

A malaise hits Italian academia

Bright scholars find few opportunities

By Elisabetta Povoledo

LUCCA, Italy: After five years at the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, where she is about to receive a PhD in economics, Ines Buono is ready to come home.

She wants to teach and pursue her scholarly interests, which include tracking the possible impact of Turkey's entry into the European Union, but Italy's stagnant academic job market offers meager prospects to the 30-year old researcher.

Run by a select cadre of aging academics, ivory towers in Italy are as well defended as Fort Knox, but without the gold.

Among the few exceptions: a research fellowship at the Institutions, Markets and Technologies Institute for Advanced Studies, an international graduate school opened in 2005 that aims to do what traditional places of higher learning in Italy have not managed: Lure the best and brightest scholars to Italy. Buono, short-listed after a rigorous selection, was one of 301 scholars to compete for the single post for young research fellows offered by the university.

"In part it's personal, I want to settle down," said Buono, whose boyfriend lives in nearby Florence. "But I am also a positive and active person and I would like to give my contribution, small as it may be, to my country." In the end, however, Buono did not get the position.

That so many young scholars should apply to a program that is only three years old, "is surprising and should give pause for reflection," said Fabio Pamolli, the IMT director, of the more than 800 applications the school has received each year from both Italians and foreigners.

"Italy does not have a model for the training of an academic elite," he said. IMT, which offers PhD programs in social and political science, economics and computer sciences "works outside of the traditional university system in

Italy and that's why it's possible to experiment," he said.

For the most part, Italian universities — overstuffed, overcrowded and underfunded — are often depicted by critics as hubs of influence peddling rather than bastions of knowledge.

Candidates for the April 13-14 parliamentary elections have been promising structural overhauls and increased funding for university research, but critics are skeptical. "They all say they're going to invest more, but when they get in power no one speaks about universities anymore because the money just isn't there," said Mariano Giaquinta, a mathematics professor at the prestigious Scuola Normale Superiore university in Pisa and the co-author of the 2007 book "A hypothesis on the University," on the problems in Italian academia.

The general disinterest of the political class regarding issues of higher learning has had widespread repercussions.

"Everyone says that to improve Italy's economy there has to be more investment in education and training. They say research is the motor of innovation that will let Italy enter into a technological system it is currently not part of," said Alberto Civica, an official with the UIL trade union. "Italy isn't competitive when it comes to technology, here it's all about services."

On Thursday, Civica and a few dozen researchers were demonstrating at the Ministry of Public Affairs for better job security. "We've seen a constant reduction in funding to universities and research, they say that it's important but then they do the opposite," said Francesco Sinopoli, a demonstrator.

With money for universities drying up, Italians have been plumbing various fonts for funding. When the European Research Council began allocating grants to university researchers last year, Italians submitted the largest number of applications.

"If so many researchers turned to Europe it's because in Italy they can depend on paltry resources, compared to their German, Dutch and French colleagues," wrote Salvatore Settis, director of the Scuola Normale Superiore, in

an editorial in La Repubblica in January. The bitter truth: Italy "is not an attractive research environment, our top talents have no faith in their country, foreigners don't consider Italy an option," Settis wrote.

One consequence of the system here has been a steady exodus of top students abroad.

Tracking university graduates who move abroad is not an exact science, but Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development figures show that nearly 50,000 people with university education left Italy for other OECD countries in the last ten years.

Successive Italian governments have implemented various programs to stem the brain drain, but the proposals put forward offered no long-term security and ultimately failed.

The heart of the problem, critics agree, is that in the academic world, merit and excellence come second to advancing the interests of one's power base.

"The selection process is blocked," with no real competition, "and those who are hired are not necessarily the best people for the post," said Giovanni Floris, who wrote a book last year about Italy's disdain for the notion of meritocracy. "In the end it's a caste that doesn't differentiate" because professors chose their favorites, he said.

It's an old caste at that. Of the 15,984 full professors working in Italian universities, only 13 are under 35 years old, according to government figures published by the Milan newspaper Corriere della Sera. More than 30 percent are over 65. In all there are 61,930 professors — both full and assistant — and researchers working in Italian universities, but 17,919 of them do not have tenure and are waiting to get a full time position.

The fundamental problem remains. Schools like IMT, as well as a handful of others, "may produce people of quality, but the problem is that they have a very complicated future," in Italian academia, Giaquinta said. "The real issue is what do you do with these people in a situation where there are few outlets for excellence. If that doesn't exist, then what can you do."