

ACADEMIC RECRUITMENT IN ITALY:

AN OVERVIEW FOR FOREIGNERS

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In the following pages, I will try to explain to non-Italian readers how academic recruitment works in Italy, and to illustrate its key aspects. It is not an easy task, as we are facing an extremely complex system, suffering from chronic lack of stability. For this reason, I will not go too deeply into details,¹ hoping to give nonetheless a sufficiently accurate picture of its architecture.

1. AN UNSTABLE REGULATION

A well-working higher education system requires fundamentally stable recruiting procedures. This stability is required with respect to the number of people recruited in a given timeframe and the rules defining the recruitment procedures. Unfortunately, academic recruitment in Italy is highly unstable on both these fronts..

¹ For a more in-depth discussion of Italian academic recruitment see A. BANFI, Aspetti problematici del reclutamento accademico in Italia, in *Ius Publicum Network Review* 2015, 1.

Starting from the last point, it must be said that the troubled history of recruitment procedures in Italy dates back more than a century;² only in the last decade we can count one major - but never applied - reform (the «Riforma Moratti» of 2006)³, an attempted but never implemented reorganization of recruitment procedures for researchers (2006)⁴, and then the ambitious «Riforma Gelmini» (l. 240/2010): the latter had an enormous impact on the academic system in Italy and has completely redesigned the recruitment procedures. But this reform has already been modified twice, in particular with regard to academic recruitment (in 2014 and 2015)⁵.

Now, beyond any appreciation of merits and demerits of the measures mentioned above, it is clear that the tendency of governments and of the legislature to intervene with such frequency on recruitment processes results in a harm to the entire system: uncertainty is greatly increased, making it harder for those who intend to pursue an academic career to organize and make their own choices in the most rational and appropriate way.

This uncertainty, arising from the chronic instability of the regulatory framework, is mixed with other unfavorable factors: for example, the continued uncertainty arising from the replacement - in the early stages of the academic career - of permanent positions with non permanent ones, the continuing reduction of university resources and the restrictions imposed to academic personnel turnover. The effect of all this is to discourage aspiring young

²See M. MORETTI, I. PORCIANI, *Il reclutamento accademico in Italia. Uno sguardo retrospettivo*, in *Annali di Storia delle Università Italiane*, 1997, I (http://www.cisui.unibo.it/annali/01/annali_01.htm); M. ROSTAN, M. VAIRA, *Una professione che sta cambiando*, in M. Rostan (cur.), *La professione accademica in Italia. Aspetti problemi e confronti nel contesto europeo*, Milano 2011, 11-50; C. FRANCHINI, *Il reclutamento dei professori universitari*, in G. DELLA CANANEA, C. FRANCHINI, *Concorrenza e merito nelle università. Problemi, prospettive e proposte*, Torino 2009, 79-88.

³ Dlgs. 164/2006.

⁴ L. 298/2006, art. 1 c. 647

⁵ D.l. 90/2014 (art. 14); l. 190/2014, art. 1 c. 347.

researchers, leading them to relocate or to abandon their projects; ultimately, we might even be confronted with phenomena of inverted selection: only the less qualified ones could be willing to deal with a path so rough, uncertain and not especially rewarding.

Moreover, the history of Italian university is characterized by a succession of "opening" and "closing" of recruitment channels, sometimes ending in a *ope legis* saturation of roles.⁶

Also in this case, history seems to repeat itself, as the dl 90/2014 suspended the third round of national qualification procedures,⁷ that has not been started pending changes to the implementing provisions of the section of the l. 240/2010 concerning academic recruitment; to date the expected schedule for the new round (late February 2015)⁸ has already been widely exceeded and the texts of the new decrees are not public, and as a result they have not even started the approval process.

The considerable volatility of the Italian policymakers in the field of academic recruitment – almost every kind of procedure has been tried in the past decades, national competitions, local competitions, national qualifications - can be explained in several ways: on the one hand there is often the need to correct badly designed procedures that rapidly produce side-effects. On the other hand, when it comes to academic recruitment and therefore individual evaluation, often ideology comes into play, with a clash of ideas linked to different and often mutually incompatible views concerning the role of the university system and its social and economic function.

It is therefore necessary that those who have a government responsibility become conscious of the importance of the university system for the social and economic development of the

⁶This happened in 1980 after the d.P.R. n.382/1980.

⁷ See below, § 3.

⁸D.l. 90/2014, art. 14 c. 3.

country;⁹ it requires not only adequate funding, but also stable rules, the effects of which should be carefully monitored to allow focused, limited maintenance when necessary.¹⁰ It should be decided then, once and for all, what we want from academic recruitment and how it should be designed. Errors should be corrected and the new rules should be tested for a period of time sufficiently long to ensure an accurate monitoring of results. It is absolutely necessary to intervene not with new "epochal reforms" but with correctives aimed at solving the known criticalities.

