



The Bologna process in the European and Italian university system.

Alessandro Figus

prof. PhD drHc International Institute of Management IMI-Nova (Moldova) and Link Campus University (Italy) – email: a.figus@unilink.it

Doi: 10.2478/gssfj-2018-0009

Abstract

This wants to be a contribution for those who want to understand the Bologna process, intergovernmental cooperation of 48 European countries in the field of higher education. The Bologna process guides the collective effort of public authorities, universities, teachers, and students, together with stakeholder associations, employers, quality assurance agencies, international organisations, and institutions, including the European Commission, on how to improve the internationalisation of higher education, a project that is at the base of the modernization of the European educational system and well beyond.

Keywords: *Bologna process, Dublin descriptors, higher education*

1. The Bologna Declaration.

In the Declaration of Bologna, the Sorbonne Declaration aspects were adopted and the side of European cooperation in quality assurance was added. In the years later, the ministers of education met every two years to discuss the progress, new aspects, and the applications for new membership to the EHEA¹. The figure below shows the ministerial Bologna meetings that took place from 1999 to 2015 in chronological order:

Bologna, Italy 1999
Prague, the Czech Republic 2001
Bergen, Norway 2003
London, UK 2007
Leuven, Belgium 2009
Budapest, Hungary 2010
Bucharest, Romania 2011
Yerevan, Armenia 2015

A communiqué was adopted in the several meeting that outlines the decisions taken by the member states. The aims of the Bologna Process were to be reached through

¹ See Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999, retrieved from https://www.eurashe.eu/library/bologna_1999_bologna-declaration-pdf/

a decentralised implementation of the defined tools and agreements. Although the member states are responsible for the implementation, a process strictly and supervised on European level². Therefore, the process is an ongoing preparation of ministerial meetings and supervision, and at each meeting, new aims and objectives, as well as achievements, were discussed. The first declaration consisted of six main action lines, and later more action lines were added.

The action lines are listed below:

Bologna conference 1999: 1. Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees 2. Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles 3. Establishment of a system of credits 4. Promotion of mobility 5. Promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance 6. Promotion of the European dimension in higher education

Prague conference 2001: 7. Focus on Lifelong learning 8. Inclusion of higher education institutions and students 9. Promoting the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area

Berlin conference 2003: 10. Doctoral studies and the synergy between the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area.

The prominence of student mobility to the integration of the European Union and Europe was accepted even before the start of the Bologna process. The importance was previously underlined with the overview of the "European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students", short ERASMUS, in the far 1987. The idea of the program was to support students financially to enable them to study in a foreign European country focused on studying abroad was to increase young people's horizons and arrange for students with respected experiences.

The Erasmus programme started with eleven participating countries and developed throughout the years to the largest student mobility programme, it was and is the most successful programs of the European Union. The Bologna Process plays an unimportant role in this success because it introduced the ECTS system (ECTS is a credit system designed to make it easier for students to move between different countries).

The Italy the ECTS system is indicated by Presidential Decree 212/05 states: "Academic Training Credit (CFA) is the measure of the volume of work of learning, including individual study, required from a student with adequate education initial preparation for the acquisition of knowledge and skills in the training activities envisaged by educational syllabus of courses of study (art.1)".

By definition, therefore, ECTS / CFA credits are based on learning time (rather than teaching) and learning outcomes (rather than on the contents of the study plans), understood not only as knowledge but also as a skill. In conformity with the European system, Presidential Decree 212/05 assigns the value to each year of full-

² See Battistelli, F. (2005) (edited by), *La cultura delle amministrazioni fra retorica e innovazione*, Franco Angeli, Milano.

time study conventional 60 credits. Moreover, it assigns to each credit the value of 25 hours of engagement of the student, for a total of 1500 hours per year. The workload of a full-time study program in Europe is equivalent in most cases to 1500-1800 hours per year, and in such cases, a credit represents a workload ranging from 25 to 30 hours.

Since they are based on the learning achievements and workload of a course, a student can transfer their ECTS credits from one university to another, so they are added up to contribute to an individual's degree programme or training) ECTS helps to make learning more student-centred.

It is a central tool in the Bologna Process, which aims to make national systems more compatible. ECTS also helps with the planning, delivery and evaluation of study programmes, and makes them more transparent, and the degree structures converging in Europe through the Bologna Process, student mobility facilitated through the Erasmus program was made even easier.

