GIUNIO LUZZATTO AND ROBERTO MOSCATI

# UNIVERSITY REFORM IN ITALY: FEARS, EXPECTATIONS AND CONTRADICTIONS

## 1. THE CONTENTS OF THE REFORM

### *1.1. The Starting Point*

During the last third of the past century, higher education in all developed countries, including Italy, experienced a dramatic increase in student numbers. From 1965 to 1995, enrolments in Italian higher education went from 298,000 students to 1,116,000 – nearly a fourfold increase.

However, there was no significant change in the structure of the higher education system. During the 1960s and 1970s, various reform laws were proposed, but never came to a final vote in Parliament; this was due not only to governmental instability, but also to strong academic political connections and conservatism.

Of course, minor adjustments were implemented in order to meet new needs. The number of professors substantially increased, and in 1980 their status was reorganised according to three positions: full professor, associate professor and researcher. In the same year, PhD programmes started. In 1990 a short-cycle course (*Diploma universitario*, 3 years) was added to the traditional long-cycle one (*Laurea*, 4 or 5 years). Elements of autonomy were introduced into a system traditionally highly centralised and bureaucratic: universities obtained a certain amount of freedom in defining their statutes (in 1989) and in managing their budgets (in 1993).

However, there was no autonomy at all as far as degrees and curricula were concerned. A decree by the Minister was required to establish or to change any degree. The decree covered every detail concerning the curriculum leading to the degree. The system was quite rigid.

Two indicators demonstrate the inadequacy of this system. From 1965 to 1995, the students *fuori corso*, that is, those not graduating in standard time but still enrolled at university, increased from 105,000 (one-third of regular students) to 569,000 (more than a half). This reduced the numbers graduating, with the average age at the time of graduation being between 25 and 26 years old. The proportion of drop-outs reached more than 65% in 1997.

Diplomas (short-cycle courses) brought no meaningful improvement: less than 10% of students followed diploma programmes. Their lack of attractiveness was due



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both to the fact that diplomas were not a 'first-cycle' *Laurea* programme, and to their lack of recognition by the labour market.

Also due to unsuccessful experimentation with short-cycle courses, there has been no political effort to establish a non-university sector in higher education, except for the particular field of Arts (*Accademia* for visual arts, *Conservatorio* for music). There are experiments with postsecondary programmes (*Istruzione e Formazione Tecnica Superiore*, IFTS), and a possible expansion of IFTS is indicated in a very recent reform law of the secondary school system. However, at the moment, IFTS has very low student numbers, is present in only a few cities and has no institutional status.

### *1.2. The Reform Law (1997) and the following Decrees (1999–2000)*

In 1997, a general higher education Reform Law was adopted. Its goal was to enable the system – whose structures still corresponded to an obsolete idea of an elite university – to fulfil new functions, and be more widely open to a dynamic world. A first objective was to overcome the negative situation outlined above. This required both a differentiation of the degrees, in order to meet different needs, and a student-centred teaching organisation, in order to lower the number of drop-outs and *fuori corso* and to have a graduation age comparable to that in the rest of Europe.

Thus, there were clear political goals to be achieved. A necessary instrument to reach them was flexibility of programmes and curricula; and flexibility required increased university autonomy. Consequently, autonomy had to be interpreted as a valuable tool, not as an end in itself.

The general objectives provided by the 1997 Law had to be specified by ministerial decrees. A committee of experts, led by Guido Martinotti, vice-rector of the University of Milano-Bicocca, was appointed to elaborate proposals for those decrees. After a few months, a report was submitted, and a debate about it started throughout the university world in Italy. While almost every academic senate, every faculty, every professor had always complained about the absence of reforms, many diverging opinions immediately came to the fore once a concrete project was put on the table.

Minister Luigi Berlinguer thought that aligning the reforms with European trends in higher education could help in overcoming internal resistance. Thus, together with French Minister Claude Allègre he seized the opportunity of a Sorbonne centennial celebration (in 1998) in order to draw up a joint statement by the Ministers of France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom about a common orientation in their university policies; that statement, together with the following Bologna declaration (1999), became a cornerstone on the way towards implementing the Italian reform.

