

STRENGTHENING UNIVERSITY TEACHING THROUGH FACULTY DEVELOPMENT: STRATEGIES TO REDUCE THE GAP BETWEEN RESEARCH AND TEACHING IN ITALIAN UNIVERSITIES IN LINE WITH EUROPEAN POLICIES

L. MENTORE, L. REFRIGERI

Lucia Mentore¹, Luca Refrigeri²

¹Department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism Sciences University of Macerata

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1194-217X>, E-mail: l.mentore@unimc.it

²Department of Humanities, Social and Education Sciences, University of Molise

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4459-5571>, E-mail: luca.refrigeri@unimol.it

***Abstract:** This article intends to reflect on the current state of Italian universities, on new models and perspectives in an attempt to reinforce and promote attitudes and beliefs regarding various aspects of the role of the university lecturer, in accordance with the Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) adopted by the ministers responsible for higher education in 2005 following a proposal prepared by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), in cooperation with the European Students' Union (ESU), the European Association of Higher Education Institutions (EURASHE) and the European University Association (EUA). In particular, the aim is to raise awareness of Faculty Development activities; to establish an ongoing reflection and reconsideration of teaching strategies, with a view to making student learning more and more central.*

***Keywords:** University; European policies; teaching; faculty development;*

Introduction

The evolution of the Italian academic landscape, though rich in tradition and prestige, has undergone a series of substantial transformations over the past decades. From a time when academic research enjoyed primary attention over teaching activity, there has been a gradual shift of focus towards the recognition and enhancement of the pedagogical skills of university lecturers. This shift in perspective has been influenced by an international context in which educational institutions, particularly those in Europe (Yerevan, 2015) (Commission, 2013) (ENQA, 2015) (CRUI, 2014) (QUARC_Docente, 2020), have recognised the need for structural reforms aimed at ensuring high quality higher education that is more oriented towards the needs of contemporary society. The present article aims to explore this paradigm shift in Italian university teaching, focusing on the increasing importance attributed to didactics and the improvement of teachers' teaching skills. Through a historical analysis spanning the period from the 1999 Bologna Process to the present day with the implementation of Faculty Development programmes, we examine the crucial milestones and key initiatives that have contributed to redefining the role and approach to university teacher education and to bridging the gap between research and teaching. From the recognition of the urgency of a specific preparation in the field of teaching-learning, to the promotion of professional development programmes and the creation of centres dedicated to didactic innovation, we will explore the progress made in the Italian context, thanks also to the European policies promoted by ENQA and the strategic

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objectives set out in Europe 2020 and Europe 2030. Furthermore, approaches and models adopted at national and international level will be analysed in order to draw lessons and promote an informed discussion on the future direction of higher education in our country. We aim to contribute to awareness of the crucial importance of the quality of university education in shaping the minds and perspectives of future professionals and citizens. In an ever-changing world where knowledge is becoming obsolete at an ever-increasing pace, investing in the training and support of teachers is essential to ensure a high standard of education that is inclusive and adaptable to the needs of the contemporary world.

From academic prestige to reflection on didactics

The figure of the university lecturer, in the common imagination, has often been shrouded in an aura of mystery and secrecy, arousing many questions and curiosity. As David Layton wrote, quoting Mathews in his book “University Teaching in Transition” (Layton, 1963):
«University teaching may be regarded in the same way as a mystery profession. It is practised as if it were a secret ritual behind closed doors and is not a topic of conversation in polite academic society».

In the past, it was possible to sustain this view of teaching in many universities, both Italian and foreign, where the idea seemed to be shared that the ability to teach was a kind of post-doctoral gift that was neither appropriate nor necessary to investigate. The transmission of knowledge was considered secondary to self-advancement, and the relationship between teaching and research was clearly unbalanced in favour of the latter (Nicholls, 2007). In the history of Italian university education, the focus on teachers' teaching skills has gone through variations over time. Traditionally, teaching skills and, more generally, teaching competences have not enjoyed the same degree of consideration as they do today; the academic prestige and research reputation of the lecturer assumed greater prominence than his pedagogical abilities. These aspects were commonly valued as fundamental priorities, while the act of teaching was sometimes considered a secondary task, if not a 'necessary evil' to be performed in order to maintain academic standing. In the late 1880s, Pietro Cogliolo (1859-1940) observed how:

