

A family business? Nepotism in Italian universities

Walter De Marco (August 06, 2008)



NEPOTISM

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ALMOST AS OFTEN AS WE PROMOTE FAMILY MEMBERS.

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An expat Italian professor in the United States denounced illegal hiring procedures in Italian academia. As a result, university officials and professors from across the country are being investigated on charges of administrative misconduct.

Forget about straight A's, reference letters, academic publications and professional experience, if



you want to teach at an Italian university, the most important asset is your family tree. Yes, because unless you are the child, a relative, or at least the protégé of a university professor, your chances of getting the job are quite slim. At least that's what university professor Quirino Paris believes.

Originally from Trieste, University of California professor Quirino Paris developed a statistical model to prove that academics at Italy's 77 universities have adopted illegal or unethical methods "to give privileged collaborators and family members an unjust advantage in their academic career.", he writes.

"Every university department [in Italy] is a restricted caste, an ivory tower with its own rules, impermeable and very diffident.", says a Florence high-school teacher who prefers to remain anonymous. And this explains why nepotism and favouritism are a common, long-standing practice in Italian academia.

This teacher, completed a research doctorate at the University of Genoa in 2000, and says that the children and relatives of his professors have managed to pursue careers in his field, although not all of them had better academic merits than he did.

"My only 'defect' is that I am not the child of a professor", he jokes.

Upon the release of Paris's study, in 2005, angry Italian academics and graduate students joined forces to expose all the possible cases of unjust hiring procedures by the so-called "baroni" (barons) in online forums, and report them to justice authorities. As a result, prosecutors launched investigations to verify whether the countless cases of kinship among faculty members at the same institutions are the consequence of rigged hiring procedures. The procedure to fill vacancies in Italy's public sector, including universities, is called "concorso", and is regulated by the government.

As Paris's article explains, whenever there is an opening for a faculty position at the university, one of the local deans, or even the president, chooses the winner deliberately. This choice is not based on merit or experience, but rather on convenience. In fact the position often goes to their own children, relatives or favourite students. Meanwhile a notice of the "concorso" is published in the official outlets, and a selection committee is formed among professors of that discipline. However, all members of the committee are informed ahead of time of the candidate that the "barone" wants to hire, so they act accordingly.

It is difficult to understand how long this practice has been going on. However, the aspect that has allowed it to survive is arguably this "caste system" itself, which has prevented any external influences from upsetting the power structure of many academic departments. When everyone is either a mastermind or a player in the same scheme, denouncing the system may result in self destruction.

From northern borders to the shores of Sicily, the instances of kinship among academics abound. A notorious example is the Faculty of Economics at the University of Bari, where Massari is the last name of 8 faculty members. Other familiar last names among academics at this university are Dell'atti and Girone, both linked to former university president Giovanni Girone.

This nation-wide plague has not spared major universities, such as "Sapienza" in Rome, which is home to nearly 140,000 students. Here the authorities are investigating whether the university's president Augusto Guarini has used his influential position to facilitate his daughter Maria Rosaria's academic career as a professor of Property valuation.



Florence university president Augusto Marinelli is also being investigated with regards to the role he might have played in his son's academic career. Marinelli's son Nicola obtained a research position in the Faculty of Medical Studies in Florence in 2002, before he even completed graduate school.

Meanwhile the websites on academic corruption and nepotism have flourished. Some of their names are Concorsopoli, Ateneo Pulito, Ateneo Palermitano and Malauniversitas.

The government has also acknowledged the need to eliminate this widespread phenomenon. In an attempt to introduce more ethical and transparent hiring procedures, the former minister of Universities and Research Fabio Mussi proposed a number of changes to the current law on university recruitment. After a two-year-long political and bureaucratic ordeal, the new regulations were rejected by the Parliament of Italy earlier this year.

Bio

Walter De Marco is an Italian-Canadian teacher and freelance journalist. He has an MA from the University of Buffalo, NY, and has published articles on education and culture in various American, Canadian and Italian newspapers.

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