A change of minister (quite frequent in Italy) brought some delay. However, continuity was ensured by Under Secretary of State Luciano Guerzoni, who was in charge of the ministerial action concerning the Reform, and finally Decree Number 509, *Regolamento recante norme concernenti l'autonomia didattica degli*

*Atenei*, was adopted in November 1999. The Decree organises university degrees and programmes along the following lines:

- The first degree (*Laurea*) is a prerequisite for the second degree (*Laurea specialistica*),[1] and a qualification for the labour market. Curricula may be partly differentiated, in order to orient students more towards further study or towards employability, by varying the mix of basic foundations of disciplines and of applied activities (laboratory or extramural).
- Credits, to be defined according to ECTS (European Credit Transfer System), are now part of an accumulation system, not just a transfer system, as was the case with respect to the European programmes for student mobility. The credits connected with each course are the bricks on which a 'modular' curriculum is built. Programmes are defined in terms of credits, not by their length: *Laurea* is a 180-credit programme, *Laurea specialistica* is a 300-credit programme. The specification of three, or five, years of study merely indicates the time usually required by regular full-time students to complete those programmes.
- Normally, 180 of the 300 credits needed for *Laurea specialistica* are obtained through recognition of credits acquired in a *Laurea* programme. For the same *Laurea specialistica*, more than one *Laurea* may have an entirely recognised curriculum; the 120 credits to be added are going to be different for students coming from different *Lauree*, in order to complement the ones already acquired. Access to a *Laurea specialistica* may also be allowed from a *Laurea* curriculum only partly recognised; in this case, more than 120 credits have to be added.
- For both *Lauree* and *Lauree specialistiche*, *Classes of study programmes* are determined at the national level; a Class is the framework for the study programmes offered by universities in the same disciplinary field.[2] The legal value of a degree (e.g. for access to regulated professions or to the civil service) is the one attributed to the Class to which the degree belongs.
- Each Class is characterised through a description of its general cultural and professional objectives, and through prescriptions concerning no more than two-thirds of the credits required for the degree; those prescriptions assign a certain number of credits to sets of subjects, not to individual subjects, leaving in any case at least 5% of the credits as electives for each student. The determination of the Classes, and their characterisation, may be revised every three years.
- Within any Class, each university may build up one or more study programmes. For each programme, the university: (i) determines precise cultural and professional objectives, in the frame of the general ones indicated for the Class; (ii) defines the exact title of the degree awarded at the end of the programme; (iii) assigns a part of the credits by choosing one or several subjects within each set as defined by the national prescriptions; (iv) is completely free in assigning the remaining number of credits (at least one-third).

- In each programme more than one curriculum may be offered, and this enhances flexibility. Moreover, students may propose a do-it-yourself curriculum, combining credits according to their own interests. Such a proposal has to be submitted to the Council in charge of the programme, and the Council may either approve it, or reject it, or ask for modifications.
- To guarantee transparency, the study programmes of all universities are listed on a national web site; furthermore, it is compulsory to add to any degree the 'Diploma Supplement', formulated according to European agreements.
- The PhD is the third degree which has legal recognition. No *Classes* are defined in this case; the only national prescription is that *Laurea specialistica* is necessary to be admitted, and that the PhD programme has to last at least three years.
- Programmes not leading to a recognised degree (e.g. programmes for further education, or specialisation courses) may be offered by universities on a completely autonomous basis. A programme of 60 credits at least, requiring a degree for admission, may use the name of *Master universitario* ('*di primo livello*' if it follows *Laurea*, '*di secondo livello*' if it follows *Laurea specialistica*).
- Generally, there are no restrictions (*numerus clausus*) to entering university programmes, except for the cases where rules are given by the EU. Universities are allowed to place some restriction on individual programmes, due to restrictions in existing facilities (e.g. classrooms, laboratories).

Having given the general rules through the Decree Number 509, the next step for the government was the determination of the various *Classes* and their characterisation. This was accomplished in 2000, through a decree defining 42 Classes for *Lauree* and another one defining 104 Classes for *Lauree specialistiche*. To give an idea of what a Class means, here are some examples: for '*Laurea'* there is a Class 1 *Biotechnologies*, a Class 25 *Physical Sciences and Technologies* and a Class 38 *Historical Sciences*; for *'Laurea specialistica'* a Class 7/S *Agricultural biotechnologies*, a Class 85/S *Geophysical Sciences* and a Class 98/S *Modern History*.

Inside each Class, there are prescriptions concerning sets of subjects and corresponding credits. In order to avoid programmes constituting a very narrow group of disciplines, for all Classes not only subjects belonging to the most specific area characterising the Class are indicated, but also subjects belonging to related areas, and some space is guaranteed for interdisciplinary connections and extramural work (Luzzatto 2001).

