

# THE EVALUATION OF THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM FROM THE BOLOGNA PROCESS (1999) TO TODAY: SOME REFLECTIONS ON IMPROVEMENT APPLICABLE TO THE ITALIAN MODEL

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**Abstract:** *The Bologna Process was born in 1999 as an intergovernmental collaboration agreement in the Higher Education sector. The initiative was launched with the Bologna Conference at the conference of European Higher Education Ministers, signed in Bologna in June 1999 and inspired by the previous meeting of the Ministers of France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom in 1998 (Sorbonne Declaration 1998). The objective was precisely to build a European Higher Education Area that was based on principles and criteria shared between the participating countries. Subsequently, the inspiring principles of the reform were implemented by the various countries adhering to the reform. At a European level, both specific agencies operating in the field of evaluation of Higher Education and research systems (e.g. ANVUR, ARACIS, etc.), as well as regulatory bodies (e.g. ENQA, EQAR, etc.), have been created. In Italy, the reform was started by Law 30/12/2010, n. 240, "Regulations regarding the organization of universities, academic staff and recruitment, as well as delegation to the Government to encourage the quality and efficiency of the university system": Law no. 240/2010 therefore represents the starting point of the reform launched in Italy. The objective of the paper is to offer an overview of the state of the art of the application of the reform in Italy 25 years after the start of the Bologna Process.*

**Keywords:** ANVUR, Disability Management, Higher Education, Open Government, Public Management.

**JEL classification:** I21, M41, M48

## 1. Introduction

The Bologna Process was established in 1999 as an intergovernmental agreement for cooperation in the field of Higher Education. The initiative was launched with the Bologna Conference at the conference of European ministers of Higher Education, signed in Bologna in June 1999 and inspired by the earlier meeting of ministers from France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom in 1998 (Sorbonne Declaration 1998). The aim was precisely to build a European Higher Education Area based on principles and criteria shared by the signatory countries, namely:

- academic freedom, institutional autonomy and participation of teachers and students in the governance of Higher Education.
- academic quality, economic development and social cohesion.
- encouragement of free movement of students and lecturers.
- development of the social dimension of Higher Education.
- maximum employability and lifelong learning of graduates.
- consideration of students and lecturers as members of the same academic community.
- openness to the outside world and collaboration with Higher Education systems in other parts

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of the world.

The European Higher Education Area is based on an intergovernmental cooperation agreement formally signed at the interministerial conference held in Budapest and Vienna in March 2010.

Within the framework of the European Higher Education Area, governments have set up some important structural reforms, such as:

- the introduction of a comprehensible and comparable system of qualifications, based as uniformly as possible on a three-cycle system of first, second and third levels.
- the implementation of a shared qualification framework aimed at the European Higher Education Area.
- the transparency of study courses by means of a common credit system, based not only on duration but also on the workload of the individual course and the related learning outcomes, certified by the Supplement Diploma.
- the recognition of degrees and study periods.
- a shared approach to quality assurance.

Based on the agreements reached within the European Higher Education Area, governments have implemented the necessary legislative reforms since 1999.

In Italy, Ministerial Decree No. 509/1999 introduced the three-cycle university system at first, second and third level, while Law No. 240/2010 proceeded to reform the university system in line with the quality assurance themes envisaged at European level by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

ENQA “(...) was first established in 2000 as the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education to promote European cooperation in the field of quality assurance in Higher Education. In 2004, it became the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education with the aim to contribute to the maintenance and enhancement of the quality of European Higher Education, and to act as a major driving force for the development of quality assurance across all the Bologna Process signatory countries. (...)” (Source, more information about ENQA is available at <https://www.enqa.eu/about-enqa/>).

In Italy, the reform was started by Law 30/12/2010, n. 240, “Regulations regarding the organization of universities, academic staff and recruitment, as well as delegation to the Government to encourage the quality and efficiency of the university system”: Law no. 240/2010 therefore represents the starting point of the reform launched in the Italian university system.

25 years after the Bologna Process starting point, it is therefore possible to carry out an assessment of the state of the art of the Italian reform system: the objective of the paper is to offer an overview of the Italian system. In the Italian model, quality assurance issues are overseen:

- for school education system by the Ministry of Education and Merit (in Italian acronym MIM), through the National Institute for the Evaluation of the Educational System of Education and Training (in Italian acronym INVALSI).
- for Higher Education system by the Ministry of University and Research (in Italian acronym MUR), through the National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes (in Italian acronym ANVUR) established in 2006 by Law no. 286 November 24, 2006.

