

Management of human resources in the Italian University

An insight from the Biochemistry University Professors into the rules on recruitment and career progression

1. Introduction

Recruitment and career progression are critical processes that affect the proper functioning of any working community. The more complex is the work carried out, the more sensitive these procedures become.

Academic communities, either Italian and foreign, primarily rely on two essential activities: teaching and research, which may have many direct and indirect consequences with profound and extensive effects on the society.

Universities perform a highly complex work that has a relevant impact on society. It affects the intellectual and civil quality of citizens, the capacity of innovation in the manufacturing sector, the training of the future leaders and the international reputation of the Country. Indeed, as the history of our Country confirms, we have relied on the creation of universities to promote social and cultural progress of less developed regions.

Through many contacts with other disciplines, the Biochemical Community has long been aware of how delicate, difficult and challenging is the matter. In fact, the making of good proposals, that can improve the ability of the Academic Community at managing recruitment and career progression of the university staff as effectively as possible, is a real challenge.

The difficulty and complexity of the subject must not discourage us from reflecting on the opportunity to critically revisit the way in which recruitments and career progressions are now managed in the Italian universities, mostly after the implementation of the reform introduced with Law 240.

The National Committee of the Biochemistry University Full Professors has therefore started a work of analysis of the rules by which recruitment and promotions are managed in other Countries in comparison with Italy. In addition, we reasoned on how much our legislation is actually moving

the system away from the recommendations of the European Charter for Researchers that inspired Law 240.

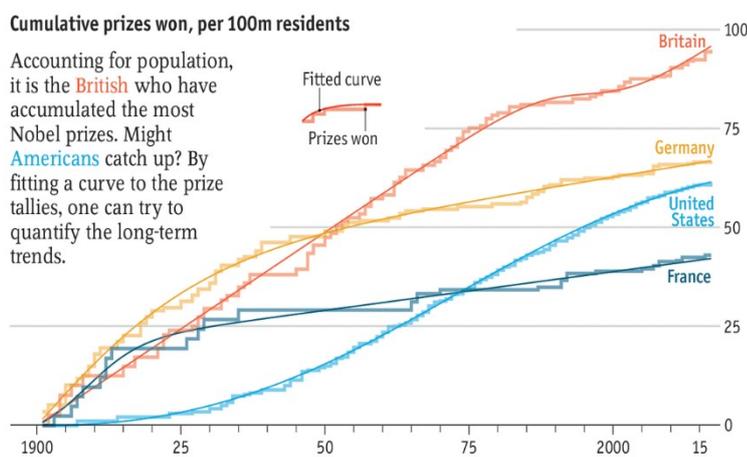
2. Access to academic positions

Achieving a doctorate or PhD is an important but not exclusive step for university careers in European universities. Indeed, in many European countries, it is a legal requirement for access to academic positions.

In almost all European Countries, the status of PhD students is mainly that of students, with some exceptions, such as Sweden, where PhD students are employees.

According to the Eurydice 2017 report “Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Academic Staff” (website at the end of the document), PhDs are obtained in Europe at an average age of 30.

A doctorate is not a legal requirement in UK for access to academic positions. The UK model is interesting for several reasons. Among which are the highly competitive research system and a very challenging mode of assessing the impact of universities' activities. Through the Association of Italian Scientists in UK (AISUK), the large community of Italian researchers abroad has often made its critical view on the recruitment policy by Italian universities. The procedures of British universities are independently regulated, and not controlled by the government. Management autonomy and strict financial controls characterize UK universities. The great interest in their recruitment model is justified by the success of British researchers in scientific activities (see graph of the cumulative number of Nobel prizes awarded in proportion to the Population-Source Economist).



Recruitment of new staff is based on strict comply with the law. The recruitment process is clearly separated from the internal career progression. Recruitment must be merit-driven, but restricted to two criteria: "job description" and "person specification" where both the work (main purpose, duties and

responsibilities) and professional features of the candidate required for the selection (qualifications/

skills and abilities/experience/attitudes) are clearly described. The candidate's profile is based on the precise needs of the University that starts the recruitment process. The very frequent legal appeals in Italy for the so-called "profiled competitions" would not make any sense in UK.

The recruitment of new staff must be advertised at national and international level, in full agreement with the European Charter for Researchers. Direct calls are possible (for clear fame), but this is an exception which needs final approval by the Rector.

Career progression is reserved for employed staff. Everyone can self-propose for career progression and, before a formal application, the applicant discusses it in the annual appraisal.

Although UK retains its original approach to recruitment and career progression, in most European Countries and UK itself, there is a post-doctoral phase after graduation with fixed-term positions associated with research projects. During this time (the average duration is 6 years), research and teaching credentials are developed. This is the most difficult and crucial period of the academic career.

