

## **The Bologna Process in Italy: Political Purposes and Practical Implementation of a Higher Education Reform**

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### **1. - Introduction**

In 1998 Italy together with Germany, France and United Kingdom signed the Sorbonne Declaration, the first step towards what has become known as the "Bologna process". In Italy the legislation which implemented, or regulated the implementation of, the consequent reform of study programmes was passed in 1999 and 2000, apparently in accordance with the recommendations of the Bologna Declaration (1999). However, even though the timing of the reform was consistent with the "Bologna process" and the legislation was publicly linked to it, there are important differences between the Bologna process and the Italian university reform. The Bologna process "aims at the creation of the European area of higher education as a key way to promote the mobility and employability of citizens and the Continent's overall development" (Bologna Declaration, 1999). In practice, however, the Italian government seems, like those in a number of other countries, to have used the external expectations of the Bologna process as a legitimating rationale to enable it to address longstanding and intractable internal problems. In the Italian case, therefore, the reforms were mainly designed to improve the efficiency of the university system, by addressing some of the traditional shortcomings which had been identified much earlier: very low completion rates, a very high level of drop-out, excessive completion times and the low employability of graduates.

The reform of the teaching ordinance in Italy was seen as indispensable by the Minister for the University and Scientific Research Luigi Berlinguer, not long after the formation of the new centre-left government in 1996. After the Sorbonne Declaration, the already specially created working group coordinated by Guido Martinotti had to partially correct the direction taken by its own work. In fact, the almost temporal coincidence with the Bologna Declaration meant that the teaching ordinance reform was not seen in Italy as a process belonging to a more general international plan. In one of those paradoxes so dear to history, the "Bologna process" is still widely unknown to the Italian academic world, and risks being held responsible for judicial rather than academic implications. This misunderstanding indicates unfortunately both the level of international isolation in which large part of the Italian university system lives, and the lack of information about the European dimension of the reform furnished by the bodies in charge.

The reasons that pushed the Italian government to intervene in the university system in the late nineties, as just said, were mainly tied to the awareness of the low level of system' productivity. Drop-out rates were high, and the average time-to-graduate was twice the established period ( 6 or 7 years instead of 4 in faculties like Political Science and Humanities), with a percentage of graduates a little over 30% of enrolments.

However, the vision held by the then Minister of the University and Research was more complex than what came out of the Sorbonne and Bologna Declarations. It concerned not only the restructuring of university pathways, but also a revision of the educational cycles in the whole Italian school system. It also involved rethinking the didactic and pedagogic roles to allow them to overcome the rigid separation of different areas of knowledge, introduce open, flanking educational cycles, and anchor knowledge to action with the introduction of experimentation (completely ignored by prevailing pedagogic models, influenced by the philosophy of Idealism). It also embraced the logics of lifelong learning in the construction of the contents of cycles and pathways. It was indeed a revision of the educational offer, both in structure and contents and went far beyond the Declarations of Sorbonne and Bologna, on which however it was based. (Berlinguer,2004)

The reform was carried out hastily in Italy, without sufficient information being given to those involved and without any experimental phase testing its effects. In fact, fearing that they would not manage to let the project take off in time, the incumbent government had the law approved without a real parliamentary debate and asked for it to be implemented very quickly, with a legally-binding force everywhere. One result was persistent resistance within the academic world, not so much at top levels (most rectors and deans accepted it), but at bottom level, especially at Humanities and Law. It is obvious that a reform offered by the outside

world (national government) takes the form of a top-down imposition that meets greatest resistance at the base. Nevertheless, the reform was implemented with the construction of new educational pathways, by means of a tiring and exacting labour supervised by degree course heads helped by only a few motivated colleagues. There was no attempt to revise the contents and procedures of the offer which called for a general commitment to revise the habitual ways of transmitting knowledge. This resistance against rethinking not the mechanics of the courses but their contents and the procedures for transmitting them marks the gap between the expectations of those promoting the Reform (the political part of the country, according to Guy Neave) and those on the field implementing the Reform (the real country, again according to the same author)(Neave,2002,2005).

It is worth to add that no extra finances were available for the implementation of the Reform, and with the change in government political backing became timid and then disappeared.

More than anything else, it must be said that there were no signs of trade-off for the actors of the Reform, either for the teaching staff or the technical and administrative personnel. And that in spite of the fact that in most cases it did cost a real effort to bring about the changes introduced by the Reform Law.

