

# Accreditation in Higher Education in Italy

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In the wake of the Bologna Declaration, the Italian higher education system is currently undergoing deep changes regarding the structure of degrees awarded and the accreditation process. After giving an insight into the reform of higher education cycles and qualifications in Italy, the essay outlines the procedures of approval, accreditation and evaluation of degree programmes as well as the minimum standards and the variables used for this purpose. Further emphasis is put on the institutional design of the accreditation process in Italy. In addition to a specification of the participating actors, the general regulations and the auxiliary means provided, the procedures regarding the design of curricula as well as the position and the options of the Italian higher education institutions to shape the process are illustrated.

## 1 The national system of higher education in Italy

### 1.1 Size of the system

Italian higher education is organized in a binary system: university education, and non-university education. The university sector consists of 77 institutions subdivided into two main categories: state universities (63 institutions) and non-state universities legally recognized by the competent State authority (14 institutions). The university population currently is 1.800.000 students.

The non-university sector covers, first, higher education institutions for music, dance, figurative and applied arts (fine art academies, national academies for dance and drama, national school for cinema, music conservatories and higher institutes for applied arts). Next, there is higher integrated technical education and training (IFTS programmes). The sector also comprises second level professional programmes under the responsibility of the Regions. Finally, there is higher education for languages (interpreters and translators).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Dieser Aufsatz ist ein gekürzter und aktualisierter Nachdruck einer Publikation in: Schwarz, Stefanie; Westerheijden, Don F. (Eds) (2004): Accreditation in the Framework of Evaluation Activities. A Study in the European Area. Frankfurt am Main (Reihe: Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft, Materialien und Dokumente Hochschule und Forschung, Bd. 105)

<sup>2</sup> See Berning, Ewald (2002): Hochschulen und Studium in Italien. München (Bayerisches Staatsinstitut für Hochschulforschung und Hochschulplanung, Monographien: Neue Folge 61)

## 1.2 Outcomes of the Bologna Declaration: Reforms of higher education cycles and qualifications

The main purpose of the 1999 reform was to endow all higher education institutions – and above all universities – with greater teaching autonomy, which was unprecedented in the Italian educational tradition. With reference to the university sector, the 1999 reform has now been fully implemented. Universities autonomously define the teaching rules of their degree programmes in their institutional teaching regulations (*Regolamento Didattico di Ateneo-RDA*); in particular, the RDA determines the name and the educational objectives of each degree programme, the general framework of the teaching activities to be included in the curriculum, the number of credits to be attributed to each teaching activity, and the modality of the final degree examination.

In conformity with the objectives of the Bologna Declaration, the 1999 university reform has also defined the new architecture of the system. Italian university studies are now organised in three cycles.

The first cycle (undergraduate studies) consists of one type of degree programme, called *Corsi di Laurea (CL)*, which aims at providing undergraduate students with an adequate command of general scientific methods and contents as well as specific professional skills. Access is based on the Italian school leaving qualification, which is awarded after passing the relevant state examinations, following completion of 13 years of schooling; equivalent foreign qualifications may also be accepted. Admission to individual degree programmes may be subject to specific course requirements. First degree programmes last for three years. The first degree (*Laurea-L*) is awarded to undergraduates who have earned 180 credits.

The second cycle (graduate studies) includes three types of degree programmes: *Corsi di Laurea Specialistica-CLS*; *Corsi di Specializzazione di 1° livello-CS1* and *Corsi di Master Universitario di 1° livello-CMU1*.

CLS are aimed at providing graduates with an advanced level of education for the exercise of a highly qualified professional activity in specific areas. Access to CLS is based on the Italian first degree (L) or an equivalent foreign qualification; its length is two years. The degree, *Laurea Specialistica-LS* (second degree), is awarded to graduates who have earned a global amount of 300 credits, including those of the first degree that have been recognised for access to the CLS (maximum 180); it is also compulsory to write an

original dissertation. A limited number of CLS regulated by specific EU directives (dentistry, medicine, veterinary medicine) share the following features: the educational requirement for access is the Italian school leaving diploma or an equivalent foreign qualification; admission is always subject to entrance exams; courses last for five years, except medicine which takes six years.

CS1 are devised to provide the knowledge and abilities needed for the practice of a few specialised or highly qualifying professions (e.g. teaching, legal professions); they may be established exclusively in application of specific Italian laws or EU directives.

CMU1 are advanced scientific programmes or continuing education courses open to the holders of a *Laurea-L* or an equivalent foreign degree; admission may be subject to additional conditions. The course lasts for a minimum of one year. The degree is awarded to graduates who have earned at least 60 credits.

*Corsi di Dottorato di Ricerca* (third cycle degree courses) aim at training postgraduates for very advanced scientific research or for very high professional appointments; they envisage the use of suitable teaching methodologies such as updated technologies, study periods abroad, internships in specialised research centers. Access is based on an Italian second degree (LS) or an equivalent foreign degree; admission is subject to passing very competitive exams; the official length of studies is at least three years; the writing of an original dissertation is necessary to obtain the third degree called *Dottorato di Ricerca-DR* (research doctorate).

