciplines in order to provide students with the right approach to knowledge learning. At the same time, this allows to attain convergent and divergent higher learning²¹.

4. Research and evaluation

An important aspect of the new reformist structure concerns evaluation in the light of the following principle: «In order to reward virtuous universities according to the principles of merit and responsibility and to urge the less virtuous ones to adopt better policies, it is necessary to face effectively the evaluation problem»²².

In the reform's spirit and perspective, evaluation represents the central and strong element on which every university has to base its political choices and investment strategies²³. On the other hand, evaluation with its present structure represents a novelty, something new in the Italian higher education history, most of all when it comes to research and publications. Its subjects and objects,

¹⁹ See: M. Baldacci, *Ripensare il curricolo*.

²⁰ A. Calvani, *Manuale di tecnologie dell'educazione*, ETS, Firenze 2002, p. 171. In particular, for the idea of a learning community and pedagogical theories and practices, see *Pratiche della formazione. Teoria e metodi degli interventi formativi*, a cura di L. Ariemma, F. M. Sirignano, Pensa Multimedia, Lecce 2005, pp. 227–246.

²¹ R. Semeraro, *La valutazione della didattica universitaria. Paradigmi scientifici, rivisitazioni metodologiche, approcci multidimensionali*, pp. 39–45. Particularly interesting, in this respect, is the essay by N. Paparella, *L'organizzazione e la qualità dell'offerta formativa. Funzioni e responsabilità dei docenti*, in *Il docente universitario. Una professione tra ricerca, didattica e governance degli Atenei*, a cura di L. Galliani, Padova 2 e 3 dicembre 2010, Atti della VIII Biennale Internazionale sulla Didattica Universitaria, Pensa Multimedia, Lecce 2011, pp. 145–158. *Pratiche della formazione. Teoria e metodi degli interventi formativi*, p. 230.

²² The then Minister of Education Mariastella Gelmini so claimed in the *Linee programmatiche per l'Università (Programme Lines about University)* introduced to the Culture Committee of the Italian Parliament on 17th June 2008.

²³ G. Domenici, *La valutazione della ricerca universitaria. Questioni aperte*, „Pedagogia Oggi” 2004, n. 3, pp. 16–22.

its procedures and the use of the results of the evaluation itself are even newer components. When in the recent past research was subjected to evaluation, its object was the research project, not the scientific production or the list of publications of the researcher/professor going through recruitment and promotion.

Therefore, in the latter case evaluation was *ex post*, different from an *ex ante* evaluation justified by and essentially linked to the possibility of applying for research funds. Neither the need to examine the correctness and the reliability of scientific publications, that is to verify that publications had been described correctly, nor the formulation of a merit rating was deemed necessary.

The evaluation process changed on 13th May 2010 when the Italian Court of Auditors set up the ANVUR (National Agency for the Evaluation of the University and the Research System), which replaced the CNVSU (National Committee for the Evaluation of the University System) and the CIVR (Committee for Evaluation of Research, established with the Legislative Decree 204/98). The birth of the ANVUR hid a new mission close to a new philosophy linking the financing of universities to the evaluation of research on one side, and promoting the culture of excellence and merit on the other. At this point the fundamental tool was the continuous monitoring of scientific production, mainly aimed to avoid indiscriminate funding by the MIUR (Ministry of Education, University and Research) and to replace it, according to certifiable parameters, with the allocation of resources on a qualitative basis. According to this logic, both research and the overall university framework are object of periodic and severe quality ‘measurements’ ranging from didactics to students’ learning levels, their insertion in the job market and the coherence of their job with their educational qualifications, as well as the ability to obtain private and European funding²⁴. In other words, everything has become the object of a meticulous evaluation process. The results of the evaluation of research and degree courses offered by each university are the first parameter used to allocate resources and rewards to the most virtuous institutions²⁵. Every university is

²⁴ Bill 1905, 20th May 2010 “Norme in materia di organizzazione delle Università, di personale accademico e reclutamento, nonché delega al Governo per incentivare la qualità e l’efficienza del sistema universitario” (“Rules on the matter of University and academic staff organization and recruitment, as well as delegation to Government to stimulate the quality and effectiveness of the university system”). Article 5, paragraph 2, point b, defines «l’introduzione di un sistema di valutazione periodica, da parte dell’ANVUR, dell’efficienza e dei risultati conseguiti nell’ambito della didattica e della ricerca dalle singole università e dalle loro articolazioni interne» («the introduction of a periodic evaluation system by the ANVUR of the efficacy and results obtained in the fields of didactics and research of every single university and their departments»). See also the DPR (Decree of the President of the Republic) n. 64 of 21st February 2008 “Regolamento concernente la struttura ed il funzionamento dell’Agenzia nazionale di valutazione del sistema universitario e della ricerca (ANVUR)” (“Regulations concerning the organization and the running of the National Agency for the Evaluation of the University and the Research System”).

