

The quality assessment (QA) of higher education (HE) in the European Area (EHEA) and in Italy

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1. Two pillars in EHEA QA

- In EHEA up to the last decade QA has been lagging behind relative to many developed (US UK Ireland Canada Australia New Zealand Hong Kong South Africa) and developing countries (Brasil Colombia Mexico Portorico Thailand). Currently EHEA QA is based on 2 pillars. The latter are determined as
- 1.1 Standards and guidelines (SG) for quality assurance on HE procedures (3 elements-self eval., internal and external eval.) and on HE inputs (n. of teachers, teachers/students ratio, credits ECTS/course,total credits, dwellings etc)
- 1.2 Focus on HE QA of outputs (content of Universities' degrees described in terms of expected learning and capabilities for expected job descriptions) and of outcomes (achieved LO in generic terms i.e. knowledge, skill,competence –KSC,sometimes called generic skill,correlated to employability, and in specific terms correlated to employment)

2. Historical EHEA QA evolution: a changing paradigm

- In the 13 years since the Bologna Declaration (1999) the most important steps in the EHEA QA are:
- 2003 Berlin Communiqué of European HE Ministers and their request to ENQA to focus on 1.1 and to Member States to focus on 1.2
- 2004 Joint Quality Initiative by 21 experts (no Italian) and their Dublin Descriptors focussing on generic skill (communicating abilities, learning to learn, problem solving, critical thinking to be found in different degrees at different levels of HE study)
- 2005 Bergen Communiqué («We adopt...the framework for qualifications-QF EHEA, comprising generic descriptors for each cycle based on LO and competence

2. Historical EHEA QA evolution: a changing paradigm (cont)

- ...We adopt SG for quality assurance as proposed by ENQA». Both pillars 1.1 and 1.2 are therefore «adopted» in the Bergen Communiqué 2005
- 2006/962/EC Recommendation of the Eu Parliament and Council on key competences for lifelong learning (LLL) (such as «ability to communicate, to learn, cultural awareness, sense of initiative») «ensuring that initial education and training systems offer all young people the means,...providing a common European reference framework». It establishes a connection between LLL and HE LO
- 2007 Eu Commission proposal on EHEA QA based on European Qualification Framework (EQF for LLL) i.e. 8 levels of qualifications in HE defined in terms of generic LO (as in the Dublin Descriptors), implying for each Member State the necessity of adopting a National Qualification Framework (NQF) described in terms of EQF by 2012
- 2007 London Communiqué acknowledging increasing awareness in EHEA QA of necessarily focussing «more on learning than on teaching», more on 1.2 than on 1.1
- 2008/C111/01 Recommendation of Eu Parliament and Council on the establishment of EQF for LLL and the adoption for EHEA of 8 levels of LO defined in terms of KSC. The first 3-year Italian cycle corresponds to level 6
- 2009-2010 Leuven, Budapest and Vienna Communiqués and 2012 Eu Parliament Resolution strongly «support EHEA common, generic LO»
- In EHEA by 2012 not only in the Anglosaxon countries (see for ex QF in UK, 2010), as it was traditionally the case, but also in some Nordic country (see for ex the Danish case in Nordic Quality Assurance Network in HE, 2005), the most prominent approach in QA has become the one based on pillar 1.2 at all 3 levels of self eval. of internal and external eval

3. Italian legislation and implementation

- The most important legal steps in the Italian QA of HE concerning the 2 pillars are:
- DM 270/2004 integrated in 2007, whereby Universities have to assess at the beginning of the 1° (3 years) and 2° (2 years) cycle the «adequacy of each student knowledge» beyond his/her possession of a given degree
- DPR 76/2010 creating ANVUR and the external body for HE QA of «processes, results and products (art 3, 1 a)»... In particular(art 3,2 a) « ANVUR QA concerns efficiency and effectiveness of teaching on the basis of quality international standards also referring to learning outcomes and employment outcomes of students»; ANVUR also defines «criteria and methodologies ...for periodic accreditation»
- L 240/2010 assigning to ANVUR (art 5, 3 b) the role to define ex ante «criteria and indicators for the QA of efficiency and results obtained in HE and research», (art 5, 3 d) consistently with the EHEA Ministers; (art 5, 3 c) «more empowerment is assigned also to self evaluation»
- DM 544/2007 and 17/2010 whereby Universities are requested to ensure their HE offer in efficiency -both on procedures such as the existence of an internal Quality Presidium or the internal/external evaluation of NIV, and on inputs (ECTS/student, teachers, students, dwellings) - and in effectiveness (students' satisfaction, employed/non employed students 1,3,5 years after the completion of their studies)
- Dlegislative 19/2012 on accreditation recalling Bergen Communiqué 2005, SG EHEA, the necessary procedures for quality assurance (self eval., internal and external eval.) and also the necessary effectiveness measures in terms of LO and employability. It is the first Italian legislation introducing LO as an element for QA in HE thanks to the Italian Parliament redraft of the initial draft of the Dlegislative 19/2012
- 2012 L project to reform labour market by Minister Fornero includes arts 67-69 on NQF LLL

