

ACCREDITATION IN THE ITALIAN UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

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1. The National System of Higher Education in Italy

1.1 Size of the system

Italian higher education is organised in a binary system and articulated in the two following sectors:

- university education
- non-university education

The university sector consists of 77 institutions subdivided into two main categories:

- State universities (63 institutions)
- non-State universities legally recognized by the competent State authority (14 institutions).

The university population currently amounts to 1,800,000 individuals.

The non-university sector covers:

- higher education institutions for music, dance, figurative and applied arts (fine art academies, national academies for dance and drama, national school for cinema, music conservatories, higher institutes for applied arts);
- higher integrated technical education and training (IFTS programmes);
- 2nd level professional programmes under the responsibility of the Regions;
- higher education for language mediators (interpreters and translators).

1.2. Outcomes of the Bologna Declaration: reforms of higher education cycles and qualifications

The 1999 reform had the main purpose to endow all H. Ed. institutions -and first of all universities- with a greater teaching autonomy, unprecedented in the Italian educational tradition.

With reference to the university sector, the 1999 reform has been fully implemented. Nowadays universities autonomously define the teaching rules of their degree programmes in their institutional teaching regulations (*Regolamento Didattico di Ateneo-RDA*); in particular, the RDA determines the name and the educational objectives of each degree programme, the general framework of the teaching activities to be included in the curriculum, the number of credits to be attributed to each teaching activity, and the modality of the final degree examination.

In conformity to the objectives of the Bologna Declaration, the 1999 university reform has also defined the new architecture of the system. Italian university studies are now organised on 3 cycles.

The first cycle (undergraduate studies) consists of just one typology of degree programmes, called *Corsi di Laurea* (CL), aimed at providing undergraduate students with an adequate command of general scientific methods and contents as well as specific professional skills. General access requirement is the Italian school leaving qualification, awarded on passing the relevant state examinations, after completion of 13 years of global schooling; also foreign comparable qualifications may be accepted. Admission to individual degree programmes may be subject to specific course requirements. First degree programmes last 3 years. The 1st degree (*Laurea-L*) is awarded to undergraduates who have earned 180 credits.

The second cycle (graduate studies) includes 3 typologies of degree programmes: *Corsi di Laurea Specialistica-CLS*; *Corsi di Specializzazione di 1° livello-CS1*; *Corsi di Master Universitario di 1° livello-CMU1*.

- CLS are aimed at providing graduates with an advanced level of education for the exercise of a highly qualified professional activity in specific areas. Access to CLS is by the Italian 1st degree (L) or a foreign comparable qualification; length is 2 years. The final degree, *Laurea Specialistica-LS* (2nd degree), is awarded to graduates who have earned a global amount of 300 credits, including those of the 1st degree that have been recognised for access to the CLS (max. 180); besides, the drawing up of an original dissertation is also compulsory. A limited number of CLS regulated by specific EU directives (CLS in dentistry, human medicine, veterinary medicine) share the following different features: educational requirement for access is the Italian school leaving diploma or a foreign comparable qualification; admission is always subject to entrance exams; course length is 5 years, except for human medicine which takes 6 years.

- CS1 are devised to provide the knowledge and abilities needed for the practice of a few specialized or highly qualifying professions (e.g. teaching, legal professions); they may be established exclusively in application of specific Italian laws or EU directives. Access is by a *Laurea* (1st degree) or a foreign comparable degree; admission is subject to the passing of a competitive examination; course length varies between 2 and 3 years. The final degree, called *Diploma di Specializzazione di 1° livello-DS1* (1st level specialisation degree) is conferred to graduates who have earned 300-360 credits globally, including those of the 1st degree that have been recognised for access to the CS1.

- CMU1 are advanced scientific programmes or continuing education courses open to the holders of a *Laurea-L* or a foreign comparable degree; admission may be subject to additional conditions. Course length is min. 1 year. The degree as *Master Universitario di 1° livello-MU1* (1st level university master) is awarded to graduates who have earned 60 credits at least.

Third cycle degree courses (postgraduate studies) consist of *Corsi di Dottorato di Ricerca-CDR* (research doctorate programmes); *Corsi di Specializzazione di 2° livello-CS2* (2nd level specialisation programmes); *Corsi di Master Universitario di 2° livello-CMU2* (2nd level university master programmes).

- CDR aim at training postgraduates for very advanced scientific research or for professional appointments of the highest consequence; they envisage the use of suitable teaching methodologies such as updated technologies, study periods abroad, stages in specialistic research centres. Access is by an Italian 2nd degree (LS) or a foreign comparable degree; admission is subject to the passing of very competitive exams; official length is min. 3 years; the drawing up of an original dissertation is necessary for the awarding of the 3rd degree called *Dottorato di Ricerca-DR* (research doctorate).

- CS2 are devised to provide postgraduates with knowledge and abilities as requested in the practice of highly qualifying, specialized professions (e.g. medical specialities); they may be established exclusively in application of specific Italian laws or EU directives. Access is by an LS (2nd degree) or a foreign comparable degree; admission is subject to the passing of a competitive examination; course length is normally 1 year, except for all CS2 of the health sector which may take up to max. 5 years.

- CMU2 are advanced scientific programmes or continuing education courses open to the holders of an LS or of a foreign comparable degree; admission may be subject to additional conditions. Studies take min. 1 year. The degree (*Master Universitario di 2° livello-MU2*) is awarded to postgraduates who have earned min. 60 credits.

