

# The Italian university system's transition towards a formally entrepreneurial, substantially neo-centralist governance model

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*The Italian University system's transition towards a model of entrepreneurial governance is examined in this paper. First, the main historical evolution of the Italian university system is illustrated. Secondly, the paper focuses on the transition to an entrepreneurial governance model, along New Public Management lines, which was formally reached with the implementation of Law 240/2010. Thirdly, we focus on the recent changes affecting the recruitment and evaluation of university lecturers and more generally, of the university's performance, trying to argue how under a formal appearance of an autonomous entrepreneurial system of universities lies a core of neo-centralistic orientations and practices. The paper is based on documentary research and on a number of privileged witness-interviews with members of the Department of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Florence.*

## *Introduction*

The Italian university system consists of 68 public universities, 20 private universities and 11 online universities (Anvur, 2023). After having presented its own theoretical framework and methodological approach, this paper traces the main historical evolution of the modern Italian university system, which was originally shaped on a centralized Napoleonic model in the second part of the XIX century. Secondly, it focuses on the transition, which began at the end of the 1980s, towards the adoption of an entrepreneurial governance model. The cornerstone of this phase is the Gelmini Law No. 240 of 2010, which is based on the private enterprise model and, as will be seen below, in a broader perspective, on the principles of New Public Management (NPM). In order to outline the main changes introduced by the Gelmini Law, we examined the governance system it has introduced within Italian Higher education, from the interpretation given to the notion of higher education to the system's funding shaped by the Ministry of University and Research (MUR) in the period between 2008 and 2013. The reorganisation of the university's governing bodies and, finally, the change in the performance evaluation system and in the faculty recruitment system known as national scientific qualification (ASN) will also be taken into account. A concluding reflection will focus on the recent changes affecting the recruitment of university lecturers through the ASN.

## *1. Theoretical framework*

In this paragraph, we aim to make explicit the theoretical assumptions supporting our interpretation of the transition of Italian University system from a centralized, homogeneous, essentially Napoleonic model to a system of formally autonomous universities, with a governance in which representative collegial organs have been superseded, at the various levels of articulation (university, schools, departments) by

“managerial” boards and individual executive organs, in competition among each other mainly in a field of “excellence” whose principles and rules are established by a central agency of accreditation-evaluation, and through this on the quasi-markets for students and for mainly public (scarce and uncertain) resources and, to a lesser extent, private resources.

Historical and sociological comparative studies on the European and Western Higher education systems have developed an ideal typology of modern university-system models (French Napoleonic, German Humboldtian, Anglo-American model) (Anderson 2004; Rüegg 2004; 2011; Côté, Furlong 2016). According to its methodological status, the ideal typology poses an articulated list of pure, abstract types each one identified through a conjunction of characters and distinguished from each other by a tendentially exclusive ordered paired-disjunction of characters; these types are never completely realized empirically (empirical cases, even paradigmatic examples, never fully correspond to all and only the characters of any of the pure types, which only serve as conceptual reference points in a logic of approximation to them). The main characters of the Napoleonic model are the following; firstly, its being a centralized, hierarchical and homogeneous nation-state institutional branch, with almost no statutory and administrative autonomy among the various territorial units of the system which are strictly governed from the head of a centralized State (with the State Capital hoarding the main part of the system resources, both quantitatively and qualitatively); the second is its main goal of providing, through teaching, formal credentials (having legal value) towards specialized professions (often through national thematic institutes, the *Grandes Écoles*) both within the state apparatus and civil society – and this implies that the innovative scientific research function can be conceived (and implemented) largely independently and separately from the higher education function; the third character is both the selection of student attendance and the allocation of graduated personnel via competitive, formally meritocratic competitive examinations (*concours*) on high professional skills.

The German-Humboldtian model of university system has in common with the Napoleonic its public, statist character; but at the same time, having developed in a linguistically and culturally strongly united nation but nonetheless subdivided among many different regional political regimes and subsequently in an unitary Empire (afterwards Federal Republics) that maintained a strong regional articulation, the system has developed through less centralistic lines, and each local university maintained a characteristic individual institutional and cultural physiognomy and autonomy (vs the homogeneity of napoleonic faculties and universities) within a plurality of regional States; the second character is to exercise a strict connection between original disciplinary research (lying at the frontier between the known and the unknown) in all the fields of interest (the German concept tied to the term *wissenschaft*, i.e. science, embracing together theology, philosophy, law, philology, history and other traditional humanistic, disciplines with mathematical and natural empirical disciplines) and teaching: in the sense that the teacher is a master who have to teach the method and results of his own original personal research activity to students-apprentices whose main task is to learn approaches and methods of autonomous research rather than specific, technically detailed and accomplished knowledge systems (that prevail in the Napoleonic teaching function). In this sense,

the model clearly distinguishes approved, recognized and publicly sanctioned systems of knowledge as pertaining to the “inferior” school system, from the superior higher studies properly scientific enterprise of critically assessing present knowledge and establishing new pieces of knowledge (Von Humboldt 1810/2017). This ideal conception of a constitutive connection among methodically disciplined research and teaching-learning within the community of teachers and students lies at the base of the notions of *Lernfreiheit e Lehnfreiheit*, teaching freedom and learning freedom (which together imply research freedom). Freedoms which, deriving from a notion of pure science which is achieved through a collective cooperative-competitive endeavour of achieving new *pure* knowledge through freely questioning and modifying the old one, in no way are politically original power attributes of the university; they are rather conditions that only the State authority can and must guarantee to the university teachers and students: a limited, State *octroyée* freedom shielding the university both from within, from the dictates of the State apparatus to which the university ultimately belongs, and from without, the pressures of the material utilitarian interests of the civil society, in order to guarantee the possibility of achieving new *pure* knowledge. The third main character of the German model is the concept of *Bildung*: the results of higher education are an organic global built-up personality of the new doctor, as free as responsible, capable of a critical scientific attitude towards its tasks throughout the many specialistic fields of professional life more than counting on highly specialized skills. In this sense, the credentials offered by the German model to its graduates are more of an informal reputational, prestige character (tied to the specific renown of the university of origin) than of the formally certified, meritocratic one of the Napoleonic model (a difference which is maintained even though competitive forms of professional selection and appointment are often formally the same in both systems). The third model is the anglo-american one. Its first character is its not being originated through a legal reform imposed by the Sovereign within a modern State institutional public infrastructure (as both the Napoleonic and the German system do, even though those two stems from clearly different levels of centralization and *tabula rasa* policy strategies over the former traditional assets) but its being gradually and cumulatively developed through time inside and outside of the State control: the angloamerican model of higher education is peculiarly polycentric and heterogeneous in its genesis, spreading from such different origins as surviving *ancien régime* corporate *universitates* (Oxford, Cambridge, Dublin), State public initiatives at a national and local level (The Scottish universities) (Anderson 2004: 192) and various kinds of private initiatives coming from churches (in a denominational, post-Reform sense) as from private philanthropic, trade or interest associations (*Land Grant*\_US Universities, British *Redbrick* Universities) (OECD 1999; Whyte 2016). Its mission is equally plural and differentiated: it keeps within itself the formation to specialized higher liberal professions/administrative State bureaucratic offices and the scientific vocation to the advancement of knowledge; but this two goals (that respectively characterize the Napoleonic and the Humboldtian models) exist among many other aims, from the formation of a well-rounded gentleman's humanist personality to a functional-utilitarian conception of producing high skilled work-profiles adapted to the changing and developing needs of a society in fast technological, economic and social transformation and development within a growing differentiation and specialization

