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# REFORMING ITALY'S UNIVERSITY SYSTEM: HOPING FOR A BETTER GRADE

*Laura Rheinauer*



## Introduction

The Sorbonne Declaration, signed by Italy, France, Germany and the United Kingdom on May 25, 1998, outlined the central role of universities in the development of a “Europe of Knowledge.” One year later on June 19, 1999, 29 European countries signed the Bologna Declaration, which drew up a specific proposal for the creation of this “European Higher Education Space.” The Bologna Declaration called upon the signators to reform their own higher education systems in order to create overall convergence at the European level. It set 2010 as the deadline for completing this “European space for higher education in order to enhance the employability and mobility of citizens” (Confederation of EU Rectors...), thus enhancing the international competitiveness of European higher education. It is expected that after these reforms all European university graduates, regardless of their home country, will have attained a comparable education

preparing them for a successful career in any country. The signing of the Bologna Declaration set into motion a series of reform initiatives in Italy still under way today. For a country with the highest collegiate dropout rate in Europe, these reforms come at a crucial time. (*Education at a Glance*)

Current reform in Italy, while part of a broad European initiative, seeks to reconstruct many specific aspects of the Italian higher education system considered faltering and anachronistic. The reform of Italian higher education has three basic goals: to complete university autonomy; to change the structure and curricula of degrees; and to create a system more in line with others in Europe. (Eurydice) The choices that Italy makes in reforming its state-run university system can have significant influences on education, employment and its status in the EU. This reform may be described as a “Herculean task, its sensitivity and complexity...matched by the excitement of the challenge of getting Italy’s universities ready

for the new generations of the next millennium...making Italy's universities the protagonists of the common commitment to create a European higher education area." (Confederation of EU Rectors...)

In this article I analyze the proposals to reinvigorate Italy's system of higher education, including the purpose, plans for implementation and future potential. After providing historical background and assessing current conditions of higher education and its perceived faults, then examining the proposed reforms for their possible impact and the barriers to such reform, I conclude with recommendations for improving reform initiatives.

### Historical Background

The oldest universities in Italy date to the Middle Ages, when groups of citizens organized into corporations or universities related to specific professional activities. The University of Bologna celebrated its 900th anniversary in 1990 and is arguably the first university in Europe and in the world. These original universities arose as free entities, but by the early 1800s fell under state influence. The Casati Law of 1859 created the current education system in Italy: universities became part of the state administration. In 1969, Law 910 created free access to universities for qualified students who had completed five years of upper secondary school. During the 1960s the country enjoyed economic growth and an increase in popula-

tion. Although this increased the rate of enrollment in universities, the demand for degree holders in the job market remained essentially constant; therefore, the number of unemployed degree holders grew. By the late 1980s degree holders were forced to accept almost any job made available on the market even if that career did not fit their degree. This trend continued and in 1991 graduates in engineering, statistics and the natural sciences waited an average of 12 months before finding a permanent job. Graduates in the social sciences and humanities waited on average more than 24 months. (Moscati, 1991) These alarming figures continued into the next decade. In 2000, 31% of those aged 15 to 24 were seeking employment. (Italian National Statistical Institute) The average age of an individual with a university degree at first employment is 27.8 years. (Italian National Statistical Institute) These figures, along with Italy's lagging tertiary education levels outlined in Table 1, illuminate Italy's need for reform.

### The Need for Reform

The case for reform rests on issues that have long hindered the progress of Italian universities. First, the lack of university autonomy has been a leading factor in demand for change. Second, a limited relationship between businesses and universities and a unique system of post-secondary education have contributed to the problems that Italy currently faces. Finally,

**Table 1**  
**Comparison of Tertiary Education Statistics**

Country	Students Graduating with First Degree in Three to Five Years (%)	Population that Has Achieved Tertiary Degrees (%)	Expected Years of Schooling in Tertiary Education	People who Enter the Tertiary Level of Education (%)
Italy	1.1	9	2.3	44
France	18.5	11	2.6	58
Germany	5.2	10	2.0	43
United Kingdom	35.6	17	2.6	74
United States	33.2	27	3.6	57

Source: *Education at a Glance*.

unregulated degree structure and unregulated university faculty propel the need for reform. (Eurydice)

The move toward granting universities full autonomy has been under way since the 1980s, yet only now is being fully addressed. Italy's 65 state-run universities have continuously struggled with the rigidity of centralized national curricula and syllabi that prohibit each university from making autonomous decisions regarding its educational goals and needs in its specific region. Since the unification of the country in the 1860s, universities in Italy have been under the direction of the Ministry of Education in Rome. Universities have an extremely bureaucratic and hierarchic nature. Decisions come from the national level, allowing little freedom for universities to create their own curricula. This was not the most effective method of administration or an efficient way for universities to adapt to changing local needs. Law 127, which is outlined later, has essentially granted local autonomy to universities, but still has not completely solved problems of bureaucracy.