Finally, the reform included the adoption of the Diploma Supplement (DS) and of a national credit system based on the ECTS. Therefore, Italian degree programmes are now structured in credits (CFU = *crediti formativi universitari*); a university credit corresponds to 25 hours of work per student, time for personal study included. The average annual workload of a full time student is conventionally fixed at 60 credits.

Scheme of the University System

degree-courses <i>corsi di studio</i>	degrees <i>titoli accademici</i>	Credits earned CFU	years anni
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1st cycle – undergraduate studies/students <i>1° ciclo</i>

<i>Laurea degree course Corso di Laurea –CL</i>	<i>1st degree / Laurea degree Laurea-L</i>	180	3
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2nd cycle – graduate studies/students <i>2° ciclo</i>

<i>2nd (Laurea) degree course Corso di Laurea Specialistica- CLS</i>	<i>2nd degree (2nd Laurea) Laurea Specialistica- LS</i>	120	2
<i>1st (level) Specialisation degree course Corso di Specializzazione di 1° livello-CS1</i>	<i>1st (level) Specialisation degree Diploma di Specializzazione di 1° livello-DS1</i>	120 - 180	2 - 3
<i>1st (level) University Master degree course Corso di Master Universitario di 1° livello-CMU1</i>	<i>1st (level) University Master degree Master Universitario di 1° livello -MU1</i>	60+	1+

3rd cycle – postgraduate studies/students <i>3° ciclo</i>

<i>Research Doctorate programme Corso di Dottorato di Ricerca- CDR</i>	<i>Research Doctorate degree Dottorato di Ricerca-DR</i>		3+
<i>2nd (level) Specialisation degree course Corso di Specializzazione di 2° livello-CS2</i>	<i>2nd (level) Specialisation degree Diploma di Specializzazione di 2° livello-DS2</i>	60 - 300	1 - 5
<i>2nd (level) University Master degree course Corso di Master Universitario di 2° livello-CMU2</i>	<i>2nd (level) University Master degree Master Universitario di 2° livello -MU2</i>	60+	1+

1.3. Governance of the university system: from centralization to autonomy

In the last decade some substantial developments have occurred in terms of distribution of powers in the management of university education.

- The first important step towards decentralization was made in 1989: the Ministry for Universities and Scientific and Technological Research (MURST) was established as a separate entity from the Ministry of Education with a view to further promote the two sectors of university education and scientific research by attributing their coordination to the same specific authority. One of the purposes of this reform was to separate the responsibility for the decisions in matters of university policy, entrusted to MURST, from their actual management, a task attributed to individual universities and research bodies. Another objective was the implementation of university autonomy. At the end of this reform process, fulfilled with positive results, MURST merged once again with the Ministry of Education building up just one entity, i.e. the present Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR).
- A second significant development was a wide transfer of powers from the central government to individual universities. Full institutional autonomy was gradually achieved through a series of legislative acts: statutory and operational autonomy was sanctioned by law 168 of 1989, financial autonomy by law 537 of 1993, autonomy for the recruitment of the teaching staff by law 210 of 1998, and finally teaching autonomy by ministerial decree 509 of 1999.
- A third important change consisted in the transfer of wide normative and regulation powers from Parliament to the Government by means of provisions leading to deregulation, power delegation, decentralization of functions, administrative simplification.
- The fourth important modification took place in the organs representing the different components of the academic community as well as in the advisory bodies assisting the Minister in matters of university policy: most of them were reformed or newly established (e.g. National University Council, Italian University Rectors' Conference, National Council of University Students, National Committee for the Evaluation of the University System).

As to the management of the system, the most significant innovation has undoubtedly been the gradual decentralization of competences from the central government to individual institutions. Said process has produced the shift from a type of management based on a strong ministerial authority to a new managerial model in which the central government has gradually yielded up to universities all operational powers, even if retaining a few financing and policy responsibilities; universities have increased their powers in relation to the management of operational processes, and have achieved full autonomy (statutory, financial, didactic, staff recruiting).

2. Accreditation, approval and evaluation

2.1. Why programme accreditation?

In Italy the system of accreditation of university degree programmes started in 2001. On the one side, universities had just designed the new degree programmes and were applying to the State for funding. On the other side, in order to allocate funds efficaciously the Ministry of Education (MIUR) requested the cooperation of the National Committee for the evaluation of the university system (CNVSU); the Committee should elaborate a system of programme accreditation so that only those degree programmes that could successfully go through the whole process would benefit of the ministerial financial support.

As a consequence, two distinct but correlated procedures were put simultaneously into being:

- the first concerning the formal approval of new university curricula (see paragraph 2.3);
- the other concerning the accreditation of the programmes themselves, after checking if they actually met the minimum quality standards (see paragraph 2.4).

2.2. Accreditation of degree programmes: CNVSU's proposal

In its proposal CNVSU adopted the definition of accreditation included in the 2001 CRE report: **"Accreditation is a formal, published statement regarding the quality of an institution or a programme, following a cyclical evaluation based on agreed standards"**.

If we analyze that definition, the essential feature of accreditation is evidently the necessity to pre-determine the requirements unanimously regarded as indispensable ("agreed standards") to guarantee the desirable quality levels. To such an end it is useful to adopt a system of "cyclical evaluation" based on quantifiable, verifiable and representative indicators. Eventually, the publication of the evaluation outcomes ("published statement") aims to provide an explicit, substantial -and not purely formal- acknowledgement of the qualitative levels ascertained.