Also, the number of participating countries grew. Currently, 33 countries participate, including all European countries, Turkey, Macedonia, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein.

Moreover, the ECTS was introduced in all participating countries, which was already established with the Erasmus program to simplify the conversion of grades. In addition to the easier recognition of courses also the quality of courses was to be assimilated through the instruction of quality assurance tools.

The Erasmus program changed over time. It is now part of Erasmus+ and not only facilitates studies at foreign universities but also internships abroad, in fact; currently the Erasmus program supports around 300,000 higher education students every year.

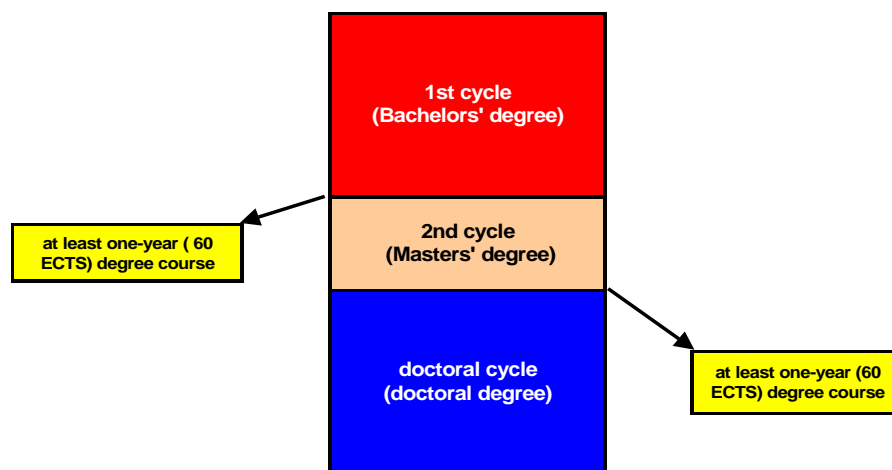


Fig. 1 - From Coimbra group glossary, see <https://www.coimbra-group.eu/cg-statement-on-the-bologna-process-2/>

The European Union, thus all its member countries, is improving the system of application of the principles defined during the Bologna process, which takes its name from the place where, in 1999, Europe initiated a process aimed at realizing a series of reforms for the construction of a European area for higher education, based on mutual trust, collaboration, and respect for differences among cultures, languages, and educational systems. This happens primarily through national laws and regulations that are valid and binding for all institutions of higher education. What comes from it represents an extraordinary example of cross-border regional cooperation in higher education, which achieves a considerable amount of success in other parts of the world, provoking a profound change in the global educational system and that allows for a deep reflection aimed at a general sharing of the project. There is still a significant amount of work to do at the European, national and particularly higher education institutions level, involving teachers and students, to ensure subsequent improvements and the creation of a higher education European area³.

The Bologna process should be applied to single member states, as well as being implemented through national laws and regulations valid and binding for all institutions of higher education. Having joined forces in Budapest and Vienna, the ministers of education of signatory countries (47) have officially launched, the 11th and 12th of March, 2010, the European area of higher education.

At the moment 47 countries have adhered to the Bologna Process. And these go well beyond the 27 members of the European Union: Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Vatican City.

The ministers of education of the 47 participating countries should meet every two years to assess the results achieved, formulate further indications, and establish priorities for the following two years.

Following the first meeting in Bologna in 1999, the Ministers met in Prague in 2001, in Berlin in 2003, in Bergen in 2005, and the last meeting was held in 2007 in London. In the time elapsing between the ministerial conferences, a fundamental role is played by the so-called "Bologna Follow-up Group", which meets twice a year too and is made up of representatives of all signatory countries and the European Commission. Representatives of the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education

³ See Mancini M, *L'Università italiana nello spazio europeo dell'alta formazione*, Università Italiana, Università Europea, La convergenza dei percorsi formativi da Bologna 1999 a Londra 2007 Camerino, 1 febbraio 2007

(EURASHE), the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB) and the Council of Europe are also present as observers. Finally, numerous seminars, called "of Bologna", are organised every year in various European venues to discuss the issues related to the process, to examine the remaining obstacles and to propose new forms of collaboration.