Now, the experience of similar measures in other countries teaches us how in the implementation of any reform, consideration must be given above all to the level of acceptability, and that in no case must it be thought that the expectations can be realised 100%. (great expectations are always met by mixed performances) (Cerych,Sabatier,1986).

From this point of view, the implementation of the "Bologna process" up to the present cannot be judged negative, though it still calls for further examination and adjustments which can only pass through a greater sharing of the general objectives of the process.

## 2. – A Monitoring Project of the Reform Implementation

In order to verify the degree of acceptance of the reform and thus its implementation in some universities, a project has been presented to the Italian ministry of University and Scientific Research (MIUR) by six universities (Milano-Bicocca, Pavia, Urbino, Sassari, Genova, Venezia "Ca' Foscari") and co-financed by those universities and the ministry under a programme of internationalisation of the Italian higher education system. In fact, six European universities has been invited to join the project in order to provide both an external evaluation of the reform and to allow Italian members of the involved universities (academic and administrative staff) to visit non-Italian universities and learn how they have dealt with their changing processes. Each of those European universities identified a scholar available to participate to the project. Namely, they were Alberto Amaral, Universidad do Porto; Oliver Fulton ,Lancaster University; Pierre Dubois, Université de Marne-la-Vallée; Joseph Gines-Mora, Universitat Politècnica de Valencia; Donald F. Westerheijden, Universiteit Twente; Stefanie Schwarz-Hahn (later Ulrich Teichler), Kassel Universität . The project lasted four years (2004-2007).

The project has been inspired by the consciousness of the novelty represented by the reform of the didactic procedures in the Italian higher education system, and of the difficulties related to the implementation of its different steps. The inquiry sets itself a target to monitoring the introduction of the reform, taking into exam some universities in which to follow the development of the new training processes and, at the same time, the general policies of the universities involved in the new framework of autonomy.

Thus, a network of six Italian universities and six foreign universities have been created with the aim of reaching these objectives. The functioning of the new courses and the new curricula of different disciplines have been taken into consideration with special care (at Faculties and *Corsi di laurea* level) in terms of rate of enrollment, success in the exams, use and distribution of credits, correlation with professional figures and the administrative organization for the innovation, in relations to the traditional courses.

At the individual university level some other indicators have been considerate: as newly introduced systems of evaluation, control of the enrollment, relationships with the labour and the professions market (job placement services, stages, practices), and the government and governance policies put into action in the autonomy system

Operationally, the analysis of the problems related to the realization of the reform have been carried on especially through the semi-structured individual and group interviews (recorded), based on a common outline, administered by the researchers and addressed to the significant representatives of the academic staff (Rectors, Deans, Directors of the courses /*Corso di laurea*), Head of the departments), of the governing structures (members of Academic Senate and Administrative Council), of the technical and administrative staff (administrative directors, high and middle level officials of different services), members of student organizations.

### 3. – The Italian academics facing the reform

Inside the project a sample survey of the attitudes of Italian University teaching and administrative staff to the implementation of the teaching ordinance reform has been also carried out <sup>1</sup>

It seems worth to consider the results of the survey according to the basic research hypothesis of different attitude toward the reform among academics (here we concentrate the analysis only on the academic staff) both according to their institution as well as to their disciplinary field.

#### 3.1. - Differences according to the institutions

First of all, it emerged that the attitudes toward to the reform of the teaching staff belonging to the same subject areas seemed to be more homogeneous than those of academics belonging to the same institution. The universities in the study ( Milan-Bicocca, Genova, Sassari, Urbino, Pavia, Venezia “Ca’ Foscari”), varying greatly in size and territorial site, do not seem to have interpreted the reform in a univocal way, nor, consequently, to have provided an homogeneous treatment in the process of its implementation. It is indeed true that some of the mechanism used to greet the reform can be recognised as typical of a certain university or explained as due to the peculiar situation of one or another environment. But even with some exceptions, they did not seem overall enough to characterise the attitude of the totality of the academic staff present. On the contrary likenesses between the same faculties in different institutions appeared even more evident and often acted as explicative value for the analysis of the impact of the reform.

From what emerges from the analysis, some characteristics of the universities have had nevertheless an influence on the reform implementation, contributing to the development of a certain homogeneity . In particular, we signal the cases of Venezia, Sassari and Urbino.

At the **University of Venezia “Ca’ Foscari”** a positive acceptance of the reform produced rapid results in its implementation through a new opening toward society and the activation of numerous study pathways. It can be held that at the beginning there was an excessive hurry in the process, perhaps connected to a tendency going back before the reform to retrieve important spaces in the territory for the university. Afterwards, there was a stage of rethinking, which brought among other things a reduction in the number of pathways activated.