Within the framework described above, the universities had to reorganise their whole teaching programme. Almost all programmes for the new *Laurea* started in 2001; for *Laurea specialistica*, the first programmes started in 2002.

## 2. PROBLEMS IN THE REFORM IMPLEMENTATION

All educational reforms have a number of obstacles to overcome. In its implementation, the Italian University Reform had to face (and is still facing) a number of difficulties that can be differentiated into two domains:

- The absence of the consideration of a number of prerequisites as crucial for the success of the Reform and its 'philosophy'.
- The attitudes of the main actors involved in the change process, particularly academics.

### *2.1. Weaknesses in the Framework*

Basically, the idea of the Reform originated with a small number of members of the government and the professoriate. Government supporters feared Parliament would endlessly debate all the details and possibly impose delaying strategies. The result was an unusually rapid process of elaboration, presentation and approval of the project. This speediness – although useful to the Reform's approval – left the core of the project deprived of a number of structural supports of crucial relevance for its complete success.

First of all, a redefinition of the academic profession in terms of rights and duties of this peculiar category of civil servants, making it more in line with the new rules the Reform was introducing, did not become a political issue. Consequently, there is no clear definition of the distribution of teaching loads, which the Reform has increased together with a new involvement in administrative matters, tutoring and organisational business. In addition, academics remain linked to their disciplinary fields, hindering identification with their university as an institution. Thus institutional collegiality is made less appealing and more difficult to achieve.

Secondly, the government did not provide an additional financial allocation in the budget to support the Reform. The Reform, if nothing else, created a substantial increase in teaching. This created a shortage of teachers and, in many cases, of classrooms, which will become more and more evident when the second level of courses is completely activated.

Lack of financial resources prevented significant incentives for academic staff to be willing to give more time to teaching activities and prevented the part-time engagement of school teachers. This was one of the reasons why the proposed comprehensive orientation programme for secondary school students in their final years was not implemented. This created a serious mismatch between the cultural background of prospective university students and the requirements of the new courses, that could be measured in terms of debts of credits. The problem is that, due to a number of organisational reasons, it is very difficult for universities to provide a large number of remedial courses before or during the first year of study for students who may have chosen a field of study without any serious consideration of their background and inclinations.

Another consequence of the weakly supported start to the Reform is the delay in the implementation of the evaluation policy which remains undeveloped. This is

particularly unfortunate for the complete development of the autonomy that is supposed to characterise the system. Without evaluation the autonomy of the universities will not create a real system of higher education.

The same governmental attitude (which became less and less favourable with the change of Minister of the University and Scientific Research, and later when the entire government changed following the 2001 election) did not help the presentation of the main points of the reform project. Besides a few minor initiatives in some universities, the rather complex structure of the Reform was not publicly debated. The government was supposed to hold a number of conferences throughout the country, but they were constantly postponed. Thus, the implications of the Reform were not at all clear to the large majority of academic staff, and in many cases they were misunderstood. Even now there are many different interpretations of the Reform in the university system.

Finally, with respect to autonomy, there is the further issue of the adaptation of university governance to the new needs of individual universities and of the system as a whole. The way of leading a self-governing university in competition with other universities has been left to the traditional leadership (rector, academic senate and administrative council), which is tailored to a centralised system where power in the individual university is based on the balance among different disciplinary fields. At the system level, the Ministry did not reshape its structure (or develop its culture) in order to provide the general framework for the working of university networks and to verify and reword individual performances. Consequently, the old structure (and culture) retain power and control.

### *2.2. The Attitude of the Academic World*

The lack of an appropriate framework able to facilitate the success of the reform project presents only one side of the picture – a side where the predominant role is played by the government and the world of politics in general. However, in the analysis of the implementation process a crucial role is also played by other actors, mainly the professoriate.