²⁵ *Linee guida per l’Università (Programme Lines for University)* 6th December 2008: «l’allocazione delle risorse sulla base della qualità (della ricerca, dell’insegnamento e dei suoi risultati, dei servizi e delle strutture) è per il Governo il criterio fondamentale di un nuovo sistema universitario più libero e più responsabile, sia a livello centrale che nei singoli atenei» («the allocation of resources on the basis of quality (of research, teaching and its results, services and facilities),

also assessed for staff promotion, funding allocation, check of the effectiveness of investments as well as for purposes linked to scientific progress²⁶.

To better understand the new situation, it is necessary to go back to the “Gelmini Law”, which entrusted the ANVUR with the organization and the management of evaluation, made compulsory for the humanities, too. Since that moment the cultural revolution has involved also and most of all the humanities journals, including the pedagogical-educational ones, which had to provide an international board and adopt a peer review system. Evaluation has thus become the buzzword of research and has progressively structured the Italian scientific and academic world with different levels of sophistication and specialization. Today any scientific publication goes through six severe steps, each one necessary and independent from the other, on which the real reputation of a scholar depends:

- 1) *peer review*: qualitative evaluation among peers; it is a referee activity;
- 2) *Osservatorio della ricerca* (Research Observatory set up by Rector Decree n. 194 of 31/01/2006): quantitative evaluation made by each single university;
- 3) *VQR*: (Evaluation of Research Quality) qualitative evaluation entrusted to *referees*, with related difficulties concerning the large number of publications and the time schedule, and, most of all, the risk of discrepancies and randomness of judgements.
- 4) *Mediane* (Medians): quantitative evaluation, with the problem (in particular in the humanities) of the weight given to monographs (with the objective difficulty of assessing their scientific effectiveness and the absence of any ranking for publishers) and to journals, and, among these, the so-called “A class” journals;
- 5) *Commissione per l’Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale* (Examining Board for the National Scientific Qualification): judgement by five national members of the examining board about the publications (from 12 to 18) submitted by each candidate, on the basis of the medians fixed for the two academic roles (Associate Professor ad Full Professor). The huge number of publications to be assessed and the brief time allotted to the commissions in order to end their evaluation raises doubts over the objectivity and quality of the evaluation;
- 6) *Commissione di concorso* (Examining board): evaluation provided by a local examining board, in a national competition between “qualified” academics (i.e., in possession of the National Scientific Qualification) that apply for a position and that are evaluated on a comparative basis both for the quality of their publications and for other aspects, first of all, their teaching.

Let us briefly consider the third step of the complex evaluation process, the VQR for the humanities macro-disciplinary sectors.

is the main criterion of a new university system that is freer and more responsible both on a central level and in each single university»).

²⁶ P. Galimberti, *La valutazione della ricerca in area umanistica*, <http://www.meri.unifi.it/upload/sub/galimberti.pdf>. (25.09.2019).

It takes place through different important phases: from the organizational point of view, it involves the submission of the “research products” (publications), the establishment of a *panel* of experts (GEV) for each one of the 14 evaluation areas (corresponding to the 14 disciplinary areas identified by the CUN [University National Council]), and the computerization system (entrusted to CINECA through a specific convention); from the executive point of view, it entails the choice and the publication of the evaluation methods and criteria (entrusted to the *panel* of GEV).

Some obvious aspects need to be questioned: the peer review method in general, in order to eradicate the doubts concerning its intrinsic subjectivity; the notion of internationalization that can be summarized in the expression ‘research speaks English’, meaning that publications are “international” only if they are written in English or published in international journals; the importance of monographs (which are the commonest type of publication for life sciences scholars) and of journal articles.

All things considered, for the Italian scientific community the VQR has been an important step that fixed the principles of quality and merit as a «point of no return»²⁷ for research and, in general, for Italian universities. It has been a difficult process from its outset, but unavoidable in the scenario drawn by the latest OCSE figures and by the acknowledgement of quality research as the premise and real goal of every modern and competitive university system²⁸.

In conclusion, treasuring the exceptional heritage of data, comments, and material produced by the VQR, as well as the comparison between past and present, and the critical points emerged, it is worth putting forward some hypotheses in order to optimize the whole evaluation system. A comment results from the six steps above mentioned: the non-existent connection among the different evaluation levels, so that the result of one has no consequence on none of the others. It can happen that publications positively evaluated by the examining board A of the national qualification B are not going to be approved by the VQR referees or by the C members of the local D examining board. Not only are not the medians themselves always binding, but an examining board can also decide them not

²⁷ The expression was used by Giuseppe Catalano, director in office of the Scuola Università Management of Mip Consorzium of Politecnico di Milano, on 9th June 2010, at the opening of the training course on the topic “Il sistema di finanziamento delle Università e degli enti di ricerca: obiettivi ed opportunità per il 2010” (“The financing system of universities and research organizations: goals and opportunities”) held at MIUR.