Finally, the reform included the adoption of the Diploma Supplement (DS) and of a national credit system based on the ECTS. Therefore, Italian degree programmes are now structured in credits (CFU = *crediti formativi universitari*); a university credit corresponds to 25 hours of work, including personal study. The average annual workload of a fulltime student is fixed at 60 credits.

Table 1: Scheme of the Italian university system

Degree courses <i>corsi di studio</i>	Degrees <i>titoli accademici</i>	Credits earned CFU	Years anni
<b>1<sup>st</sup> cycle – undergraduate studies/students</b>			
Laurea degree course <i>Corso di Laurea</i> – CL	1 <sup>st</sup> degree/Laurea degree <i>Laurea</i> – L	180	3
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> cycle – graduate studies/students</b>			
2 <sup>nd</sup> (Laurea) degree course <i>Corso di Laurea Specialistica</i> – CLS	2 <sup>nd</sup> degree (2 <sup>nd</sup> Laurea) <i>Laurea Specialistica</i> – LS	120	2
1 <sup>st</sup> (level) Specialisation degree course <i>Corso di Specializzazione di 1° livello</i> – CS 1	1 <sup>st</sup> (level) Specialisation degree <i>Diploma di Specializzazione di 1° livello</i> – DS 1	120–180	2–3
1 <sup>st</sup> (level) University Master degree course <i>Corso di Master Universitario di 1° livello</i> – CMU 1	1 <sup>st</sup> (level) University Master degree <i>Master Universitario di 1° livello</i> – MU 1	60+	1+
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> cycle – postgraduate studies/students</b>			
Research Doctorate programme <i>Corso di Dottorato di Ricerca</i> – CDR	Research Doctorate degree <i>Dottorato di Ricerca</i> – DR		3+
2 <sup>nd</sup> (level) Specialisation degree course <i>Corso di Specializzazione di 2° livello</i> – CS 2	2 <sup>nd</sup> (level) Specialisation degree <i>Diploma di Specializzazione di 2° livello</i> – DS 2	60–300	1–5
2 <sup>nd</sup> (level) University Master degree course <i>Corso di Master Universitario di 2° livello</i> – CMU 2	2 <sup>nd</sup> (level) University Master degree <i>Master Universitario di 2° livello</i> – MU 2	60+	1+

## 2 Accreditation, approval and evaluation

### 2.1 Why programme accreditation?

In Italy, the system of accreditation of university degree programmes was launched in 2001. On the one hand, universities had just designed the new degree programmes and were applying to the state for funding. On the other hand, in order to allocate funds efficiently, the Ministry of Education (MIUR) asked the National Committee for the Evaluation of the University System (CNVSU) in order to elaborate a scheme of programme accreditation. Only accredited programmes would obtain ministerial financial support.

As a consequence, two distinct but correlated procedures came simultaneously into being: one for formal approval of new university curricula (see chapter 2.3), and one for the accreditation of the programmes themselves, after checking if they met the minimum quality standards (see chapter 2.2).

## 2.2 Accreditation of degree programmes: CNVSU's proposal

In its proposal, CNVSU adopted the definition of accreditation proposed in the 2001 CRE (Conférence des recteurs européens) report: "Accreditation is a formal, published statement regarding the quality of an institution or a programme, following a cyclical evaluation based on agreed standards". If we analyse that definition, the essential feature of accreditation is evidently the need to predetermine the requirements that are unanimously regarded as indispensable ('agreed standards') to guarantee the desirable quality levels. It is useful, therefore, to adopt a system of cyclical evaluation based on quantifiable, verifiable and representative indicators. Eventually, the publication of the evaluation outcomes ('published statement') aims to provide an explicit, substantial – and not purely formal – acknowledgement of the qualitative levels ascertained.

The objectives of the Italian system of programme accreditation have been determined as follows:

- Reduce autoreferential elements as well as the merely bureaucratic respect of the formal requirements;
- Create a system of clear information and transparent, verifiable guarantees on the qualitative standards of individual study programmes;
- Contribute to a competitive system that can operate fairly within a university context that is characterised by a wide and diversified educational offer;
- Promote within individual institutions a constant process for quality improvement by sensitising all actors involved;
- Allocate resources, organisational commitment, educational outcomes.

CNVSU's working plan provided for two subsequent implementation phases. First, a starting phase – pre-accreditation – in which the minimum standards were determined in terms of resources for an institution to offer sound education in the different classes of degree programmes, and, within individual classes, in each programme (number of teachers, their

qualification, number and sizes of classrooms, libraries, laboratories, etc.). The second phase of accreditation also had to consider the minimum standards in terms of the qualitative characteristics of the education process and of its outcome in terms of graduates.

### 2.3 Approval of degree programmes

The procedure for the approval of university degree programmes is articulated in the four phases outlined below.

#### ● Phase one: Drawing up of university teaching regulations (RDA)

Individual institutions codify the rules for the organisation of the teaching of their degree courses in the *Regolamenti Didattici di Ateneo* (RDAs). University teaching regulations and their amendments are issued by rectoral decree. The RDAs also determine the modalities according to which individual institutions must issue the Diploma Supplement. In conformity with the Lisbon Convention of 1997, it registers the main information on the specific curriculum completed by students to obtain that degree.

