

**The fifteen year evaluation experience in Italian universities
with its crisis factors and a desire for Europe**

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Abstract

The paper makes a critical examination of the evaluation of university activities in Italy 15 years after its introduction. Along with indisputable development there are various weak points which are analysed by using the data collected with an empirical survey. Being aware of the limits of the steps that have been taken up to now is useful in view of the birth of the new national evaluation agency.

The fifteen year evaluation experience in Italian universities with its crisis factors and a desire for Europe

1. Towards a new evaluation phase in Italian universities

The promotion of teaching and scientific quality in universities through incentives linked to evaluation results has been at the forefront of an initiative taken by the Italian Government. This is confirmed by the setting up of the ANVUR (National Agency for the Evaluation of the University and Research) and the Pact for universities and research signed on 2 August 2007 by the Minister of the University and Research and the Minister of the Economy. The Pact fundamentally accepts the points set out in the report made by the Technical Commission for public finance “Measures for financial reorganisation and promotion of the efficacy and efficiency of the university system” (31 July 2007). This report acknowledges the fact that Italian universities have had to deal with huge changes in the past fifteen years, highlights the shadows and strong points and underlines in particular “the substantial lack of any kind of competitive system for rewarding universities that adequately meet the requirements of families and enterprises”. It also recognises that attempts have been made to resolve the critical state of the system by “taking steps to reduce expenses and encourage sound management behaviour even if the results have not been completely satisfactory owing to their limited extent and great discontinuity over the years”. The Commission has therefore singled out the essential factors for rationalising the Italian university system, namely, giving greater autonomy to universities, guaranteeing the financial stability of the system and improving incentive schemes.

These recent authoritative documents are in line with the conclusions of a research work of ours according to which the great commitment to evaluation activities by the system as a whole and by many single universities has shown its weak side in the uses of the results of evaluation (Rebora, Minelli, Turri, 2007).

Bearing in mind the new evaluation period foreseen for universities by the Italian government, this paper aims to make a critical analysis of the last fifteen years, highlight and discuss current difficulties by using the results of a survey conducted especially for the purpose and ultimately put forward suggestions for improvement.

2 Fifteen years of evaluation in Italy

In 1994 the law laid down that each university should set up an internal evaluation unit with the task of certifying the existence of the necessary resources for carrying out and coordinating the different evaluation activities. Since then these units have worked with a certain degree of continuity, used a wide range of evaluation methodologies and made annual reports that have progressively included more information and data.

In the same period national committees have also worked intensely. The CNVSU (National Committee for the Evaluation of the University System) has produced an enormous quantity of statistical data on the system and individual universities. In order to carry out these activities, together with others aimed at guaranteeing the existence of minimum quality standards in universities (student-professor ratio, suitability of the premises, ascertainment of student satisfaction among attending students in each course of study), the CNVSU has used evaluation units for collecting and guarantee the reliability of data. The CIVR (National Committee for the Evaluation of Research) through the triennial evaluation of research (VTR) in the years 2001-2003, made available an unprecedented acknowledgement of the quality of research in universities. Evaluation regarded the international excellence of a selection of research products submitted by the universities to the peer review process. The assessment came to an end in February 2007 with the publication of a ranking list of universities based on the various disciplines. The CRUI (Association of Italian Rectors) promoted voluntary self evaluation in degree courses which led to widespread experimentation of evaluation methodologies fostering the diffusion of quality awareness.

The combined effect of these different factors has had important consequences. Information available universally on the internet has greatly increased and deals with virtually every aspect of the working of these organisations. As regards university teaching, the compulsory survey of student satisfaction using the scheme prepared by the CNVSU has made academics face up to student learning needs. In the research field the assessment promoted by the CIVR has drawn attention to research evaluation: over 800,000 contacts were made in the three months following the first publication of the results of the VTR. The system's overall qualitative leap in terms of the extent and quality of information is clearly evident.

There are other positive aspects: a large number of academics who were not experts in evaluation but whose expertise was in some way related to it have been involved in evaluation practices thanks to the evaluation units and their initiatives and thanks to the Campus One project in which many academics took part. In the last few years there has been a slowing down of self-referencing on the part of academics who, after initial resistance, have accepted the diffusion of evaluation and have started to see it as a valuable resource (Boffo and Moscati, 1998 – Turri, 2005). Some scientific disciplines have voluntarily begun to take more interest in the quality of research and this has greatly affected behaviour, especially among younger academic staff

Evaluation, however, continues to vary considerably from one university to another as the evaluation units have not all worked equally efficiently (Dente, 2006). There is an enormous difference between the contents and details in the reports made by the more advanced units and those in the less dynamic ones. Along with the evaluation units that have autonomously promoted evaluation of departments through peer review, have accepted international evaluation initiatives such as the Institutional Evaluation Programme promoted by the European University Association and have taken steps to monitor and stimulate teaching quality there are other units that only satisfy the minimum requirements laid down by the CNVSU and CIVR.