dynamics. It correspondingly results in a highly differentiated spectrum of higher education institutes, both at the organizational and the credential level (prerequisites for attendance, duration of the studies, registration fee costs, level and value of formal credentials). Its third character on the kind of educated person the system is purported to produce is equally pluralist: but its accent lies more on the endowing the individual with a set of resources and capabilities (in some cases, formally, in others informally sanctioned) which enhances its chances of success in attaining scarce superior positions in a growingly stratified and selective social environment; thus in conceiving higher education more as a private asset than a mainly public good receiving formally public sanction and certification (Napoleonic and German).

This typology is clearly relevant for our interpretation in the next paragraphs under three aspects: a) the prevailing organizational culture of the Italian HE system; b) the strategies and the goals for the construction of a European HE area; c) the diffusion of a university governance configuration inspired by the NPM doctrines.

a) We'll see that the Italian HE system from the national Unity in 1861 to the reform of 1989 mixed the characters of the Napoleonic model – it was a National homogeneous system directly governed by the Central Ministry which led the organization and even the content of the universities' activities through a myriad of extremely detailed regulations and circulars – with those of the Humboldtian one – the mainly organization through Faculties instead of *Grandes Écoles*, the institution of the Chair and of the *Privatdozent*. But the centralistic character was the prevalent one. It presents for a long duration of 120 years a configuration of extreme centralization within which the ministerial bureaucracy and an academic oligarchy of powerful professors could entertain a *de facto* corporative opaque governance of the system (so clearly and acutely described from the outside by Clark 1977). And surely a very resilient one: if it's true that the opening of university access to all the possessors of secondary certificates in 1969 (sanctioning an extremely sudden, abrupt transition from an *élite* university system to a mass one) happened without touching the existent organization (and in general even its sheer quantitative structural dimensions – with huge side-effects of overcrowding, delayed students careers and dropouts) of the system; and if it's true that the autonomous status the Republican Italian Constitution of 1948 granted to universities remained a dead letter for 40 years, until the Ruberti Reform of 1989. On the contrary, all the three major reforms of governmental initiative (in 1989, 1999-2000 and 2010) were formally implemented very quickly (the very short time-frame of implementation being clearly indicative), even though representing radical departures from the principles and the configurations of the previous functioning system. In summary, 1989: transition from a centralized system to a series of autonomous universities; 2000: transition from the long-standing 4-5 year duration of the university single degree course to a 3+2 years double degree system; 2010 (among other things): abolition of the secular faculty configuration and the conservation of the much less entrenched department as the main subunit of the University. All this shows an extremely strong system disposition against bottom-up, external pressures to changes and a corresponding extremely favorable disposition towards top-down, internal ones: what we consider clear evidence of the deep-rooted centralistic nature of the Italian university system.

b) The political statements of principles and the following normative texts defining and orienting the construction of the European HE Area, From the Sorbonne Declaration to the Bologna and then the Lisbon EU processes have been characterized by a main reference to both the Humboldtian and Anglo-american models, at the expense of the Napoleonic one. But if the first has been recalled mainly within the sphere of principles and values, in characterizing the free vocation of the scientific spirit within the European university tradition, the second has served as a much more direct and pragmatic point of reference for the effective measures of re-organization and re-alignment of the various national HE systems to fit within the European area (Amaral *et al.* 2009): here is sufficient to cite the anglo-american genesis both of the 3+2 years standard course duration and of the credit-unit system for measuring the study workload and duration (Wagenaar 2019), which constitute the main operative pillars of this reform process. As such, the construction of EHEA seems to us clearly oriented towards the anglo-american model (Maassen 2008); and we try to trace its influence in the next paragraphs.

c) The diffusion of the New Public Management theoretical, methodological and operational approach to public policies can be considered merely a specific development within the European administrative sphere of a much larger political ideological hegemony which originated through the eighties of XX century and acquired dominance after the fall of Socialist regimes of Eastren Europe at the start of the last decade of the Century (Gerstle 2022). Anti-government and deregulation agendas, assumption of the individuals' initiative, of the private enterprise and of the free market as *a priori*, indisputable positive reference points have acquired a dominant position throughout western Europe (arriving to get a quasi-ontological status of post-ideological undisputable truths/values): a status that has yet to be completely overcome in the public debate, though having lost much of its ideological appeal since the world's economical Great Recession of 2008. Even though we consider this hegemony as a historical fact, in what follows we try to illustrate how within the evolving Italian HE system of the XXI century a much more subtle and sophisticated technocratic tendency is at work: a tendency that, independently from the ideological colors of its political enablers, uses New Public Management tools and strategies (managerial extra-academic top university leadership; lump sum financing and accounting control procedures; audits and assessments of productivity, efficiency and cost for value; competitive procedures for ranking the institutions on Excellence; new Third Mission tasks) (Amaral 2008), firstly enacted within universities of the anglo-american model (many authors depict historically the NPM oriented interventions as the first main strong intervention of a regulatory State within the tendentially more autonomous, self-governed realm of anglo-american universities) (Reed 2002; Fulton 2002), in an extremely detailed and dirigistic fashion, in order to lead the HE Italian system, formally represented by autonomous, entrepreneurial universities in a substantially neo-centralist way (the main strategic objective of the last two decades being the construction of a stratified system of a few top-élite *Research* universities and a base of lower status *Teaching* universities competing with new online-university institutions on the mass tertiary education market).