#### ● Phase two: Teaching regulations of degree programmes (RDC)

The teaching regulations of each degree programme (*Regolamento Didattico di Corso di studio*-RDC) are determined by the competent teaching structure in compliance with the RDA, taking into account the respect of freedom of teaching and of teachers' and students' rights and duties. Individual RDCs define the organisation of the respective degree programmes.

#### ● Phase three: Consultations and approvals

The proposal of a new programme must be accompanied by the opinions and supporting motivations of advisory bodies.

First, the *University Evaluation Unit* gives its opinion on available resources and their congruence with the objectives of the programme.

The *Regional Coordinating Committee* (CRC) advises on proposals for new programmes. The CRC is made up of the rectors of the universities in the same region, the president of the Regional Council and a student representative. The CRC also coordinates initiatives in such matters as the planning of access to university studies, student guidance and

welfare services, advanced professional education, lifelong and recurrent education, and the use of university facilities.

The *employers'* advice is also compulsory. Universities must consult local organisations representing industries, services and the professions to check the congruency of the educational proposals with the economic needs of the regional territory and the occupational opportunities that may be realistically offered to future graduates.

The *National University Council* (CUN) must check the proposals to determine whether they correspond to the compulsory curricular content according to the decrees approving the various degree classes and the teaching activities provided for by the RDA. The CUN may either approve the proposal or ask the university authorities to reconsider their proposal.

Finally, the office for university autonomy and students' affairs of the *Ministry of Education* (MIUR) examines the proposals, checks their procedural correctness, the compulsory advisory opinions, and issues the decrees approving the respective university teaching regulations.

#### ● Phase four: Approval of RDAs

Once this process of consultations and control has been completed, the rectors of the individual institutions approve the university teaching regulations. The RDAs are the internal legal basis to launch new degree programmes.

## 2.4 Minimum standards for accreditation

These are the aims that are agreed upon and the criteria that are adopted in the evaluation of the resources which are regarded as indispensable for the accreditation of new study programmes.

### Objectives of the control of minimum standards:

- Ensure all students (and their families) that each university has the resources necessary to support its educational offer;
- Through the dissemination of information to those concerned, guarantee that the educational offer of each institution is transparent and can be compared with that of other universities;

- Check the congruence between the supply, the demand for education, and available resources;
- Allow both MIUR and universities to allocate available resources efficiently through specific incentives and disincentives.

**General evaluation criteria:**

- One credit (CFU) must include approximately eight hours of 'front' teaching;
- Different reference dimensions have been identified with respect to students who enrol in the degree programmes of the various classes;
- Each permanent teacher normally covers 120 teaching hours in the classroom. It is assumed that such a teaching engagement is mainly (50%) for the Laurea programmes (first cycle), e.g. 60 hours • CL + 40 hours • CLS + 20 • CDR, master courses, etc.;
- The subjects in which available teachers are competent must be consistent with the profiles offered in terms of number of credits assigned to 'basic', 'qualifying', 'similar/integrative' educational activities;
- University facilities (classrooms, labs, etc.) must be adequate for all enrolled students (full-time, part-time).

**Variables used:**

- Programmes offered by the faculties (due to the transformation of already existing programmes and to the setting up of new ones);
- Enrolled students;
- Permanent teachers available in the different subject areas;
- Usable facilities (classrooms, laboratories, libraries).

**Calculation of adequate student numbers:**

- Full-time students are usually expected to have an average workload of 60 credits per year, corresponding to at least 1.500 hours. The institution must guarantee teaching services at least to the amount determined in the decrees that approved the degree classes (generally corresponding to 650–750 hours per year).



- Part-time students are required to engage in an average workload that corresponds to the number of credits for which they enrolled (less than 60). The teaching load for the educational activities reserved for such students (whose proportion will remain limited) is determined accordingly as the proportion of the 60 credits required from full-time students.

#### **Diversified dimensions of degree programmes:**

On the basis of preliminary analyses of the data concerning students who matriculated in 1999–2000, four groups of degree programmes have been identified with reference to the different classes; a referential quantity (maximum student number) and a variability interval have been attributed to each group. This type of evaluation was considered necessary to ensure minimum quality standards of the educational offer. It allows for timely adjustments of overcrowded courses through their diversification or subdivision, and avoiding courses with very few students, which could cause inefficient use of resources (excess educational offer). A higher number of matriculated students than the maximum value of the interval shows the need to adjust the resources and/or to provide for the subdivision or diversification of the offer. A lower number of matriculated students than the minimum shows a probably inefficient use of resources.

#### **Number of permanent teachers:**

The minimum number of permanent teachers for a Laurea programme is determined to cover at least 80% of the subjects related to the main types of educational activities (basic, qualifying, similar and integrative).

- One-cycle CLS: 15;
- Teachers engaged both in the CL and CLS in the first study programme of the class: 16; in the subsequent programmes: 12;
- Teachers engaged in one programme typology in the first study programme of the class: 9 (CL) and 7 (CLS); in the subsequent programmes: 7 (CL) and 5 (CLS).