2. The objectives of Bologna process.

The initial Declaration signed in Bologna (1999) articulates six specific objectives:

1. The adoption of a qualification system that is easily comprehensible and comparable, also through the use of the Diploma;
2. The adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, of first and second level respectively;
3. The adoption of a didactic credits system – based on the ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) model, that is the European system of accumulation and transfer of credits focused on the student and based on the workload required of a student to reach the objectives of a course of study (objectives to be preferably expressed in terms of learning outcomes and skills to be acquired);
4. The promotion of mobility through the removal of obstacles to the full exercise of students, researchers, and administrative staff circulation;
5. The promotion of European cooperation in quality assessment;
6. The promotion of the necessary European dimension for higher education.

In Italy, the implementation of the objectives listed in the Bologna Declaration has been carried out through three types of action:

1. The launch of structural reforms, to offer an adequate and legal structure;
2. The allocation of special funds aimed at promoting and sustaining the realisation of dedicated activities;
3. The creation of a new National Committee to fulfil the specific tasks intended by the Process of Bologna.

Since 1999, Italian universities have thus been fully reformed according to the objectives of the Bologna process. The new Italian law was approved in 1999 and amended in 2004, and it represents a comprehensive, integral, and radical reform of the educational system which strives to quickly align itself with the sectoral directives established by the European Union.

In November 1999 it was adopted as the last step in a reform process aimed at improving the autonomy of institutions of higher education. The Ministerial Decree (DM) 509/1999 offers the architecture of the system, setting general objectives and criteria, and at the same time assign greater flexibility to institutions in establishing curricular paths. The main purposes of the DM 509/1999 are to set in motion a series of reforms that could allow for the construction of a more competitive and attractive Italian system of higher education, both for the community and foreign citizens.

Traditional and long study programs are thus transformed in the so-called “three plus two” or “two-cycled” system based on a first degree called Laurea (3 years – 180 credits) and a second degree, formerly known as Laurea Specialistica, which is now called Laurea Magistralis (2 years – 120 credits). The system concerns the accumulation of ECTS, which was introduced in 1989 within the Erasmus program and now belongs to the Socrates program. The ECTS is the only tested and working credit system in Europe. The ECTS was initially conceived for the transfer of credits; the system facilitated the recognition of study periods abroad, increasing the quality and volume of student mobility in Europe. In the last years, the ECTS has evolved in a system of accumulation, to be used at the institutional, regional, national, and European level⁴. This is one of the main objectives of the Declaration of Bologna of June 1999.

Regarding the study cycles (Figure 2), there is thus a first cycle where university studies consist exclusively of Degree Courses (1st degree), which aims at providing students adequate scientific and general methods, as well as contents that have a direct reference to specific professional abilities and skills. The Laurea provides for the assignment of 180 ECTS credits, taking into account that 60 credits, by convention, measure a workload related to the time in which it is believed that an average student can obtain the required learning outcomes of a full-time student within an academic year. In most cases, this is equivalent to 40 weeks per year where a credit can be quantified as a workload ranging from 24 to 28 hours per week. The Laurea, therefore, allows a direct link with the labour market, and an access to the 2nd cycle of university studies.

The Laurea is, thus, the title issued by the Italian university at the end of the first cycle as established by the convention of the Bologna process. It is obtained in three academic years, and it provides the student with 180 university credits delivered by the study plan that becomes the only parameter, according to which the title is issued, established by the Bologna process. The term “laurea Triennale” (triennial degree) is, according to us, an improper one. The possession of this title allows access to the Italian Laurea Magistrale and first level master's degrees.

The second cycle can be defined as advanced studies and includes the Laurea Specialistica/Magistrale. These pave the way to the last degree of specialisation, that is the PhD which has a total duration of three more years and is aimed primarily at the exercise of an extremely qualified activity in specific areas.

Admission to the courses offered by the Laurea Specialistica/Magistrale is subject to specific prerequisites determined by universities themselves: to be admitted to a laurea magistrale course, students must possess a university degree obtained after a three-year course or another qualification obtained abroad but declared valid within Italian territory. The magistral degree is obtained at the end of two-year courses that can be accessed if, in possession of a degree, a university degree or, pursuant to

⁴ See Mancini M, *L'Università italiana nello spazio europeo dell'alta formazione*, Università italiana, Università europea, La convergenza dei percorsi formativi da Bologna 1999 a Londra 2007 Camerino, 1 febbraio 2007.