## 2. Methodology

Our main research question is: How has the Anglo-Saxon concept of an entrepreneurial governance spread into the Italian HE system in the past quarter of the century? It is particularly interesting because the Italian HE system is historically constituted on a different organisational tradition and culture derived from the Napoleonic centralistic model. In what follows, we aim to illustrate and document this historic transition from a model that is both formally and substantively statist and centralist to a model that is formally privatist and autonomist (the entrepreneurial model) but which, in substance, as much inevitably as paradoxically retains significant elements of, and continuity with, its origins in an apparently logically opposite model. In other words, we will try to submit the notion of *entrepreneurial governance* as it is declined in the Italian HE system to an elementary application of the genealogical approach to discourse analysis (cfr. Foucault 1971; Dunn, Neumann 2016).

Our study is thus a desk-based documentary research, based on three distinct *corpora* of documents and texts that we have collected and analyzed:

1. Laws and regulations governing the Italian higher education system (e.g., ANVUR, 2023).
2. Grey literature on higher education (e.g. OECD reports); Institutional websites (e.g. MUR and ANVUR website); ROARS forum (Returns on Academic Research and School) for discussion concerning research and higher education policies.
3. Academic literature (monographs, edited volumes, and articles in scholarly journals) on higher education, covering a wide range of disciplines and subdisciplines within the social sciences, from the sociology of education to organizational and management theory.

In addition to these text *corpora*, we formed a fourth one with the transcriptions of interviews we conducted with seven university professors from the University of Florence who held before or at the moment of the interview responsibility positions within the university administration, at the national or local level. They were asked to describe the changes they witnessed while holding their administrative roles. The main topics covered during the interviews were: the major historical milestones of Italian universities and the varying ways in which power and information have been managed; criteria for recruitment for academic personnel based on historical period considered; differentiation of recruitment criteria between online and state universities; National scientific qualification and disciplinary sector related scientific committees. We mainly used this last *corpus* in order to acquire some clues on the practical administrative policies – i.e. actions/decisions qualified by constraints, goals and strategies – the changing field of academic governance made possible, favored or prescribed.

## 3. Historical milestones in the Italian university system evolution

The concept of public education and a national university system was introduced in Italy for the first time by the Casati Law of 1859. This law, in line with the Napoleonic approach (Charle 2004), effectively marked the birth of the modern Italian university. The Napoleonic model, to which Italy referred during the national unification phase, established organizational uniformity and homogeneous regulations

for every university in the system and considered academic staff to be an integral part of the public administration bureaucracy. Universities were considered organs of the State apparatus, and their functions were all delegated by the State. At the head of each university was the Rector, an organ of the State apparatus appointed directly by the King. Legal university diplomas and formal qualifications were the main educational credentials that granted access to the most prestigious roles within the bureaucracy and liberal professions. This centralized structure remained in place for over sixty years (Balus 2021). The subsequent reforms introduced by the Fascist regime were promoted on the basis of a totalitarian conception of the State. The September 1923 reform, led by the Fascist minister Giovanni Gentile, established freedom of teaching and research in principle, while also recognizing the university's legal status and administrative autonomy. However, this reform was part of a centralist approach: the minister appointed professors, while the king appointed the rector and faculty deans. The minister also supervised the universities and had the power to establish and abolish faculties (Balus 2021). During the twenty years of Fascism, university autonomy was further reduced. The Consolidated text of laws of 1933, while confirming the administrative, educational and disciplinary autonomy of universities, gave the Minister of National Education the power to replace academic leaders and decide on teaching regulations. With detailed provisions, the minister supervised the universities on behalf of the State. In fact, while in theory acknowledging autonomy, national laws and regulations guided in detail the administrative management, teaching, recruitment, career and status of the academic staff. Academic staff were reduced to the role of civil servants in the public administration in the same way as any other public employee. Furthermore, the 1935 law strengthened State power over universities by introducing additional restrictions on freedom of teaching and research. From the formation of the unified State until the fall of the fascist regime, universities educated only a small, privileged minority of the Italian society. With the fall of the Fascist regime and the beginning of the Republican era, the academic body was granted greater autonomy from the central government: in 1944, the position of tenured professor was established, and in 1945, the minister's power to remove academic staff was definitively abolished (Balus 2021). Those principled changes notwithstanding, the strongly centralized institutional structure that emerged during the twenty years of Fascism remained in place in the following decades, despite the 1948 Republican Constitution affirming the autonomy of universities. Among the most significant measures of the subsequent period, we recall Law 910 of 1969, which reformed university admission. This law allowed all holders of a high school diploma obtained after completing a five-year course of study to enroll as university students. The liberalization of admissions was a response to the need to adapt to the higher education system to cope with an increasing number of students. A further measure dates back to the 1980s (Presidential Decree No. 382), which established university departments consisting of teachers with similar disciplinary backgrounds, granting them administrative and accounting autonomy for the purpose of promoting and coordinating research. This happened while paradoxically the traditional faculty structure based on the offer of degrees was maintained. The Presidential Decree of 1980 also contained reforms to the recruitment and status of professors, who were divided into two categories (full and associate), and established the roles of

researchers, contract professors and PhD students (Balus 2021). The members of the academic body – the full professors – associated in national groups and consortia on a disciplinary basis, enjoyed a privileged relationship with the ministerial bureaucracy (Capano 2000). It was the university of the Barons, an expression that became common sense (Clark 1977; Palermo 2011). This type of university was focused, much more de facto than de jure, on the reproduction of the academic body according to a logic of co-optation, on the self-referential expansion of disciplinary affiliations, whereby certain dominant sectors within each faculty could decide to recruit new staff entirely from their own discipline, without taking into account the teaching load, i.e. the numerical relationship between teachers and students among the various disciplinary fields. In the 1970s, the transition to mass university education would have required adequate funding and reforms. Despite this, the organizational structure of the 1970s was still that of the early decades of the 20th century, designed for a small number of students. According to Istat, there were 616,898 students enrolled in 1969 and almost 1.3 million in 1989 (data from Romano, 1993). The increase in enrolment, which was positive in itself in a country historically characterized by a low rate of graduates, also increased the number of students who did not get their degree, either being expelled from the system or remaining in it for a long time as students who have exceeded the standard duration of their studies (*studenti fuori corso*). In fact, during the same period, the number of students who did not complete their studies also increased, with a steady growth rate until the 1970s. Since then, dropouts and low graduation rates became a critical and chronic problems of Italian universities. The situation was aggravated by chronic underfunding and overcrowding of teaching-learning spaces. As the organizational and management structures had not changed, universities were unable to meet the needs of students, creating a tension between the university system quantitative dimension and the growing number of students. Law 168 of 1989 (the Ruberti Law) after forty years formally implemented the principles set out in the Constitution, mainly the autonomy of Italian universities. Thus, this law states that:

«Universities are endowed with legal status and, through article 33 of the Constitution, universities have didactical, scientific, organizational, financial and accounting autonomy; the universities create their own autonomous systems with statutes and regulations» (Art. 6 - comma 1).

Moving beyond the previous centralist vision, autonomy is the defining feature of the university system within a new legal framework that considers universities as public bodies and no longer as mere organs of State administration. The reform also provides for each university to follow its own regulations through the enactment of statutes. Statutes are the primary source of law within the system of an institution which, within a framework of planning and guidelines formulated by primary legislation, governs itself in order to achieve specific objectives and guidelines. For each university, the statutes become the basis for the legitimacy of all subsequent internal regulations. Law 341 of 1990 reformed the educational system, establishing the bachelor's degree alongside the university diploma. Universities decided on their educational system, and the minister examined and approved it. Law 127 of 1997 established that educational systems must be adopted by ministerial decree, which set out the general criteria, universities drawing up the specific provisions. The 1997 law established the Observatory for the Evaluation of the University System, the first step towards a

crucial issue for the subsequent evolution of the system. Organizational and financial autonomy was specified by Law 537 of 1993. It established the Ordinary Financing Fund for universities, corresponding to the share of the State budget for the operating expenses of financial autonomy, which also included recruitment, leading to the abolition of the national staffing structure for university personnel. The same law gave universities the power to decide on how to use their budget. With the reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, the centralist approach that characterized the Italian university management since national unification appeared to be overcome. Nevertheless, paradoxically, autonomy in Italy was introduced through a reform imposed from above, following a typically top-down process. Thus, the literature on the Italian university governance highlights the lack of an institutional culture of autonomy, which attaches great importance to evaluation, within university ranks (both academic and administrative). However, this evaluative dimension was not provided for in universities' institutional processes (Boffo, Moscati 2005; Turri 2007; Regini 2009). Another most significant reform implemented at the end of the 1990s concerned the internationalization of the Italian university system. Decree 509 of 1999 initiated the process of Italian universities joining the European Higher Education Area. This decree responded to the need to facilitate student mobility within Europe by aligning the Italian higher education system with the standards of other universities in Europe, thus streamlining the procedures for the recognition of academic qualifications. As part of the process of standardizing European qualifications, University Credits (CFU) were introduced, adapted to the ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System)<sup>1</sup>. The 3+2 years course system was also introduced, taking as a reference the courses divided into three-year bachelor's degrees and master's degrees (one or two years) in Anglo-American universities. The student's career was therefore divided into a three-year degree equal to 180 CFU and a specialist degree equal to 120 CFU which, added to the previous one, had to reach a total of 300 CFU. The new system came into force in the 2001-2002 academic year, just two years after the 1999 reform, placing Italy among the first countries to adapt to the European system (Capano 2002).

#### *4. Italian universities and New Public Management*

The approval of Law 240 of 2010 (the Gelmini Law) marks the second significant reform of the university system since the Second World War. It is supported by a movement that has strongly criticised the process of autonomy and its effects, which are considered largely detrimental and counterproductive for the university system. The reform is part of a broader political and cultural trend inspired by New Public Management (NPM) (Barzelay 2001; Lane 2000; Pollitt, Bouckaert 2011). From a political point of view, NPM emerged in the 1990s during the Democratic presidency of Bill Clinton in the United States and the Labour government of Tony Blair in the United Kingdom, as an attempt to rethink and reshape the traditional left-wing principles of equality and social justice (Giddens 1999; Ravasio 2023; Guazzaloca 2015). However, although promoted by leading figures in the progressive

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<sup>1</sup> For further information on the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), a tool used in the European Higher Education Area to make studies and courses more transparent, see: <https://education.ec.europa.eu/it/education-levels/higher-education/inclusive-and-connected-higher-education/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system> (January 2026).

governments of the time, NPM draws on a tradition of thought that has historically been more closely associated with the conservative right than with a democratic-progressive vision of society. In this context, NPM revives the traditional distrust of right-wing political thought towards the public management of goods and services, favours the market over the State, and translates the services provided by public bodies into quantifiable operating procedures (McLean 1990; Middlehurst 2004). The similarities with the business world are clear: those who use public services are less citizens than users-consumers, who are as such entitled to express their level of satisfaction with the services received. Public bodies must undergo a process of rationalisation in order to overcome waste and internal diseconomies and promote greater systemic efficiency through the acquisition of a firm-like approach. Key words such as quality, efficiency, effectiveness, transparency and promotion of merit are incorporated into the principles that guide Law 240/2010. The value framework of the Gelmini reform is inspired by the private company model; it provides for the presence of private actors in university decision-making bodies; it considers the market as a spontaneous mechanism of self-regulation and efficiency; it promotes competition between universities; it attributes greater powers to the top management of the organisation – a management that should run the university according to an entrepreneurial logic - rather than to the assembly bodies. This set of principles and guidelines is accompanied by performance evaluation, the tool used to measure the efficiency of the system in all its internal components. The reform is aimed at reducing public spending. The timing of its promotion is not unrelated to the State's need to reduce the public deficit, which had somehow unexpectedly increased also as a result of the economic and financial crisis of 2007-2008, which led many countries to use public resources to bail out credit institutions and insurance companies. It is no coincidence that, reading the text of the law, one notices that any innovation introduced by the reform is accompanied by the recurring corollary, repeated like a mantra, “without additional costs for the State”. Even more clearly, Table 1 shows the total public funding for the Italian university system in absolute terms from 2008 to 2013, when the effects of the economic and financial crisis had already spread to Italy.