The second difficulty facing higher education is the limited relationship between universities and industries. The Ministry of Education, having removed responsibility for developing curricula from the universities' teaching bodies, has ensured little interaction between universities and local businesses. According to Dr. Georgio Gottardi of the University at Padova these two institutions historically have had a strained rapport with one another. Reorganizing the academic system by transforming its over-centralized structure and giving administrative and academic autonomy to each university hopefully will improve cooperation between them. Universities just recently have taken on the role of a local system of innovation. Many schools are beginning to realize the benefits of working with local businesses. The need for skilled labor has risen in recent years, and universities need to capitalize on this. Building a positive link between local industries and higher education institutions is advantageous for both sides. Better performing students who understand the needs of a globalizing economy are better future workers. If students are encouraged to work outside the

classroom and in real world settings they are more prepared for future careers. Italy must enhance higher education through forging partnerships and creating new degrees to reflect current labor needs. (Gottardi) The "lack of any institutional relationship with the labor market and with society" (Moscati, 2002) is an area in need of reform.

The amount of knowledge and facts that students need to learn to obtain a degree is another drawback to the university system. Italy's education ministers stated in the Bologna Declaration that "an academic rationale that is excessive in terms of the educational goals" habitually yields "undergraduates who are unable to keep pace with course requirements." (Guerzoni) The length of time it takes to graduate also seems disproportionate to many. It takes seven years on average to obtain the first degree, the laurea. (Table 1) This helps explain Italy's dropout rate of 28.5% in the first year and 60% dropout rate overall. (Italian National Statistical Institute)

Because the current course offerings at universities are unregulated, many students graduate with degrees that do not prepare them for the jobs they seek. (Rocca) Marco Caccon, who dropped out of the University of Padova halfway through his program in computer science to start his own computer business, stated that he only "studied theory as an end in itself" and what he learned "turned out to be worth less than zero in the world of work." (Rocca)

Italy in fact actually outnumbers the United States, United Kingdom and Germany in the proportion of its population currently pursuing degrees. (Rocca) These countries, however, have far more college graduates overall than Italy. (Rocca) Although Italian students flock to university education in great numbers, few actually are completing their studies. Table 2 highlights the working populations of educational attainment in several European countries. It is striking how far Italy is behind its counterparts. Yet those who drop out of higher education may not necessarily do so because they cannot cope with the intellectual demands of a university or do not find their studies useful. Many Italian students "use higher education as a socially acceptable cost effective alter-

**Table 2**  
**Distribution of the Population 25 to 64 Years of Age**  
**by the Highest Completed Level of Education (%)**

	Primary	Secondary	Higher	Total
Italy	62	30	8	100
France	40	41	19	100
Germany	19	60	22	100
United Kingdom	24	55	22	100

Source: *Education at a Glance*.

native to unemployment.” (Rocca) Because looking for jobs in Italy is a long and passive process, in which the young typically wait for job offers from family or from other social connections, these students essentially buy an option on a laurea in case nothing more attractive turns up and drop out as soon as it does. Their enrollment results in a dilution of resources that could be reserved for those who genuinely seek an education. It is clear that if Italy seeks to compete with industries across Europe, courses need to be adapted so that students are adequately prepared for demands of the labor market and can enter that market at an age comparable to that of their European counterparts.

Many of Italy’s European counterparts are graduating with degrees from institutions other than universities. Italy is unique in defining “post-secondary” as almost solely meaning a university education. As the only country in which the “transmission of a body of knowledge is almost exclusively academic,” (Eurydice, p. 363) Italy lacks a system of education composed solely of “practical and professional skills.” (Eurydice, p. 363) Instead, Italy relies on its university system to train future workers. Current changes in work organization and the modernization of several significant economic sectors, as well as growing competition at the European level, have combined to create a demand for a new kind of worker with different levels of post-secondary training, a graduate with new levels of skills. Consequently, the system of higher education in Italy must adapt to meet the demands of the modern market. Italy has relied heavily on family-owned businesses, which have consistently rejected hiring university graduates and have instead trained

kin for jobs. (See article by Cunningham in this issue.) Italian degree holders must be able to compete not only in this market but also in the European market. Future workers can benefit from modifications in post-secondary education opportunities. University degrees that provide adequate training to better equip students with the skills necessary to compete with the employed who do not hold degrees, yet still have well paying jobs, is a potential modification. (MURST)