Ministerial Decree 270 of 22 October 2004, a university degree; the total workload is 120 ECTS credits for 2 years. The title obtained is that of the Laurea Specialistica/Magistrale LS/LM (as foreseen by the Bologna process) and is issued to those graduates who, once all the curriculum requirements have been satisfied, have the opportunity discuss their dissertation during the final exam session. Hence, after the two cycles, the most deserving student will find the opportunity to be admitted to the "Research Doctorate", i.e. to access the "post lauream" academic degree. This was introduced into the Italian university system in 1980 (Law 21 February 1980, n.28, D.P.R. 11 July 1980, No. 382), and represents the highest level of university education. The PhD thus represents the third cycle of university education, as established in the Bologna Process. A curiosity is that while the Italian graduate is qualified as "doctor", as a peculiarity of the Italian university system, in other countries the title corresponding to "doctor" is granted only after the PhD, or in specific cases such as, for example, graduates in medicine or dentistry.

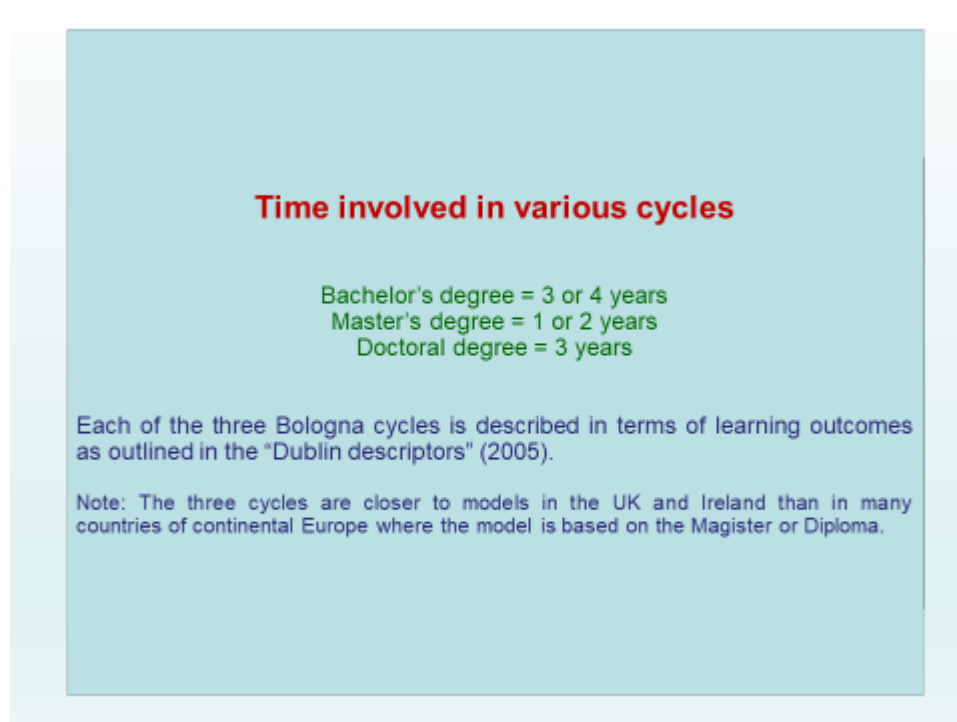


Figure 2: The Bologna cycles

3. Magna Charta Universitatum

The Bologna process can be defined as the process of European integration at university level born from shared European policies whose effects will positively

affect the European educational system in the coming years⁵. To this end, the key role that universities will play in promoting student mobility aimed at a socio-cultural exchange and facilitating job search across the continent should be emphasised. In Italy, the university reform passed in application of Law 127/1997 has therefore completely changed the meaning of this academic title, aligning the Italian university system with that of the rest of the European Union (now known as the Bologna process) and the United States of America, assuming a transitional step in the advanced training of citizens. With regards to the specific Italian case, the reform process has been accompanied and is still characterised by many dark knots, which the academic and political component have the duty to face to try, at least, to untie. Such a radical reform, placed in a complex world like the university one, requires a wide knowledge of its sustainability among all the protagonists but above all, it requires to be sustained through an incremental and continuous strategy by a constant verification process able to suggest possible adjustments and amendments. At the beginning of 2018, the first European Summit dedicated to education was held in Brussels with the aim of creating a 'European Higher Education Area' by 2025. The result would be to complete a long process aimed at encouraging the creation of a European Higher Education Area that was born in 1988 with the Magna Charta Universitatum⁶. The document, where the basic values of the university tradition are outlined with the aim to encourage the strengthening of ties between European universities but also open to the adhesion of extra-European universities too, was signed by 660 universities from 78 different countries. Among the values expressed, the immense link between teaching and research and the freedom of teachers from any pressure is emphasised. At the present time, strong also of what has been accomplished in these fifteen years, it is now important to develop a reflexive orientation aimed at understanding the reasons why some things did not work and what worked instead, understanding also what were the original intentions that have not been implemented with the intent to "start again where it was left off". At the Summit on January 25th, 2018, a new deadline for 2025 was set within which to renew the European Higher Education Area, focusing on the student, an integrated system of quality assessment, an innovative method of technical skills, and finally the opportunity to access more member countries without problems.

