

How is changing the university system in Italy

At the end of 2010, the Italian Parliament approved a law proposed by the Government, which goes to a very significant change in the university system of our country. This is the most important reform in recent decades. In the nineties, in fact, thanks to a special law, the Italian universities had fully implemented the autonomy conferred by the Constitution by adopting its own statutes and regulations and by the possibility of using state funding on the basis of its own programming human and material resources.

After twenty years, therefore, the state is back on the university system, with the aim of enhancing the quality of teaching and research and, at the same time, increase the efficiency of universities in the use of allocated resources.

The main areas of intervention include:

- The level of internal governance and the accounting system of universities
- The recruitment of teachers
- The evaluation system of teaching, research and use of resources.

The universities, therefore, should adopt an internal structure of government leaner, more efficient and more open to the needs of the productive forces of the country. As an example, the Boards of Directors shall be composed of few members (maximum eleven) but highly qualified and accountable for all decisions vital for universities (e.g. resource allocation, activation of courses). Some members of the board should be external, the President of the board can be chosen among the members as an alternative to the Chancellor of the university.

An important change is in order the role of the head of administration. The new law provide for setting the general manager at the same level of the other bodies. Besides the role outlined by the law is focused on management skills, more than the actual role. The head of administration, before the new law was focused on legal and relating to bureaucracy.

The law, moreover, has also intervened on the term of office of the Chancellor that all state universities, except in some specific cases, cannot exceed six years.

The system of recruitment of teachers has also changed. We move from a system of competitive local vacancies for each university, into a national certification system with the centralization of the selection board appointed each year for each scientific field.

Furthermore, lecturers and research fellows can be recruited by universities only for temporary contracts (maximum six years) and only after passing a national selection in the related scientific field, can remain at university as professor.

The evaluation of institutional activities had been introduced with the implementation of autonomy, twenty years ago. The recent reform has strengthened the role of the evaluation system and this important task entrusted to an independent agency (ANVUR).

Another important aim of this law is to improve the performance of the Italian universities on worldwide scale.

Since several months all the Italian Universities are engaged in revising their statutes and main regulations. The Ministry of Higher Education, in turn, is engaged both in the analysis of the statutes adopted by each single University - which must approve in order to become effective, and the production of several measures in accordance with law reform.

This is thus a very important and so challenging moment for all those working in the field. Moreover, this change is accompanied by a severe cut in public funding, which, over the last three years, have been cut, more or less, 8% (eight per cent).

From this short description we can infer that:

1. change in Italian universities did not come from inside but was dictated by state law. This is a result of a long legal debate developed over the past decade both within academia and industry alike. The need to adapt the university system to the needs of a society that has to deal with open and global knowledge has led some to react differently than others. The change, however, as we have said, came from outside.
2. the government expects from the Italian reform law a real improvement of resource management, cost control, recruitment of human resources and consequently improvements in the quality of teaching, research and then the university preparedness of Italian citizens
3. However, although with a more limited degree of autonomy than before the entry into force of the current law, the translation of the principles, rules and guidelines into concrete actions and behavior is up to individual universities and to those who compose it. It will take at least ten years to know the real impact of these changes on the university system and whether the desired improvements will be made. Everything will depend on how many universities have considered this request for change as an opportunity.

As always, the challenge is to improve quality and reduce costs, this is the reason why the law provides for a new accounting system that registers earnings and costs of the activities and not only incomes and expenditures.

The new model of governance, according to the law, leads to integration and collaboration among universities. Some universities are already making agreements in order to arrange services and set up common activities with the goal to improve the teaching quality and research and, at the same time, to share the costs.

Antonella Bianconi