All this requires, first of all, a political investment on the Ministry of Education, University and Research: it cannot continue to be the weak center as seen in recent years, unable to effectively govern the whole system.

Having said that, in the following pages I will try to identify and briefly expose the key points that threaten the current recruitment system, starting from the beginning of the academic career.

2. UNSTABLE PEOPLE.

As mentioned earlier, it is not only the instability of recruitment procedures that can act as a powerful disincentive against the best aspiring researchers and professors. The reform of 2010, in fact, abolished the old academic position of «researcher» - for a long time the first step in permanent academic positions – and replaced it with non-permanent positions.

In the logic of the reformer, replacing permanent positions with fixed-term, non-permanent ones was aimed at increasing competition and productivity of individuals. On the other hand, a merit-based selection (the so-called national qualification – see below), should have

⁹See. I. VISCO, *Investire in conoscenza. Per la crescita economica*, Bologna 2009, 53 ss.; W.W. MCMAHON, *Higher Learning, Greater Good. The Private and Social Benefits of Higher Education*, Baltimore 2009, 69 ss.

¹⁰See M. DE BENEDETTO, M. MARTELLI, N. RANGONE, *La qualità delle regole*, Bologna 2011, 197 ss.

ensured for the most deserving young researchers, in a few years, the possibility of transitioning to the permanent role of associate professor.¹¹

In fact, things have gone very differently: the rapid path that should have led young researchers to the professorship proved illusory. Especially because of financial constraints, the first steps of academic career soon become a sequence of non-permanent, eventually short-term positions: with the constant risk of missing renewals with even long periods without pay. It is not implausible to calculate a period up to approximately fifteen years between graduation and the achievement of a permanent position.

In the current situation, in fact, a PhD is a prerequisite for access to an academic career. After that you can have access to postdoctoral research grants (maximum duration: 6 years) or research positions so-called type A (maximum: five years).¹² Finally you will be able to apply for a type B researcher position (duration: three years). The latter positions may be converted into associate professorship, if the researcher has received the national scientific qualification.

Moreover, the economic and financial situation of the country is heavily affecting the universities and their ability to hire: it is therefore reasonable to assume that in many cases the way to permanent academic positions will be a long, bumpy journey.

It must also be considered that type B researchers are quite expensive and that their recruitment is biased by the constraints which, for reasons of public finance, were placed on academic staff turnover.¹³ This does not apply, however, for postdoctoral research grants.

11L. 240/2010, art. 24 c. 5.

12L. 240/2010, art. 24 c. 3.

13L. 147/2013, art. 1 c. 462.

This is the reason why at this time in Italy there are only 331 B-type and 2675-A-type researchers.¹⁴ The research grants, however, are more than 15,000.¹⁵

It is not enough: there is indeed a further problem concerning selection procedures for researchers. In fact, they will be recruited on the basis of local competitive selection procedures. According to the L.240 of 2010, the universities should adopt regulations governing these procedures in accordance with the principles listed in the European Charter for Researchers. In particular, with regard to the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers, the Charter requires the following: *Selection committees should bring together diverse expertise and competences and should have an adequate gender balance and, where appropriate and feasible, include members from different sectors (public and private) and disciplines, including from other countries and with relevant experience to assess the candidate. Whenever possible, a wide range of selection practices should be used, such as external expert assessment and face-to-face interviews. Members of selection panels should be adequately trained.*¹⁶

That said, the local regulations do not seem to be always consistent with the principles of the Charter; there is indeed a wide variety of procedures for the appointment of selection committees, usually comprising an internal member and other external commissioners to be selected by lottery or just designated by the department. On this point there are also very significant differences between universities, which gives the impression that the procedures for selection of commissioners for the recruitment of researchers in many cases will not be entirely transparent.

¹⁴Source: Ministry of Education, University and Research, 24.3.2015.

¹⁵Source: <http://www.dottorato.it/documenti/speciali/IV%20INDAGINE%20ADI%202014.pdf>

¹⁶http://ec.europa.eu/euraxess/pdf/brochure_rights/eur_21620_en-it.pdf

As shown, a number of factors are likely to discourage younger people to pursue an academic career. This is due to the multiplication of temporary positions, the limitations to the turnover of academic staff and the chronic underfunding of the system. The effects of this can be extremely serious in the long run; a first threat is a break of the chain of education and research in entire scientific areas. The loss of scientific and disciplinary skills can take place very quickly, while it is very difficult to reconstruct what has been abandoned. Second threat: a system built by its architects aiming at the promotion of quality and excellence could end in a mechanism of reverse selection: low wages, instability and uncertainty of jobs and of the regulatory framework will discourage the most competitive individuals – they will satisfy elsewhere to their ambitions - and leave the field open to the less qualified.