The achievement of the objectives, with an increase in the current investment quota, as well as the overcoming of the bureaucratic barriers and the transposition of the regulations signed in the various national laws will be fundamental. Great importance is also given to the activities under Erasmus +. The European Higher Education Area aims to pursue, above all, academic freedom, institutional autonomy and the participation of teachers and students in the government of higher education

⁵ See Finocchietti C., Silvia Capucci S., *The Reform of the Italian Higher Education System* Beiträge zur Hochschulforschung, Heft 3, 27. Jahrgang, 2005 13

⁶ See <http://www.magna-charta.org/resources/files/the-magna-charta/english>

in order to generate academic quality, economic development and social cohesion, as well as encouraging students and teachers to move freely without circumscribing the space of action, but rather extending the process. It aims at developing the social dimension of higher education, foster the employment and lifelong learning of graduates, and foster collaborative practices with higher education in other parts of the world. It strives for the introduction of a system of comprehensible and comparable titles (the three-cycle system of first, second and third levels), to get a picture of the titles for the European Higher Education Area, and pursue the transparency of the courses of study through a common credit system based on the recognition of qualifications and periods of study.

It should also be noted that, in this sense, it seems easy that, over the past decade, the matter of how to define the targets of the training programs has always been addressed in two different European contexts, each of which has come to formal approval of precise documents: on the one hand, the Bologna process and on the other hand, the continuing education that is the Life-Long Learning (LLL) in which the values and principles enunciated by the Bologna process are interwoven with a quality control system (in this sense the "Dublin descriptors", which constitute an organic package and should be read in relation to each other, are to be highlighted). These are used to describe the titles that fall within a national framework (National Qualifications Frameworks or NQF), provided that the national frameworks can add traces and further elements and functions that are more detailed and specific.

4. Dublin Descriptors

The general results of a title, i.e. the learning outcomes common to all graduates of a certain type, can be expressed through a qualification descriptor.

Necessarily, the descriptors of the European Titles Framework can only be of a general nature is applicable to a wide range of disciplines and profiles considering the NQFs. In the framework of the European Higher Education Area, the learning outcomes must, in fact, be designed as descriptions of what an individual must know, understand and know how to do at the end of the relevant cycle.

In fact, the Dublin descriptors⁷ (Figure 3) take into consideration five dimensions:

1. Knowledge and understanding;
2. Applying knowledge and understanding;
3. Making judgements;
4. Communication skills;
5. Learning skills.

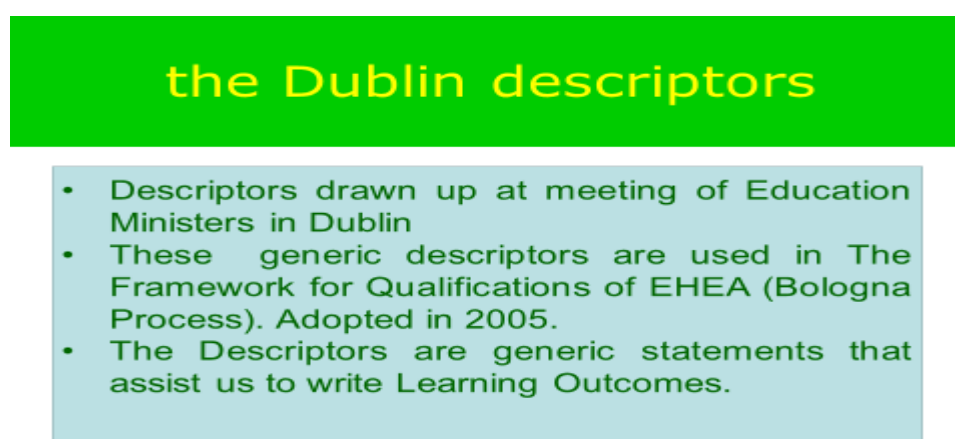


Figure 3: The Dublin descriptors

Through the use of the descriptors, it is possible to design the curricula in credits based on the expected learning outcomes and the necessary workload expected in order to reach them. The application of these criteria within the new Bologna Process could re-launch the process itself, expanding its original objective.

