THE HARSH REALITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN ITALY

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Abstract

Recent statistical surveys show that tertiary education is not widespread in Italy. The percentage of Italian adults 16 to 65 years of age who have a degree is in fact more than 10 percentage points below the European average. In recent years, several reforms implementing the Bologna Process, and aiming specifically at increasing the number of university graduates, have had some positive effects, but the gap is still far from being filled. This article illustrates the terms of the problem, first by presenting some statistical data on tertiary education in Italy and second by focusing in particular on the legislative and institutional dimensions. Lastly, a number of policy proposals for improving tertiary education will be presented.

Keywords: Higher education, Italy, policies.

1 INTRODUCTION

Participation in university education has increased steadily in Western societies since the middle of the last century. While around 10% of a given age cohort in European countries received an academic degree in the 1950s, by the end of the last century this figure had risen to 25% on average. Growth has continued apace, and according to the most recent estimates the percentage of access to tertiary education for each age cohort in the European Union is now around 63%, with peaks of 89% in Denmark and 70% in the Netherlands [1].

Foresightedly, Trow [2] recognized in this change “a broad pattern of development of higher education, a transition — under way in every advanced society — from elite to mass higher education and subsequently to universal access”. For Trow, an elite system can be defined as one in which less than 15% of an age cohort attends tertiary education institutions. When the enrolment rate is between 15 and 35% of the cohort, we can speak of mass education. Universal access can be said to be achieved when the enrolment rate of the cohort exceeds 50%. Trow does not reduce this transformation to exclusively dimensional terms. In his opinion, the transition in these three phases of higher education is also marked by a change in the purpose of university education. In the elite phase, the main goal was “shaping the mind and character of the ruling class”, while in the mass phase, the emphasis shifts “to the transmission of skills for more specific technical elite roles” and “to preparing a larger group in professional and technical skills”. Lastly, in the universal phase, the purpose of university education is “to maximize the adaptability of that population to a society whose chief characteristic is rapid social and technological change”.

Though this transformation has affected the main developed countries, Italy does not seem to have participated fully; today, the percentage of any given age cohort accessing tertiary education has stopped short at 44%. If Italian university education has not reached the so-called universal phase from a dimensional standpoint, must we also conclude that all the other transformations that Trow links to this passage (regarding student selection, the relationship between student and teacher, the structuring of the curricula, academic standards, etc.) have also failed to take place?

To answer this question, the following pages will scrutinize a number of features of tertiary education in Italy from both a dimensional and a legislative and institutional standpoint. It must be borne in mind, however, that Trow regards the elite, mass and universal phases as Weberian ideal types which do not correspond to an actual empirical reality. Nevertheless, these phases are useful tools for describing and clarifying the main problems of higher education, viz., 1) the functional relationships among the various components or aspects of given systems; 2) the difficulty of transition from one phase to another; 3) the problems arising in the relations between institutions of higher education and the larger society and its economic and political institutions. The Italian university system undoubtedly feels the weight of these problems, but to an even greater extent, it is suffering from the lack of several important drivers for its growth.
The following sections will be organized as follows. Section 2 will describe the situation of higher education in Italy. The most recent reform initiatives and their outcomes will be presented in section 3, while section 4 will outline the factors to be evaluated. Lastly, some of the main proposals for developing and improving higher education will be illustrated in section 5.

2 THE EVIDENCE OF A DELAY

In the second half of the last century, the Italian university system expanded enormously, with enrolment passing from 300,000 in 1961, to over 1,800,000 in 2008. Despite decades of strong growth, however, university education in Italy is still lagging far behind other advanced economies, so much so that today it is estimated that only 18.2% percent of the Italian population between 25-64 years of age holds a university degree, as against the European average of 31.4%.

Not only that, but the Italian university system’s growth came to a halt before it reached the universal phase. From its peak in the 2008/2009 academic year, the demand for university education has steadily dwindled. Indeed, in the 2015/2016 academic year, total enrolment in Italian universities had dropped to approximately 170,000, with almost 35,000 fewer incoming students. While the number of first-time freshmen began to rise again a couple of years ago, total enrolment is still declining because it is linked to both the flow of incoming students and to the flow of students leaving universities (those who have graduated or who have dropped out).