The objectives of the Italian system of programme accreditation have been determined as follows:

- reduce autoreferential elements as well as the merely bureaucratic respect of the formal requirements typical of the Italian system centred on the legal validity of study qualifications;
- create a system of clear information and transparent, verifiable guarantees on the qualitative standards of individual study programmes; this objective produces a higher level of rationality in the choices made by those subjects that apply to the

university system from the outside as interested actors: the students and their families who have to decide how and where to invest in education as well as companies, industries and bodies, both private and public, in demand of graduates.

- contribute to a competitive system that may operate fairly within a university context characterized by a wide and diversified educational offer; actually, this fact could cause the risk of the distribution of misleading information on very different programmes bearing the same denomination or on very similar courses with different names;
- promote within individual institutions a constant process for quality improvement by awakening all the actors involved to the necessity to verify regularly the consistency among pre-determined objectives, allocated resources, organizational commitment, educational outcomes.

CNVSU's working plan provided for two subsequent implementation stages:

- a starting phase -pre-accreditation- in which the minimum standards in terms of resources are determined that are indispensable for an institution to be able to offer sound university education in the different classes of degree programmes, and, within individual classes, in each programme (number of teachers, their qualification, number and sizes of classrooms, libraries, laboratories, etc.);
- a second phase in which accreditation has also to consider the minimum standards in terms of the qualitative characteristics of the education process and of its final outcome in terms of graduates and postgraduates.

2.3. The approval of degree programmes

The procedure for the approval of university degree programmes is articulated in the 4 stages outlined here below.

Stage 1 - Drawing up of university teaching regulations (RDA)

Individual institutions lay down the rules for the teaching organization of their degree courses in the so-called *Regolamenti Didattici di Ateneo* (RDAs). University teaching regulations and their amendments are issued by rectoral decree; said decree also states the date of the entering into force of the rules of the programme(s) concerned.

Each RDA determines:

- the names and objectives of all the degree programmes offered by the university concerned, it also gives the numbers and definitions of the respective classes;
- the general framework of the educational activities to be included in the curricula;
- the credit number to be attributed to each educational activity;
- the main features of the final examinations to be passed for the awarding of the different degrees.

In conformity with the respective university statutes, RDAs also regulate the organizational aspects of the teaching work common to all degree programmes; in particular they define:

- objectives, times and modalities for the competent teaching structures to jointly provide for the planning, coordination and control of the outcomes of the different educational activities;
- the procedures to entrust university teachers and researchers with annual teaching duties, including integrative activities, guidance and tutoring;
- the procedures concerning the organization of tests, subject exams, the final degree examination;
- modalities for the assessment of students' performance; the grading scales in use are 18-30 (subject exams) and 66-110 (degree examination); the highest grades (30 and 110 respectively) may be followed by a note of special distinction (*lode*);
- the evaluation of the initial education of the students to be admitted to 1st and 2nd cycle degree programmes (CL and CLS respectively);
- the organization of educational activities propaedeutic to the evaluation of the initial education of students to be admitted to CL as well as those related to additional educational obligations;
- the setting up of a university service for the coordination of all guidance activities to be carried out in cooperation with upper secondary schools, and of a tutorial service for all students in each degree programme;
- the introduction of specific organizational modalities for the teaching activities devised for part-time students;
- the ways to single out the university structure or person taking up the responsibility of each educational activity;
- the evaluation of the quality of all activities;
- the ways to make both procedures and decisions public;
- the rules for the awarding of joint degrees.

The RDAs also determine the modalities according to which individual institutions must issue , the so-called "diploma supplement", an explicative document to be added to each degree: in conformity to similar models adopted by most European countries, said document registers the main information on the specific curriculum completed by that student in order to obtain that degree.

Stage 2 - Teaching regulations of degree programmes (RDC)

The teaching regulations of each degree programme (*Regolamento Didattico di Corso di studio-RDC*) are determined by the competent teaching structure in compliance to the RDA as well as in the respect of teaching freedom and of teachers' and students' rights and duties. Individual RDCs define the organizational elements of the respective degree programmes.

In particular, each RDC determines:

- the list of curricular subjects with the subject areas of reference; it also specifies all other educational activities and, if that is the case, the modular structure of certain subjects;
- specific educational objectives, credits, and those subjects or other educational activities that may be propaedeutic;
- curricula offered to students; also the rules are given for students to submit their individual study plans, if necessary;
- the typology of available teaching/learning activities, distance tuition included, of subject exams, and other ways to assess students' performance;

- provisions regulating attendance, when compulsory.

Stage 3 - Consultations and approvals

The proposal for the setting up of a new programme must be accompanied by the motivated opinions of a few advisory bodies.

- University evaluation unit

The Unit gives its opinion on available resources and their congruency with the objectives of the programme.

- Regional coordinating committee (CRC)

The CRC is made up of the rectors of the universities located in the same Region, the president of the regional council and a representative of the students. Besides giving its advice on the proposals for new programmes, the CRC coordinates the initiatives in such matters as the planning of the access to university studies, student guidance and welfare services, advanced professional education, permanent and recurrent education, exploitation of university facilities. Moreover, the CRC coordinates the relations of the university system with the school system, the education institutions of the Region and the economic and social representatives of that territory.

- Employers

Also the employers' advice is compulsory. Therefore universities must consult the local organizations representing industries, services and the professions. The consultation is meant to check the congruency of the educational proposals with the economic needs of the regional territory and the occupational opportunities that may be realistically offered to future graduates.