In Italy, this phase corresponds to the figure of the fixed-term research fellow (*assegnista di ricerca*), who should perhaps be reconsidered in the light of the establishment of the RTDa (fixed-term researcher type a) position.

Access to open-ended academic roles includes a set of specific procedures concerning selection and recruitment, as well as the requirements for career progression.

3. Selection and recruitment

In all European Countries, a number of criteria on the necessary qualifications must be met before being admitted to the selection process for any academic position,

In almost all European systems of higher education (U.K. excluded) qualification, or a centrally coordinated accreditation, is required by law to access to academic positions. Usually, qualification is based on the following three criteria:

- i. Evaluation of research activity of the candidate, documented by a significant amount of publications.
- ii. Evaluation of teaching experience of the candidate. In some Countries, a *lectio magistralis* is required for a proper evaluation.
- iii. Evaluation of management skills of the candidate.

In Italy, a National Scientific Qualification (Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale, ASN) based on threshold values has been established since 2010. This does not include any evaluation of the candidate's teaching experience.

A progressive devaluation of teaching expertise in the qualification process differentiates Italy from other European countries, and gives less warranty to the students about the fact that their Professors are indeed fully competent on the subjects they are teaching. The declaratory statement of each sector should not be used to identify research topics that belong to the research activity of the candidate, but rather to identify her/his deep knowledge of the subject, and the ability to teach it.

While we wait for a reform that re-introduces the assessment of teaching expertise in the National Qualification, local committees are strongly recommended to consider such teaching skills during the selection procedures.

Most of the higher education systems in Europe have a legislation that rules recruitment by local institutions once a national qualification has been obtained. The most common recruitment procedure is selection of the best applicant to a public alert. Each institution, according to their specific needs and using the scientific profile in the selection, publishes such notices. This is not far from the British system. Alternatively, European recruitment can also occur by direct contact with the candidate.

It is worth noticing that, in Italy, a direct call of the candidate is regulated by a law (art. 1, comma 9, legge n. 230/2005) that has been changed 5 times with 5 subsequent amendments. In the last years, the National University Council (Consiglio Universitario Nazionale, CUN) has often given directions on how to apply this recruitment procedure, in the absence of clear regulations.

It would be desirable for the current law to be re-written, and coordinated with art. 18 of the law n. 240/2010 (that governs the university system) to regulate the selection of the best foreign scientists and the re-entry of highly qualified Italian scientists with experience of research and teaching abroad.

A comparative analysis of the Eurydice 2017 report shows that, in Europe, the composition of selection boards is the most regulated step of the evaluation process. In almost half of European

Countries, the legislation addresses not only composition of selection boards, but also legal appeal procedures.

In Italy, the mechanism of selection of committee members is too vague. In order to guarantee more uniformity among different institutions, the procedures of recruitment of RTDb researchers, Associate and Full Professors (according to art. 18 of law n. 240/2010) should be ruled by National guidelines.

4. Career progression

A distinction between recruitment and career progression procedures is desirable, and seems somehow necessary.

It would be desirable that, following current rules governing the application of art. 24 of law n. 240/2010, and consistently with rules for progression of RTDb researchers to Associate Professors, the Universities could formally decide the career progression of teachers with a national qualification to the higher professional level through internal assessment procedures.

5. Recommendations of the European Charter for Researchers

Recommendations of the European Charter for Researchers (https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/am509774cee_en_e4.pdf) should be read integrally and fully understood, thus avoiding using only selected sections, according to the interests of individual subjects only.

A few crucial recommendations from the European Charter for Researchers are reported below.

Career development

Employers and/or funders of researchers should develop, preferably within the framework of their human resources management, a specific career development strategy for researchers at all stages of their career, regardless of their contractual situation, including researchers on fixed-term contracts. This strategy should also include mentors to provide support and guidance for human and professional development of researchers, thus motivating and helping them to reduce any insecurity about their professional future. All researchers should be informed of such tools and arrangements.

Teaching

Teaching is an essential component of structuring and dissemination of knowledge. It should therefore be considered an indispensable part of the researchers' career paths. However, teaching commitments should not be excessive, and should not prevent researchers from carrying out their research activities, particularly in the early phases of their careers.

Employers and/or funders should ensure that teaching duties are adequately remunerated and taken into account in the assessment/appraisal systems. The time devoted by senior members of staff to train early stage researchers should be considered as part of their teaching commitment. Appropriate training should be provided for teaching and mentoring activities as part of the professional development of researchers.

Evaluation/appraisal systems

Employers and/or funders should introduce for all researchers, including senior researchers, an evaluation/appraisal system for assessing their professional performance on a regular basis, in a transparent manner, by an independent committee. In the case of senior researchers, the committee should be international.

Such assessment and appraisal procedures should take into account their overall research skills and results, e.g. publications, patents, management of research, teaching/lecturing, supervision, mentoring, national or international collaboration, administrative duties, public awareness activities and mobility. All this should be considered in the context of career progression.