Analysis of evaluation in the Italian university system has taken place in an institutional context that continues to be rather confused, conflicting and continually changing (Boffo, 1997 - Boffo & Moscati, 1998). Opening the door to Europe by taking part in the Bologna Process with its reform of degree courses

and introduction of credit systems has been extremely important even if there has been widespread resistance from university staff who have not always approved of the innovations. Although complete autonomy of the universities is declared in principle it is actually hampered by three factors.

- The state mechanism for the allocation of funds restricts the true autonomy of the universities in deciding how these funds are to be used as they are tied up for specific expenses (Capano, 2007).
- The recruitment of academic and non-academic university staff is also strictly regulated by the state. In addition, academic staff still have a “non-contractual” status, which means that management is less flexible and salaries are not performance-related.
- University governance, based on collegial bodies elected by university professors, pushes any degree of autonomy towards solutions that favour academic power such as the rapid increase in the number of degree courses offered by the university regardless of actual student and labour market demand (Capano, 2007).

In this context evaluation has not been able to curb degenerative phenomena connected to irresponsible management of autonomy such as the unusual proliferation of universities and degree courses or the career structure of academic and non-academic staff that is not based on their merits. The intended use of evaluation results in decision-making when allocating funds has fallen on stony ground (CNVSU, 2004). In universities there is a similar situation as evaluation units have worked with a certain degree of continuity, made use of a wide range of evaluation methodologies and made annual reports which over time have included more information and data, but all this effort has only affected decision-making in a few cases.

For this reason and others such as the need to comply with ENQA standards by adopting a system of credits and also stimulated by the positive outcome of the CIVR procedure, the Ministry of the University started procedures for setting up ANVUR at the end of 2006. This agency will take the place of the CNVSU and the CIVR and is aimed at promoting the quality of research and university teaching as well as determining the parameters for the transfer of funds to universities.

3. Factors of crisis encountered in the past

In order to get a true picture of evaluation in Italian universities it is necessary to consider the elements that hinder and limit the efficacy of evaluation practices. Consequently a survey was made with a closed answer questionnaire divided into the following two sections:

- Section A, with questions on the importance given to six crisis factors that result from the study of literature and can lead to the failure of evaluation systems. (for further details on the 6 factors, vide Rebora, 2007 – Minelli, Rebora, Turri, 2007);
- Section B, where the interviewees were asked to give their opinion on 24 items linked to the six factors mentioned.

The questionnaire was sent (table 1) throughout 2006 to all rectors, administrative directors (as evaluated subjects) and presidents and members of evaluation units (as evaluators) in Italian universities. The interviewees were asked to express their opinion with a rating from 1 (no problems) to 6 (critical factor in the failure of audits).

CATEGORY OF INTERVIEWEES	POPULATION	EMAILS SENT	REJECTED EMAILS	DELIVERED EMAILS	TOTAL NUMBER OF REPLIES	DISCARDED EMAILS	EFFECTIVE REPLIES	% REPLIES OUT OF DELIVERED EMAILS
P.N.V.	76	74	1	73	25	4	21	28,77%
C.N.V.	414 ¹	359	18	341	120	17	103	30,21%
RETT.	76	76	0	76	20	0	20	26,32%
DIR.	77 ²	77	0	77	34	3	31	44,16%
TOTAL	643	586	19	567	199	24	175	31,39%

Table 1. - Sampling criteria and percentage of responses for each interviewed category - P.N.V.: president of evaluation unit; C.N.V.: member of evaluation unit; RETT.: rector; DIR.: administrative/general director.

The analysis carried out with the closed answer questionnaire (table 2) shows that 6 different factors have a rating of at least 3 (corresponding to a “fairly serious problem” in the questionnaire scale) and 4 (“serious problem”) in the case of “university governance”. The high response rate (table 1) in a distance questionnaire on such a thorny matter as the failure of evaluation systems also testifies to the interviewees’ widespread interest in the subject.

