DEHEMS project

HE review – Country report about the Higher Education System

Country: Italy
Country report about the Higher Education System in Italy

1. Introduction


Main regulatory framework in Italian Higher Education driven by the article 33 of the Constitution and by some leading laws, such as, among others, the Law 168/1989, on university's autonomy, along with the Law 509/1999, shaping the regulatory framework on university programmes.

2. Overview about the HE System

The Higher Education system in Italy\(^1\) (corresponding to ISCED 5, type A and B, and ISCED 6, in compliance with the European glossary on Education, see figure 1 below) consists of a university (state and private universities, polytechnics, universities for foreigners, schools of advanced studies and on-line/distance learning universities) and a non-university sector (among others, national academies in the Fine Arts, Cinema, Dance and Drama, Music Conservatories, schools and institutes for the education and training of professionals in various fields, such as language mediation, design, etc.).

Most of the existing university institutions were established directly by the State, while a limited number, originally set up by private entities, were later recognized by the Ministry. The Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) shapes the regulatory framework of the Italian higher education system, well supported by some advisory bodies such as the National University Council (CUN), the National Committee for the Evaluation of the University System (recently transformed into the National Agency for the Evaluation-ANVUR), the Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI), and the University Student National Council (CNSU).

\(^1\) ISCED 5 stands for Tertiary Education, level including theoretically based programmes with academic orientation (type A) and programmes with occupational orientation (type B); ISCED level 6 includes programmes of the doctoral type, accordingly to the European glossary on Education.
Accordingly to the article 33 of the Italian Constitution, universities are allowed to perform autonomously within a regulatory framework defined by national laws. Thus, State universities are public entities endowed

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2 Since then, some national laws, issued along the last 20 years, have reformed the shape of the higher education sector and contributed to define the following principles for universities:
- in 1989, the Law n. 168/1989 set up the Ministry of the University (MURST), then transformed into the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR); since then, universities have been given increasing degrees of autonomy and related responsibilities, well embedded in statutes and regulations on financial management, teaching and courses, along with further autonomy in the process of recruitment of teaching staff;
- in 1999, the Regulation / DM n. 509/1999 introduced the CFU, university credit system, to sort out the issue of the high rate of university study dropout but, above all, to deal with the tendency towards students mobility and the alignment of the recognition of university qualifications with the ECTS system (European Credit Transfer System);
- in 2008, the Law n. 133/2008 deals with savings in public expenditures and, according to that, universities have been allowed to change their legal status to private foundations and consequently perform as private enterprises;
- lastly, in 2009, the Law n. 1/2009 has issued an ongoing reform concerning procedures for recruitment of professors / researchers, which does not allow universities to overcome a fixed threshold of personnel costs as a compulsory requirement needed to go on with new recruitment’s procedures. Moreover, the Law introduces some meritocratic principles applied to the process of resources allocation, such as the mechanism for the allocation of a percentage of at least 7% of the total FFO amount (where FFO represents the main State funding allocated to universities), that has to be measured by performance indicators related to teaching, results in research, along with the provision of facilities.
with scientific, teaching, managerial, financial and book-keeping autonomy; according to such principle of autonomy, each university may comply with the national regulatory framework by means of its own statutes and regulations, issued by rectoral decrees.

### Table 1. Overview about the Italian Higher Education System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of HE</th>
<th>Number of Institutions</th>
<th>Number of Students enrolled (% of Women)</th>
<th>Number of Graduates (% of Women)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year</strong></td>
<td><strong>2000</strong></td>
<td><strong>2007/08</strong></td>
<td><strong>2000/2001</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universities</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>1.722.457 (56%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>171.806 (56%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of programme</th>
<th>Number of Students enrolled</th>
<th>Number of Graduates in compliance with the “Bologna Graduates”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Former regulatory framework</td>
<td>1.211.046</td>
<td>206.616</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New regulatory framework (DM509/99)</td>
<td>511.411</td>
<td>1.602.576</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Source of data: CNVSU Report 2009/2010

