

ITALY: Academics' pension age under scrutiny*Lee Adendorff*

The pension age for Italy's ageing professorial body could be lowered to 65 years under reforms currently being discussed in the Italian parliament, in an attempt to address what Education Minister Mariastella Gelmini has described as an urgent need for 'generational turnover'.

Italy has the oldest academic staff in Europe, with 54% of professors over the age of 50 compared with 41% in France, 30% in the UK and 29% in Germany, according to figures from the European Union statistical agency Eurostat, analysed by the Ministry for Education and Research.

This figure is most evident for tenured full professors, 53% of whom are aged 60 or over in Italy according to the country's National Committee for the Evaluation of the University System.

Yet earlier retirement for senior academics to make way for younger teachers is proving a complicated solution. Last year a law was passed lowering the effective pension age from 72 to 70 years for full professors at the discretion of the university. Reforms currently under discussion by the Italian government will consolidate this limit and could see the pension age for associate professors lowered even further to 65 years.

Paolo Manzini, Vice-president of the Tenured Professors Union said that although under the reforms 60% of the funds freed up by retiring full professors had to be used to fund places for assistant professors - the first rung on Italy's three-tiered academic ladder - retiring academics would be effectively replaced in a ratio of just 1:5.

"Two years ago there were 62,768 academics in our universities, and at the end of last year we numbered 60,882. In five years' time, with the various reforms and lack of places being created, I would not be surprised to see that number drop below 45,000," he said.

Even the government's National University Advisory Council is not sure it is a good idea. In a paper published in July, the council pointed out that lowering the pension age could mean an extra 1,500 retirements annually, with out-of-budget termination payments that could amount to as much as EUR300 million (US\$402 million) a year.

However, keeping professors in the academy until the age of 72 is costing a fortune. Giuseppe Caputo, an assistant professor at the University of Salerno, has written extensively on the issue of reform for the online university magazine MenodiZero.

Recent data quoted by Caputo show that a professor at the end of his or her academic life costs an Italian university around EUR120,000 annually and that in an extra seven years of career (from a hypothetical 65 years to the actual 72 years) this amounts to EUR840,000. "With this amount you could pay 28 assistant professors for a year," he said.