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Italian jobs cause ruction

Brain Gain programme goes wrong.**Alison Abbott**

Hundreds of researchers who moved to Italy in the belief they had been promised permanent careers are now finding themselves without a job. And confusion has erupted as the country's research ministry has suspended one appointment made through the same scheme.

The Brain Gain programme was established in 2001 to attract external talent — including both foreigners and Italians who had left the country — into the stagnating Italian research system. The idea was that if the scientists worked for a few years in Italy they would be well placed to compete for new positions, which many of the 466 scientists who came to the country saw as a promise of a job.

But a national budget crisis over the past few years has meant that virtually no new positions were created. In response, the government set aside a €3-million (US\$4 million) pot to support new positions specifically for these outsiders.

But now some universities are arguing that the Brain Gain scientists are 'queue jumping', and should compete equally with local scientists who may have been waiting longer for new permanent positions to come up.

For this reason, these universities have not even applied for a share of the €3 million available to support such researchers. Tommaso Gori, a Brain Gain research cardiologist who returned to Italy from the University of Toronto, Canada, and has been working at the University of Siena, has found himself without a professorship. "My department wanted to hire me but the faculty did not put my name forward," he says. Gori, who says he had had offers for tenured positions elsewhere before moving to Italy, thinks he may have to leave the country again.

Red tape

Many of those who did have the support of their universities came across a second block when the National Council of Universities (CUN), which verifies the eligibility of all candidate professors, last autumn unexpectedly insisted that the Brain Gainers should be considered in the same way as all other foreign academics — meaning that they would only be eligible for a tenured academic position if they had occupied the same level in their previous country.

This rules out many of the Brain Gainers, who came to Italy on post-doc positions.

"It is as if the research we did in the last few years here counts for nothing," says molecular geneticist Massimo Pasqualetti from the University of Pisa, who has built up a transgenic mouse facility in the four years since his return from Strasbourg, France. Pasqualetti, whose European research grants cover two PhD students and a post-doc, has had no salary himself since October, even though his faculty wanted to hire him.

Letter of the law

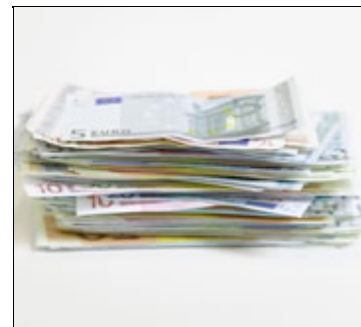
The rules have created a very odd situation, Pasqualetti says, as many Brain Gainers who had been working as post-docs at elite universities such as Harvard have been rejected out of hand.

But the Italian press has been particularly focussed on the story of Aldo Colleoni, who was given a job at the University of Macerata using the Brain Gain money — an appointment that has started a bitter row. According to press reports, Colleoni says he was a full professor at Zokhiomj University in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia — a facility that does not seem to have a website. The Italian press also reported, which *Nature* can neither confirm nor disprove, that Colleoni signed the document verifying his professorship himself, as he serves as honorary consul to Mongolia in Italy.

Research minister Fabio Mussi has blocked Colleoni's appointment in response to these press reports, requesting to see the documents on which the position was granted.

Colleoni was contacted by *Nature*, but did not respond to questions about the appointment. The University of Macerata did not answer repeated attempts to contact them by phone. *Nature* waits to see the conclusion of the research ministry's inquiry.

The research ministry is also displeased about the Brain Gain situation as a whole. "The CUN is too concerned with the letter of the law, not the spirit of the law," says Luciano Modica, secretary of state for universities. He is hoping to persuade the CUN to support the aims of the Brain Gain programme, instead of nitpicking "the bureaucratic formal interpretations".

*Punchstock*

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