

Title

How universities react to new rules: a comparison between Spain and Italy about evaluation tools

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Abstract

Introduction

Spain and Italy both are examples of countries whose legacy in terms of academic world is clearly defined by the personal influence of senior scholar and the legal framework of civil servants. As the quest for more accountability to the national State, or other public spenders, is getting a binding factor, especially during this structural financial crisis, the academic system has elaborated, mainly at national levels, new ways to trigger self-responsibility upon how resources are invested and how universities may or ought to propel new kind of spending and fund raising.

This mix of cutting funds and at the same time new pushes and focuses of a kind of “value for money” which means basically scientific productivity are generating deep changes in the long period. Nonetheless in the short period systems may react in order to: *i)* lessen the impacts, *ii)* postpone the constraints toward the younger cohorts, *iii)* change practices to avoid actual changes; *iv)* use asymmetric awareness to create better knowledge to respect to other competitors (for instance different departments in the same university) and get advantages in the game with new rules.

Evaluation to this regard is assumed as one of the driving mechanisms, that may have different actual outcomes according to country national legislations and institutional asset (i.e. agencies in charge to manage and implement rationales in terms of decision making which are nested and implied in evaluation exercises and practices). The different timing and milestone by which the two nations under investigation developed let nonetheless observe different kind of reactions and even different stages of this still on-going change. More interestingly, Italy and Spain look to have generated slightly different paths of actual implementation for the organizational and scientific community point of view.

Similarities and different contexts between Spain and Italy

A general overview of the two national contexts is offered as part of the qualitative analysis. In Italy the general process of change of universities can be started since the Ruberti's reform in 1989 with the “autonomy” discourse and the rise of Department as new structures. Further main steps are the Bologna process and the long reforms led firstly by Berlinguer and accomplished by Moratti around in 2000 year brought to deep changes. More recently a general law passed in December 2010 reinforced some changes in recruitments, organizational asset of universities and governance. The last “Gelmini law” even re-introduced a national agency for the exercise of evaluation of research for the missing years 2004-2010, since the first exercise “number 0” called VQR was done for the years 2000-2003 and lately abandoned. The current context in Italy is an implementation of the law through decrees which is leading by time toward a stronger role of departments, whose dimension is compulsory at least of 40 tenured members. Apparently, this change should spoil some traditional asset of power. In Spain the rise of evaluation is more recent, and even the general law of reform of university was ruled in 2001. The main system of accreditation¹ for any level of characters present in universities, even the not tenured, and the “six years” evaluation have generated relevant changes in the scientific production and the strategies of publications, basically establish new awareness about how scholars have to behave in order to achieve one's career milestones. Nonetheless even the Spanish system has encountered critics (both claiming more objectiveness and more modern, neutral criteria and on the other hand claiming the spoiling of the essence of a scientific community based on self-regulation) among its scientific community

¹*Acreditación*, which has been present in Spanish context for quite two decades and *abilitazione* in Italy (which are just started in late 2012 for the first time and is not inquired in this data collection) are here considered as an effort to have a “neutral”, indirect and preliminary evaluation of scientific activities (upon research, such as teaching and administrative tasks).

and some kind of re-balancing mechanisms whose role has been to don't push to extreme consequences the emphasis over quality. As a matter of fact the double system of national and regional government have created new equilibrium and, especially in more developed and competitive regions, the general context has become tougher.

The framework of change

The change that is at stake is in this paper analyzed under different perspectives. The following points are not analyzed as core focus of the analysis, they are the general aspects that are implied in institutional change carried on by different levels of university.

a) From one side the question is to govern a general policy of restrictions and cuts due to the difficulties of both countries that cannot anymore afford the regular pace of the increasing costs of public research: the national funding must be regulated by restrictive rationales, and selections under strategies are required.

b) According to the general paradigm of the New Public Management a more new better defined concept of selection of public spending is – by no means with great problems, conflicts and coping with reactions by the actors involved in micro (individuals and équipes), meso (departments level) and macro level (institutional or national communities) – changing the way universities are managed. In the latter examples evaluation of research may be seen as an awarding tool in favor actors (individuals, teams, department, universities: the level in question matters) who demonstrated according to “transparent and objective” rules to have deserved further funding.

c) A third current change in nowadays universities is the organizational perspective. As recently investigated the concept of *complete organization* let rise the question of universities as a not self-ruled community composed by internal factions, hierarchies based on prestige, and personal influence. Hitherto the shift toward an organization whose features of power, identity and governing mechanisms pass all from a more formally defined rules is still uncertain and on-going.

d) As a consequence of the latter point, an another emerging change is the scientific community as no more as an universal community albeit ruled by personal, often dyadic between maestro and alumni, relations. A more bureaucratic and – supposedly –, clear and objective mechanisms to reproduce the community (so, recruitment for the tenures and vertical careers whenever tenured) is becoming relevant, at least by the ideas of decision makers (both politicians and scholars who have had influent roles in the processes) who designed the processes.

Method

The empirical research design has been carried on considering two universities per country. The selection of institutions (four cases) is based on different types of universities. The first case is a recent and averaged size Italian university whose strategy is based on evaluation in order to guarantee better performances and run new paths of development trying to invest in key disciplines. The other Italian university is one of the oldest and largest with strong potentialities and difficult governance processes. The Spanish cases are both in competitive contexts with more university: the first is a generalistic university and the latter is specialized. The Italian system brings university to have internal conflicts between disciplines and to don't have necessarily a strong competition toward resources at university level (funds, national and international grants and enrolment); in the Spanish system the competitiveness is based on being first movers and more innovative (i.e. indexed publications, knowledge transfer and other “third mission” activities, according to specificity of disciplines), but conflicts between disciplines are not present, since differences are triggered within the disciplines. Therefore all universities are in a quite competitive contexts and are expected to react to exogenous evaluation (led for instance by specific agencies) and may trigger so forth in

different ways: formally vs. informally; strategically vs. tactically; push innovation vs. conserving niches.

For each of the four universities around a dozen of in depth interviews have been done in 2011 and 2012. The selection of characters reflects the hierarchy of the organizations, so that the first appointments are set with rectors or vice-rectors. In a fall, top-down way further figures are suggested in order to appoint deans, head of departments, tenured and not-tenured researchers. In order to escape any risk of misbalance a particular attention has been paid to get different points of view, especially by disciplines. The clash between hard, pure sciences and the humanities is underlined with room for “middle disciplines” like management. All four universities have a good reputation, are medium-large size in terms of students enrolled and personnel and are settled in a quite competitive context for students and especially resources. Few basic information about organizations and persons interviews will be fostered in a very strict confidential way.

Expected Results

The expected results are an in depth comments and a general discussion of the above mentioned patterns in order to distinguish actual change that would determine more innovative universities from one side, and strategic or tactic resilient behaviors on the other side. In the latter case only the appearances and procedures would change, but not the actual structures that rule the universities and its community. Assuming that both dynamics are present and coexist, differences between brief, medium and long period are to be taken into account, paying attention especially in those drivers that let emerge actual change in the desired path, and those that are not effective. Moreover

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