- National university council (CUN)

CUN has to check the proposals with reference to the correspondence between the curricular content determined as compulsory by the decrees that have approved the various degree classes and the teaching activities provided for by the RDA (university teaching regulations). The outcome of CUN's control may be either the approval of the proposal or a motivated request for the competent university authorities to re-examine/reconsider their proposal.

- MIUR

Eventually, the service for university autonomy and students'affairs of the Ministry of Education examines the proposals submitted by individual universities, checks their procedural correctness, the set of compulsory advisory opinions, and issues the decrees approving the respective university teaching regulations.

Stage 4 - Approval of RDAs

Once completed the above process of consultations and control, the rectors of individual institutions approve by their own decrees the respective university teaching regulations; the RDAs are the internal legal bases allowing to actually start new degree programmes.

2.4. Minimum standards for accreditation

Here are the aims agreed upon and the criteria adopted in the evaluation of the resources regarded as indispensable for the accreditation of new study programmes.

2.4.1. Objectives of min. standards control

- Ensure all students (and their families) that each university has at least the resources necessary to support the proposed educational offer.
- By the diffusion of information to all the individuals concerned, grant that the educational offer of each institution is transparent and comparable to that of the other universities.
- Check the congruence among the planned offer, the demand for education, and available resources.
- Allow that both MIUR and universities may efficaciously allocate available resources by means of specific incentives/disincentives.

2.4.2. General evaluation criteria

- 1 credit (CFU) has approximately to include 8 hours of “front” teaching.
- Diversified reference dimensions have been identified with respect to students to be enrolled in degree programmes of the different classes.
- Each permanent teacher normally covers 120 teaching hours in the classroom. It is assumed that such a teaching engagement is mainly (50%) intended for the Laurea programmes (1st cycle) - Egs.: 60 h.s x CL + 40 h.s x CLS + 20 x CDR, master courses, etc.
- The subjects in which available teachers are competent must be consistent with the educational profiles offered in terms of number of credits assigned to “basic”, “qualifying”, “similar/integrative” educational activities.
- University facilities (classrooms, labs, etc.) must have as adequate sizes as to grant their use to all enrolled students (full-time, part-time).

2.4.3. Variables used

- Programmes actually offered by the Faculties (due to the transformation of already existing programmes and to the setting up of new ones).
- Enrolled students.
- Permanent teachers available in the different subject areas.
- Usable facilities (classrooms, laboratories, libraries).

2.4.4. Calculus of adequate students' numbers

- Full-time students: conventionally they are required an average workload of 60 credits per year, corresponding to min. 1500 h.s. The enrolling institution must guarantee teaching services at least to the min. extent determined in the decrees that approved the degree classes (generally corresponding to 650-750 h.s a year).
- Part-time students: they are required an average workload corresponding to the number of credits for which they enrolled (<60). The teaching load for the educational activities reserved for such students (whose proportion will remain limited) is given by the ratio (<1) between the engagement they have undersigned (expressed in credits) and the 60 credits required from full-time students (FTE = Full-Time Equivalent).

Diversified dimensions of degree programmes of the different classes

On the basis of preliminary dimension analyses carried out by elaborating the data of students matriculated in 1999-2000, four groups of degree programmes have been singled out with reference to the different classes; to each group a referential quantity (max. student number) and a variability interval have been attributed.

This type of evaluation is considered necessary to guarantee the min. quality standard of the educational offer: in fact it allows timely adjustments of overcrowded courses by their diversification or subdivision, and also to avoid the running of courses with very few students which may cause an inefficient exploitation of available resources (exceeding educational offer).

A number of matriculated students higher than the max. values of the planned intervals shows the necessity to adjust the resources and/or to provide for the subdivision or diversification of the offer.

A number of matriculated students lower than the min. values of the planned intervals, whereas the requirements related to teachers and facilities are met, shows a probable ineffective exploitation of available resources.

Permanent teachers' numbers

This is how the minimum number of permanent teachers is determined that are necessary for the Laurea programmes so as to cover at least the 80% of the subjects related to the main types of educational activities (basic, qualifying, similar and integrative).

- 1-cycle CLS: 15;
 - teachers engaged both in the CL and CLS in the first study programme of the class: 16; in the subsequent programmes: 12;
- teachers engaged in just one programme typology in the first study programme of the class: 9 (CL) and 7 (CLS); in the subsequent programmes: 7 (CL) and 5 (CLS).

Indispensable facilities

- Classrooms: their sizes must be adequate to host all the students enrolled at each course year for 15-20 weekly hours at least (60 CFU x 8 teaching hours in the classroom = 480 seat-hours per student). If we calculate teaching periods of 28 (24) weeks a year, it makes 17.1 (20) seat-hours per week. Consequently a classroom of such sizes as to adequately host a full class and exploitable for 30-40 h.s a week during the teaching periods may meet the needs of the students of two classes.
- Laboratories: must have suitable characteristics and such sizes as to grant all the students the opportunity to use them. The availability of work places must be compatible with the requirements fixed in the teaching regulations of the different programmes or in specific regulations (e.g. in the case of programmes characterized by restricted access such as dentistry, human medicine, veterinary medicine).

Application of minimum standards

Minimum standards have first been applied to 1st degree programmes (CL). The total number of teachers needed for the programmes of a Faculty has been determined by the sum $a + b + c$:

a = min. number of teachers for new and transformed CL: $\text{Nr. of classes} \times 9 + (\text{Nr. of programmes} - \text{Nr. of classes}) \times 7$;

b = min. number of teachers for 1-cycle programmes: $\text{Nr. of classes} \times 15 + (\text{Nr. of classes} - (\text{Nr. of programmes}) \times 15$;

c = number of teachers employed in interfaculty programmes.

