

Funding cut threats 'won't settle' Italy's long lettori dispute

Universities may well accept a 1 per cent funding penalty as a cheaper option, compared with paying money owed to lecturers



A threat to dock 1 per cent of the state funding of Italian universities is unlikely to force them to pay money owed to foreign-born academics because, in many cases, accepting the sanction will be the cheaper option, according to an advocate for those affected.

Foreign lecturers employed as low-paid *lettori* under a 1980s law have fought for decades for the back pay and benefits they would have been paid had they been Italian, after a series of domestic and European court cases confirmed their dues.

The European Commission has twice told Italy that the practice violates European Union rules on the equal treatment of workers from countries within the bloc but David Petrie, chair of the Association of Foreign Lecturers in Italy, told *Times Higher Education* that about 200 educators are still waiting for justice.

On 19 May, Italy's highest court reversed a lower court decision that had awarded more than €200,000 (£171,000) in unpaid wages to an Australian English language lecturer at the [University of Basilicata](#),

despite European Court of Justice rulings that require such payments.

On 26 May, Italy's university and finance ministers, Anna Maria Bernini and Giancarlo Giorgetti, [signed a decree](#) that the ministries said would "put an end to years of litigation" by docking 1 per cent of the main state funding for universities that had still not awarded back pay.

"This is the first time they've suggested any sanctions, but the sanction seems very weak indeed," said Mr Petrie, adding that for many of the roughly 20 universities involved it would be less than the cost of what they owed *lettori*.

The promise of penalties followed a [February announcement](#) from Ms Bernini, who previously taught public law at the [University of Bologna](#), that her ministry had set aside €43 million to help universities compensate *lettori*, a pot which Mr Petrie said would likely be too small to cover all the costs.

Mr Petrie said the European Commission would probably wait to see if the threat of penalties stirred universities into paying up before bringing a case at the ECJ, which would be the seventh time the issue has come before the EU's supreme court. "It's beginning to make the whole institution look silly," he added, referring to the fact that previous rulings had seemingly done little to change the behaviour of the Italian state or universities.

A 2011 Italian law, named after Mariastella Gelmini, a former higher education minister, sought to settle the dispute by granting earlier back pay and pensions to *lettori* while imposing swingeing cuts on their future pay. Many said their pay was cut by [up to 60 per cent](#) because of the law, leading the then UK prime minister David Cameron to [raise the issue](#) with the Italian government.

About half the *lettori* who had taken their universities to court "had got something approximating a reasonable enough remedy", Mr Petrie added. In one of the larger cases, 14 lecturers at the [University of Padua](#) jointly won €5 million. "If that's one university you can see why it's a

fighting figure for the universities and the state.”

Mr Petrie said the Gelmini law had to be struck off the statute books before the decades-old dispute could finally be resolved. Many of the foreign lecturers have retired since the fight began and he estimated that between 30 and 40 had passed away.

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