The **University education** (Table 1) consists of 95 universities, whose 56 state universities, 3 state polytechnics (Bari, Milan and Turin), 17 free or non-state but legally recognised universities, 3 universities for foreigners (Perugia, Reggio Calabria and Siena), 6 higher schools or “special system high schools” offering qualifications only at the two more advanced levels of education, and 11 on-line universities. The **Non-

3 Source of data: Eurybase Report 2009 and http://statistica.miur.it/ustat/Statistiche/provvisoria.asp

4 The New Framework for the provision of university courses does not consider the distinction between undergraduate and postgraduate courses, but, just to align the Italian system with the main terminology in use at the European level, we may assume that, on the one hand, the 1st and 2nd cycles correspond to the Undergraduate and Graduate level and, on the other, the 3rd cycle to the Postgraduate one.

university education consists of the following institutes, especially those providing higher education in applied arts and music (Higher level Arts and Music Education system - AFAM) and delivering certifications degree-equivalent⁶.

Public universities are primarily State funding-based, but the percentage of funds allocated to university by State-sources have been decreasing⁷ since 2001 and, nowadays, such percentage of public funding appears as aligned with that applied in most European countries. Moreover, a certain diversification of income streams is getting a widespread phenomenon, and Italian universities seem more entrepreneurial and non-State funding oriented. Thus, exploring the principles of the funding system for public universities, the legal framework is given by the Law 537/1993, concerning funding mechanisms as well as the introduction of a more performance-oriented system of resources allocation: the main State funding allocated to universities is named FFO whereas, quite recently, a reforming framework⁸ has been introducing a model of resources allocation (concerning a percentage of at least 7% of FFO) based on three leading performance indicators, namely quality of teaching and research, along with quality/efficiency/efficacy in combination with status of buildings and university campuses.

Concerning the 17 private or non-State universities, but officially recognised by a decree of the Minister of Education, these are entitled with legal recognition of their role and status as attributed after an evaluation process on university statute, organisation and accounting model, and so on. Degrees awarded by such universities, as legally recognised by the State, have same legal value as those of State universities. Non-State universities have to comply with general principles defined by the national university legislation for State institutions.

The main differences between State and non-State universities refer to funding and governance. Concerning the funding system, private universities can rely on diversified sources of funding, and count on some “third

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⁶ Among others:
- Academies of Fine Arts (Accademia di Belle Arti) as an institution providing higher education in applied arts (painting, sculpture, decorating and scenery); they are 20 State and 24 legally recognised.
- Higher Institutes for Artistic Industries (ISIA), institutes offering specific training in the design field (graphic design); there are 4 across the country, based in Faenza (ceramic design), Rome and Florence (industrial design), and Urbino (graphic design).
- National Academy of Drama “Silvio D’Amico”, located in Rome and offering training courses for actors and directors.
- Conservatoires, as higher education institutions providing training in the applied arts of music; there are 54 and 21 across Italy, the former State-based and the latter as officially recognised institutes.
- National Dance Academy, located in Rome and whose the aim is to offer training for dancers, soloists, choreographers.

⁷ The percentage was of 72,9% in 2001 and of 64,3% in 2007 (CNVSU Report 2009/2010).

⁸ Law 1/2009, article 2.
stream” activities and funds\(^9\), in addition to State funding. Furthermore, a wider statutory autonomy has been recognized to such universities, and, according to such degree of autonomy, they can perform and adopt some innovative practices and models of management.

Considering the 11 on-line universities, set up in 2003 to increase access to learning resources accordingly to a regulatory framework titled on “E-Learning Plan of Action”, the original aim seems to be quite far from achievement and some issues have to be raised, related to number of enrolled students (slightly over 17,000 in 2008/2009), continuous drops in new enrolments, not extremely qualified faculties, financial resources often not aligned with development’s plans, and, lastly, new trends forcing introduction of such e-learning platforms also in traditional universities\(^10\).

3. Impacts and status quo of the Bologna Reform

According to the Bologna process, countries have been encouraged “to elaborate a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems, which should seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile. They also undertake to elaborate an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area”. This was the first direct reference to learning outcomes in an official Bologna communiqué, which tries to identify a key role for learning outcomes.

