The Bologna Process in Italy

Gabriele Ballarino and Loris Perotti, Department of Labour and Welfare Studies,
wTw and CHESS-UNIREs, University of Milan
1. Introduction

In this paper, we describe how the Bologna process has unfolded in Italy\(^1\). Italy was not just the country where lays the town of Bologna, after which the process was named, but also among the early adopters of the reform, fully introduced since academic year 2000/2001. If one looks at its impact on the formal structure of curricula and study programs, the reform of the Italian higher education system (henceforth HES) undertaken under the banner of the Bologna process appears to have been one of the major educational reforms ever achieved in Italy. Since WW2, only the reform of secondary education, implemented in 1962, had a stronger impact. We will approach our object from the point of view of the contemporary theories of institutional change (Streeck and Thelen 2005, Amable and Palombarini 2009), with two main research questions in mind. Our first question concerns the reform itself as an institutional change, the product of the interaction of the major stakeholders governing the Italian HE system. We ask why the reform was possible, in an HES system generally reluctant to change. Our second question concerns the general outcome of the reform. Theories of institutional change state that in contemporary political economies liberalisation is the typical outcome of incremental institutional change (Streeck and Thelen 2005), and many Italian observers are critical of the Bologna Process because it brings too much market into universities. We ask whether this judgement is true: did reform bring about a liberalisation of the Italian HES?

Besides this Introduction, the paper includes 4 section. In section 2, the relevant theory is presented. Then, in section 3 we briefly present the main features of the Italian Higher Education System (HES) as they could be observed in the second half of the Nineties, at the outset of the Bologna process. In section 4 we focus on the process itself, describing the way the main actors behave and interacted during its design and implementation. In section 5 we tackle the issue of liberalisation, checking whether the reform process produced an increase in the weight of markets as a regulatory mechanism in Italian academy. Section 6 discusses the main findings and provides some conclusions.

2. Institutional change and Higher Education

Despite having been developed from, among others, analyses of institutional changes in a set of national systems of vocational education and training (Thelen 2004), the analytical perspective

\(^1\) This paper was presented at the XVII Conference of CES, Montreal, 15/4/2010: we would like to thank the session’s organizer, Luis de Miguel, and all participants for useful comments. We are also indebted to Massimiliano Vaira, who kindly provided us with his papers on the topic, that were very useful for our own work. Comments are welcome, please write to gabriele.ballarino@unimi.it
proposed by Streeck and Thelen (2005) to study incremental institutional change in modern capitalist societies has not been used yet for educational systems. At the contrary, in most of the cases scholars studying the evolution over time of educational systems have stuck to the two traditional perspective on institutional change. On one side, they do not believe it is possible a systematic theory of institutional change, and take the historicist stance consistent with this point of view. On the other side, they use the standard “punctuated equilibrium” model. According to this model, institutions are typically in balance. It is exogenous shocks that force them to change, to cope with the unbalanced produced by the shock itself, in order to find a different equilibrium. Between shocks, incremental changes are not able to produce a different equilibrium, while they can adjust the existing one.

In fact, the first major point made by Streeck and Thelen’s (2005) important paper concerns those two opposite ways of looking at institutional change in modern capitalist societies. According to Streeck and Thelen’s discussion, institutional change can happen incrementally and a new equilibrium can emerge without explicit shocks and breaking points. Such an approach, proposing a “third way” between historicism and punctuated equilibrium theories, is by no means a completely new one: to the European scholar, it appears to be like a welcomed reprise of the theoretical stance that was current among classical sociology and political economy. Marx and Engels, for instance, often refer to the Hegelian concept of “quantity turning into quality”, meaning that long-term incremental change can give way to major institutional break-ups even in the absence of exogenous shocks (Engels 1907, 156 ff.).

However, this “incremental change approach” pioneered by Streeck and Thelen can be of particular use when looking at institutional changes of educational systems and notably of HE, in order to avoid an analytical bias related to the interaction structure typical of educational reforms. For instance, in a recent paper relating to our very own subject, Dente and Moscati (2008) describe HE reforms in Italy as driven by exogenous shocks coming from the political system, and explain their different outcomes by the reactions of the internal actors of the system towards the exogenous shock. While we acknowledge the importance of the interaction between political system and academic actors, especially in a system like the Italian one, where (as we shall see below) market relations have never had a strong role, we would be cautious in defining HE reforms as “exogenous shocks”. Instead, we suggest that it is analytically more fruitful to see the reform as an endogenous process, namely the result of the working of the HE system in its relation with other institutions, both national and supra-national. Research on education too often separates the political processes that produce the reform from the socio-economic processes governing the evolution of the system,
and this separation is likely to be sharper in cases where reforms are heavily “marketed” by the political system and the mass media, as it is the case for the Bologna process in Europe.

A second important contribution of Streeck and Thelen’s (2005) paper is their proposal of distinguishing the five modes of institutional change reported in table 1. What they have in common is their incremental nature: in all cases, institutions change slowly but steadily, without a visible breaking point. In the case of displacement, a subordinate institution slowly becomes more important than a previously dominant one. In the case of layering, existing institutions are modified so that the new elements (layers) gradually modify the existing structure. In the case of drift, a more or less intentional neglect of institutional maintenance in a context of external social change results in a loss of institutional efficacy with respect to social reality. In the case of conversion, old institutions are redeployed towards new purposes. Finally, in the case of exhaustion institutions gradually weaken and wither away over time.

*Table 1 about here*

We are not in presence, of course, of a theory of institutional change in the strong sense of the term, nor do the authors systematize it. However, the five modes outlined can be taken as a fruitful empirical typology to arrange and discuss evidence. This is what we will do here, using Streeck and Thelen’s typology to describe some aspects of recent HE reforms in Italy from the point of view of institutional change. Our aim at “endogeneizing reforms” could also be a way to address one shortcoming of Streeck and Thelen’s approach, namely its reliance on the outcomes of the processes of institutional change. In fact, it has been noted that analyses of institutional change should give weight to the state and the political arena, where different actors conflict in order to pursue their interest (Amable and Palombarini 2009). Thus, we will focus on the actors involved, especially on the government and on the professors, the two main actors of the Continental systems of HE since the 19th century (Clark 1983).