Namely, ANVUR “(...) carries out the following tasks:

- *Evaluating procedures, results and outputs of institutions’ management, teaching, research and technological transfer activities.*
- *Defining criteria and methodologies for the assessment of institutions and programmes (including PhD, Master and Post-graduate medical programmes) with a view to their periodic accreditation by the Ministry.*
- *Steering the assessment activities undertaken by universities’ Independent Evaluation Units.*
- *Drawing up the procedures for collecting and evaluating students’ satisfaction with programmes (in cooperation with universities’ Evaluation Units).*

- *Developing and proposing to the Ministry quantitative and qualitative requirements for the purpose of universities' establishment, merger, federation or closure, and of study programmes' activation, merger or closure.*
- *Providing benchmarks for public funds allocation at the request of the Minister. It includes the definition of minimum performance levels and standard unit costs for specific services.*
- *Assessing the results of program agreements between MIUR and individual institutions and their contribution to the overall improvement of the evaluation system quality, based on expected results and predefined benchmarks.*
- *Assessing the effectiveness and efficiency of public funding programmes and incentive programmes for teaching, research and innovation activities.*
- *Undertaking further assessment exercises, defining standard parameters and providing technical regulations at the request of the Minister. (...)" (Source, more information about ANVUR is available at <https://www.anvur.it/en/agency/mission/> ).*

ANVUR is entrusted with assessing full professors applying for membership in the National Scientific Habilitation Committees, which examine candidates for both positions: the National Scientific Habilitation (in Italian acronym ASN) is a necessary requirement to apply for permanent positions of Full and Associate Professor in Italian Universities. The Agency also proposes to the Ministry the minimum values of the indicators of scientific qualification used in the ASN procedure. Finally, ANVUR rates scientific journals to calculate such indicators in humanities and social sciences.

ANVUR, by AVA system (AVA in an Italian acronym of "Self-assessment, periodic assessment, accreditation"), aims to improve the quality of teaching and research of universities, through the application of a Quality Assurance model based on internal procedures for the planning, management, self-assessment and improvement of teaching and scientific activities and on an external verification carried out in a clear and transparent way. The verification translates into an accreditation judgement, outcome of a process through which a university is recognized as possessing (Initial Accreditation) or maintaining (Periodic Accreditation) the basic quality requirements for its institutional functions.

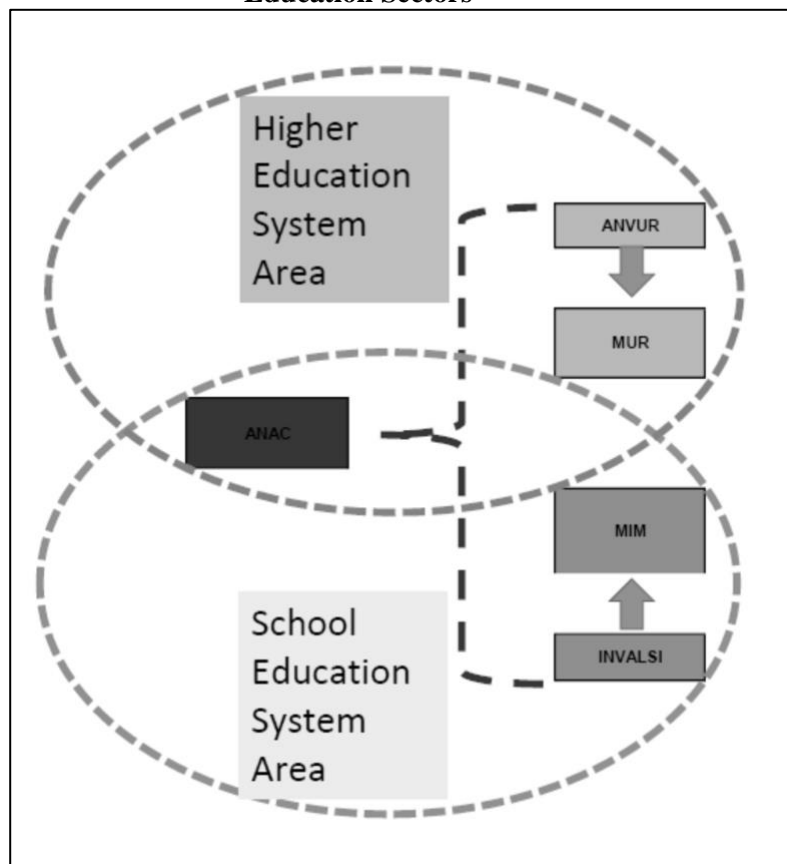
A further actor of the Italian model is the National Anticorruption Authority (in Italian acronym ANAC), created in 2012 by Law no. 190 of 2012.

The Italian Anticorruption Authority (ANAC) was created with the aim of implementing Article 6 of the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) and is an independent administrative authority whose institutional mission is to prevent corruption in all areas of administrative activity.