«In Italy, the academic body was very little animated by 'class spirit' and did not always adequately fulfil the important educational and training function to which it was called. In his opinion, the lack of didactic activity was mainly explained by the privilege granted by many lecturers to professional practice, to the exercise of liberal professions and sometimes to the pursuit of a brilliant political career. Towards the end of the 1980s, the problem of restoring dignity to the figure of the university lecturer came to occupy an important place in the heated debate underway on the university question; the academic world was going through profound needs for renewal, which had matured first and foremost on the basis of a critical assessment of the actual training and educational capacities offered in Italy by the higher education system. If the basic problem of the Italian university was identified in the poor preparation it gave to the younger generations, it was widely believed that this mainly depended on its distinctly professional character. The widespread discontent and reflection on the problems of the higher education system lasted about thirty years. The debate had experienced its greatest expansion in the late 19th century and was rekindled again towards the end of the Giolitti era. The political and social context had changed profoundly, but the problematic nodes of the Italian university system continued to be more or less the same and, at least until the Gentile reform, would

remain so. The issues around which the professors' reflections had developed were theoretical and pedagogical in nature (such as freedom of teaching and study, the relationship between practical and scientific learning, between the structural characteristics of the higher education system and its formative and educational capacities) and of a more political nature, such as that of the relationship between the state, the university and science. This set of problems was to find in the question of higher education an important point of coagulation. Between the 19th and 20th centuries, it was this that accompanied, and profoundly marked, the formation process of the Italian academic body» (Verrocchio, 1997).

The predilection for research recognised as a primary need of the academy and the lack of attention to learning and teaching, however, has not only characterised past eras. In 2011, Ettore Felisatti wrote: «In the Italian university system, the gap between research and teaching is significant (Felisatti, 2011)». This statement soon triggered many questions: how is it possible that this gap is still tangible in the 21st century? How is it that in other school grades, teaching skills are a *sine qua non* for entering the teaching profession, while in the university environment this is not the case? What is being done to consider research and teaching as equal? The answers to the above-mentioned questions are not so easy to answer and can only be well understood if one resorts to a bit of history. In the following, a time span from the 1999 Bologna Process to the present day will be analysed in order to understand what initiatives have been taken both at the institutional level and by individual Italian universities in compliance with the European guidelines in the field of higher education.

The evolution of the Bologna process and the need to qualify university teaching in Italy

Over the last two decades, there have been many reforms and notable programmes at the European level that have shown an ever-increasing interest in improving higher education (ENQA, 2015) (EUA, 2018) (Commission, 2013). In particular, stronger ways have been adopted to open universities to the international dimension than in the past, with the shared goal of building the European Higher Education and Research Area. This implied a process of harmonisation and convergence of higher education and research systems involving both national and supranational administrations of European countries. This project is known as the 'Bologna Process', defined in the Bologna Declaration signed on 19 June 1999 by the ministers of 29 European countries (Bologna, 1999). As early as 1997, in the so-called Lisbon Convention, the Council of Europe and UNESCO drew up a convention allowing for the recognition of higher education qualifications acquired in Europe. As is well known, the milestones of this process begin with the Sorbonne Declaration, signed in 1998 by the Higher Education Ministers of Italy, France, Germany and the United Kingdom. Subsequently, the process continued with the Ministerial Conferences in Prague (2001), Berlin (2003), Bergen (2005), London (2007), Leuven (2009), Budapest and Vienna (2010), Bucharest (2012) and Yerevan (2015). One of the main objectives of this Process was to ensure the certifiable quality of higher education provided by individual educational institutions in European countries.

