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Governance of Higher Education as a policy
instrument for balancing between autonomy
accountability and academic freedom

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Introductory remarks

- Autonomy is a basic component of the move toward **the managerial paradigm**, ideally linked to the enhancing of quality, efficiency and effectiveness
- Autonomy is an **intrinsic characteristic of the Universities**. It allows the free setting of the University mission and strategies, with the sole view of the accomplishment of objectives coherent with the institutional norms and values.
- Autonomy is a **flexible concept**, subject to changes according to the different configurations between the State and the Universities across time in different countries. It shapes the University relationships with the external world (state, stakeholders, society as a whole), and impact on the institutions accountability and on the academic freedom.

Introductory remarks

- **Accountability directly affects autonomy:** the more Universities are supplied of autonomy, the more they are supposed to be accountable toward society, the more they are responsible for their performance and should undergo evaluation processes.
- **Academic freedom tends to be reduced with the enlargement of institutional autonomy.** The new internal level of government restrict the individual power of the academics, rectors' leadership is enhanced, and decision-making process was hardly affected by managers.
- These effects are visible in countries, such as most of the European ones, with a strong dependence of Universities from state funding

Aim of the paper

- The paper addresses the issue of governance as institution (North, 1990) balancing between autonomy, academic freedom and accountability, thus affecting the relationships between the State, the HEIs, the intermediaries and the stakeholders, guaranteeing the respective space of action.
- According to the approach by instruments (Lascomes and Les Gâles, 2004), the paper assumes that path dependency affects the mode of governance, thus the balance between these three factors, as it tends to maintain stable the national HE configuration.
- The implementation of any reform processes is suitable to modify the existing balance, and the outcome largely depends by the way in which the equilibrium between the three factors will be reshaped

Theoretical framework

- The State – university relationships, and the distribution of power among them are analysed using the Musselin's (2004) approach of “university configurations” a frame where interdependencies between universities, professors and the overseeing authorities are inscribed, that circumscribe the actors' behaviours without prescribing the possible behaviours
- Autonomy would reinforce the University as organisation, allowing a space of manoeuvre and setting strategies
- Accountability would represent a mean used by the State in order to control the Universities performance, and for steering their behaviour in order to favour transparency and responsibility
- Academic freedom would represent a value to be maintained in order to preserve the freedom of teaching and research of individuals against the excess of external constraints. It applies to individuals within universities

