The Delayed "Meta-Change" of the Italian University: the Way to Rationalization And The Challenge of Didactic Requirements

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Abstract: This essay focuses on the ongoing reformist process involving the Italian Universities and most importantly, the accreditation and evaluation of the didactic courses. To the fore is the progressive weakening of the didactic requirements, so as to introduce so-called "responsible autonomy" into our universities. The theoretical reflection on the current reformist process is developed in compliance with the European guidelines regarding the rationalization of the higher education systems (remarked in the communiqué of the Yerevan conference) and the sociological reflection on the post-modern universities. According to Vico, Habermas, Derrida and Bauman, universities should pose as cognitive, modern and inclusive spaces. In particular, Bauman's metaphor at the beginning of the Bologna Process on universities' meta-change provides interesting interpretative keys. The metaphor of meta-change, referred to post-modern education institutions, allows a better understanding of the difficulties that universities face such as the functional and cultural shifts peculiar to the liquid society. As a matter of fact, the revision of didactic parameters implies the need to satisfy the educational instances of the post-modern actors, submerged in the fluctuating complexity of our times.

Keywords: higher education reform, quality assessment, didactic rationalization, sociology of education

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Introduction. Universities and the mission of accreditation

The Italian University system is supporting an effective rationalization of didactic courses. The main purpose of the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research is to promote the challenge of assessment, efficiency and accountability in Universities. To the fore is the need to understand the consequences of the "meta-change" that is affecting our Universities in the era of globalization, as remarked by Bauman in reference to the advent of the individualized society.

The concept of "meta-change" has been emphasized by Bauman in reference to "the change in the fashion in which the situation is changing" in post-modern education (Bauman, 2001, p. 136). In the light of the deep educational and professional shifts engendered by complex society, the European higher education systems have joined the process of harmonization highlighted in the declaration of Bologna of 1989. Hence, a long series of decrees and reform laws aimed to rationalize our universities and implement the quality and reliability of both didactic and scientific activities. Specifically, universities must face the effects of the accreditation process of didactic activities, regulated by more draconian requirements in compliance with Law no. 240/2010 and ministerial decree no. 47/2013.

The boundaries of turnover limits and the cutback in public funds caused the lack of sustainability of these requirements. The application of the latter reveals the alleged incapacity of political and academic actors to interpret the "meta-change" of educational systems (Brown, 2009). Therefore, the current reform instance sheds a light on the definition of more sustainable educational requirements, despite the normative hypertrophy of the last decade and the need to support the quality assurance process. As a result, this paper focuses on the recent ministerial decree no. 987/2016, which is destined to weaken the teaching requirements to be observed by universities. In fact, the courses are now strictly bound to implement a curricular restyling which may lead to a significant rationalization of the educational offer. Hence, the opportunity to assess some effects of the current normative season, marked by the mission of quality and accreditation. In other words, this endeavor is bolstered in the light of a cultural renewal aimed to endow universities with a new capability to read the educational meta-changes of our postmodern times.

This is a crucial aspect effectively emphasized by Bauman in reference to the advent of the liquid University (Oxenham, 2013), anticipated by the negative myths of the university in ruins (Readings, 1996) and university of disaster (Virilio, 2009).

Bauman and the liquid University: the meta-changes of educational systems

It is tempting to say that the universities have fallen victim to their own perfect fit and adjustment; it just happened that what they adjusted to was a different, now vanishing, world. That was a world marked first and foremost by the slow, sluggish by present standards, flow of time. A world in which it took quite a while for skills to become obsolete, for specialisms to be relabeled as blinkers, for bold heresies to turn into retrograde orthodoxies, and all in all assets to turn into liabilities and for the spade to stop being a spade (Bauman, 2001, p. 136).

In one his most underrated books, *The Individualized Society*, Zygmunt Bauman has outstandingly depicted the slow but unstoppable process of decay that universities have undergone worldwide over the two last decades. This process of decay has multiple economic and cultural causes and various consequences at an educational level. To the fore is the weakening of both symbolic value and cultural heritage provided by tradition, according to the educational paradigms of a world becoming obsolete and irrecoverable.

The old method of linear transmission of knowledge was surpassed by the advent of a different way to conceive knowledge and culture, much more adherent to the perceptive and communicative paradigms of the digitalized society (Morcellini, 2013a; Boccia Artieri, 2012), encumbered by the anxiety (and need) of permanent connectivity. In such a social scenario, marked by the rapid shift of cognitive skills and assets, universities are required to provide legitimate educational expectations to their stakeholders (mainly students, families and businesses). Those expectations are moulded in compliance with the new interactional paradigms peculiar to the society of disorder described by Raymond Boudon in the Eighties (1984).

That same narrative was covered by Bauman just at the dawn of the twenty-first century, when the process of harmonization of European higher

education systems was spreading. He emphasized two historical drawbacks identified as the lack of convergence among the different educational qualifications and the sluggish international mobility that still nowadays plagues our university system. In the theoretical framework defined by his sociology of complexity, Bauman clearly analyzed the best practices and limits of the liquid university entangled in the functional shifts imposed by social, economic and cultural instability of our times. He changed the course of the analysis of postmodern education - especially on the university model – in order to enucleate the factors that led to the incapacity of universities to keep up with innovation. The dichotomy of medieval and postmodern university duly expresses the distance between two different worlds, linked together only by the institutional myth of knowledge and culture (Janin, 2008).