**Facilities:**

- Classrooms must be able to host all students enrolled in each course year for 15–20 hours per week at least (60 CFU • eight teaching hours in the classroom = 480 seat-hours per student). If we calculate teaching periods of 28 (24) weeks a year, it amounts to 17.1 (20) seat-hours per week. Hence, a classroom that can adequately host a full class for 30–40 hours per week during the teaching periods may meet the needs of the students of two classes.
- Laboratories must be suitable to give all students the opportunity to use them. Availability of work places must be compatible with the requirements fixed in the teaching regulations of the different programmes or in specific regulations (e.g. in the case of *numerus clausus* programmes such as dentistry, medicine, or veterinary medicine).

**Application of minimum standards:**

Minimum standards have first been applied to first-degree programmes (CL). The total number of teachers needed for the programmes of a faculty has been determined by the sum of a + b + c:

a = minimum number of teachers for new and transformed CL:  $\text{Nr. of classes} \cdot 9 + (\text{Nr. of programmes} - \text{Nr. of classes}) \cdot 7$ ;

b = minimum number of teachers for one-cycle programmes:  $\text{Nr. of classes} \cdot 15 + (\text{Nr. of classes} - \text{Nr. of programmes}) \cdot 15$ ;

c = number of teachers employed in interfaculty programmes.

The number of teachers calculated according to the formula above must be subtracted from the number of teachers available in the faculty. A result below zero shows a lack of minimum standards, whilst a result above zero shows the presence of teachers who are employable in CLS (second cycle programmes).

**Criteria for special funding (innovation):**

The following criteria must be checked in the new CL for the allocation of special funds reserved for teaching innovation:

- Timeliness and completeness of procedures for the establishment and launch of the CL;
- Permanent group of teachers mainly engaged in the CL (minimum standards in terms of 'stable' teaching);
- Attractiveness: the number of students enrolled in the first year must be higher than the minimum planned;
- Evaluation of CL quality must be regular, and refer both to organisation and outcomes, according to both national and international criteria;
- Employability and connection with the context: clear definitions of the professional profiles and labour market; consultation with local representatives of the various socio-economic components (industries, services, the professions);
- Setting up of a 'trend committee' for each CL (which includes representatives of the labour market);
- Percentage of contract teachers who, hired from outside the academic world, are competent in specific professional fields;
- Inter-university and international co-ordination; regional planning of educational supply in conformity with the educational needs of the territory; international agreements for the co-ordination and exchanges.

**Evaluation effects:**

New CLs (i.e. not originating from previous Laurea programmes) must meet minimum quality standards to be included in the programmes that serve the objectives of the 2001–2003 planning and the related funding. If individual universities do not allocate the resources for teaching innovation in conformity with the pre-determined criteria, their quota of ordinary funding may be reduced.

Programmes that lack minimum quality standards are not funded nationally. Universities may decide to abandon them or to run them all the same using their own financial

resources. In particular cases, it is also possible to submit an adjustment plan to the CNVSU to reach the minimum quality standards.

#### **Agenda for the development of CNVSU's analyses:**

- 2001–2002: check of compatibility of total number of teachers per faculty with the educational programmes offered;
- 2002–2003: check the number of teachers available to ensure the CFU required (basic, qualifying, similar or integrative). Details on the availability of adequate facilities (classrooms and laboratories);
- 2003–2004: check teachers' specialisations in relation to the areas of the subjects offered. Map of available classroom places, of the need for laboratories, and facilities to support students. Advertise the programmes.

## **2.5 Further national accreditation systems**

### **Degree Programmes in Engineering**

The Council of the presidents of the Italian faculties of engineering has elaborated SINAI (the national system of evaluation and accreditation of degree programmes in engineering). The Council had two main motivations: the on-going process for the implementation of university teaching autonomy and the academic and professional recognition of qualifications within the European Union.

Regarding the former, as a consequence of curriculum liberalisation, automatic validation of academic and professional qualifications will no longer be possible. Degree programmes belonging to the same 'class' may lead to professional profiles with diverse competences, not only in different institutions, but also within the same university. This may occur even if the degrees bear the same name. Besides, a further consequence of the institutional autonomy process will be greater competition among universities. Hence, the problem of quality assurance becomes extremely important: competition in educational goals of a high standard will be necessary. The implementation of institutional teaching autonomy must therefore be accompanied by a rigorous application of quality control of educational objectives as well as of the structuring process and final product of individual degree programmes.

The second reason why it is urgent to start a national scheme of programme accreditation is the academic and professional recognition of qualifications within the European Union. At the European level the emerging trends in quality assurance and mutual recognition of qualifications in engineering all point to the need for trans-European co-ordination to facilitate recognition and mobility.

The accreditation system of programmes in engineering is based on their evaluation. It is now an internationally shared opinion that a system of accreditation of degree programmes (CdS) must be based on an evaluation of the CdS. We note that evaluation of a CdS may concern either teaching (from the educational objectives of the CdS to the resources and methodologies which allow for their achievement) or organisation (the evaluation must make the application of the procedures devised for the observation and control of teaching and its outcomes credible). Some accreditation systems prefer to evaluate teaching rather than organisation (e.g. ABET); others (in particular those inspired by ISO 9000) prefer to evaluate organisation.