There are a number of reasons operating at different levels for this reversal of trend. The financial and economic crisis that broke out in 2007, and the lengthy recession that followed, undoubtedly had a major impact. The aging population is also a structural condition with a significant impact. Fifteen years ago, young people aged between 20 and 29 in Italy totalled around 6.1 million. By 2016, the number had fallen to only 5.6 million. However, the drop in the rates of transition from upper secondary school to university shows that the youthful population is less inclined to continue their studies at tertiary level.

The ratio of the number of first-time freshmen admitted to university to the number of upper secondary school graduates in the previous school year is an indicator that measures the transition from secondary school to university. This indicator, after a period of constant growth (up to a national average of 72.6 first-time freshmen out of 100 secondary school graduates in 2003/2004), has steadily decreased. In the 2011/2012 academic year, it was 58.2% and in the 2015/2016 academic year it was 50.3% [3].

In the last two years, first-year enrolments have stopped dropping, which is clearly a good sign, but the rate of transition from upper secondary school to university still remains rather low. This lower propensity on the part of young people is not compensated for by applications by mature students, whose enrolment rates are at very modest levels in Italy, by contrast with many countries where
participation in tertiary studies by adults, including those already in employment, accounts for a significant portion of university entries. Nor is it compensated for by foreign student enrolments, which are quite low and unable to contribute significantly to increasing the number of university entries relative to the population as a whole.

The problem, however, does not lie only in young Italians’ limited access to tertiary education: even for those who do enrol, the completion rate is rather low.

Table 1. Tertiary education completion rate in several European countries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of enrolment</th>
<th>Completion rate</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>2000-2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>2007-2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>2008-2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>2000-2001</td>
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<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>2002-2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>2003-2004</td>
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<td>France</td>
<td>2008-2009</td>
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<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>2003-2004</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>2003-2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>UE-22 average</td>
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Source: OECD, Education at a Glance, 2013

With this evidence in mind, it should come as no surprise that Italy ranks near the bottom in Europe in terms of youth population (25-34 years) holding a tertiary education degree: 25%, as against the EU-22 average of 40%. As a comparison between young adults and the older generation (see Figure 2) clearly shows, there has been some progress in the spread of tertiary education in Italy, but it is still far from sufficient.

Figure 2. Percentage of younger and older tertiary-educated adults in several European countries.

Source: OECD, Education at a Glance, 2013

I close this brief description on a positive note. In contrast with shrinking enrolment in undergraduate programs, post-graduate programs — that is to say, first and second level Master's degree and Specialization programs — are all on the rise.
3 POLICIES AND THEIR OUTCOMES

The foregoing description of the Italian university system’s status quo raises many questions: why do fewer young people enrol in university in Italy than in other countries? Why do many of them drop out of university or do not complete their program at the right time?

Some regulatory measures introduced over the decades seemed to lay the foundations for a modern university system capable of dealing with the growing complexity of economic and social action, and in particular of coping with the profound changes taking place in knowledge systems — in the relationship between science and technology, in the world of production and work — and the demand for democratization of knowledge and equal opportunities for all citizens. However, a brief overview of education policies implemented in Italy in the distant and recent past shows that their outcomes have been rather controversial.

The birth of the mass university in Italy has been traced back to two pieces of legislation: Law 1859 of 1962 which established the unified lower secondary school, and Law 910 of 1969 which liberalized access to the university. The first law abolished the need for students to make an early choice between academic and professionalizing tracks, offering a single comprehensive school track lasting until the end of compulsory education. The second law made it possible to enrol in any university program regardless of the type of secondary school diploma obtained, be it general curricula (high schools), technical education (technical institutes) or vocational education (professional institutes). These measures, which were intended to help bring about the transition from the elite university to mass higher education, marked a change that was more formal than substantial. The abolition of student tracks during compulsory education and the liberalization of university access undoubtedly enabled a larger number of young people to continue their studies longer, but an educational approach rooted in a highly selective traditional model led many students to drop out before graduating.