Bauman dwells on the transition from a social dimension ruled by manual ability, reflexivity and the sedentary way of life. The new existential mindset is regulated by automation, frenzy and mobility, turned into inalienable features of the consumer society already immortalized by Baudrillard (2017) in the Seventies. In fact, the quiet, cosy atmosphere of monastic scriptoria, where the *dictamen* was functional to the creation of handmade didactic texts (as outlined by McLuhan, 2011), has been replaced with the new space of the multimedial lecture hall or, in some cases, the virtual educational environment. Perhaps the transition from the manuscript to the typographic era was not so crucial from a functional point of view as was the transition from the electric to the digital civilization. In the past, universities had the chance to comply with the change according to a time reaction that was not so short, in the light of the advent of modern times.

The discovery of electricity and the consequent acceleration of scientific progress bolstered a technological development never seen before in the history of the human race. Nowadays temporizing implies the loss of perception of the ongoing innovations which ineluctably build our interactional mindset. This new modernity (underlined by Anthony Giddens, 1990) led to a quick transformation of schools and universities into educational agencies, compelled to take into account the way knowledge is conceived in the era of globalization. The ability to sense where the tide of change flows and how it might be exploited at a functional level appears as a real landmark of the current reform actions, both national and transnational. Tradition is no longer sufficient to

perpetuate an educational authority that lasted for a millennium, also thanks to the prestige of an institution that may still exploit an outstanding symbolic machine.

Of course, the symbolic identity of every institution is bound to be altered by the cultural shifts which regulate the social act, according to the appearance of new identity frameworks (Kerr, 2001). This reform path endowed universities with the interpretative advice necessary to face the new educational scenarios. The latter were naturally deeply modified by the diffusion of the digital mindset. In the meantime, the decline of traditional educational strategies implies times of reaction that are much more suitable to the functional instability of the liquid society. To the fore is the willingness to give up a vanished world, made of linearity, contemplation, study. Conversely, the liquid society represented by Bauman is made of synchronicity, improvisation, instability. This is why every reflection on the future of our universities (as Nietzsche remarked, 2009) cannot set aside the chance to consider how important the construction of a real culture of change may be:

> Such a world, let me repeat once more, is now vanishing, and the sheer speed of its vanishing is far in excess of the capacity for readjustment and redeployment the universities have acquired over the centuries. Besides, it is not just that the situation in which the universities operate is changing; the most difficult thing to cope with adequately is, so to speak, the "metachange" – the change in the fashion in which the situation is changing… (Bauman, 2001, p. 136).

The fading of the ancient academic world is also imputable to the lack of spirit of adaptability to any possible cultural or communicative shift, so relevant in terms of cognitive reactivity. Bauman is right when he points out that the contexts in which universities operate change more rapidly than the necessary countermeasures can be defined.

"Readjustment and redeployment" may pose as two of the potential keywords of any possible analysis of University reformism, suspended between rationalization and harmonization. The Italian higher education system is no exception, if we only consider the great number of normative actions advanced after the introduction of the double degree system. Starting from the declaration of Bologna in 1999, the increase of reformist initiatives produced such a normative hypertrophy that it led to a significant redundancy of norms, laws, notes and regulations. On the one hand, this

normative accumulation has implemented the rationalization of the academic services, including the degree courses, subjected to the respect of rigid requirements. On the other hand, the normative hypertrophy of the last two decades reflects the lack of political planning, replaced by the tendency to improvisation.

The absence of a political mindset can be explained by the lack of the meta-change that Bauman deals with. It is quite clear that the concept of the liquid university carried out by Bauman (2000) stems from the provisional nature of our society, ruled by the incessant replacement of symbolic and experiential paradigms. Likewise, in those years, both Morin (2001) and Derrida (2002) spread their philosophical vision to University reformism. Morin came up with the proposal of the reform of thought that should support an effective reform of the academic space. The latter is strongly linked to the vision of the well trained mind. Derrida highlighted the chance to construct a university without conditions, free to profess the endeavor of knowledge without influences, censorships, restrictions (Derrida, 2002).

It is needless to remark on the idealistic meaning of both proposals, whose application would require years and years of intellectual training. Furthermore, it is hardly necessary to mention that Bourdieu paid attention, in the Eighties, to the symbolic capital of the academic actors, whose task is often the reproducibility of their symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1988). His analysis of the post-modern university poses a very stimulating reflection on the self-reference of the academic actors, involved in their educational task to an extent functional to the preservation of their symbolic power. In such a shifting scenario, the focus on the postmodern university made by Bauman allows a better understanding of the reasons that led to the Declaration of Bologna.