The attitude of the university professors towards the Reform has been far from homogeneous. Opposing positions have been taken with differences arising among disciplinary fields and divisions within the same area, faculty or department. Generally, academic staff in the Hard Sciences (pure and applied) seem to be more in favour of the Reform, perhaps thanks to their tradition of being more in touch with the European dimension and thus more aware of the needs to reduce the gap with other European systems of higher education. On the other hand, groups of professors from the Humanities and Law developed a sometimes strong resistance toward the innovations sponsored by the Reform. Besides a general resistance towards innovations and change processes, the attitude of this part of academia is an example of a traditional way of interpreting the role of the university, and academic staff, which is very much diffused among Italian university professors (Moscati 1997). Simply, this attitude conceives of the university as an institution for the formation of an elite and, accordingly, the role of the university professor is

dedicated to the accomplishment of this purpose. This attitude, while producing a rather vertical and authoritarian structure of internal relations inside academia, well described by Clark (1977), can be explained by the self-reliance of the academic world and its relative marginality in Italian society. The transformation of the system from elite to mass higher education (which began in Italy in the early 1960s) conflicted with the traditional attitude of a relevant part of the academic staff who wanted to maintain strong selection of students. On the one hand, the government's open-door policy supported the growing social demand for higher education, while on the other, a substantial proportion of academics continued selecting students through a very severe evaluation of their performance based on elite standards. This elitist attitude explains the resistance of part of the academic staff to the reform project since it made very clear the difference between the task of the first level of courses (the heightening of the country social capital) and that of the second level (the training of the elite) (Trow 1974; Capano 1998, 2002). For the academic 'traditionalist', the introduction of the first level simply meant the cultural decline of the university.

At the same time, a large number of university professors, even inside the Humanities and Social and Political Sciences, accepted the idea of the Reform. Support came first from the academic leadership, namely, rectors (through their National Conference: the CRUI), deans and heads of departments; also, professors responsible for individual study programmes were heavily involved. Due to their roles of collective responsibility these members of academia were more than others aware of the need for a modernisation of the higher education system, and thus started to work for the Reform's implementation. The traditional vertical academic power structure helped to engender a positive attitude toward the Reform. As a result, a good number of academic staff became involved in the hard work of transforming the structure of study courses and curricula. Through this collective effort the new configuration of courses (at least for the first level) was ready earlier than expected (Luzzatto 2001).

Problems arose with respect to the contents of the curricula. As we recalled in section 1.2, national rules defining Classes of study programmes were not extremely compelling. In implementing the rules the ministerial bureaucracy tried to increase the compulsory components, based on the excuse of preserving the legal validity of the degrees. Nevertheless, a high degree of autonomy was left to universities.

The faculties were compelled to structure their curricula and organise courses. The traditional habit of leaving professors free to teach courses in their discipline without requiring any shift among topics or to coordinate the content of their courses with those of others was a barrier to innovation in structure and content of curricula. Thus, in some cases the need to reduce traditional four- or five-year programmes into three-year ones, required by the Reform, created a concentration of the existing curricula into smaller units: that is, the same number of courses with abridged content. Someone called it 'the bonsai phenomenon' (Pontremoli and Luzzatto 2002).

In addition, the traditional culture of conceiving university studies as the final period in the life span devoted to training and organised learning prevented the

rethinking of course content where some aspects could be completed through future lifelong learning activities.

Lack of collegiality has been mentioned already as a problem in the building of coherent curricula. An individualistic attitude hindered collective debate on difficulties related to the first experimentation of the Reform, and made academic staff resentful of the 'excessive waste of time' produced by frequent meetings at the faculty or department level. Also, examination of the basic content of the legal aspects of the reform project were often insufficiently pursued because of the scattered attendance of faculty members at meetings.

To sum up, it seems fair to say that Italian academics, not accustomed to the collective design of the curricula and study programmes, were, on the one hand, overwhelmed by the new freedom to elaborate courses of study in different ways while, on the other hand, they found it easier and more convenient not to intrude into the autonomy and independence of their colleagues justifying this under the 'sacred' label of 'academic freedom'. Thus, very often a number of new opportunities were not taken into consideration, particularly with respect to curricula differentiation. For example, we can emphasise the debate on the apparently contradictory characteristics of the first three-year level, leading to the labour market or to the second level of studies. There was criticism about the possibility of combining professional courses with courses of basic theory. However, the problem did not eventuate.

The weak understanding of the 'philosophy' of the reform project and its implications left in many cases under-utilised other possibilities made available in the building of the curricula. For example, in the majority of cases credits have been assigned in each study programme only to those subjects which had already been indicated as compulsory, at the national level, for the corresponding Class. Thus, most faculties demonstrated little creativity and relinquished the possibility of relating their programmes to specific cultural and professional needs. This gap *vis-à-vis* the evolution of the culture outside the university domain seems particularly evident in the Humanities (in the Faculty of Letters, to be more precise), where criticism toward the Reform has been sharper (Detti and Guastella 2002). Furthermore, the creation of individual paths was opposed by the authoritarian tradition of providing de facto compulsory tracks, while professors ignored the new possibilities offered to students.

