

Italian protesters win concessions

Thousands of researchers and students who have taken to the streets in protest at reforms of Italian universities and public research institutes have won some limited concessions from the government. The protesters had argued that the reforms, which include significant budget cuts, would further weaken a research base that is already short of resources. The Italian government maintains that its reforms are necessary to modernize a university system that is corrupt and inefficient, but has reversed some of the cuts.

The protests began in October following legislation proposed by Silvio Berlusconi's right-wing administration that would have put the careers of 2000 temporary researchers in jeopardy. The law, put forward by the minister of public administration Renato Brunetta, would have ended a programme introduced under the previous left-wing government of Romano Prodi to give temporary employees in the civil service, including researchers, permanent contracts in order to overcome the effects of a series of hiring freezes previously brought in by Berlusconi in 2002.

The Brunetta bill also directed protesters' attention towards legislation pushed through by decree in the quiet days of August. Known as "law 133", it set out budgetary reforms across the public sector for the next five years,



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cutting university funding, which in 2006 was worth €7.5bn, by €1.5bn over a five-year period, while allowing universities to replace only one in five retiring lecturers. Law 133, which was passed with very little discussion in the cabinet and no parliamentary debate, also introduced the possibility for universities to become private foundations in order to secure funding and would moreover have meant an immediate 10% cut in personnel at research institutes.

These measures led to wide-ranging demonstrations in Rome and beyond, including students blocking people from entering or leaving university departments. The protests appear to have had some impact, with a new decree put forward by education and research minister Mariastella Gelmini

Up in arms

Researchers in Italy take to the streets to protest against government reforms.

in early November softening some of the blows contained within law 133. Many universities will now have the money to replace half of the departing lecturers, while the 10% cut at research institutes has been dropped, although the university funding cuts remain in place.

Matthew Moulson, a staff researcher at the National Institute for Nuclear Physics (INFN) in Frascati, near Rome, welcomes this latest reversal, as well as a delay to Brunetta's measures, but warns that Italian research remains in a precarious position. He points out that even without the 10% cut, many INFN temporary researchers, including many who work at CERN, will soon be forced to leave as their short-term contracts cannot be continually renewed. "Law 133 as it was would have destroyed us. Period. The new amendment basically takes us back to where we were before, which was already a critical situation."

The government is now drawing up new, more comprehensive legislation to reform universities, including measures to reduce the number of students who drop out and ways to tackle the widespread problem of nepotism within departments. It is also proposing a new "evaluation agency" to distribute funding to departments based on research performance.

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Rome

Middle East

SESAME seeks cash to open its doors

Researchers from the Middle East met in Jordan last month to celebrate progress towards the region's first synchrotron-radiation source, which is due to be ready for users by 2011. Known as SESAME, the facility is being built near the Al-Baqqa' Applied University in Allan, about 30 km from the Jordanian capital Amman, and is designed to promote peaceful scientific co-operation between nations in the troubled region. However, the project still has to find \$15m – a fifth of the total costs – in order to finish construction or SESAME risks being delayed beyond 2011.

SESAME (Synchrotron-light for

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Experimental Science and Applications in the Middle East) produces X-rays that will be used to carry out a range of experiments in physics, chemistry, biology and medicine. The \$100m facility was first proposed in 1997 and has until now been run under the auspices of UNESCO with nine member states including Iran, Israel, Pakistan and the Palestinian Authority. Most of SESAME's equipment comes from donations from other labs, such as an 0.8 GeV injector system from the BESSY lab in Berlin and beamlines from the Daresbury Laboratory's recently closed Synchrotron Radiation Source in the UK.

The inauguration, attended by dignitaries such as the Jordanian prince Ghazi Bin Mohammad and the director-general of UNESCO Koichiro Matsuura, marked the completion of the centre's main building, which is operated by 20 full-time staff, and the installation of the beam-injector system from Berlin. However, the project has been delayed as a result of a decision taken in 2003 by SESAME members to increase the energy of the storage ring from 1 GeV to 2.5 GeV so that the facility can compete with cutting-edge "third generation" synchrotrons. That prevented SESAME from simply using the original BESSY1 storage ring. "We are optimistic that we will get the funding and it won't hold things up," says Chris Llewellyn-Smith, the new head of the SESAME council.

Michael Banks