One last observation: OCSE statistics, in 2013 report *Education at a Glance*, shows that Italy has one of the worst students to teaching staff ratios among the 26 considered countries.¹⁷ In these conditions, it is unlikely to expect any improvement soon.

3. THE NATIONAL SCIENTIFIC QUALIFICATION

As a prerequisite to be full or associate professor, the l. 240 of 2010 established the National Scientific Qualification (ASN):¹⁸ the qualification, of limited duration, is released by national commissions. According to the law, the qualification has the aim of certify the scientific qualification which is a necessary requirement to access to full and associate professor positions.¹⁹ Qualified candidates can then be recruited by the universities on the basis of local procedures: what we just said about researchers applies also for these.

¹⁷ [http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag2013%20\(eng\)--FINAL%2020%20June%202013.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag2013%20(eng)--FINAL%2020%20June%202013.pdf)

¹⁸art. 16. See also d.P.R. 22/2011; d.m. 76/2012; ANVUR resolution 50/2012.

¹⁹L. 240/2010, art. 16 c.1.

The first two rounds of the ASN have shown the flaws of its design; such flaws were widely expected and they provoked an extensive litigation before the administrative courts.²⁰ In an attempt to limit the discretion of Commissioners it was decided to adopt quantitative, mobile thresholds - the so-called median – to discriminate eligible and non-eligible candidates. The same thresholds have been used for the selection of the commissioners.²¹ The medians were calculated on the basis of citation data for the so-called "hard sciences" (h index and total number of citations) and based only on a rough calculation of productivity and journal rankings for the social and human sciences.²² At the end, such statistic thresholds have produced paradoxical effects.

Given a measurable numerical indicator for each member of a population of subjects, the median is the numerical value that divides the population into two equal parts, one situated below the median, the other located above. The median is in fact a statistical indicator characterized by an essentially comparative value which has no direct connection with the real scientific qualification of individuals.

Here are some examples: imagine an extremely productive scientific field, in which 90% or more of its members have a scientific production of excellent quantity and impact. 50% of the components of this field would still be below the median and for that reason could not be qualified or selected as a Commissioner, even if they were fully in possession of the scientific requisites whose assessment is the ultimate goal of the ASN. In addition, a very productive

20A. BELLAVISTA, *Il reclutamento dei professori e dei ricercatori universitari dopo la Legge „Gelmini“*, in *Rivista AIC*, 2012, 3, p. 3 e ss.; G. DE NICOLAO, *Le mediane suicide delle abilitazioni scientifiche nazionali*, in *Federalismi* 2012, 16; A. BANFI, G. DE NICOLAO, *La valutazione fra scienza e feticismo dei numeri* in *Il Mulino*, 2013, I, 88-95.

21Exceeding the medians was necessary to be commissioner, while the commissions were free not to strictly apply the quantitative criterion to the candidates.

22About Italian journal rankings or ratings see A. BANFI, *Il resistibile fascino delle classifiche di riviste*, in *Rassegna Italiana di Valutazione*, 2011, XV, 51, 9-21.

scientific field or whose components are highly cited, will have extremely high medians; as a result it will be especially difficult to exceed the thresholds. On the contrary a not very productive field or a field whose members are rarely cited will have medians that are low and easy to exceed. Moreover, in several cases it has happened that the medians established for candidates to the associate professorship were higher and therefore stricter than the medians required for full professorship: a paradox that highlights the arbitrariness of the use of a comparative indicator in a procedure that should ensure an absolute level of scientific qualification. Moreover, there are further paradoxical effects. For example, a candidate to full professorship exceeding the median in a given time, could not exceed it after the recruitment of a new full professor whose indicator is above the median. In fact the hiring of a new professor can move the median upwards (or downwards). In a similar way, the median rises after the retirement of a professor who is below the median. These examples show that candidates can be affected by accidents that are totally extrinsic to scientific qualification itself. It must be considered that the National Evaluation Agency (ANVUR) calculated medians for scientific areas with a population of only four full professors, as “History of the Ancient Near East”.²³

But apart from all that, it should be stressed that it is not reasonable to adopt a policy that presumes that 50% of the population of professors in service does not possess a requirement which is, on the other hand, seen as mandatory for those seeking to be recruited.

That said, it should also be noted that the procedure suffered from further weaknesses, that can reach the point of jeopardizing it in case of litigation. In fact, the law required the presence of a foreign commissioner, coming from one of the OECD countries; apart from the odd restriction to OECD countries only, huge problems occurred in mapping the disciplinary skills of foreign commissioners to the Italian disciplinary fields.

²³ More paradoxes are generated by the normalization by academic age. On this point see A. BANFI, *Aspetti problematici del reclutamento accademico in Italia*, in *Ius Publicum Network Review* 2015.