A third important point made by Streeck and Thelen (2005) is a general interpretation of institutional changes in contemporary capitalist political economies. According to their view, incremental institutional change takes the shape of liberalization, i.e. of an increase of “market relations in areas that [...] were reserved to collective political decisionmaking” (Streeck and Thelen 2005: 30). According to their view, liberalization is in fact the “natural” direction of incremental institutional change, unless some institutional actor does not strongly push in another direction. We have some doubts concerning this statement. Theoretically speaking, a perspective considering actors and their interactions as one of the major factors of institutional change should
not find any direction of change to be a “natural” one. It may be, of course, that some “natural” mechanisms (for instance self-interest and a limited rationality) push some actors in a direction (for instance more reliance on market relations), but no “natural” outcome is guaranteed once the whole variety of structural pressures, actors and interactions is taken into account. We cannot pursue such theoretical arguments further, as our second research question is an empirical one: what we want to see, is whether this statement holds for the case of institutional changes in Italian HE. Did the Bologna process liberalise Italian HE?

3. Before Bologna: continuities and change in the recent history of the Italian HE.

In this section, we situate the Bologna process in the historical and structural situation of the Italian HES. First, we describe its main features, focusing on three key-points relevant in a comparative perspective: low participation, low differentiation and strong power of the academic oligarchy. Second, we outline the already going on process of institutional change, set in motion by a series of reforms undertaken between 1969 and 1991.

3.1. Old-age practices and expansion: change in Italian HE as an institutional drift

Despite the old and venerable traditions, the spread of HE has been quite slow in modern Italy. As figure 1 shows, as late as in 1960 less than 10% of 19-years-old were accessing universities. The following expansion has been slow but steady, and in the current decade cohort-specific rates of enrolment at the university came close to the standards of the leading industrial countries².

*figures 1 and 2 about here*

The graph also shows that, as it happened almost everywhere, the expansion of HE has been slower than that of secondary education. Figure 2 gives a further and important detail of the process, namely the decline of 19-years-old population, as a function of decreasing fertility. Moreover, the graph shows the increase of the spread between the number of students enrolled per year and the total number of enrolled students. Since the mid-00s, the spread has ceased to become larger, but it is by no means decreasing. This can be taken as an indicator of one of the major features of the Italian HE system, that is its very low efficiency. One could also speak of selection mechanisms, but they are not intentional, since the students that abandon universities are not pushed out in some formal way, but simply drop out and disappear from the institution’s view.

² The figure for enrollments as a % of 19-years old population is of course overestimated, as many enrolled are older than 19.
A second relevant feature of the Italian HES is its low level of differentiation: higher education is almost exclusively the responsibility of universities. In fact, international comparisons classify the Italian higher education system as “unitary”, distinguishing it from “diversified” systems, where higher education is offered by many types of different institutions, as in the USA, and from “dual” systems as in Germany, where two main types of institutions exist, one academic and one vocational (Arum, Gamoran and Shavit 2007). Universities number 86: among those, 26 are not owned by the state, most of them being introduced recently and achieving only very low quality standards. The Italian public HES also includes six scuole superiori (graduate schools who do not offer undergraduate programs) and many accademie di belle arti e conservatori di musica (respectively art and music postsecondary schools). It is interesting to note that, differently from what happened elsewhere, the formal differentiation among institutions remained low despite the strong expansion that interested the system during the last decades. In fact, the creation of the scuole superiori since the late 90s has been the only attempt by now to introduce some institutional differentiation into the system. But on the other hand, during the same period the post-secondary art and music schools were formally parified to universities, thus decreasing formal differentiation.

To give a full picture of the Italian HES, one should also note that a great number of postsecondary private vocational schools exist, most of whom offer courses in the fields of business management and design & fashion.

A third comparative feature of the Italian HES is the central role of professors in its governance (Clark 1977; Giglioli 1979). In fact, when Burton Clark (1983: 139 ff) introduces his well-known “triangle of coordination” model of university governance, he uses the Italian example to show how in given circumstances the academic oligarchy becomes the most powerful actor in the triangle. The relevant circumstances were those of the Italian national state formation, when a comparatively weak state centralized the previously existing pre-unitary HE systems in order to keep control on an élite not wholly convinced with the new state and to reduce heterogeneity among existent HE institutions (characterized by very different levels of performance and quality). The autonomy of the universities was reduced to a minimum, lowering the space of market coordination. However, at the same time the weakness of the governments and the bad performance of the state bureaucracy left the academic oligarchies quite autonomous. In Weberian terms, the professors were enabled more than elsewhere to hold on to the traditional patrimonial view of their own power, in contrast to a legal-rational one. With few exceptions, a low accountability on the part of the professors towards the state and the prevalence of particularistic interests with respect to a system-wide vision have

---

3 Of those private institutions, 10 are distance universities.
4 Only the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa is an ancient institution, born during the French rule during the Napoleon era.
since been a key feature of the new HES, as well as the high incidence of strong and direct links between the full professors and the political élite, as distinguished from the ministerial bureaucracy (Miozzi 1993). Full professors are organized according two lines: first, the discipline, as it is typical of the profession (Clark 1983); second, the facoltà as a “confederation of disciplines”, that has the responsibility for both the study courses and the selection of new professors (Capano 1998; Boffo et al. 2004). However, the actual norms regulating academic work and careers do not fully mirror the academic oligarchy’s preminence (as they did, for instance, in the British Old Universities), and the formal regulation has always remained a central and bureaucratic one, according to the tipical Continental mode, based on nation-wide norms and academic standards. In particular, wages are relatively low (particularly at the beginning of the career), are set at the national level and grow automatically with seniority; tenure is relatively easy to get; there is no systematic evaluation of performance and/or productivity and both universities and facoltà have few means to constrain the professors’ “academic freedom” or “academic autonomy” (Moscati 2001).

