

2<sup>nd</sup> Workshop on the Process of Reform of University Systems  
**UNIVERSITY AND SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC COMPETITIVENESS:  
WHICH LINK?**

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### Questions for participants

1.  
Investments in research and knowledge are considered key factors in boosting the economy of a country. Given the role traditionally played by universities in the process of knowledge production and diffusion, they are expected to be crucial actors

#### Answer

They're not alternative views, or at least I wish they weren't. I work in a major group (and I understand that mine is in some ways a privileged position) which has been working with many Italian and foreign universities for years. We respect their autonomy, and the results have been positive. Every year, the Eni Group hires 500 to 600 graduates who

have studied at the universities the Group collaborates with. My experience as a manager has helped me understand that in Europe (and in the whole world, I think), economic progress is strongly linked to the quality of the collaboration between the academic and business worlds, which means that such cooperation is possible, and indeed desirable. One of the tasks of a good manager is thus to seek out different forms of collaboration between universities and the company.

In Italy, this is more difficult for two reasons. First, there are few large companies, and a great deal of small and mid-sized firms and while it's almost natural for a large company to cooperate with universities, for a small one, it's much harder. Second, for many years, the world of the university has believed that if it's to maintain its autonomy, it must not work too closely with the industrial sector. In relation to the first point, it is clear that firms of all sizes are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of education in boosting competitiveness both for themselves directly and for wider economy as a whole. At the same time, the academic world is realizing that its independence is not threatened by collaboration with industry. Confindustria, the association of Italian industrial firms (which plays a very important role in Italy, perhaps more than in other countries), is

strongly committed to helping small companies find ways to work with universities. So, I'm quite optimistic about this.

Have you heard Schopenhauer's story about the porcupines? They were cold, and they tried to get closer to each other to warm up, but they ended up pricking each other. So, they moved apart and got cold again. In the end, they found the right distance that allowed them to get warm without harming each other.

That's how a good relationship between the university and the world of business should be...

2.

Universities are gradually losing their prominent position (if not their monopoly) in the system of knowledge production and dissemination, and are hardly able to keep - or find - a distinctive role in the emerging knowledge

### Answer

The Bologna program and the resulting introduction of "serial" training programs (such as the "3+2" model) into all Western university systems give pause for serious reflection: should the university provide a solid cultural foundation or an advanced level of specific knowledge?

Here, too, I don't see these as opposing positions. Universities still play the most important role in producing highly qualified young people. And I think that businesses continue to seek graduates with broad-based cultural, intellectual and, especially, methodological backgrounds rather than with extremely narrow specialisations. Highly specialised technical knowledge can be provided by post-graduate studies or from other areas of the educational system. In this area, companies must at least be aware of the training opportunities that are out there. In Italy (and I'm only giving an example here), companies do not hire many researchers with doctorate degrees because it is believed that these young people should only work in the university system! The situation in other European countries is very different. Confindustria is working hard not only to ensure that companies understand the importance of researchers with doctorates, but also to place them in positions at companies.

With regard to the situation in Italy (which is characterized, as I mentioned earlier, by a great multitude of small companies), associations such as Confindustria that operate in all geographic areas of the country play a fundamental role in enabling the needs of companies to be met by the many players in the world of education and training. Quite often, this role is recognized legally.



3.

Insofar as this distinctive role of the universities is different from the role they have played so far, do you see any peculiar mechanisms through which they could be helped - by the corporate world and financial institutions - to take upon

### Answer

Yes, without a doubt.

And particularly in Italy, where universities are principally financed with public funds. Autonomy means responsibility

and accountability. It means setting goals and evaluating results.

Many people argue that the university is not a company. I agree. It's much more than that. It's a cultural venture. But like any company, it must manage its resources as best it can and efficiently reach the lofty goals which lie at the heart of the economic and civil development of a country. These concepts are even more important today for three reasons: the large number of students attending the university, the special attention paid to public finance (particularly in European countries), and the importance of education to the competitiveness of any country.

Today, we are finally aware of this in Italy, where the public finance system is gradually tending to reward the performance of universities and grant recognition when specific goals are reached. Naturally, our university system has a long way to go in this regard, but it's on the right track.

I believe that on the one hand, universities must be given greater independence, for example in choosing professors, in making agreements with the business sector, in the level of tuition paid by students, and in the number of foreign instructors, which is currently limited by law. On the other hand, ground rules of governance must be laid down for all public universities. In other words, although every university must be free to handle its affairs at it best sees fit, it must follow the same rules of accountability as all the others do. In this way, a person can judge the performance of any university. I also think it's necessary to have a national independent evaluating authority. And this is the direction I think our system is moving towards.

Of course, the system will require responsibility and ability...from the world of business, too.

New rules of autonomy, responsibility and financing, along with independent assessment, will open the door to abolishing the legal status of the university degree that still persists in Italy. But this must be a result, and not a premise.

The world of finance and business can thus help the university system without limiting its autonomy; indeed, it can even aid the university, for example, by imparting administrative methods such as its models of quality assessment. It can - indeed, it must - establish a dialogue with universities to communicate the needs and knowledge of markets in today's framework of international competition. It can provide significant economic resources, and even instructors. And universities will still be autonomous and will autonomously decide whether to take advantage of these opportunities. But they will be judged by the results that stem from their decisions.