Another consequence has been the lack of interdisciplinarity due to the tradition of non-cooperation among disciplinary fields. Each faculty defined programmes through the almost exclusive utilisation of its own academic staff. As mentioned above, the way professors are 'aligned' to the disciplines in each scientific field allows them to refuse any involvement in other sections where knowledge has been academically divided. While the Reform has expanded access to an entire disciplinary field, few know it and even less take advantage of it. The combination of a field's separation with the unawareness of the appropriate utilisation of the university degrees in the labour market explains the unrealistic building of curricula leading to unlikely professional role models. This is characteristic of some of the new second-level study programmes (Luzzatto 2002).

Another opportunity provided by the reform project and not seized upon by the university community has been a new kind of diversified relationship with external 'stakeholders'. As stated already, the academic world has traditionally relied on itself, keeping to the Humboldtian model in terms of absence of relationships between collective academic entities while allowing individual academics to provide their expertise to external 'buyers'. This academic isolation has been reinforced by a society which has failed to understand the relevance of higher education from social and political points of view. From an economic perspective, it can be noted that large Italian industrial companies have developed a policy of hiring people at lower levels and then providing internal training for career advancement. Also, the majority of firms are traditionally very small and thus not in a position to establish any serious relationship with the world of higher education. Both characteristics help to explain the limited relevance given to higher education and research by the Italian industrial sector. In other domains (services) middle-level degrees have resulted in being more useful for companies very often having handicraft origins. Only very recently are there signs that these trends are changing (Frey and Ghignoni 2000).

From the university perspective this lack of external demand has reinforced the tendency of self-reliance, with a number of consequences that the Reform is making more and more evident. The Reform has been resisted by a number of academic staff who have ignored what has been going on in other European systems of higher education. In addition, the establishment of relations with the external environment has been resisted due to the fear of interference in the independence of researchers and the decline of pure research in favour of applied research for the benefit of private interests. If nothing else, this fear appears outdated and inconsistent with the reality of the Italian situation where there is a traditional weakness of private interest and support of university teaching and research. This attitude suggests a fear of accepting the challenge of an open confrontation with the external world, in favour of maintaining the status quo which offers a 'stable revenue'.

Finally, the Reform promotes the increased relevance of teaching activities. This is a phenomenon which is in general related to the transition from elite to mass higher education, but in Italy it was only through the Reform that it became clear to all. The new two-level structure (plus the masters programmes and the doctoral programme) provides a substantial increase in the number of courses each university has to offer. Further, counselling programmes to advise students have had to be provided, together with a number of remedial programmes. For the last three years, a large group of academic staff has been involved in building new courses. The academic world resents the increasing amount of time and energy devoted to teaching activities (and to the related organisational and administrative duties) to the detriment of research activities. Yet, universities are compelled to promote teaching, since a larger number of students results in more financial subsidies from the Ministry, more resources to hire new academic and administrative staff, and more money from student fees. It seems that also among Italian universities the competition for students is ready to start.

## 3. THE PRESENT SITUATION

### *3.1. The Monitoring*

As the Reform radically changed the whole structure of Italian universities, systemic monitoring of its implementation was essential. However, monitoring was only partial.

Detailed quantitative analyses of the first outcomes have been conducted by a specialised committee: the *Comitato Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema Universitario* (CNVSU). We refer to two of the committee's results.

First, the new system of university degrees has attracted strong appeal. The number of first-year students (*immatricolati*), which had been stable for some time, increased from 310,924 in 2000–01 (the year before the Reform) to 331,368 in 2001–02 (+6.6%) and to 346,894 in 2002–03 (+4.7%).

Second, there has been a small improvement in one of the major problems of Italian universities, namely the drop-out phenomenon. Eighty-four per cent of the students who first enrolled in 2001–02 have reached the second year in 2002–03, whereas two years earlier the proportion continuing was 80%. This should bring about an increase in the number of graduates.

No national analysis has been done concerning qualitative aspects. Preliminary studies, by some universities, of their implementation of the new programmes exist, but are insufficient for a meaningful general understanding.

