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News

Strikes could 'break' Italy's universities

Action by junior staff would cripple teaching.

Alison Abbott

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.

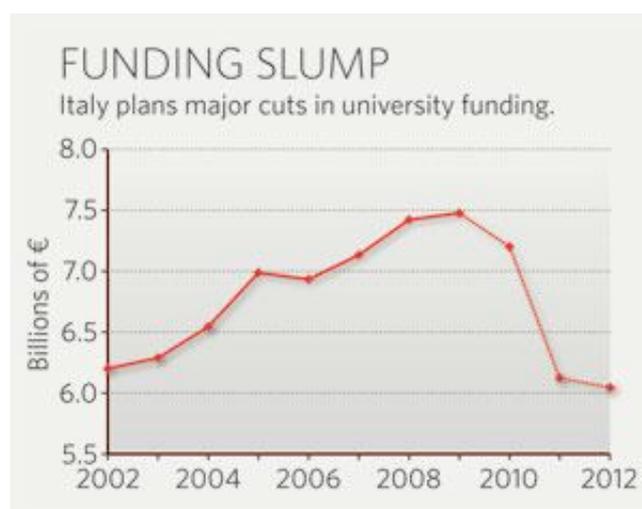
Enrico Decleva, rector of the University of Milan and head of the Conference of Italian University Rectors, admits that the strike would be crippling. "But we also have a much bigger problem," he says. "The huge budget cuts will hit the universities at every level."

Tessari says that she and many other ricercatori plan to strike as much to protest the budget threat



The University of Bologna.

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SOURCE: MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, UNIVERSITIES AND RESEARCH

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. The number of courses in Italian universities rose from 116,000 in 2001–02 to 172,000 in 2007–08, and without the army of ricercatori there will not be enough professors able to take over, says Decleva.

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