

Italian Presidency of the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative

Round Table on Education and Inter-university Cooperation *“Building the European Higher Education Area - A further step forward”*

The evaluation of the Italian Universities

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Universities, not unlike many institutions, such as religious orders or trade and professional unions, enjoyed from their birth in the Middle Ages a large amount of autonomy. I am tempted to translate autonomy with the stronger expression “self rule” which is used in the context of by political entities seeking independence. Indeed self rule is exactly the original meaning of the word autonomy, which comes from the Greek words *autos* and *nomos*.

In the context of the Italian society of the Middle Ages, autonomy was really “self rule”. For instance a privilege generally enjoyed by students and teachers of a medieval university was that they could be tried only by a court appointed by university authorities, students and teachers were thus subject, even for criminal offences, to what was called “domestic jurisdiction”. There was one good reason why Italian city – states allowed “self rule” to the universities: the presence of a university in a city brought not only prestige, but also money and commerce. Students and teachers were a rare commodity and they could, at any moment, pick up their bags and move to another town. This migration happened at least once, when students and teachers of the university of Bologna decided to move to Padua to found a new university.

Of course “self rule” of universities, generally respected by the government of the towns, was often infringed upon by Church authorities, and by princes, kings and emperors. One cannot forget that the University of Naples was founded by Frederic II, (a German emperor whom the Italians claim as one of their own and dab with the nickname “*stupor mundi*” or “wonder of the world”), with the explicit mandate to educate jurists to be loyal to the Emperor and not to the Pope.

But it was only with the birth of the Italian National State, the Kingdom of Italy, in the second half of the nineteenth century that the question of the autonomy or self rule of universities came up as a major question in the reorganization of the system of instruction. This reorganization was inspired by the perceived need to subtract public education to local influence and especially to the influence of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Kingdom of Italy, not unlike most national states in Continental Europe, was rigidly organized as a centralized system of government. The universities, by and large, did not have sufficient financial resources or earning power. In other words, their bargaining power was close to zero. They became thus part of a centralized

system of education. Even the selection of the professors hired to fill the chairs was organized on a national basis, moving away, in this respect, from the model of German universities, at the time the paradigm of a modern university system.

Nevertheless after the second world war the Constitution of the Republic of Italy proclaimed the autonomy of universities. But how is autonomy to be exercised and maintained when the government, and ultimately the taxpayer, is footing the bill of universities, which have to all practical purposes the legal monopoly of higher education?

The answer to this intriguing question was not found until it became apparent that through a stratification of contradictory regulations mostly related to demagogic acceptance of unreasonable demands of the union of public employees, the university system had become financially irresponsible. The only way to reinstate financial responsibility was to make single universities responsible of the allocation of the resources which they were given. The system of minute allocation of the funding for specific purposes was thus abandoned, and finally Italian universities acquired financial autonomy. This meant of course that resource allocation to universities had to be measured against objective results of university activity, rather than abstract needs. But universities were free to choose their own strategy in achieving their goals.

“Evaluation” of university activity became at this point a must for the Government and for individual universities. For the Government it was necessary, at least on principle, to monitor the activity of universities and to assess the results, in order to modulate the allocation of resources, according to pre - assigned parameters. For each university it became necessary to understand and monitor its own activity, in order to bring its performance to meet the criteria and parameters indicated by the Government, and thus maximize the amount of resources which could be obtained.

These “evaluation activities” are entrusted to a National Committee, appointed by the Government, and to local Evaluation Panels appointed by the Rectors. It is remarkable however that the National Committee and the Evaluation Panels are not working one against the other. The opposite is true. The climate of cooperation is evidenced by the fact that we meet to “exchange notes” at least once a year. Right now one such meeting is going on in another part of the city.

But what do in practice do and accomplish the National Committee for the Evaluation of the University system and its local counterparts?

First of we they collect data. This is a task which is more difficult than it sounds. It aims at achieving a dynamic picture of the university system. Our goal is to arrive at a data basis which accounts which contains in real time the transcript of records of every student, without of course violating anybody’s privacy.

The National Committee is also in charge of establishing parameters to modulate, on the basis of performance the funding of each institution.

We are still relatively behind in setting standards for evaluation of research. At the moment the National Committee is in the process of defining units of assessment of research activities, in other words the specific fields of research within which comparative evaluation is deemed possible.