

Science teaching in Italian universities could be crippled if tens of thousands of junior staff make good on threats to strike later this year. The 'ricercatori' (researchers) are protesting harsh university budget cuts and a looming reform bill, which threaten their futures. The bill was designed to align Italy's struggling university system with international norms by, among other measures, eliminating the ricercatore position and introducing instead a tenure-track system. It is broadly welcomed in university circles, but massive funding cuts may make its goals unachievable.

Ricercatori — the lowest academic grade, beneath 'associate professor' and 'full professor'— currently move up the academic scale by applying for open positions in competitions organized by the government. The proposed tenure-track system would instead offer young scientists three-year contracts that could be renewed once. If a central panel of experts then judged them suitable for tenure, they would be placed on a 'habilitation' list; universities would consider listed academics for professorships. But the law does not offer a way for existing ricercatori to get on the list. "We are afraid we will be stuck as ricercatori for the rest of our lives," says neuropsychologist Alessia Tessari, a researcher at the University of Bologna.

A survey conducted at the University of Turin suggests that two-thirds of Italy's 25,000 ricercatori will stop teaching courses and running exams during the strike. A walkout on this scale "will break the university system", says chemist Dario Braga, pro-rector for research at the University of Bologna. Ricercatori are not obliged to teach, but in practice they run a significant proportion of courses, particularly in the sciences.

Enrico Decleva, rector of the University of Milan and head of the Conference of Italian University Rectors, admits that the strike would be crippling. "But we also have a much bigger problem," he says. "The huge budget cuts will hit the universities at every level."

Tessari says that she and many other ricercatori plan to strike as much to protest the budget threat as to protect their positions. Last year, the government decided to slash the already tight university budget from €7.49 billion (US\$9.27 billion) to €6.05 billion between 2009 and 2012, a fall of 19%. In addition, an emergency financial budget now under discussion in parliament, which is intended to save about €24 billion in public spending by 2012, would allow universities to fill just one post for every five vacated over the next three years and one for every two in 2014, almost wiping out recruitment.

Most agree that Italy's universities are badly in need of reform. But the cuts may make it impossible to raise standards and increase universities' autonomy, two goals of the reform bill. A net of complex rules, some of which are in a constant and paralysing state of flux, stymies the universities. Academic recruitment and promotion — a mostly centralized procedure — had in any case almost ground to a halt for five years before a trickle of new posts were opened this year, because controversial selection rules were being revised. Powerless to hire, universities will not be able to take advantage of the reforms.

The reform bill is scheduled to be approved before August, but that date is likely to slip. In the meantime, academics are lobbying for compromises. Decleva says, for example, that the government must ensure that researcher-grade scientists can compete with new tenure-trackers for promotion to associate professors.

If these changes don't happen, and the ricercatori carry out their threat to strike, universities may find themselves unable to open for teaching in September. (*A. Abbott Published online. 30-06-2010. Nature 466, 16-17*)

### *Comments*

1. This undoubtedly represents a dramatic and very frustrating situation, which is made even more dramatic and frustrating by the "specific context" in which it is progressively developing. In this respect, it should be firmly kept in mind that the Italian scientific community, with special emphasis on that working at academic level, is dealing since years with a chronic lack or clear insufficiency ("best case scenario") of public research funding on behalf of the Government. As a matter of fact, just 1% of the national "gross domestic product" (GDP) is invested since years into scientific research, with our Country being one of those spending less money in funding this vital, crucial and strategic activity all throughout the European Union (where almost the double is spent as an average). Notwithstanding this, papers produced by Italian scientists frequently rank among the most cited ones in many disciplines all over the world. Italy is currently experiencing a hard economic situation, which is part of a global financial crisis. Under similar conditions, it is even more important – not to say mandatory – that a Country does not "forget" to bet on its future, thus "re-writing" the "rules" of public research funding. And, ironically, this is all but a paradox! (*G. Di Guardo, University of Teramo*)

2. Italian Universities are struggling to compete at an international level, the main problem being the lack of funding to support research activities. In my experience at least 50% of University

groups do not accept diploma or PhD students any longer because they do not have any funding to support their projects. Currently I see two main problems with this reform bill and the attached additional cuts in investments in University and education.

Recruitment. Even if research in Italian University might recover in the future, we will experience a generation gap. Hiring of young scientists is and will be hampered by the budget cuts and the rule preventing to fill more than one of five vacated positions.

□ The appeal of a career in Italian Universities for young scientists. The issues mentioned and against which ricercatori are striking is just one aspect of this problem whose roots lie in the belief of part of the Italian society and political class that, in a period of economical crisis and cuts in public spending, education is not a priority. (*G. Cesareni. University of Rome, Tor Vergata*)