The three major features we have singled out are of course related to each other: in a relatively small HES, there is less pressure for differentiation and it is easier for the academic oligarchy to hold onto its power. Moreover, a low level of institutional differentiation is directly associated to the strength of the academic oligarchy. It can be argued that while in other European countries, such as Germany or the UK, the introduction of a parallel channel of vocational HE has increased the role of other actors (most notably local governments, employers’ associations, local chambers of commerce and other economic institutions) in the system’s management, in Italy (as in Spain) the failure to establish such a channel has left a comparatively stronger power in the hands of the academics.

From what reported above, it appears that despite its quantitative importance, the process of expansion did not bring about qualitative changes in the organization of Italian HE. In general we would describe the evolution of the Italian HE system for most of the XX century as a process of institutional drift: in this case, institutional change does not take place by a deliberate initiative on the part of policy-makers, but by “rules remaining unchanged in the face of evolving external conditions” (Streeck and Thelen 2005: 31).

3.2. A reform for each decade

It is well-known that since the 60s the increase of university participation has put considerable stress on the institutional structures and on the behaviour of the main actors of the HES of all Western advanced countries. Given its key features briefly outlined above, for the Italian HES this

---

5 We do not translate the term, as the meaning of the English word „faculty“ is a different one.
stress has been quite higher than elsewhere. This is why the need of a systemic reform has for long been a Leitmotiv in both the Italian public discussion and scholarly research on tertiary education (Miozzi 1993; Capano 1998). In fact, while the system remained almost unchanged for one century, from its outset until the late 60s, a curiously recurrent ten-year pattern has been observed since, as major reforms were attempted in 1969, 1980 and 1989.

**1969: opening access**
The first change took place in 1969, when with the law 910/1969 the government abolished the rules restricting access to university introduced in the 20s by the Fascist minister of education and idealist philosopher Giovanni Gentile. The rules designed by Gentile limited open access to university to high school graduates from the academic tracks (the licei). In contrast, high school graduates from technical and vocational tracks (istituti tecnici and istituti professionali) could enter the technical faculties, but only in the very same field of study they had been taking in higher secondary. The 1969 reform enabled all students to freely access their preferred university and field of study, provided that they had taken five years of higher secondary education and passed a (not very selective) national examination (esame di maturità). In fact, the reform de-stratified higher secondary concerning access to university but did not directly involve university.

The debate on the causal relation between this reform and the expansion of the participation to HE has not been settled yet, but if we look at figure 2 (see above) it is hard to see any relation between the reform and enrollments, whose increase in fact appears to have been steeper during the 60s than during the 70s. What matters more, is that the increase in the heterogeneity of students caused by the expansion of participation did not have any major impact on the professors’ practices in teaching and assessing students and junior researchers. Such practices remained those of an élite university, where both teaching and promoting junior researchers is based on strong and personal relations between professors and students. This resulted in the increase of the dropout rate that can be seen in figure 3. The graph is based on survey data, as administrative data on dropouts are available only from the 90s on. It is easy to see both the constantly high dropout rate and its trend to increase over time, up to the cohort that entered universities in the late 80s.

*figure 3 about here*

---

6 Data come from ILFI’s first and second wave (1997 and 1999). ILFI is the Longitudinal Survey of Italian Families, see [http://www.soc.unitn.it/ilfi/eng/index.html](http://www.soc.unitn.it/ilfi/eng/index.html). Figures for the graph are taken from Ballarino, Bison and Schadee (2007), and university dropouts are arranged over time according to the cohort of entry in to the school system.
Also the number of permanent professor’s positions did not increase enough with respect to the expanding demand (see figure 4 below). New teachers were recruited on a contingent basis, often without the usual (and necessary, according to the profession’s self-understanding) selection based on their effort and scientific merit. In Streeck and Thelen’s terms, the 1969 reform can be thought as an attempt to an institutional conversion, as an existing institution (the élite university) was re-oriented towards new purpose (the mass university). But it was only a partial one, as in fact the institution was not changed enough in order to be able to reach its new purpose.

1980: introducing new organizations and curricula

During the 70s militancy was very high among both students and young professors, determining a situation of permanent conflict in many Italian universities. To cope with this situation, a second major reform was introduced in 1980. The reform changed the basic organisational structures of the universities, substituting multi-professor departments in Anglo-Saxon style to the previous institutes in the Continental tradition. The institutes coincided in most of the cases with a single chair, and were patrimonially managed by the holder of the chair. Recruitment was also reformed, with the aim of making it more transparent and less dependent on the personal relations among the baroni and between them and the candidates. The PhD title was introduced, as the first ladder of academic careers, as well as the position of associate professor, as an intermediate career ladder between assistant (re-named ricercatore by the reform) and full professor.

According to Streeck and Thelen’s (2005) typology, the 1980 reform can be seen as a case of institutional layering: new institutions typical of the American model of HE organization, as the PhD title and the departments, were introduced as new institutional layers in an HES that kept its original features substantially unchanged. In fact, during the early 80s the large majority of the new teachers recruited during the seventies were given professorial positions ope lege, with an administrative fiat sponsored by the left-wing parties and readily accepted by most of the already existing professors, who were able to maintain most of their power also towards the newly recruited (Capano 1998: 117). This expansion of the academic personnel is easily seen in figure 4, showing how the number of professors increased much faster during the 80s that in any other observed period. The same goes, of course, for the ratio of students to professors, that decreased steeply during the 80s.