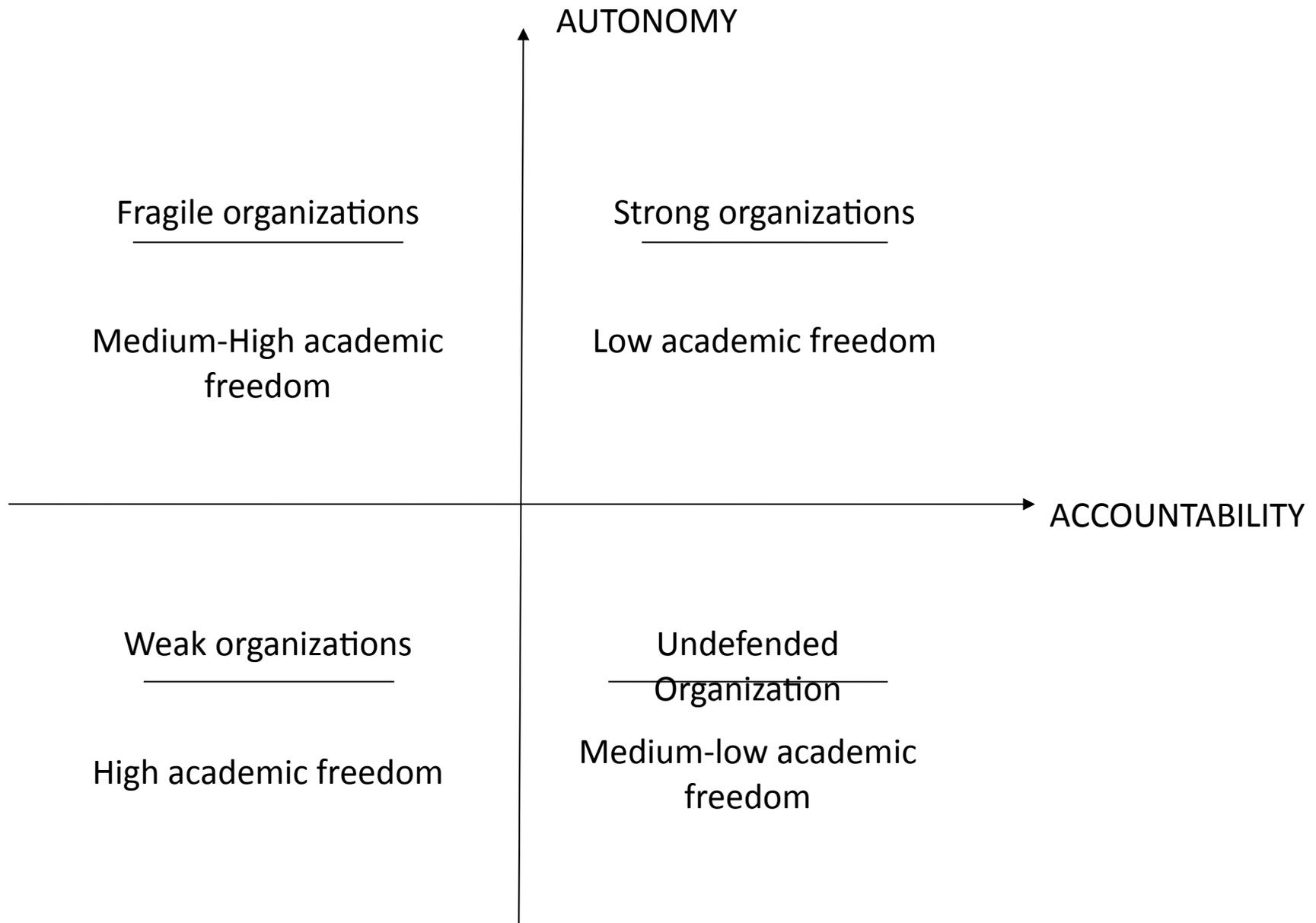
Definition of Academic Freedom (Karran, 2010)

- Teaching academic freedom
 - The subject curriculum and how it is taught
 - Who shall be allowed to teach and to study
 - How students' achievements shall be assessed and graded
 - Spicing in pursuit of teaching and research excellence
- Research academic freedom
 - Subject areas, and the research methods
 - With whom and for what purpose doing research
 - Methods and avenues for dissemination, accession, exploitation and commercialization of the findings of research
- Tenure
 - Avoiding fear of reprimands for teaching and research
 - Defining the adequate cause for dismissal

Definition of Academic Freedom (Karran, 2010)

- Self governance
 - Have the right to voice opinions on the educational policies and priorities within their institutions
 - Have the determinant voice and prominent role in decision-making processes
 - Be able to appoint, from among their number, people into positions of managerial authority, and hold them to periodic account by agreed democratic processes
 - Be able to determine who shall serve as Rector
- Academic freedom definition shall includes its rights but also its limitations

What relationships between autonomy accountability and academic freedom?



Methodology

- We focus on Italy, a particular case of long-time unchanged organisational assets of universities, where the implementation of reforms aimed at reinforcing HEIs as organisations has been affected by path dependence (Paradise et al, 2009)
- According to the proposed model, we expect that in Italy the introduction of autonomy without balancing with accountability and academic freedom:
 - does not change the existing distribution of power, maintaining a strong academic freedom,
 - did not contribute to the move toward the managerial paradigm, ideally linked to the enhancing of quality, efficiency and effectiveness,
 - did not reinforce Universities as organizations.
- We deal with the problem of autonomy in a diachronic perspective, looking at the changes of the national configuration of autonomy over the last 15 years (1990 – 2005), and how they are related to the modifications in accountability and academic freedom

The autonomy-accountability principle

- Two periods in the policy implementation of autonomy and accountability:
 - 1989 to 2001, led by centre-left coalitions, was characterized by a reinforcement of university autonomy through the decentralization of many competences and powers, and by the institutionalization of evaluation within universities;
 - 2001 to 2006, led by a centre-right coalition, Government tried to circumscribe the space of manoeuvre of universities (reducing the Universities core funding, introducing a funding formula, reinforcing the linkages between performance and resource allocation) in order to repair shortcomings and drawbacks produced by the perverse use Universities made of autonomy.