²⁸ For an overview of the starting steps of the VQR in Italy, see the reports and the results by Civr. See, in particular, the analysis and the reports by its President Franco Cuccurullo, namely: *Rapporto Civr/Le valutazioni dei panel di area*, „Atenei” 2004, n. 3–4, pp. 11–17; *La ricerca italiana alla prova della valutazione*, in M. Morcellini, A. Masia (a cura di), *L’Università al futuro. Sistema, progetto, innovazione*, Giuffrè, Milano 2009, pp. 107–112; *L’Università e la ricerca italiana tra cambiamento e valutazione (Intervista a Franco Cuccurullo)*, in A. Lombardinilo, *Università: la sfida del cambiamento*, pp. 93–98. For a detailed description of the passage Civr-Anvur see: A. Lombardinilo, *L’Università in divenire. Innovazione, riforme, prospettive nell’ultimo decennio*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2010. The full text of the report of the examination held at the Cultural Committee of the Italian Parliament on the 26th can be consulted at http://nuovo.camera.it/461?stenoq=/_dati/leg16/lavori/stencomm/07/indag/ricerca/2010/0126&pagina=s010 (25.09.2019).

to be binding, causing conflicting effects and thus recognizing the centrality of single auditors to the detriment of an objective evaluation.

There is no doubt that any research evaluation process has to provide conclusive results; it must be, in other words, reliable, for only in this way it will be useful. Rather than be punitive, evaluation should become a way to effectively promote research, and a ‘compass’ to direct scholars’ research in the best way.

Being confident in the global evaluation system and hoping for a sensible simplification, it is appropriate finally to consider the use of *peer review*, trying to show new methods to limit the several distortions related to its potentially uncertain nature (for it is subjective). A proposal could be the following one. If it is possible to minimize this risk through a more careful selection of peers²⁹, perhaps involving a bigger number, like other European countries do, it seems also necessary to experiment further tools fit to guarantee and strengthen the auditors’ integrity of judgement, for example thanks to the use and combination of mixed methods³⁰. The role played by the Internet and by computer-aided publishing, particularly valuable for the humanities, cannot be underestimated³¹. In conclusion, new technologies can be instrumental in overcoming the critical points concerning evaluation. These problems demand to be faced attentively and seriously, and this is the challenge of quality research in our country.

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²⁹ See: G. Domenici, «Valutazione della ricerca, procedure e distribuzione delle risorse – Editoriale», „ECPS – Journal of Educational, Cultural and Psychological Studies”, n. 2, p. 9–16.

³⁰ See P. Rossi, *La valutazione della ricerca*, in «Analysis», N. 2/2010, pp. 4–7. Commenting on the attention paid to the new communication methods and their effects on research evaluation, Paolo Rossi, member of CUN for Area 2 since 2006, reports «l’idea del “controllo aperto”, lanciata da *Nature*, e consistente nell’idea di esporre i manoscritti per un certo tempo su *Internet*, con la possibilità di essere commentati da tutti i lettori interessati, prima che il comitato editoriale decida di “pubblicarli” (probabilmente soltanto in forma elettronica), anche sulla base dei giudizi che sono stati espressi» (p. 7) («the idea of the “open control”, launched by *Nature*, and consisting in the idea to publish the manuscripts for a certain period of time on the Internet, with the opportunity to be commented on by all the interested readers, before the publishing board decides “to publish” them (probably just in a digital edition), also on the basis of the judgements expressed online»).

³¹ The subjectivity of *peer review* also derives from the fact that *referees* tend to behave in compliance with the paradigm within which they work and have been trained; the risk can be that of evaluating a publication on the basis of its adherence or affinity to the theses or the field of interest of the evaluating auditor.

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UNIVERSITY, REFORM, EVALUATION: THE ITALIAN CASE

SUMMARY

This essay deals with the Italian University reform, analysing its origins and main educational and managerial aspects, including the different positions on the identity and the role of this institution and of the diverse routes of higher education. The reform was passed while in the Old Continent an ancient 'idea' of Europe as a confederation of states activating an effective integration and unity process was taking shape, one aimed at 'nationalizing' and bringing together in the best possible way peoples that had shared for centuries religions, anthropological values, economic forms, legal codes, political institutions, and scientific knowledge. Moving from these premises, University is investigated not only as a crucial training place where research is carried out in synergy with didactics, but also as the driving force behind the most advanced scientific development, affluence, technological advancement, innovation, ideas and talents.

KEY WORDS: university, reform, evaluation, the Italian case