1989: autonomy and decentralization
A third reform followed between 1989 and 1991, carried out by Socialist minister of Education Antonio Ruberti, a well-known professor and academic manager himself. The reform aimed at decentralising the HE system, in order to make it more flexible and adaptable to society’s changing needs. First, a separated ministry for the University was created, while earlier responsibility for HE was held by the ministry of Education. Second, while earlier the single universities directly depended from the Ministry of Education, they were now given formal autonomy. Universities had to give themselves their own statutes, and were enabled to take strategic decisions. For the first time they had the possibility to introduce new study programs and curricula without having to wait for the ex ante endorsement on the part of the ministry. It has to be remembered that such endorsement could arrive after many years of wait and negotiations among ministry and professors, thus seriously damaging the possibility of innovating programs and their curricula, adjusting them to the economic and social demand. To this end, besides the traditional four-to-six years laurea, a new two- or three-year program was introduced: the diploma universitario, a vocationally-oriented program similar to the Anglo-saxon bachelor or to the German FH-Diplom.

The reform was apparently accepted by the majority of the professors, but it was fiercely opposed by a strong nation-wide student movement (backed by the still strong Communist party, opposing the government), that for a few months menaced to bring the conflict of the 70s back. The rationale for the students’ opposition was the fear that autonomy would have entailed, as a consequence, a de facto privatization of the system. However, the implementation of the new rules was slow and only partial, as the consent of the professors were more a passive than an active one. This was particularly true from the point of view of the reorganization of curricula. Moreover, the recruitment of professors and the mechanisms of financing remained untouched by the reform.

**Reforms and expansion**

From the point of view of the Streeck-Thelen typology, the 1989-1991 reform is another example of institutional change via conversion, i. e. when “new purposes are attached to old structures” (Streeck and Thelen 2005: 31). In fact, the governing bodies of the universities remained the same, but they were given new roles and purposes in the context of autonomy. This is why observers’ opinion diverge on the evaluation of this reform: according to a number of observers, the Ruberti reform was the first one to really mark a change in the Italian HES (Capano 1998: 258 ff.; 2008). According to other ones, on the contrary, the reform was not as effective as its promoters envisaged, because of the passive resistance of the academic élite, which in general did not exploit its newfound autonomy to actually change the system but just to expand it (Moscati 2008: 106 ff.).
In fact, from the point of view of the system-level outcomes it has to be noted that the 90s were a period of strong change in the Italian HES. The (partial) decentralization of the procedures required in order to open up a new *facoltà* or a new study program, or to hire new professors, gave the universities the opportunity to expand their offer and to increase the enrollments. Moreover, most of the governments of the first part of the decade had a policy oriented towards the increase of equality of opportunity and the widening of access to HE. In fact, figure 2 shows the period between 1988 and 1992 to have been the one with the strongest increase of enrollments, and figures reported in table 2 show how the teaching supply increased notably, both from the point of view of its content variety and its geographical distribution.

Table 2 about here

4. The reform process

In this section we come to the substantive core of the paper, namely the Bologna process. First, we will describe the context in which the Italian reform was embedded, and then how the reform process unfolded. In this way we will be able to answer our first research question presented above, namely how was such an apparently radical reform possible in an HES that has proved himself very difficult to change.

4.1. The context

*The political context*

The early 90s were a period of deep change for Italian politics and society (Ginsborg 2003). As a product of both the breakdown of the Berlin Wall and of a process of endogenous exhaustion, the party system that had ruled the country since WWII collapsed, giving way to a new political confrontation between a center-left coalition led by the former Communist party, now renamed Democratic Left Party, the only surviving party of the previous system, and a center-right coalition led by media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, whose *Forza Italia* personal party took since the 1994 election most of the votes and of the personnel away from the previous ruling parties (the Christian Democratic and the Socialist). The 1996 election was won by the center-left coalition, led by professor Prodi, a well-known industrial economist and a former manager. Prodi’s coalition won the national election although not having the majority of votes, because of the division between
Berlusconi’s party and the regional right-wing xenophobic party Lega Nord. For the first time since the beginnings of the Republic (1948), the opposition had won the parliamentary elections. From our point of view, this was an important event, as the following change of political personnel damaged the strong links existing between the political élite and the academic oligarchy. Moreover, this political renewal explains the drive to reform that pervaded Italian HE politics at that time (Vaira 2001). The Prodi government, despite its tiny majority in the parliament, intended to actually change the country, and education, particularly the HES, was an ideal candidate. Right or wrong, despite the ongoing changes pushed by the Ruberti reform, universities were still perceived by most of the media and the public opinion as old institutions, where scholars would sit in their ivory towers without any responsibility towards the rest of the world and, most of all, towards the taxpayer. In sum, public opinion would not support professors trying to avoid a reform of the system. A second important driver of change was the “advocacy coalition” built by Ruberti, that was still alive and kicking, especially because of the activity of Luigi Berlinguer, a professor and a politician, minister for both Education and HE in the Prodi government (Martinotti 2008). But a third feature of the political contingency has to be considered, namely the fact that the Prodi government was presenting itself not just as the one that would change the country, but as the one that would “bring Italy into Europe” (Vaira 2003). This is where the close association between the European and the Italian HE reforms comes from, and we will come back to it below.

