An approach to accreditation: the path of the Italian Higher Education

Carlo Calandra Buonaura
Primiano Di Nauta

CNVSU

A rapidly changing system

✓ Italian Universities are going through a transition from a highly regulated to a more autonomous system. Faculties are facing with the difficulties of determining their objectives and qualifying their programmes to compete in a relatively free market of HE providers.

✓ This is part of the process started by the European Union that implies an increased responsiveness of the universities to the society demands on:

- the educational provisions;
- the research activity;
- the expertise services.

Italian Higher Education system

Overview:

✓ 77 Universities (63 state and 14 non-state)

✓ Universities are the main institutions for delivering degree level educational programmes and undertaking scientific research

✓ Financing and evaluating activities are handled at Ministerial level

Student population

Total enrolled, "regular" and graduate students in Italy from 1960 to 2000
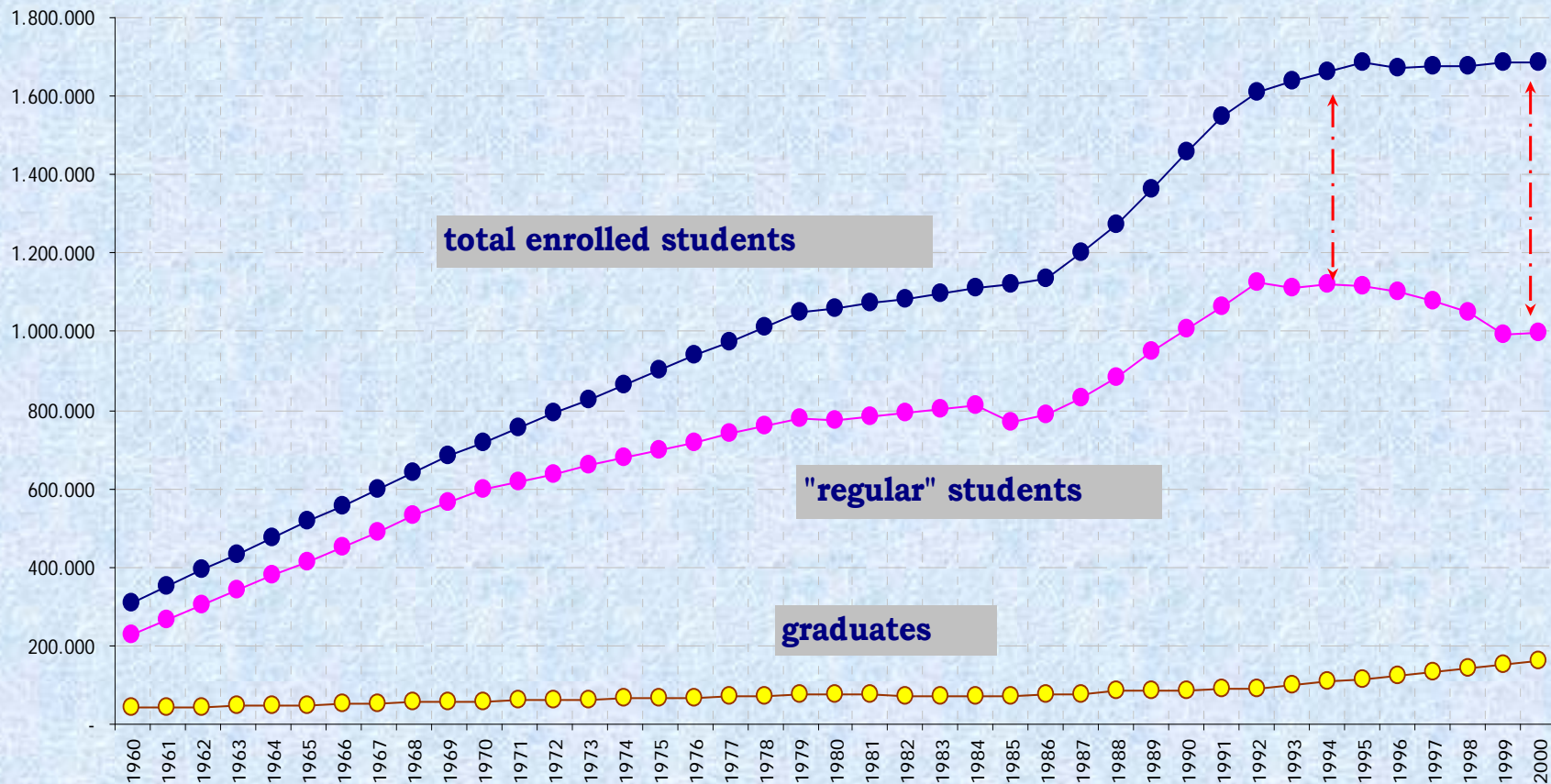
Bologna process consequences

✓ The Bologna process has introduced a revolution in the Italian higher education system characterized by:

- changes in the degrees;
- introduction of credits;
- increased autonomy of universities (significant freedom in organising educational programmes).
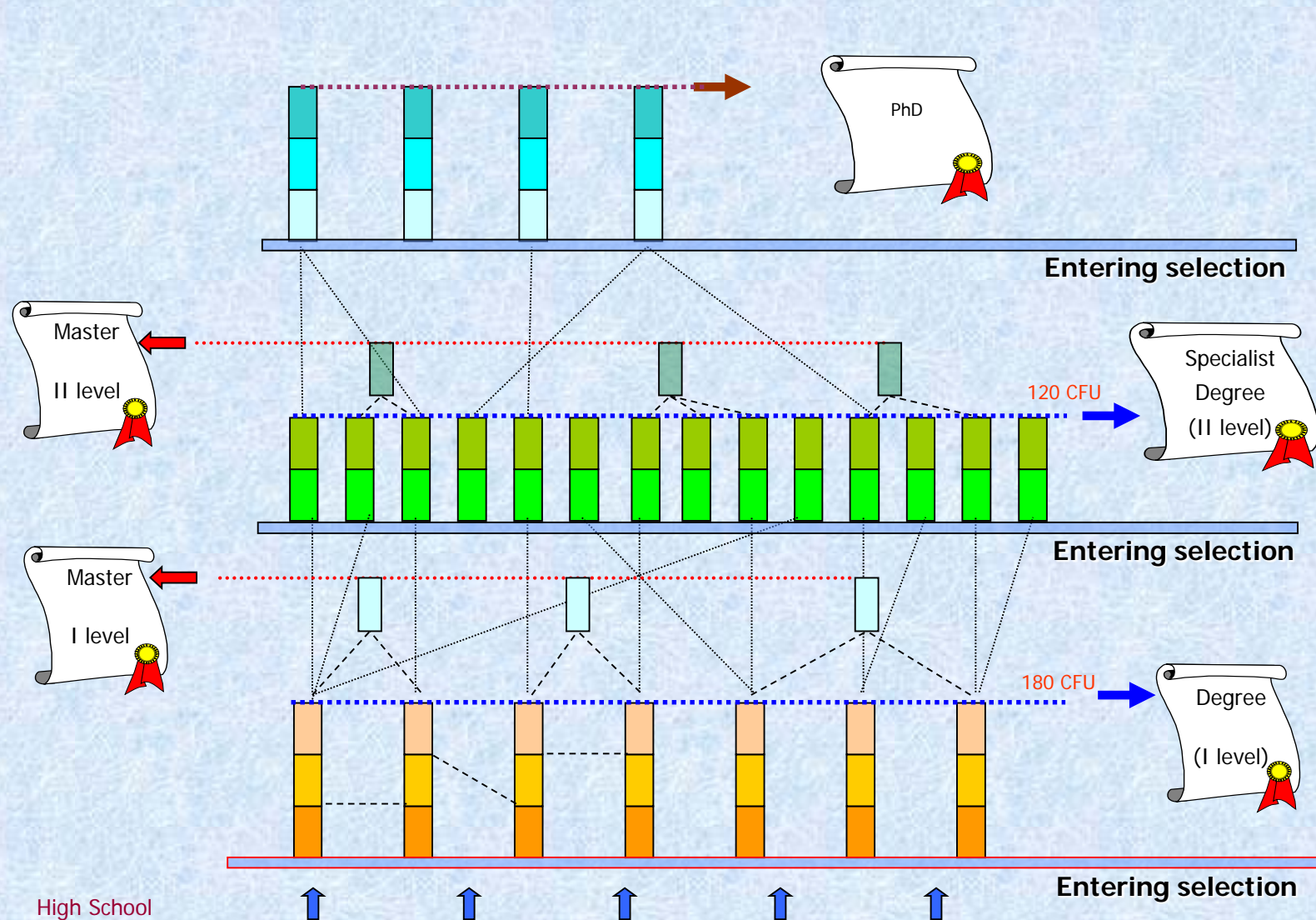
Educational routes before the HE system reform
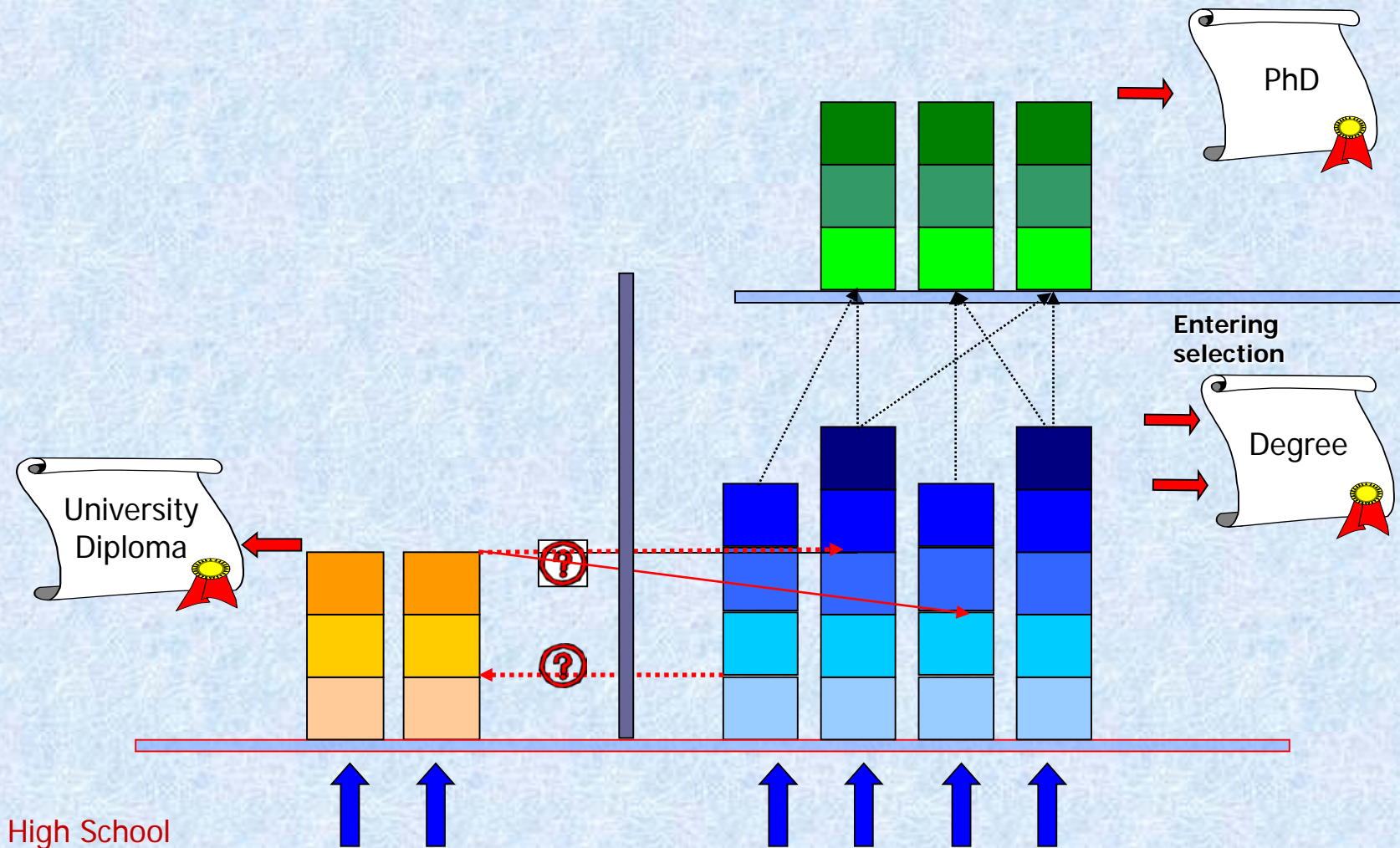
Characteristics of the old system

