

tions. This direction reflects Carnegie's new ideological commitments, and it will inevitably mean that the most useful classification of academic institutions will be much less valuable for understanding the complexity of the American academic system. Where institutions and others could informally "benchmark" themselves against specific categories of colleges and universities, this will no longer be possible.

What Is To Be Done?

Large, complex, and differentiated academic systems need measurements of institutional characteristics and roles. Such measures will, in a sense, be de facto rankings. But the original goal of the Carnegie Classification, to define the entire U.S. academic system by role and function was a valuable

exercise and succeeded, despite criticisms, in generally being accepted as reasonably objective. Similarly, Britain's quality assessment efforts that resulted in informal "league tables" were useful.

More precise definitions of the various functions of academic institutions are needed, to be followed by an objective categorization of academic institutions within countries and perhaps regions. Thoughtful classification of academic institutions can help prospective students choose the most appropriate institution, provide institutional categories to guide institutional planning as well as funding, and introduce some rationality into analyzing the increasingly complex array of academic institutions that characterize many national systems. ■

Italy: A Hard Implementation of a Comprehensive Reform

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There have been many attempts to introduce reforms in the Italian higher education system, especially after the 1960s, when social demand exploded in Italy as it did everywhere else in Europe. At that time, a strong egalitarian philosophy prevented the introduction of diversification at the postsecondary level and resulted in the implementation of a complete open-door recruiting policy. Thereafter, the university operated according to the principles of a centralized administrative system (the French model), with academic power channeled through chair holders (the German model), in pursuit of the traditional task of the reproduction of elites. Over the years, the lack of any institutional relationship with the labor market and with society, together with the system's poor level of productivity (high dropout rates and graduation rates barely reaching 40 percent of those enrolled) made clear the need for reform. Some attempts at reform came from the world of politics (the political leaders becoming more and more worried by the "peculiarity" of the higher education system), but these were counteracted by the academic powers that be. Only in the 1990s did some measures undertaken by the government become effective. Basically, these affected the universities' budgets—for the first time giving individual institutions a lump sum every year to be administered independently and linking a small (but growing) percentage of it to the institutional performance (number of on-time graduates per number of students enrolled and so on). Since then, the principle of autonomy for each individual university grew progressively, together with the concept of evaluation of academic performances.

The New Reform Project

In 1996, the then minister of education, Luigi Berlinguer, created two special commissions for the study of a comprehensive reform of the entire education system. The one devoted to tertiary education proposed a project that introduced several innovations intended to increase the productivity of the system, reduce the average length of studies (normally well above the established standards), and differentiate postsecondary tracks in relation to the labor market and the new professions. The first and most relevant change included the creation of a binary system with a university track made up of a three-level structure of courses and degrees: first level, *laurea*, after a three-year curriculum; a second level, *laurea specialistica*, after a two-year curriculum; and a third level, *dottorato di ricerca* (Ph.D.), after another three years of studies—together with a parallel postsecondary professional track to be organized outside the university at the regional level. In addition, the curriculum of each field was divided into a core group of disciplines to be found at all universities and a second group to be structured independently by each university to enhance its autonomy as an institution. A second step was the introduction of a credit system and the European Transfer Credit System to make individual curricula more flexible and to ease the creation of continuing education programs.

Third, the development of a real national system of evaluation was established, with evaluation offices at each university coordinated by a National Committee of Evaluation. The members of this body were nominated by the ministry but given the task of independently carrying out evalu-

ations of universities, visiting them regularly and distributing incentives and rewards to the best-performing departments. Finally, an organized network of tutoring and counseling was created to assist students in making choices about postsecondary education during the early period of their studies.

The project was discussed for several months by groups of academics nominated by the disciplinary associations to decide on ways of implementing it within the different fields. Subsequently, a number of laws and governmental decrees were passed—in the years 1999 and 2000—reproducing (with some changes) the basic principles of the committee's document.

Resistances

This current academic year (2001–2002) has seen the first phase of reform implementation. However, some instances of resistance became visible as early as last year within the academic world over restructuring of curricula. A number of criticisms were raised concerning the reduction of the duration of the first level by academics, especially in the humanities. In fact, many critics maintain that cutting the traditional length from four to three years will make it impossible to provide adequate science and cultural backgrounds to students. The structuring of the second level of courses led to an incredible proliferation of tracks, some quite peculiar, but in fact representing attempts by prominent members of the faculty to have their own “specialized” tracks. In addition, it has been very difficult to distinguish the number of credits assigned according to the relevance of courses since no one was ready to admit that his or her own course was less challenging, relevant, or difficult (i.e., less important) than the others.

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Risks

This kind of resistance points to the main risks that are endangering the success of the reform. Clearly, those sections of academia most insulated from the changing demands of the outside world are also those that are resisting the reforms since what counts for them is the internal academic world and its logic. Not surprisingly, the resistance is coming not from the applied sciences but rather from the soft sciences, the considerable cultural and scientific traditions of which are not challenged by a changing society. At the same time, the autonomy of the individual university is a relatively new development for a traditionally

centralized system, and thus the professional identity of many members of academia still comes more from their disciplinary field than from their academic institution. Last but certainly not least, not all academics have accepted the idea that at least the first level of the university track should be intended for the majority of the students and not for the top minority (the future elite).

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As a result, the danger is that there will be only a cosmetic change in the structure but not in the content of curricula. Consequently, at the end of the first level no student will have attained an adequate training for any professional activity whatsoever and will be almost compelled to go on into the second level of courses, thus de facto stretching university studies from four to five years (consequently, increasing the number of academic places—to the benefit of academia).

Positive Aspects

Nevertheless, the picture is not as dark as it might have been considering the traditional resistance toward change in the Italian academic world. Some positive aspects can be detected from the broad involvement of academics (to a greater extent, but not only, in the hard applied sciences) in the challenging work of restructuring the old curricula and of introducing counseling and tutoring activities. In particular, the large majority of rectors and deans favor the implementation of the reforms. At least, they have the feeling that too much time and effort have already been invested to stop and give up now, even if the new government seems not to be very fond of any innovations introduced by the previous administration. The positive attitude toward reform is the result of several factors including links with the international academic domain (the European Conference of Rectors has probably affected the Italian body); the internationalization of many scientific fields; and the growing impact of the idea of Europe, which in the academic world erodes the traditional consciousness of “being different.”

Under these circumstances, the real danger to successful reform may not come as much from inside academia (as in the past) as from the undeclared opposition of the government, which seems unwilling to give support to higher education and to scientific research in the form of financial resources.