The academic context
As suggested above, the Ruberti reform was from many points of view obstructed by the academic oligarchy. However, it has to be kept in mind that the academic oligarchy itself was not a single and wholly consistent actor. In a rough way, one can distinguish at least two main political and cultural orientations in the Italian academic profession since the 70s (Miozzi 1993; Moscati 2001). On one side, there are the most traditionally-oriented academics, politically close to the Christian Democrats or to the small right-wing parties before 1994, and close to the coalition led by Berlusconi afterwards. On the other side there is a group of modernizing academics, more often internationally networked, and politically close to the left-wing parties before 1994 and to the center-left coalition afterwards. The first component is strongly embedded in the ancient faculties of Law and Medicine, while the second is stronger in the Natural and Social Sciences. Berlinguer, despite being himself a scholar in Ancient Law, was a key figure of the latter component. From the late 80s on, together with Ruberti himself, he had a key role in the organization of a series of meetings and conferences on HE and its reform, to some of which Prodi himself took part (Vaira 2001).
When Berlinguer became Minister, he wanted to keep intact this special relationship with the reform-minded academic component. In fact, while the Ruberti reform was designed outside the academy, and was thus felt by the latter as an external imposition, Berlinguer decided to involve the professors in the design of the reform. But to get them involved on a representative basis would mean relying on the professors’ and universities’ associations, that of course include a number of conservative professors, thus risk of long delays or of the kind of passive behaviour that had been detrimental to the implementation of the previous reform. So, instead of involving the academic oligarchy via a general representative, Berlinguer chose a criterion of expertise (Vaira 2003). He made a survey of the recent Italian research on HE, and chose 15 scholars of HE to be part of a commission, led by sociologist Guido Martinotti, with the task to propose a reform strategy. Moreover, he paved the way for such a reform by including universities in a more general law decentralizing the management of all state administrations and making it more flexible, in the spirit of the New Public Management theories. From a legal point of view, this law was the seminal one for the reform: since the parliament passed it, no further assembly vote was needed to approve the content of the HE reform. In fact, most of the following policy measures introducing the new curricula were mere governmental decrees (Perotti 2009, 73 ff.).

4.2. The initiative: changing degrees

The reform strategy and the search for consensus

Berlinguer explained his view of HE reform by means of the mosaic metaphor. He wanted to reform the system in a piecemeal fashion, with a flexible strategy minimizing the risk of a strong opposition, with respect to a system-wide reform (Vaira 2003). In this perspective, the Martinotti commission, who started its activity in early 1997, focussed its work on the structure of the curricula and of the degrees. In fact, as it was happening in other HES with a similar degree structure, as in the German one, the four-to-six years single-level traditional degree (the laurea), was judged to be too rigid an option in front of the expanding and differentiated demand. Moreover, the length of the programs was also thought to be responsible of the high dropout rate. So, there was some consensus on the fact that degrees had to be differentiated, and that shorter degrees had to be introduced. Of course the new shorter diploma universitario degree, introduced by the Ruberti reform, was meant to be a step in this direction, but it was seen as not a sufficient one. In fact, given the autonomy they had in the introduction of study programs, most of the universities and of the facoltà did not introduce this degree, with the notable exception of

---

7 Law 127 of May the 15th 1997, known in Italy as the Bassanini law, from the name of the minister of the Public Administration that signed it.
Engineering, Statistics and a few others. However, the new degree was strongly sponsored by Confindustria, the Italian employers’ association, whose role in policymaking had been quite strong after the collapse of the party system. In fact, just a few months after becoming Minister, Berlinguer had involved both Confindustria and the labour unions in the process, by getting them to sign a common advice on the necessity of a reform of the whole national educational system. In this sense, the curricula reform in Italy was an example of a neo-corporatist style of consensual policymaking based on concertation and social pacts among the government and the social partners (Regini and Colombo in print).

The Martinotti commission completed its workings by the end of 1997. Its proposal was not very different from the French model of that time, including three successive titles: a two-year one, a three-year one and then a full four-to-five years laurea. We shall see below that this proposal was rapidly changed during the following year. However, immediately a well-designed process of consensus-building was started by the Ministry: the report drafted by the commission was diffused via the Internet; the media were invested; both the conference of the rectors (Crui) and Confindustria organized conferences supporting the reform; a group of Oecd observers were called for consultancy, and so on. This strategy was designed to increase the legitimacy of the reform in the eyes of the media and the public opinion on one side and of the academics on the other. However, concerning the latter, doubts have been expressed as to whether the consensus-building strategy promoted by Berlinguer was actually succesful (Vaira 2003).

**Two turning points**

In fact, it was two further events that made the reform possible, producing the consensus that was needed in order to overcome the resistance of the academic oligarchy. Of course, as observed above, the latter’s power with respect to the government had decreased because of the renewal of the political personnel and the demise of the previous ruling parties, but it still had the possibility to stop or significantly relent the reform process. Both events happened in a few weeks of 1998: first, in May the Sorbonne declaration started what was later to be called the Bologna process, second, a law passed in July (law 210/1998) changed the regulation of recruitment, easing up internal careers of already tenured professors.

The first event is well-known, as its importance for the reform of Italian HE (Vaira 2001; 2003). The embedding of the Italian reform in an European dimension gave it more legitimacy, given the high prestige associated with Europe in Italy, on the part of both the élites and the electorate. In fact, some 10 years later Martinotti himself, in an essay discussing the reform, stated that observers criticizing the Italian reform hit the wrong target, as the reform was an European one, and the
Italian government just obeyed to an European pressure (Martinotti 2008: 56). Recent research shows this to be only partially true: the European reform was not started by any European body, but by a group of HE ministers (including the Italian one) looking for legitimacy for their own national reforms (De Witte 2006). We will come back to the European level below.

Second, the law 210/1998 gave the professors the opportunity for a mass advancement in the academic hierarchy, once more without any actual evaluation of their research or teaching performance. Figure 4 seen above shows in fact that since the 90s there had been a constant increase in the number of university professors with respect to the (also increasing) number of students. Figure 5 adds something to the picture, by showing since 1998 a change in the internal composition of the academic body, with a strong increase in the percentage of full professors with respect to the other two types of position.