It also helps us explain (from a sociological point of view) the logic of the "open" teaching in our universities that are now strictly bound to implement a curricular restyling (Campbell & Carayannis, 2013; Kuokkanen, 2007; Ford, 2002). This happens in compliance with the normative dispositions of some recent ministerial decrees. Their purpose is to weaken the didactic requirements and, more generally, reassess the state of controlled autonomy of the last decade. Rationalization can be an effective solution to solve the drawbacks of postmodern universities, in compliance with a wider planning strategy, freed from political, economic and personal conditionings. Bauman argues that rationalizing cannot be an existential advice, applicable for any aspect of daily life:

> What has been said here of the universities applies to present-day education as a whole. Coordination (perhaps even pre-ordained harmony) between the effort to "rationalize" the world and the effort to groom rational beings fit to inhabit it, that underlying assumption of the modern educational project, seems no longer credible. And with the hope of rational control over the social habitat of human life fading, the adaptive value of "tertiary learning" becomes all the more evident (Bauman, 2001, p. 138).

The modern educational project, based on the rationalization of life in all its aspects, still retains its obsolete heritage of an enchanted world. The spell has been broken by the extinction of the experiential reticulates belonging to tradition. The adaptation process involving women and men in the postmodern world failed because of the impossibility of learning and teaching complexity in all its aspects. In the era of liquid interactions higher education should provide the social actors with the necessary "adaptive value". This is possible on condition that people become aware of the meta-change that rules every attempt to cope with ongoing changes.

As regards our universities, the challenge of assessment and efficiency requires an effective strategy of adaptation. In our postmodern world new skills and competencies are required to probe our fluctuating environments. Understanding the meta-change would allow us to contrast the educational drawbacks of our digital times, by means of a constant and attentive capability of analysis. Bauman's insights shed an important light on the functional limits of our universities, swamped by political indeterminacy and stranded in perennial reformism (Lombardinilo, 2014; Masia & Morcellini, 2008).

The challenge of harmonization: from Vico to Yerevan

The topic of rationalization was already pointed out by Giambattista Vico in the Age of Enlightenment, in order to check the rationalist mindset bolstered by Cartesian thought. In the fragmentation of disciplines Vico sees one of the most relevant drawbacks afflicting the Neapolitan university, where he taught Rhetoric (Lilla, 1993). According to the philosopher, the fragmentation of disciplines stems from the process of specialization (both humanistic and scientific) and the increasing availability of typographic supports. The path to complexity is paved with a great number of discoveries, supporting the outstanding development of our

technological civilization. This furious process of mechanization takes root in the years that precede the outburst of the first industrial revolution.

The diffusion of Cartesian philosophy accelerates the tendency to specialization of scientific disciplines, bound to reduce the intellectual and social influence of the humanities (Naddeo, 2011). The result is a substantial separation among the disciplines, dragged back by a cognitive indeterminacy devoid of any solution of continuity: "Arts and sciences, all of which in the past were embraced by philosophy and animated by it with a unitary spirit, are, in our day, unnaturally separated and disjointed" (Vico, 1990, p. 76). The separation of disciplines was bolstered in compliance with the increase of knowledge and complexity, supported by the growth of the educational instances of the mechanized society. Hence, the appearance of the cognitive drawback that Morin and Beck focused on, in reference to the interactional phenomenology of the risk society (Beck, 1992).

Vico's considerations *On the Study Methods of Our Times* (written in 1709) makes us dwell on the "separated and disjointed" nature of our higher education system. Both separation and disjunction pose as two hypothetical keywords of any possible reflection upon the didactic reformism of the last two decades. This reformist tendency was inspired by the need to rationalize the didactic offer as much as possible. Rationalization implies the concept of harmonization. The Bologna Process aims to achieve it by means of the definition of common goals to be pursued throughout the European higher education systems (Enqa, 2016; Eua, 2016a; Regini, 2015). Harmonization is the remedy found to heal the fast decay of the postmodern university (Barnett, 2013; Brown, William, 2009; Cowen & Klerides, 2009).

To the fore is the lack of reactivity in facing the course of change. In the same way (but in different times and contexts) harmonization was the solution proposed by Vico to solve the drawbacks stemming from the Cartesian approach. This is why he appeals to professors' involvement in converging their didactic efforts into a shared educational planning:

> I would suggest that our professors should so co-ordinate all disciplines into a single system so as to harmonize them with our religion and with the spirit of political form under which we live. In this way, a coherent body of learning having been established, it will be possible to teach it according to the genius of our public polity (Vico, 1990, p. 77).

The utopia of a "single system" destined to include all the possible disciplinary declinations seems to be linked, for example, to Parson's functionalist approach to education. This is possible in the light of a method of studies posing as a drive for the American society in the age of the economic boom (Parsons, 1963). In the meantime, Vico's suggestions remind us of the perspective of the convergent knowledge constructed by Jenkins in reference to the advent of the digital civilization (Jenkins, 2006), let alone Vico's influence on McLuhan and Habermas. McLuhan developed the concept of University as a "market place", stranded by the pressures of economic and productive actors. In the same years the German sociologist proposes his own notion of University under a democracy alongside the outburst of the students' movement, in the wider context of the theory of communicative act (Habermas, 2009). Neither McLuhan nor Habermas neglected Vico's theory of historical courses and recourses.

