

HIC SUNT LEONES – WHEN IDEAS DON'T MEET POLICIES: ITALY AND THE REFORM OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Summary In the article a review is provided of the implementation of various strategies and policies which have been introduced into the Italian higher education system. The author shows that the most significant impact of the implementation of such policies is the creation of enormous amounts of data, facts and figures. He, however, puts forward a highly sceptical view on whether the evaluation activities have actually contributed towards systemic, institutional learning in higher education policy. He concludes that the Italian case in higher education policy has shown the existence of two levels in the Italian higher educational policies: a formal one, really modern, apparently ready to change and sensitive to the new ideas, and an informal one that makes it impossible *de facto* to implement the norms and the laws that are sometimes made through the years. Ignoring the existence of these two levels can lead to several errors of analysis regarding the Italian case-study.

Keywords higher education policy, implementation of policy, role of ideas in policy reforms, Italy

This paper represents the first step of a path I am walking through in order to understand in depth the characteristics and problems of the Italian higher education sector and policies. It was born from the idea to study my country, after being focused for my PhD thesis on the New Zealand higher

education context, which I chose out of interest to study something very different (and geographically far, the farthest country in the world from Italy) from what I know. Now I come to analyse Italy, and I think I can look at it from a more detached and possibly unbiased point of view. After spending some peri-

ods of my life in New Zealand and England, now I feel ready to speak about Italy without a typical Italian “accent”. And this could be a basis for a comparison between realities that are never considered to be studied together (Italy and New Zealand). Of course, it is a trial, and the following is really the start of it.

1. Theoretical Framework

Political science and sociology traditionally emphasised the role of the individual interest in the policy processes of capitalistic societies; less emphasis has been put on how ideas could deeply influence those processes (Campbell, 2002). Only in recent times has this aspect been studied in depth (De Rosa, 2009). From this point of view, it seems good to me to review the major theorization in this sense.

Campbell (2002) makes a review of the major theories in this path. He starts by taking into consideration two groups of theories: the first focuses on so-called cognitive paradigms, that are visions of the world of policy-makers which define the range of choices that they consider when they have to formulate different kinds of policies.

The second group of theories takes into consideration the normative frameworks. Following this theory, normative ideas are assumptions on values, identities, and other socially shared expectations. From this point of view, policy-makers usually operate according to a logic of moral or social pertinence. The normative beliefs could be so strong as to overwhelm the individual interests of policy-makers. In fact, they influence in depth the way in which they perceive their interests, and which policies and institutions they prefer.

Other studies use the cognitive paradigms and the normative frameworks not to clarify the differences between the policies, but to show the similarities between them. They explain that the affirmation of a Western political culture has made the national political institutions and the policy-making apparatus homogeneous. This literature can be included in the thread of so-called world culture. In this sense, Røvik (1996) describes how these ideas move fast and far, and shortly are internationally perceived as the best approach possible.

Anyway, there are authors who underline how important local and national characteristics play a role against uniformity. For example, Halpin and Troyna (1995) state that different countries seem to do similar things, but if they are examined more in depth, they turn out to be not as similar as they seem at first.

Some researches try to explain how policy-makers draw some public policies to be acceptable to the majority of people. From this point of view, the political elite strategically create some structures and use them to legitimate their choices in the eyes of the public. This is the so-called frames literature.

Another extremely important thread is the one of programmatic ideas. Following this point of view, policy change derives from new programmatic ideas. Often they are the dependent variables for political sociologists and political scientists.

All these paradigms seem to lack one element: the explanation of the causal mechanisms which are fundamental for the influence of ideas on policy-making. Several studies have tried to give an answer to this question. A way to do this is to show the process by which some ac-

tors bring some ideas in the policy arena and then use them effectively. These actors are often academics and other intellectuals. Their preparation and prestige are very important to make their voice heard over the voices of everyone else. In the same way, think tanks and research institutes can have a great influence. From this point of view, we can talk of epistemic communities at the international level. They are responsible for generating new ideas and diffusing them among the national policy-makers and other people in the international community.

Kekk and Sikkink (1998) argued that these networks are effectively important because their members are often responsible for generating the most important ideas that constitute the world culture, to which sociologists attribute isomorphic effects at the national level (Kekk, Sikkink, 1998, cited in Campbell, 2002: 30).

