

## University Autonomy. July 15<sup>th</sup> 2021

### SPEAKERS

Prof. Riccardo Mussari (Project Coordinator), Prof. Pasquale Ruggiero (Moderator), Prof. Paulo Resende da Silva (Moderator), Prof. Francesco Frati (Speaker), Prof. Ana Costa Freitas (Speaker).

#### **Prof. Paulo Resende da Silva**

Good morning. This is the first activity from the Working Package 2 that involves a cycle of six webinars; the aim of these webinars is to share some International and European visions about six different topics. This first webinar will focus on the concept of autonomy and how it is implemented and applied in Portugal and in Italy, especially in Evora and in Siena Universities. So, I give the word to Professor Riccardo to give his welcome words.

#### **Prof. Riccardo Mussari**

Thank you, Paulo. I want to thank all the participants for being there and the two speakers for having found the time to give us their contribution. Autonomy is a fundamental topic not only for the INSPIRE project, but also for all universities all over the world. I would like just to stress two things. First of all, autonomy was a conquest for European Universities, and second, it is a challenge. I'm sure that the Rectors will show us in practice, how difficult is to manage autonomy.

#### **Prof. Pasquale Ruggiero**

Thanks to the Rectors for their availability. I just want to briefly introduce the Rector of the University of Evora, Ana Costa Freitas. She holds a Bachelor's in agronomy by the Lisbon University and a PhD in food biotechnology by the University of Evora. She has a qualification on chromatographic methods applied to the food industry at the University of Evora. She has also a very long experience in the university management and governance; she has been vice rector between 2006 and 2010, vice president of the scientific Council of the University of Evora, vice president of the Institute of Mediterranean Agricultural Sciences, vice president of the Executive Council of the Department of Agricultural Science, and vice president of the scientific Council of the department. She has been president of the Department of Plant Sciences at the University of Evora and also a member of the Steering Committee of the PRIMA program. She has a high-level expertise in the Horizon 2020 policy, and she is also an advisor of the Bureau of the European policy advisor for the European Commission.

#### **Prof. Paulo Resende da Silva**

I want to present Professor Francesco Frati, the Rector of University of Siena. He has a Bachelor's in biology and a PhD in animal biology at the University of Siena. He was a visiting fellow at the Department of cell biology and anatomy in Cornell Medical Colleges, and a postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology in the University of Connecticut. He has a lot of experience on university government and management. He was vice rector, rector delegated for teaching affairs, Vice Dean of the Faculty of Science, chair of the Department of evolutionary biology, member of the national academy of entomology, Associate Editor of molecular Phylogenetics and Evolution and a member of the editorial board of the pedobiology and entomology. He was member of the steering committee of the Italian Zoological society between 2007 and 2011.

So, good morning to both of our invited professors, Professor and Ana Costa Freitas and Professor Francesco Frati, and let's start the conversation about autonomy.

**Prof. Pasquale Ruggiero**

First of all, I think that it's necessary to define the concept that we are going to discuss. My first question is related to the idea that you have about the concept of autonomy. In general, if we look to the dictionary, the definition of autonomy is related to the right of self-government. We could speak about a black box, because the concept of autonomy can be filled-in in many ways. So, my first question is, what do you think about autonomy? What is autonomy for you?

**Prof. Prof. Ana Costa Freitas**

Universities need autonomy to fulfill their challenges, as it is the right to make contracts, to hire people, to define a strategy, to receive a budget and use it -according to the law, obviously-, to define the university courses, the number and types of masters or PhDs courses, to elect the boards, the rector, the presidents of scientific councils and so on. I think this is quite important, since some schools in Portugal have no autonomy, and the fact that we, as universities, receive a budget, even small, is very relevant, especially considering that we can use and manage it according to our strategy. Another important aspect related to autonomy of universities is related to the fact that people can choose their own research activity.

**Prof. Pasquale Ruggiero**

Thank you. So, I think that you are stressing more on two main aspects of the university autonomy, that are the strategic aspect and the organizational aspect, both needed in order to be independent in making the decisions that you want to implement within the university.