ANAC's activity is carried out by means of supervision on various fronts: application of anti-corruption legislation and compliance with transparency obligations, granting of public appointments conflicts of interest of officials, the award and execution of public contracts (Source, more information about ANAC are available at <https://www.anticorruzione.it/mission-e-competenze> ).

The Figure 1 schematises the actors engaged in the evaluation model applied to the Italian university and school education sector, illustrated above.

**Figure 1: Actors engaged in the evaluation model applied to the Italian Higher Education and school Education Sectors**



Source: Elaboration produced by the authors

## 2. The evaluation system of the Italian university system: an analysis of the state of the art today

The Bologna Process AVA system has been operational since 2013 and during these last ten years, ANVUR has released three versions: the present version is AVA3: at this point, it is possible to make an initial analysis of the results that have emerged from the application of the AVA system after a decade of implementation.

The analysis of the state-of-the-art focused on the strengths and weaknesses present in the Higher Education Area, following a methodology approach very closed to the “Aprioristic Theory” (Rothbard, 1962; Freadman et al., 1992; Haspelmath, 2012).

Jointly, the article also tries to offer some reflections for improvement on the evaluation of the Italian Higher Education Area.

Among the strengths, the following should be noted:

1. the improvement in aspects concerning the good performances and impartiality of the University Institution (recommendation also enshrined in Article 97, paragraph 2 of the Italian Constitution),
2. the realisation of university education paths more closely tailored to stakeholder’s interests, including stakeholders both internal to the university system (e.g. students, employees, etc.) and external (e.g. companies, public institutions, etc.).

On the other hand, weaknesses would include, among others, the following aspects:

1. systemic weaknesses,
2. organisational weaknesses.

Systemic weaknesses include, e.g.:

- to increase the sharing of the importance of evaluation model in the university system,

- to contain the phenomena of academic polarization.

These two weaknesses are closely linked to an approach to evaluating the university system that, in several areas, that favours the prevalence of formal over substantive aspects.

The consequences of this approach are to miss the long-term benefits to stakeholders (internal and external), highlighted in the strengths mentioned above.

Two examples may clarify these reflections.

The first example concerns the inclusion of students with disabilities in university education.

The topic is overseen by Diversity Management, which deals with the management of diversity, defined as “(...) *the practice or quality of including or involving people from a range of different social and ethnic backgrounds and of different genders, sexual orientations, etc. (...)*” (Oxford University Press, 2021: <https://www.oed.com/>).

Diversity Management can be identified in the following citation: “(...) *Diversity management (...) supports diversity in organizations and eliminate oppression based on race, gender, sexual orientation and other human differences, in order to improve the health and effectiveness of organizations (...)*” (Plummer, 2003).

The issues of Diversity Management have been discussed in the international literature for thirty years now, including in the term that set of practices and policies aimed at enhancing diversity within a work environment in the aspects of gender, sexual orientation, ethnic origins, culture and human abilities (Pollifroni et al., 2016-a; Riccò et al., 2014; Shore et al., 2009).

This convergence of themes finds confirmation in the international literature that identifies the following areas of Diversity Management study: a) Disability Management, b) Gender Diversity Management and c) Cultural Integration Management (Pollifroni et al., 2023) and the example in question concerns the approach to Disability Management issues followed in the evaluation practices of the university system.

In the cited case concerning the evaluation of the university system, it is quite evident that current evaluation processes focus more on the analysis of the formal aspects followed in Diversity Management to the detriment of the substantive ones.

Processes and supporting documentation, such as the minutes taken at coordination meetings, manuals and guidelines drawn up to take care of the formal aspects of all this documentation are analysed to affirm that the system is certainly oriented towards inclusion and respect for persons with disabilities: unfortunately, empirical evidence and our own experience as parents register opposite conclusions.

There are no records, for example, of whether what was formally stated in the e-mails about the treatment provided for persons with disabilities was then actually adhered to in final examinations by university teachers regarding students with disabilities, especially in the case of psychic disabilities. The latter often refrain from denouncing the anomalies of the system to avoid possible retaliation by university teaching staff, who unfortunately still consider themselves to be an unpunishable and uncontrollable category.

Often the issue is resolved by stating: “We will give the student additional time for the exam!”: but this is not sufficient because addressing these problems requires a lot of time on the part of the teacher to look for appropriate solutions to very varied and different situations.

The evaluation model of the university system must therefore act to fill these serious gaps to protect students with disabilities and their families, providing a clear message that the university has changed in recent years and within it, there are no categories of unpunishable and uncontrollable subjects.

The second example concerns the conceptualization of the inactive university teacher in scientific production. In this case, the evaluation model of the university system limits itself to defining the “inactive university teacher” as someone who does not write scientific contributions. However, are we sure that this is the only possible situation?