Another hypothesis that has been considered to explain the influence of ideas on the policy processes is the one that underlines the weight and importance of institutions. They can determine which ideas can be put in the process, and then adopted and implemented as policies. From this point of view, the diffusion of ideas is a much more complex and mediate process than what is generally thought.

Surel in particular underlined the value of two variables that seem to be insufficiently considered by the literature on ideas: the interest of actors and the role of institutions. If, for instance, we consider that one nation is a subsystem, and that it is subject to a similar norm as the others, it could be effectively possible to isolate the discrepancy within the diffusion of some social paradigms. The particular and different reception of the

same paradigm in each nation allows us to identify and compare the operationalization dynamics of these norms, partly related to specific structures of interests and institutional configurations in each national context. Surel himself gives us an example when he discusses the difference of meaning ascribed to the neo-liberal ideology during the period of its diffusion in France, United States and Germany (Surel, 2000: 506-507).

On the other hand, Geva-May talks about public policy and policy-making itself being profoundly influenced by ways of life and cultural biases of their cultural context. Consequently, the cultural factors should be considered within the analysis of public policies. From this point of view, the author talks about culture as the neglected variable within the context of this analysis (Geva-May, 2002).

Developing the cultural approach of Douglas and Wildavsky, Swedlow identifies a differentiation of policies, depending on the social contexts in which we operate. From this point of view, he makes a distinction in: hierarchic contexts, to which we can associate the concepts of order and property; egalitarian contexts, to which we can associate the concepts of equality and liberty; individualistic contexts, to which we can associate autonomy and personal space; and fatalistic contexts, to which we can associate fortune and hope to survive (Swedlow, 2002: 271-272).

Hall's point of view is also very interesting. He stresses how changes in the policy paradigm are decisive in the adoption of one or another possible policy solution, and applies this concept to the shift from the adoption of the Keynesian paradigm to the monetarist one in the economic policy of the United

Kingdom (Hall, 1993). The author interprets the policy paradigm as an intellectual construction, strongly related to a policy subsystem that contains a series of ideas shared by the same policy actors. The interrelationship between these ideas permits to establish the objectives of the different policies, because it determines which definition of the problems will be adopted. Furthermore, the paradigm warrants the resolution of problems and the fulfilment of objectives. In fact, it constitutes a universe of meanings as well as a set of institutional practices. Being composed of ideas, the policy paradigm has a double connotation: on the one hand, it establishes the goals of a policy and the conceptual map that will be used to give meaning to reality. In this way, it becomes a source of inspiration that is essential to the identity of policy actors (in this sense it has an affective nature and is strictly related to the beliefs and visions of the world of policy actors and, from this point of view, we can say that the affective nature of the policy paradigm is its policy core). On the other hand, the cognitive part represents its flexible part, the main function of which is to protect the deep core. The affective nature of the deep core of the policy paradigm is the reason why it is so difficult to change it. At the same time, the cognitive connotation explains how it is possible to modify it in several directions (Capano, 1999: 61).

The role of ideas is not always a successful one within the different policy arenas. Sometimes bright ideas do not translate in new policies that are coherent with them, and this determines a sort of “non-success” of the ideas themselves in being effective.

The goal of the present paper is to describe a case of policy stalemate con-

cerning the Italian higher education policies in the last eighty years. This context is really important to analyse because here we can see how a lot of bright, interesting ideas did not have any effective policy result. The choice of this policy sector is due to its huge resilience to any attempt of change through the years. In order to show the situation in a diachronic spectrum, I opted for the methodology of an historical dense description of the trials of policy reforms within the Italian higher education sector.

2. Attempts of Reform

For more than a century now, the Italian higher education sector has been characterised by continuity. Few real changes were made during the 1930s, under the Fascist regime, while during the first 40 years of the post-war Republic, only marginal, incremental modifications were introduced. These changes did not alter the basic, original features of the management of Italy's higher education system and of the mechanisms of governance within the universities.

The traditional model of institutional and systemic coordination was characterized by the absolute dominance of academics. The Italian case constituted a specific variation on the classical oligarchic model; the combination of powers between academic guilds and the State bureaucracy was of an asymmetric nature; the former exercised a much greater influence than the latter. Academic schools and guilds constituted the real coordination mechanisms both at the institutional level (where decisions made by individual universities were simply the sum of the preferences of the most powerful academic groups and subject-areas within the said institutions), and at the systemic level: systemic governance, in

fact, was based on informal, but persistent interrelations between the most powerful local chair-holders and the ministerial bureaucracy. Although this was, in theory, a centralised system, central decisions were in fact taken under pressure from the most powerful academic schools and groups. Centralised control was of a purely formal, bureaucratic nature: during the phase of implementation, everything was negotiable between the centre and the periphery of the system.