Recruitment

Employers and/or funders should establish open, efficient, transparent, supportive and internationally comparable recruitment procedures that are appropriate to the job proposed. Advertisements should give a broad description of the knowledge and skills required, and should not be so specialised as to discourage potential applicants. Employers should include a description of the working conditions and the rights of the Employee, including career development prospects. The time schedule of the publication of the post, the call for applications, and the deadline for applying, should be reasonable.

6. Specific problems of the Italian system for recruitment and career development

The rules adopted in Italy for recruitment and career development suffer of logical inconsistencies. We may say that represent a poorly functional attempt to reconcile opposite requirements. Recruitment and career advancements are supposed to be decided by the University Departments, previous allowance of the necessary funding by the University administration, and publicized either

nationally (for “open” positions) or internally (for “reserved positions”). Departments’ decision is based on research and teaching needs, also in view of the periodic evaluation of their research (VQR) and teaching activities (AVA). However, once the public procedure starts, the requirements of the Department disappear from consideration: the procedure is based on the scientific “sector” of the candidates (SSD, e.g. Biochemistry), and on supposedly objective (i.e. bibliometric) parameters measuring the research productivity of the candidate. It is perfectly possible that a Department decides to recruit an enzymologist (SSD BIO/10, Biochemistry) while, in the end, the procedure selects an expert of NMR spectroscopy (again, SSD BIO/10, Biochemistry). This problem raises from the failed attempt to reconcile the requirements of the Department with the legal rights of the candidates. Since the rights of the candidates receive a stronger support by the law than those of the Department, the outcomes of the recruitment, or advancement procedures, often end up in law courts.

7. Conclusions

This document arises from the deep and widespread discomfort that the academic community experience in dealing with the process of recruitment and career progression in Italy. There is a clear divergence between what the new rules impose, and the possibility to carry out the best practice for recruitment and promotion. The aim should be to ensure the best balance between the short and long-term strategy of the departments, and the scientific and personality value of the candidate for recruitment or career progression.

Human resources and the management of human capital is crucial in the Universities as well as in any modern company. It is quite disappointing to see that the matter is more and more often associated to the trivial conflict between the conservative forces of the academic establishment and the frustrated values of young talented scientists. The worst consequence of such a stereotypic representation is the deterioration of the relationship between the academic world and the society.

After almost 7 years of application of the law 240, there is a wide and motivated feeling in the academic community that the new rules have not cured the system dysfunction such as nepotism and lack of transparency. We are fully convinced that the success of the Universities is now challenged on a global and international scale, and therefore we have carried out a comparative analysis of the management of human resources in Italy and other European Universities.

Such a comparative analysis, although preliminary, and limited to a few Countries, suggest the need for immediate and substantial amendment of the rules of recruitment and careers progression.

We feel that a few urgent amendments are necessary:

- i. The procedure for assigning national qualifications (eligibility) to full professors and associate professors (university teachers of level I and II) must include an assessment of teaching competence.
- ii. Universities must gain more freedom in order to guarantee career progression for teachers already in service, who are believed to be skilful and competent. There is too much focus only for recruitment of teachers from outside the university.
- iii. The so-called "profile" of candidates used in the selection procedure for recruitment must be reviewed in its conception and application. The profile of the candidate must only be used for a better identification of which candidates' skills are closer to the needs of Universities and Departments, avoiding any kind of discrimination. This is necessary, because the description of the specific skills and competences of the different scientific clusters ("declaratorie dei settori scientifico-disciplinari") are very broad, and largely built only to define teaching skills, while research skills are considered less important. Therefore, the prescriptive use of those descriptions to define the scientific profile needed by single departments is very misleading. The description of the ideal scientific profile requested by the department should be fully integrated with the scientific strategy of the department itself, as well described in the three-year departmental development plan. A plan, which is built on technological investments, collaboration among all university teachers, and special features of the territory in which the department is located.

Most importantly, our University system is experiencing a lack of global strategy. While the number of young scientists acquiring the National Scientific Qualification (Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale, ASN) is constantly increasing, showing that the quality of the University training system and of the candidates is good, the total amount of economic resources for funding the Italian Universities and research is decreasing. This condition is increasingly creating frustration, which in turn generates discomfort for those who belong to the University staff, and will manage the recruitment procedures, and for the so-called "precari" (precarious), researchers who deserve a research and teaching position, but will wait in vain forever. Therefore, the research productivity, and the teaching quality of the Italian Universities, are in danger, while the Country is experiencing a strong emigration of highly qualified scientists who, to survive and fulfill their expectations, will find a career abroad. All this must end as soon as possible.

Our recommendations are fully consistent with the “European Charter for Researchers”. We also firmly believe that the Charter must be treated holistically, taking into account all of its sections and not simply cherry picking those that may be convenient to justify Government and University management decisions.