The unifying element in the **University of Sassari** appears to be its general scepticism about the character and prospects of the reform. The problem should probably be observed in the context of the relationship between university and territory. Sassari is in a peripheral location, with a lack of socio-economic resources worsening over the last few years. The organisation of the university is marked by the fact that a large percentage of the teaching staff commutes.<sup>2</sup> They are generally younger than the residents and are not likely to stay long in Sardinia. The state of the university budget ( which has no private backing) has not been conducive to a reform labelled “zero cost”, especially in the scientific faculties already penalised by a lack of job openings. As logical consequence then the criticism against the reform have been rather severe, and the reform itself has been more discussed at the University of Sassari than in other places.

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<sup>1</sup> The survey was carried out on all the teaching staff and a chosen group of administrative personnel from the six universities under scrutiny: the universities of Genova, Milano Bicocca, Pavia, Sassari, Urbino and Venezia “Ca’ Foscari”.

As regards the teaching staff, the reference universe consisted of 5,104 individuals who altogether were in service in the various seats, according o the data furnished by the universities themselves. As for the administrative personnel, 184 were selected, who for the roles they cover within their universities, could well have been directly involved in the reform process at local level.

The telephone survey was directed at 4,900 of the teaching staff and 184 members of the administrative personnel whose telephone numbers were supplied by their universities. Telephone contact was preceded by an e-mail message illustrating the contents and objectives of the survey and requesting collaboration in the telephone survey.

The telephone interviews were carried out from the CATI structure within the Laboratory of Sociology of the University of Milan Bicocca. In most cases the interviews took place at work, The total of the valid interviews was 2,566 ( 2,447 of the teaching staff and 119 of the other personnel).

<sup>2</sup> The survey may well not have reached many commuters and been answered mostly by locals.

Just as peripheral and with even greater financial problems was the **University of Urbino**, which suffers from the problem of geographical isolation to which has been added a serious financial crisis which eventually (after the period of the survey) compelled the government to restore the budget transforming into public the private nature of the university. Attempts to implement the reform met, on one hand, with the problems already encountered at Sassari (few links with the territory, teaching staff commuting), and, on the other, with a traditional fragmentation of the study programmes which makes the university look like a "confederation of free faculties". Under these circumstances, where not even departments had been set up, the process of implementing the reform received considerable scepticism, expressed with varying levels of intensity among the faculties' members and involving the administrative personnel.

It can be held, therefore, that in the case of these three universities, their conditions influenced overall the attitude to the reform, seen either as an opportunity or (more) as an extra complication for an already precarious existence.

In the other three cases this particular component did not emerge as a common denominator.

### 3.2. - Results according to the different subject areas

The questionnaire was structured, along two lines of themes, aiming at evaluating the levels reached in the implementation of the reform and the opinions provided by the interviewees on the reform itself.

Following the formulation of the questions, as they were presented in the questionnaire and referring to the responses of the teaching staff, separately for the different subject areas, the picture can be summarised as follows.

#### (a) Professional goals and teaching/learning activities

The link between curricula pathways, and well defined educational objectives of the degree courses – objectives prescribed expressively by the reform – seems to be fairly alien among the teachers interviewed: Little more than 40% of the interviewees had some awareness of it.

Languages and Sciences are among the scientific areas most greatly aware of the correlation, while on the other side Humanities and Law signal scarce familiarity.

Here too, as in other cases where the spirit of the reform required careful examination for changes to be carried out, those who had held some position of responsibility revealed greater awareness than the others. The differences are more marked at Economics, Engineering and Languages, while there are none in the Humanities.

#### (b) Curricula and their market value

One crucial point in the interpretation of the reform is the profile given to the academic pathways in relation to their objectives. This is particularly crucial for the first level degrees which should be directed towards a dual aim, both preparing for second level courses and inserting students in the labour market. The possibility of reaching both objectives is evaluated positively by 58.2% of the interviewees at first level. Worth to be noted the only 5% who are in favour of differentiating the pathways in order to reach the two objectives.

Positive evaluations are greater at Economics and Engineering, negative ones at Law and Humanities. At Languages the evaluations are low both for those having held posts of responsibilities and the others.

A crucial knot of the question is tied to the possible contradiction between the cultural level of the pathways and the market value of the degree. The majority of those interviewed show the fear of seeing the cultural quality of the pathways reduced in favour of their value on the job market. This fear is understandably greater at the level of 1<sup>st</sup> degree (63.5%) than at the 2<sup>nd</sup> (43.4%).