- ✓ Beside having a less flexible structure, the old system was characterized by a rigid regulation of the educational programmes, which fixed even the designation and the contents of single courses.

- ✓ Since the programmes were the same everywhere, accreditation was not considered necessary (even if there were significant differences in the quality and performance of the universities).

- ✓ A programme approved by the Ministry was to be considered "accredited".

The new system

PhD

Entering selection

Master
II level

Specialist
Degree
(II level)

120 CFU

Master
I level

Entering selection

180 CFU

Degree
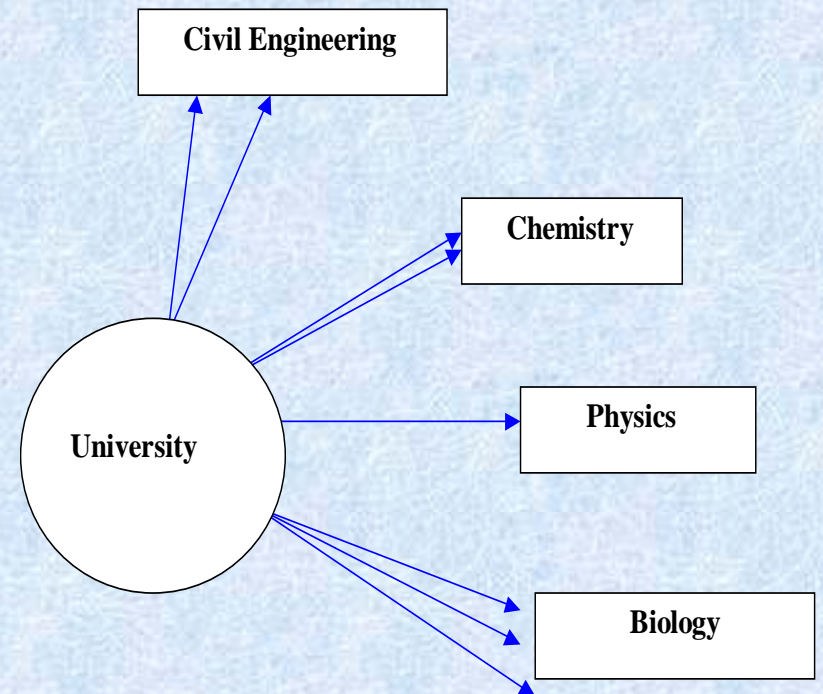(I level)

Entering selection

High School

Rules of the new system

- ✓ The programmes are classified according to classes.
- ✓ Within each class a minimum number of credits for specific disciplines are determined by law.
- ✓ Each class defines the institutional mission of the programme.
- ✓ The providers are expected to complete the programme(s) until the proper number of credits is achieved.

Programmes and Classes

- ✓ Universities may have on offer more than one programme per class.
- ✓ 42 classes have been established for the three years programmes (Laurea).
- ✓ 104 classes for II level degree programmes (Laurea specialistica).

University → Civil Engineering

University → Chemistry

University → Physics

University → Biology

Autonomy and responsibility of universities

- ✓ After the reform the existing universities have maintained the rights of awarding degrees at all level, including PhD programmes.
- ✓ Each university is responsible for the quality of the educational provisions. The Ministry settles the basic quality standards, which HE programmes are supposed to meet.
- ✓ Since universities are autonomous, nothing prevents them from offering programmes that do not meet the standards.

Problems

✓ The decentralization and the increased freedom given to universities raise the problem of their accountability.

✓ The introduction of the new educational system requires a period of adjustment to adapt the institutions and the HE programmes to the new reality.

✓ It would not be wise to determine rigid and detailed accreditation standards in such a situation. Rather, it is convenient to use simple quality standards that can be helpful to guide universities and stakeholders in the transition.

Institutional versus Programme Accreditation

- ✓ Most universities have a long-standing tradition and it would be very expensive, time-consuming (and probably not very convenient in a transition period) to start an institutional accreditation process.

- ✓ For new universities this can be carried out, by relating the funding to the achievements of certain standards in terms of educational programmes, realization of didactic and research infrastructures, administrative organization, services provided to the students etc.

- ✓ **In all the other cases the Ministry has decided to start a form of accreditation of the educational programmes**.

The present situation

✓ Most universities will complete the first cycle of the I level degree in the current academic year. The first cycle of the II level degree is starting.

✓ Two basic needs:

- *Information on the educational programmes*: since the universities are free to determine their educational offer, there is a large variety of programmes, which differ in the design of the courses and curricula;

- *Accreditation of programmes*: based on fundamental quality standards, to be improved as the transition goes on.

