

FROM AUTHORIZATION TO ACCREDITATION – A DIFFICULT PATH FOR THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM IN A CHANGING SOCIETY.

Why the problem of “accreditation” seems to have surfaced in Europe only in recent years? I shall not attempt to give a general answer to this question. I will rather try to explain why it was not an important issue in Italy until very recently, and why accreditation is a difficult problem, in view of the many changes which the Italian university system is currently undergoing. The remarks presented here could also apply to other European countries, especially of continental Europe, and also to countries where the accreditation of universities has not yet come to full public attention.

We are in Rome, which is one of the oldest cities in Europe, and whose oldest university celebrates its 700th anniversary this year. I should be excused, therefore, if I go back to the medieval beginning of the Italian university system.

After a brief period of spontaneous generation and growth, Italian universities, unlike universities of other European countries, were established by an explicit act of a religious or civil authority, which authorized their activity conferring, in general, special privileges to the faculty and to the students.

Probably the first university explicitly established by a ruler, to fulfill a “political” mission, was the University of Naples, which has now assumed the name of its founder “Frederick II”. It was indeed created, in the first half of the 13th century, by Frederick II, Roman (which, at the time, meant “German”) Emperor, and King of Naples. The University of Naples was established to contrast the political influence of the Law School of the University of Bologna, a city which, like most Italian cities of the North at that time, sided with the Pope, in the century long struggle for world supremacy between the Papacy and the Empire. Accordingly, Frederick II forbade his subjects to teach or to study at the University of Bologna. Similarly the University of Rome was established by the Pope, exactly 700 years ago in 1303.

At the end of the nineteenth century, when the Kingdom of Italy succeeded to the many sovereign states of the peninsula, the 22 universities operating in the Italian towns passed under control of the central Government. Government control meant that the charter approved by the Ministry of Education, explicitly listed the schools or faculties, which were authorized and the courses of instructions and degrees which these schools could offer. 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.

“Authorization” automatically implies “accreditation” in a system which is rigidly controlled by a central authority. Under these conditions, there should be no need for a system of accreditation. Whatever is authorized is automatically accredited and it is the Government who is responsible for providing the necessary staff and facilities to the institutions for the courses of instruction allowed in their charters.

It is natural to ask why we talk of “accreditation” under these conditions, which are not far from the conditions under which operate many European universities. Is it because we blindly follow North American fashions and North American terminology, ignoring the fact that we operate in a very different context? Is it because small groups of bureaucrats, firmly entrenched in the Quality Assurance Agencies of each country, want to consolidate and extend their power over the university system?

There is, perhaps, a grain of truth in these explanations. But it is also true that an apparently minor change occurred in the relationship between the central authority and the university system in Italy,

which has become one of the reasons to introduce “accreditation”. The change can be synthesized as follows: in order to gain a better control over the university system, universities are given free rein on how to spend the money they receive from the Government, but the Government reserves the right to measure the level of financing against results achieved. Of course the priorities in terms of results are fixed by the Government.

This change came about when it was realized that the system of rigid control through authorization, detailed regulation, and minute indications on how the money should be spent, made it impossible to control the growth and the global expenditure of the system. The growth of the university system through the seventies and the eighties in Italy was characterized by intensive lobbying by local authorities and politicians, and by academic groups, to obtain, even in absence of the necessary facilities, one or more “authorizations” to initiate new courses of instruction, or to give life to new universities. Very little attention was given to the problem of adequately financing the new institutions or the new courses of instruction. It was understood that the government would have to pick up the bill sooner or later.

For a while, until the late eighties, it was thought that the growth of the university system could still be controlled through “three year plans”, approved by the Ministry on the advice of Parliamentary Committees. But the results were not particularly brilliant.

Finally, in the middle nineties it was decided that in order to control the expenditures of the university system it was more convenient to give the universities free rein in the allocation of resources obtained from the central government. Rather than footing the bill for each “authorized” activity, the Government would provide a global funding, measured on the basis of a “formula” based on indicators of results. In other words, the allocation of resources to universities was measured against objective results of university activity, rather than abstract needs. At the same time, universities were free to choose their own strategy in achieving their goals.

As a result, the universities are induced to compete for more money from the government and, as a consequence, for better performance. We have introduced what may be called a “simulation” of market conditions.

But as every economist knows, competition among service providers does not always produce positive effects. Any funding of university institutions which is based on “results” is heavily dependent on the number of students, or at least the number of graduates. The universities are thus induced to increase the number of students by offering new courses of study on topics attractive to students. This may lead to a form of deceptive publicity, which requires a corrective intervention on the part of the central authority.

In general, the type of “quasi-market”, which is induced by the new system of financing the universities, requires that the offer of instruction on the part of the universities is “accredited”, because of the “asymmetry” of information between users and providers of the instructional services. A central authority must define rules on the basis of which the providers of services are admitted to the market. Accreditation, a concept that only a few years ago could be ignored by Italian universities, and which seemed to apply only to the American system of higher education, has become an issue in Italy, and indeed in most European countries.

At the beginning we may have thought that accreditation should only apply to newcomers to the system, or perhaps only to universities which are not totally sponsored by the State. But as time passes these limitations appear less and less reasonable. Every institution is a “newcomer” when it starts a new course of instruction, or shifts its resources from one area to another. Indeed, the main

practical difference between accreditation and authorization is that the former is never permanent, but it is subject to periodic reviews. We must bring ourselves to accept that accreditation concerns the whole university system.

What do we mean by accreditation of a university? We must bear in mind that accreditation implies setting of “standards” for an activity, which traditionally prided itself in being above “standards”. It is not too difficult to set minimal requirements in terms of number of permanent faculty, libraries, laboratories and other facilities. Much more difficult is to indicate reasonable standards of performance for a university. Let me state in this context just two of the many problems which could be raised.

One serious problem is the definition of the level of instruction suitable for a university education. Should it be defined independently of the level of competence and prior education of entering students? Or should it be calibrated on the actual level of the student body, no matter how low?

In Italy, as in most European countries, university education is no longer reserved to an élite. It is expected that the university system addresses itself to a high percentage (at least 30%) of the population of young people. Under these circumstances the level of instruction must adapt to many different needs, expectations, and prior education of a diversified student body. It seems reasonable not to deny accreditation from an institution which takes upon itself the task of teaching students who do not meet the highest standards in terms of prior education. But if accreditation is supposed to have any relevance outside the university system, it should say something about the level of competence which is expected of the graduates. We are registering here a conflict between the duties of the university system to address itself to a larger and larger percentage of the student population and the need to be accountable to the public and the prospective employers for the level of competence of the graduates.

A second problem, which is connected with the former, is the question of the role played by the scientific research of the faculty in the definition of a university. Is it still reasonable to expect that all university faculties be actively engaged in research? If so, does this mean that the standards for accreditation should include an evaluation of the research of the faculty? How far can a country afford a university system addressing itself to 40-50% of the population of young people, where all faculties are allowed time and resources for creative research?

On the other hand, a university is traditionally the place where scientific research combines itself with teaching to provide an intellectual environment which should foster creative thinking. University teaching has been for the last two centuries the most important vehicle for the “transfer” of scientific and technical innovation to society and the productive world. Under these circumstances, a university without research may be considered a contradiction in terms. The solutions adopted by some countries in the sixties to create institutions of higher education which are not fully universities are being abandoned, as the examples of England and Sweden show. Do we really have other solutions?