How large is autonomy in Italy?

- Universities are responsible for
 - defining their own institutional strategy,
 - their internal academic and administrative structure,
 - the structure of their decision making bodies and academic profile.

Universities:

own most of their real estate,

are entitled to buy and sell their real estate independently,

are entitled to buy and sell other financial assets, with no restriction on how money can be spent.

Universities have the power to decide:

the overall number of students

the number of students per discipline,

to admit special categories of students

to decide on the criteria for student admission (EUA, 2007).

Tab. 1. Dimensions of autonomy in the Italian Universities: degree of achievement in 2008 (CHEPS et al. 2010)

1) Organisational autonomy, defined as the “capacity of Universities to decide for themselves on their internal authority, responsibility and accountability structures without any external interference”

MEDIUM-HIGH

2) Policy autonomy, defined as the “ability ... to constitute their own academic community in terms of student and staff selection and to determine their teaching and research programmes”

MEDIUM-HIGH

3) Interventional autonomy that is “the extent to which organisations are free from ex-post accountability requirements”

HIGH

4) Financial autonomy

HIGH

Limits to autonomy

- Limitation of the power to (EUA, 2007):
 - decide on structure and content of the degree programs, as well as for opening and closing down study programs
 - recruit permanent academic staff (recruitment rules and authorization for hiring new personnel),
 - establish the salary levels, but gained the power to select researchers directly and to decide positions to be opened using the resources made available through the turn over
- Taking into account a few characteristics of governance of a sample of universities in Europe, Aghion and colleagues (2007) showed that Italian universities are significantly older than the others, they have a very high level of budget autonomy, but limitations in hiring people and setting the wage, comparing with the average result of the sample surveyed (10 European countries).

The effectiveness of autonomy

- Bonaccorsi and Daraio (2007) checked autonomy of Universities on the basis of their habit to procure financial resources
- They founded a lower position of the Italian HEIs in comparison with other European countries as to capability to attract funding from industry and other public sources, but a similar position as to their dependence from central government and other public sources
- Summing up:
 - autonomy granted to the Italian HEIs allows in principle a space of manoeuvre similar to other European countries
 - differences are mainly related to hiring, wage setting autonomy, capability to attract external resources

The implementation of autonomy

- Universities remained the sole providers of tertiary education
- Academic qualifications have the same legal value because the quality of educational programs offered by Italian universities is supposed to be equal throughout the national territory
- University professors are civil servant, whose rules, workload and salaries are equal for all, and are determined by the Government
- Each university in Italy was entitled of substantive autonomy, but continue to work in a context characterized by a monopoly within the local and national market of higher education.

The implementation of autonomy

- The implementation of autonomy by the universities was largely affected by a conservative and corporative behaviour of Universities, that emerged from:
 - Reform of statutes (academics still play a major role)
 - Absence of managerial competences
 - Reform of bachelor and master degree
 - Use of the new rules for recruitment (localism and seniority)
 - Use of the turn over (mainly for career development)
 - Proliferation of degree courses
 - Fragmentation of teaching
 - Use of the credit system
- Tensions arised in some cases from:
 - Stakeholders
 - International research groups
 - Internal competition

The implementation of accountability

- Evaluation is the mean that should realize the accountability of the academic activities
 - *1995 Osservatorio* and University Units (overall assessment of university system)
 - Rectors played a leading role in defining evaluation procedures using expertise to influence decisions and methods elaborated by the university evaluation
 - *1999 CNVSU* (education, funding rules and doctorates), CIVR (research) and NUVs
 - Rectors acted more for lobbying purposes than as intermediaries between the Government and the academic institutions
 - *2004 Three-Year Evaluation Exercise VTR*
 - Rectors and Universities recognize differences in the quality of research outputs, and highlight the weakness of the University governance
- Impact on resource allocation and on regulation was negligible

