

**Governance and evaluation in the Italian University system: an
analysis of the Italian experience**

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Abstract

Evaluation and quality assurance in higher education are closely linked to system governance.

The paper proposes four possible patterns of university system governance, according to locus and focus of governance. This frame of reference takes into consideration the Italian university system over the past twenty years where great changes have taken place and evaluation has been introduced.

The paper pinpoints those characteristics that Italian university system governance has taken on over time which are in line with the external (locus), negotiation-based (focus) pattern. This model requires strong support by suitable evaluation systems geared to fully implement the ENQA guidelines.

Questions

- Do you think that national university system governance should pivot on external references in order to overcome self-referencing attitudes?
- Do you think that diversity among universities in terms of objectives and values should be encouraged?
- According to you, to what extent should the role of evaluation be enhanced as a lever of governance systems?

1. Four patterns of system governance in higher education

An analysis of university system governance pinpoints locus and focus of governance (Rebora and Turri, 2008).

Locus of governance may be inside or outside the university system. The decision-making centres that influence or condition important choices and events concerned with system governance are either within or without the institutional sphere of the university, its organisation and staff. There are thus two extremes of locus of governance and obviously a wide range of intermediate situations.

The concept of *focus* of governance stems from the idea of shared or conflicting aims and interests between actors that Olsen (1988) took from organisational literature (Simon, 1957). Decision-making on governance issues may be strategically rational and driven by the shared aims and values of the people taking part or has to face the multiple and conflicting aims and values of those involved. In these extreme cases there exists a rational strategic focus of governance where rational policies and strategy can fully develop or a negotiation-based incremental focus of governance where the bases for building up shared strategies are fragile. In the latter case decision-making shows an inclination towards negotiation, managing conflicts and heeding the emotional waves of public opinion in the search for quick and easy consensus.

There are four possible different patterns of governance (vide Fig.1):

- internal locus and rational focus: internal strategic governance. Forms of “self-government driven by intellectual values” develop and are expressed by the most influential actors inside the university system who assume leadership and define strategies.
- internal locus and conflicting focus: internal negotiation-based governance. The university system is still self-regulating in accordance with internal criteria but there is no coherent leadership and vital decisions come from multiple or conflicting processes. Governance may be interpreted as an “alliance of independent *feuds*”.

- external locus and rational focus: external strategic governance. The university system is unable to govern in accordance with its own criteria and has to respond seriously to external requests and the influence of external actors. University action can thus be interpreted as an “instrument of public policies” when the system is coherent and the political actors governing it are able to orient it on the basis of a shared strategy.
- external locus and conflicting focus: external, negotiation-based conflicting governance. The system has to answer external requests and drives but is unable to define and carry out a unitary strategy because the different actors that make up the system follow their own objectives which are numerous, heterogeneous and sometimes even conflicting. Complex changeable relationships thus come to light among a variety of institutional actors that lack any hierarchical order. This situation can be interpreted in terms of pluralistic or even fragmented networks.

Figure 1: Framework for the analysis of university system governance (Rebora and Turri, 2008)

2. System governance and evaluation in Italy

Prior to 1988 university system governance was relatively simple and there were very few centralised institutional bodies.

Locus of governance was certainly inside the university system which was governed by an alliance between the ministerial bureaucracy and the centres of university power, thus perpetuating the Italian university tradition. The influence of external interests was extremely limited. University professors, on the other hand, were particularly influential and conspicuous both in the political world, where many of them were present in Parliament and frequently became Ministers or Premiers, and in the economic world where they were administrators of private or state-controlled banks and firms. Externally influential academics “protected” university interests from outside influences.

Focus of governance was characterised by decision-making aimed at the search for consensus through negotiation, settlement of conflicts and agreements between central powers. It thus developed along lines that lacked transparency and did not fully comply with formal guidelines. More often than not, decision-making was a mere formal ratification of decisions taken elsewhere. So, rationality gave way to incremental negotiation that was not particularly conflicting but oriented to the search for general agreement through continuous mediation between influential groups. The democratic structure of the system with its elective and collegial bodies was more of a ritual with an external appearance and a legitimising role rather than a truly operational role.