The following items deserve further investigation:

- Did the rules for Classes of study programmes leave adequate space for local choices?
- Did the universities completely utilise those spaces which were at their disposal?
- Are interdisciplinary programmes present or, at least, how much relevance has been given, in the various programmes, to disciplines different from the ones most directly characterising specific programmes?
- Flexibility was supposed to become a cornerstone of a system: but to what extent is it really present? Examples: alternative choices inside the curricula; possibility of entering the same *Laurea specialistica* coming from different first-level *Lauree* etc.

As can be seen, both national and local decisions should be under scrutiny. The main objective would be to identify the precise cause of each unsatisfactory result with respect to: what can be ascribed to the framework (our point in section 2.1), what can be ascribed to the rules, and what can be ascribed to the way the rules have been applied.

Even in the absence of systematic monitoring, some statements can be made. Without models to guide the correct way to proceed with the Reform, and not being supported by efficient systems of evaluation to rectify wrong policies, the universities revealed a serious weakness in the mechanism of governance. The large majority of universities could not rely on governing structures which were able to

deal with the basic problems of administration, especially in terms of coordinating the didactic supply and the research activities among different faculties. Further, university administrations had no model to refer to in the process of adopting policies of fund-raising from different sources (other than the traditional ministerial ones) and offering various services in order to balance the budget.

Nevertheless, the Reform did not collapse. On the contrary, it was able to take off and to develop the three-year first level and later the two-year second level in all universities. The reason for this success is based on the positive response that the top (the Reform promoters) received from the bottom (namely the academics). It seems fair to say that a consistent part of the academic staff either felt that the old system of higher education had to change or, as we have already suggested, accepted the reform because it was coming from the local academic authority (rector, dean, head of the department, and the like).

Without a detailed inquiry into the successes and weaknesses of the Reform implementation, there is a serious danger that new decisions to modify the Reform will be taken in the absence of sufficient and objective data. In fact, a 'reform of the Reform' based on prejudices could destroy elements which are (at least potentially) satisfactory, without correcting mistakes and insufficiencies.

### *3.2. An Overall Analysis*

Almost all the components of the situation outlined above can be explained in the framework of the traditional relationship between the university and society in Italy. An unwritten agreement of reciprocal non-interference has regulated this relationship which has been at least partially functional as long as the university was devoted to elite formation in a country whose economy was not based on scientific innovation. Small groups of scientists could modernise their departments (in Hard Sciences) here and there without affecting the higher education system which produced individuals of high quality but a poor level of education on average. The centralised structure of the system could not be changed from the inside, being too dependent on the political domain, and it could resist changes imposed from the outside. This was the case when a minister, coming from the university community (the former rector of the University of Rome, Ruberti), tried to modernise the system in the 1980s. The Parliament approved his proposals but the laws were not implemented.

With respect to the Reform debated here the situation was somewhat different. On the one hand, a part of the academic community was convinced that the situation (the role and functions of the university) had to change and the majority of these academics included most of the rectors and many of the faculty deans who trusted the minister in charge (again a former rector: Berlinguer). On the other hand, the aims of the Reform were presented in advance to the academic community while the Law was passed in the Parliament almost without debate. Unfortunately, the Minister changed immediately after the approval of the Reform and a few months later the entire government changed. The connection between the politicians who introduced the Reform and the innovators inside academia first weakened and then

was clearly broken. Using Cerych and Sabatier's words, the 'fixers' of the reform lost the political support from outside the academic community and the push for change began to lose power. Nevertheless, the Reform was diluted but not cancelled thanks basically to the growing awareness among academics of the need for a new kind of higher education (Cerych and Sabatier 1986: 251).

In terms of authority distribution, we can refer to the traditional 'continental mode' described by Burton Clark by saying that in Italy (i) the power of allocation of funds has partially shifted from the government to the individual university thanks to the introduction of administrative and financial autonomy in the 1990s, while (ii) the combination of faculty guild and state bureaucracy has largely lost its impact. In fact, the growing complexity of the system has given room to "strong rectorial power at university level … [as well as] to stronger deanships at the faculty level" (Clark 1983: 127). This development allows the seesawing between innovators (rectors basically supporting the reform) and forces opposing the reform: the rank and file of academia who otherwise – with the not-so-hidden support of government – would have easily maintained the status quo.

The purpose of widening access to higher education has been included as one of the main goals of the Reform through the shortening of the first cycle and the programme of orientation, guidance and introductory remedial courses. As has been said, while the drop-out rate is declining, the programmes for supporting first-year students have not been developed as expected. Still, we have to wait to evaluate the complete results of the Reform.