In order to explain how this increase was possible, we have to briefly go through the details of the Italian academic labour market (for more detail see Moscati 2001 and Boffo et al. 2004). Before 1998, associate and full professors were recruited by means of a national and complex procedure. For each sub-discipline, every other year the positions required by all Italian universities were assigned by a single national commission, elected by all the professors of the sub-discipline. This procedure had worked in the earlier and smaller system, but under the pressure of expansion it rapidly became slow and messy. Commissions were not formed on a regular basis, as stated by the law, but in an erratic way, determined more by informal negotiations between the Ministry and the interested groups of professors than by the actual research or teaching needs of the universities. The new law substituted the national procedure with a local one: when a facoltà would need a position, given it had the money to finance it, a local selection committee would be elected (on a national basis), to choose among the candidates willing to cover the position. But what mattered was an annex to the law, that enabled selection committees to give a maximum of two “eligibilities” (idoneità), that is to nominate two candidates for the position. One of the two idonei would then get the local position, while the second could get a position, without any further selection, by any university willing to do so. In almost all of the cases, the second idoneo has then been called, without any further selection, by the very same facoltà he was working in. Moreover, the law

---

8 To our knowledge there are no figures on this topic, and more research is needed. According to anecdotal evidence (ie to what is heard among colleagues), the cases of idonei not having been nominated by their own facoltà are really scarce, and typically depend on a lack of financial resources. In our own discipline, Sociology, we are aware of just one case of a facoltà denying a full professor position to an associate who had become idoneo, despite having the resources to nominate him, because of his very low scientific productivity during the previous 15 years (in fact, he had not
provided that for two years the *idonei* would number three: this is where the steep increase of the percentage of full professor observed in figure 5 after 1998 comes from.

In sum, the law 210/1998 gave the academics the possibility of a massive self-promotion. For more detail, we refer to the few existing papers on this topic (Bianco 2002; Boffò et al. 2004). The authors of the latter study conclude their analysis stating that “this findings […] confirm the image of the Italian University as a frozen organization, where recruitment of new blood is still lagging and where endogamy reproduction of the professoriate seems to be the main personnel policy” (Boffò et al. 2004, p. 250). What is of importance from our point of view, is that this reform eased up the acceptance of the new structure of the curricula on the part of the academic oligarchy: in fact, the conference of the Italian university rectors (Crui) approved it and substantially supported also after the change of parliamentary majority in 2001 (see below). Of course, there is no *ex ante* causal link between the law 210/1998 and the reform of the curricula: we do not think that the ministry on purpose eased up careers in order to achieve the academic profession’s consent on a controversial reform. But *ex post* it seems to us quite clear that without the massive upgrading that followed the 1998 law the introduction of the new curricula would have been much more difficult. In fact, the actual process of implementing the reform at the local level was a negotiation among disciplines (ie academic groups) in which the creation of a course was a means to create a position to promote a professor (Vaira 2003).

The reform

The Sorbonne declaration, given on the 28th of May 1998, called for the institution of an European HE area, by adopting a common two-tiered structure of the study programs. It is known that the Sorbonne event was the initiative of the French minister of education Claude Allègre, as was the proposal of the two-tiered model (Witte 2006, 124 ff.). The minister’s purpose was to use the occasion of the 800th anniversary of the Sorbonne’s foundation to put forward an European declaration he could then use to strengthen the French reform he had designed. The keystone of the latter reform was the reduction of the three levels already existing in the French system to two levels, in a structure quite similar to the traditional two-tiered American model. A similar orientation was also emerging in Germany: aware of this, the French minister contacted his German and then his Italian colleagues in order to get a common declaration. The British minister was contacted only a few weeks before the day of the event. Of course, the two-level structure proposed by the Sorbonne declaration, later to become the core of the Bologna process, was different from the three-level one proposed by the Martinotti commission. Ironically, the latter was taking its

---

published anything at all, and had already received his associate professor position a few years before by getting an *idoneità*). The professor brought the *facoltà* before a court, but he lost the case.
inspiration from the very same French system that the French minister was willing to reform. Thus, the Italian minister did not hesitate in changing the content of the reform in order to exploit the opportunity coming from Europe, and despite the doubts expressed by some of the members of the Martinotti commission he opted for the new European model (Vaira 2003).

The Prodi government resigned at the end of 1998, making an important change to the political context of the university reform. The new executive, led by M. D’Alema (the leader of the former Communist party), was weaker and less inclined towards reform than the Prodi one, and Berlinguer was just the minister for Education. The new minister for HE, Ortenso Zecchino, despite not being a part of the network of reform-oriented academics we mentioned earlier, pushed the reform forward. However, he significantly altered the policy-making process implementing it and weakened some of its more innovative features. In particular, concerning the direct involvement of academics in the reform process, he abandoned the expertise criterion and came back to the representation one. But in this way more power was given to the conservative component of the academic oligarchy (Vaira 2003), and this diminished the space for an actual innovation of the curricula. According to the original design, single universities and *facoltà* would have been relatively free in designing the curricula, while the new rules actually implemented constrained heavily this freedom by requiring all the new degrees to belong to a set of classes (*classi di laurea*), each stating a number of compulsory courses to be taken to get the degree. The classes were defined by representative commissions where the possibility for innovation were weak, and the end result were that in most of the cases the new two-tier courses were just an adaptation of the previously existing one-tier ones.

A law approved in January officially introduced the Master title into the Italian HES. Since the 70s, many private business schools were already organizing Master courses, but their titles were not recognized by the state. The formal recognition of the title gave universities and *facoltà* the possibility to open up a number of Master courses, since the academic year 1999/2000, anticipating the reform of the curricula. In the meantime, the European process was going on steadily. Although there was no strong involvement in the process on the part of the Italian minister (Witte 2006, 131), its enlargement from the 4 country signing the Sorbonne declaration to the 29 ones signing the Bologna one in June 1999 strengthened the legitimacy of the national reform. In November 1999 a governmental decree (law 509/1999) reforming HE curricula and titles was finally published⁹. The decree formally introduced the new Italian HE titles, according to the two-tiered structure that by then was associated to the Bologna process. The new system was to be introduced on a compulsory basis by all Italian universities, starting from the 2000/2001 academic year.