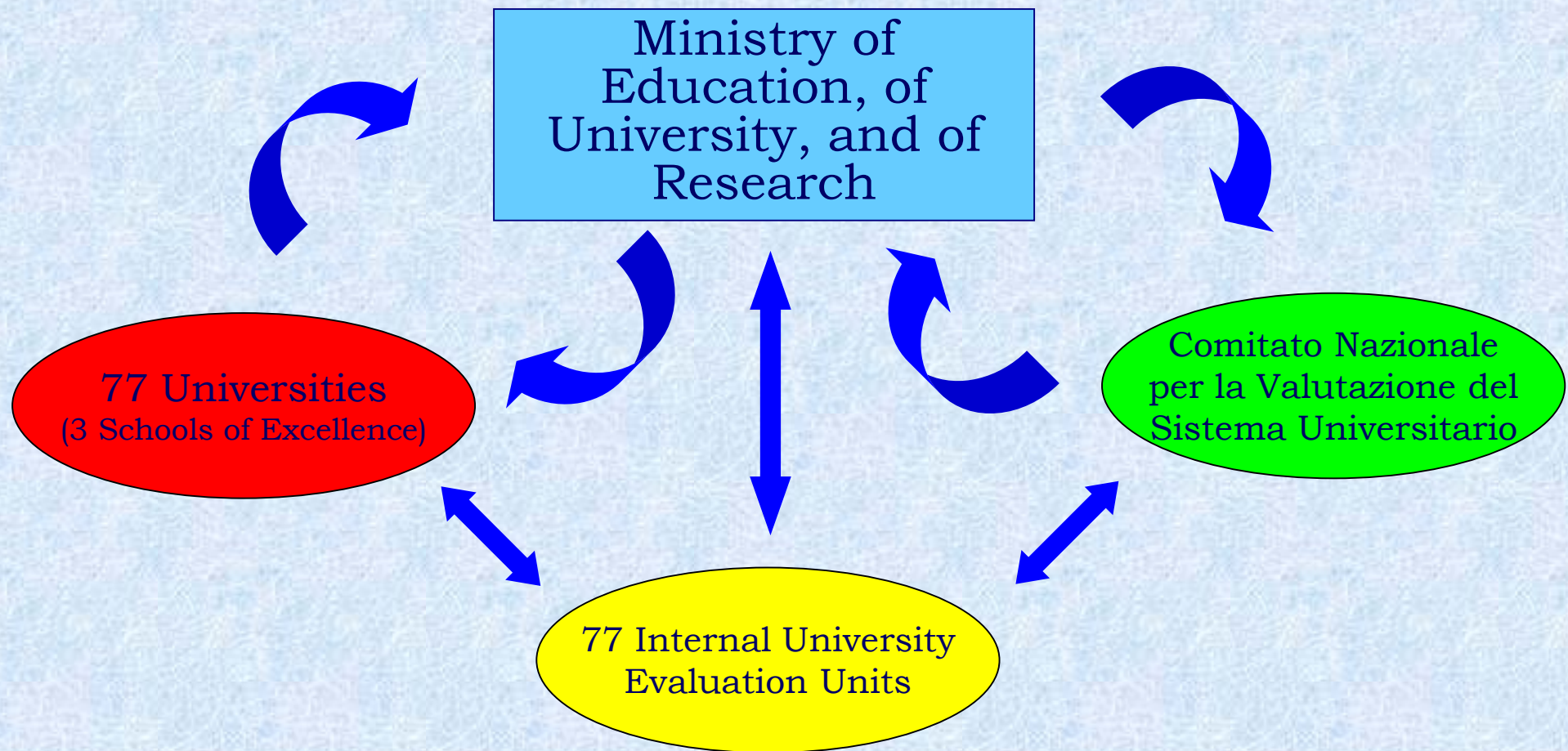# Monitoring the changing system

- ✓ Evaluation and quality standards are the tools to drive the system towards a better performance.

- ✓ Introduction of an evaluation network to help the universities in the transition.

Italian Evaluation Network

Ministry of Education, of University, and of Research

77 Universities
(3 Schools of Excellence)

Comitato Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema Universitario
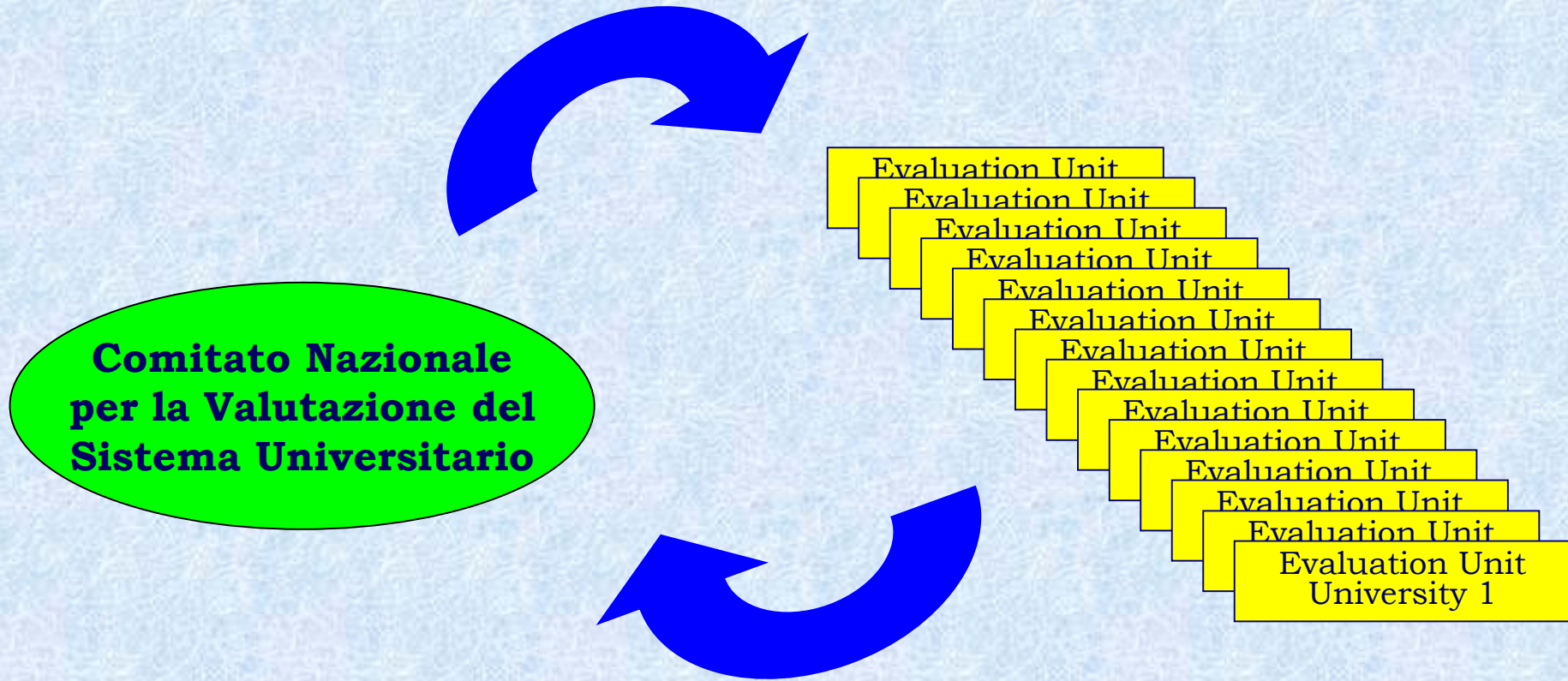
77 Internal University Evaluation Units