In this kind of governance there was no room for evaluation. At that time and in that context universities could still take their own merits for granted. Evaluation was wholly in the hands of academics and restricted to when they entered the profession or made progress in their career.

1989-1998: the drives towards external governance and the birth of evaluation

The year 1989 was a turning point in the Italian university system as it witnessed the beginning of a wave of reforms that continued throughout the 1990s, recognising and strengthening the autonomy of universities *vis-à-vis* the government. In 1989 the law 168/1989 was passed.

In the period that followed the *locus of governance* started to move towards the outside of the university system because forces that were unconnected to the university world came into play not just in the shape of stimuli but also as actors directly involved in the reform process. The idea of setting up a university that would abandon its traditional detached attitude to seek actively for a *partnership* in society and the economy was certainly one of the fundamental criteria that inspired the new policies. The implementation of these early measures were reinforced by a series of external driving forces. Europe in particular became a driver through many different channels such as framework programmes for research and international exchanges on the part of university staff and

students, which started off on a small scale but then developed rapidly. And last, but not least, the setting in motion of the Bologna Process.

The focus of governance was not significantly different from the previous period and was still characterised by the prevailing incremental decision-making based on negotiation.

System governance in the period in question changed from being an “internal strategic governance” structure to an external, negotiation-based conflicting governance structure.

With the advent of greater autonomy, legislation began to foresee evaluation as from the year 1993. The first measure on university evaluation was laid down in Law 537/1993 (significantly the same law that reformed university funding systems) which decreed that state universities should set up evaluation units in order to verify “through comparative analyses of costs and returns, the correct management of public resources, the productivity of research and teaching in addition to the impartiality and good performance of administrative action” (article 5). The law provided for the setting up of the Observatory for the evaluation of the university system whose task was to assess the efficiency and productivity of research and teaching activities and validate the plans for developing and redressing the balance in the university system (article 5), but the Observatory only became operative in March 1996.

This marked the beginning of the Italian university’s experience with quality assurance systems. It was a pioneer period characterised by the prevailing trend towards voluntary improvement of activities, especially teaching. Results were encouraging: according to the Observatory only two out of a total of fifty-six state universities still had to set up evaluation units in 1997.

1999 - 2006: Fragmentation of the system and the growth of evaluation

1999 marked another turning point with two important measures that supported the drive for autonomy but also facilitated the subsequent drift towards a more marked fragmentation of the system. The first occurred when Parliament passed new laws regulating the appointment of

professors, decentralising the task to the individual universities (Law 210/1998). The second took place immediately afterwards, in the wake of the Bologna Declaration, when teaching systems were reformed with the adoption of new undergraduate and post-graduate curricula. With regard to university autonomy this was tantamount to opening Pandora's box. The actual implementation of these two measures by the universities marked the complete surrender to fragmentation.

The *Locus of governance* in this new period was therefore characterised by a shift towards the outside that had already begun in the previous period. However, it also developed radically taking on a plural meaning, *loci*, as a result of the widely differing drives from the local environment that were welcomed by the university especially with regard to the development of new curricula. After the general election in 2001 the new government did not halt this tendency but accentuated it by opening up to external forces that set up new private universities (especially distance learning ones) whose proposed curricula were generally weak. In other words, university autonomy with its great dependence on external resources opened up the way for an indiscriminate search for any kind of possible support rather than opening up only to the market.

The *focus of governance*, moreover, remained incremental and negotiation-based with an increased conflicting charge. The opening up to the outside did not improve internal cohesion as the development of initiatives highlighted internal divisions and conflicts. Some internal and external actors even made alliances and projects of different importance and significance that were difficult to accommodate in a common strategy for the individual university or the system as a whole.

