

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

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To understand the subject of accreditation in Italy it is important to focus the attention on some initiatives which have been recently taken by the *Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca* (MIUR) under the advice of the *Comitato Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema Universitario* (CNVSU) that have a strong impact on the whole university system. And it is also important for CNVSU to have indications, criticisms and ideas concerning these initiatives as they are a part of a strategy, that aims at the gradual introduction of accreditation standards in the Italian university.

The basic idea is just to have gradual developments in the university system related to the use of general quality standards. In fact graduality is a must in the present period that is characterized by two important changes: an increasing decentralisation of functions and responsibilities, and a complete modification of the university degree system.

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 high education providers. This process does not occur only in Italy, is a global process started at European level. The implication is that there is a sort of increase of responsiveness of the university to society demands, and this concerns all the activities of university system: education, research, expertise.

The Italian education system enumerates 77 universities, 63 state universities and 14 non-state ones. Universities are the main institutions for the delivery of degrees at high education level, and of course for performing scientific research. Financing, funding and evaluating universities, is handled at a ministerial level. The student population is in the order of 1.6 million students, but the number of regular students is smaller, about fifty per cent. One of the reasons is that not all students are full time students, many of them are part time, and this is a somewhat new reality. Indeed one of the difficulties that universities may have in offering educational programmes is just to take into account this diversification of the student population.

A second change has been then introduced with the Bologna process, that caused a real revolution in the higher education system in Italy with the introduction of the two level educational system and of the educational credits. Before the Bologna process, at the end of high school education, students could choose between a *diploma* course (a three-year course) and the traditional *laurea* course (from four to six years, depending on the subject). The *diploma* course has always been chosen by a small percentage of students, most preferred to get the more qualified, more common, more traditional *laurea* course, considering also that after *laurea* graduation there was the possibility, for a restricted percentage, to enter the PhD system. It was a rather rigid system, especially because it was ruled at a national level by a detailed regulation of the educational programmes. Even the name of the courses and the context of the single courses were ruled by law. The idea was to offer the same standard all over the country. Since the programmes were supposed to be the same everywhere, accreditation was considered not necessary. Of course, there were significant differences in quality among universities, but the principle was that the programme was the same everywhere as, once it was approved by the Ministry, it was automatically “accredited”.

The new system is completely different, and it is very difficult to know the kind of graduates it is producing, as it started three years ago, and the first students are graduating just now. It is organised in two levels, a first level, with entering selection in some courses, and a second level, *laurea specialistica*, which is supposed to be culturally more professional in character. One year courses on specific professional subjects (in Italy they are called Masters) can be taken after both degrees, getting a first level Master or a second level one. Of course there is also the PhD school with a very restricted selection.

According to the rules of the new system, programmes on offer are classified on the basis of classes (42 for the first three year courses and 104 for the second level). The institutional mission of the educational programme of each class is broadly defined by law. Within each class there is a minimum number of credits for specific disciplines that are determined by law.

Universities, the providers, are expected to complete the programmes until the proper numbers of credits is achieved, which implies that roughly 60-70% of the programme is defined by universities, independently of any indication from the law. Even after the reform, the existing universities had maintained the rights of awarding degrees at all levels, including PhD programmes; in other words there are no restrictions for universities, and they can offer all the three levels of degree.

In principle each university is responsible for the quality of the educational provisions, but the Ministry set some basic quality standards, which higher education programmes are supposed to meet. As universities are autonomous, nothing prevents them from offering programmes that do not meet the standards, except the fact that they do not get funding. In principle, if they want to offer low quality courses, they could. This is the main problem, the increased freedom given to universities raises the problem of their accountability.

The introduction of the new system requires a period of adjustment, and it is necessary to adapt institutions and their high education programmes to the new reality. That is why it would not be so wise at the moment to determine rigid and detailed accreditation standards; it seems more convenient to use simple quality standards, that can be helpful to guide the universities and the stakeholders in the transition. There is not an enough experience of the new system to allow a systematic accreditation of universities and courses.