The evaluation network

✓ **CNVSU** (National University Evaluation Council): an indipendent body of experts appointed by the Minister.

✓ **EU** (Evaluation Units): University self-evaluation committee formed by experts appointed by the University Rector.

Internal University Evaluation Units

feedback and methodologies

Comitato Nazionale
per la Valutazione del
Sistema Universitario

Evaluation Unit
Evaluation Unit
Evaluation Unit
Evaluation Unit
Evaluation Unit
Evaluation Unit
Evaluation Unit
Evaluation Unit
Evaluation Unit
Evaluation Unit
Evaluation Unit
Evaluation Unit
Evaluation Unit
Evaluation Unit
Evaluation Unit
University 1

collecting experiences and data

Information and comparison

✓ One of the purpose of accreditation is to guarantee the potential students that a given HE programme has gone through a process of evaluation and it has been found to have acceptable quality standards.

✓ Students should be given equivalent good quality education regardless of their choice of HE institution. Moreover they should be able to compare programmes of different universities in order to choose the courses that will provide them with valuable qualifications. Such choice should be based on real and updated information on the quality of the courses rather than on perceptions.

The data base of programmes on offer

The BOFF has been established with the purpose of providing students with qualified and comparable information on the education programmes of all Italian universities. Every year each provider is expected to publicize the education programmes to be delivered. The curriculum design and the course organization are made available through a data base at the Ministry web site. The same data base points out the programmes that meet minimum quality standards (**quality threshold**) set by the Ministry under the advice from the CNVSU.

BOFF
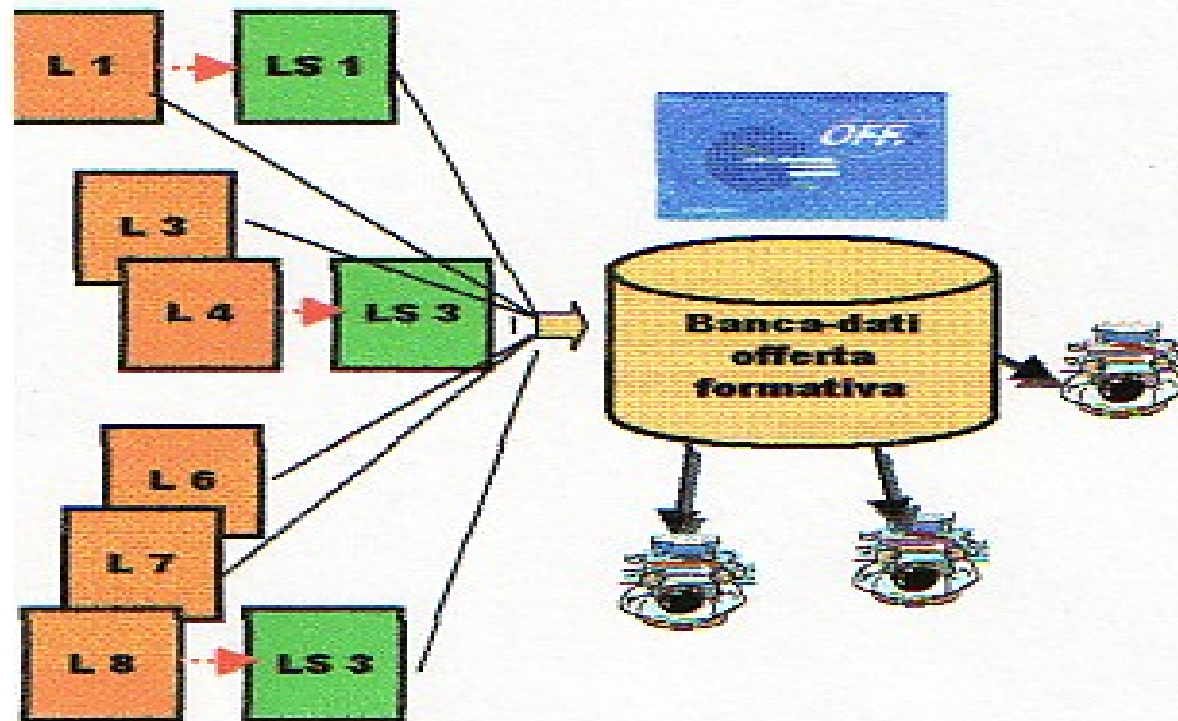
Quality threshold

Quality threshold is based on the principle of **sustainable HE programmes**, according to which the university is expected to have:

- ✓ an adequate number of teaching professors, to cover the courses indicated in the programmes;
- ✓ a proper size of the student classes;
- ✓ the proper qualification and competence of the teaching staff;
- ✓ the availability of the necessary infrastructures (libraries, classrooms and lecture theatres, teaching laboratories, etc.).

