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The
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Italy's brain drain

No Italian jobs

Why Italian graduates cannot wait to emigrate

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EDITION

ALESSANDRO WANDAEL is a photographer. His is a profession in which success should depend on talent alone. But not so in his native Italy. The photo credits in magazines show that photographers who have family or other close ties to editors are working regularly, he says. "Those who don't, aren't."

The 37-year-old Mr Wandael, a former architect, has lived abroad ever since graduating: first in Berlin; now in New York. Figures in this field are often outdated and vague. But Mr Wandael is far from alone. According to 2005 statistics published by the OECD, he is among some 300,000 highly educated Italians who have opted to leave a country that has become rich without dismantling a social framework in which access to jobs depends on family ties, political affiliations and *raccomandazioni* (string-pulling recommendations).

Last month saw unexpectedly violent student protests in a number of cities against proposed reforms to the university system. Some commentators detected in this a symptom of the frustration the Italian way of doing things generates among the educated young.



How serious is the problem? It "does not exist", said a junior minister in 2002, claiming that only 150-300 graduates a year left the country for good. A minister in the current government privately acknowledges the phenomenon, but says that the only real cause for concern is the departure of scientific researchers. But neither of these contentions stands up. A 2004 study found that, of all Italian emigrants, the share of those with degrees quadrupled between 1990 and 1998. In 1999, according to a separate study, 4,000 graduates cancelled their Italian residency. And just 17% of Italian graduates in the United States, the most popular destination, are involved in research and development, according to the (American) National Science Foundation. The biggest chunk work as managers.

Yet what distinguishes Italy from its peers is not the absolute number of its exiled graduates (in 2005 more left Britain, France and Germany than Italy), but that it has a net "brain drain" (see chart), something more typical of a developing economy. In other words, the number of educated Italians leaving the country exceeds the number of educated foreigners entering it. By contrast, many of Italy's developed-world counterparts are involved in "brain exchanges": as British computer scientists disappear to Silicon Valley, Spanish medical researchers find work in Britain, for example.



Last year Silvio Berlusconi's government made the second attempt in nine years to lure back exiled academics, this time with tax breaks. But this misses the point, according to Sonia Morano-Foadi, a law lecturer at Oxford Brookes University who interviewed more than 50 émigré Italian scientists in 2006. Her subjects identified two main reasons for their decision to quit the homeland. One was Italy's scant investment in R&D (the lowest of the European Union's 15 pre-2004 members). The other, "the most important and difficult problem of academia in Italy", was its "non-transparent recruitment system".

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