One of the problems, definitively to be solved very soon, is whether to go in the direction of institutional or programmes accreditation considering that most universities have a long standing tradition, and it would be expensive, time-consuming, and probably not convenient now, to start an institutional accreditation process. Of course the situation is different for new universities, for which institutional accreditation can be performed to monitor their achievements, and check whether their standards in terms of educational offering, in terms of realisation and infrastructures, in terms of service to the students, are acceptable. This is indeed what CNVSU is doing at the moment, following the starting-up of new universities with site visits, checking their activities, while, in all other cases, that is to say long standing old universities, the Ministry decided to start a form of accreditation of the programmes on offer.

At the moment, most universities will complete the first cycle of the first level degree in the current academic year, and this means that the first students are going to get their three-year degree, while the first cycle for the second level degree starts just with the academic year 2003/04.

In this background there are at least two basic problems to be considered.

The first one is the information on the educational programmes, as universities are free to determine their educational offer, there is a large variety of proposals of programmes, which differ in the design of the course and curriculum. How can students and stakeholders be guided towards the proper choice?

The second problem is how to establish some accreditation procedures for these programmes, based on fundamental quality standards, to be improved while the transition goes on?

To better understand the situation it is necessary to spend few words on the Italian evaluation system. It has been introduced with the purpose of driving the system toward a better performance. It is based on a network with four main actors: Ministry, Universities, CNVSU, and the Internal Evaluation Units (IEU). CNVSU is an independent board of experts appointed by the Minister, with the task of advising and consulting to the Minister, as all the decisions concerning the introduction of quality standards are taken by the Ministry. The IEUs are self evaluation university groups of experts appointed by the Rector of each university. There is a systematic link between the CNVSU and IEUs: IEUs collect experience and data, while CNVSU provides methodology, feedback, indications, suggestions. This is a kind of virtuous loop, which allows to systematically improve data, procedures and so on.

Getting back to the problem of information, one of the purposes of accreditation is to guarantee that potential students can attend programmes which pass through some processes of evaluation that ensures acceptable quality standards. In principle students should be given equivalent good quality education regardless of their choice of the higher education institution. They should be able to compare programmes of different universities, in order to choose the courses provided with good qualifications. Such a choice should be based on real and updated information about the quality of the courses rather than on perceptions. This is the reason why MIUR decided to create the database of programmes on offer (*Banca Dati dell'Offerta Formativa*, BOFF). This database has been established with the purpose of providing students with qualified and comparable information on the education programmes for all Italian universities. Students can get information by simply visiting the BOFF web site. Every year, each provider is expected to publicise education programmes on offer, as well as the curriculum design and the course organisation, through the BOFF database. In the same database the student can find information about the matching of **minimum quality standards** for educational programmes, set by the Ministry under the advice of the CNVSU.

Quality standards provide a quality threshold for all educational programmes. They are based on the principle of sustainable high education programmes. According to this principle a university is expected to offer programmes with a proper number of teaching professors, a proper size of the student class, a proper qualification and competence of the teaching staff, the availability of the necessary infrastructures (libraries, classrooms, teaching laboratories and so on). This could seem a very obvious thing, but it is not always so obvious as, according to their complete autonomy, universities have to compete. Each university tends to attract more students and, to gain competitive advantage, it could deliver programmes without the proper quality.

This is a very basic and very rough form of accreditation, an accreditation in the sense that the outcome is a yes or a no, a match or non-match of standards. The threshold is not fixed once for all, but can be raised by further qualifications of all standards. Improving the standards is expected to induce a better quality of the programmes. This procedure does not aim at excellence, but has the purpose to make stakeholders confident with those educational programmes on offer that reach a certain level of quality.

It is interesting to look at the relation between this sort of accreditation and funding. As a result of the accreditation process, university programmes acquire a label, indicated in the (BOFF) database, so that stakeholders are informed of the achievement of the minimum quality standards, which allows them to be eligible for Ministry funding.