To achieve the highest objectivity and efficiency, the SINAI method integrates evaluation of teaching and of organisation in a single procedure, thus adopting an approach that is original at the international level. Its designers were conscious that the introduction of an evaluation culture in CdS must take place gradually. The procedure would consist in six fundamental steps: production of data, indicators, and parameters; their analysis; drawing up of an annual self-evaluation report; regular control and external evaluation by an independent body; quality improvement measures; observation of effects.

### **Master Programmes in Business Administration**

Accreditation of MBA programmes has been consolidated over the years. The accrediting agency is an independent association, ASFOR (Association for business management training). Established in 1971 to promote a management culture and develop the educational offer in that field, ASFOR now has more than 50 members (higher schools, universities, and other institutions). It participates in the main European projects on the development of management and quality control.

The main objective of its accrediting process and of the granting of the label 'accredited by ASFOR' is to make a clear distinction between those master programmes which meet a significant set of requirements – to be evaluated globally – and the thousands of programmes offered as 'Master's'. At present, there are some 20 programmes which are

accredited by ASFOR. The decision on the significance and solidity of individual programmes is based on:

- Check of the existence of objective and explicit criteria that the organising institution sends in beforehand (objective and comparable basis for evaluation);
- Partial evaluations expressed by each of the bodies involved in the accrediting process.

Through its accrediting operations, ASFOR intends to provide a useful service to the potential clients of master programmes: they may avail themselves of a guidance tool. It is also a service for companies: thanks to the existence of minimum quality standards, they may rely on a more homogeneous product. Finally, ASFOR aims to support the higher education institutions: when applying for accreditation, they accept to engage in the constant upgrading of their respective programmes.

The minimum compulsory standards for ASFOR accreditation are:

- Applicants' selection: applicants' personnel data (age, academic qualifications, previous professional experience at managerial level) and admission procedures;
- Teaching: minimum length in hours, study plan (compulsory subject areas), on-the-job projects, academic staff, teaching direction;
- Evaluation of participants' performance: expected outcomes must be determined at the beginning of the programme, checked at regular intervals, formally assessed at the end;
- Placement procedures: percentage of master's degree holders who are employed at their level within six months;
- Programme funding.

### **Accreditation of Non-State Institutions**

Italy has 14 Non-state universities, almost one fifth of the present total number of Italian universities. In the history of Italian universities, institutional accreditation has taken different forms in relation to the main transformations affecting the university system. In the system in force in the post-war period up to the 1980s, institutional accreditation took place through a process which resulted in the legal establishment of a university

or the transformation into State universities of private institutions (*libere università*) or of separate branches of State universities. It is possible to trace in all these procedures some implicit measures of quality assurance: certain minimum standards are required, together with the favourable opinion of the advisory bodies made up of representatives of the academic staff. Those involved in the process included the institution applying for accreditation and the Government, Parliament, the Ministry of Education and the National University Council.

Institutional accreditation changed when university planning on a national basis was introduced with the first four-year plan of university development (1986–1990). The establishment of new universities lost its former element of spontaneity and became subject to criteria of rational planning and specific provisions to be included in pluri-annual plans for the development of the university system. This new phase involved the *Regional Co-ordination Committee*, made up of the rectors of the universities located in the same region, and CRUI (Conference of the Rectors of Italian universities): they both had to give their opinions on the individual proposals and the university development plan as a whole.

More recently (as from 1996), the legal process of formal approval has been supported by an external evaluation carried out independently of the Ministry of Education by the *Observatory for the Evaluation of the University System*, which later became the *National Committee for the Evaluation of the University System* (CNVSU). CNVSU examines teaching, research and buildings; the availability of adequate human resources for teaching and administration; and the availability of necessary financial resources and the articulation of the budget. If CNVSU gives a favourable opinion, the next step is the formal establishment of the Non-state university. The juridical instrument that is used is a ministerial decree which simultaneously approves the statute and the RDA (university teaching regulations), legally recognises the institution, and authorises it to award legal degrees. The process for the accreditation of Non-state universities does not only consist in an *ex ante* evaluation. CNVSU also periodically checks the situation *ex post* – that is after the formal approval of the institution and the publication of the related decree – to ascertain consistency of the subsequent development phases of the university with the development plan submitted for approval. Therefore, at later stages, CNVSU checks the existence of the minimum standards in relation to teaching, instrumental equipment, building structures, financial resources, and personnel in order to verify that there is an adequate number of permanent teachers, researchers and technicians, depending on the university, as well as adequate infrastructures and services for all students.

This is CNVSU's way of interpreting its role as the 'guide' of Italian universities towards the evaluation culture. Its methodology of *ex post* evaluation aims to control how far the newly recognised institutions carry out their initial development plan; how consistent a plan they have elaborated for the adjustment of their facilities during the first years of their newly-acquired legal status; time and modalities in which the new institutions succeed in obtaining all the resources needed to carry out a regular teaching and research work at university level; the availability of teachers in the transition phase in relation to those required for their future permanent status.

