

Italy: Students, staff fight cuts

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Rome's Sapienza University is one of Italy's most prestigious universities and Europe's biggest with more than 140,000 enrolled students. But this northern autumn, despite the cold weather outside, Sapienza University — like many others in Italy — is at boiling point.

The heat is in response to funding cuts to Italy's public education system. Further cuts are in store if the university reform package proposed by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right government is passed.

The heatwave started in September when the chancellor of Sapienza, Luigi Frati, threatened to block the start of the academic year. His reasons were simple: Sapienza University is broke. The chancellor is refusing to start an academic year in which the university will not even be able to pay its teaching staff.

Professors, researchers and students have responded to the lack of public funding by going on strike.

The Tremonti Law of 2009 (named after Italy's minister for economy) forces universities to rationalise the amount of money they spend on salaries so that they fall within a 90% threshold of the specific financial fund attributed to each university.

Sapienza University reported that salaries amounted to 98.03% of the financial fund, which is what has triggered this year's financial troubles and the chancellor's rebellion.

Now, education minister Maria Stella Gelmini is proposing a law that would allow universities to seek funding from private sources and that blocks universities from offering full-time positions to researchers on temporary contracts.

The government's vision is of a university operating as a business, where making a profit is the main aim. The quality of its schools and the conditions of its workers are secondary considerations.

In the Faculty of Political Science, as in many others, the faculty council unanimously agreed to postpone lessons until November 3 in protest against the government moves.

One Spanish professor explained to her students why she was on strike: she told them that, for the new academic year, the Department of Languages could not afford to subscribe to foreign magazines.

Lack of funding has left the department unable to purchase new books for its library, hire new mother-tongue tutors or organise language laboratories all due to lack of funding.

The whole faculty has been unable to offer its usual evening courses aimed at full-time workers. It is clear a lack of public funding seriously impinges on the quality of public education.

What has always been considered a first-rate generator of culture and excellence risks becoming a second-rate degree dispenser. Faced with this state of affairs, university staff felt there was no

option but to strike.

The protest was strongly supported by students, even though the interruption to the academic year has meant some students had to postpone their graduation by six months.

On October 14, students, researchers and unions protested outside Rome's Montecitorio building. They booed the government that, inside, was debating Gelmini's university reform package.

The protesters arrived clad in lab coats, with effigies of hung medical researchers representing the death of free research in Italy. Others carried banners asking about the future of microbiology with micro funding.

One researcher from the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Rome Tor Vergata said he was protesting because researchers are faced with a complete lack of job-security: "I don't know if I have a wage this year", he said.

He placed researchers' struggle against low wages and precarious work conditions in the wider context of funding cuts to all levels of education. He pointed out the warped priorities of a government that ploughs billions of euros annually into defence, while slashing funds to primary areas of social welfare.

The date for consideration of the Gelmini law has now been postponed to after the approval of the budget. However, the tension inside Italy's universities remains high.

In a country with 20% youth unemployment and where non-union wages average about three euros an hour, what hope is left for young people when they are also forced to face the disintegration of a quality education system?

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P.S.

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