Somewhat similar problems also occurred regarding the data on which the medians were calculated: for the calculation of the medians of the "hard sciences," the commercial bibliometric databases of Thomson Reuters and Elsevier were used. As a result, the values of individual indicators were calculated on the basis of dirty data. In fact, data from commercial databases is not error-free and is subject to delays ranging from a few months to more than a year in counting citations; as a result the first two rounds of the ASN were conducted in many cases on the basis of questionable data, and by questionable commissioners.

Recent corrective measures, introduced with dl. 90/2014, led to the cancellation of the requirement for a foreign commissioner and opened the way to the review of the procedures²⁴. It is desirable, therefore, that steps are taken also to revisit the issue of quantitative thresholds, with the purpose of building consistent and robust procedures.

The legislator, however, did not want to work on an even more critical point of the ASN. The procedure is an open one, which has its own rationale, as it was built as a "qualification" assessment procedure. However, the number of qualified candidates is extremely large, and certainly superior to the absorption capacity of the system. It is very likely that when the number of such people will have reached a certain threshold, so as to constitute a pool of electorally significant votes, the question of some *ope legis* stabilization will arise. However, for the above-mentioned reasons, it would be a damaging event and once again detrimental to the entire university system. For these reasons it would be better to introduce some kind of limited enrollment procedure.

²⁴See art. 14 dl. 90/2014.

4. OTHER CRITICAL ISSUES

In this brief review, which does not pretend in any way to be complete, I would like to inform the reader of some other critical aspect of our recruitment system. First, and this is obviously a general issue that affects not only the university system, the massive reduction in funding: the main instrument through which the state finances the university system has dropped in real terms by about 20% between 2009 and 2013.²⁵ This clearly has an impact on the academic staff, i.e. the number of university professors has decreased by 22% between 2006 and early 2013, and all this in spite of the fact that the country lies in the last places in Europe in terms of teacher-student ratio and by number of graduates.²⁶

In addition to this, the limitation of the turnover of academic personnel, actually scheduled to return to 100% (but not more) in 2018, is also heavily affecting the system. These policies have been especially punitive for the universities, since a series of equations transcending the real cost of staff per unit have been adopted: a full professor, "weighs" the same whether he is at the beginning or at the end of his career, and therefore regardless of his real salary. This means that the limitations of the turnover are staff-based and not cost-based: a cost-based calculation could easily show how the bond was in fact stricter than could seem at a first glance.

The policies aimed at a reduction of academic staff and the funding cuts adopted by governments in the last decade are somewhat puzzling; they mark a renunciation to higher education and research as drivers of social and economic development of the country. In this

²⁵ See CUN, Dichiarazione per l'università e la ricerca, le emergenze del sistema, gennaio 2013 (<https://www.cun.it/provvedimenti/sessione/119/dichiarazione/dichiarazione-del-30-01-2013>).

²⁶*Ibid.*

respect Italy is a nation that, in a context of a very serious financial and economic crisis, has moved in the opposite direction to its major European partners.²⁷

It should also be observed that this does not only act as a disincentive for those who wish to commit their life to teaching and research, as has been said before, but ends up fossilizing the system further, and preventing any internal dynamism.

This is the case of teachers' mobility, that used to be a characteristic of the early stages of academic career. There is certainly no need to discuss here the obvious advantages that the mobility of university professors and researchers implies: it allows the comparison of different experiences, enriches people, avoids the isolation of peripheral locations and hinders academic inbreeding. Yet, the recruitment of external professors costs much more than promoting internal staff; as a result academic mobility in Italy remains scarce, limited to the minimum levels required by law (20% of the resources allocated for new hires).²⁸ This is an additional - hardly negligible - flaw in our recruiting system.

Finally, I should also mention that the adoption of quantitative criteria for recruitment, has opened the way for individual quantitative assessment: which is not only contrary to international best practices,²⁹ but occurs in a country still not equipped with enough antibodies against opportunistic, abusive or even fraudulent behavior enacted by academics.³⁰

²⁷Cfr. European Commission, *Funding of Education in Europe. The Impact of the Economic Crisis*, Euridyce Report 2013 (http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/thematic_reports/147EN.pdf)

²⁸L. 240/2010, art. 18 c. 4.

²⁹See for example the *S. Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment*, DORA (<http://www.ascb.org/dora-old/files/SFDeclarationFINAL.pdf>)

³⁰See for example *Call the Cops*, *Nature* 2013, 504, 7478: *Italy has no scientific-misconduct procedures in place*. See also A. BANFI, *Impatto nocivo. La valutazione quantitativa della ricerca e i possibili rimedi*, in *Rivista trimestrale di diritto pubblico*, 2014, II, 361-384