*Table 1. Funding from the Ministry of Universities and Research to the university system and the right to education (in millions; years: 2008–2013)*

Years	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Student subsidies	462	688	428	375	470	427
University system	7723	7756	7457	7081	7214	6876
Total funding	8186	8444	7885	7456	7684	7302

*Source:* ANVUR, 2013.

Between 2008 and 2013, all voices decreased significantly: aid to low-income students by 7.6%, funding of the university system by 11%, and total funding by 10.8%. But let us look in detail at the most significant organizational changes that have affected the internal bodies of the university and the academic staff.

- a) The university's governance underwent a reconfiguration. The rector acquired greater powers. The previous administrative director, who came from the university's internal bureaucracy, was replaced by the general director, a professional manager recruited from the market, appointed by the Board of Directors and hired on a fixed-term private law contract.
- b) The academic senate, which includes the department directors, passes from being the main decisional university assembly to an advisory function; it also has the power to make proposals to the rector and the Board of Directors on matters relating to teaching and the functional organisation of the university.
- c) The Board of Directors, composed of at least three members from outside the university, assumes decision-making and management powers.
- d) Two new bodies are established: the Evaluation Unit and the Board of Auditors: the former composed of a majority of external members, while the latter composed solely of external members.
- e) Faculties are abolished and replaced by schools, administrative units dedicated to the organisation of teaching.
- f) Departments are maintained but reduced in number and regrouped. Research-focused structures, departments are assigned the task, previously assigned to faculties, of proposing the recruitment of new academic staff. A minimum number of forty members is also established, below which the department is dissolved, forcing its members to join other departments.

In 2013, following the reform, the number of university departments nationwide fell from 1,625 to 829, halving in number (and correspondingly doubling in size) (ANVUR 2013). This reduction served to rationalise resources, i.e. to make more efficient use of staff, especially administrative staff, with a view to reducing the number of employees; this “rationalisation” operation led to the closure of departments below the minimum threshold which however, depending on the context, could boast a certain academic prestige that nevertheless had to take second place to economic and managerial considerations.

g) The role of permanent researcher as the third level of teaching staff is abolished, replacing it with two types of fixed-term researcher: the first is a three-year contract renewable for a further two years and no more (Type A Fixed-Term Researcher); the second is a three-year non-renewable contract, at the end of which the holder of the position is subject to evaluation and, if they have obtained the National Scientific Qualification (ASN) in the meantime, is appointed to the role of associate professor (Fixed-Term Researcher Type B).

h) The recruitment system of academic staff on the basis of local competitions alone is abolished. In its place, a new procedure called ASN (*abilitazione scientifica nazionale*) is established. These are commissions composed of first-level professors divided by disciplinary field at the national level. The members are drawn from among all those who possess, on the basis of a series of criteria related to their scientific productivity and are in charge for a two-years term. Once the term has passed, that

commissioner is removed from the draw list for a five-year term. This measure, together with selection by drawing lots, provides for the rotation of commissioners in order to avoid, as far as possible, positions of privilege, conflicts of interest and discretionary evaluations towards ASN candidates. The minimum requirements for a candidate to apply for scientific qualification-in addition to participation in international conferences and funding obtained through competitive tenders-are determined based on significantly different criteria.

For disciplinary fields traditionally belonging to the so-called “hard sciences”, such as medicine, physics, mathematics, etc., bibliometric indices are taken into account, that is, citations obtained through various databases within a given time frame, usually 15 years for the first group and 10 years for the second. For other branches of knowledge, such as history, philosophy, sociology, etc., the “research products” (as publications are henceforth called, denoting a productivist orientation of economic origin) are taken into account, based on three categories: monographs, articles and/or contributions in scientific books and journals even in this case according to a time frame ranging from 15 to 10 years depending on the type of category within which the publication is placed and whether you are competing for the ASN for the associate or full professorship. The candidates belonging to the non-bibliometric sectors must meet certain differentiated quantitative requirements for each of the three categories (monographs, articles and/or contributions in scientific books and journals and class A journals) measured on the national median value of publications of those belonging to the group for which one is competing.

##### *5. The twelve-year functioning of ASN as the recruitment system in the “entrepreneurial” university*

As described in the previous paragraph, this system would appear to be an “objective” one by which to measure the candidates’ publications. In reality, this criterion is less so than one might think, since a paper, to be considered valid, must be published in scientific journals recognized as such by ANVUR (National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research). The same applies to articles published in class A journals, a smaller set of all journals considered scientific by ANVUR itself. In other words, publishing articles in journals that have not achieved this “official” scientific status, regardless of their merit content, is worthless when it comes to exceeding the thresholds for the category to which one is competing. Indeed, judging panels, when they find that the thresholds, at least two out of the three categories mentioned above, have not been exceeded, are exempt from evaluating the candidate, declaring the evaluation negative.

Not only that: “predatory” journals were mistakenly included within the “scientific” journal lists compiled by ANVUR. These are journals that require a substantial payment to publish and at the same time do not follow a serious double-blind review process (Drago, 2021). In this sense, the drafting of lists of scientific journals has opened, in the Italian context, a thriving market for accredited publishing groups, which provide a cash contribution from the author to publish within their journals. Otherwise, as mentioned, that paper is not counted towards exceeding the thresholds. In its first application dating back to 2012, obtaining the qualification for the first or second tier was only possible if the candidate received a positive evaluation from 4 out

of 5 components. In addition, a member of the selection board had to be a first-tier professor (Italian or not) permanently employed at a foreign university. Later, as a colleague told us at the time, “we asked to eliminate the mandatory presence of the foreign member, otherwise it would have been like saying that we were not capable of judging correctly”. Thus, since 2023 the members have all been Italian, while in the meantime the minimum threshold for obtaining the ASN has also changed, going from 4 to 3 positive evaluations out of the 5 members (MUR 2023). The first change made during the work should be judged, in our opinion, negative because the presence of a foreign member, alien to the self-referential logic of the Italian academy, would have represented greater impartiality of judgment towards the candidates. The second, on the other hand, is positive because in the previous threshold it was sufficient for two commissioners to negatively evaluate a candidate to establish a real right of veto against the remaining members of the commission.