On account of this, Vico's reflections on his cultural scenario shed a light on the cognitive development in Europe in the age of Enlightenment in accordance with the slow but ineluctable growth of mechanization. In the same way, Habermas's interest in the destiny of the European Union (2012 and 2009) is interlaced with the attention paid to the mechanization that permeates our risk society (2015). In the background is an end to national identities, overwhelmed by the overbearing influence of the transnational agencies. The education institutions are no exception, as implied in the European guidelines concerning the harmonization of higher education systems. Two centuries and a half after Vico's observations, the current European policies on education continue to be inspired by the instances of harmonization and rationalization, yet in a different scenario.

But the concept of harmonization implies the definition of common rules and shared goals. The latter have to be pursued without neglecting the importance that the right to study and the assessment of quality should have in a society increasingly competitive and hyper-specialized (Neave, 2012). The utopia of the university under a democracy matches the perspective of the open university, shaped according to the principles of flexibility, efficiency, performance. The process of harmonization bolstered by the Declaration of Bologna is founded on the compliance with common shared dispositions that the national governments have to transmit to every single university. Hence, the great quantity of normative actions that the Italian Minister of Education, University and Research promulgated in the last two decades (Capano, 2015; Valentini, 2013; Mazzoli, 2013; Moscati, 2012).

The effort aims to stimulate an effective reform path. The proliferation of degree courses and the excessive number of teaching contracts led to the introduction of severe procedures of accreditation. Three years later the enactment of ministerial decree no. 47/2013, the requirements imposed on universities for the accreditation of their courses (assessed and controlled by Anvur) were revised by ministerial decree no. 987/2016, preceded by decrees no. 1059/2013 and 194/2015 (modified by decree no. 168/2016). Apparently, these last normative actions should provide more freedom to universities in the management of courses, by reconsidering the didactic parameters for the accreditation (decree no. 47/2013).

In addition, it will be possible to acknowledge fixed-term researchers, adjunct professors and extraordinary professors among the teaching assets necessary to the subsistence of every course. This new normative deal seems to be inspired not only by the cutbacks in funds and the partial block in turnover, but also the need to safeguard the autonomy of universities. Their autonomy was strongly reduced by the normative hypertrophy of recent years. The goal of rationalization was clearly outlined by the European Commission. In particular, these achievements were remarked in the inter-ministerial meetings promoted by the Ministries of Education of the 47 countries taking part in the Bologna Process. These biennial meetings make it possible to check out the construction of the European Higher Education Area and highlight both goals and drawbacks of the current process of harmonization of universities. In this perspective, the Italian Minister of Education, University and Research fuelled a progressive weakening of the didactic requirements, so as to make universities much more responsible in terms of didactic management and quality assurance.

The recent decree no. 987/2016 modifies and abrogates the previous decree no. 47/2013. The latter sanctioned the start of the current process of accreditation and evaluation of university degree courses. The previous strict requirements are destined to become unbearable, especially because of the progressive reduction of financing and turnover. More specifically, the drastic decrease in the number of professors on contract (as stated in law no. 240/2010) caused the revision of decree no. 47/2013.

Nowadays, the new normative dispositions on accreditation permit universities to found their didactic services also on the fixed-term researcher. This new disposition attests that Universities are destined to respect more flexible didactic requirements. This is one of the purposes

determined by the inter-ministerial conferences of the Bologna Process, strengthened by the Education Ministries in the last conference held in Yerevan (2015, 14-5 May). The goal of international mobility mingles with convergence, harmonization (two ideas owed respectively to Jenkins and Vico) and inclusivity (outlined by Habermas in accordance with the sociological approach to university studies). This challenge deals with the quality and relevance of learning and teaching.

The academic actors ought to foster the employability of graduates throughout their working lives, by implementing the inclusion of agreed structural reforms (Rhoads & Szelényi, 2011; Znaniecki, 1994). Scholars cope with the social and cultural relevance of hyper-specialization and communicative dynamism. This is the wider scenario in which the goals of convergence and innovation are pursued in our university system, in compliance with the priority of shared rules and adequate assets. From this point of view, the communiqué drawn up in Yerevan emphasizes the strategic macro-context in which the project of the European Higher Education Area should take form.

Furthermore, the communiqué hints at the bureaucratic drawbacks engendered by the structural reforms in the single countries. It is not by chance that the Yerevan communiqué is mentioned in the premises of decree no. 987/2016, just in reference to the need to support structural reforms, in accordance with the general guidelines of the Bologna Process. Indeed, the new decree would contrast with the goal of de-bureaucratization outlined in the communiqué, despite the effort to back universities out of the state of controlled autonomy of the last years. This reformist framework was remarked by the Ministers of Education gathered in Yerevan:

> Together we are engaged in a process of voluntary convergence and coordinated reform of our higher education systems. This is based on public responsibility for higher education, academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and commitment to integrity. It relies on strong public funding, and is implemented through a common degree structure, a shared understanding of principles and processes for quality assurance and recognition, and a number of common tools (Yerevan communiqué).

To the fore is the definition of normative actions destined to support the functional renewal of our universities, in the light of a permanent attention to quality and sustainability. Freedom, autonomy and integrity are key words in a programmatic strategy inspired by a different functional

mindset. In the changing scenarios of our post-modernity, the transformation of academic space into an inclusive and free institution implies a reformist strategy that can no longer afford to trust in "voluntary convergence".

