

# Rise of a meritocracy offers Italy chance to revive stagnating university system

## Global Village

**A Tuscany graduate school bucks the trend in a nation where most things are politicised, says Guy Dinmore**

Secure and prosperous within their ancient walled city, the people of Lucca in the northern Italian region of Tuscany guard their reputation for being conservative and rather suspicious of the outside world.

The Romans built the first fortifications and grew beyond it, another was

added in the Middle Ages and further expansion led to a third Renaissance ring that survives intact to this day, providing a looping panoramic vista of the plain and Tuscan hills beyond.

For centuries Lucca clung to its status as a republic, fighting off its neighbours, resisting incorporation into the rest of Tuscany. Hemmed in by the walls, its houses were famous for growing upwards rather than out, with gardens sprouting on top of towers.

"We are a conservative island in a sea of red," says Mauro Favilla, the city's elderly mayor from the ruling centre-right Forza Italia party, referring to Tuscany's reputation as a communist stronghold.

Lucca is rather happy, however, to have opened its doors to an innovative institution that is not only breathing life into the city but, in a small but significant way, could help revitalise Italy's stagnating university system and help stem its brain drain.

IMT (Institutions Markets Technologies) is an international graduate school - founded in 2005 with state, local and private

funding - with a governance system that is unique in Italy.

It has two international advisory boards with "reputational" veto power over appointments. Its PhD programmes are entirely in English, it is recruiting foreign professors and offering scholarships to foreign as well as Italian doctoral students.

In a country where

**'Italy has the lowest ratio of graduate programmes, about half the EU 15 average'**

almost everything is politicised, Fabio Pammolli, IMT director, has had to overcome resistance and criticism at many levels in his drive to promote meritocracy.

"Along with Turkey and Mexico, Italy is one of the most closed in terms of human capital and has the lowest ratio of graduate programmes, about half the EU 15 average," says Prof Pammolli, who also has a

chair in Florence and is a visiting research fellow at Boston University.

Italy's rigidly hierarchical university system that promotes age above merit is losing its young talent as it clings to elderly professors. Resources for research are paltry. Last year, France's National Research Council hired seven young researchers in theoretical physics. Four were Italian. Meanwhile, in Italy 64 per cent of full physics professors are older than 60.

"It is our choice as a country," says Prof Pammolli. "Do we want to follow internationally accepted rules of appointments, or the bureaucratic, national selection procedure, which prevents openness?"

Set up three years ago, IMT has 150 students. Oriented towards excellence and relevance, IMT offers doctoral programmes in two interdisciplinary research areas - economics and institutional change, and computer science and applications.

In December it received 301 applications for a three-year post as graduate researcher/teacher in

political economy, more than 100 from the US. This is partly a reflection of the cultural attractions of Lucca but also because IMT is seen as a good opportunity for young researchers to make their names.

The campus is emerging from restored religious buildings, including a church converted inside into a gleaming steel and glass library. Funding for construction comes from a foundation established when Cassa di Risparmio, a savings bank, was privatised.

Efe Biresselioglu is a fascinating example of Lucca's new interaction with the world. Turkish and with an MA from Finland, Mr Biresselioglu has just returned from his mandatory year out, spent at Norway's Institute for International Affairs, to complete his doctorate at IMT on Turkey's role as an energy conduit. He plans to move on to the US. "You are on your own a bit here, but things are changing," he says, pointing out what he saw as uneven standards among students and, at first, a lack of supervision.



Old and new: the IMT campus is emerging from restored religious buildings, including a church converted inside into a gleaming steel and glass library Alamy