From May 23-25, 2018, the Ministerial Conference of the Bologna Process was held in Paris, where the primary importance promoted by the Bologna Process was reaffirmed, and its objective to support lifelong learning and employment, the quality of training and the mutual recognition of titles and qualifications, especially with reference to academic and higher qualifications in the three-cycle system (degree / masters / doctorate as previously mentioned), was reiterated.

Today the Bologna Process is led by a Presidency with a three-year mandate. The Paris conference has sanctioned the end of the French presidency and the passing of the baton to Italy, which will manage the presidency from June 2018 to May 2020. The Italian one will be a very important triennial, both because it includes the celebration of the Twentieth anniversary of the Bologna Declaration (June 2019), both because the Paris Communiqué adopted in Paris has launched a crucial challenge to the Participating Countries to enable the educational system to

⁷ See http://ecahe.eu/w/index.php/Dublin_Descriptors

contribute in an effective, integrated and increasingly responsible manner to the future of young people and of our own company “Beyond 2020”. The key themes from which to respond to this challenge start from the founding values - freedom and academic integrity, institutional autonomy, participation of students and staff in governance, social responsibility – but must take into consideration the escalation of social problems due to unemployment, social inequalities in migratory processes, religious radicalization, as well as the change in society due to mass digitization.

Therefore, Italy, through the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR), has the role of guiding and coordinating the thematic and work groups that will have to deal with continuous personal development, the quality of training, of innovation, inclusion and civic and ethical commitment, greater inter-disciplinary and inter-cultural collaboration and permeability towards mutual learning. In continuity with the past presidencies, the MIUR will make use of CIMEA, an ENIC-NARIC center for Italy, for the guidance of the Bologna Follow-up Group Secretariat (BFUG), of the Conference of Italian University Rectors (CRUI) for technical and scientific contributions to the Bologna process and of “Studiare Sviluppo” (Studying Development) to support the administrative, organizational, financial and logistic management of activities related to the Italian Presidency in the three year period 2018-2020.

It is also true that the university is asked to actively and responsibly interpret its autonomy by consciously exercising the margins of "micro-politics" that this status confers on the governance of the university. Ultimately, a new push, coming from the institutions, could be given. The Ministry develops regulations, decrees, explanatory notes, etc., but there should be a greater interest coming from the institutions to deepen the matter trying to increasingly involve our society, informing, and not limiting itself only to formalities but taking care of the realization of an ambitious project with international value based on the spirit of renewal.

References

- Battistelli, F. (2005) (a cura di), *La cultura delle amministrazioni fra retorica e innovazione*, Franco Angeli, Milano.
- EACEA (2015), *The European Education Area in 2015*, Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive agency (EACEA, Education and Youth Policy Analysis).
- EACEA (2018), *The European Education Area in 2015*, Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive agency (EACEA, Education and Youth Policy).
- Finocchietti, C., Silvia Capucci S. (2005), *The Reform of the Italian Higher Education System* Beiträge zur Hochschulforschung, Heft 3, 27. Jahrgang, 13.
- Mancini M. (2007), *L'Università italiana nello spazio europeo dell'alta formazione* Università Italian Università Europea, *La convergenza dei percorsi formativi da Bologna 1999 a Londra 2007*, Camerino.

Internet web sites:

www.bologna-berlin2003.de
www.bologna-berlin2003.de
<http://www.bolognaprocess.it/>

Italian Laws

Law 19th October 1999, n. 370 - *Provisions on University and scientific and technological research.*
Decree by M.U.R.S.T. 5th May 1999 "*Tasks and composition of the Observatory for the evaluation of the university system*"
Decree by M.U.R.S.T. 24th May 1999, *Appointment of the Observatory members.*
Decree by M.U.R.S.T. – 3th November 1999, n. 509 – *Regulations containing rules concerning the teaching autonomy of the universities. Regulations containing amendments to the Rules,*
Decree by the President of Republic – 23th March 2000, n. 117 – *Regulations containing norms concerning the teaching autonomy of the Universities. With regard to procedures for the recruitment of university professors and researchers, pursuant to Article 1 of the Law of 3 July 1998, n. 210.*
Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers - 20 April 2000 - Supplementary intervention fund for the granting of honorary loans and scholarships.