



Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca

CIRCULAR

by the Minister for Education, Universities and Research

regarding certain implementing aspects of the new legislation on the attainment of the National Scientific Qualification introduced by Law 30 December 2010, no. 240

This circular is addressed, first and foremost, to the members of the Evaluation Committees and applicants to the first Call for the attainment of the National Scientific Qualification. The aim of this circular is to underline the strong points of the new national qualification introduced by Law 240/2010, and following implementing provisions, while providing information on the implementation of some specific aspects which have raised a number of comments from different quarters, including motion no. 1/01152 submitted to the Lower House of the Italian Parliament in October 2012.

The qualification was introduced in order to allow the “disciplinary communities” to express an independent and accountable judgement, through ad-hoc Evaluation Committees, on whether a candidate is eligible for the National Scientific Qualification required in order to run for first-level and second-level academic positions in Italian Universities. Successively, each individual University, acting strictly on the basis of meritocratic criteria in line with best international practices, carries out a comparative evaluation of applications for open academic positions received from candidates who hold the national qualification.

In recent years a large number of professors have relinquished tenure upon retirement. As a consequence, once the current economic conditions and their repercussions on the Italian University system improve, ensuring that calls to award the National Scientific Qualification are opened at regular intervals will allow to bring the recruitment system back to its full capacity. Furthermore, in order to provide clear information on the demographic trend of faculty, the Ministry will publish on its website projections of relevant data split up by sector and by level in a dedicated section on academic staff.

The qualification and recruitment procedures are part of a two-step process whereby the independence and accountability of the “disciplinary communities” and of universities complement and integrate each other. In this respect, it may be useful to recall that as per Law 240/2010, ex post assessment of recruitment policies adopted by Universities, alongside the assessment of their research activities, are a significant factor in the allocation of government funding (*fondo di finanziamento ordinario*).

It is reasonable to assume that some of the difficulties we are witnessing in this first round of applications for the award of the National Scientific Qualification are a consequence of the long standstill in academic recruitment through public competitions which has now raised up expectations in such a large number of candidates. In addition, the

high number of applications received in this first Call is, presumably, also due to uncertainty about whether calls for applications in future will actually be published routinely, on a yearly basis, as explicitly set forth in article 16, par. 3 letter d) of Law 240/2012.

It is therefore both necessary and useful to advise that the Ministry, in compliance with the above legislation, will publish the next 2013 Call to apply for the National Scientific Qualification on January 28, the application deadline being 31 October 2013. Applying online will allow candidates who decide to withdraw their application for the 2012 Call to automatically transfer their application to the 2013 session and update previously entered information by the set deadline.

In addition, on 28 January 2013 the dates for the next 2014 and 2015 Calls will also be published in order to provide the timeline for the first four calls (2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015), thus allowing candidates to plan their application well ahead. The only way to ensure that the National Scientific Qualification fulfils the purpose for which it was established, i.e. selecting candidates with an adequate scientific record to run for the position of university professor in Italy, is to provide certainty that calls will be issued at regular intervals. The purpose of this qualification is not, whatsoever, to select a restricted number of “*in pectore* winners” through a comparative evaluation, nor that of carrying out an exercise without real selection effectiveness.

From a procedural point of view, it must be pointed out that the 2013 Financial Stability Law postponed the deadline for Committees to complete their work for the 2012 session, according to the number of applications received.

The following are the deadlines set by Directorial Decree 9 January 2013, no. 47:

- 30 April 2013 for Committees examining up to 500 applications;
- 31 May 2013 for Committees examining between 501 and 750 applications;
- 30 June 2013 for Committees examining more than 751 applications.

That said, most of the remarks raised from different quarters regard the criteria and parameters, differentiated by level (first and second) and by subject area, on the basis of which the Evaluation Committees are called to express their informed judgment on the curriculum of candidates.

This judgment, preceded by a brief description of the candidate’s individual contribution to research and development activities (as per Ministerial Decree 7 June 2012, no. 76) must be “based on an analytical assessment of academic titles and publications” (art. 3, par. 1) while taking well into account “the quality of scientific production” (art. 4, par. 2, letter *c*), and art. 5, par. 2, letter *c*)) and the achievement of significant scientific results alongside their international relevance (art. 3, par 2).

The curricula of all candidates will be available on the websites of the Ministry and of the University where the procedure is taking place (with the exception of applicants who withdraw their application before the deadline, as per art.2, par. 8 of Directorial decree 20 July 2012, no. 222). At the end of the procedure, the judgement expressed by the Committee and the list of applicants who obtained the qualification in alphabetical order will also be published.