### 3 Analysis of the accreditation processes: actors and regulations

Following the publication in the official journal of the Italian Republic of the legal tool introducing university teaching autonomy (Ministerial Decree 509 of 3 November 1999), universities were actively engaged in designing new degree programmes. This took about one year (2000–2001). As soon as the institutions officially presented their educational offer for the academic year 2001–2002, the procedures for the approval and accreditation of the new programmes started in early 2001. The Ministry of Education (MIUR) decided to set in motion a monitoring process to check if individual universities, when designing the new curricula, complied with all features and requirements they had submitted for approval, and if the degree programmes really met the minimum quality standards agreed upon.

MIUR began by requesting the co-operation of CNVSU, the national committee for the evaluation of the university system (i.e. the Italian Agency for Quality Assurance in University Education), but other actors were also rapidly involved in the approval and accreditation procedures.

It seems relevant to point out that, in the present phase of the process, a discrepancy has been observed between the accrediting actors on the one hand and a large component of the academic world on the other. While at the national level the complex legal provisions of programme approval and accreditation have been implemented, at the institutional level there is very limited awareness of what is going on among academics and administrative officers who are not directly involved. Action should therefore be taken to inform the academic and university staff about accreditation and to sensitise them to the need for regular quality evaluation in every day university life.



### 3.1 The actors in the Italian system of programme approval and accreditation

The procedures for the accreditation of degree programmes have been agreed upon by a technical team made up of CNVSU, MIUR, CRUI and CNSU.

#### **National Committee for the Evaluation of the University System (CNVSU)**

The CNVSU determines the criteria for the evaluation of all universities; draws up an annual report on the evaluation of the university system; promotes the experimentation and implementation of quality assessment procedures, methodologies, and practices. It also carries out technical evaluations of the proposals to establish new State or Non-state universities in order to authorise them to award legal degrees. Furthermore, CNVSU defines the data that universities must transmit periodically to the committee itself. It elaborates and executes an annual plan of external assessment sessions concerning individual institutions or single teaching units. It reports on university planning (level of accomplishment and results), carries out research on the state of university education and student welfare services with a view to implement social justice and democracy in education, and on policies regulating access to university programmes. It carries out studies to define criteria for the redistribution to universities of the balance quota from the total funds for their ordinary financing. At the Minister's request, the CNVSU also carries out preliminary investigations and advisory sessions, defines standards and parameters and elaborates technical legal texts with reference to the different activities of individual universities and to the projects and proposals they submit to the ministry.

CNVSU is an independent body that interacts autonomously with individual universities and the Ministry of Education, University and Research; it has a technical and administrative secretariat and has a specific place in the national budget.

#### **Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR)**

The MIUR was established in 1999. It merged the facilities, financial resources, staff and functions of the former *Ministry of Education* (MPI) and *Ministry for Universities and Scientific and Technological Research* (MURST). Concerning university education, MIUR plans the development of the university and research systems; is responsible for legislation on general education matters and financing of universities and public research bodies; monitors and evaluates the education system; transposes the EU and international legislation into the Italian education system; deals with European harmonisation and international integration; implements university autonomy; supervises non-univer-

sity institutions of university level; regulates university access; participates in the activities related to the access to the civil service and regulated professions; ensures a connection between university and school education as well as between vocational and professional training.

### **Conference of the Italian University Rectors (CRUI)**

The CRUI is an association of the rectors of all Italian universities, both State and Non-state but legally recognised. CRUI pursues the following goals: present the needs of the university system to government and parliament, based on an in-depth analysis of issues; express its views on the university development plan and on the state of university education; promote and support university initiatives at national and international level by developing close relations with similar associations within and outside the European Union.

### **National Council of University Students (CNSU)**

The CNSU was conceived as an advisory body of student representatives. It elaborates proposals for the Minister in the following fields: projects to restructure the university system; ministerial decrees on general guidelines for the organisation of degree courses, and providing means and methods to promote student guidance and mobility; criteria for the use of the balance quota, i.e. the amount of the total fund for the ordinary university funding which is determined through the re-equilibrium formula. In addition, CNSU elects its representatives at CUN (National University Council); may submit proposals on other university matters of general interest; draws up for the minister a national report on student conditions in the university system; may interrogate the minister about facts of national consequence concerning teaching and student life.

### **National University Council (CUN)**

University proposals for new degree programmes are also subject to the advice of the National University Council. CUN is an elective body representative of university autonomy. It formulates proposals and advice on university planning, criteria for the use of the balance quota from the fund for the ordinary financing of universities, decrees regulating the structure of degree programmes, definition of subject sectors and recruitment of university teachers and researchers.

### Other relevant actors

Italian universities have set up a system for the internal evaluation of their operational management, teaching and research activities, and student welfare services. Availing themselves of comparative analyses of costs and results, all institutions verify the correct use of public resources, research and teaching productivity, the regular development and the fairness of their management. At each institution, evaluation is in the hands of a collegial body, the *University Evaluation Unit*. Its composition, objectives and functions are regulated by the university statutes: it is made up of five to nine appointed members, at least two of whom are chosen among scholars and researchers who have experience in the field of quality assessment, even if they do not belong to the academic community. University evaluation units are granted the following rights: operational autonomy, access to all necessary information, and dissemination of their proceedings within the legal limits of the respect for privacy. Evaluation units periodically collect anonymous students' opinions on the teaching activities of the respective institutions.

