

Implementation of Bologna process in Italy

Italian Universities have a long and distinguished history, from the foundation of the first European Universities in Bologna and in Padua in the eleventh century, and the foundation of Rome University, established by Pope Bonifacius VIII in 1303.

The Bologna Declaration of 1999 is a key document in the history of European community.

Following the “Bologna process” aimed at the development of an integrated and coherent European Higher Education Area (EHEA), several European countries have undertaken reforms of the University system and to promote labour mobility among member countries, involved an harmonisation of the structure of University programmes, as well as the introduction of a credit system to facilitate mutual recognition of degrees. This process had different implications across countries: for some countries the reform simply meant a mild rescheduling of the existing higher education programme structure, while in others it involved a major restructuring of the whole university system, changing both the structure and duration of study programmes.

The Bologna Declaration marks a turning point in the development of European higher education.

- It was signed by 29 countries ;
- It is a commitment freely taken by each signatory country and is not a reform imposed upon national governments or higher education institutions. So, it is not a path towards the “standardisation” or “uniformisation” of European higher education. The fundamental principles of autonomy and diversity are respected and reflects a search for a common European answer to common European problems.

The Bologna Declaration is an action programme based on a set of specified objectives:

So, we are engaged in co-ordinating our policies to reach in the short term the following objectives, which we consider to be of primary relevance in order to establish the European area of higher education and to promote the European system of higher education world-wide:

- Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, also through the implementation of the Diploma Supplement, in order to promote European citizens employability and the international competitiveness of the European higher education system;
- Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles.
- Establishment of a system of credits - such as in the ECTS system- as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility. Credits could also be acquired in non-higher education contexts, including lifelong learning, provided they are recognised by the receiving universities concerned;
- Promotion of mobility by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement with particular attention to:
 - for students, access to study and training opportunities and to related services;
 - -for teachers, researchers and administrative staff, recognition and valorisation of periods spent in a European context researching, teaching and training, without prejudicing their statutory rights;
- Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies;
- Promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education, particularly with regards to curricular development, inter-institutional co-operation, mobility schemes and integrated programmes of study, training and research.

The “Bologna process” and the Italian reform of university studies

Main points

- 1) Italian system of tertiary education is university-based
- 2) after secondary school, students can choose:
to enrol into university; to go into the labour market; both.

3) - “legal” value of university degrees: it certifies the cultural and professional qualification achieved and is the same across all higher education institutions whose status is recognised by the State

- a university degree also awards the honorific title of “*doctor in ...*”, which (still) conveys an important status in Italian social organization.

Both these aspects of the Italian university system are likely to reinforce a “credential” value of the degree, as opposed to a “market” value (i.e. based on the real value of the qualification obtained and the scientific prestige of the higher education institution involved).

The Italian reform of university studies: from a single four/five year degree to a two-tier system

The reform of the Italian university system has developed along two main routes.

a major change in the structure of degrees

introducing a two-tier structure in which students can enrol into:

a first three-year cycle (*Laurea breve*)

a second two-year degree (*Laurea magistralis*, the master level).

with the purpose of shortening the duration of studies required for obtaining a university degree.

These aspects of the reform have stimulated much controversy between:

those (favourable) who interpreted the shortening of the first cycle as a mean to increase enrolment, reduce drop-out rates, improve equality of opportunities for access to university and, finally, to allow a faster way to enter the labour market;

those (against) who remained sceptical both about the academic contents of a shorter cycle and the market value of 3-years degrees in the new system.

The change of university curricula brought to

- a considerable increase in the number of fields student could choose and

- a reduction in the number of exams and in the complexity of contents.

These features replaced the old system characterized by a binary single-tier structure, in which students could enrol into either

- ‘long’ (four-to-five year, *Laurea*) or

- ‘short’ (two years, *Diploma universitario*)

BUT: in 1998 only 11 percent opted for the two year degrees,

while long courses could be considered by far the most relevant form of university education.

Among the reasons to motivate the need to reform the Italian university system those most often reported are:

- low enrolment rates;

- very high drop-out rates;

- low number of graduates (*the lowest among the OECD countries: only 40 percent in 2000*)

- excessive actual length of university studies.

In order to gain a better understanding of the factors influencing students’ decisions to enrol in university, it is also important to consider some aspects:

- The relevance of the credential aspect of university education is consistent with the results of Brunello and Cappellari (2008) who find that while there is substantial heterogeneity in labour market returns across academic institutions, students do not seem to choose university according to these returns, but rather tend to select universities that are close to the parental home.

- education, and its interactions with college enrolment decisions.

- Specifically, after compulsory education students are given the choice to go in a “generalist” schooling track (*Liceo*) which naturally leads to university studies and is predominantly chosen by students with higher family background.

- Alternatively students may opt for a more labour market oriented schooling track (*Istituti tecnici e professionali*) where students from lower family background are over represented.

- The lack of any vocational training tracks at the tertiary education level in Italy has contributed to reinforce this diversion effect (see Checchi and Flabbi, 2006)

In 2001 the reform introduced with Law 509/1999 reached its implementation stage, mostly to put into practice the main features of “*Bologna agreement*”, but also to deal with the problems of the old system – i.e. increase tertiary enrolment and the number of graduates.

The routes through which the reform is likely to have had an impact on human capital investments and students’ performance are

- the reduction in the length of studies (ie. 1-year shortening of the legal duration to get a first cycle degree) and
- the reduction in the number of exams (and possibly their complexity), both reducing the costs of investing in tertiary education .

In other words, the various features of the reform are expected to have had an effect on

- the number as well as
- the characteristics of the individuals who made their higher education choice under the new system.

In particular, the larger effects on enrolment rates are likely to come from individuals that were somehow constrained in the old system

Concluding remarks

The “Bologna process”, aimed at the development of a common structure within higher education in European countries, is changing the contour of university studies – both in terms of structure and duration of study programmes – as well as the economic incentives to go to college.

Italy is an interesting example, since the implementation of the reform implied a major restructuring of the existing system unanticipated by students and determined a significant change in college enrolment rates.

While for some students, the effect of the reform simply meant a re-scheduling of their progression through the education system, for a sizeable group of student the reform seems to offer better opportunity to attend higher education.

A recent study demonstrated that the reform significantly increased the probability of going to college and that this effect is stronger for the ‘marginal’ students, i.e. individuals with good schooling ability but unfavourable family background. Overall, results are consistent with an equalising effect of the reform on opportunities in the access to higher education.

It will be important to monitor the future developments of college enrolment and drop out, once more data will become available.

References

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