Since its issue (DM 509/99), a reformed legal framework for teaching system allows universities to plan autonomously their study programmes in compliance with teaching regulations adopted by each university; furthermore, such reform introduced the concept of CFU (the equivalent of ECTS\(^11\)), namely university credits corresponding to a minimum of 25 working/studying hours, including contact hours and notional student workload, chosen as means to measure learning outcomes required to students to achieve such level of certification (where an average annual workload for full-time students can be usually quantified in 60 credits). Such regulatory framework has been progressively leading to a new shape for university programmes, that’s a reformed system well aligned with the broader reform undertaken at the European level and with the aims stated in the Bologna process.

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\(^9\) Third Stream concerns with the interaction between University and the rest of Society, with many implications and applications, from private (industry) to public sector (links with regional and local bodies), from a cultural landscape to a social and civic arena.

\(^10\) Bocconi University and Milan Polytechnic have been experimenting some informative channels on YouTube.

\(^11\) ECTS stands for European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System.
Here’s the reformed system of university programmes, currently organized in a three-cycle sequence:

### Table 2. Reformed system of university programmes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cycle</th>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Length of the course</th>
<th>CFU / university credits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st cycle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate level</td>
<td>Laurea (L)/First Degree</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd cycle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate level</td>
<td>Laurea Magistrale (LM)/Degree</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First-level Specialist Degree</td>
<td>In compliance with Italian law or EU directives (the length of studies may vary)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First-level University Master/</td>
<td>At least 1 year</td>
<td>Not less than 60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd cycle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate level</td>
<td>Research Doctorate</td>
<td>3 or more years</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Second-level Specialist Degree</td>
<td>In compliance with Italian law or EU directives (the length of studies may vary), about 2-6 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Second-level University Master/</td>
<td>1 year or more</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master II</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

According to the findings of the Bologna Process Stocktaking Report 2009, Italy has achieved the outcomes as represented in the table below (from indicators which range from Green to Red, through Light Green, Yellow and Orange), well summarized by the following short descriptions: regulations on the operation of the QA Agency for universities and research were adopted in 2008; access to the second cycle has been eased; as of 2008-09 universities must apply the Dublin descriptors when reforming their first and second cycle programmes; a working group was established to develop the levels for the NQF for higher education and to identify the qualifications to be included; a strategy on LLL in HE has been developed and a new framework law reforming LLL was proposed; national guidelines for the recognition of prior learning have been prepared; scholarships for doctoral students have been increased. Future challenges include: in the short term - full implementation of ministerial decrees concerning the first Bologna reform, full implementation of the LLL guidelines for HEIs; in the long term - definition of the guidelines for the reform of governance and preparation of its legal basis.
### DEGREE SYSTEM

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<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Stage of implementation of the first and second cycle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Access to the next cycle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Implementation of national qualifications framework</td>
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### QUALITY ASSURANCE

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Stage of development of external quality assurance system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Level of student participation in quality assurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Level of international participation in quality assurance</td>
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</table>

### RECOGNITION

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<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Stage of implementation of diploma supplement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>National implementation of the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Stage of implementation of ECTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Recognition of prior learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4. Unitary or binary system

As early introduced, Higher Education in Italy is structured in a binary system, consisting of two main articulations, namely the university and the non-university sector; in addition, some higher technical education and training (IFTS) and non-university higher education provided by other institutions.

### 5. Stratification

Italian education appears stratified from the secondary cycle of education (ISCED 3, corresponding to the age of 14), when students are asked for making the choice between lycee (with its articulation in classical upper secondary school, scientific upper secondary school, linguistic upper secondary school, upper secondary school with a sociological-psychological and pedagogical orientation), technical schools, vocational schools (above all art schools), and initial vocational training.

Then, considering a tertiary level of education, the main source of stratification seems related to the choice between University and non-university education.