Governance that was "external, negotiation-based and conflicting" clearly ended up by creating problems for the central government bodies who were caught off balance by the speed with which previously centralised administrative procedures were decentralised to the universities. Evaluation in this period was considered a possible way of stopping the fragmentation of the system. Since 1999 state evaluation bodies had become stronger and new tasks were assigned to the National Committee for the Evaluation of Universities (CNVSU) which took the place of the National Observatory and

was responsible for the evaluation of teaching and for guiding the university evaluation units which were made compulsory even in private universities (Turri, 2007). Research was evaluated, too. The Italian Committee for the Evaluation of Research (CIVR) was set up for assessing the quality of research and carried out from 2004 an important three year exercise (2001-2004) for the evaluation of university research with great efficacy (Minelli et al., 2008). In particular the end of the period in which Moratti was Minister and the beginning of Mussi's ministry (2006-2008) showed the need to take measures to check the uncontrolled development of the system. The aim was to set up evaluation systems that made it possible to govern universities by "steering at a distance" in a system that combined autonomy with rules and behaviour dictated by the state and was valid for all universities. However, the university system was now heading in the direction of fragmentation and the universities differed considerably from one another. In this type of situation standardised guidelines, such as the minimum requirements for degree courses, were opportunistically interpreted by the universities.

3. Conclusions and scenarios for the future

From what has been said a close link can be seen between system governance and evaluation systems in Italy. Together with funding and legislation, evaluation is in fact the main government lever that the state can use on the university system. It is thus crucial to understand the development of system governance in order to plan future evaluation systems.

Literature has already recognised the complexity in defining and understanding the development of university system governance torn between autonomy and the quality of academic activities.

In their work Maassen and Van Vought (1994), referring to previous articles (Ashby, 1956; Steinbrunner, 1974), put forward the idea of steering (defined as a "model of self-regulation") based on a cybernetic perspective or rather decision-making that is distinctly fragmented and limited to taking into consideration a small set of critical variables. In this set-up the state is "the actor who

watches the rules of a game played by relatively autonomous players and who changes these rules when the game is no longer able to lead to satisfactory results” (Maassen and Van Vought, 1994:41). However, this is not a renouncement of responsibility by the state but is more a matter of “framework steering” where national bodies set “the broad parameters for higher education development, while leaving most of the details and initiatives to individual institutions” (Maassen and Van Vought, 1994:57). The two authors also show that the diffusion of system governance models that are inspired by these principles help to boost innovation and flexibility in universities.

Goedegebuure (1996) associates the shift towards more self-regulated system governance models with the diffusion of greater diversity inside university systems. The state is, in fact, encouraging differentiation between universities in order to help the system as a whole to meet the increasingly different demands of society.

The theme of diversity in higher education goes back a long way in time. It was certainly stimulated by the move towards a mass education system with its need to diversify and distinguish missions and teaching/research programmes in order to satisfy more varied and widespread needs. (Trow, 1974).

According to Neave (2000: 19) the question of diversity must be critically analysed by considering potentially negative aspects such as the “fragmentation and the balkanisation of responsibility”. Meek (2000) looks at the issue of differentiation with regard to an opening up to the market by highlighting two contradictory tendencies: the first in which differentiated teaching/research programmes are developed in order to satisfy particular market niches and the second in which the activities of successful competitors are imitated. King (2007: 423) also questions the link between an opening up to the market and differentiation maintaining that the relationship is ambiguous and in some cases “the reputational stratification of university systems, which intensifies with increased competition, may limit the opportunities for sector self-regulation”.

Another theme highlighted by literature regards the presence and involvement of a greater number of stakeholders. A recent piece of research on the subject talks of “steering through networks” and how

“Responsibilities that were formerly those of the state have thus not only been transferred to higher education institutions but also to other organisations such as research councils, accreditation bodies etc. New actors at the national level (e.g. ministries of economic affairs) and regional level are entering the higher education scene, especially given their interest in the emerging knowledge society and technology transfer. In this respect the state’s role becomes one of a network manager (‘steering through networks’) and new regimes of governance emerge: we now see a more multi-actor, multilevel governance framework emerging in a number of countries”. (Stensaker, Enders and Boer, 2006: 12)

According to Potì and Reale (2005) if one acknowledges the importance of formal and informal networks inside the university system which interact horizontally and are self-coordinating, then the government role is “to facilitate the network interactions, activate them and participate in them”

As regards system governance in general, literature seems to pinpoint not only one but a multiplicity of different elements for understanding recent developments in the state/university relationship. In addition to opening up to the market other issues such as behaviour and services differentiation and the question of networks with wide groupings of state and private subjects must be taken into consideration bearing in mind that the more autonomous universities adopt behaviour that adjusts to new conditions and therefore cannot be interpreted with strictly rational schemes.