The teacher number calculated with the above formula must be subtracted from the global number of teachers available in the Faculty; a result <0 shows the necessity to single out the programmes lacking in minimum standards, a result >0 shows the presence of teachers employable in CLS (2nd cycle programmes).

Criteria for special funding (innovation)

The following criteria must be checked in the new CL for the allocation of special funds reserved for teaching innovation:

- Timeliness and completeness of procedures with respect to the establishment and actual start of the CL;
- Teaching supportability and stability: permanent group of teachers granting to the CL the majority of their engagement (min. standards in terms of "stable" teaching);
- Attractiveness: the number of students enrolled in the 1st year must be higher than the min. planned value;
- Evaluation of CL quality must be regular with reference both to organization and outcomes, according to national as well as international criteria;
- Employability and connection with the outside context: clear definitions of the professional profiles and respective labour market; consultation of the local representatives of the various socio-economic components (industries, services, the professions).
- Setting up of a "trend committee" for each CL (it includes representatives of the labour context);
- Percentage of contract teachers who, hired from outside the academic world, are competent in specific professional fields;
- Interuniversity and international coordination; regional planning of the offer in conformity with the real educational needs of the territory; international agreements for coordination and exchanges.

Evaluation effects

- As to new CL (i.e: those which do not originate from the transformation of the already existing *Laurea* programmes), the possess of the minimum quality standards caused their inclusion among the programmes useful for the objectives of the 2001-2003 planning and for the related funding.
- In case individual universities allocate the resources for teaching innovation non in conformity with the pre-determined criteria, a reduction in their quota of ordinary funding may be applied in subsequent years.
- Programmes lacking in min. quality standards are not covered by national funding. Universities may decide to stop them or to run them all the same by using their own economic resources. In particular cases, it is also possible to submit to the CNVSU an adjustment plan with a view to reach the min. quality standards.

Agenda for the development of CNVSU' analyses

- 2001-02: control of the compatibility between the total number of teachers per Faculty and the educational programmes actually offered.

- 2002-03: check of teachers available to guarantee the CFU required (basic, qualifying, similar or integrative). Details on the availability of adequate facilities (classrooms and labs).
- 2003-04: control of teachers' specialization in relation to the subject areas of the subjects actually offered. Map of available classroom places, of the diversified needs for specialistic laboratories, and facilities for student's support. Advertising of the programmes.

2.5. Other accreditation systems

Other forms of accreditation in relation both to institutions and programmes do exist. The description follows of the three examples which seem better consolidated and of a greater interest.

2.5.1. Degree programmes in engineering

The Council of the Presidents of the Italian Faculties of Engineering has elaborated the SINAI (national system of evaluation and accreditation of degree programmes in engineering). The Council's motivations were essentially two: a) the on-going process for the implementation of university teaching autonomy; b) the academic and professional recognition of qualifications within the European Union.

a) As a consequence of curricula liberalization, in Italy any automatic validation of Italian academic and professional qualifications will no longer be possible: in fact degree programmes belonging to the same "class" may lead to professional profiles characterized by diversified competences not only at different institutions but also within the same university; this may occur even in the case the respective degrees bear the same denomination. Besides, a further consequence of the institutional autonomy process will be the increasing competition among universities. In such a perspective, the problem of quality assurance in education becomes extremely important: it will be necessary to have such a competition take place on educational goals of a high standard. The implementation of institutional teaching autonomy must therefore be accompanied by a rigorous application of quality control of educational objectives as well as of the structuring process and final product of individual degree programmes.

b) The second reason that makes it appropriate and even urgent to start a national system of degree programme accreditation is the problem of the academic and professional recognition of qualifications within the European Union. At European level the emerging trends in matters of quality assurance and mutual recognition of qualifications in engineering all agree on the necessity of a transeuropean coordination to the end of facilitating recognition and engineers' mobility. The accreditation system of programmes in engineering is based on their evaluation; actually, it is by now an internationally shared opinion that a system of accreditation of degree programmes (CdS) must be based on the evaluation of CdS themselves. On this subject it seems appropriate to note that the evaluation of a CdS may concern either teaching (from the educational objectives of the CdS on to the resources and methodologies which allow their actual achievement) or organization (the evaluation must be such as to make it credible the real application of the procedures devised for the observation and control of teaching and its outcomes). Some accreditation systems prefer to evaluate teaching rather than organization (e.g.

Abet); others, instead (in particular those inspired by ISO 9000), prefer to evaluate organization.

To the end of granting the highest objectiveness and utmost efficacy, the SINAI method integrates the evaluation of teaching and of organization in just one procedure, thus adopting a type of approach really original at international level. Its contrivers are conscious that the introduction of an evaluation culture with respect to CdS must take place gradually according to the following 6 (fundamental steps: production of data, indicators, and parameters; their analysis; drawing up of an annual autoevaluation report; periodical control and external evaluation from an independent body; corrective provisions adopted in consequence of the intermediate evaluation stages; observation of effects.

2.5.2. Master programmes in Business Administration

The history and praxis of the accreditation of MBA programmes has consolidated over the years.

The accrediting agency is an independent association, ASFOR (Association for business management training). Established in 1971 with the main purpose of promoting a management culture and developing the educational offer in that field, ASFOR now has more than 50 members (higher schools, universities, other institutions). It participates in the main European projects on the development of management and quality control.