A new government draft law (No. 1518) reforming university recruitment has been proposed in January 2026. The most significant change is the abandonment of ASN and the delegation of the entire process of both evaluation and hiring to local universities. This draft was presented to the Senate of the Republic on June 3, 2025 as the result of a working group that analyzed the functionality of the ASN system 15 years after the approval of Law No. 240 of 2010 and 12 years after its first implementation (Roars 2025, 3).

The main goal that has driven the proposed abolition of the ASN system is, first and foremost, to reduce the number of people expecting to be awarded professorships simply for passing the national evaluation, and consequently, to reduce the distortive effects of the pressure produced by these cumulating expectations on the strategic programming of the Universities.

Furthermore, the dual assessment, quantitative at the national level and then qualitative at the local level provided by the ASN, has been judged “redundant” by the working group on the ASN.

This group has also advocated the extension of the evaluation criteria for recruitment, including teaching, third mission, and administrative-management activities, none of which was adequately taken into account by the ASN system. However, the regulatory proposal aims to

«Radically simplify the current system, ensuring the maintenance of a minimum threshold of scientific productivity and qualification requirements, shared at the national level, as a condition for access to university teaching» (authors' translation of draft law n.1518).

We observe that this proposed reform of university recruitment remains based on the logic of scientific productivity. Therefore, candidates' self-declaration of eligibility could be easily verified through (and thus replaced by) the results of their scientific output recorded in the computerized publication cataloguing system owned by each university.

Finally, according to the reform proposal candidates will be asked to discuss scientific production and teaching preparation through a trial lecture.

«The new system aims to concretely hold universities accountable for their respective recruitment policies. From this perspective, the evaluation of new hires becomes a fundamental element in the distribution of the FFO award share, and the contribution allocated to non-State universities. The aim is

to introduce a reward system for universities that hire the best, that is, those who in the post-hiring period demonstrate that their productivity indicators, with their publications and their overall activity, have contributed to the improvement of the activities of the university that recruited them» (authors' translation of draft law n.1518).

Indeed, the ASN-based system that has been in place for over ten years has a whole series of shortcomings. First of all, as it is recalled in the draft reform proposal

«The results of the ASN, also due to the different practices adopted by the individual national commissions, have created a strong heterogeneity in the percentage of qualified individuals between the various competitive sectors and between the different qualifying rounds, clearly compromising the very idea of a unitary and generally homogeneous system for all scientific areas» (Roars 2025, 3).

One of the causes of the significant discrepancy in evaluation between disciplinary sectors is linked to the fact that commissioners do not always have the skills to judge candidates. This is particularly true for minor disciplinary sectors which, in the commission, are aggregated into a macro-sector where the commissioner from that specific disciplinary sector may not be present, because he is not drawn by lot. As a colleague from the University of Florence who has not passed the ASN twice told us “I belong to a small sector whose commissioner is not drawn, or even if he were, he is one along with four other disciplinary sectors, which do not have the skills to evaluate objectively and seriously”.

Scientific knowledge has become increasingly specialized, so those who find themselves evaluating candidates who do not belong to their disciplinary field can be induced to infer evaluations for or against the candidate without actually having a precise knowledge of the state of the art of a specific field, therefore not being able to evaluate whether the publication being evaluated is based on a reworking, perhaps well done, with existing knowledge or, on the contrary, it presents significant innovative aspects (Capoferro, 2025).

#### 6. *ANVUR as the centralized Dominus of the “autonomous” and “entrepreneurial” university*

The Gelmini reform attributes to ANVUR (*Agenzia nazionale di valutazione del sistema universitario e della ricerca*), whose members from the academic world are appointed by the minister, the key role of evaluating and monitoring universities. A public law body with its own administrative and accounting autonomy, ANVUR is responsible for designing and implementing *ex ante*, ongoing, and *ex post* evaluations of the Italian higher education system. Through guidelines and prescriptions, i.e. secondary and tertiary regulations, it specifies in detail the qualitative level of performance to reward academic units (universities, departments, research centers) that achieve the best results, assuming a central role in strategic decisions affecting Italian universities: from the allocation of public funds to the accreditation of higher education institutions; from curricula to the formulation of productivity standards for recruitment and academic careers; from the criteria for establishing commissions for the ASN to the selection of scientific committees for the allocations of research grants (Cingolani, Fazekas 2020). Protocols and indicators that measure performance according to a ranking order have significantly modified the dynamics of university governance, orienting it towards formalized meritocratic and competitive logics

(Mateos-Gonzalez, Boliver 2019). The Sisyphus's effort of the Italian Government rhetorically evoked by skeptics to assure meritocratic criteria in university governance, seems to have come to fruition (Capano 2010). However, there is no shortage of fundamental contradictions in the management of the system set up by ANVUR. First of all, with a plethora of prescriptions and guidelines, most often stated in detail, ANVUR is increasingly configured as a top authority with the power to direct (or heterodirect) universities, essentially less and less “autonomous”. Furthermore, any type of template, including indicators and indices, first establishes the categories based on which to evaluate universities. They must adapt to these, establishing new offices specifically dedicated to optimize their performance in terms of specific scoring systems. For example, as a colleague told us, the University of Florence has equipped itself with software on the basis of which to select bibliometric publications for periodic evaluation of the quality of research. For non-bibliometric sectors, internal commissions within each department decide which publications to select, within a shortlist indicated by the author, in order to optimize the results based on the criteria indicated by ANVUR. Secondly, the requirements and forms prepared by the agency for the accreditation and quality assessment of universities constitute, as Gianfranco Viesti recalls, “an exercise capable of committing substantial university resources for months among both technical and teaching staff”, inevitably leading to a weighing down of procedures and a considerable expenditure of resources (Viesti 2018, 101). The evaluation of universities according to the procedures developed by ANVUR has led to a progressive shift from standard forms of funding (FFO: Ordinary Fund Funding) to reward-based approaches, based on the principle that universities that achieve better performance will have a greater share of resources available.<sup>2</sup> In detail, the FFO is divided according to three dimensions: a historical basis, that is, with respect to the previous costs incurred by each university; the standard costs per student established on a national scale; and, finally, reward mechanisms tied to universities' ranking on various indices of merit (ANVUR 2016). From the information we can gather from the ANVUR reports, the 2017 FFO for public universities was divided as follows: 24.5% based on the award share (within this, 80% based on the results of the VQR and 20% based on the quality of the research environment, teaching and internationalization summarized in the category: “Enhancement of responsible autonomy”); 20.7% corresponding to standard costs, 2% in the form of a pre-requative share and 52.4% according to the historical breakdown, all this for a total amount of public resources equal to 7.405 billion (ANVUR 2018). It should also be remembered that, based on some simulations carried out by the same agency, if the historical funding share were eliminated, equal to just over 50%, and the Ordinary Funding Fund were allocated according only to the two remaining items, 30% according to the VQR results and 70% based on standard student costs, we would have a significant reconfiguration of funding on a macro-regional basis.