With the Bologna Declaration, the signatory ministers committed themselves to promoting national reforms in order to develop a university system that is convergent at the European level and competitive at the global level (Epasto, 2015). Thus, if at the European level a greater involvement of universities has been evinced, in the Italian reality there has been, on the one hand, a structural modernisation of courses of study, and on the other, there has been no impulse to the active protagonism of communities, teachers and students on didactic issues (Felisatti, 2020). The mainly

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normative view of didactics has limited an in-depth understanding of its complexity, neglecting the crucial role of teaching and learning. It has underestimated the fact that without true teaching professionals, effective quality of education cannot be guaranteed. Today, the realisation is strongly emerging that this perspective is essential to truly improve the educational process. The document Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) states:

«Responding to diversity and growing expectations for higher education requires a fundamental shift in its provision; it requires a more student-centred approach to learning and teaching, embracing flexible learning paths and recognising competences gained outside formal curricula» ((ENQA), 2015).

The concluding document, signed by the Ministers of Education of the 48 European countries, of the 2018 European Higher Education Area Ministerial Conference also reiterates how, in order to ensure high quality education is essential, academic career progression should be based on both success in research and success in teaching that is of high quality.

“As high quality teaching is essential in fostering high quality education, academic career progression should be built on successful research and quality teaching” (EHEA, 2018)

Being competent in research is essential in order to develop knowledge, contribute to solving the problems of today's society, and formulate theories that explain how the world works. It develops critical competences, forming individuals capable of critical thinking and problem solving, which are essential to face the complex challenges of society. However, this is not enough to make someone a good teacher. As reiterated by the European Science Foundation «While effective teaching is vital for student learning, in higher education, academics in Europe are not as well prepared for their teaching careers as they are for their research» (Pleschová G., 2012). Just as research requires specific preparation, so does teaching require adequate training. It is not enough to possess knowledge in order to be able to transmit it effectively; it is essential to master learning theories and to know various teaching methods to foster different learning styles in students. «Quality teaching implies that the teacher is not simply limited to knowledge of his or her discipline, but that he or she also masters theories of learning and is aware of the existence of multiple teaching methods to foster different learning styles in students» (Commission, 2013). The study Promoting a European dimension to teaching enhancement (EUA, 2017), conducted by the European Forum on Enhanced Collaboration in Teaching (EFFECT) and the European University Association (EUA) clearly shows how in some European countries - including Italy - there are no national Faculty Development strategies dedicated to the promotion of teaching and learning, or more generally to the promotion of teaching. Moreover, in Italy and other European countries, at least until 2015, there were still no national or legislative indications for the promotion and improvement of teaching by university lecturers. The desired renewal of university institutions, however, is taking hold and depends not only on well-conceived educational policies of the competent bodies, but also on the adaptation of structures and resources, and, above all, on the updating of teaching methodologies and the enhancement of teachers' professional skills. It is only through such a wide-ranging transformation that the implementation of education and training services, suited to the needs of a nation that must necessarily keep up with the times, can take place. Times that are accelerating, especially with regard to the ways in which knowledge is acquired and the ever decreasing time it takes to be considered obsolete (Epasto, 2015).

Therefore, reasoning and encouraging didactic qualification, initial and continuous training of university lecturers is one of the fundamental pillars for a global renewal; both of the academic

community and of society itself. A strong push in this direction was given by the ANVUR Governing Board, which, at its meeting held on 3 March 2015, set up a Working Group on the subject of the qualification and recognition of teaching skills in the university system, called QUARC_docente. With this decision, it was intended to develop some strategic guidelines for the enhancement of teaching professionalism and the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning processes (ANVUR, 2018). At this point in time, Italy finds itself confronted for the first time with a system that analyses and focuses on the teaching skills of university lecturers, «Innovative and quality teaching is realised through the reasoned realignment of functions, tasks, resources and structures, where central is the search for multi-perspective correspondences within and outside the system» (ANVUR, 2023). This represents an important step towards an official recognition of the importance of teaching in academia.