The normative centralization involving Italian Universities confirms that any possible convergence between administrative functions and didactic efficiency cannot set aside the definition of rules. The latter unavoidably risk reducing academic freedom in managing the emergency of adaptation. Despite the important results of the last decade, the voluntary convergence promoted by the Bologna Process risks implementing the bureaucratization of the academic procedure, with particular regard to accreditation and evaluation practices.

After all, the taxonomic anxiety that afflicts our universities conceals the deep awkwardness of most of our universities. In fact, they are engaged in an unproductive struggle for enrollments and public funds. This is an aspect that the Ministers of Education clearly emphasized in Yerevan, by paying attention to the drawbacks of hyper-reformism:

> Nonetheless, implementation of the structural reforms is uneven and the tools are sometimes used incorrectly or in bureaucratic and superficial ways. Continuing improvement of our higher education systems and greater involvement of academic communities are necessary to achieve the full potential of the EHEA. We are committed to completing the work, and recognize the need to give new impetus to our cooperation (Yerevan communiqué).

The construction of an open and inclusive community has to do with normative simplification and communicative clearness. These two factors are functional to opportunity to support the recognition of prior learning and ensure reliable and meaningful information on graduates' careers. In this sense, the reference to the Yerevan Conference in decree no. 987/2016 certifies the centrality of the harmonization and rationalization policies for the European higher education systems. To the fore is a new awareness of the effects of the normative paths promoted in every single country.

These features are expressed in the "European guidelines for the quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area adopted by European Ministries of Education in May 2015 during the Yerevan Conference, which modify the previous guidelines adopted in 2005 in Bergen". The legitimacy of the current reformist process, founded on the efficiency of

accreditation and rationalization, lies in the ability to turn the transnational inputs into reliable instructions. The latter might be functional to speed up a process of renewal that can no longer be delayed. The educational outcomes achieved between the two conferences of Bergen (2005) and Yerevan (2015) allow us to assess the progress made so far in the process of harmonization in Italy too. The challenge of rationalization has started a new deal, much more flexible, also in accordance with the insight in the Yerevan guidelines.

The progressive weakening of the didactic requirements fixed by decree no. 987/2016 seems to reveal a different approach to the renewal of academic space. The latter is destined to re-acquire the lost autonomy, provided that universities help in contrasting some dangerous drawbacks inherited from the past, above all, the lack of accountability and the loss of socio-cultural appeal.

"Flexible requirements": Ministerial Decree no. 987/2017 and the weakening of accreditation parameters

> Of equal importance and directly related to the definition of function in contemporary higher education is a critical examination of the way the education process is currently conducted. To a great extent, it appears that curricula and modes of instruction are inordinately influenced by the traditional regimes of graduate instruction. They may or may not be adapted to the particular educational function being performed and, at times, do not even reflect an understanding of the manner in which learning occurs (Dungan, 1970, pp. 146-147).

This is what Ralph A. Dungan pointed out in 1970 in an essay entitled *Higher education: The Effort to Adjust*, collected in a volume edited by Grabaurd and Ballotti, *The Embattled University.* To the fore is the crisis of American Universities, analyzed in the same years both by Habermas and McLuhan. The paragraph of Dungan's essay from which the above text is quoted deals with "Curricula and the Mode of Higher Education". The effort of adjustment is linked to the socio-economic and political factors that permeate any single functional system. This is an aspect that Talcott Parsons previously outlined in reference to the American higher education practices (Parsons, 1959).

In the same way, the effort towards harmonization implies the attempt to adjust and contrast the drawbacks of flexibility afflicting our liquid society. Richard Sennett remarked the consequences of new capitalism on personal lives (Sennett, 1998). According to the sociologist, harmonization aims to contrast both political improvisation and cognitive instability, to the extent that rules might be shared and applied on a large scale. Dungan's point of view can be exploited as a mere suggestion, useful to focus our attention on the effort to fit curricula to the real professional and cognitive instances of society. This is why any reform project must take into account the potential didactic and educational outcomes, rather than imposing centralized indications. The risk is of implementing the level of bureaucratization and functional complexity.

In Yerevan the Ministers deliberated to "review national legislations with a view to fully complying with the Lisbon Recognition Convention". This is one of the main commitments outlined by the Ministers of Education, so as to facilitate the convergence of every nation and remove the bureaucratic obstacles that hamper the way to simplification and transparency. As regards the Italian reformist process, decree no. 987/2016 (*Self-evaluation, evaluation, initial and periodic accreditation of university venues and degree courses*) modifies and replaces decree no. 47/2013. It defines the new criteria for accreditation of the degree courses and introduces (in an experimental way) the so-called professional degrees. The new courses will be active starting from the academic year 2017/2018. The first experimentation will involve the existing didactic systems and only some degree classes. The courses will have restricted entry (no more than 50 students will be admitted for each course) and will involve a fair number of tutors belonging to the businesses engaged in the formative paths.