The contribution of higher education to regional development was included in the goals of the Reform but largely has not been realised. Reasons are possibly related to the resistance to the general idea of mass higher education and the university meeting social demands. Only the three polytechnics developed a policy that took into account the local environment, being based on faculties (architecture and engineering) traditionally devoted to applied research. The Reform included a coordination of rectors at the regional level, aiming for a better connection of the universities with the social and economic environment but so far there are no examples of productive coordination. Universities still have to clarify for themselves the new tasks of cooperation and competition that the Reform implies.

As mentioned, there have been examples of vocational and short-cycle higher education in Italy. Their failure has to do basically with the lack of corresponding professional role models in the labour market and with the low level of prestige attributed to vocational courses even if provided by universities. This last point is due to a cultural attitude that is hard to overcome. This is also one of the reasons why the Reform attempted to combine in the first level the two aims of providing a professional background for those who wanted to enter the labour market and a preliminary cultural background for those who intended to pursue studies at the second level (*Laurea specialistica*). The general difficulty is the resistance to introducing elements of vocationalisation inside the university.

But the real general problem – using the Cerych and Sabatier scheme – is the attempt to realise a comprehensive reform affecting, in one hit, curriculum, system structure and the distribution of power. In this respect the Italian reform is reminiscent of the 1968 French one. Perhaps, from one perspective, the attempt

involved too many radical changes all at once. But, on the other hand, another change (the redefinition of the academic staff role) is missing. In a system which had resisted change for so long, revealing its bottom-heavy, weak attitude toward innovation, the attempt to introduce a general reform could have been the best way to obtain, in the end, a reduced but still effective transformation.

## 4. FURTHER PERSPECTIVES

### *4.1. The Attitude of the New Government Toward the Reform Implementation*

The process of implementation started to face difficulties when the government changed. The new government did not have the same positive attitude toward the reform project as the previous one.

Reasons for this are not very clear, neither in theoretical nor ideological terms. The present government of centre-right quickly demonstrated (as in other political fields) a need to differentiate itself from the former government of left-left. Therefore, it cancelled the School Reform at elementary and secondary level, but could not do the same at the university level since, as we have seen, the Reform had already started, and academic support was also relevant from a political point of view. So far, the government has produced some decrees on minor points and has proposed some 'adjustments' through a committee of university professors. Basically, all these moves can be interpreted according to three factors.

#### *4.1.1. Distrust of Academia*

The Ministry of the University has produced a decree introducing the so-called 'minimal prerequisites' (*requisiti minimi*) for the creation of any new study programme. Some dimension of spaces, number of structures and technical resources have been listed but especially a minimum number of academic staff has been established, specifying how many full professors, associate professors and researchers are needed to start a new course, no matter which kind of disciplinary field and which kind of university are involved. Now, it is fair to say that in some cases the way new courses have been established gives ground to the ministerial reaction since it is possible to suspect the basic underlying reasons were related to the personal interests of individual academics (or of small groups of them) to the detriment of minimal scientific standards. However, the rigidity of the established rules, disregarding the specificity of the local situation, belongs to the old bureaucratic attitude of the centralised system.

The same attitude is revealed by the attempt the government has recently made to abolish the financial autonomy of the universities (introduced by another government some ten years ago). Taking advantage of the difficulties many universities are now facing in balancing their budgets – thanks to the reduction of financial support from the government itself, but also because of their weakness in dealing with this aspect of the autonomy – the government indicated its willingness to directly administer the financial part of the higher education system (De Maio 2002).

*4.1.2. Managerial Attitude*

The measures presented above may also derive from the managerial origin of some of the leading members of the present government (the Prime Minister and the Minister of Education, University and Research among others). A new proposal recently circulated would reform the first level of studies providing a common first year for all students and then a division into two tracks of two years: one for those who want to pursue studies at the second level and one for those who want to enter the labour market after the first degree (*Laurea*). This modification – redesigning the first three-year level in a 'Y' shape – has been presented as a way of cancelling the overlap between the two goals included in the first level of courses, which the Reform conceived either as leading to the second level or to the labour market, but within the same track. The separation of tracks clearly is a way of simplifying the alternatives, assuming there are jobs in the labour market, following the first university level, which require only technicians and others (at higher level) which require 'knowledge of methods' (meaning that the 'how' can be separated from the 'why'). No one can avoid noticing that the 'philosophy' underlying this proposal belongs to a now defunct cultural and economic period. This reminds one of the long debate in recent years about the German *Fachhochschulen.* In addition it is worth remembering that a parallel professional postsecondary track already exists in the School Reform and operates at the regional level. The new proposal, not even requested by the Italian economic world, seems a gift to that part of academia that fears the cultural decline of the first level of university instruction: the brilliant students will be separated from the average ones.