With respect to the new degree programmes, the approval and accreditation process made use of the database on the educational offer of all Italian universities (<http://offertaformativa.miur.it>), which was constituted to:

- Provide telematic support for the elaboration of the new degree programmes, from their planning to ministerial approval and the control of minimum quality standards;
- Provide full information on the educational offer of individual universities and on the teaching content of all their programmes (these we described by means of a common standardised grid) in order to guide students in their choice of studies.

### 3.2 Degree programmes: from national definition of curricula to institutional teaching autonomy

As with higher education systems in some other continental European countries, the Italian university model was based on academic programmes and degrees whose content was rigidly defined by national regulations under the supervision of the State. Because of such centralised control in addition to their academic significance, university degrees also had 'legal validity' and produced juridical effects (e.g. in relation to public competitions for functions in the civil service or for access to regulated professions).

Over the years, national university regulations have evolved considerably; the most interesting phases of their evolution are summarised in the following paragraphs.

In a first phase, the national teaching regulations consisted in a series of detailed rules and tables which fixed the names of the different programmes, their legal length, the number and names of compulsory subjects, the modalities of final degree examinations, and the names of the degrees to be conferred. The most obvious consequence was national homogeneity of degree programmes in the same field and of the same type. The laws that produced these regulations date back to the early 1930s; the act most commonly quoted as the main legislative reference is the decree No. 1652 of 1938.

A partial liberalisation was introduced in 1969 to satisfy the pressing requests from university student associations. Students were allowed to submit individual study plans, which were different from those defined by the teaching regulations, provided they respected the pre-determined number of subjects and chose from the list of subjects actually offered by the respective faculties. These 'personal' study plans were subject to the approval of the competent faculty councils whose members, when making their decisions, had to take into account the educational level and the professional competence to be achieved by those students through the degree programmes concerned.

The national regulations underwent a substantial revision in 1990 with the *riforma degli ordinamenti didattici universitari* (reform of university teaching rules; Law No. 341 of 1990). Its main objective was to restructure all degree programmes on the basis of the greater university autonomy, and promote greater flexibility of the system. In this respect, the 1990 reform:

- Sanctioned revision of curricula of all degree programmes, defined criteria for their regular updating, and modified administrative revision procedures;
- Introduced the principle that the educational content of a programme is partly optional, meaning that national regulations must determine only general subject areas to be covered; hence, once the minimum standard of homogeneity necessary to preserve the legal validity of individual degrees was granted, much leeway was given to individual institutions;
- Pursued the recomposition of knowledge by opposing fragmentation in ever more specialised fields and in ever more subject courses, through the definition of subject areas.

The Ministerial Decree 509/1999 reform had to reconcile two conflicting factors: the institutional autonomy in the definition of university curricula and the need for legal validity of degrees through their reference to national regulations. The 'classe' was introduced as a solution. The degree programmes of the same cycle and typology which share the same qualifying educational objectives and the related indispensable teaching/learning activities, independently of the names they are given in individual universities, were organised in groups called '*classi di appartenenza*'. In relation to each class of degree programmes, at national level the qualifying educational objectives were identified along with the teaching/learning activities necessary to achieve them; these activities have been grouped in six main types:

- Basic education;
- Subject fields characterising each class;
- Subject fields connected with or integrative in relation to those characterising the class, with special reference to cultural contexts and interdisciplinarity;
- Educational activities chosen by students;
- Educational activities aimed to check students' competences in foreign languages, and to train them for the final degree examination;
- Other educational activities devised for the students to acquire further competences in foreign languages, information technology and telecommunications skills, abilities to create relations, or any additional skill or competence that can help their transition to the labour market; these activities are also meant to facilitate students' choice of a future profession through direct contact with the labour market (e.g. professional guidance and training periods).

The central authority determines a minimum number of credits that are compulsory at national level for each of the above. Individual institutions autonomously define the content and development of the curricula in a national context.

## 4 Accreditation and evaluation schemes in relation to Europe and globalisation

### 4.1 Italy and the Bologna Process

Italy immediately transposed the principles and criteria of the Bologna Declaration into national legislation. The ministerial decree 509/1999, while defining a number of detailed provisions concerning the university system, also determined the complete reform of its overall framework by dividing it into cycles, establishing first degrees which granted their holders an initial effective transition to the labour market, introducing a credit system based on the ECTS, and adopting the Diploma Supplement. This was in conformity with the two international agreements signed by the European Higher Education Ministers at the Sorbonne and in Bologna in 1998 and 1999, respectively.

In order to promote the Bologna Process further, Italy has modified its national legislation to allow Italian universities to design integrated curricula leading to joint degrees, in collaboration with foreign institutions.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Italy has considerably developed the internationalisation of its university system thanks to two specific projects launched in 1999 and 2001 respectively.<sup>4</sup> Both are supported financially by the Ministry of Education through a co-financing plan.

These two projects undoubtedly encouraged the internationalisation of universities. They facilitated international programmes for mobility of students, teachers and researchers, which created a cultural climate in the universities that initiated and sustained international and intercultural initiatives. This stimulated the process of university self-assessment, as it gave greater opportunities for comparison with university systems of partner countries, the integration of curricula or the introduction of an international and intercultural dimension in teaching and learning activities, in research and in services.