The decree provides for the increase of training experiences and professional experiences. In addition it weakens the teaching bonds (50% and above): "the formative project is developed through agreements with either skilled firms or their associations or professional orders which ensure the acquisition of at least 50 cfus and no more than 60 cfus in activities of curricular stages, also in reference to the basic and characterizing activities" (Art. No. 8, Par. No. 2a).

The decree defines the criteria that universities must comply with to be certified. Each university may propose no more than one course a year. No later than the first year after being graduated, at least 80% of students must be employed, on pain of the non-accreditation of the course for the

academic year 2021/2022. Furthermore, the decree confirms some dispositions of the previous decrees nos. 1059/2013, 194/2015 and 168/2016. They allow the fixed-term researchers, the adjunct professors and the extraordinary professors to be reckoned among the teaching points necessary for the subsistence every single course.

In particular, the start of professional courses was announced with satisfaction by the President of the Conference of the Italian Rectors. He actively contributed to the definition of the new educational paths. In the sitting of December 21, 2016, President Gaetano Manfredi outlined that: "We are on the right path. Universities and companies have been interacting with each other for decades to guarantee the cultural, economic and social development of our country. Students increasingly ask for curricular training and less theoretical educational opportunities. From now on we have a reference framework which helps us foster the collaboration between universities and productivity. This was possible by means of the attentive work in the territory and not only through the initiative of single actors. From now on we have shared parameters which will aid students and families to chose the degree course. This is an experimentation which must be checked, analyzed and assessed seriously and with transparency".

The normative dispositions stated in decree no. 987/2016 seem to fuel the responsible autonomy defined by ministerial decree 635/2016, concerning the *Guidelines of programming of universities (2016-2018)*. In the wider framework of the "responsible autonomy" of universities, the decree aims to improve outcomes, renew didactic methodologies, and to provide awards for merit. In accordance with guidelines of the normative measure, universities should pursue those four macro-purposes through the application of specific Indicators (attached to the decree). At a programmatic level, the decree considers the economic and functional sustainability of universities. This goal might be pursued in compliance with the revision of accreditation procedures defined by the decree no. 47/2013.

These actions count on the real sustainability of universities, both economic and formative, in an historical phase marked by the reduction of funds, the shutdown of the turnover, the decrease in enrollments. As regards the "Improvement of outcomes achieved in programming 2013-2015" (Purpose A), the actions promoted by universities concern both in/out and ongoing tutoring and the empowerment of international degree courses. In reference to the "Modernization study and research spaces"

(Purpose B) the decree takes into account the availability of didactic and research equipment, the renovation and safety of classrooms and laboratories, the strengthening of students' "transversal skills".

In reference to the "Young researchers merit grants for teachers" (Purpose C), the decree fuels the allocation of type A contracts for tenured lecturers, support for the mobility of professors and researchers, and the integration of the award fund for professors. The outcomes will be checked year by year and assessed at the end of the triennium. The achievement of the "Responsible autonomy of universities" has a particular relevance (Purpose D, paragraph 5). The Ministry allocates 20% of the award fee of the Ordinary Financing Fund (FFO). This fee is destined for universities in accordance with the outcome of improvement concerning Indicators independently chosen (among those indicated in the attachment no. 2). They concern the quality of research spaces (group 1), the quality of didactics (group 2) and the strategies of internationalization (group 3).

The initial and periodic accreditation of courses and seats are another relevant feature of the decree (Paragraph 6). It will be forbidden to create new universities (both public and private, except through mergers), for the academic years 2017/2018 and 2018/2019. Universities can extend the basic or characterizing activities to further scientific-disciplinary sectors (defined by the decrees on the new degree classes dated March 16, 2007). This chance will be provided in compliance with the formative purposes of the corresponding class, after the acceptance by MIUR and CUN.

This concession is aimed to "strengthen the attractiveness of universities on an international scale and their relationship with the labor market when providing international courses. The same outcome will be pursued for the other courses within the limit of three plus 10% of the didactic offer" (Par. 6, comma 2). In reference to the accreditation and promotion of degree courses, universities will have the opportunity to start up four kinds of courses: conventional (in attendance), mixed mode (no more than two-thirds in e-learning mode), full or partial e-learning.

The indicators for accreditation of courses (appropriateness of the teaching staff, tutors and structures) will be "opportunely differentiated in accordance with the specificity of the didactic activities". The former Minister of Education, University and Research, Stefania Giannini, pointed out that: "The new triennial planning assesses the responsible autonomy of universities and aims to make our university system more innovative and competitive. The purpose is to make our universities much more

specialized in accordance with the purposes they will decide to pursue. Our country does not need more universities. We will have more flexible rules in the construction of the degree courses, so as to make them more appealing to the job market. We will involve universities in the new mode to distribute the award funds, which will take into account the features of southern Italy".

These are some of the purposes of the new accreditation actions involving Italian universities, engaged in the attempt to speed up the advent of a more responsible autonomy. To the fore is the flexibility of didactic requirements - autonomy, efficiency, evaluation are the three cornerstones of the flexible university of our times, swamped by the dizzy shifts of the society of disorder (Boudon, 1984).

