



No Place Like Home. Italian Scientists and Professionals Overseas

Walter De Marco (July 07, 2008)



Italy is one of the top European countries to suffer from brain drain. As its research facilities and job opportunities wane, Italian scientists and professionals look to jump-start their careers abroad—even if leaving home is a reluctant choice



A Rockefeller University researcher, a University of Toronto doctoral student and teaching assistant, a University of California scholar and instructor of Physics. What do these three have in common? They are all Italian-born and educated young academics with outstanding experience and qualifications, for whom there are no jobs in Italy, yet they have managed to put their knowledge and skills to use on foreign soil.

Two studies released recently by the OECD and by the Migrantes organization, show that university-educated professionals continue to migrate abroad in our time. Italy is among the top European countries affected by this type of migration, commonly referred to as the brain drain. Italian and international specialists and organization leaders agree that in most cases the migration of highly qualified professionals and researchers from their home country is most often the result of necessity, rather than choice. One of the leading reasons for this ongoing exodus from European countries being “the inadequate support for research by Italy and other European countries”, says Calogero Rubino, the president of the Collettivita’ Italiana association in Grenoble.

On the Rockefeller University campus in Eastside New York, Roberto Picetti brushes shoulders with leading-edge biomedical scientists, including seven Nobel-prize winners. Picetti is an Italian-born-and-raised neuro-scientist, who has also worked for a private company in Milan for two years. After losing his job, he was unable to find another one here, so he returned to the United States, where he had previously completed a post-doctoral degree program. As soon as his former American employer learned that Picetti needed a job, she gave him back his job at the Institute of Neuro-pharmacology, where he has now worked for over three years.

Born in the northern Italian city of Luino, Picetti is a Biology graduate from the University of Pavia who earned his Ph. D. in Neuroscience from the University of Strasbourg in France, and then a post-doc at the Scripps Research Institute in San Diego. Although he can boast a remarkable international academic and scientific career, Picetti is one of thousands of Italian scientists whose decision to study and work abroad has been caused by the lack of opportunities in his home country, rather than choice.

Many professionals in other areas also face the same involuntary choices.

“Is Italy a country where someone with a goal is able to live, work, and fulfill their ambitions, and at the same time find or save the money [they] need to start a new business?” wonders Luca Di Giovanni, a 30-year-old manager from Italy at a Los Angeles Information Technology company. Di Giovanni, who earned his university degree in Italy, says that if he had stayed there, he would “have wound up running photocopies, or doing something just a bit better.”

On his way to the University of Toronto’s St. George campus, Sciltian Gastaldi crosses paths every morning with hundreds of busy multiethnic commuters in the city’s downtown core, where sidewalks are scattered with hot-dog vendors and panhandlers, even in the cold winter months. Gastaldi is a PhD candidate and a Teaching Assistant in the University of Toronto’s Department of Italian Studies. Although his exotic first name may suggest otherwise, he is a Rome native who has won journalism and literary awards in Italy. Gastaldi also wants to be a university professor, but every time he applied for a Ph.D. program in Italy, he was inexplicably turned down.

A quick glimpse at Gastaldi’s CV or website is enough to tell that he does not lack the skills or the qualifications to become a professor. He has completed undergraduate degrees at the universities of Rome and Bologna, and his two university theses on American history and politics were published as books. He also has a number of post-graduate diplomas, two novels and several collaborations with



Italian and Canadian newspapers under his belt.

After many unsuccessful attempts to enter a doctoral program in Italy, he was offered admission and a teaching job at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Italian Studies, and he says that his talent and enthusiasm are finally being rewarded there.

Many professionals in other areas say that they left Italy after experiencing similar difficulties.

Rome native Claudia Cannatelli's fascination with volcanoes led her to southern California, where she has to drive four hours every day between her home in LA and the UC Santa Barbara campus, where she is a physics teacher and post-doctoral student. Cannatelli earned a degree in Physics from Roma Tre University in 2003. After countless applications for doctorate programs and jobs, both in the private and public sectors in Italy, she was finally accepted into a Ph.D program at the Federico II University in Naples in 2004. This program allowed her to attend courses and carry out research in the United States.

Upon completion of this Italian-funded program, Cannatelli was invited by her supervisors at Virginia Tech University to pursue a post-doctoral degree there, which she completed last year. For personal and professional choices, Cannatelli eventually relocated to Los Angeles, where she is now living with her future husband.

University of Toronto doctoral candidate Sciltian Gastaldi, who has lived there for less than two years, says that he would be happy to continue to live and work abroad. However, both Roberto Picetti, who works at the Rockefeller University, and the UC Santa Barbara scholar Claudia Cannatelli say that they would rather live in Italy, or at least in a country nearby.

"My fiancée and I are trying to find jobs in France or another country in Europe," says Cannatelli, who has never lost her hopes to be able to live and work closer to her family and to familiar places.

Bio

Walter De Marco is an Italian teacher and freelance journalist living in Toronto. He has an MA from the University of Buffalo, NY, and has published articles on education and culture in various American, Canadian and Italian newspapers.

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