*4.1.3. Political Support From Pressure Groups*

As is understandable, the new government, not being in favour of the current Reform, has to rely on groups who, for different reasons, resist it.

Take for example the exception proposed for the Faculty of Law. Some prominent law representatives have asked to have a long-cycle (five years) course, without a first level, for the legal profession. Needless to say, this exception may be the beginning of a number of similar requests by several professional organisations and other groups in the professoriate.

Another case in point is represented by the curricula content in teacher education programmes, where conservative academic forces are trying to enforce the disciplinary components to the detriment of educational sciences, didactics and teacher training activities.

A third example is the proposal to make the 120 credits of the second level independent from those of the first level. The idea of the Reform was to consider all the 300 credits together (180 at the first level + 120 at the second) in order to allow students coming from different disciplinary first levels to enrol in the same second level (with different debts in terms of credits to cover). The separation of the two sets of credits would prevent de facto this possibility and in practical terms would compel students to stick to their original disciplinary field. Again a rigidity, which would reduce the innovative impact of the Reform to the benefit of those sectors of the academic community who are opposing the transformation of the status quo.

Finally, there is a sympathetic attitude towards pressures by the powerful leaders of *Ordini professionali* (the organisations of engineers, lawyers etc.), who want the reduction of the rights of first-level graduates. This converges with the interests of those professors who still consider only long cycles as meaningful.

We can say that in terms of the interest group perspective (as suggested by Burton Clark), the present situation can be seen as reproducing the unstable seesawing between reform supporting groups and reform opposing groups where the former include the modernising forces inside academia as well as the economic and political domains, while the latter include conservatives from the three sectors of society with the support of the present national government (Clark 1986: 265).

### *4.2. The Present Debate*

As we have seen, the implementation of the Reform seems to risk the progressive dwindling of its strength because of the unofficial opposition of one of the key implementing institutions: namely, the government. Consequently, if no other interest group (stakeholders) supports the Reform, all the burden will remain on that part of academia that in the first period has been directly involved in the implementation of the Reform.

Thus, it is not surprising that firm opposition to proposals of hasty changes came, first of all, from university rectors, through their National Conference (CRUI). Traditionally, Italian professors, and even more their leadership, are rather conformist. This time, they resisted government's proposals.

As mentioned earlier, financial autonomy of universities is under attack, together with important elements of the reform of didactical activities. Many universities have real problems in managing their budgets, due to the reduction in state funding. However, they refuse to give up their administrative autonomy, only recently acquired.

As far as the Reform is concerned, the main objections to drastically altering its structure are based on the need of waiting for its first results. At the national level, not only rectors, but also a usually conservative institution representing the various disciplinary areas, CUN (*Consiglio Universitario Nazionale*), expressed this need. At the local level, all those who three years ago (for *Lauree*) and one year ago (for *Lauree specialistiche*) worked hard in building up new curricula were frightened by the idea of starting all over again.

According to recent statements by the Minister, the government could partly modify its attitude: no new rules would be imposed, whereas some changes would be allowed, on an optional basis, to those universities, or those academic sectors, willing to adopt them. The debate is still going on, and at the moment no final official decision has been taken.

To conclude, we can only repeat that an exhaustive monitoring of successes and failures should precede any substantial revision of the Reform; otherwise, there is the danger of a mere revival of obsolete schemes. In this chapter, we have expressed a number of criticisms concerning weaknesses in the framework of the Reform and

insufficiencies in its implementation. In our opinion, they should stimulate further progress; surely, it would be disastrous to go back.

## NOTES

[1] There is an exception to this 'serial' structure of short cycle and long cycle (a central point in the Bologna Declaration). In a few cases (e.g. medicine and pharmacy), where prescriptions about degrees and curricula are given by the EU, there are study programmes leading directly to *Laurea specialistica*.

[2] To better understand the meaning of Classes, below we provide a few examples of Classes of *Laurea* and Classes of *Laurea specialistica*.

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