The drawbacks of flexibility: the (lacking) reinvention of university

> The system of power which lurks in modern forms of flexibility consists of three elements: discontinuous reinvention of institutions; flexible specialization of production; and concentration of power without centralization. The facts which fall under each of these categories are familiar to most of us, rather than arcane; it is harder to assess the personal consequences of these facts (Sennett, 1998, p. 47).

In his volume published in 1998, *The Corrosion of Character*, Richard Sennett pointed out how great the changes are connected to the advent of the so called flexible man. The latter is stranded by the illusions moulded by the interactional and economic instability of our post-modernity. Basically, flexibility is the consequence of the fleeting nature of existence, in the times of provisional balances, fuelled by the tumultuous replacement of traditional symbolic patterns.

Allegedly, the educational institutions are engaged in this challenge of identity "reinvention" required by the cognitive upheaval, therefore a symbol of the web society. Nevertheless, flexibility has become a fundamental feature of our times, with particular regard to the provisional dimension of the labor market. As a consequence, higher education systems can no longer neglect the employment emergency that afflicts the liquid society underlined by Bauman (2001).

Somehow he foreran the idea of a flexible society proposed by Sennett at the end of the nineteenth century. The latter copes with the concept of the

"flexible power" of institutions, compelled to exploit the power system embedded in the "modern forms of flexibility" mentioned by Sennett. In particular, the "concentration of power without centralization" would better fit the reformist process of higher education, in accordance with the harmonization process bolstered by the Bologna Process. The construction of the utopian concept of harmonized university is founded on democracy, inclusivity, mobility, freedom of research and teaching (in some measure foretold by Habermas and Derrida).

These features are also inspired by the necessity of "readjustment and redeployment" remarked by Vico long before the advent of the connected civilization. Furthermore, the recent ministerial decrees show how relevant the centralizing influence of the Ministry is, as regards (at least) the planning of the didactic courses. The aim is to fund universities more accurately and rapidly, so as to re-gain the institutional functional appeal of the past.

This endeavor implies a different administrative and cultural mindset and professors are also destined to bolster a new - more efficient - way of teaching. To the fore is the need to make quality the real hallmark of our innovation (despite the lack of relevance for the competitive exams). The progressive increase of fees allows students to claim a worthwhile educational experience, guaranteed to be abreast of the times. This is what Biggs and Tang point out in reference to the teaching strategies for quality learning:

> Now that students have to pay higher fees, they will be likely to demand high profile programmes that are well taught and will enhance their employment prospects. Those who can, will shop around to find the right one for them. Some, using the logic that education is a commodity to be bought, feel that having paid for a degree they are entitled to be awarded one. The pressures on staff are complex: to teach in a student-friendly manner, but that may encourage them to lower standards. Such downward pressures, in some celebrated cases, have also emanated from administration, because of the funding implications of failing students (Biggs & Tang, 2011, p. 2).

The emphasis on the economic role of students calls for the balancing-out of the quality of didactic services with the administrative efficiency. Universities are still trying to interpret the changing scenarios drawn by the ongoing complexity. Readjustment and redeployment match with flexibility

and decentralization, in compliance with the need to contrast the oppressive normative hypertrophy.

Educational inclusivity of students should be achieved by means of the assessment of didactic strategies. In this sense, the notion of constructive alignment well expresses the attempt to link quality and proficiency in higher education policies. This is why it is possible to point out that "Good teaching supports those activities that lead to the attainment of the intended learning outcomes, as in constructive alignment" (Biggs & Tang, 2011, p. 29).

Such a cultural shift implies the training of educative actors provided with an innovative mindset, more open to cognitive flexibility. These are some of the problems connected to the meta-change that Bauman deals with, in order to explain the chronic delays of the higher education systems of the three last decades. This is what Dungan wrote in 1970: "Despite our protestations about pluralism and multi-functionality, we tend on the whole in higher education to do essentially the same thing with quite divergent degrees of quality. In general, we have not adapted either institutional structure or curriculum to the large and increasing varieties of needs of the individual or the society" (Dungan, 1970, p. 143).

Dungan carried out his survey a few years after McLuhan's premonition of universities turned into market-places (Logan, 2010; Levinson, 1999). The multi-functionality of the higher agencies nowadays is a permanent outcome, not so easy to achieve in public institutions swamped by the excess of bureaucracy and centralism. Accreditation and evaluation can no longer be differed, especially because of the strong competition involving higher institutions on a global scale. In this sense, the "flexible specialization of production" outlined by Sennett in reference to the downfall of the public man may involve economic actors as well as educational professionals. Their assets might become obsolete in the scenario of the ever connected society. The metaphor of the flexible society mingles with the vision of an inclusive community, potentially nourished by the coordinated action of both professors and students.

The economic instances spread by capitalism strongly influence the educational strategies that universities fuel so as to manage the decay of modernity described by Lyotard (1979). Sennett effectively highlighted the counter-circuit caused by the transformation of universities into labor markets. Furthermore, multi-functionality implies an attentive focus on the reticular mindset moulded by the diffusion of the web society:

> The cornerstone of modern management practice is the belief that loose networks are more open to decisive reinvention than are pyramidal hierarchies such as ruled the Fordist era. The join between nodes in the network is looser, you can take away a part, at least in theory, without destroying other parts. The system is fragmented, therein lies the opportunity for intervening. Its very incoherence invites your revisions (Sennett, 1998, p. 48).