### 6. Standardisation
Higher education in Italy does not appear a standardised system because, since the issue of the legal framework (DM 509/1999) and academic year 2001/2002, the national context has been implementing the provision of university programmes. Since then, two main types of programmes and degrees tracks will co-exist and, on the one hand, the traditional ones based on former regulations which is going to be gradually removed\(^\text{12}\) and, on the other, the new ones based on the above mentioned regulations. Such new framework, as early stated, allows universities to plan autonomously their own study programmes accordingly to the regulatory framework as elaborated and adopted by each university.

But, just to balance university’s autonomy with the need of assuring quality to the provision of programmes, some compulsory requirements for universities have been introduced, as needed to set up new study programmes (dealing with number of professors and scientific disciplines in programmes to deliver, definition of minimum/maximum students enrolled in such new programmes, provision of facilities such as laboratories, libraries, and classrooms).

One of the main issues of standardization/differentiation across the University sector concerns different layers all along the decision-making process: on the one hand, the central/governmental level in charge of the definition of a legal framework and, on the other, the university layer and its autonomy’s role of shaping a regulatory framework for the provision of university programmes. And just analysing minimum and necessary requirements, we may make the assumption of some differentiation among the central and university level of decision, on the one hand, and, as a consequence, among faculties and universities organizing and delivering programmes all across the country.

Furthermore, there seems to be a certain differentiation among Italian universities, even if a formal diversification has never been centrally defined. Thus, some points of reflections driving some differentiation concern: average fees applied to enrolled students in the universities based in the North of the country (almost double in comparison with fees applied in the South)\(^\text{13}\); region of location of the university (trend of outgoing students from the South to the Centre and the North)\(^\text{14}\); low trend of students enrolled in the South to carry out international programmes of mobility\(^\text{15}\); traineeships programmes as mainly driven by the location of the institution\(^\text{16}\); some other factors dealing with reputation, attractiveness of the city, provision of distinctive programmes or appealing facilities. Otherwise, it does not emerge a bold differentiation among private and public universities, even if, within a “mass university”-driven Italian sector, some examples of “elite universities” may be quoted around, in some private (Bocconi in Milan or Luiss in Rome), polytechnics or traditional...

\(^{12}\) Defined as the former framework for the provision of courses.

\(^{13}\) CNVSU Report 2009/2010 pg. 13

\(^{14}\) CNVSU Report 2009/2010 pg. 32-33

\(^{15}\) CNVSU Report 2009/2010 pg. 88

\(^{16}\) CNVSU Report 2009/2010 pg. 81
universities (Turin, Milan, Bologna), primarily driven by their high degree of attractiveness or their status of internationally or vocationally-oriented universities.

A further interesting issue of standardisation/differentiation refers to the percentage of students enrolled in their own home regions of almost 80.4% in academic year 2007/2008; thus the establishment of local universities was mainly driven by the aim of providing university sites in all the regions, to attract local students and provide plenty of opportunities to undertake studies in their own region; and the Multi Campus model, experienced by Italian University since 1995, pursued just the aim of decentralizing some traditional and huge universities (such as Bologna, La Sapienza in Rome, others) and setting up some campuses spread across the region (such as, at Bologna University, the local campuses of Forlì, Ravenna, Cesena, Rimini). But a main weakness of such delocalization seems, quite often, related to inadequate levels of university services, in terms of faculties, focus on research, delivery of facilities.

In conclusion, just to summarize the main issues related to standardisation/differentiation, we may categorize all the Italian universities in traditional or research-oriented universities, internationalised-oriented or more community-based universities, the latter more focused on the local development of their region.

7. Selectivity

Italian tertiary education does not appear highly selective but driven by non-selective principles and extremely open and focused on enrolment of ingoing students. Concerning all the programmes, an upper secondary school certificate constitutes the necessary requirement for being admitted, and equivalent foreign qualifications may also be accepted. The legal framework for teaching autonomy (DM 509/1999) forces universities to clear up, in their regulations, entry requirements needed to be admitted to programmes, in terms of initial preparation, along with the definition of procedures to deal with students’ selection. But for the most of university courses, above all considering the First Cycle, there’s no restriction on number of applicants admitted, but admissions may be subject to specific requirements (such as interviews, written exams, written exam on some fields of study, admission tests, and admission is commonly delivered even when the student records some lacks in preparation, which has to be recorded, but that does not stop any further stage of admission). A higher degree of selectivity may be required at the Second Cycle, when recommendations by the national framework support the application of higher degree of selectivity in admissions, as a means to strengthen the orientation of students.