Difficulties in regulating university staff also have contributed to a faulty university system and perpetuated the degree to which academic coursework is unregulated. University professors have long enjoyed influential positions in Italy. More than half the government is made up of university officials and half of Italy’s members of Parliament are composed of professors. It may be unreasonable then to expect that they will pass legislation that destroys these privileges. Italy has a long tradition of turning out an academic elite through its university system, and professors have used their prerogative to assign exorbitant amounts of work to guarantee only the brightest students will graduate. The amount of coursework professors assign, regardless of the value of the course to a student’s degree, has gone unregulated for years. In practice, how much a professor works depends on his or her conscience. (Bompard, “Fear...”) Most Italian university teachers and departments employ traditional teaching methods based on lectures and oral examinations. With an average student to faculty ratio of 28:1, class lecture sizes can sometimes reach up to one thousand students. (Eurydice, p. 377) Although some professors attempt to combat this size with additional

office hours, most professors have yet to make concrete attempts to improve teaching methods. There has been no “means of assessing the actual amount of learning which is required of the students in the course of their studies.” (MURST) Training for teaching staff in higher education also has not been regulated either at the school or national level. (Eurydice, p. 378) The excessive and unregulated amount of course work in the name of status has failed to adequately train and educate future employees of Italy. It is clear that Italy’s ambitious reform of its higher education system will not succeed unless academics can be held accountable if they are unproductive or in breach of disciplinary codes.

### **Reform Initiatives**

Italy has begun to tackle issues of autonomy, degree structure and degree content through the passing of reform laws. It is difficult to draw clear and concise lines between what has been reformed and what remains unchanged in Italy. The Information Network on Education in Europe clearly stated why:

This is true in part because of primary normative laws that call for enacting decrees and regulations to be issued later which are often only issued after extremely long delays. Thus, very often, the paradox arises that although a valid law exists to cover the question, it is not actually enacted for a long time or is only enacted very gradually over a very long period of time. (Eurydice, p. 379)

Too often Italy passes reform laws that are not required to be enacted until years later. Because established deadlines are so far off it is easy for universities to delay until the last moment. This makes it difficult to determine compliance and to assess the impact of reforms. For instance, Law 127 (discussed later) came into effect in 1997, yet universities had another five years to comply fully with the principle of autonomy. By 2002, three universities still had not, but the deadline was extended. (Eurydice) Sometimes, laws are passed but are not yet implemented; at other times, laws are passed but implemented tentatively. The reform measures detailed next

have all passed and are in the process of being fully accepted and executed.

The principle of university autonomy, established in 1997 by Law 127, sanctioned universities’ full teaching autonomy and entrusted to them the power and responsibility to design courses on the basis of regional characteristics, student demand, collaboration with local firms and competition between universities. (British Council) Despite this law being passed there is resistance from those in power at the state level. The Ministry of Education still hands down legislation from the state level and many are not sure if local autonomy has been completely embraced. The impetus for university autonomy began in May 1989 with the passage of the Bassani Act. This act created the Ministry for Universities and Scientific and Technological Research (MURST) to enlarge the “organizational, didactic, and financial autonomy of universities.” (British Council) By transferring authority to the regional and local levels the government hopes that universities will design courses that keep better pace with advances in knowledge and labor market needs. A revamped degree structure has courses “based on regional characteristics and collaboration with local firms.” (Bompard, “Italy”) New degrees based on regional needs should produce students who can more easily find work after graduation.

Reform efforts to reduce coursework needed to obtain one degree have led to major alterations of degree requirements. This new system, started in the 2002 academic year, introduced two sequential cycles. The first one lasts three years and leads to an undergraduate degree or “laurea.” The subsequent cycle lasts two years and leads to the equivalent of a graduate degree titled “laurea specialistica.” The first three-year degree gives a basic university education for anyone wishing to continue after high school (“maturita”). Designed to prepare students for specific professional outlets, especially in the business sector, this degree also provides training in at least one European language other than Italian. All students, irrespective of their course of study, have competency training in the use of computers. The second cycle of two years provides specialization for students who wish to continue their

studies. Only students completing the combined five-year cycle are awarded the title of “dottore.” The separate and more advanced Ph.D.-level “dottorato di ricerca” still exists, although there are plans to make this degree more accessible.

