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# Academic degree recognition

Italy vs U.S.

# The Issue (1)

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- Academic degrees in Italy possess “legal value”:
- Only legally recognized degrees entitle citizens to access high-level positions in Public Administration (PA), to work as experts and consultants in PA, to exercise qualified professional activities, to become teachers and University professors.
- Therefore public supervision and control must be exerted not only on Italian (public and private) institutions releasing academic degrees but also on the process of foreign degree recognition.

# The Issue (2)

- The Bologna process and related reforms may have worsened the situation, because the number of academic degrees was increased and comparison is sometimes made harder.
- Italian degrees now range from first level “*laurea*” (three academic years) to second level “*laurea magistrale*” (two additional years), possibly followed by “*dottorato di ricerca*” (Ph.D.), requiring three more years.
- Also “university master” courses exist and are regulated by law, but the corresponding degrees have no “legal value” and are therefore not subject to recognition procedures.

# Recognition procedure (1)

- Foreign degrees may be accepted as equivalent to the “*laurea*” or to the “*laurea magistrale*” by any individual University releasing the corresponding Italian title.
- Once recognized, equivalence holds nationwide.
- Italy subscribed the European convention (1990) on the equivalence of study periods and the Lisbon Convention (1997) *on the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education in the European region*.
- There is however no general equivalence table.
- Bilateral agreements with individual States have been signed, but such procedure works only for Countries with strict legislation on academic degree release.

# Recognition procedure (2)

- In practice each request is treated individually, with attitudes that may change according to University and discipline and may also change in time.
- In typical cases individual curricula are compared with local standards, and integrations may be requested, in the form of exams to be passed. As a consequence the final examination must often be repeated.
- Strictly speaking this is not a declaration of equivalence, rather an agreement that part of the Italian study program has been performed abroad and need not be repeated.
- Usually things are made much easier when the original degree ranks higher than the requested one.

# Recognition procedure for Ph.D. (1)

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- The status of Ph.D. in Italy is quite peculiar.
- Ph.D. has not, at present, a “legal value” comparable to that detained by lower degrees when referred to the possibility of getting contracts and positions in PA.
- Nevertheless, there is a strong tendency to turn the Ph.D. title into a legal precondition for University careers (not compulsory until 2015).
- As a consequence the validation process is assumed (especially by academic subjects) to need more stringent and accurate protocols.

# Recognition procedure for Ph.D. (2)

- Italian recognition of foreign doctoral degrees follows a path quite different from the “*laurea*” procedure.
- The only Authority entitled to Ph.D. recognition is the *National University Council* (C.U.N.), an elective body mainly composed by University professors of several different disciplines.
- Rules are rather strict:
  - the foreign Ph.D. program must not be less than three years long;
  - candidates must exhibit a Ph.D. thesis;
  - institutions releasing the title must be unambiguously characterized as Universities and must enjoy some kind of international credit.

# Recognition of U.S. degrees (1)

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- On purely formal grounds, and taking into account the typical times required for completion of curricula, one might compare Italian and U.S. degrees according to the following scheme:
- Bachelor's degree -> *Laurea*
- Master's degree -> *Laurea magistrale*
- Doctorate (Ph.D.) -> *Dottorato di ricerca*



# Recognition of U.S. degrees (2)

- In practice it is somewhat difficult to match the Italian approach, based on legal identification of authorized institutions and nationally screened and approved curricula, with U.S. accreditation procedures, based on quality checks and leaving to individual institutions much greater freedom of choice both in their internal organization and in their educational strategies.
- C.U.N. tends to act (somewhat surreptitiously) as an Italian Accrediting Agency for U.S. (and other) higher education institutions, or at least for the degrees they release. The international experience of most C.U.N. members is instrumental in the formation of consensus.

# Equivalence of academic positions (1)

- A special problem is posed by recent legislation offering Italian Universities the possibility to recruit in permanent positions foreign-based (tenured) professors and researchers without going through the traditional “*concorso*”, once the “equivalence” of their foreign positions to Italian ones has been ascertained, and once a quality check of the candidate (and of his/her present institution) has been performed.
- C.U.N. is in charge of validating the equivalence and of establishing commissions in charge of quality checks.

# Equivalence of academic positions (2)

- In principle one might expect that an equivalence table could be easily established according to the scheme:
- (full) professor -> *professore ordinario*
- associate professor -> *professore associato*
- assistant professor -> *ricercatore universitario*
- In practice we are again faced with a variety of situations, related to different denominations, different roles and different qualification of institutions, especially when considering U.S. Universities whose quality ranges from absolute world primacy to little more than high school level.

# Equivalence of academic positions (3)

- In the recent past C.U.N. has accepted tenure-track assistant professors in highly qualified U.S. institutions to be considered equivalent to Italian associate professors.
- It is not obvious that such an informal (albeit substantial) classification may be maintained, in view of the need of enforcing the equivalence table in the form of a Decree issued by the Ministry, and also in view of other more or less comparable situations that may be evoked and not always easily classified (instructors, senior scientists, ...)
- Some help offered by experts of the U.S. academic system might be quite useful.

# Conclusions

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- The Italian University system (and not only it) is used to make confidence on a correct definition of the formal procedures, taken as a substitute for the assumption of personal responsibility by public servants and for a strong motivation towards higher performances,
- As long as this happens, it will not be easy to insure the possibility of a mutual recognition of values, that should be essentially based, in our view, on a comparison of real competences and achievements.

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