The chief objective of its accrediting process and of the granting of the label "accredited by ASFOR" is to clearly differentiate those Master programmes which satisfy a significant set of requirements -to be evaluated globally- from the thousands and thousands of programmes offered under the "Masters" denomination. At present the programmes accredited by ASFOR are about 20. The decision on the significance and solidity of individual programmes is made with reference to:

- the control of the existence of objective and explicit criteria that the organising institution notifies beforehand (objective and comparable basis forevaluation);
- the partial evaluations expressed by each of the individual bodies involved in the accrediting process.

By its accrediting operations ASFOR intends to provide a useful service to:

- the potential clients of master programmes: they may avail themselves of a guidance tool;
- to companies: thanks to the existence of minimum quality standards, they may rely on a more homogeneous product;
- the organising institutions: when applying for accreditation, they accept to engage themselves in the constant upgrading of the respective programmes.

The minimum compulsory standards for ASFOR accreditation refer to the following items:

- applicants' selection: applicants' personal characteristics (age, academic qualifications, previous professional experience at managerial level) and admission procedures;

- teaching activity: min; length in hours, study plan (compulsory subject areas), on-job projects, academic staff, teaching direction;
- evaluation of participants' performance: expected outcomes must be determined at the beginning of the programme, checked at regular intervals, formally assessed at the end;
- placement procedures: percentage of master holders adequately employed within 6 months;
- programme funding.

2.5.3. Accreditation of non-State institutions of higher education

Italy has 14 non-State universities, almost 1/5 of the present total number of Italian universities. Most of them have been established in recent years; in particular, this is the case of the *Università Carlo Cattaneo - "LIUC"* at Castellanza and the *Università Campus Bio-Medico* in Rome (1991), the *libera Università degli Studi "San Pio V"* in Rome and the *Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele* in Milan (1996), the *libera Università di Bolzano* (1997), the *Libera Università Europea "Jean Monnet"* at Casamassima and the *Università della Valle d'Aosta* (2000).

In the Italian university history, institutional accreditation has taken different forms in relation to the main transformations affecting the university system.

- In the system in force in the second post-war period up to the eighties, institutional accreditation took place through a process resulting in the enactment by law of the establishment of a university or of the transformation into State universities of private institutions (*libere università*) or of separate branches of State universities. It is possible to trace in all these procedures some implicit measures of quality assurance: certain minimum standards are required along with the favourable opinion of the advisory bodies made up of representatives of the academic staff. As to the subjects involved in the process, in addition to the institution applying for accreditation they were the Government, Parliament, the Ministry of Education and the National University Council.
- Institutional accreditation changed when a university planning on national basis was introduced by the first 4-year Plan of university development (1986-1990). The establishment of new universities lost its past element of spontaneousness and occasionalism to become subject to criteria of rational planning and to specific provisions to be included in pluriannual plans for the development of the university system. This new stage involved new subjects: the Regional Coordination Committee, made up of the Rectors of the universities located in the same Region, and CRUI (Conference of the Rectors of Italian universities): they were both entrusted with the task to give their opinions on the individual proposals and on the entire university development plan, respectively.
- In more recent years (as from 1996) the legal process of formal approval has been supported by an external evaluation carried out, independently of the Ministry of Education, by the Observatory for the evaluation of the university system, later on transformed into the National Committee for the evaluation of the university system (CNVSU). CNSVU examines teaching, research as well as building structures; the availability of adequate human resources with reference to both the teaching and the administrative staff; eventually, the availability of the necessary financial resources and the articulation of the budget. In case of CNVSU's favourable advice, the next step is the formal establishment of the new non-State

university. The juridical instrument used is a ministerial decree which simultaneously approves the Statute and the RDA (university teaching regulations), legally recognizes the institution, and authorizes it to award legal degrees. The evaluation process for the accreditation of non-State universities does not only consist in an "ex ante". CNVSU periodically checks the situation also "ex post" -that is after the formal approval of the institution and the publication of the related decree- to the end of ascertaining the consistency of the subsequent development stages of the university with the development plan drawn up by the university itself and submitted for approval. Therefore, at later stages CNVSU controls the existence of the minimum standards needed in relation to teaching, instrumental equipment, building structures, financial resources, and personnel. All that, once the initial period of the new degree courses is over, to verify the presence of an adequate number of permanent teachers, researchers and technicians, all depending on the university concerned, as well as the existence of the related infrastructures and services so as to adequately satisfy the needs of all enrolled students. This activity corresponds to CNVSU's way of interpreting its role as the "guide" of Italian universities towards the evaluation culture. CNVSU's methodology of "ex post" evaluation intends to control to what extent the new legally recognized institutions carry out their initial development plan; how consistent a plan they have elaborated for the adjustment of their facilities during the first years of their newly-acquired legal status; times and modalities in which the new institutions succeed in getting all the resources needed to carry out a regular teaching and research work at university level; the availability of teachers in the transition phase in relation to those required by their future steady condition.

3. Analysis of the processes: actors and regulations

3.1. The Italian system of programme approval and accreditation: the actors

The procedures for the accreditation of degree programmes have been agreed upon by a technical team made up by CNVSU, MIUR, CRUI and CNSU.