Examination of the responses from the interviewed categories highlights that the most critical area is “university governance”. In the opinion of the presidents and members of evaluation units and administrative directors this area is the most critical whereas the rectors hold that “inappropriate relationships and conflicts of interests” and to a lesser extent, the “technical aspects of evaluation” more greatly affect the effectiveness of evaluation systems. Less importance is given to factors such as the “organisation and policies of staff in evaluation units”, “personal characteristics of evaluators” and “public policies and system factors”.

¹ Some members belong to one or more evaluation units.

² One university has both an administrative director and a director general.

SECTION A						
FACTORS CAUSING PROBLEMS FOR THE EFFEECTIVENESS OF EVALUATION ACTIVITIES						
(mean rating for each interviewed category)						
	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Technical aspects of evaluation	Personal characteristics of evaluators	Organisation and policies of staff in evaluation units	University governance	Public policies and system factors	Inappropriate relationships and conflicts of interests
P.N.V.	3.19	3.76	3.62	4.24	2.81	2.81
C.N.V.	3.48	2.94	3.32	3.89	3.06	3.00
RETT.	3.85	3.30	3.60	3.55	3.70	4.10
DIR.	3.44	3.34	3.31	4.16	3.38	3.94
MEAN	3.49	3.34	3.46	3.96	3.24	3.46

Table 2: Responses to section A of questionnaire - P.N.V.: president of evaluation unit; C.N.V.: member of evaluation unit; RETT.: rector; DIR.: administrative/general director.

Scale: rating from 1 to 6 where 1= no problems - 6 = critical factor in the failure of audits

The collected data thus highlight a significant difference in the responses from the categories of interviewees who have varying points of view and sensitivity on the issue.

In particular, the differing opinions of the rectors and presidents of evaluation units is an important symptom of uneasiness. The rectors underline “inappropriate and unethical relationships” between evaluators and those being evaluated (rating 4.10 out of 6) giving the impression that the large number of academics who are members of the units and, more often than not, also work in the university itself compromises objectivity. The presidents, on the other hand, emphasise problems of governance (rating 4.24 out of 6) describing them as the “indifference of university government bodies towards evaluation”, thus casting a shadow on the behaviour of those in charge of the university, that is to say the rectors.

Table 3 shows the points in section B of the questionnaire that the interviewees consider to be the most critical for determining the failure of evaluation systems. The presidents of evaluation units and administrative directors put the “indifference of university government bodies towards evaluation” as the most important point out of the 24 in the list whereas members of evaluation units put it third. The rectors’ point of view is completely different: the first three places in the list all concern factors that are linked to problems of inappropriate relations or conflicts of interests and in particular involve the relationship between evaluators and evaluated subjects.

PRESIDENT OF EVALUATION UNIT	MEMBER OF EVALUATION UNIT	RECTORS	ADMINISTRATIVE-GENERAL DIRECTORS
GOVERNANCE Insufficient internal operational support for evaluation units 3.67	GOVERNANCE Indifference of university government bodies towards evaluation 3.86	CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS Evaluators and evaluated subjects belonging to the same environment and ensuing over-familiarity 4.40	GOVERNANCE Indifference of university government bodies towards evaluation 3.97
TECHNICAL ASPECTS Insufficient and not very methodical definition of evaluation procedures and practices 3.48	GOVERNANCE Insufficient communication and interaction between the different subjects involved in the evaluation activities 3.37	CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS Conflict of interests and lack of independence between universities being evaluated and evaluators 4.20	TECHNICAL ASPECTS Insufficient and not very methodical definition of evaluation procedures and practices 3.91
GOVERNANCE Indifference of university government bodies towards evaluation 3.38	TECHNICAL ASPECTS Insufficient and not very methodical definition of evaluation procedures and practices 3.37	CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS Involvement of evaluators in interests systems and alliances dominated by evaluated institutions 4.15	CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS Evaluators and evaluated subjects belonging to the same environment and ensuing over-familiarity 3.84

Table 3 - *The three most critical factors affecting the efficiency of evaluation and quality assurance practices in Italian universities for each category of respondents*

These responses show the climate of mistrust surrounding evaluation activities. This is also endorsed by the administrative directors whose opinions come somewhere in between the rectors and presidents of evaluation units and give high ratings to problems of governance and conflicts of interest. A situation of uneasiness and mutual mistrust affecting the relationship between the main characters involved thus emerges. This fact may partly explain and partly be the consequence of the difficulty in using the enormous amount of information that is now available through completely different channels from the past and which constitute the undoubted success of evaluation in university decision-making, funding and as an impetus for improvement.