**Prof. Francesco Frati**

I believe that Ana already highlighted several important issues about autonomy. In my view, if we consider the concept of autonomy in general terms, it is the possibility of having nobody telling you what you have to do. Differently from other countries where local or national governments might be willing to impose decisions about university issues, the possibility that universities have in the Italian system of making up their own decision, always respecting the laws, is probably the most distinctive aspect of autonomy. As Ana already mentioned, in our universities the procedures for the selection of university staff, of Professors, are done autonomously by each single University.

Then I see a dichotomy in terms of autonomy; on the one side we have the organization and administration aspect, and on the other side, the teaching and research aspect. As for the first aspect, of course, autonomy cannot be completely achieved in public universities, as long as we depend on the money coming from the government. Anyway, I am convinced that we need a public university system, because this is the only way by which we can assure every single citizen, despite of its family economic situation, to be able to access the education system, so I strongly support public universities. But of course, public universities have to respect some constraints given by the laws, by the financial support they receive from the central government, that can somehow limit the level of autonomy of each single institution. On the side of research and impact to teaching, in Italy, we have a large area of autonomy as researchers are absolutely autonomous in deciding in which field to perform their own research based on the curiosity of the researchers, and not on the impositions from somebody else, and I think this is a very important achievement that the global university system has reached in the last century.

**Prof. Paulo Resende da Silva**

As public universities, we have to act in accordance with the general regulations of our countries. Looking at the concept of autonomy, what kind of constraints or limitations the universities have to face when having to respect the national regulations?

**Prof. Francesco Frati**

Let me make an example. The composition of the two most important governing bodies of our university, the Senate, and the managing boards, is defined by the law, with a very low degree of freedom for the university. So, the law defines which characteristics the members must possess to be appointed into these boards and how many members the boards must have, but what is important is that the final decision about the members to be chosen -among the ones having the characteristics required by the law- is made by the universities. And this gives the university a great deal of autonomy in their decisions. Then we have a number of general rules and laws, that go from the procedure of Professor selection to the general structure of the teaching programs, but in spite of this general rules, every other decision is taken by each university alone, and in some cases, even by each department alone, especially when we transfer a high degree of autonomy from the central government to the departments.

**Prof. Prof. Ana Costa Freitas**

I think we have probably a different organization. Of course, we have a general law. The most important thing for me, is that the rector and the government bodies are not appointed by government. We have a general law for all universities, but then each university makes its own statutes. So, we don't have any specific indication, for example we know that we need a scientific Council, but there is no indication of who should be appointed there. As for the Senate for instance, it's our choice to have one or not; in our case, we have the Senate but we don't have any specific rules about which bodies should be represented there and in which percentage. Moreover, the rector has the powers which are delegated by the Minister, and he can delegate these powers to the directors of department. I fully agree with Francesco with when he said that we need public universities, because of the idea that everybody has the right to receive higher education. In Portugal we have too much population in the border parks, so close to the sea, and less population in the interior part of the country; and if we didn't have public universities, a university could not be viable in economic terms. So, we need universities supported by the state. In Portugal we don't receive budget for research, we just receive budget for university, so if you want to do research, you have to apply for specific projects' competition. All the regulations for professors, for staff, etc. are made at the university level and also the elections for the university staff are all made internally.

**Prof. Pasquale Ruggiero**

I think that there are two pillars of university autonomy that are almost clear and common in your answers. The first pillar relates with the direct election of the university members by the community of each university; for instance, we are in presence of two rectors that have been elected by the community that they represent in front of the government and in front of the citizens, so they have the responsibility for the organization that they represent and govern. The second pillar is related to the idea that the central government provides the universities both the general frame within which the university should move, and the financial independence needed by the universities to provide a good research and teaching service to everybody in a country.

Now I would go deeper in the management. And my question is: in terms of different aspects of university autonomy - you can have an autonomy from the financial point of view, or in the research, or under the administration perspective, which one you think it's the most important that you should have since the beginning?