Greater access to university was not accompanied by a corresponding adaptation in teaching regulations and university organization. In truth, there was at least some attempt to modernize: Law 168 of 1989 granted teaching, scientific, organizational, financial and accounting autonomy to universities (in implementation of Article 33 of the Italian Constitution), leaving the power to plan university development and decide how resources are allocated to the central government (i.e., the Ministry). Often, however, the national authority has failed to fulfil its role effectively, setting ambiguous goals, showing excessive tolerance for universities that do not meet standards, or showering resources indiscriminately rather than allocating them on the basis of performance. This law, like others that followed, did not achieve the desired results. The causes of its ineffectiveness include the lack of systematic measures, insufficient government funding, the alliance between the entrenched academic establishment and the ministerial bureaucracy, and a dim view of the university's social relevance [4].
A more radical change was finally proposed by Ministerial Decree 509 of 1999, which implemented the European agreements known as the Bologna Process, which, in order to arrive at a system of comparable academic qualifications, provided for the adoption of a university model based on two main cycles, the establishment of a single academic credit system, the promotion of European mobility and cooperation in quality assessment. This reform has effectively transformed the Italian university system’s educational provision. The change, which came into effect in 2001, consisted of dividing tertiary education into two cycles: a first cycle (level I) lasting three years and intended to enable graduates to apply their knowledge and understanding in an occupational context, and a second more advanced cycle (II level), lasting two years, which provides graduates with the grounding needed for highly qualified activities. The reform also contemplates several five-year specialist degree programs (such as Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy, and Veterinary Medicine).

Between 2001 and 2005, the possibility of earning tertiary qualifications through a shorter program, combined with the opportunity for those enrolled in the pre-Bologna system’s four-year programs to migrate towards a three-year degree almost doubled the number of graduates, which went from 161,484 to 301,298. The surge in university participation, however, soon tapered off, as the pool dried up of students who had interrupted their studies or failed to complete their programs on time, who took advantage of the new system to obtain a first-cycle degree in a short time (see Figure. 1).

These lackluster results gave new strength to the widespread criticisms regarding the outcomes of the reform: criticisms which primarily center on the fragmentation of the courses, the proliferation of degree programs, an increase in the number of exams to be taken and the introduction of master's programs that do not correspond to international standards. The most important criticism is directed against Italy’s maverick approach to applying the two-cycle module: the first level in Italy is not in fact occupationally oriented, as in other European countries. The Italian student who finishes the first three years of tertiary education in many cases is not prepared to enter a specific area of the labor market. However, these perverse effects are not due to the legislative framework, but to how it has been interpreted by the universities' various governing bodies (Academic Senate, Department Council, etc.), which have chiefly sought to protect their own parochial interests.

Operationally, the reform was effectively implemented, despite its complexity and the stringent time constraints. However, the most important factor needed for full implementation was lacking: an effective understanding and acceptance of the reform’s aims on the part of all members of the academic world. Ultimately, the reform hoped to make academia less inward-looking and more open to the needs of society and the economy. This openness should have led to degree programs that instilled specific professional skills, and stronger links with local stakeholders in terms of offering collaboration, consultancy and services, and of accepting proposals, initiatives and stimuli from civil society. Academia, however, saw these new aims as a debasement and impoverishment of higher education, and a violation of the institution’s autonomy. The self-referentiality of academic knowledge — or the poor match between university provision and the demand for higher education — seems to be confirmed by the fact that the highest educational qualification awarded by the Italian university, the doctorate, basically has no market in the world of work. Its value is solely as a credential when applying for a position at the start of a public university teaching career, and it is thus only a means of academic self-reproduction. Here again, as in the cases described above, the changes that followed the reform were formal (transformation of the structure of educational provision), but not substantial (maintenance of teaching content and methods).

Resistance to change is a classic topos in organizational studies, and the Italian university no exception. As is typical of loosely coupled institutions [4], it has succeeded over the decades in holding to its own stance by adapting to changes in the historical, social and economic context, isolating itself from perturbations and pressures from outside. The Italian university system’s extreme fragmentation and internal variety (with its many different professional groups and roles, multiple disciplines, etc.) has allowed it to adopt forms of adjustment that we can define as partial or relative.