The only bold issue of selectivity has been stated, in compliance with the legal framework17, by the definition of a threshold in enrolment of some programmes in the following fields of study, such as medicine, veterinary, dentistry, architecture; accordingly to European directives, a 3+2 year model does not apply to such courses,
which remain still organised in one only cycle of 5 or 6 years (other courses, such as architecture, pharmacy and law may choose between the provision of a 3+2 model of courses or the model lasting 5 or 6 years).

8. Academic versus vocational orientation
Vocational orientation considers primarily polytechnics and some private universities, such as Bocconi or Luiss; but, considering some recent tendencies, it is shown how also some more traditional universities have been approaching similar models of vocational-oriented programmes, therefore less academic-oriented.

9. Tuition fees
Tuition fees are defined in compliance with the national framework\(^\text{18}\) in their minimum amount and charged by institutions to enrolling students. These are normally calculated on the basis of students’ income and may vary among degrees, according to course level, typology and subject area (same regulation applied to Italian and foreign students) and may also be varied yearly, by decisions taken by Governing Bodies of each institution. Moreover, an average amount of fees paid by students in academic year 2004/2005 was quantified in € 880 for enrolment in first and second cycle degrees and, as early noted, average fees may vary among universities located in the North or in the South of the country.
Concerning the exploration of means to support students (such as bursaries, scholarships, and halls of residence), these appear as inadequate to the needs both of enrolling or potential students in some cases: one of the examples refer to the rate of financial cover of such means of support, which appears quite differentiated among regions and universities, therefore some universities cannot provide support to all the students selected as beneficiary\(^\text{19}\).

10. Institutional transition regimes
The assumption was that students enrolled in ‘90s made their university’s choices without considering their capabilities but primarily driven by fashionable programmes, therefore increasing the percentage of dropouts after the first year (over 21%) and decreasing that of the graduates (between 40%-45%).
Since then, voluntary or compulsory initiatives of orientation/ training/counselling have been promoted by all the universities, at the conclusion of the secondary cycle as well as along the university studies, just to address the process of selection. Thus, dealing with such institutional transition regimes, on the one hand, the regulations set out by the legal framework (DM 509/1999) force universities to boost and deliver compulsory training/counselling activities, which have to be carry out along (as activities embedded in the curriculum) or

\(^{18}\) Law n. 306/1997, titled on “Regulations on University contributions”.
\(^{19}\) CNVSU Report 2009/2010 pg. 71
after the graduation (as activities of counselling/orientation), and detailed explanations of such activities have to be necessarily included in the regulatory framework of each university. On the other, a further law\textsuperscript{20} aims to promote training activities among universities and private enterprises/professional associations/public bodies, which have to be defined through bilateral agreements; but also students’ associations can deal with some delivery of training stages and traineeships.

11. Labour market programmes
Concerning vocational guidance, this can be offered by universities to graduates (by 18 months from the graduation) in order to deal with the wide spectrum of professional opportunities aligned with the professional track of study; just to address such issue, universities have set up some offices specialised in such kind of support and counselling. Moreover, universities may promote agreements with the private sector to offer further grants, professional stages and internships.

12. References
1) Among the Eurydice documents:
   - “National Summary Sheets on Education System in Europe and Ongoing Reforms” 2009 Edition EACEA
   - “Structures of Education and Training Systems in Europe”
   - “The Structure of European Education Systems 2009/10: schematic diagrams”
2) www.miur.it
3) Bologna Process Stocktaking Report 2009

\textsuperscript{20} Law 196/1997 titled on “Regulations on the topic of employment promotion”.