Universities as autonomous institutions simply did not exist; indeed, it is doubtful whether they could really have been considered institutions as such. In fact, they were not in a position to decide anything of any importance themselves: the most important decisions – those regarding budget allocation, academic recruitment and strategic planning – were in the hands of the system's central powers (and were governed by the previously mentioned informal bargaining process). This meant that in the internal decision-making process, real authority lay not with the universities' official, *democratically elected* governing bodies (the Senate, the Administrative Board, faculty councils, etc.), but with individual professors with tenure, the so-called university *barons*, and with their powerful networks. Individuals with formal power (such as Rectors and Deans) were expected to mediate between the different, often divergent interests of internal groupings, but without the necessary institutional power to do so independently. Universities were simply arenas where individuals and groups of academics managed internal power on the basis of almost con-federal or federal relationships.

Self-government, collegiality and democracy (the fact that all institutional

positions were elective) were mere rhetorical devices. Self-government only covered marginal issues; collegiality was a meaningless term concerning the oligarchic logic of a system based on the personal interaction of chair-holders, while democracy was a symbolic instrument legitimising roles with limited concrete powers.

The challenge represented by the move towards a mass education system – an international trend that has forced all Western governments to introduce periodical structural innovation in their higher education systems since 1960 – proved incapable of modifying the deep-rooted features of governance in the Italian university system. The increase in numbers has been enormous: in 1960 there were about 268,000 students enrolled at Italy's universities: by 1980 this number had exceeded 1 million, and by 2006 the total student population had almost doubled again, to about 1,800,000. However, the massive raise in numbers, in the absence of the necessary structural transformation of governance mechanisms, meant that the performance of the inherited system worsened. The pressure of numbers made the governance system even more fragmented. This because the rise in numbers of the permanent teaching staff rendered bargaining between academic groups more difficult. So, the institutional decision-making style inherited from the past now had to satisfy a much larger set of preferences. This led to a transition from *distribution* to *microdistribution*, and to a further reduction in the universities' capacity to adapt to external changes and to the new demands of the socio-economic system.

Thus the way things were conducted within the Italian university system re-

mained unchanged for decades in spite of the rapid, radical changes in the external environment.

However, quite unexpectedly, and thanks largely to the entrepreneurial spirit of one individual, Antonio Ruberti, first Minister for Higher Education and Research, the age of reform got underway in 1989. That year, Law 168 was passed. This law marked the beginning of a process of innovative national legislation which has continued right until the present day. It set up a new ministry, which took over the responsibility for higher education and research from the Ministry of Education, but this ministry was conceived as a central coordinating agency capable of controlling the correct implementation of governmental directives and goals. Furthermore, Law 168 provided for a general framework of didactic, organisational and scientific autonomy for all universities.

The reform process saw the development of the (contradictory) plan for *centralised de-centralisation*. The principles inherent in this approach seem to conform to the newly fashionable self-regulatory model of higher education.

The new policy strategy based on the *politics of institutional autonomy*, implemented by the Italian government since the passing of Law 168 in 1989, needed the support of strong institutions to be genuinely effective. But universities were, on the contrary, very weak institutions at the time. One of the most important signs of the difficulties to be encountered in implementing the new policy was the timing with which the universities established their own status. The problem was that the rules governing universities were the product of the past *democratic-representative* age, and as such they were not compatible with

the age of *accountability*. However, the inability of the national government and parliament to change this general framework transformed these rules into constraints. What happened is that universities dealt with the design of their internal government by resorting to their inherited consensual, corporative practices and employing them within an unchanged general framework. The risk was that the universities, not being forced to strengthen their institutional leadership and management, would decide to keep their inherited *democratic* culture, and this is exactly what happened. A historically rooted culture based on corporative-democratic principles substantially conditioned the design of the universities' internal governing structure.

So, as it ever happens in the Italian environment, there was a strong difference between the formal and the informal rules. The truth is that Italian universities continue to be highlighted by profound problems regarding the question of the relationship between politics (that is, the power of academics) and administration (that is, the role of non-academic staff, and especially of those in senior academic positions). The idea that university professors are both rule-makers and arbitrators in deciding *how* the said rules are to be implemented is still deeply embedded in the Italian university system.

