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## Brains in Chains



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ITALY  
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"Did you know that the average young Italian researcher earns less than a dish washer?"

Scientists are usually very familiar with grant deadlines, but 30 November 2002 is a deadline of a different sort. It is the date by which young Italian researchers have been asked to submit some rather unusual papers. Rather than detailing their research, their manuscripts are to describe their personal experiences within the walls of universities and public research institutes throughout the country.

If the concept sounds familiar to some, it's no surprise. The initiative is the work of Italy's 4-year-old PhD student association, [Associazione Dottorandi e Dottori di Ricerca Italiani](#) (ADI), the brains behind a similar move to put pressure on Italian policy-makers in 2001. *Cervelli in fuga* (*Brains on the Run*) was a collection of stories from 20 researchers with a common tale to tell: their scientific escape from Italy. The book became a cause célèbre for the Italian media, highlighting issues such as low salaries, the impossibility of developing an independent career, nepotism, and the total lack of meritocracy under the Italian system. "Depressing conditions unworthy of an otherwise highly developed country," is how Riccardo Mancini, publisher of both of these provocative projects, describes the situation.

The response of the politicians and Italy's elite group of powerful university professors, the so-called baroni, is--as it always has been--that international exchange is the lifeblood of research. Nobody is against this concept. But unfortunately, it is not clear that brain drain is always a phenomenon born of "noble reasons," claims Flaminia Saccà, ADI's general secretary. Instead, it is often a result of young researchers being forced to leave the country.

And what about those who, just as bravely, decide not to leave? There are many young Italian brains trying to coexist with the inefficiencies, antidemocratic mechanisms, and chronic funding shortages endemic to their country. Well, that's why the "bellicose kids" of ADI are back, working on [\*Cervelli in gabbia\*](#) (literally, *Brains in the Cage*). Following the format of the previous book, this latest project is still in the process of collecting and selecting stories; however, it is expected to see the light of day at the beginning of next year.

*Cervelli in gabbia* will be a further denunciation, a window on the difficulties young people face every day in Italy's research realm, and a source of sad surprises. For instance, did you know that the average young Italian researcher earns less than a dish washer? The testimonies will cover the seemingly trivial, "for example the daily fight against bureaucracy simply to have access to basic goods--toner, printer paper, standard reagents," right through to more serious issues, suggests Saccà. Issues such as the ridiculously long path required to reach decent positions. And the concorsi system, the national competitions through which, by law, academic positions are filled, increasingly criticised for allowing appointment decisions to be influenced by personal contacts.

*Cervelli in gabbia* will be an album of snapshots of a daily struggle for survival. What happens, for example, when someone applies for a €10,000 grant, the maximum a 35-year-old Italian researcher can hope to be awarded, and then sees these peanuts further rationed because national funding has been cut?

ADI is not using its soapbox merely to whine. Rather its sequel heralds an opportunity to analyse the current situation through the eyes of Italian science's most important participants--the research workers of the future. Because what the researchers are witnessing is a true state of emergency, despite establishment reassurances.

"Needless to say, it is not at all easy to find people ready to expose themselves and lay bare their thoughts, since the system does not forgive," continues Saccà. For this reason most case studies will appear under a pseudonym. Further, it is likely that profilees will have their pictures taken from behind. The ADI is still debating this latter idea: The effect might be extreme, but more than justified, many believe.

For those courageous enough to participate, it is not only the stories of stay-at-home researchers that the ADI is seeking. They're also after the experiences of previously escaped but now returned brains, who they hope will describe the broken promises and disappointed scientific hopes they found once back in the motherland, or even of professors who might share the same worries, despite their safe status.

*Cervelli in gabbia* is timely. Even in the midst of rumours of a debatable shake-up of the Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche--the national research council--the Italian government is once again failing to recognise the importance of science and technology for the social and economic development of a wealthy country. According to the new 2003 financial plan, hiring will be frozen and research funding further reduced. It seems that for Italy's young researchers things may yet get even worse before they begin to get better.

*If you are an Italian researcher with a story to tell, e-mail [cervellingabbia@dottorato.it](mailto:cervellingabbia@dottorato.it), or call Marco Bianchetti (+39.328.2216420) or Augusto Palombini (+39.347.4565457)*

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