4 A SHORTCOMING OF THE SYSTEM

The outcomes of tertiary education reform policies in Italy have been uncertain, unexpected and sometimes even unwanted. The CIPP model (context, input, process and product evaluation) proposed by Stufflebeam [6] is a useful framework for carrying out assessments that can help bring about effective improvements in such situations, as it not only focuses on results, but also concentrates on the antecedent and concomitant conditions, on the resources available and on the procedures adopted.
Analyzing the context in which tertiary education operates is fundamental because it provides a picture of the constraints and opportunities in which it acts. In this regard, numerous analyses agree in portraying an unfavorable context. In addition to Italy’s demographic situation — the aging population mentioned above — the low general cultural level is also a negative factor, as it does not stimulate the demand for education. Other factors as well contribute to a less-than-dynamic picture. The Italian economy is mainly based on small and medium-sized enterprises that turn out low to medium tech products and have limited capacity for innovation and investment in research. Consequently, it exerts limited social pressure on universities to provide better performance both in terms of training highly qualified personnel and in terms of producing knowledge that can be applied in the world of production. Lastly, the precarious government finances, burdened by an enormous public debt, constitute another contextual factor that limits the growth of tertiary education in Italy.

This last consideration leads directly to the examination of the inputs and, in particular, to one of the most important weaknesses of the Italian university system, its underfunding: just 1% of GDP compared to 1.4% of the EU-22. The situation worsened considerably following the recent economic and financial crisis. The Ordinary Financing Fund (FFO), which in 2009 amounted to 7.5 billion euros, fell in 2016 to 6.9 billion, or 8% in nominal terms and almost 20% in real terms. In addition, hiring was first frozen, then severely regulated, with the result that tenured faculty fell by 20% (from 62,000 to 50,000), a decrease only partially offset by newly recruited temporary researchers, a job category which has only recently been created.

The lack of economic and human resources undoubtedly weighs heavily on how the university carries out its processes, i.e., all of the activities involved in its fundamental missions: teaching (transmission of knowledge) and research (production of knowledge), and the so-called third mission (a wide range of activities involving generation, use, application and exploitation of knowledge and other university capabilities outside of academic environments) [7]. The activities connected with achieving these goals are numerous and heterogeneous: they range from planning degree programs to offering job placement services, from managing financial resources to faculty recruiting, and from participating in research calls to disseminating research results to a non-specialist public.

The Stufflebeam CIPP model, although dated, continues to provide a solid analytical basis for policy planning through a cycle of planning, structuring, implementation, review and reformulation of decisions. However, it should be understood not so much as a scheme that describes a deterministic relationship between variables, but as a conceptual approach that makes it possible to categorize aspects that are regarded as important, as they are understood in the broad sense. In the university in its universal phase, the socioeconomic context is not simply a background, but is a book that must be read in order for the university to anticipate change rather than undergoing it passively. In the university of the universal access phase, the inputs are not just the available resources, but are also the “potential resources”, which universities imagine they can access with fund-raising actions, requests for financing from private individuals, licensing agreements and royalties on patents, and consulting fees. In turn, the processes should not be seen simply in terms of carrying out activities, but as governance that can produce strategic decisions in tight deadlines, implementing decisions effectively and, if necessary, reformulating the objectives.

### 5 PROPOSALS UNDER CONSIDERATION

A few lines back, I noted that Italy has not reached the phase of universal higher education, as less than half of any given age cohort enrol in university. More harshly, Martinotti [8] argues that the Italian university system has not even passed through the mass phase, except as regards access, which in any case is still limited. In all other respects — from the number of students who graduate, to the methods for teaching and assessing skills, down to the criteria for choosing faculty — the traditional model of elite universities still seems to be in force. Italy is certainly not the only country to have encountered difficulties in transitioning to a system that better meets contemporary society’s education and training needs. In 1999, Trow observed that “[...] most European countries are still struggling to complete the structural reforms necessary to institutionalize mass higher education” [9]. Dubet [10] recognizes that the French university model is still anchored to the old patterns of republican elitism, based on the clear separation of the elite grandes écoles, which reward only the brightest students whose school career has been faultless.