Threshold and accreditation

✓ The ***quality threshold*** is a ***very basic form of accreditation***: the outcome is a "yes" or a "no". The threshold is not fixed once for all; it can be raised by further qualification of the standards.

✓ ***Threshold evaluation does not aim at excellence***: its purpose is to make the stakeholders confident that the educational programmes reach a certain level of quality.

Accreditation and funding

- ✓ As a result of the accreditation process, the university programmes acquire a label that allows them to be eligible for Ministry funding (special incentives).

- ✓ This label is indicated in the BOFF, so that the stakeholders are informed of the achievement of the minimum quality standards.

- ✓ It is therefore essential for the judgement to be based on pre-defined standards and objective data, to ensure the transparency of the procedure.

- ✓ All data that contribute to form the assessment need to be checked carefully.

Methodology

✓ In the present stage the evaluation is mainly based on quantitative indicators, that are collected and treated in a proper way, to reduce the number of possible errors.

✓ Beside the data base of the HE programmes, national data base of university professors and students are used to determine the standards and to compare the data of each university to the standards.

✓ Local evaluation units (EU) are responsible of those aspects that cannot be easily expressed by numerical indicators.

✓ The accreditation is largely based on a self-evaluation carried out by the local evaluation units along the lines indicated by the CNVSU.

✓ The local units are supposed to check the data and to control whether the requirements are really met by the institution offering the programme. This self-study provides qualitative and quantitative documentation for the accreditation.

Course programmes academic year 2001/02

Some numbers:

- ✓ **2650** first level course programmes set-up (136 "unicum cycle" course programmes)
- ✓ **492** faculties
- ✓ 373 (**75,8 %**) faculties complying with "minimum quantitative standard qualifications"
- ✓ 119 (**24,2 %**) faculties do not have sufficient teaching resources to run their course programmes in compliance with "minimum quantitative standard qualifications"

Faculties and minimum quality standards

Legend:
- N. facoltà con requisiti minimi (75,8%)
- N. facoltà senza requisiti minimi (24,2%)
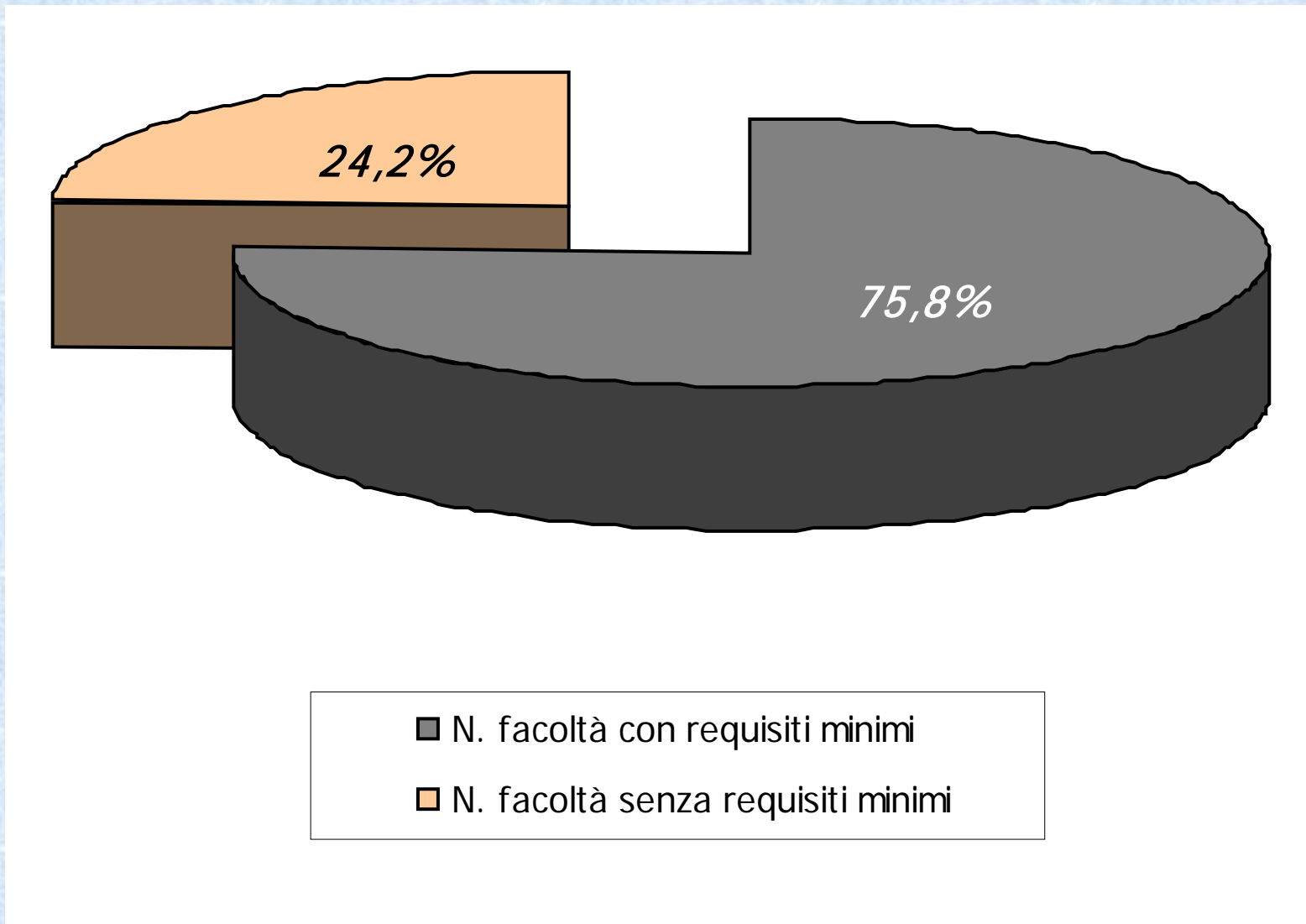
Faculties and minimum quality standards - a.y. 2001/02
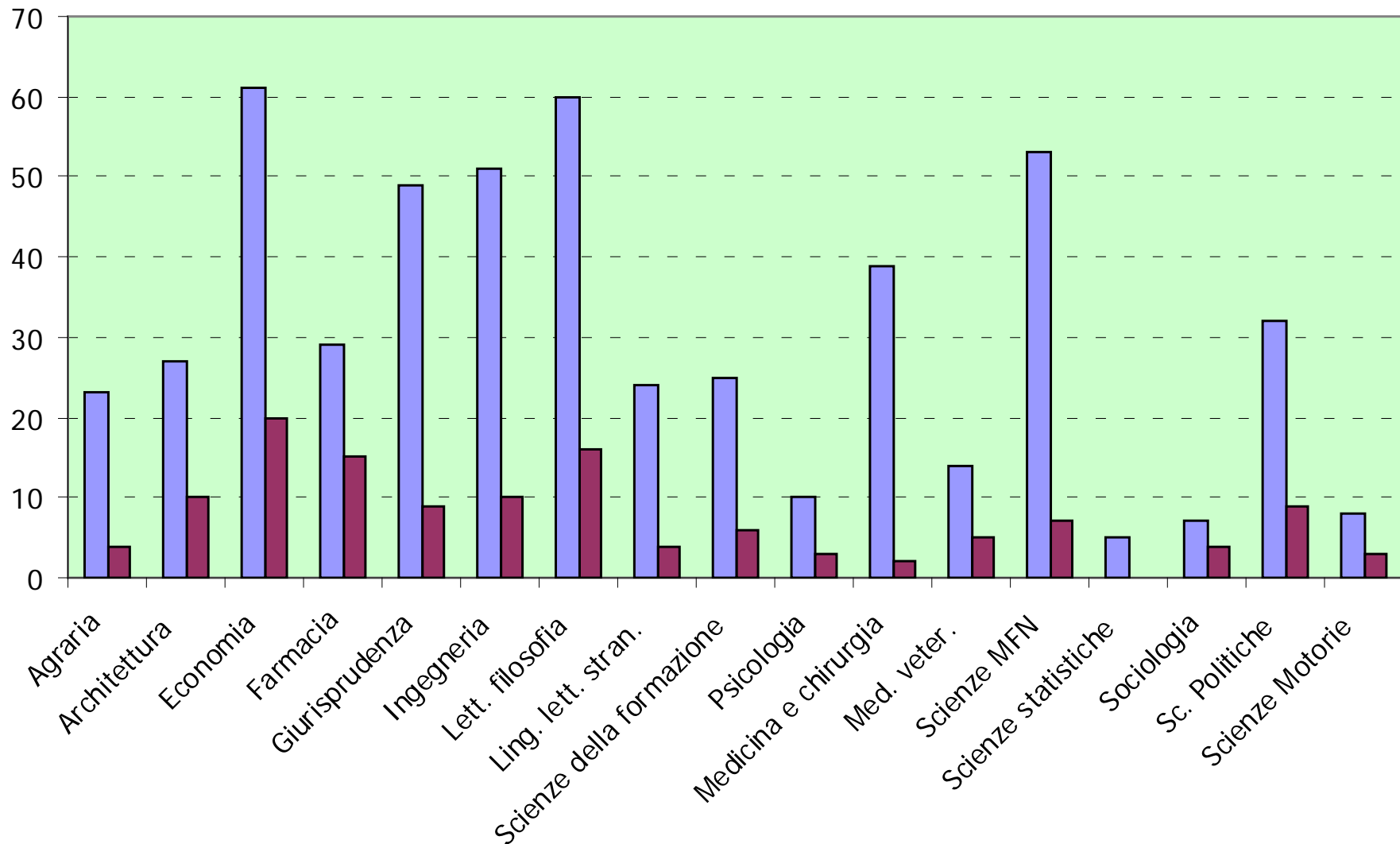
Results in the first two academic years: a comparison