This opinion is particularly evident at Languages, Engineering and Sciences. An explicit difference between degrees with practical objectives (for the professions) and degrees with more cultural values is rejected by the majority of respondents, with 54.6% for the first level and 59.1% for the second.

A greater leaning towards a distinction between the two is met at Economics, Engineering and Sciences, while negative evaluations are more marked at Law, Languages and Humanities (both at first and second level).

**(c) The reform prescribes the opening of universities towards society under the form of comparisons with the productive system and local institutions**, in order to understand the features of the outside world and measure them with the professional figures the university is educating. From what appears in the answers of the respondents, the comparative analysis has begun but has not reached any relevance yet. In 20% of the cases there is no comparison under way, for another 16% the comparison is insufficient, another 20% sees it

as in a phase of further examination, 13,3% is unable to evaluate the problem, and lastly 29,3% sees it as irrelevant to the new university programmes.

The Faculties where the comparison has greater meaning are Languages, Pharmacy, Economics and Engineering, while the situation seems most critical at Humanities and Law, always for the first level degrees. For the second level positive values of those signalling familiarity with the issue are lower, probably because the second level is still in a phase of consolidation (the survey has been taken in the year 2005).

Again in this case more awareness of the initiatives under way is greater among those who have held posts of responsibility, in particular at Medicine, Science, Engineering and Economics.

**(d) Should teaching methods change to match the reform? And have they really changed?**

Most respondents agree that they should change (78.7%), including those considering a global change (36.1%) or a consistent one (42.6%). The need is particularly felt at Languages and Engineering. As for the real change, the majority thinks that not much has happened. Little or nothing according to 57.7%, in particular at Humanities while the situation seems better at Engineering and Languages.

**(e) Overall judgements**

The idea of opening new degree courses – which has been consistent through the years after the reform and tanks to the initial autonomy of the universities in this respect - is rejected by 75.5% of respondents as for the first level degree. The majority is of the same opinion as for the second level too (61.3%). If anything there is a widespread call for existing degree courses to be merged. Not to be forgotten a leaning towards interdisciplinary degrees. Strongest opposition to the creation of new degree courses comes from Law, Engineering and Economics.

**(f) Academics has been asked whether the reform had been discussed sufficiently at different level (Senate, Department, Faculty meetings).**

The creation of the new teaching structure is thought to have been discussed adequately by little over half of the interviewees; particularly referring to the level of central structures (Senate). But here there has been a number of recriminations pointing to a lack of information, especially at Economics and Engineering. Also here there are significant differences between those who have had roles of responsibility and those who have not.

**The evaluation of the involvement of the academic bodies in the concrete application of the reform** shows relatively high degree for the faculty meeting while there is less awareness of the involvement of the Senate and of other degree course councils. The involvement of the student representatives is foreseeably judged as modest.

The faculty meetings with larger participation were those of Languages, Engineering, Economics and Law. As could be predicted, particularly in this case of evaluation of the level of awareness those who have had roles of responsibility show a higher level of involvement, with differences which rise to over 10 points at Law, Sciences, Engineering, Medicine and Pharmacy.

**In analysing the quality of the involvement of the central university bodies in the process of reform, the type of debate which developed** does not appear to have been judged very positively by the majority of respondents. The most significant character which emerges is the level of conflict considered productive (69.0% of the respondents). A level above average is reached at Humanities, Languages and strangely enough at Medicine. A debate producing more creativity than conflict has been considered at Engineering, Medicine and Science. Producing more conflict than anything else at Humanities. It appears striking here the significant declarations of ignorance about the reform (22.0% of interviewees), with peaks at Pharmacy, Economics, Engineering and Sciences. This level of ignorance is confirmed by the big difference, again, between those having held positions of responsibility and the others. In fact, 58.0% of the former judge the debate constructive against 39.3% of the latter. The gap, which rises to over 20 points at Economics, Engineering and Law, emphasises the difference between who dealt (or had to deal) with the reform and those who accepted (or had to accept) without having had opportunities to discuss it (or without being interested in discussing it)

**(g) As it is well known, the reform had among its declared objectives the reduction of time-to-graduate, of dropping out percentage, as well as of encouraging mobility, both at home and abroad, of students.**

The impact of the reform on the dropping out phenomenon seems to be evaluated positively by the majority of respondents (54.0%), but less so on the international mobility (48.3%) and on the time-to-graduate (45.2%). The indications are not always completely coherent in the subject areas. Engineering signals a majority of positive answers to all three issues; Languages on times and mobility, Economics on times. More negatives responses on all three issues come from Law.