**Prof. Prof. Ana Costa Freitas**

I think it's difficult to decide. I think the main point is that we should be able to decide, along with the community, how our university is going to follow its path by defining a strategy, and we should have a point of continuity in that strategy, because otherwise, we would always start again from the beginning; there has to be a continuity in a project. In order to avoid frequent changes in strategy, for example, rectors can be elected for two consecutive mandates, and I'm in the second one. I think that it's very positive that rectors are elected with a program that is supposed to be followed. There is another thing that is sure: the more autonomy you have, the more demanding it is because autonomy makes us the legal responsible for everything at university.

**Prof. Pasquale Ruggiero**

I totally agree with you and I'm quite happy of your answer, because you got the idea that autonomy is not something stable; instead, it's something that needs to be managed over time. Sometimes we have the idea that autonomy is something that is given is a stable, while it is exactly the opposite.

**Prof. Francesco Frati**

I believe that the most important side of autonomy is the academic autonomy, and I define academic autonomy as the possibility of making our own choices in terms of research and teaching. We all know that we have rules to follow, but it's very important that we are able to perform our own research, and that we are able to decide where to invest our money and our efforts in terms of teaching programs. The second very important side of autonomy is recruitment, the choosing of people: there is nobody telling us which Professor has to be hired. Of course, we have to follow specific procedures which ensure an equal access to all the potential candidates to our call; but at the same time, we are absolutely autonomous in terms of making these decisions. The third aspect is financial. As we mentioned, being a public university, we depend a lot on the grants coming from the government; somebody could say that there is no complete autonomy if you are not financially autonomous, but at the same time, I believe that this is something that we have to defend. So, the little part autonomy that we are forced to renounce to, on the basis of the fact that our financial support comes from the government is something that we give to the fact that this system supports a public university system. I would like also to emphasize what Ana said in her intervention: autonomy requires commitment, it is demanding, it requires being able to take our own decisions.

I believe that our contribution is also useful if we communicate to the people attending the webinar, the problems that sometimes may arise when implementing autonomy. When we are given more autonomy, we are given more responsibility in taking decisions. And sometimes we are in situations in which we have to take difficult decision, and the difficulty depends on the fact that we are autonomous. Sometimes people tell me "We don't need to take a decision, somebody else will take this decision for us". No, this is giving up some of our autonomy. So, if we want autonomy, we have to be ready to assume the responsibility of taking important decisions. That's a crucial issue.

**Prof. Paulo Resende da Silva**

We are working in a university and inside of the university we have our community, students, and stuff. And inside the stuff we have two different subgroups, the academic staff and the administrative stuff. So, when looking to autonomy, we need commitment -using Francesco's word-, but also the engagement of the stuff. So how can our universities increase commitment and engagement for real autonomy in our universities?

**Prof. Francesco Frati**

If you ask single colleagues, heads of departments, single researchers, heads of offices, single staff members, whether they want more autonomy, they would answer they want more autonomy. And this is natural. But once you have autonomy, you have to be ready to take decision. Sometimes, Heads of departments, who are continuously asking more autonomy in using the budget in making their own decisions, come to me and say "I don't know what to do, can the administrative body, the Academic Senate, take this decision for me?". Sometimes I have been forced to answer like "You wanted this autonomy, now it's your decision!". People are happy with having their own autonomy, but some of them are not prepared to manage this autonomy.

**Prof. Prof. Ana Costa Freitas**

I fully agree with Francesco. I think people want autonomy, they want to decide. But then, when they don't know what to do, they come back to us. I think because it's very demanding. We should discuss with everybody, but the moment of decision is always individual. During the pandemic situation it has been quite difficult to define the rules for our functioning, because people want more autonomy to decide, but when they are asked to take a decision, then they prefer that someone else decides for them. I think it's the kind of thinking that more autonomy will give more freedom, but autonomy is not directly related to this. You have to be able to take hard decisions and to be prepared for that.

**Prof. Pasquale Ruggiero**

Thank you, I could say, given your answer that, when you are not autonomous, you can make questions, when you are autonomous, you have to give answers. That is the reality. I totally agree with you, when you say that in order to be autonomous, you need to be competent, because you need to provide answers. Do you think that to be autonomous is something always good? Do you see any disadvantage in being autonomous as a system and as a university within a system? Do you see any drawbacks or difficulties coming from autonomy, that could be an obstacle that hamper a good autonomy in the system?