Tipo di facoltà	a.a. 2001/2002			a.a. 2002/2003 (**)		
	N. facoltà attive	N. facoltà con carenza di risorse (*)	%	N. facoltà attive	N. facoltà con carenza di risorse (*)	%
Scienze statistiche	5	0	0,0%	5	0	0,0%
Medicina e chirurgia	34	2	5,9%	39	2	5,1%
Med. veter.	14	1	7,1%	14	5	35,7%
Architettura	22	2	9,1%	27	10	37,0%
Agraria	23	3	13,0%	23	4	17,4%
Ling. lett. stran.	23	3	13,0%	24	4	16,7%
Ingegneria	50	7	14,0%	51	10	19,6%
Giurisprudenza	49	9	18,4%	49	9	18,4%
Scienze MFN	53	10	18,9%	53	7	13,2%
Psicologia	9	2	22,2%	10	3	30,0%
Lett. filosofia	55	13	23,6%	60	16	26,7%
Economia	59	19	32,2%	61	20	32,8%
Sociologia	6	2	33,3%	7	4	57,1%
Sc. Politiche	30	10	33,3%	32	9	28,1%
Scienze della formazione	25	10	40,0%	25	6	24,0%
Farmacia	29	21	72,4%	29	15	51,7%
Scienze Motorie	6	5	83,3%	8	3	37,5%
Totale complessivo	492	119	24,2%	517	127	24,6%

Results in the first two academic years: a comparison

Percentuale di facoltà con carenza di risorse minime

Legend: a.a. 2001/2002 (blue), a.a. 2002/2003 (orange)

