

ITALY

University Appointments Scandal Widens

VENICE—Physicist Giorgio Salvini, Italy's minister for research and universities, is probably wishing he had stuck to science. Since his appointment in January, one of Salvini's most pressing tasks has been to reform the discredited system of national competitions, or "concorsi," which determine who will be appointed to university chairs. Meanwhile, a scandal that began to engulf the system last year continues to widen, and Salvini's prescriptions for reform remain bogged down in parliamentary politics. As a result, professorial appointments are stalled, and some 2000 posts are now vacant in university departments around the country.

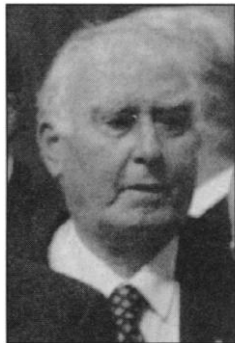
The crisis confronting Italian universities is a product of a national fever for rooting out corruption in public institutions and widespread dissatisfaction in the academic community with the concorsi system. The system came under public scrutiny a year ago when a number of concorsi were exposed as being rigged (*Science*, 11 November 1994, p. 965). Now more than 100 professors, mainly members of concorsi boards that judge the candidates, plus a handful of academics who were awarded chairs, are under investigation for corruption. And the investigations moved into a higher gear last week when a rush of press reports declared that Rome's public prosecutor, Adelchi D'Ippolito, who leads the concorsi inquiries nationally, has collected enough evidence to threaten with trial nearly half of those under suspicion for abuse of office.

These investigations were preceded by swelling complaints from within the universities themselves. The current system "threatens to bury alive once and for all the ambitions of our young researchers and of the honest citizen," says Laura Calzà, an associate professor in the medical faculty at Cagliari University. What was initially a trickle of grievances turned into a flood earlier this year when a professor from a medical faculty who chaired a concorso board was given a 12-month suspended sentence for imposing his own protégés when assigning posts. The scientific community saw that exposing corruption could bring results.

Since then, 10% of the appointments for full professor made in 1992 by 330 concorsi have been blocked and some appointments revoked because of legal challenges, resignations, suspension of board members, and inquiries by the National University Council (CUN). Investigations into a further 10

concorsi were announced last week.

When he was first appointed, Salvini had hoped to clean up the system in time for a new round of concorsi beginning in June. He first put forward a proposal for a new system in March. It was then revised by a special commission of the Senate, and the final bill was presented to the Senate 6 weeks ago but has not gone forward because of fierce argument over the new rules. Powerful university professors are known to have links with parliamentarians and are believed to be blocking the changes, fearing they would reduce their power. "There are some people secretly opposing me," Salvini says.



Giorgio Salvini: Pushing for reform.

Salvini's new system would maintain the two grades, associate and full professor, but in place of the old concorsi boards, which assigned posts anywhere in the country, Salvini's scheme would hold competitions in two phases: one national, which would choose a group of candidates 50% larger than the number of posts available; and a second, at university faculty level, which would assign individual chairs. Full professors would

be judged by up to 40 professors in the field, who would decide by majority vote.

The Senate's failure to act on the reform proposal has put Salvini in an unenviable position. The old concorsi system is thoroughly discredited and reforms stalled, but the universities have meanwhile started another academic year with gaping holes in their research and teaching staff. Some professors are accusing Salvini of neglecting his duty by not starting another round of concorsi. As a result, Salvini said at a press conference last week that the situation is getting desperate. "The concorsi can't wait," he said, so "I have decided that we'll go ahead, even if with the old rules."

And that has prompted an uproar from some academics who have been demanding reforms. Salvini has been inundated with letters of protest from the CUN and academics of all grades against proceeding using the old rules. Claudio Modini, CUN member and associate in the medical faculty at Rome's "La Sapienza" University, says, "It is absurd that, despite public opinion, the government, the [science] minister, the university community, all demanding a new law for the concorsi, these are still being operated under the old system." As of now, however, there's no telling when a new system will be in place.

—Susan Biggin

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HUMAN GENETICS MEETING

Publicity Fears Cancel Gene Talk

MINNEAPOLIS—On a Friday morning late last month, hundreds of geneticists descended on a convention hall here for the "breakthrough" research session of the 45th Annual Meeting of the American Society of Human Genetics (ASHG). The main attraction: The unveiling of one of the year's hottest gene discoveries—the defective gene that causes Bloom's syndrome. Patients with the syndrome become riddled with cancers, so the gene's identity may give insight into the mechanisms that trigger malignancy. But the geneticists who attended the session left disappointed—victims, said some conference attendees, of a larger problem that's been plaguing conferences, especially the big open ones like the ASHG meeting. Worried both about tipping off competitors and about generating premature publicity in the press, researchers are becoming reluctant to present their hot new findings until they have been published—at which point, they are already stale.

The Bloom's syndrome talk apparently fell victim to fears of advance publicity. It was to be given by geneticist Nathan Ellis, a member of the team led by James German of the New York Blood Center in New York

City that made the discovery. But the results are scheduled to be published in an upcoming issue of *Cell*, and, according to ASHG press officer Jane Salomon, on learning that German had spoken with journalists, *Cell* editor Benjamin Lewin contacted German, warning that publicity for the new finding would jeopardize its publication.

Lewin refused to talk with *Science*. But German says that, although Lewin drew his attention to *Cell*'s policy on prepublication publicity, "there was certainly no unpleasantness, no threats." Nonetheless, German pulled the paper from the meeting, and the disappointed geneticists were less understanding than he was about the situation. "It was terrible. The scientific process was disturbed. Dr. German was prevented from presenting [his findings] for criticism in an open forum of his colleagues," says geneticist Richard Gatti of the University of California, Los Angeles.

Although all journals loathe being scooped by the lay press, most (including *Science*) allow researchers to present their findings at conferences even when journalists are present, and even if it results in press coverage. *Cell*, however, has a reputation for