**Prof. Prof. Ana Costa Freitas**

I don't think that there is something bad in autonomy. It's difficult, but you must have it, because of the definition of university. University is academic freedom, research freedom, and the rest has to come with this, because if you don't have administrative autonomy, then how can you have all the rest? So, I think that the definition of university has to be linked to autonomy. It might be demanding and not always easy, but what in life is easy and what is in life is not demanding? So, I think they cannot be separated, it's a must. Sometimes we hear things we don't like, other times we say things for which we can be criticized and so on, but that's life. That comes being an academic and being in research. So, I don't see any drawback, it's just a risk that we have to deal with.

**Prof. Francesco Frati**

I agree. I think we don't want to give up our autonomy. If possible, you will ask more autonomy in taking some decisions. I am quite happy about the level of autonomy that I have as a rector in the university system. And I'd like to mention one more thing. Autonomy has nothing bad with it, but sometimes difficult issues come up not from big important decisions, but from smaller ones. For example, when you have to take decisions about smaller points, procedures, details in the organization of the programs, in that case you would like to have some more indications from the government. But when you have to take decisions on important issues, just like, for example, who must elect the rector, who must appoint the members of the board, who must elect the heads of the departments and so forth, in those decisions, we want to be autonomous and autonomy has nothing bad.

**Prof. Paulo Resende da Silva**

Now I think it's relevant for us to better understand your perspective and your opinion about how you implement internally autonomy. When autonomy needs to be deployed and which are the conditions? This question is relevant because, as a result of your answers, we need to increase the capacity to take a decision at the local and medium decision level, at the deans levels, at the department levels. So, how you implement this system internally in your universities, to exploit better the concept of autonomy?

**Prof. Francesco Frati**

We're trying to transfer a relevant part of autonomy to the peripheric bodies, the departments for example. In Italy, each university is organized in a number of departments, whose number changes from one university to another according to the size, and I am a stronger supporter of giving the departments the autonomy of making their own choices. I know that in this case, we might have some drawbacks. For example, we leave the departments a lot of freedom in taking their own decisions in selecting the people they want to recruit -always according to the general laws, which are national-. What we have to do is to check whether these decisions taken by different departments are coherent one with the other, as we don't want to duplicate professors in the same area, unless this is required. So, my idea is that it is correct that the universities transfer a great deal of their autonomy to the single internal organizations or organizational structures of each own university. But this requires responsibility on side of the single organizational structure, and a certain level of coordination on the side of the governing bodies.

**Prof. Prof. Ana Costa Freitas**

I do agree with Francesco. We have our difficulties, especially in the administrative part because of the reduced budget, meaning that we cannot distribute enough money. Sometimes different people have to discuss a lot to make a decision. For this reason, we cannot have too much bodies, because one of the dangers is that it takes too long to take a decision, and this is sometimes a problem. For example, you might have to go to a scientific Council, then to a pedagogical one, then to the rector, then to the management board, and so on, and for this reason it might take too much time to take a decision. So, I think that having autonomy also means that we must have confidence in the people that are elected, talk with them as to take decisions in a shorter way than we sometimes do. Sometimes it happens that you have to go on from one body to another, and after two months or three months, you lose the opportunity. I also fully agree about the importance of giving autonomy to the departments for staff recruitment.

**Prof. Paulo Resende da Silva**

One of the participants is asking: "Of course we have the academic and scientific autonomy. But when we have financial limitations, how can we improve and manage autonomy? In Portugal, for example, we have seen the financial budget decreased of the 50% / 40% of what was in the past. So, how can we increase the autonomy with a more constraints in financial budget?"

**Prof. Prof. Ana Costa Freitas**

We have autonomy for everything, so we can decide whether to recruit someone or not according to our budget; in Portugal everything concerning university belongs to the same minister, so the recruitment of researchers, staff and so on is our decision. Of course, now, with the restrictions in economy, we cannot go up to 5% or 3% of the last year, but it's our decision according to our budget. Of course, the budget is not enough, but what is important is that we have our own incomes from services, from research products, that we keep for the overheads of the university.