CNVSU

The National committee for the evaluation of the university system (CNVSU) is the institutional body entrusted with the following tasks: determine the general criteria for the evaluation of all universities; draw up an annual report on the evaluation of the university system; promote the experimentation and implementation of quality assessment procedures, methodologies, and praxes; define the type and nature of information and data that individual universities have to transmit periodically to the Committee itself; elaborate and execute an annual plan of external assessment sessions concerning individual institutions or single teaching units inside them; carry out technical evaluations concerning the proposals of establishing new State or non-State universities with a view to authorize them to award legal degrees; draw up reports on the actual situation of university planning (state of accomplishment and results), carry out research and prepare documents on the condition of university education, the state of student welfare services with a view to fully implement social justice and democracy in education, and on the policies regulating the access to university programmes; accomplish studies and produce documents to define the criteria for the redistribution to universities of the balance quota from the total fund for their ordinary financing; on the Minister's request, carry out further activities related to quality assurance such as preliminary investigations, advisory sessions, definitions of standards and parameters as well as elaboration of technical legal texts; all this also with reference to the different activities of individual universities and to the projects and proposals they submit to the Ministry.

CNVSU enjoys the legal status as an independent body interacting autonomously with individual universities and the Ministry of Education, University and Research; benefits from a technical and administrative secretariat and a specific budget item.

MIUR

The Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) was established in 1999. It was attributed the facilities, financial resources, staff and functions of the former Ministry of Education (MPI) and Ministry for universities and scientific and technological research (MURST). As concerns the specific sector of university education, MIUR carries out the functions pertaining to the State competence: planning of the development of both the university and the research system; legislation on general education matters and financing of universities and public research bodies; monitoring and evaluation of the education system; transposition of the EU and international legislation into the Italian education system; European harmonization and international integration; full implementation of university

autonomy; supervision of non-university institutions ranking at university level; rationalization of the conditions regulating university access; participation in the activities related to the access to the civil service and regulated professions; connection between university and school education as well as vocational and professional training.

CRUI

The Conference of the Italian University Rectors (CRUI) is an association made up of the rectors of all Italian universities, both State and non-State but legally recognized. CRUI pursues the following goals: a) adequately illustrate the needs of the university system to governmental and parliamentary authorities, after an in-depth analysis of all questionable issues; b) express its views on the university development plan and on the actual state of university education; c) promote and support university initiatives at national and international level by developing close relations with similar associations within and outside the European Union.

CNSU

The National Council of University Students (CNSU) has been conceived as an advisory body made up of representatives of the students enrolled in the different programmes at Italian universities. The student council elaborates proposals for the Minister on: a) projects for the restructuring of the university system; b) ministerial decrees fixing the general guidelines for the organisation of the different degree-courses, and providing means and methods to promote student guidance and mobility; c) criteria for the use of the balance quota, that is the amount of the total fund for the ordinary university funding which is determined through the so-called equilibrium formula. Besides, CNSU: d) elects its own representatives at CUN (National University Council); e) may submit proposals on other university matters of general interest; f) draws up for the Minister a national report on student conditions within the university system; g) may interrogate the Minister about events or facts of national consequence as concerns teaching and student life.

CUN

University proposals for the setting up of new degree programmes are subject also to the advice of the National University Council.

CUN is an elective body representative of university autonomy. It formulates proposals as well as compulsory advice on: a) university planning b) criteria for the use of the balance quota from the fund for the ordinary financing of universities; c) decrees regulating the structure of degree programmes; d) the definition of subject sectors; e) recruitment of university teachers and researchers.

Italian universities have set up a system for the internal evaluation of their operational management, teaching and research activities, student welfare services.

Availing themselves, among other means, also of comparative analyses of costs and results, all institutions check such factors as the correct use of public resources, research and teaching productivity, the regular development and the fairness of their managerial operations. At each institution the evaluation action is entrusted with a collegial body, the so-called "university evaluation unit", whose composition, objectives and functions are regulated by the university statute: it is made up of min. 5 up to max. 9 appointed members; at least two of them are chosen among scholars and researchers experienced in the field of quality assessment, even if not belonging to the academic environment. University evaluation units are granted the following

rights: operational autonomy, access to all necessary information and data, publicity and diffusion of their proceedings within the legal limits of the respect for privacy. Evaluation units periodically collect students' opinions on the teaching activities of the respective institutions; anonymity is granted.

With respect to the new degree programmes, the approval and accreditation process took advantage of a recent informational infrastructure, i.e. the database on the educational offer of all Italian universities (<<http://offertaformativa.miur.it>>), which was worked out to meet two chief requirements:

- provide a telematic support to the elaboration stages of the new degree programmes, from their planning to the ministerial approval and the control of minimum quality standards;
- provide full information on the educational offer of individual universities and on the teaching content of all their programmes (these are described by means of a common standardised grid); such a complete information was primarily intended - and still is- to facilitate students' guidance towards university matriculation.

3.2. Degree programmes: from the national definition of curricula to institutional teaching autonomy

Like the H.Ed. systems of some continental European countries, the Italian university model was based on academic programmes and degrees whose content was rigidly defined by national regulations under the supervision of the State. Such centralized rules and control produced a fundamental consequence: in addition to their academic significance, university degrees also possessed "legal validity" and produced juridical effects (e.g. in relation to public competitions for functions within the civil service or for access to regulated professions).

Over the years, national university regulations have evolved considerably; the most interesting phases of their evolution are summarized in the following paragraphs.

At a first stage, the national teaching regulations were made up of a series of detailed rules and tables which fixed the names of the different programmes, their legal length, number and names of all compulsory subjects, modalities of final degree examinations, names of the degrees to be conferred. The most obvious consequence was the homogeneity within the whole national territory of the degree programmes in the same subject field and of the same typology. The bulk of laws that produced such teaching regulations dates back to the early '30ies, even if the act commonly quoted as the main legislative reference is the decree No. 1652 of 1938.