Our analytical framework has the advantage of drawing attention to the university’s opening to the outside world and to a myriad of aims and objectives that fall into either the “pluralistic or fragmented network”. This view takes in a multitude of possible governance set-ups with extremely diverse features and differing consequences. In our opinion, choosing between a fragmented or a pluralistic network may provide a useful outline for future studies. A pluralistic structure of the system is a feasible alternative to the drift towards fragmentation. Truly pluralistic governance is born of the combination between the autonomous entrepreneurial drive of state and private

universities and the ability of government bodies to organise, stimulate and go along with the university system.

Differentiation implies that a large number of reference models, not pre-defined but ready to face specific strategic aims, are present at the same time. Significant examples may include local state universities, universities with an international orientation, private universities that stem from the ambitions of specific communities, entrepreneurial universities that manage to appeal to local resources and attract external funding even with the support of national bodies.

In a pluralistic system, governance is thus called upon to safeguard the combination of strength/dynamism in universities and the diversity of reference models. Diversity should be limited by means of suitable requisites related to strength and dynamism that are set by system governance.

This reasoning recalls the actual concept of universities and the need to define a base common to them all and deemed necessary, without sacrificing differentiation.

In 1988 representatives of the most important European countries signed the Magna Charta Universitatum in Bologna when the university there was celebrating the nine-hundredth anniversary of its foundation. The Magna Charta defined the ideal features of the university inherited from the medieval tradition and its evolution over the years and went on to describe universities as institutions devoted to creating and preserving knowledge, passing it on to future generations so as to enhance human potential. The three pillars of the university are: institutional autonomy, the indivisibility of research and teaching and lastly the universal international perspective that is an intrinsic part of higher education. The university's fundamental role is to increase the influence of reasoning in contemporary society through research, teaching and the interplay between them. It therefore has to take a more active part in the problems and debates that enliven society by strengthening its intellectual leadership (Felt, 2004). This is not a task that can simply be acknowledged by the university but has to be borne out by facts.

This definition makes clear the basic distinctive features of the university in terms that are coherent with the requisite for strength and dynamism without closing the door on diversity and differentiation that are typical of pluralism.

Basically speaking, the Magna Charta affirms that the character of and university 'label' cannot be attributed to just any educational structure.

System governance has to ensure that the institutions recognised as universities have the requisites inherent in the concept as defined in the Magna Charta and has to create the conditions for improving these features. True *steering at a distance* is possible when there is a platform that functions even when there are differing drives and behaviour on the part of the university.

One crucial ability should be at the root of all this: the one of assessing requisites, the condition and the results of universities and of their respective fundamental functions and activities.

The guidelines for Quality Assurance laid down by ENQA (2005) are in line with this approach:

- at university level, autonomous evaluation systems have to check how the adopted strategies are working and spread an internal quality culture which, in turn, leads to improvement;
- at national level, a periodical evaluation system provided with follow-up activities has to verify the effectiveness of the university evaluation system and ascertain whether certain pre-fixed aspects regarding quality are present.

As the ENQA guidelines state "External quality assurance procedures should take into account the effectiveness of internal quality assurance procedures". This implies developing a national evaluation system that enhances and measures itself against local university evaluation systems. This type of solution permits greater flexibility in evaluation taking more into account the size, geographical position and history of each university while preserving and enhancing university autonomy by making university government bodies more responsible for their actions and giving them a boost for effective management of university activities.

To sum up, national bodies can support a pluralistic system of universities in three ways:

- to establish a threshold in order to prevent the diffusion of too weak higher education initiatives
- to provide rules that university leaders (rectors, deans and the various coordinators of teaching activities) can use in order to validate and strengthen their strategic choices and their government structure
- to allocate resources in order to stimulate and to reward the entrepreneurial drive of both state and private university .

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