Another important step on the path through the Italian reforms in the higher education sector dates back to 1999. In fact, Italy was the first country to implement the Bologna Declaration guidelines: the Declaration was signed in the spring of 1999, and immediately afterwards (the following autumn) a ministerial decree was issued introducing the new system. Italian academics and

universities in general were totally surprised by the introduction of the reform. The radical reform of the pre-existing, one-tier system led to the creation of a bachelor/master's degree system, the basic features of which are as follows:

- a. strong interdependency of the first-level degree, lasting three years, with the second-level (specialisation) lasting 2 years
- b. introduction of educational credits, conceived as units by which to measure a student's workload
- c. greater degree of autonomy for universities in establishing the contents of their educational programmes.

The most important shortcomings and weaknesses which emerged from the implementation of the new degree framework were as follows:

- a. remarkable proliferation of first and second-level degree courses
- b. unsuitable use of credit systems
- c. proliferation of first and second-level master's degrees
- d. unchanging nature of university teaching.

It is no surprise to discover that the university system's central powers were forced to intervene in an attempt to get universities to behave more virtuously. This happened in 2002, with the introduction of minimum structural requirements for the creation of a degree course. It happened again in the latter half of 2006, with a recent new ministerial regulation setting an upper limit of 20 examinations on bachelor's degree courses, and of 12 examinations for the *Laurea Magistrale*. So, in order to correct the direction taken by the autonomous universities, the government was forced to take a step backwards and limit their very autonomy.

The ongoing debate is restricted to a narrow group of policy and political actors. Higher education is not deemed a particularly important topic in Italian politics and society. The mass-media only focus on higher education when something dramatic happens (strikes, complaints, appeals against the results of processes of academic recruitment, and so on) (Capano, 2008a: 482-498).

In his seminal study on Italian universities, Burton Clark (1977) underlined the specific characteristics of the powerful national academic guild. His diagnosis of the *triumph of particularism* characterised Italian academics as strongly individualistic figures, possessing absolute academic power and a considerable capacity to influence the political system (Government and Parliament) from within. Clark emphasized in particular the ability of this individualistic, particularistic oligarchy to get organised at the national level. According to Clark's analysis, the deep-rooted nature of that system can only be challenged by a process of decentralization, even if this could entail the risk of excessive parochialism (Clark, 1977).

Changing higher education is not a simple task, especially in Italy. Universities are resilient institutions *par excellence*, perfectly capable of defending their own inherited practices, values, routines and internal interests. Nonetheless, they sometimes have to change in order to survive. In the Italian universities, survival attempts are clearly not in keeping with the needs of society or with government requirements. The real problem affecting universities in Italy is that of institutional governability. Why is it so difficult to place what is empirically evident on the political agenda? In

the Italian case, there are three fundamental constraints.

The first one is cultural: the majority of the leading players (the inner-circle of policy-makers) in higher education policy at all levels – government, ministers, trade unions, student associations, rectors and the most distinguished scholars – are still convinced that the traditional values of collegiality and *democracy* are of vital importance. They believe that the autonomy of Italy's universities is not working for the simple reason that they are underfinanced.

The second constraint is represented by the perceived social irrelevance of universities in Italy.

The third one is that, from a political point of view, higher education policy has never been among the priorities of the Italian political parties.

The only hope lies with the opening of a policy window, and above all with the emergence of an entrepreneurial policy-promoter capable of presenting the need for change, together with a series of radical solutions, in terms that are more acceptable to the major policy actors (Capano, 2008a: 501-503).

This kind of dynamics can be observed also in the implementation of the ideas of evaluation and accountability. These are two of the most popular catchwords employed by higher education reformers in the Western world over the last twenty-five years. Universities, just like other public organizations, have undergone profound, radical change during that time. Generally speaking, this has been the age of New Public Management for universities as well, even if this epithet only partly reflects what has been going on in Western higher education systems. The *ivory towers* of high-

er education have been under constant pressure to change their attitude, behaviour and traditional values, and the question of evaluation and institutional accountability have been of focal importance to the ensuing process of change. Evaluation implies external scrutiny and assessment of all fundamental university functions; not only research and teaching, but also administrative activities and financial management. Institutional accountability, which represents the other side of the coin, means that universities are asked to give account of their own performance to external stakeholders, in particular to the government and the public. Evaluation and institutional accountability are two fundamental aspects of the *steering at a distance* strategy that has been adopted in recent years, especially in Europe. Seen from a comparative perspective, this has not been a homogeneous process. Institutional accountability and different forms of evaluation have also been introduced in Italy over the past twenty years. At the end of this process, in January 2006, a huge report was presented, comprising a final report for each academic subject, a rating of each university, and a ranking of universities, subdivided according to size.