**(h) The overall judgement on the reform** was divided into three different components: (a) the theoretical structure of the reform; (b) its implementation in the national university system; and (c) in the home university of the interviewees. The majority has a negative opinion of the theoretical framework of the reform (54.0%). The percentage is reversed when evaluating the implementation of the reform in the home university: 51.7percent of the respondents judged it positively, while a majority had problems in evaluating the implementation at national level.

Law, of course, scores among the most critical faculties, alongside with Humanities. Positive evaluations are signalled at Economics, Engineering, Languages and Pharmacy.

As for the distinction between those who have held positions of responsibility and the others, there is a higher level of positive evaluations of the theoretical framework of the reform among those holding responsible roles at Economics and Sciences. As for evaluations of the reform implementation in the home university, Economics and Science together with Pharmacy, Engineering and even Law signal more positive evaluations among those holding managerial roles. In particular, the evaluations of the latter at Law are 60.5% positive, while they fall to 38.9% among the others. This gives rise to the thought that, just as in the other cases, the evaluations of those who have never dealt directly with the reform can be easily influenced by preconceptions and prejudices.

#### 4. – Concluding Remarks

Summing up the survey results a few rather clear indications emerge:

- First of all, after five years from its introduction reform purposes and meanings turned out to be not very diffuse among the academics. This lack of knowledge reinforced the traditional resistance to all changes characterising a bottom-heavy system like the Italian HES (after all, not so different from the others HES in this respect).
- Resistances appeared to be stronger in some fields (Humanities, and Law in particular) than in others (Natural Sciences, and hard applied sciences in particular). One of the possible explanations of this difference could be related to the closer of the latter – organisationally as well as epistemologically - to the reform purposes. Particularly in terms of the degree of connection with the society and the economy (the relation between the labour market and the professionalization of curricula being perhaps the most obvious example).
- The characteristics of the environment in which a university is located seem to have an impact on the degree of acceptance of the reform. The dynamics of the local economy makes easier for the university to establish all sort of linkages recommended by the reform, if they do not exist already. On the contrary, a poor area prevents similar initiatives and support the “philosophy” of a self-sufficient institution. As a result, universities in urban rich regions in the North of the country are more ready to accept the reform than those in peripheral areas of the South.
- For the success of the reform the role of the university governance seems crucial. In fact, the reform has been an example of the top-down process in which the lower levels have been left without accurate information. The “engineering” part of the reform has been a task for leaders at different level: not only rectors at the top but, even more, deans and heads of departments. And in fact, members of the university middle management have been the real mediators introducing and structuring the reform. Consequently, they appear to be more in favour than the academic staff at lower level.
- One element in common in the process of implementing the reform which has been found in the six universities seems to have been the relative scarcity of dialogue it has produced. To put it better, the interviews show – as has been mentioned above - quite a clear difference between those who had materially worked on the creation of the new pathways, and those who only had an indirect knowledge and accepted (or were called upon to accept) the innovations introduced. It follows that two very widespread features emerged from the answers to the questionnaire: (i) a majority of positive evaluations of the reform among those holding positions of responsibility in the academic bodies, and (ii) a mediocre knowledge of the characteristics and implications of the reform in the rest of the university population. What was missing was a widespread and detailed analysis of the objectives of the reform and its operative implications.

- In recent years the awareness of the structural components of the reform and its implication has spread out and more or less accepted. Some distortions (the strict links between contents of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle) have been modified, and the multiplication of courses restrained by governmental measures. Still, what appears to be difficult to modify is the content of courses which perhaps reflects the resistance of a large part of the Italian academic staff to accept some implications of the transfer from a (supposed) elite higher education system to a mass higher education one<sup>3</sup> as, for instance, the lowering of the student quality and the consequent need for a different kind of teaching.
- A way of concluding these analysis could be perhaps a remark on the key relevance the actors operating in the institutions affected by the reform always have in making the changing process effective. In this respect, it is worth to remember that “policy implementation becomes very interactive ... (since) many systems involve a multiplicity of actors, at least partly independent of each other, but rarely is the diffusion of authority as great as it is in higher education”(Cerych,Sabatier,1986,256) Thus, also in the Italian case progressive transformations have more chances to succeed through a series of stages involving the interested subjects in their own process of transformation.

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<sup>3</sup> Of course the terminology is taken from the very well known work of Martin Trow . In fact the transformation is not only numerical and a HES “for many” cannot be considered simply as a multiplication of a HES “for few”