Academic freedom

- Academic freedom is a **fundamental principle** of academic life, but it is different between countries and it is more and more threatened by the transformation of HE in recent decades
- Academic freedom **may be used as a value supporting academics pursuing their individual objectives**, rather than the objectives of the University as organisation
- Karran selected **five parameters** in order to measure academic freedom across countries,
 - the constitutional protection,
 - the existence of a specific legislation on it,
 - the legislation on university governance (self-governance)
 - the method of appointment of the university Rectors (chosen by the academics and from the professors)
 - the existence of academic tenure.
- **Italy scored high in almost all the parameters**, and presents similarities with France and Germany, and rather an opposite situation with Netherlands and UK

Academic freedom

- Karran's observations on legislations of 12 countries seem to confirm a direct relationship between the emergence of the managerial paradigm, the decentralization of decision-making power to universities and the threatening of academic freedom
- In Italy such an extensive guaranty of academic freedom, joined with a large substantial autonomy, and weak accountability create a situation where reform processes would tend to be implemented in order to pursue individual objectives rather than institutional aims

The new phase of HE reform in Italy

- January 2009
- The amount of the FFO was reduced and the resources not distributed were allocated on the basis of the performance of Universities
- Universities that did not respect the threshold for the personnel costs cannot hire new personnel
- Universities can use only a share of 50% of the turn over
- Changes in the national rules of recruitment
- Impact on universities with different rate and pace (pro-active behaviours vs entrenchment)

The new forthcoming reform

- The Administrative Board members are appointed according to selective procedures, and must include a representative of the students and external stakeholders
- Rector is elected among the full professors of the Italian universities, and his/her mandate cannot be longer than eight years (4+4);
- NUVs shall be composed mainly by members outside the university
- Departments would become the medium government level of Universities for both teaching and research activities;
- Recruitment of professors remains in the hands of the Universities, but it relies upon a preliminary accreditation based on national examinations
- Evaluation become the basis for resource allocation (increase of the professors' wages, funding, recruitment policy, and institutional ex-post performance
- A new Agency (ANVUR) in charge of research assessment, accreditation and quality assurance

But...

- the same legal value attributed to the graduation
- the identity of the mission of all the Universities
- the lack of differentiation of the higher education institutions
- the exclusion of other actors from HE (accredited post-graduate courses)
- thresholds on the cost of the personnel and on the tuition fees were not removed
- the legal status of the professors (civil servants) was not modified

Conclusions

- The Italian case shows that the balance between autonomy, accountability and academic freedom is hardly affected by path dependency
- Government policies did not pursue with a strong and persistent political will the harmonisation of the three factors considered thus reinforcing the power of academics
- Reform processes did not affect some distinctive Italian features: universities remained the sole player of the higher education system, the graduation provided by universities had the same legal value, Government determined the status and working conditions of University professors
- Most Italian universities did not strengthen the role of institutional management, thus weakening the possibility to cope with complexity and competition
- Other universities put in action a self-reforming process, in order to anticipate forthcoming government policies

Conclusions

- Recent government initiatives want to reform the governance in order to promote more co-ordinated, internationalised and market-oriented behaviours
- A turning to a command and control scheme in the relationships between university and the state is visible, but it does not circumscribe the academic freedom, rather tends to create new élites. Tentative governance does not take care of balancing academic freedom.
- Innovative modes of governance are emerging only in few HEIs, mainly driven by the presence of facilitators of change (groups with high international standing, interdisciplinarity, high mobility of HR)
- Given this picture, we cannot expect changes in the national configuration driven by the reform, but phenomena of hollowing out of some HEIs and a general reduction of the equity of the HE system
- The model of relationships between autonomy, accountability and academic freedom is not confirmed by the empirical analysis.