A partial liberalization was introduced in 1969 to satisfy the pressing requests from university student associations. Students were allowed to submit individual study plans, different from those defined by the teaching regulations in force, provided they respected the pre-determined number of subject and made their choices out of the list of subjects actually offered by the respective Faculties. Said "personal" study plans were subject to the approval of the competent Faculty Councils whose members, when making their decisions, had to take into account the educational level and the professional competence to be achieved by those students through the degree programmes concerned.

The national regulations underwent a substantial revision in 1990 due to the so-called "*riforma degli ordinamenti didattici universitari*" (reform of university teaching rules; Law No. 341 of 1990). Its main objective was to restructure all degree programmes on the basis of the increased university autonomy, and promote a greater flexibility of the system. In this respect, the 1990 reform:

- sanctioned the revision of the curricula of all existing degree programmes, defined the criteria for their regular updating, and modified the administrative revision procedures in force;
- introduced the principle according to which the educational content of a programme is partly optional in the meaning that the national regulations must determine only the general subject areas to be compulsorily covered by the different curricula; in such a way, once granted the minimum standard of homogeneity necessary to save the legal validity of individual degrees, a wide chance for discretionality was given to individual institutions;
- pursued the recomposition of knowledge by opposing, through the formula of the subject areas, both to its fragmentation in more and more specialistic fields and to the proliferation of subject courses.

The reform approved by DM 509/1999 has faced the important problem of how to reconcile two conflicting factors: on the one side, the institutional autonomy in the definition of university curricula, on the other the necessity to grant the legal validity of degrees by their reference to a series of national regulations. As a solution, the "*classe*" was introduced. The degree programmes of the same cycle and typology which share the same qualifying educational objectives and the related indispensable teaching/learning activities, independently of the denominations they are attributed by individual universities, have been organised in groups called "*classi di appartenenza*" (classes of degree programmes). In relation to each class of degree programmes, at national level the qualifying educational objectives have been identified along with the teaching/learning activities necessary to achieve them; such activities have been grouped in six (6) main typologies:

- a) basic education;
- b) subject-fields characterizing each class;
- c) subject-fields connected or integrative in relation to those characterizing the class, with special reference to cultural contexts and interdisciplinarity;
- d) educational activities of students' choice;
- e) educational activities aimed to check the students' competence in a foreign language, and to train them for the final degree examination;
- f) other educational activities devised for the students to acquire further competences in foreign languages, skills in information technology and telecommunications, relation abilities, or any additional skill/competence useful for their transition to the labour market; also those activities are included which have the purpose to facilitate the students' choice of their future professions by the direct contact with the labour sector to which a certain degree may give access (e.g. in particular activities of professional guidance and training periods).

The central authority determines a minimum credit number that is compulsory at national level for each of the above typologies. In the respect of said national limits, individual institutions autonomously define the content and development of the curricula. Degree programmes belonging to the same *classe* are attributed by law the same legal validity.

4. Accreditation and evaluation schemes in relation to Europe and globalisation: the Italian debate

The internationalization of Italian higher education has opened once again a very lively debate on the legal validity of study qualifications (both academic degrees and professional titles).

In recent years, three main positions have emerged, ranging from the will of definitively abolishing such a legal validity to the belief that it is still necessary and even useful.

a) Abolitionists

Associations in favour of free education are inclined to repeal such a legal validity by the removal of both the national teaching regulations and the State Examinations licensing to the professions. Their position is based on the belief that programme regulations must be modified in such a way that free educational initiatives arising from the social context may really be carried out freely in integration of the central action of the State. The same opinion is shared by the representatives of the oldest Italian Liberal culture, large groups of the industrial world as well as by some Catholic associations which, active in the educational sector, have recently put forward that type of solicitations.

Abolitionists generally take as their preferential pattern the US experience which is based on the lack of State curricular control, on the qualitative competition among educational institutions at different levels, and leaves the problem of the value of degrees to the evaluation of the occupational market rather than of the State.

b) Realists

The opposite position, while in favour of institutional autonomy, is more realistic as concerns the legal validity of qualifications: it admits its utility and the necessity to keep it in quite a number of sectors. The supporters of this opinion believe that the global deregulation is thought of as if it were a sort of mythical device capable of eliminating the limits of the Italian educational system, whereas in reality it would cause more problems than those it aims to solve. The system of the legal validity of qualifications still has a function in many sectors; for example in the case of programmes devised for the access to health-related professions, as well as of those training for the other professions regulated by law, and, in more general terms, for the protection of consumers. Besides, with respect to university education the 'realists' maintain that the recent reform of the system has already considerably modified the concept of the legal validity of study qualifications both from a formal and from a substantial point of view. The realists' position has a wider cultural background; they fear the risk that a generalized and drastic abolition of the legal validity may cause a transfer of powers in educational matters from the State to professional corporations rather than to the occupational market. There is also the risk that a deregulation in education may involve high social costs; it would undoubtedly offer to the economically strongest groups wider opportunities to obtain the most valuable qualifications (or simply the most advertised ones), and would cause an objective failing of the social guarantees of citizens' equality as well as of solidarity trends.

Therefore, in the realists' opinion, a solution which still provides for a certain public control on study programmes and qualifications is undoubtedly more respectful of democracy.

c) Accreditationists

A third more recent position aims at gradually substituting the national teaching regulations with the new praxis of programme accreditation which is meant for quality assurance in education. The supporters of the accreditation model connect its adoption to the processes of the increasing teaching autonomy and stress its importance to the end of granting the quality of the educational offer of individual institutions.