Italian degree cycles also must be “organized according to a system of exchangeable educational credits to provide mobility and cooperation in evaluating quality and creating a European open market in education similar to some extent, to the single market in goods and services.” (“Academics Face a Summer of Unease”) According to this system one credit represents approximately twenty-five hours of study. The average workload required to obtain each degree is now expressed as 60 credits. This is roughly half the typical amount of credits in a bachelor’s degree for most United States institutions, but the amount of study hours is twice the amount. This national credit transfer and accumulation system follows the principles laid down by the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). The ECTS is a direct outcome of the Bologna Declaration. Degrees are to be recognized throughout Europe automatically. This could, one day, lead to a pan-European degree. Both this new credit system and the degree structure have been passed and are in the process of implementation.

As professors have been virtually free of any control, supervision, discipline or objective evaluation of their work, this new system of credits will objectively measure a course’s importance. A professor teaching a minor course worth only a few credits would therefore no longer be able to impose huge essays and very difficult time-consuming examinations. Lecturers have to face the fact that the number of credits for a specific course is a measure of the workload of the student, not of the prestige of the academic teaching the course. Credits will become more marketable than the professor’s reputation. In the past the importance of a course was deemed equivalent to the stature of a professor. Now, the importance of a course will be related to its workload and relevance for a degree. The majority of new courses are found in the applied fields of technology and economics, whereas the number in the humanities departments is more limited. Diploma degrees

are now designed to provide more direct access to the labor market and to reflect the increased demand for immediate qualifications that currently exists in the technologic and commercial sectors in Italy. New courses with financial assistance from external sponsors have been “successful in yielding a short term professional return.” (Eurydice, p. 375) The first-level degree is designed to provide students with an adequate understanding of methods and aspects of specific sectors so as to achieve the level of competence required by particular professions. (Eurydice)

The new degree cycle appears similar to the old degree cycle, but is now attainable in a shortened time frame. The older system required the student to complete all five years in order to gain an education. In reality this took up to seven years. The advantage of breaking the course into two steps is to allow those students who do not want to invest so much time in a specialized degree the opportunity to graduate and enter the labor market sooner. The new “three plus two” system enables students to decide when and if they will stop their education. Yet there has been little effort to create degrees that reflect the needs of society or allow students to design their own course of study.

## **Barriers to Success**

Despite the Italian Parliament passing several laws in the past five years demanding that universities comply with reform efforts, attempts to fully restructure higher education have met opposition. Changes in government party leadership, as well as resistance by university faculty, have created impasses in compliance with reforms.

Prime Minister Berlusconi and his center-right government are often cast as Europhobes, bent on revoking reform measures and restricting future endeavors. The May 2001 election campaign became heated when Berlusconi’s center-right alliance stated that if elected they would dismantle the reforms introduced over the past seven years. (Bompard, “Berlusconi”) Berlusconi did take office and although he did not revoke all past reforms, he did extend implementation deadlines. The resignation of

foreign minister Renato Ruggiero in January of 2002 and charges of corruption within the Italian government increased instability. So too, the replacement of Luigi Berlinguer, who spearheaded the radical reform of Italy's higher education system as head of the Ministry for Public Instruction (MPI), has created confusion for his successors. (Bompard, "Berlinguer") In efforts to appease political parties the Italian government often has extended compliance time for reforms. To gain support from Italy's "variety of political parties representing such a variety of interests" (Moscati, 1991) reforms are adopted, but universities are given immense leniency for when they are expected to fully adopt such reforms.

Significant resistance to change also has come from within academia itself. Italian faculty argue that if the value and significance of a degree is established through credits by law, then universities will have no incentive to compete for quality and prestige. Faculty also feel some confusion regarding the purpose and process of many fundamental aspects of the reform. For instance, the initial spirit of the reforms emphasized autonomy and experimentation, but the applicative rules impose so many conditions and requirements as to make real autonomy and experimentation problematic. (Fontana) Although these fears are not unfounded, proponents of reform legislation argue that revamping the degree system to aid students in their future employment endeavors is more beneficial than the prestige of a university. The chancellor of Bocconi, a Milan university comparable to the London School of Economics, states that "the implications of the reform are still unclear for the university system." ("Academics . . .") What is unclear, however, is if the leaders of Italy's prestigious universities are truly confused about reform legislation or if they are merely stalling because they are reluctant to change.