3. Italian legislation and implementation (cont)

- While both pillars appear in the current Italian legislation on QA of HE, only the first pillar has been up to now only partially implemented in terms of procedures and inputs. Italy is catching up EHEA QA on the first pillar but is lagging behind on the second pillar and the latter gap is widening, as this has been the most dynamic component of EHEA QA in the last decade
- Indeed Italy has only formally introduced in 2010 (MIUR-CIMEA, 2011) the NQF (erroneously translating qualifications with degrees, without indicating the correspondence between the latter and generic or specific LO). But in fact, as indicated by CEDEFOP 2011 and 2012, Italy is one of the very few European countries (together with the Czech Republic, ex Yugoslavian Macedonia and Liechtenstein) where the NQF has not been established yet, in spite of the approaching 2012 deadline imposed by the Eu legislation
- LO embodied in Italian Universities' degrees having legal value, in terms of QF EHEA or EQF LLL, are absent *de facto* and are only partially present *de iure*. As Luzzatto (2012) puts it, this new paradigm «would require a Copernican revolution in places where the Ptolemaic approach has generally been the rule»: in Italy the morality of intentions, as in 1.1, has systematically dominated over that of results, as in 1.2
- Employment outcomes measured by the % of students having a job 3 years after the completion of their degree, are in principle among the parameters of QA of HE considered for the allocation of public funds to Universities on a meritocratic basis (FFO). In practice, the Minister's decree on FFO 2012 states that « this parameter is not utilized, as the necessary data for its computation are missing»

4. Previous Italian experiences in testing generic learning outcomes

- Although EQF LLL and QF EHEA are virtually absent, some experience of testing GENERIC LO has been made in Italy:
- 4.1 in the students' admission to some University, according to DM 270/2004, for ex in Padova, where the ability to communicate, the language and mathematical skills are assessed. The first cases of these tests are probably in Italy those of Normale di Pisa, with the different purpose of selecting the best rather than assessing the overall distribution of skills
- 4.2 in the application to Italy of generic LO tests produced by the OECD or derived from it (PISA for 15 years old, INVALSI for primary +secondary education, PIAAC for adult and old people)

5. Previous Italian experiences in testing specific learning outcomes

- Some experience of testing SPECIFIC LO has been made in Italy:
- 5.1 in the description of the courses provided to students by some University, for ex in Bologna, specific expected job capabilities are indicated; in the same University effective LO are tested as far as foreign languages are concerned
- 5.2 in the application to Italy of specific LO tests for University students in Economics produced by the OECD (AHELO)
- 5.3 in the degree of satisfaction expressed by various stakeholders on specific courses (by students), or on overall curricula (by employers)
- 5.4 While generic LO are universally considered to be more important than specific LO both for employment perspectives and for personal success in life (Harvey and Knight 1996, Wagner 2008, but also Passerin 2012 quoting Montaigne –a well functioning brain is better than one just full, Ricci 2012), some empirical evidence shows (Luzzatto 2012) that Italian Universities are better in providing specific rather than generic LO

6. World experiences and methods to implement the generic LO tests

- As the generic skill strand in OECD AHELO 2012 shows, there already exist and are used tests on problem solving and critical thinking considered to be culturally free so as to be identically used in countries as different as Colombia Egypt Finland Korea Kuwait Mexico Norway Slovak Republic USA (similarly in PISA or in PIAAC)
- Many more countries in the world have individually experienced that same test BEFORE AHELO, for ex Ireland in the Eu. Countries may negotiate the packet they buy for ex from CLA to obtain a test that suits them best
- The value added measurement is important: it can be tested directly (at the entry and the exit of the cohort) or indirectly, using the contextual variables (individual and environmental) to «clean» the rough data. One of the robust empirical facts emerging from these tests for ex in Ireland seems to be that the value added of Universities and of HE exists
- Methodologies vary in many ways: according to the presence or the absence of constructed response tasks besides multiple answer questions, the use of dynamic or static computer programs, the efforts put in the translation and nationalization of tests, the kind of training given to scorers etc
- In the world the most frequently utilized tests on generic skill (problem solving, critical thinking, ability to communicate) are those of ACER, CLA, ETS