

# Government Wins Fight to Modernize Academic Appointments



**Future imperfect.** Rectors' leader Piero Tosi wants more reform.

**ROME**—After almost 2 years of debate, Italy's Parliament approved a law last week to reform the status and recruitment of academic staff and bring the university system in line with those of other leading nations. The most dramatic change will be the elimination of the *ricercatore* position, a tenure-track job for young researchers, currently numbering 20,000. The law will also switch professorial appointments from a local to a national system and allow universities the autonomy to take on contract research projects and make ad hoc academic appointments.

The government took action this autumn after the bill risked running aground under the weight of hundreds of amendments. On 28 September, University Minister Letizia Moratti called on the Senate to give the bill a vote of confidence. Designed to free up the bill's progress, the appeal passed the next day, with government supporters blaming the opposition for obstruction tactics. But opponents complained of a "coup," and the college of university rectors (CRUI), an unyielding critic, declared the action an "unacceptable forcing of parliamentary practice." When the bill returned to the Camera Parliament's lower house on 25 October, opposition delegates walked out in protest. The bill was passed.

The position of *ricercatore*, which the bill will phase out by 2013, was introduced in 1980 to boost university research. In reality, many *ricercatori* were overloaded with teaching duties while others remained in the role for an academic lifetime. Under the new law, young researchers will be employed on 3-year contracts and can complete only two contracts before they must

apply for an associate professor position.

The new law will also reform the *concorsi* system, in which universities set up panels to vet candidates for promotion to associate or full professor. The *concorsi* have often been attacked for favoring in-house candidates. Moratti plans to combat this "localism" by returning to national appointment competitions abandoned in reforms 7 years ago. Successful candidates will be put on a list from which universities can choose individuals to apply to fill their posts.

Another aspect of the law covers new rights for universities to draw up contracts with businesses and other bodies to fund research. And to combat brain drain, says Moratti, they will be able to directly appoint candidates from abroad—Italian nationals or otherwise—to associate and full professorships. Researchers from industry may also be named temporary professors.

Although Moratti is confident that the provisions will benefit young researchers and "bring the Italian system up to that of the most advanced countries," there remain many opponents. During the bill's progress, CRUI, for one, called for even greater university autonomy, researcher assessment to ensure a meritocratic system, better career paths for young researchers, and guarantees of adequate funding. According to CRUI President Piero Tosi, approval of the new law is unfortunate because basic questions about the future of the universities are left "unresolved."

—SUSAN BIGGIN

Susan Biggin is a writer in Trieste, Italy.

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