In compliance with Sennett's reflection, we can point out that fragmentation usually provides the chance to modify and improve the functional systems, especially in the age of multi-functionalism and hyper-specialization. According to the patterns of the flexible society, institutional actors should exploit the weak points of functional systems, so as to make any potential restoration possible. When the "system is fragmented" any possible improvement is related to the ability to focus on the best practices and drawbacks featuring the economic dynamics. The latter are strictly linked to the adjustment of the cognitive skills and it might be argued that incoherence itself may be an advantage in terms of improvement and rationalization.

The metaphor of flexible society might be referred also to the ongoing attempts of adjustment that the higher educational systems support to speed up the process of harmonization. Furthermore, Sennet's reflection on the corrosion of character may result so close to Bauman's theory of the individualized society. Therefore, education poses as a fundamental feature of the innovation path bolstered by progress and globalization. The metaphor of the individualized society is also inspired by the ongoing fragmentation of interactional practices, although the permanent connectivity that permeates the everyday digital life. This is particularly true for educational environments, marked by the incumbent risks of cognitive obsolescence:

> Inefficiency or disorganization does not mean, however, that there is no rhyme or reason to the practice of sharp, disruptive change. Such institution reorganizations signal that change is for real, and as we know only too well, the stock prices of institutions in the course of reorganization thereby often rise, as though any change is better than continuing on as before. In the operation of modern markets, disruption of organizations has become profitable. While disruption may not be justifiable in terms of productivity, the short-term returns to stockholders provide a strong incentive to the powers of chaos disguised by that seemingly assuring word

> "reengineering". Perfectly viable business are gutted or abandoned, capable employees are set adrift rather than rewarded, simply because the organization must prove to the market that it is capable of change (Sennett, 1998, p. 51).

In the light of our multi-functional priorities, the purpose of academic actors concerns the opportunity to preview the incoming cognitive scenarios. This endeavor requires a new functional mindset, more modern and innovative than in the past. The essential condition to win this tough challenge means analyzing both the changes and meta-changes that characterize the multi-functional dimension of universities. Rationalization should be a tool and not a purpose of the reformist process in which European universities are involved.

This is why Bauman remarked that "the effort to 'rationalize' the world and the effort to groom rational beings fit to inhabit it, that underlying assumption of the modern educational project, seems no longer credible". For this reason academic actors need a sheer meta-changing mindset, destined to ease the escape from crisis conditions:

> The world to which the institution adjusts leaves its imprint on the shape of the institutionalized routine, on the monotony of pattern reproduction. But it also shapes the institution's way of coping with crisis, reacting to the change in the environment, articulating problems and seeking solutions. Whenever they are in crisis and well before the nature of the crisis has been fathomed and understood, institutions tend to resort instinctively to their repertory of tried and thus habitualized responses (Bauman, 2001, p. 137).

Nowadays, the tendency to symbolic and power reproducibility is hampered by the loss of the ancient authority as the blurred heritage of a stranded world, encumbered by the speed of progress. However, the empowerment of the current reformist process would allow our universities to develop a new functional awareness founded on rationalization and harmonization. The progressive weakening of didactic requirements and the introduction of professional courses aim to accelerate the transition from the current limited autonomy to the responsible autonomy required by the convergence society (Jenkins, 2006).

The purpose is to fathom the fleeting nature of our digitalized communities: "Because they are temporary, these communities form and disband with relative flexibility. Because they are tactical, they tend not to

last beyond the tasks that set them in motion" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 57). To the fore is the acquisition of a meta-changing mindset needed to face the fall-out of productive and technological devices. This is one of the main endeavors of the embattled universities of our times, suspended between flexibility and efficiency.

Conclusion

The metaphor of meta-change, referred to the higher education institutions, may facilitate a better understanding of the drawbacks afflicting universities in the era of interconnected knowledge and digitalized interactions (Willets, 2017). The rationalization of the university system cannot neglect the revision of didactic parameters, in accordance with the educational shifts bolstered by our fluctuating complexity.

As mentioned before, Bauman's metaphor on universities' meta-change may help us understand how the university changes in compliance with the metamorphosis of our world. To the fore are the effects of the "politics of Visibility" described by Beck in reference to the digital revolution, also involving "the ways of interaction and communication in today's schools" (Beck, 2016, p. 136).

The meta-change concerns universities and their legacy dating back to their birth in the Middle Ages, as Sennett cleverly points out: "Universities could easily be – and often were – renegotiated about what they did and where they did it, as changing circumstances dictated; they were economic instruments set in time" (Sennett, 1994, p. 203). In the era of interconnectedness, universities must face the ongoing shifts through the challenge of social renegotiation, didactic rationalization, quality assessment and research evaluation (Borrelli, 2015).

These outcomes should be neither delayed nor hampered by bureaucratic shackles or self-reference. The academic actors face the need to interpret the meta-change of our university system in the light of scientific and cultural requirements engendered by the globalization of our cultural skills (De Martin, 2017).

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