Categories: Scienze statistiche, Medicina e chirurgia, Med. veter., Architettura, Agraria, Ling. lett. stran., Ingegneria, Giurisprudenza, Scienze MFN, Psicologia, Lett. filosofia, Economia, Sociologia, Sc. Politiche, Scienze della formazione, Farmacia, Scienze Motorie
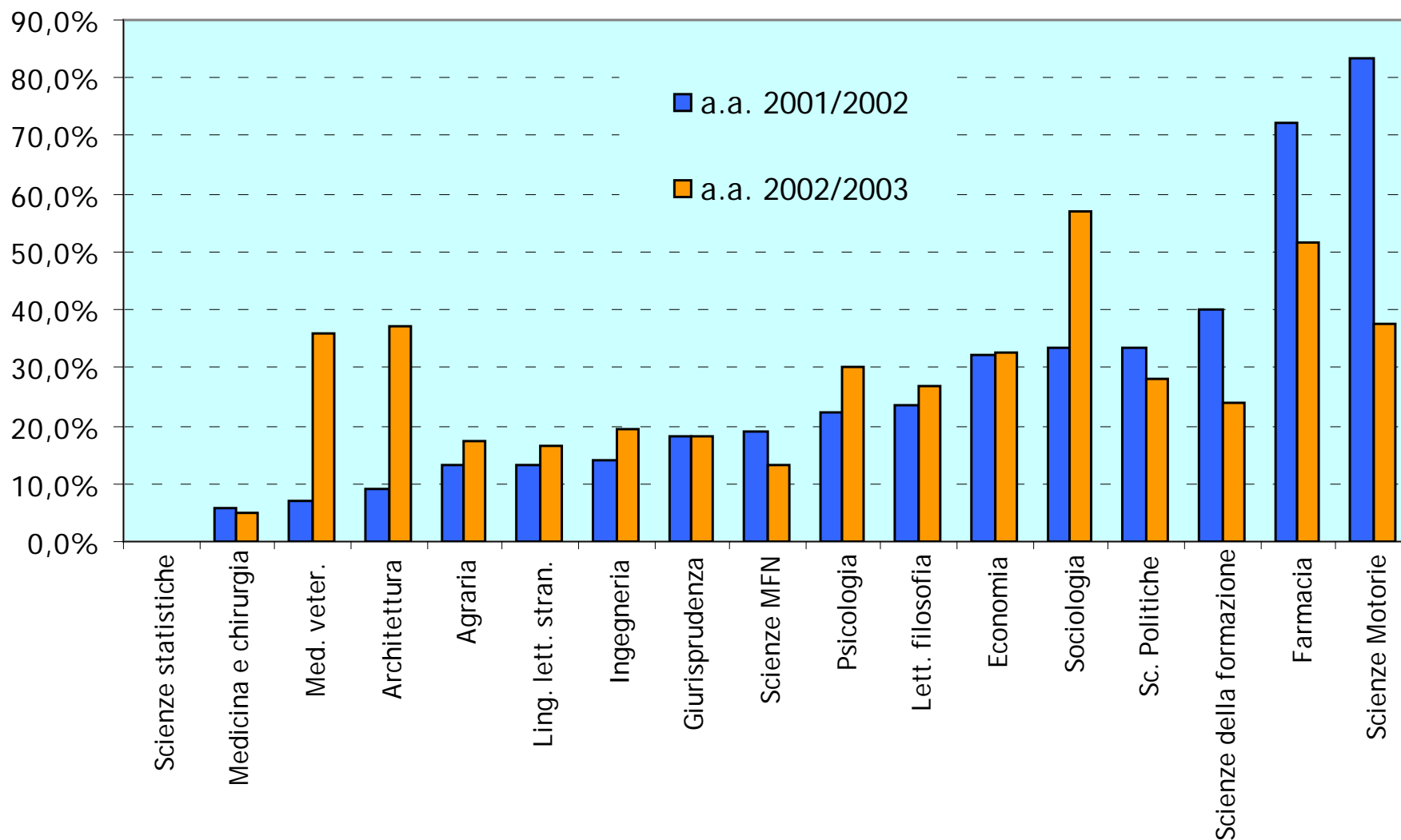
Further quality elements for the accreditation of the II level degrees

- ✓ Proper publicization of the *access requirements.*

- ✓ *Attractiveness* to graduates of other universities and to foreign students.

- ✓ Scholar *scientific production.*

Publicization of II level programmes

✓ Graduate students are expected to get easily information on:

- the programme;
- the conditions for registration (number of proper credits, nature of the accepted degree, ect.);
- how to acquire missing credits;
- verification of the individual preparation.
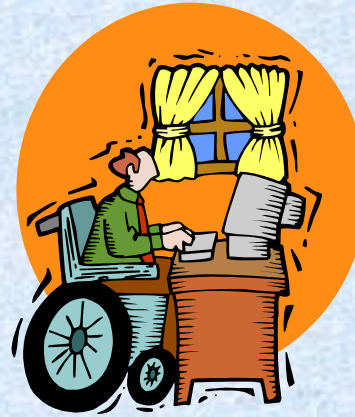
Attractiveness

✓ Students in Italy have a low mobility: they often choose the nearest university rather than the one that offers the more valuable qualifications.

✓ The second level degree is oriented to a cultural and professional specialization. Each university is supposed to specialize the educational programmes, with a stronger qualification compared to I level courses.

✓ This should attract a significant fraction of graduate students from other universities.

Outcome & accreditation

✓ Up to now the interest has been concentrated mainly on *ex-ante* accreditation. However the reform of the HE system has established the general purposes and achievements for any class of programmes. Clearly the next step in the accreditation will be based on the assessment of the intended outcomes.

✓ Threshold requirements of the outcomes include several issues that need to be analised, like the characteristics of the educational process, the professional achievements, the rating of the graduates on the job market, etc.

Some steps in this direction have been already undertaken by CNVSU

- ✓ Quantitative data are collected every year on the students status in each programme (success and failure rates, satisfaction, etc.).

- ✓ Introduction of a feedback questionnaire to be filled by students at the end of the programme, starting from the present academic year.

- ✓ Support to the realization of a yearly graduate data base (Alma Laurea) which allows to get information on the professional state of graduates five years after the end of their university period.

Summary

- ✓ Accreditation in Italy is still in its infancy.
- ✓ Important results have been achieved in the direction of sustainability of the HE programmes.
- ✓ Work in progress to prepare tools for outcome accreditation.