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A Sisyphean task : evaluation and institutional accountability in Italian higher education

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Abstract

Evaluation and accountability are two of the most popular catchwords employed by higher education reformers in the Western world over the last 25 years. For 25 years governments throughout Western countries have been using evaluation and institutional accountability as policy tools to steer their university systems at a distance. From a comparative perspective, this has not been a homogeneous process; nor has it displayed any clearly 'convergent' trend when observed from the substantial, rather than from just the formal, point of view. In this general context the Italian case is presented here through a detailed analysis by which it is shown how evaluation has been implemented in the Italian university system and how the institutional accountability conceded to the universities has been managed and to what effects. The results are frustrating: each university activity is evaluated but without any effects regarding their performance; institutional accountability has proved to be very weak, whereas universities have continued to behave in an irresponsible way from the financial and managerial point of view. What emerges seems to be an enormous collective effort not able to

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concretely pursue significant results without a radical change in the governance arrangements both at the institutional and the systemic levels. The causes of this waste of collective sources depend both on the low degree of legitimization of the evaluation process, and on the malfunctioning of the mechanisms of institutional and systemic governance. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)