---

⁹ No parliamentary approval was required, as it was just an execution of the Bassanini Law mentioned above.
A similar implementation, centralized and compulsive, makes a big difference with respect to other cases, for instance the German one, where the Bologna system was incrementally introduced in a decade’s time, and put the universities’ structures heavily under pressure. Moreover, it was a blatant violation of the principles of autonomy introduced by the Ruberti law. But there was a contingent political reason to it. The implementation of the new curricula structure had to be very fast, because since the fall of the Prodi government among the leaders of the center-left majority the opinion was widespread, that the following elections would be won by the center-right coalition. In fact, the latter had been brought back together by Berlusconi after the 1996 division, and it was now the turn of the center-left coalition to be divided, as the small Communist party Rifondazione had walked out. Given that the center-right parties, pushed by conservative academics, were strongly against the reform and had promised to cancel it once back in power, the center-left policymakers felt that the only way to defend it was to complete its introduction to the point that a cancellation would become impossible\(^{10}\). This is another point where the embeddedness of the reform in the contingencies of Italian politics can be clearly observed.

5. HE reform and the market

We come now to our second research question, concerning the overall orientation of the reform. According to the influential paper by Streeck and Thelen (2005: 30), in most of the cases institutional change in advanced political economies takes the shape of liberalization, that is “the steady expansion of market relations in areas that under the postwar settlement of democratic capitalism were reserved to collective decisionmaking”. We ask whether this is true for the Italian HE reform. In fact, many opponents to the reform would agree with Streeck and Thelen’s statement, since the main accusation moved to the reform was that it had opened to the market the doors of a realm that was not his own (see for instance Beccaria 2004; Ferraris 2009). Is this true?

In order to answer to this question, we use the results of a research led in the Milan metropolitan area a few years after the reform (Ballarino and Regini 2005). Because of the lack of national-level evidence, we rely on this area, in the region of Lombardy, in Northern Italy. Milan does not have the ancient academic tradition of other Northern Italian towns as Bologna and Padua, but since the 19th century a strong university system was developed, now including seven universities, who

\(^{10}\) The role of the facoltà of Law was very important in the center-right adopting this stance. In fact, in 2004 the new Berlusconi government de facto abolished the reform for law studies. Another very powerful and conservative discipline, Medicine, had been partially exempted since its very outset. In fact, when in 2001 the center-right coalition led by Berlusconi came back to power, the parallel reform of compulsory education designed by Berlinguer was abolished before being implemented.
altogether number about 1/10 of Italian undergraduate students\textsuperscript{11}. Moreover, given the central role that Milan has for the Italian economy as a whole, we can assume that pressures towards liberalization should be stronger here than elsewhere, where the economy is weaker and more relying on public expenditure and/or relatively mature industries.

As a part of a research on the role of economic actors in HE in the Milan area, in 2003/2004 we studied 26 cases of newly introduced study programs, in whose foundation a strong involvement of external actors could be found. The cases were selected on this variable, so that “traditional” programs, designed and managed only by academics, were not included in the research design. Thus, we had a sample of cases where, according to the privatization hypothesis, the demise of collective decisionmaking with respect to market relations should have been at its strongest\textsuperscript{12}. The cases were studied from the point of view of the conception, the design and the management of the programs, by means of interviews with the relevant actors, both internal and external to the academy. When possible, informations about the occupational outcomes of the students after graduation were also collected. Given the lack of space, we cannot enter the details of our empirical work\textsuperscript{13}, and we will go straight to its conclusions, arranged according the three operative steps mentioned above, that are to be found in each course: conception, design and management.

First, in a slight majority of the cases (14/26) the conception of the program was internal to the academy, but embedded in ongoing external relations of professors or in the partnership committees existing in many universities and facoltà. When the conception was external, it came in all cases from non profit actors, be it professional or employers’ association, or public agencies of various kind. The acceptance of the external proposals on the part of the universities were conditional on two factors: first, the financial situation (depending in turn on the government’s provisions); second, the academic power of the professors promoting the new program. Of course the first can be called a market mechanisms, as it is based on scarcity of resources, but it is a mechanism that is activated by an administrative decision concerning university funding. The second is a typical mechanism involving conflict over power in an organization ruled by a formally egalitarian oligarchy, as is the university (Clark 1983).

Second, the design of the new programs involved in most of the cases (20/26) a cooperation between academics and external actors. The cooperation took different shapes: in some cases it was an informal one, in some it was institutionalized in committees or other common bodies. But what

\textsuperscript{11} To give an idea, in 2004/5 more than 34.000 students enrolled in the undergraduate programs of the seven university we are considering (Ballarino 2006a). The public universities are: Università di Milano; Università di Milano-Bicocca and Politecnico di Milano, the private are Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (confessional), Università commerciale Luigi Bocconi, Istituto Universitario di Lingue Moderne and Università Vita e salute San Raffaele (not confessional).

\textsuperscript{12} It has to be remembered that the study did not include the Business Schools.

\textsuperscript{13} They are available in chapter 6 of Ballarino and Regini (2005).
is important is that only in a minority of cases the design process took the shape of a kind of “market” process, where the academic’s expertise was “bought” by the external actors in order to persecute their own aims (usually in terms of prestige of their institution). When, conversely, the cooperation is a stable one, the relation takes a shape that is not a market one, at least in the sense of neoclassical microeconomic theory. The level of formalization does not make a big difference from this point of view. Of course one can talk about markets in a much broader and more Weberian sense, by including in the concept type of social relations where things other than money, or even immaterial, are exchanged (see Collins 1988; Zelizer 1994; Beckert 2009), but this is not what the current idea of liberalization, used by Streeck and Thelen, means.

Third, the management of the programs was only in one case delegated in whole to the external actors, and even in this case, after the first year the organization changed, in order to involve more the university administration. In fact, the external actor (a non profit pension fund for civil servants) lacked the specific administrative expertise needed to manage an university program. Generally, this was the main reason why academic personnel were in charge of most of the management of the programs. However, the involvement of external actors typically included the provision of teachers, stages and employment opportunities for the students after graduation. Moreover, in all cases where informations on the occupational outcomes were available, it was possible to observe a positive association between the involvement of the external actors and the occupational outcomes of the students. But this is a general mechanism, the very same one on which the institutional relations between schools and labour markets are based in countries such as Germany and Japan. It is a social mechanism that the relevant literature typically contrasts with the market mechanism sensu microeconomic theory, as it involves heavy constraints on rational and self-interested action (Rosenbaum and Kariya 1989; Soskice 1994).