To make up for lost time — as we have seen, the Italian university system has yet to go through not one, but two phases of development, viz., mass and universal education — quick and decisive action must be taken. In view of the difficult contextual conditions and the inertia that dogged the main
attempts at reform to date, it is legitimate to ask what kind of education policies could pave the way to putting the Italian university system's performance on a par with the best universities elsewhere in Europe.

Over the years, many proposals have been made in this regard. Scholars, politicians and union representatives have all had their say, often following the intellectual fashions of the moment. We can divide these suggestions into two categories: the very general, and the more specific.

One of the most general proposals is to abolish the legal value of educational qualifications. According to the proposal's supporters, this would put universities in competition, which they see as the best remedy for the many inefficiencies (from waste to recruiting procedures that fail to enlist the best candidates) that beset the Italian university today. If the value of educational qualifications is determined by the market rather than the law, each university would be forced to hire the best faculty members, provide better training, and offer more efficient services to students. This is an interesting proposal, which has strengths, but does not necessarily seem to be connected to the expected result: what guarantee is there that if educational qualifications have no legal value, universities will indeed compete virtuously and improve their performance, rather than eschewing all responsibility or forming a cartel to lower costs and hence the quality of the educational provision?

A quite different approach was taken by a workshop entitled "The Positive University of the 21st Century" held in 2015 and attended by several rectors of Italian universities and representatives of the business world. The workshop advanced ten ideas for a Positive University: universities must be social institutions, not ivory towers; universities are public assets but not public agencies; universities must promote interdisciplinarity; universities must guarantee an ethical approach; universities must increase partnerships with the business world; universities are mass institutions but must continue to pay particular attention to individuals; universities compete and cooperate through networks; universities must be increasingly open to the world around them; universities must attract and nurture talent; universities must provide for life-long learning. It is difficult to disagree with these highly general proposals. However, since they fail to specify timeframes, procedures or goals, they are little more than a catalog of good intentions.

Other more specific proposals focusing on circumscribed measures have emerged from a careful reading of the situation. For example, the TreeLLLe Association [4] notes that in order to encourage an increase in enrolment, we must solve the age-old problem of scholarships, which in Italy are not awarded to all those who are entitled to them due to a lack of resources. To reduce the high drop-out rate and increase the number of graduates, "Professional University Schools" (SUP in their Italian acronym) should be set up through agreements with firms, professional bodies and the like to meet the needs for specialized employment-oriented training (as indicated in Figure 3) which are not satisfied by the few non-university tertiary education programs that are now available.

There are many other interesting proposals that aim to increase the number of graduates in Italy. However, since they fail to specify timeframes, procedures or goals, they are little more than a catalog of good intentions.

6 CONCLUSIONS
The European Union has announced its target of increasing the share of the population aged 30 to 34 holding tertiary level qualifications to 40% by 2020, inviting individual countries to set national targets that take the specific conditions in each country into account and to establish appropriate policies to achieve them. In Italy, the national target was set at 26%, so it can be said to have been achieved: university graduates now account for 26.2% of the population in that age group. However, there is little cause for rejoicing, since the target is decidedly unambitious, and very far from the European goal or from the figures reached in the most advanced countries. This does not seem to arouse particular concern in the government or even among the public, as if people had become resigned to seeing the country relegated to the bottom of the education rankings.

Nor is the university system itself immune from this passivity. Busily defending the sacredness of institutions devoted to the production and transmission of knowledge, along the lines of von Humboldt's nineteenth-century "theoretical university", it has not always been aware of how the world around it is changing. For a long time the Italian university has shown itself incapable of reflecting on itself. Proof of this is the fact that Higher Education Studies, which in other countries is a consolidated
field of inquiry, is underrepresented in Italy, where significant work has begun to appear only in recent years — see for example [11], [12] —. It is up to academia to find the motivation to redesign its role in the new conditions in which it finds itself operating, overcoming its structural inertia and taking the lead in promoting its own renewal.

REFERENCES