As can easily be deduced, reflection on the didactic qualification of university lecturers is a fairly recent issue, but one that is delicate and fundamental in the concerns of the bodies in charge of evaluation, both nationally and internationally. The *Guidelines for the professional development of teachers and strategies for the evaluation of teaching in universities*, published by the ANVUR QuarcDocente working group on 15 March 2018, draw attention to the need to «raise the level of qualification and evaluation of university teaching, through strategic actions aimed at strengthening the teaching-learning skills of teachers» (ANVUR, 2018), and to deepen and explore new perspectives and actions aimed at enhancing innovation in education, with a focus on the quality assurance and continuous improvement process of universities in an increasingly competitive global context. Further confirming the need to strengthen teaching and learning skills is the establishment of the *Permanent Laboratory on Didactics* within the CRUI association which includes several working groups, including a group dedicated to the topic of "Learning and Teaching," with the aim of creating a network of dialogue between the various universities to improve the quality of the educational pathways offered to students. Similarly, the EUA's 2018 report "Trends 2018: Learning and Teaching in the European Higher Education Area" (EUA, 2018) and the EFFECT project (European Forum for Enhanced Collaboration in Teaching) highlight how national initiatives to boost teaching qualification and initial and continuing training of university teachers still represent a terrain of great heterogeneity within the European Higher Education Area. And they point to experiences in countries such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, which have long developed a common framework for the competencies of university lecturers, are models for many EU countries.

Promoting Teaching Innovation to narrow the gap between research and teaching: experience of the University of Molise Talent Center

The baseline condition indicated by international research for innovative teaching emphasizes the urgency of adequate preparation of teachers for teaching-learning activity, taking into account the diverse audiences of students accessing education. One of the main objectives of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) is to contribute to the common understanding of quality assurance for learning and teaching across borders and among all stakeholders (ENQA, 2015). Indeed, it is required of faculty to be capable of preparing effective environments for student learning (Biggs, 2011) and of the academic community to develop actions to support the qualification of a faculty faced with new and emerging challenges in higher education (Yerevan, 2015). Universities are called upon to strongly support the revision of traditional models

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of teaching and invest in the development of professional skills to modernize university teaching and learning (Commission, 2013). In this direction, there is a need to rebalance the relationship between research and teaching and in parallel to adopt devices for appreciating and enhancing the quality of teaching (EUA, 2018). In recent years, there has been a growing awareness in Italy of the need to enhance the teaching skills of university lecturers, especially thanks to the National Agency for the Evaluation of the University System and Research (ANVUR), several universities have initiated pedagogical training programs aimed at their lecturers, recognizing that the quality of teaching is essential to ensure a high level of education. The realization that a good researcher is not necessarily a good teacher is finally catching on, prompting universities to invest in training for their faculty. Recognizing that the quality of education cannot be separated from the qualification of teachers, who must be able not only to transmit knowledge, skills and competencies, but also to create stimulating and inclusive learning environments. This holistic approach aims to balance the importance of research with that of teaching, promoting an academic career model that enhances both dimensions «Teaching needs the discipline and without research it becomes replicative; research, deprived of teaching, loses its ability to affiliate new generations» (ANVUR, 2023). There are many universities that have established Teaching and Learning Centers (Teaching and Learning Centers) that offer courses, workshops and consulting to improve the pedagogical skills of teachers, promoting a more reflective and conscious approach to teaching.

Here I would like to report, in particular, on the Faculty Development activities initiated by the University of Molise. In 2023, the Talent, Teaching and Learning Innovation center was inaugurated. The mission of the TALENT Center is the promotion of initial and continuing training of teachers in the education and training system of all levels through the design and implementation of training and research activities in the educational field aimed at implementing the quality of teaching, with particular reference to the processes of inclusion. It aims to promote the dissemination of innovative teaching methodologies, with particular attention to the student-centered approach (student-centered) and inclusiveness. It is committed to the promotion of forms of research on teaching and learning processes, including through the activation of grants and doctoral studies on issues of university teaching. The University area of the TALENT center is responsible for organizing and coordinating all Faculty Development initiatives at the University of Molise. In particular, interventions are planned on the following areas:

1. Teacher training for university teaching innovation:

- workshop training aimed at newly hired faculty for the development of teaching and assessment skills according to a student-centered approach
- workshops and webinars on specific topics related to methods, techniques and tools for teaching and assessment
- self-study training on issues of university teaching.