The procedures, dynamics and results of the first research exercise were characterized by considerable problems and methodological shortcomings. Furthermore, with regard to the knowledge function, it is clear that universities were forced into doing something of a substantially unknown nature: they were asked to examine themselves and select what they deemed to be the best products offered by their own constitutive subject areas. This was a complex process, because the majority of universities

did not possess a data set for their members' research products.

The accountability/governance function is another story, however. Indeed, no substantial decision has been made by either government or the Ministry on the basis of the research exercise.

As regards the learning function, it is very difficult to assess the impact of the research exercise; for sure it can be said that the majority of the universities are not working on drawing lessons from past experience and results.

What emerges, therefore, is that evaluation strategies and policies have been introduced into the Italian higher education system, and the majority of institutional activities are subjected to various forms of assessment. However, the truth is that the most significant impact of the implementation of such policies is the creation of enormous amounts of data, facts and figures. Furthermore, it is highly doubtful whether the aforesaid extensive evaluation activities have actually contributed towards systemic, institutional learning.

Finally, the results of this process of evaluation are nowadays not sufficiently clear and transparent that they could be used to help the universities' potential clients (students, entrepreneurs, firms, families, etc.) in choosing a specific degree-course in which to enrol, or a department to which a certain research project may be entrusted.

3. An Historical Stalemate

The situation described above puts into evidence the existence of two levels in the Italian higher educational policies:

a formal one, really modern, apparently ready to change and sensitive to new ideas; and an informal one, that makes it impossible *de facto* to implement the norms and laws that are sometimes made through the years. Ignoring the existence of these two levels can cause several errors of analysis regarding the Italian case-study. In this analysis I tried to show some of the ambiguities that are more evident in higher education policy-making. Anyway, the presence of a big implementation gap is to be found in several other policy sectors in Italy. The consequences of the situation make the Italian context a really difficult one to experiment with any trial of policy change, and Italy a place that can be connoted through history as a really conservative place in policy and cultural terms. Under this light, the potential power of new ideas that are sometimes taken into consideration by some policy-makers is neutralized by the inertia at the level of implementation. Of course, a contribution to this situation of immobility is given also by some institutional assets and some individual interests that sometimes prevail in the moment of making something new. Anyway, my point is that the prevalent explanation for this phenomenon in the Italian context is both cultural and historical. For this reason, it has been very interesting to me to analyse the case-study of my country, after having analysed the one of New Zealand, which represents the exact opposite in terms of higher education policy: radical ideas resulted in radical policy changes in 10-15 years. As one may have noticed, the Italian case is a representation of a completely different story.

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***Hic sunt leones* – kada ideje ne prate politike: Italija i reforma visokog obrazovanja**

SAŽETAK U članku se podastire prikaz implementacije različitih strategija i politika koje su bile uvedene u talijanski sustav visokog obrazovanja. Autor pokazuje da je najvažnija posljedica provedbe tih politika bilo stvaranje enormne količine podataka, činjenica i različitih vrsta prikaza. On, međutim, izražava sumnju jesu li spomenute evaluacijske aktivnosti zapravo doprinijele sustavnom, institucionalnome učenju u području politika visokog obrazovanja. Autor zaključuje da je talijanski slučaj u području politike visokog obrazovanja ukazao na postojanje dviju različitih razina u talijanskim politikama visokog obrazovanja: formalne, doista moderne, koja je nedvojbeno spremna na promjene i otvorena spram novih ideja u javnim politikama, i neformalne, koja snažno ograničava implementaciju normi i zakona vezanih uz područje visokog obrazovanja. Ignoriranje postojanja tih dviju razina može dovesti do niza grešaka u analazi talijanskog slučaja.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI politika visokog obrazovanja, implementacija politika, uloga ideja u reformama javnih politika, Italija