The first internationalisation project resulted in the financing of 178 degree programmes (out of 477 proposals submitted by 68 institutions); the overall financial commitment amounted to 52 billion lire (almost 27 million euro), of which 20 billion lire (about 10 million euro) came from the Ministry and 32 billion lire (about 16.5 million euro) from the universities concerned.

<sup>3</sup> See paragraph 9 of art. 3 of Ministerial Decree 509/1999.

<sup>4</sup> See art. 7 of Ministerial Decree 313/1999, and art. 10 of Ministerial Decree 115/2001, respectively.

As the first project met with widespread approval (witness the number of submitted proposals), the ministry decided to open a second round for the period 2001–2003. The new proposals, again based on the principle of co-financing, were to meet some more specific requirements. For example, the ministry favoured inter-university co-operation proposals that aimed at the study of themes related to the Bologna Declaration's common European Area of Higher Education. Examples are accreditation, credits, diploma supplement, assessment, quality assurance, and academic recognition of qualifications. Besides, the proposed initiatives were to be devised to improve the quality of university organisation and its administrative structures from an international perspective and to produce positive effects on the university system. The overall financial commitment of the proposals submitted amounted to over 22 million euro, 15.5 million euro of which came from the universities concerned.

#### **4.2 Italy and GATS**

The principle of the free movement of professional services, which is one of the main GATS objectives, recently found a concrete application in Italy. In the legal process that led to the latest national legislation on immigration of citizens from non-EU countries, some regulations have been approved concerning the recognition of professional qualifications awarded to non-EU citizens by non-EU education institutions and professional bodies (cf. articles 49 and 50 of the Presidential Decree 394 of 3 November 1999). Italy has applied to these professional qualifications the same recognition mechanisms provided for by the EEC General Systems. In doing so, Italy has taken an innovative course aimed at facilitating the free movement of all professionals, independent of their nationality.

#### **5 Other quality assessment activities in higher education**

Among the various actions for quality assessment in the Italian university sector, two initiatives should be mentioned in particular. They concern student evaluation of both university administrative structures and of teaching methodology.

The 'Good Practice' Project – financed by the National Committee for the Evaluation of the University System (CNVSU) – aimed at improving university management by analysing the effectiveness and efficiency of the administrative activities at different universities. Some specific objectives of the project were to:

- Make adequate provisions for management effectiveness in relation to different types of 'clients', both inside each institution (teachers and researchers in particular) and outside each institution (mainly students);
- Check the possibility of adopting the same testing model not only to compare the performance of different universities at the same moment, but also to analyse the development of a single university over a certain period;
- Carry out the benchmarking not only of performance, but also of processes, to increase the number of available instruments to better understand the reasons for variations in results at various institutions;
- Facilitate the dissemination of the project data and conclusions to all university administrative officers by creating a managerial panel for consultation.

The second is the 'Euro Student' Project – currently run by the *Fondazione Rui*, which also started it in 1995 – consists of a national survey of the study and living conditions of Italian university students. The inquiry, which is updated every three years, is now in its third round. Data are collected by means of a questionnaire which the students fill in anonymously. Students' assessment of university teaching is examined with great care. In this respect, the final report offers interesting information at national level on the evaluation of different teaching modalities (in particular, university lectures), of university teachers' performance with reference to their professional competence, knowledge of their specialisation, teaching aptitude and method, ability to arouse their students' interest, etc. and about the teaching facilities of individual faculties.

## 6 Recent developments

There are the main developments which have lately occurred within the university sector of Italian higher education.

Towards the end of 2004, a new legislative provision introduced a few changes in the 1999 reform. Taking advantage of the experience gained by individual universities in the first four-year implementation period, institutional autonomy has been further extended with respect to degree programme designing; besides, all the classes<sup>5</sup> of *Laurea* courses

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<sup>5</sup> Classes of degree courses = groups of degree courses of the same cycle by main subject fields; e.g. class No. 12 of 1<sup>st</sup> cycle degree courses collects all the three-year *Lauree* in biology.



have been revised, the name of the *Laurea Specialistica* (the two-year master-level degree) has been turned into *Laurea Magistrale*, and the use of the academic title 'Dottore' has been regulated by national law.

As far as the accreditation of university degree programmes is concerned, the first evaluation model – which essentially consisted in checking the existence of a range of minimum requirements – has developed into a more complex pattern based on a combination of both quantitative and qualitative indicators. Accreditation is now granted after obtaining documentary evidence of the existence of the following four fundamental dimensions in the degree programme concerned:

- Needs, purposes;
- Teaching, learning, assessment;
- Resources, facilities;
- Monitoring, evaluation, revision.

A new method for university financing was adopted by a legislative act of 2004; it was devised to incentivate the quality of both teaching and research.

The 30% of the State funding now depends on the demand to be met by individual institutions (the demand is quantified by the number of enrolled students at each university site); a second 30% is linked to effective educational outcomes, yearly measured by the numbers of credits earned; another 30% is connected to the results of institutional research activities; the rest (10%) is reserved for specific incentives.

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