The case of the “inactive university teacher” should also include other situations.

For example, the situation of someone who writes a lot of articles, simply because, finding himself in situations of academic power (for example, as a director of a department or of a doctoral school). In this case the question concerns the evaluation of the real contribution of the author to the writing of the article (is it only a formal presence or has the author contributed to the creation of the research product?)

The evaluation model of the university system must therefore act to provide greater clarity and transparency to these serious situations, which contribute to accentuating the phenomenon of academic polarization. In this article, academic polarization means a situation in which the contrast between two situations of university teachers is accentuated, such as: influential university teachers and the authoritative 'ones and this difference derives exclusively from the position of academic power acquired within the Higher Education Area.

The issues addressed are strongly related to the second type of system weakness, which we have defined as organizational weaknesses that include, for example:

- to monitor the conflicts of interest in the university open competition,
- to reduce the procedural stratification of E-Government processes.

The phenomenon of academic polarization can generate increasing situations of conflicts of interest in the university open competition. Although there is little attention given to the topic by the guidelines provided at European level, in Italy this issue is monitored by ANAC (see, for example, the ANAC document no. 5796/2023).

### **3. Effective tools for controlling these situations of weakness in the Higher Education Area**

Effective tools for controlling these critical situations could derive from Artificial Intelligence applications and the development of E-Government processes (Pollifroni, 2015).

E-Government processes are a direct derivation of the “New Public Management”, or even “New Public Management Theory” (in acronym NPMT) (Barzelay, 2000; Christensen, 2002; Navarra et al., 2012; Osborne et al., 1992).

NPMT “(...) *has introduced a huge change in the management applied to the Public Sector, emphasizing the “(...) performance appraisal and efficiency; the disaggregation of public bureaucracies into agencies which deal with each other on a user-pay basis; the use of quasi-markets and contracting out to foster competition; cost-cutting; and a style of management which emphasizes, amongst other things, output targets, limited term con-tracts, monetary targets and incentives, and freedom to manage (...)”* (Pollifroni et al., 2016-b: 74-75).

Studies on E-Government have highlighted over time empirical applications (situations that now highlight concrete operational cases) and exclusively theoretical applications (i.e. situations not yet realized in operational reality). Among the latter, two cases of theoretical models of E-Government stand out:

1. E2G model (Employees to Government model), regarding career advancement processes dedicated to Public Administration employees.
2. C2G model (Citizens to Government model), concerning the recruitment processes of new Public Administration employees.

The theoretical models do not yet have such evidence of implementation: these latter models essentially concern the e-recruitment activities applied to Public Sector fully implemented by electronic processes.

To the electronic processes of the two theoretical models – E2G model (Employees to Government model) and C2G model (Citizens to Government model) – some activities would naturally be excluded, such as:

- the activities for verifying the candidates' physical-psychological fitness,
- the verification activities of the documentation presented by the candidates and declared in their CV (Curricula Vitae),
- the evaluation of the trial periods of the job title subject of the electronic selection procedure.

The implementation of e-recruiting processes in the Public Administration would certainly allow reducing the phenomenon of corruption and would give greater transparency to the same processes (Pollifroni et al., 2018) and these applications can constitute a valid support for the issues stated previously and concerning the monitor the conflicts of interest in the university open competition.

The analysis of the state of the art of E-Government applications also implemented in the university sector (both public and private) highlights:

1. opportunities (such as, possibility to evaluate performances, accountability / responsibility / transparency orientation, etc.),
2. and risks (such as, digital divide, motivational risks for the employees of the Public Sector, procedural stratification, etc.).

With reference to the latter cases - the risks - the evaluation model of the university system must find appropriate solutions to transform potential negativity into new opportunities.

#### 4. Conclusions

The objective of the paper has been to offer an overview of the state of the art of the application of the reform in Italy.

In an era in which "containers" matter above all rather than "contents" (this is the case, for example, of the evaluation models of papers produced by the university system), the paper wanted to strengthen the importance of substance over form in processes of evaluation analysed.

The analysis conducted focused on the critical issues, which represent divisive, particularly those of academic polarization and the conceptualization of the inactive teacher.

Although the evaluation process of the university system is not yet fully shared by the academic community, it is possible at this point by highlighting two important conclusions:

- the evaluation of the university system is however an irreversible and unstoppable process,
- the positive effects for new generations of teachers and students will be visible in the medium to long term.

#### Supplementary information

The individual contribution of the authors to the conception of the paper was divided as follows: Massimo Pollifroni followed the drafting of the conceptual framework of the article, Adrian Ioana followed the supervision of the paper and Riccardo Pollifroni took care of the data analysis, editing and corrections of the paper.

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