Regarding the criteria and parameters required to earn the first-level qualification, article 4, par. 1 of Ministerial Decree 7 June 2012, no. 76 provides that the evaluation of academic titles and scientific publications is aimed at assessing the full scientific maturity of candidates, certified by the relevance of the scientific issues they addressed and the achievement of unique and high-quality results, granting them a fully recognized position in the national and international research scenario. Additional evaluation criteria include the ability to lead a research team with the potential involvement of international collaborators, the experience gained as supervisor of PhD students, the ability to attract competitive funding as a project leader, especially at the international level, and the ability to promote technology transfer. In relation to the distinctiveness of each sector of the competitive examination, the Committee may decide - in compliance with art. 3, par. 3 of the abovementioned Decree - not to use one or more of such additional criteria.

Paragraphs 2 and 3 of the same art. 4 mention, respectively, the criteria and parameters that the Committee will have to use to evaluate scientific publications. Among these, special mention should be made to the criterion (art. 4, par. 2, letter c) concerning the quality of scientific production assessed against the international research scenario, based on its uniqueness, methodological rigour and innovative nature. Paragraph 4 of the same art. 4 mentions ten parameters the Committee has to comply with in order to evaluate academic titles, the first being the impact of the overall scientific production.

As to the second-level qualification, article 5, par. 1 of Ministerial Decree 7 June 2012, no. 76 provides that the evaluation of academic titles and scientific publications is aimed at assessing the scientific maturity of candidates, meaning the achievement of high quality and unique results in their research work which grants them a fully recognized position in the research landscape, at least on a national scale. Additional evaluation criteria include the ability to coordinate or lead a research team, the ability to attract competitive funding as a local project leader and the ability to promote technology transfer. In relation to the distinctiveness of each sector of the competitive examination, the Committee may decide - in compliance with art. 3, par. 3 of the abovementioned Decree - not to use one or more of such additional criteria. Paragraphs 2 and 3 of the same art. 5 mention, respectively, the criteria and parameters that the Committee will have to use to evaluate scientific publications. Among these, special mention should be made to the criterion (art. 5, par. 2, letter c) concerning the quality of scientific production assessed against the international research scenario, based on its uniqueness, methodological rigour and innovative nature. Paragraph 4 of the same art. 5 mentions ten parameters the Committee has to comply with in order to evaluate academic titles, the first being the impact of the overall scientific production.

Art. 3, par. 3 of Ministerial Decree 7 June 2012, no. 76, provides that before examining individual *curricula*, the Committee shall decide on how to weigh the criteria and parameters under art. 4 and 5 of the same Decree and on the potential use of additional and more restrictive selection criteria and parameters to evaluate publications and titles, by adopting a substantiated document to be published on the websites of the Ministry and of the relevant University where the procedure is taking place. The way criteria and parameters are weighed has to be balanced and motivated.

Such provision should be interpreted in the light of art. 6 of Ministerial Decree 7 June 2012, no. 76. This article provides that the Committee awards the qualification on the basis

of the criteria and parameters selected by the Committee itself among those listed in articles 4 and 5 (or of any other different and/or additional criteria) before it begins its activities under par. 2 of art. 4 of Directorial Decree 20 July 2012, no. 222 (2012 Call). With regards to the impact of the overall scientific production, the qualification is awarded on the basis of specific numerical indicators and their relevant application rules set forth in the Annexes to the Decree.

The overall evaluation of candidates, as stated above, has to rely on a substantive analysis of their scientific production. Exceeding the specific numerical indicators is not, in itself, a sufficient factor to earn the qualification. As a rule, the qualification should be granted by Evaluation Committees only to candidates who meet both requirements (positive judgement and exceeding the impact indicators of scientific production). However, by virtue of art. 6, par. 5, a Committee may decide not to comply with such general rule. This means that the Committee may decide not to grant the qualification to candidates who exceed the prescribed mean value for the relevant sector, but have obtained a negative judgment from the Committee. Conversely, the Committee may award the qualification to candidates who do not exceed the prescribed mean values, but receive an extremely positive judgement from the Committee. It is understood that any decision by the Committee on the above questions will have to be rigorously motivated - according to the provisions contained in art. 6, par. 5 of the abovementioned Decree and in line with the procedures established by art. 3, par. 3, of the same decree - both, preliminarily, when setting criteria and at the end of the process when the final judgement is issued.

Evaluation Committees are therefore urged to exercise their prestigious role with the utmost autonomy and scientific responsibility and in absolute transparency.

It is our hope that this circular will help evaluators, candidates and any interested party along the process initiated with the first Call for applications for the National Scientific Qualification.

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THE MINISTER
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