

Berlinguer prepares medicine for Italy's academic ills

Italy's academic community may finally have come to the point where much-needed reform will no longer drown in a sea of endless discussions and counterproposals. Wide consensus has greeted a nine-article university reform bill, proposed by Luigi Berlinguer, the Italian Minister of Science and Technological Research and Public Education.

The bill, which the Italian press has called "Berlinguer's revolution," takes aim at the heavily entrenched and controversial *concorsi* system, an arrangement based on national competitions for university posts. In this system appointments are made by a centralized authority rather than by the universities themselves. It is widely believed that the *concorsi* system allows most academic appointments to be based primarily on personal connections rather than on academic merit.

Proposed reforms of the *concorsi* system are not new, but previous plans died while waiting in vain for parliamentary approval. Now, largely because of increased funding difficulties, more and more Italian academics as well as parliamentarians are accepting the idea that universities should be given the autonomy they need to freely recruit their professors. Under Berlinguer's plan, the National Committees (which previously decided directly on the winners for a limited number of chairs throughout Italy) will now be called upon only to provide local universities with a list of all possible scholars who have reached "scientific maturity." This effectively eliminates the power of those in the centralized system who have successfully controlled appointments nationwide to this point.

Another crucial piece in Berlinguer's bill is that the *concorso* of any individual university must be limited exclusively to outside applicants, thus eliminating any bias in favor of local candidates.

"Improving the selection criteria of academics at every level will be the key step for the whole progress of Italian universities," Berlinguer says. According to the minister, a system based on university autonomy will finally create the conditions for a more rational use of funds, equipment and human resources,

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as well as foster healthy competition among universities. "The undertaking of direct responsibilities will also facilitate interactions with industries, non-academic research institutions and bodies of the European Community [EC]," says Berlinguer, adding that the EC has "always had difficulties entering into concrete and timely relations with disinterested and irresponsible university administrators."

Although they applaud Berlinguer's efforts, many academics argue that the reforms should go even further. For example, under the new bill education programs will remain under the control of a central body, the National University Council, CUN. "It will be impossible for universities to really compete with each other if they cannot set up their own education programs," says Paolo Mantegazza, Rector of Milan University.

A move in this direction is suggested in a document worked out last year by the University Rectors' Council (*Conferenza dei Rettori*, CRUI), which included a list of more than seventy criteria to improve objectivity in evaluating research and teaching productivity. Since then, a growing number of universities have set up internal individual *nuclei di valutazione* (evaluation units) based on these criteria.

Critics also point out that Berlinguer's bill fails to address another urgent need in Italian science, that of an extramural peer-review system. But it is promising to note that the CRUI document demands a peer-review system modeled on international standards. "It is a necessity for a brighter future of Italian science to pur-

sue this goal," claims Paolo Blasi, Rector of Florence University and current CRUI president.

However, it seems that radical changes such as external peer review will take time to be fully accepted. "To be successful in the long term, we have to proceed by little steps," says Mantegazza. Indeed, Berlinguer's *concorsi* reform appears to follow precisely this strategy. "Cutting the umbilical cord with the university of origin represents the first move towards a system where external evaluation will have an unavoidable role to play," Berlinguer says. Yet he also insists that peer review won't be the only answer to Italy's research problems, even though it would get the country in line with current European standards, thus allowing successful international competition.

It is also worth noting that Berlinguer's current bill, although reforming the current appointments system, does not address the need for evaluating scientists who already hold university chairs. "Judgement of individual academic merit and value is currently rather alien to Italy's university system," says Berlinguer. Under the *concorsi* system, once an individual wins a professorship it is his for life, and there are no subsequent evaluations. Mantegazza is one of many who argue that contracts for a chair should not last more than five years. Proponents of limited appointments also say that renewal of contracts has to be based upon precise criteria, and evaluated by panel members from abroad.

Despite the limitations of Berlinguer's reform, many believe that he is a savvy insider who knows how to implement decisions that aim to unblock difficult and stagnant situations. For example, in the recent finance act he succeeded in including a measure that will force the split of huge universities, such as Rome (with over 200,000 students), into smaller independent units. Therefore, even if the radical changes needed don't come immediately, their foundation appears to have been established with this slap in the face of centralized power and personal interests.

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