

# Brussels threatens Italy over failure to end *lettori* dispute

European Commission warns of further legal action after Italian universities refuse to offer back pay to unjustly treated foreign lecturers

Foreign lecturers in Italy who have been denied equal pay and conditions for decades have welcomed the European Commission's threat of fresh legal action over unpaid compensation.



The Brussels-based commission called on Italy to “put an end to discrimination of foreign lecturers”, saying it would begin proceedings in the European Court of Justice in two months unless decades of back pay due to international academics were paid, noting that “most foreign lecturers have still not received the money to which they are entitled”.

By failing to compensate the *lettori*, Italy was “still discriminating against foreign lecturers”, explained the [infringement notice](#) published on 26 January.

The notice observed that Italy had failed to abide by an ECJ ruling in 2006, which drew attention to a 2004 Italian law that, it said, “provides an acceptable framework for the so-called reconstruction of careers of foreign lecturers” in Italian universities.

“This means that the law allows for the adjustment of their salary, seniority and corresponding social security benefits to those of a

researcher under a part-time contract, and it grants them the right to back-payments as of the start of their employment. However, the majority of universities did not take the steps needed for a correct reconstruction of the *lettori's* careers," it adds.

The threat of legal action is the latest milestone in the [decades-long dispute](#) affecting about 1,000 foreign language assistants, which began in 1980, when Italy passed a law granting tenure to Italian nationals teaching in universities while giving *lettori* annual contracts renewable for five years.

This was successfully challenged in Italian courts and in the European Court of Justice during the 1990s and early 2000s as discriminating on the basis of nationality, but no action was ultimately taken against Italy.

Last year, the dispute [appeared to be close to an end](#) when Italy's higher education minister, then Maria Cristina Messa, recommended that €43 million (£36 million) be put aside to settle the claims, but many universities have still continued to resist handing over any back pay.

David Petrie, chair of the Association of Foreign Lecturers in Italy, said Italian universities should not be allowed to benefit from an estimated €15 billion over the next five years, part of European Union Covid recovery funding focused on research institutions, while it continued to flout EU law – in particular, by creating fresh legislation that sought to extinguish *lettori's* claims for back pay.

"The Italian state, instead of implementing and paying up what they were legally obliged to pay, shifted the goalposts by producing a legislative pastiche beginning with the 'Gemini' law and a subsequent so-called authentic interpretation, which led to chaos in the domestic courts and in the universities themselves," said Mr Petrie.

"In effect, these measures attempted to rewrite the ECJ ruling to the

detriment of those foreign lecturers still awaiting arrears on their wages and pensions," he explained, adding that "Italian courts frequently ignored the ECJ ruling of 2021 and 2004 in favour of the new money-saving legislation" and had also "refused repeated requests from our lawyers asking that individual cases be sent back to the Luxembourg court, which is supreme in matters of interpretation of EU law.

"Italian universities, bankrolled by their paymasters in the Italian state, continue to refuse to pay the correct wages and pensions of their non-Italian teaching staff. Meanwhile, under the EU recovery fund, Italy continues to suck up money in the form of research grants for the Horizon Programme and Erasmus for its students," continued Mr Petrie.

"It cannot be right that 30 years of illegitimate discrimination goes unpunished. Italy flouts and even flaunts its contempt for the European single market while supping greedily from common EU funds in the field of education."

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