6. Discussion and conclusions

We are now in the position to give an answer to the two research question motivating this paper, and to briefly discuss them. Our first question was on the conditions that made the Bologna reform possible in an HES such as the Italian one, where the prevailing type of changes had previously been the drift, that is the absence of any intentional institutional change in front of changing external conditions, or attempts at conversion, that is the development of old institutions towards new purposes, but with few actual results.

In fact, according to our reconstruction it was a series of contingent events that weakened the balance of powers governing Italian HE and made institutional change possible. First, the political
context was very important. In 1996, for the first time in almost half a century, the opposition won the national parliamentary elections, in a political system heavily renewed after the demise of the two previously ruling parties and the emergence of new ones. This renewal weakened the strong networks that traditionally linked Italian academics and politicians, that had guaranteed the former the maintenance of their collective power on universities even in a context of strong expansion and increased socio-economic responsibility of HE. Moreover, the renewal created the conditions for the political entrepreneurship of minister Berlinguer to emerge (in contrast to what happened to previous similarly-minded attempts such as Ruberti’s one), and the climate of social partnership cultivated by the new government guaranteed the support of the main interests associations.

Second, the European dimension of the process gave to the reform more legitimacy with respect to the public opinion, the mass media and the collective actors relevant for policymaking. Italians are generally very pro-Europe, especially when they are educated. The importance of the European legitimacy is also clear from the point of view of the reform strategies: when the design of the European reform turned out to be different from the Italian one, the latter was rapidly abandoned in favour of the former. Of course this point also reveals a weakness in the reform itself, making it clear that the role of expertise based on empirical research in the whole process was relatively low. This is something that has been also observed for the Bologna process at the European level, where the empirical and the normative level were often confused (Witte 2006).

Third, the consent of the academic oligarchy to the Bologna process was guaranteed by a massive process of internal promotion made possible by a reform of the career advancement rules that substantially relaxed the selection procedures and upgraded the status of most of the Italian professors. It has to be underlined that this is an ex-post association. The reform of recruitment was not a part of the curricula reform, and we have seen that it was the result of a long series of conflicts around university recruitment and careers, started with the strong expansion of the 60s. But it perfectly complemented the reform of curricula, as the newly promoted professors could teach the newly created courses. Of course, this observation testifies as to the persistent power of the academic oligarchy in Italian HE. Our further research on the Bologna process in Italy will check whether it was all about the reform of the curricula or if it did really change the functioning of the system. However, just entering a discussion about the outcomes of the process requires more space than what is available here.

Our second research question, directly inspired by Streeck and Thelen’s (2005) work, asked whether the Bologna process, as one of institutional change in Italian HE, can be defined as a process of liberalisation. According to our evidence, this is not the case. We studied a sample of particularly innovative new courses whose creation was made possible by the reform of the
curricula, and we observed that the market was in no way the dominant mode of regulation of the newly established relations among HE institutions and external actors. In fact, in many cases, Bologna became an important “contingent opportunity” for facing the relative shrinkage in public funds and the increasing of competition for them and for students (Ballarino and Regini 2005). But these new relations were only in a minority of cases strictly market-based, while in most of the cases they took the typical shape of institutional networks, more or less formalised, between the professors and the external actors involved. From this point of view, our findings go against Streeck and Thelen’s statement that liberalisation is the “natural” outcome of institutional incremental change in advanced political economies. It has to be added that similar findings emerged from a comparative project on changing relations between HES and the economy in six European countries (Regini, in print), giving robustness to our critique of the “liberalisation” hypothesis.

Finally, from a methodological point of view, we have verified the usefulness of Streeck and Thelen’s (2005) typology of institutional change as a descriptive tool: in fact, the processes we observed were easily classified on its five type. But we have also seen that in order to have a detailed description of a process of institutional change, and a fortiori to get a causal explanation thereof, one has to take into consideration the relevant actors and their balance of power. In fact, the analytical development of the typology of institutional change should systematically link it to some kind of typology of institutional actors and of their possible behaviours and interactions.
References


Bratti, M., Checchi, D., de Blasio, G (2008), Does the Expansion of Higher Education Increase the Equality of Educational Opportunities? Evidence from Italy, research paper, Bonn: IZA DP 3361.


Zelizer, V. (1994),
**Tables and graphs**

Table 1. Five types of incremental institutional change, according to Streck and Thelen (2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>name</th>
<th>description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Displacement</td>
<td>Displacement of dominant with existing but dormant institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layering</td>
<td>Institutional layering and subsequent differential growth of different layers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drift</td>
<td>Tolerated drift of institutions away from social reality and subsequent weakening of institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversion</td>
<td>Slow conversion of existing institutions towards new purposes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exhaustion</td>
<td>Institutional crisis because of systemic incompatibility and exhaustion of resources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Evolution of the HE supply, 1985-2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>universities</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cities with a university head office</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cities with a university site</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>facoltà</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>412</td>
<td>474</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>593*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-6 year degrees</td>
<td>778</td>
<td>898</td>
<td>988</td>
<td>1.321</td>
<td>5.591</td>
<td>5.464</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3 year degrees</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>388</td>
<td>956</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


* the figures refer to academic year 2007/2008.
Figure 1. University enrollments as percentage of age-specific population and higher secondary graduates, 1960-2007

Source: CNVSU (2008); (2009).

Figure 2. University expansion, 1960-2007

Source: CNVSU (2008); (2009).
Figure 3. University dropouts, in % of the enrolled

Source: ILFI 1997-1999 (adapted from Ballarino, Bison and Schadee 2007).

Fig. 4. University tenured teaching personnel

Source: up to 1993 CNVSU (2005); since 1997 MIUR (www.miur.it). Figures for teachers are at December 31st for each year, for students’ at January 31st.
Figure 5. Teaching personnel by type of position, 1998-2009