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<sup>2</sup> The National Research Evaluation (VQR) is still the main mechanism regulating the reward share of public funding to universities. VQRs directly affect the amount of funds received by universities and departments, incentivizing quality and scientific productivity, through the Ordinary Financing Fund (FFO). Such funding can be obtained from universities and departments that, through evaluation processes that take into account various indicators in addition to publication productivity, receive rewards for the quality and excellence of research.

The 2015 FFO, with the new breakdown, would see an increase in funding to universities in the North-West (+ 1.5%), the North-East (+ 0.3), the South (+ 0.8%), while the Centre and the Islands would have a corresponding loss, equal to -1% and -1.8% respectively. The elimination of the share of “historical expenditure” would lead to a shift in resources to the benefit of the newly established universities for a total value of 1.8%, which would be lacking for the “historical” universities. The percentages just reported are between 1.8 and 2.6% depending on whether we are referring to the old and new universities or, alternatively, to the new distribution by macro-areas of the country. In absolute value, based on the State funding of universities in 2015 (7250 million), they correspond to a shift in resources from 130.5 to 188.5 million (ANVUR 2016).

Simulations, as one might imagine, are neither casual nor harmless. In fact, since the introduction of the Gelmini law and its implementing decrees, the FFO distribution criteria have changed. With a gradual increase of 2% from year to year, the FFO bonus fee has increased (which cannot exceed 30% of the total); the standard cost per student has been introduced with a gradual increase from 2 to 5% from year to year, which will gradually replace the “historical” fee criterion up to a maximum of 70%. Thus, as we can read in the latest ANVUR report (2023), the 2022 FFO, equal to a total of 8,656 million, was distributed according to the following items: 25.5% in the form of a “historical” share, 23.1% based on the standard cost, 27% according to the reward share (VQR and Valorization of responsible autonomy), 1.7% for equalization purposes and, finally, 22.6% has been tied to specific objectives, such as the recruitment of academic staff from foreign universities and extraordinary recruitment plans. Compared to the distribution ten years earlier, there has been a significant reconfiguration of resources, with a significant reduction in the historical share, the introduction of standard costs and an increase in the reward share. In 2012, the historical distribution criterion corresponded to 75.9 while the reward share corresponded to 12.4% (ANVUR 2023).

FFO was assigned to universities and departments through evaluation processes that took into account various indicators in addition to publication productivity and were rewarded for the quality and excellence of the research.

Regarding international competition, it can be observed that in Italy, if institutional evaluations (VQRs, ANVUR rankings) may have led to some reshaping of the relative prestige of institutions at the national level, it has barely affected the performance of Italian universities in the international rankings.

This is visible in the results of the international rankings, in which Italy is present at 98th place in the QS (The Quacquarelli Symonds World University Ranking, better known as QS) with the Polytechnic of Milan. Rome La Sapienza is among the top 150 institutions of excellence of ARWU (Academic Ranking of World Universities (also known as Shanghai ranking) and QS. The University of Bologna is among the top 150 positions in THE (Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE).

Another dimension of the NPM managerial focus on evaluation relates to the assessment of teaching organization and activities: that is the AVA system (Autovalutazione, Valutazione e Accreditamento, in English self-evaluation, evaluation and accreditation) implemented in 2013 and managed by ANVUR. AVA was introduced according to the document called “European Standards and Guidelines

for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)” (Ghiazza, Salviati 2020).

The evaluation of teaching in Italy has become institutionalized in the last fifteen years and it has progressively codified a set of guidelines and indicators to be applied to study programs. AVA has evolved through three phases: AVA 1 in 2014, AVA 2 in 2017, and AVA 3 in 2022, progressively increasing the number of domains and indicators to be monitored (De Luca 2024). In detail, each course of study conducts periodic self-assessment. New courses, or courses that have undergone changes, are subject to audits by external experts in order to obtain accreditation. Accreditation is given by the ANVUR after the intervention of special evaluation committees (Commissioni di Esperti della Valutazione, CEV) (Stura *et al.* 2019). This assessment covers elements such as curriculum design, learning outcomes, student services and quality assurance processes. Student evaluation questionnaires are also part of the assessment process. The results of the evaluation may require only minor adjustments, or they may even necessitate the closure of the programme (ANVUR 2023).

In the detailed analysis carried out by Stefano De Luca (2024) on the transition from AVA2 to AVA 3, there is a shift from a 4-11-34 scheme, where 4 corresponded to “Requirements”, 11 to “Indicators” and 34 to “Points of attention”. In the subsequent version, the scheme, with different names, is 5-39-84: 5 “Areas of assessment”, 39 “Points of attention” and 84 “Aspects to consider”. Not only that, but since in the AVA 3 version the “Points of attention” do not replace the indicators, the latter are present in a number of 37 as a further specification in the “Aspects to consider,” accompanied in turn, depending on the case, by “Other indicators” for a maximum of 9. Thus, «we have a sort of accordion movement which starts from the 5 areas of assessment, widens into 39 points of attention and expands into a further 84 aspects to consider, then contracts into 37 indicators and closes in 9 additional indicators» (De Luca 2024, 53). However, there is criticism of the excessive bureaucratisation of the models and the obsession with indicators and circular procedures, which, in fact, takes time and resources away from improving the quality of teaching (Perla 2024, De Luca 2024). Ministerial Decree 386/2007 (Minister Mussi), which marks the genesis of the AVA system, states:

«The focus of competition must shift to the quality of educational provision, as well as to the scientific productivity of institutions, verifying and measuring both through self-assessment by universities and external evaluation by ANVUR» (De Luca 2024).

Although teaching quality is formally part of national and internal evaluations, evidence suggests that it remains peripheral or is completely ignored when competing for positions such as the National Scientific Qualification or professorship (ANVUR 2023; De Luca 2024). Thus, the objective expressed in the Ministerial Decree has not been achieved.