2. Support services and development of teachers' teaching skills:

- syllabus drafting guidance and support for revision of teaching records
- support in the design of blended learning paths
- guidance in the use and selection of technology resources for learning
- support in classroom management and adoption of active learning methodologies

- interpretation of course evaluation results
- implementation of inclusive learning strategies and forms of assessment
- accompaniment and methodological-didactic support for LSCs that want to innovate the teaching of some of their courses

Currently, the Talent Center is in charge of training for the design and delivery of blended learning pathways for faculty members of the Law, New Technologies and Security CoS of the Department of Law. The University of Molise's Talent Center is an important resource for the academic institution, as it is actively engaged in promoting innovation and excellence in university teaching. Through its wide range of initiatives, the Talent Center serves as a hub for the development of faculty teaching skills, the promotion of a student-centered teaching culture, and ongoing research on teaching and learning processes. This commitment not only improves the overall quality of education at the University of Molise, but also contributes to strengthening the reputation and attractiveness of the academic institution, making it a dynamic and cutting-edge place of learning. «The continuous presence of professional development support plans, appropriately supported, monitored and evaluated, becomes a key element of appreciation of educational quality and innovation in universities» (ANVUR, 2023). In this regard, the initiative of the University of Molise's Talent Center emerges as a significant example of investment in pedagogical innovation and faculty professional development. The holistic approach promoted by the Center, which integrates training, support and research, reflects the urgency of adapting university teaching to the emerging needs of students and contemporary society. Its focus on student diversity, educational technology and inclusiveness testifies to a tangible commitment to enhancing the learning experience and promoting the quality of higher education.

Conclusions

The transformation of the Italian academic landscape, from the time when academic prestige dominated over teaching skills to current efforts to enhance university teaching, represents a long journey of change and awareness. Responding to the questions posed at the beginning of the paragraph, it is possible to say that although the focus on teaching is a recent issue, a significant shift to recognize its importance has begun in recent years. Numerous initiatives have been undertaken to enhance the pedagogical skills of university teachers and consider research and teaching with equal dignity. These initiatives include Faculty Development programs, which provide specific training to improve teaching skills, and the establishment of centers for teaching innovation, which support faculty in adopting innovative teaching methodologies. Regarding the evaluation of the teaching skills of university lecturers, in Italy there is still no evaluation system in place to obtain a teaching qualification to enter the teaching profession. In spite of this, in many Italian universities, teaching quality is an element evaluated along with scientific production in teacher evaluation procedures. It remains, however, imperative to think about how to ensure that teaching skills are also considered a fundamental and indispensable criterion for academic career progression. There is a need to develop more effective and objective assessment methods that recognize the value of pedagogical innovation and the impact of teaching on student learning. Possible solutions include the adoption of systematic student feedback tools, the implementation of peer reviews of teaching activity among colleagues, and the integration of mandatory professional development pathways focused on pedagogical competencies. In addition, encouraging faculty participation in workshops, seminars and refresher

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courses on teaching and learning can foster an academic culture more attentive to teaching quality.

In parallel, it is crucial for academic institutions to recognize and value the time and effort devoted by faculty members to preparing lectures and adopting innovative teaching methodologies. This recognition can manifest itself not only through evaluation in career procedures, but also through prizes, awards and incentives that make visible the importance attached to teaching quality.

Although there is still a gap between research and teaching, the Italian university is taking important steps to close this gap. Enhancing the teaching skills of faculty members is crucial to ensuring high-quality higher education that is capable of meeting the needs of a rapidly changing society. Investing in the training and support of university faculty will not only improve the quality of teaching, but also contribute to a more balanced and inclusive academic environment where research and teaching are seen as integral and complementary parts of the educational mission. The path to high-quality undergraduate teaching requires a continuous and collective commitment from academic institutions, faculty, and educational policy makers. Only through a culture of university teaching based on innovation, critical reflection and professional updating will it be possible to ensure an educational future that is up to the challenges of the contemporary world. The future of university education in Italy depends on the ability of institutions to recognize and enhance the teaching skills of teachers. The gap between research and teaching can only be bridged through a cultural change that considers teaching an essential component of an academic career. It is essential to continue to promote teaching and technological innovation, implement constructive feedback evaluation systems, and support continuing teacher education. Ultimately, recognizing the importance of teaching skills is not just a matter of professional justice for faculty, but a necessity for the future of the education system. The journey to a balanced, high-quality university system is long and challenging, but the benefits it brings amply justify the efforts required

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