For this reason it is essential that the assessment be based on predefined standards and objective data, to ensure the transparency of the procedure. At the present stage, everything is based mainly on quantitative indicators, collected and treated in the proper way, to reduce the number of possible errors: data of programmes are linked with data concerning professors and students. An important role is played by IEUs, which are responsible for those aspects that cannot easily be expressed by numerical indicators. Just to give some results, in the academic year 2001/02 there were 2.650 first level course programmes set up for 190 faculties. Approximately 75% of the faculties

complied with the minimum quality standard qualifications in all the programmes, 25% of faculties did not comply, that means that 25% of the faculties had some programmes which were not acceptable. This was just an experimental approach starting with a rough kind of quality standard, like for example the number of professors, not their qualification.

As expected, the most difficult situation was in the most crowded faculties like Economics, Law, Humanities in general. The percentage of programmes in these faculties which did not fit all the quality standards, was of the order of 20-35%. Not only crowded faculties, also recently established universities, had insufficient infrastructures, and sometimes also an inadequate teaching staff.

In the second year (academic year 2002-2003) CNVSU started improving the threshold, including a criterion of the proper qualification of the teaching staff involved in the programmes. This implied a check on the disciplinary specialisation and personal research area of professors, linking this to the setting up of the course programmes. Of course, the target was not that 100% of the professors had to be in the right scientific area, as some basic courses can be taught by professors of different specialisations or from external experts, but at least 40-50% of the professors had to have the right qualifications. The results obtained by introducing this threshold are somewhat different: in some cases the situation has gotten worse, since including more qualified standards caused more faculties not to meet the quality thresholds. In other cases it turned out to be better, because some programmes of the previous year, which did not meet the standards, had been cancelled in the meanwhile by the universities.

The introduction of more severe quality standards has led to a reduction of the accredited programmes and to serious problems in recently established universities. In other cases there has been a significant reduction of the programmes below the standards, largely as a consequence of the decreased number of programmes on offer by some universities. In other words, after the first experiment, some universities realised that they were actually offering more than they could afford, so some programmes had to be cancelled. This is not surprising in an experimental transition, as maybe universities realised to have designed not so an appealing offer, or that the evaluation system of quality did not allow to consider the offer as a valuable one. This is the present stage of accreditation for the first level degree.

The second level degree started in the academic year 2003/04 with three possible requirements indicated by CNVSU: (i) proper publicisation of the access, (ii) attractiveness and (iii) scholar scientific production. The publicisation of the second level programmes is very important, because entering the second level is a different step in education. The offer should specify the conditions to be registered, the number of proper credits, the nature of the accepted credits, the nature of the accepted degree, and how to acquire missing credits. Attractiveness is a very important issue, as in Italy students generally show a low mobility. They usually choose the nearest university rather than the one which maybe the best for them. This maybe acceptable for the first level degree, but not for the second level, that is supposed to be highly professional. The

idea is to have some standards of attractiveness, and if a university is not able to attract students from other regions or from abroad, maybe it could be indicated as not meeting the essential quality standards.

All the issues, we have been dealing with so far, concern an ex ante accreditation, something which refers to the offer and not to the outcome. The reform of the educational system has established the general purposes and achievements of any class of programmes, and this means that the next step will be to look at the outcome, to have some assessment of the results of the educational process. There are several issues to be analysed, like the characteristics of the educational process, the professional achievements, the rating of the graduates on the job market, and so on.

Some important steps have been taken by CNVSU in order to have the necessary tools for the analysis of the results of the educational programmes. An information system has been set up that provides every year data on the student status in each programme (failure rates, success rates, satisfaction of students, ...). It is still a quantitative element, not qualitative, but of fundamental importance.

CNVSU introduced also a feedback questionnaire to be filled in by the students at the end of the programme, with a minimum set of questions. As a result now nearly 60% of the teaching courses in the programmes have a feedback by students.

Another step is the introduction of a questionnaire for the students that get the degree, before they leave the university. This allows them to give a global judgement of the university experience.

Moreover the Ministry has supported the realization of an important database, *Alma Laurea*, which allows to get information on the professional status of graduates five years after the end of their university programme. This should be a good step towards an analysis of what comes out from our high education system.

Italy is in its early stages of accreditation, in its infancy, and this could be common to other European countries, but some important results have been achieved in the direction of sustainability of higher education programmes, and CNVSU is working strongly to prepare tools for a wider accreditation.