In the mid 1990s Berlinguer sought widespread reform across all levels of Italian education. He had a difficult task, "mainly because of resistance among university staff where access to teaching posts is via a complex system that has little to do with merit and much to do with recommendations and favors." (British Council) As stated previously, professors are virtually free

of any control. Universities cannot fire or transfer academics. The tenured system is prestigious and leaves universities little ability to change staff to meet new demands of the job market. University faculty "dedicate most of their energies to private practice," and although many "work extremely hard, others do little or nothing in terms of teaching and research." (Bompard, "Fear...") It is not obligatory for faculty to be efficient and productive. Although legislation has passed requiring universities to alter degree structure or course content, actual implementation is left to the professors. If professors are not in favor of new legislation there is little that can be done to force them to abide. Legislation that clearly articulates the responsibilities of academics is expected to be passed soon.

Most universities have put off initiating reform until the last possible minute and even then not without intense skepticism. Professor Marco Fontana from the University of Parma states that this skepticism stems mostly from fears "of changing well established routines and sometimes privileges, than from a detailed cost-benefit analysis of the reform and its consequences." Those in privileged positions, both within and outside of the university system, continue to resist essential change. Continuing to "ignore their society's needs in a postindustrial world and the cultural necessity for a general upgrading of the levels of education these higher education bureaucrats and academics continue to look to the past, while their conservatism prevents a real modernization of the system." (Moscati, 1991, p. 732) This kind of resistance points to the main risks that endanger the success of reforms. (Moscati, 2002) The resistance comes mainly from the humanities sector, whose cultural and scientific traditions are not as challenged by a changing society. Also, the autonomy of the university is relatively new and thus the professional identity of members of academia comes more from their discipline field than from their academic institution. (Moscati, 2002)

To combat resistance the Italian Parliament passed Law 245 in August of 1990, establishing new rules for the recruitment of tenured faculty and research staff. Academic career ladders are to be reorganized, with the

professoriate divided into three categories: professors, associate professors and trainee professors, with promotion not automatic, but based on performance assessed every four years by a university evaluation team. This policy, however, has yet to be fully implemented. Changes in government and university leadership, on top of faculty resistance, have stalled the implementation of Law 245.

## Conclusions

In May 2001, four years after signing the Bologna Declaration, European education ministers met in Prague to “review the progress achieved and to set directions and priorities for the coming years of the process.” (“Communiqué...”) The goals laid down in the Bologna Declaration are widely accepted and used as a base for the development of higher education by most signing countries. The ministers asserted that building the European Higher Education Area would expand the attractiveness and competitiveness of higher-education institutions in Europe. They stated that Italy had met the objective of creating a degree structure based on two main cycles and the establishment of a uniform system of credits to facilitate a student’s access to the European labor market and enhance the compatibility, attractiveness and competitiveness of European higher education not only in Europe but also throughout the world. Although Italians claim they have embraced these reforms, the reality is somewhat different.

University reform in Italy was initiated because, and as part of, broad European reforms aimed at bringing graduates more quickly to the job market in a country where students have traditionally begun work later than in other European countries. Yet universities are still unconvinced that the new system will speed up the process of students entering the job market. Those desiring a professional job in Italy must follow a traditional course that begins with decisions at the high school level.

Differences between the high school tracks, all of which provide access to the university, also provide students with uneven academic backgrounds. Reform of public primary and secondary education also is under way, but may or may not yield students who are better equipped to enter post-secondary education (see article by Fowler in this issue). University reform, it is argued, should also be complemented by reform of access to leading professions. (“Academics...”)

As Italy continues to work on fully integrating reforms into the university structure, it is important to acknowledge the work done so far. Many problems have been addressed, such as the hierarchic nature of universities, the failing degree structure and the irrelevant curriculum. It is clear that if Italy wishes to compete in the European market and provide a feasible and challenging university degree, it must continue to pass and appropriately implement legislation to further improve the system. Italy has taken significant steps in revamping its entire university system, yet much is left to do. The gap between intent and implementation needs to be closed, and tenured faculty need to become more wholly invested in the change. Italy’s universities are steeped in a history of fine learning. Academic elitism has long been a cultural backbone, but universities are now realizing that the education given to students must be more than a weeding-out process. Reforms need to be accompanied by a new attitude of the elite university culture. It is imperative that the legislation enacted compelling universities to change degrees, content and academic stipulations be taken seriously by all who are involved. There has been too much time and effort already invested to stop and give up, “even if new governments are not fond of innovations introduced by the previous administration.” (Moscati, 2002) By simply stretching the time required for compliance of legislation, the Italian government makes no solid gains in momentum. When the report card on university reform comes out in following years, Italy hopefully will earn better than a “C” grade.

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