The Ava system has virtually no influence on the allocation of funds, but it has imposed a heavy burden in terms of the resources required for auditing. The indicators are rather abstracts, ambiguous and for these reasons applicable to everyone (to every disciplinary sector). This aspect has prompted universities to make strategic use of indicators for the allocation of public funds.

Finally, with regard to the Third Mission, which is a typical expression of an autonomous, entrepreneurial, innovative university, the dominant role played in Italy by ANVUR in the system is considered by an OECD (not a radical anti-government organization) analysis on the development of the Third Mission in Italy to be more a centralistic, bureaucratic hindrance than a support.<sup>3</sup>

«Italian HEIs' capacity to engage is negatively affected by the vast regulatory framework they are subjected to as public bodies. Based on evidence collected in case studies, there may be a disconnect between the formal institutional autonomy of universities and the cumbersome regulations and specific (sometimes conflicting) incentives offered by the government. An example of this disconnect is that the evaluation system takes only into account the research performance of HEIs. It provides an adverse incentive for diversifying institutional strategies, de facto limiting the internal steering autonomy of universities. [...] Conversely, in Italy, the funding scheme emphasises research at the expense of other HEI missions. The current emphasis on scientific excellence at the level of individual entities and researchers is widely perceived to have a crowding-out effect on entrepreneurial and Third Mission activities» (OECD 2019, 161).

It is assumed that partly in response to the OECD's observations, the recent ASN draft law aims to enhance the Third Mission as an evaluation element for the evaluation and hiring of university professors.

One final point to consider is how staff numbers have changed since the Gelmini Law was introduced. Since then, Italian universities have systematically replaced permanent staff with fixed-term staff. In 2010, 57,449 full professors, associate professors and permanent researchers (RTI) were employed on a permanent basis, representing 81% of the total teaching and research staff. The remaining 19 per cent were represented by 13,109 research grant holders. As already mentioned, the Gelmini law exhausted RTIs and replaced them with two positions of fixed-term researchers: type A and type B fixed-term researchers (RTDA and RTDB). As of 2010, the gap between permanent and fixed-term staff is gradually widening: in 2020, there were 46,245 full professors/associate/RTDA/B representing 65% of the staff. Post-doc account for 22% of the total (15,849), RTDAs were 7% (5,192) and RTDBs the remaining 6% (4,616). Law 79/2022 abolished RTDA, RTDB, and research grants, introducing the role of RTT (Tenure Track Researcher) and the research contract. Both contracts are much more expensive than the previous ones. However, the law did not make any provision for extra resources to be allocated. Consequently, the previous figures were extended. The funds arriving at universities under the PNRR (a strategic public investment program aimed at providing recovery and resilience to the Italian economic system after the COVID-related crisis) reinstate the massive hiring of precarious staff, mainly post-doc researchers (*assegnisti di ricerca*) and RTDAs. Nowadays, the two roles are, in fact, becoming redundant. In the future is calculated that around 60,000 aspiring researchers (PhD, post-doc, RTDAs) will have the opportunity to apply for 7,000 fixed-term positions (research contracts envisaged by the MUR within the last regulations DD 47/2025) and 2,600 tenure-track positions, with optimistic forecasts (Roars, 2025,2). Thus, it is evident that the number of permanent staff has decreased drastically over time, and this trend is expected to continue in the future. Thus, out of eight researchers, one can aspire to a fixed-term

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<sup>3</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of the emergence of the Third Mission, please refer to the text Desideri, Landucci, Pezzoli 2025.

contract, while out of twenty-three, one can aim for a permanent contract. Rationalisation of expenditure has therefore had a significant impact on staff composition since 2010.

### *Conclusions*

The Italian university system, originally modeled on the Napoleonic system, has retained the peculiarity of centralization over time. In any case, we can speak of a transition towards autonomy; numerous attempts have been made. This process began during the 1980s and has continued to the present day. During this period, university governance has been oriented towards meritocratic and competitive logics, identifiable with the entrepreneurial governance model. These logics fall within a historical-cultural framework known as New Public Management. A crucial event in this process is represented by Gelmini Law no. 240 of 2010. Considering, for example, the funding provided by the MUR to the university system and the right to education between 2008 and 2013, we observe that all expenditure items decreased significantly in the years examined. This means that the transition to autonomy, yes, occurred following a top-down model, but at the expense of the students. As highlighted in the paragraph relating to the historical evolution of the Italian university system, the problems that afflicted the university system in the years '70, unfortunately continue to persist and persist. These include chronic underfunding and overcrowding of teaching spaces, as well as the high dropout rate and low percentage of graduates.

Therefore, the buzzwords such as quality, efficiency, effectiveness, transparency, and promotion of merit incorporated among the principles guiding the Gelmini Law 240/2010 find concrete application only in part. A part that does not concern students and the proportional ratio of the quantity of students enrolled/quality of infrastructure nor quantity of students enrolled/number of teachers. On the other hand, what has found greater implementation has been the rationalization of expenditures, observable in the reconfiguration of the top bodies and staff.

Furthermore, the allocation of public funds based on the productivity of academic staff has found its concrete application in the creation of the national scientific qualification. In addressing the initial research question, it is posited that, in practical terms, the governance of the Italian university system remains strongly conditioned by attitudes and practices the Napoleonic centralist tradition. In consideration of this situation, the system can be characterised as neo-centralist. Thus, the instruments of new public management (ANVUR; VQR; AVA) become essentially part of a self-referential strategic game of competition between universities for the allocation of national resources. The entrepreneurial aspect, linked to the ideology of NPM, has therefore been essentially implemented into this competition based on the strategical use of performance indicators established and governed by ANVUR. Instead of autonomy, we can therefore speak of "heteronomy," i.e., the subordination of each university to an external authority (the ministry and ANVUR systems of evaluations) (Casavecchia, Pitzalis, Poliandri 2025). The balance between academic freedom and external regulation has become increasingly precarious, with a significant impact on teaching, research, and the university's social role (Pitzalis 2001). At this point one might wonder whether the recent proposal of reform aimed at abolishing the ASN responds to the logic that inspired the Gelmini law or not. As it has been highlighted, some

elements of this reform appear to grant greater autonomy to universities and also enhance certain activities, such as teaching and third mission activities, for the purposes of evaluating and recruiting teachers. However, many grey areas remain, and only in the future will it be possible to verify the effects of this reform, in case it will be actually implemented.

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