4 Conclusions and proposals

To conclude, evaluation has set in motion a learning process in universities that has not yet had the time or way of putting important decisions into effect and even less of significantly altering the balance of power in university governance. This does not mean that the bases are lacking for this to happen in the future as a more mature consequence of the cultural development triggered by learning processes which, at their best, led to the adoption of evaluation methodologies that were aligned with the best European ones. The birth of ANVUR fits into this picture and is a good opportunity for reflecting on the evaluation system.

Improving the evaluation of university activities in Italy is possible but great changes have to be made. The stage that is coming to an end has been anything but useless in the learning process where it has given the

chance to try out new methods, awakened interest in the issue and spread the culture of evaluation. The experience gained can be a basis for facing up to unresolved problems such as funding or the transformation of the power system. Below are some lines of action that could be valid in this new phase.

Improving evaluation methodologies by their use

A fully developed evaluation system, as the more advanced European experiences show, requires the combined use of different methodologies with enough room for personalised solutions in the field of self-assessment. Evaluation is not a technique but a set of different elements that take shape by using the evaluation reports. After evaluation has been introduced there is the problem of how to actually use and facilitate it. If the biggest hurdle is the structure of governance, action must be taken in that particular area but the issue could even be partly faced by overturning it. If governance is weak, what steps can the evaluation system take to supply evaluation output that can really be used?

Facing the question of the use of evaluation results may however serve to raise the problem of governance. There is a risk that when governance is disinclined or unable to take a stand this will produce a deadlock where evaluation is unable to acquire real importance because it is not supported by university government. On the contrary there is the risk that if evaluation tries to substitute weak university government, it is overwhelmed by the weight of the questions it raises.

Developing integrated professional expertise

The wealth of expertise, professionalism and experiences available in universities has meant that evaluation is in the hands of people who are recognised as having expertise in a field that is in some way connected with evaluation. Thus, evaluation units are made up of a large number of statisticians, experts in management control, engineers with experience in industrial quality systems and experts in pedagogy. Although this solution was probably the only one possible in the early stages, its limits are now obvious because it takes the most widespread methods as a reference point and not the evaluation process as a whole, which would be more correct. As a result, many evaluators tend to prefer particular techniques that are more in keeping with their own professional expertise and often lack a systematic outlook that takes the use and effects of evaluation into consideration. Nowadays, evaluators are required to have training and interdisciplinary sensitivity as well as enthusiasm for an activity that continually entails facing uncertainties, cultural diversity and even ambiguity and conflicts. This kind of professional development is fundamental for giving a professional identity to evaluators which brings them closer to university management and weakens their links with specific disciplinary areas. This would naturally have positive effects on curbing the conflicts of interests that currently worry rectors.

Coordinating the work of national and local systems

So far there has been no precise or productive correlation between local and national evaluation practices. The guidelines for *Quality Assurance* issued by the ENQA propose a different course of action from the one

so far tried and tested in Italy. There are to be local autonomous evaluation systems that are consistent with the strategies and nature of each university and aimed at the diffusion of an internal culture of quality which will prompt improvement. There is also to be a national system for periodic evaluation that will check on university evaluation systems and verify certain prefixed elements of quality.

In this setting improvement, not compliance, is the fundamental value for quality policies. This is the essential assumption that characterises the standards and guidelines laid down and shared by European experts. Improvement is achieved when the universities take the question in hand and face it internally. On the contrary, passive acceptance of standards or goals imposed from the top only produces bureaucracy, paperwork, and the search for formal justifications which bring about the lowering of quality. In this context external quality assurance acts as a stimulus for internal quality assurance policies and is not a means for resolving and exhausting the question. Improvement needs stimuli and external evaluation processes can greatly contribute to setting them in motion.

Promoting and sharing a dialectical concept of quality

In short, the real contribution of widespread evaluation is one of cultural growth which is reached by promoting greater awareness of the contents of the different university activities. In this context quality is not only complex but is above all controversial, contested and conflictual. This fact should not be ignored: the use of mechanical evaluation procedures is to be limited. The two poles -accountability and improvement- are irrepressible components of a challenging concept. A pragmatic approach that balances these two poles is useful whereas infinite conceptual discussions on quality are less so. Real quality is dialectic and is achieved by balancing the conflicting motivations and contrasting inclinations of the different subjects: national control bodies and university government, lecturers and students, academic and administrative staff etc. Facing this dialectic and balancing the use of objective-quantitative and subjective-qualitative evaluation methods bring about improvement. Even the behaviour of the actors is important: enthusiasm and scepticism, consolidated experience and initial experimentation, rationality and creativity can all play a role in enhancing evaluation practices.

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