



The re-regulation of the Italian university system through quality assurance. A mechanistic perspective

Giliberto Capano

Istituto di Scienze Umane e Sociali, Scuola Normale Superiore, Palazzo Strozzi, Piazza degli Strozzi, 50123 Firenze, Italy

Abstract

This paper traces the developments of quality assurance in the Italian university system since the early 1990s. Based on the theoretical assumption that the ‘quality assurance’ label covers a wide range of different mixes of policy tools by means of which governments regulate (substantially at a distance) the systemic dynamics of their university systems, this paper adopts a mechanistic perspective in order to show how the Italian version of quality assurance, and of the respective NPM policy tools, has been significantly affected by the ambiguity of governments’ approaches to the question, and by the basic inability of universities to perform as corporate actors. This has resulted in quality assurance policy becoming yet another set of formal rules to be complied with, and has had the effect of partially re-centralizing the governance of the entire university system.

© 2014 Policy and Society Associates (APSS). Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The development of quality assurance (QA) within the Italian university system constitutes an important case for those interested both in the dynamics of higher education reform and in the real effects of the NPM “revolution”. The importance of the Italian case lies in the fact that the initial features of QA were introduced more than 20 years ago, as part of Government’s attempt to introduce a “steering at a distance” mode into the systemic governance of Italian universities, and that the complex dynamics of such reform has led to the gradual spread of QA throughout the university system, although the nature and goals thereof have been modified over the course of time.

In this paper, QA is perceived as a “package” of different policy instruments by which governments try to induce universities into behaving in the expected way. QA consisting in a series of different policy tools, its impact and effectiveness are characterized by the specific policy mix assembled and then adopted. In the Italian case, this mix has been characterized by an increasingly regulatory aim which has gradually changed the repeatedly announced governmental commitment to a soft, indirect form of steering. In fact, the end result has been quite the opposite: the direct regulatory role of the State has been tightened, and the institutional autonomy of universities has been significantly weakened.

The paper is organized as follows: in Section 2, quality assurance will be conceptualized as a package of policy instruments; Section 3 outlines the theoretical background of the paper based on a mechanistic approach; in Section 4, the most important developments in university reform in Italy are listed and briefly discussed, in order to contextualize

E-mail address: giliberto.capano@sns.it.

the evolution of quality assurance policy; in Section 5, the focus will be on the specific features of the diachronic dynamics of the quality assurance package adopted; Section 6 will examine the results of the study as seen against the theoretical background.

2. Quality assurance in higher education: an ambiguous policy instrument package

In the higher education literature, quality assurance has been defined as a set of practices “whereby academic standards, i.e., the level of academic achievement attained by higher education institutions’ graduates, are maintained and improved” (Dill, 2010, p. 377).

In another words, QA is a set of policy instruments through which the institutional behaviour of universities is coordinated/regulated in order to guarantee certain expected systemic outputs and outcomes.

It is commonly accepted that public policy regulation can be based on three general working principles: governmental authority, market authority and self-regulation. However, in higher education the role of governmental regulation has proven to be hegemonic, and governments have maintained their pivotal role in coordinating their HE systems according to a specific strategy based more on a steering at a distance strategy rather than on any direct intervention – as has been the tradition in Continental European countries – or on the granting universities significant freedom of self-regulation – as has been the case for a long time in the English-speaking world – (Huisman, 2009; Kogan, 1989; Neave, 1988; Van Vught, 1989). The prevailing governmental strategy in recent years has been one of soft governance whereby governments establish goals but leave universities significant freedom to choose the instruments they are to adopt in order to pursue such goals (Capano, 2011; Gornitzka, Kogan, & Amaral, 2005; Lazzaretti & Tavoletti, 2006). The following instruments have been adopted for this purpose: financial incentives to the pursuit of specific outputs and outcomes in teaching and research; regulated competition; ex-post evaluation performed by public agencies; contracts; benchmarking; legal provisions for greater institutional autonomy; structural constraints on institutional differentiation.

Within this broader picture, the use of QA policies has been justified precisely in order to ensure that universities, having been given greater freedom to choose the ways they pursue their institutional policies, do in fact perform in the expected way. In other words, quality assurance has been one of the policy strategies adopted to make HE institutions accountable for the quality of their academic product. In this sense, quality assurance and accountability are strictly connected. As Harvey and Newton have pointed out “quality assurance is about ensuring accountability, which is an assurance that it is good quality” (2007, p. 228).

The indissoluble link between QA and accountability has to be clearly stated when trying to define what quality assurance actually consists in. In fact, it is a policy strategy (a set of policy instruments) by means of which governments induce universities into behaving in an accountable way, and ultimately verify whether their performance meets specific systemic policy requirements and goals. It is evident that the close connection between QA and accountability could create the pre-conditions for the inconsistent implementation of the steering-at-a-distance governance mode, while at the same time risking missing the established goal.

In order to clarify these points, the policy instruments adopted for QA ought to be listed here. According to Dill and Beerkens (2010), these instruments may be divided into four general types:

- *Specification of standards* (national qualifications frameworks; subject benchmarking; minimal requirements).
- *Programme accreditation and assessment* (subject assessments; subject accreditation).
- *Institutional accountability* (institutional accreditation; performance-based contracts).
- *Information provision* (national surveys; national assessment of courses; best practices; data on employability of graduates).

What is interesting about these QA instruments is that, if they are not coherently designed and implemented, the majority of them may potentially interfere directly in the way in which universities work, and thus could increase the direct role of government in addressing and controlling them, and thus potentially subvert the steering-at-a-distance governance mode by consistently reducing the institutional autonomy of universities.

For example, national qualification framework requirements can be considerably demanding in that they may concern not only the skills and knowledge to be imparted to graduates, but may also dictate the ways such goals are to be achieved (that is, which subjects are to be taught, the establishment of a specific number of tenured academics for

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1061454>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1061454>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)