**Prof. Francesco Frati**

With respect to financial autonomy, I repeat what I said earlier. I know that if we are not financially autonomous, we may consider ourselves not entirely autonomous; but at the same time, the financial contribution from the government is necessary to provide the country with the university system that allows the access of all students from all possible families to higher education. I think that giving up some autonomy in order to give everybody the possibility of enrolling a public university is a very good trade off. And in Italy, we don't have particularly strict controls on how we use the money that we receive. On the other side, I would say that that we are quite free of establishing collaboration with, for example, the industrial framework, with the companies; and so, as Anna mentioned earlier, we are also able to provide some financial support from one to one contracts, which we sign with external organization, and we are quite free of signing contracts with companies with which we establish a collaboration, or companies for which the kind of activity that our departments do may be useful and which will pay for this activity. And from these kinds of contracts, of course, we get some extra money.

**Prof. Paulo Resende da Silva**

Professors, we have other questions. What are the steps of getting autonomy? What is the highest level of management? Is it autonomy or independence?

**Prof. Francesco Frati**

Well it's almost the same thing. Usually, independence is a word that we use for countries being independent from other countries. I'd rather say autonomy, of course. But maybe I'm missing some of the little issues of interpreting a single word. In terms of how to get autonomy, I think that the only way is pushing and supporting the governments in approving laws and regulations that provide that autonomy to universities.



**Prof. Prof. Ana Costa Freitas**

I think autonomy is almost the same as independence. We are not independent from the government, because they finance public universities and give us some rules. Of course, we have private universities in Portugal as well. I prefer the public universities, and I think the country has to have public universities. And I think it's our obligation to get everybody into higher education, even if -and sometimes this is said in Portugal- we don't have enough qualified jobs for everybody and I'm sorry for that, but we still have the obligation to give people the higher education they can have, because this is definitely a way of improving their life and their culture and then their knowledge of citizens.

There is another a question about student selection. In Portugal, most of universities have a limitation in the number of students that we can enroll, and they are enrolled through national examinations. Students can choose five universities according to their preferences, and on the basis of their scores, they are enrolled in the first choice, or second choice, and so on. We have also some exceptions; for example, we can have international students, we can have students that already have higher education diploma, we can have people older than 23 years, and for them we have established special contests; these particular situations are limited, about the 20% of the total amount of students. The total amount of students is regulated every year by the Minister. Some people don't like this, but the point is that we cannot have everybody in the same universities, such as Porto, Lisbon, Coimbra, and so on. We have 14 public universities, each university must have people all over the country, even for the development of all the parts of the country.

**Prof. Francesco Frati**

In terms of student selection, in Italy we have three situations. The first one is very similar to what Anna just mentioned, and it is valid for the medical school and other programs which are associated with medical jobs. In that case, the government makes a selection all over the country; in particular, there is a fixed number of positions, students apply for these positions by choosing an order of choice for the different universities, and they will be appointed to single universities according to their scores. Then we have another kind of program, where the access of students is regulated at the local level; this occurs especially in programs with a very strong part of experimental fields; in these cases, universities may set the maximum limit of students which may be enrolled -pharmacy and biological sciences are some examples-. For the rest of programs, and I would say about 60% of programs in our university, there is no limitation to the access, so all the students that want to enroll at the University of Siena may do so.

**Prof. Pasquale Ruggiero**

I have the role to finalize the discussion that we had today all together. I see from the messages that the concept of autonomy and the discussion about autonomy is something that is very relevant for all the people attending the webinar. So, thank you very much to the two rectors, Professor Ana Costa Freitas and Professor Francesco Frati for the time that you had for us, for the inspiring words that you were able to give us to understand what is relevant, and especially in giving us the idea that our autonomy is sometimes is difficult to carry on, because it needs to be managed; it's not something written on a paper; autonomy is something that needs to be fed like a baby, in order to become productive, otherwise it could become dangerous. But it is something that is relevant for the development of the university system.

Thank you again for your time.