

## **Doctoral Education in Planning and Urban Studies in Italy: what is it really for? Introduction and Editorial note.**

**Enzo Falco**

Post-Doctoral Research Fellow  
GSSI Cities, Gran Sasso Science Institute  
Viale Francesco Crispi, 7 – L’Aquila, Italy – enzo.falco@gssi.infn.it

**Alessandro Rinaldi**

PhD Candidate  
Dpt. Planning Design and Technology of Architecture, Sapienza  
University of Rome  
Via Flaminia, 72 - Roma, Italy – alessandro.rinaldi@uniroma1.it

### *ABSTRACT*

*Data show the reduction of academic positions in Italy and invite to reconsider the role of PhD education and training as the highest level of university education. In fact, although PhDs seem to have a little advantage over Master’s level graduates in the job market, only about 10% find a job at universities. This suggests that changes in PhD programmes might be needed to match students’ needs and job market requirements. However, the opposite is also true with employers, either in the public or private sector, who should try to absorb more PhDs and use their skills and expertise.*

*The aim of this special issue is to analyse PhD education in Italy with a focus on planning and urban studies programmes by emphasising the perspectives of PhD candidates and freshly awarded Doctors since they are generally neglected in reform processes.*

*All authors who contributed to this special issue reflected on the same aim stressing different implications and perspectives. The topics investigated are: matching between students' expectations and institutional goals, the international mobility of PhD candidates, experiences of international PhD students in Italy, and the evolution of two of the oldest PhD programmes in planning in Italy at Sapienza, Rome and Iuav, Venice.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

This special issue on doctoral education in planning and urban studies in Italy was envisaged as a consequence of the national day on research methodology organised yearly by some members of the Società Italiana degli Urbanisti (SIU - Italian Planners Society). In 2015, its third edition was held in Palermo and hosted by the Department of Architecture - City, Regional and Landscape Planning Unit. The aim of this issue, considering the lack of PhD<sup>1</sup> candidates' participation and involvement in the 2015 national day on research methodology, is twofold. Firstly, it aims to be a contribution to the debate on doctoral education in Italy in planning and urban studies, its potentials as well as downsides. Secondly, it aims to involve and give the opportunity to current candidates and freshly awarded Doctors to take part in the debate and explore subjects that they

---

<sup>1</sup> For the sake of simplicity we use PhD rather than Ph.D. PhD is also internationally accepted in scientific journals such as Journal of Planning Education and Research (Goldstein, 2012) and The Journal of Higher Education (Gardner, 2008).

deem important and necessary for the improvement of PhD programmes.

Their involvement and points of view are indeed a fundamental part of the debate<sup>2</sup>.

The present piece of research, building upon data and analysis of the current situation and trends of Italian academia and PhDs programmes in terms of employment, academic positions and trends, tries to present an overall picture with a slight focus on the sector of civil engineering and architecture and planning/urban studies.

### *Background*

Doctoral education was introduced in Italy in 1980 by the D.P.R. n. 331 of 1980 (Decreto del Presidente della Repubblica, Presidents of the Republic's Decree), which aimed at a re-organization of university education bringing about changes in both its organisational and educational aspects. PhD education was conceived for developing research activity and skills in academic contexts (Alessandrini, 2014) as well as, and perhaps most importantly, the first step of a future academic career. Thus, doctoral education was established in order to improve the quality of new academics by stimulating the establishment of research skills (methodology for instance). In line with a process of European standardization of university education, PhD education in Italy has changed recently. It is now considered as the third level of university education whose aim is to train professional researchers rather than

---

<sup>2</sup> We are aware that PhD candidates may not have a comprehensive and encompassing view of doctoral education in its organizational, methodological and disciplinary issues. However, their needs, points of view and capability to conduct research are of extreme importance and represent an invaluable resource.

guaranteeing access to academia and academic career (Ficco, 2012). In line with international standards on research assessment, PhD programmes, from 2017, will also be subject to an assessment by Agenzia Nazionale per la Valutazione dell'Università e della Ricerca (ANVUR - Italian National Agency for the Evaluation of University and Research Institutes) based on publications of Faculty staff and PhD candidates, internationalization, and other criteria (ANVUR, 2014). Funding from the Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca (MIUR - Ministry for Education, University and Research) for PhD programmes will depend on the result of such an assessment.

#### *Employment situation of PhDs*

A recent analysis by ISTAT on the employment situation of Italian PhDs in civil engineering and architecture who gained the title in 2008 and 2010 highlights that in 2014 more than 90% were hired (ISTAT, 2015). Generally, as shown in Table 1, with regards to the sector “Civil Engineering and Architecture”, six years after conclusion of doctoral studies almost the entirety of PhDs are employed, although a considerable part found a job during the three years of doctorate training.

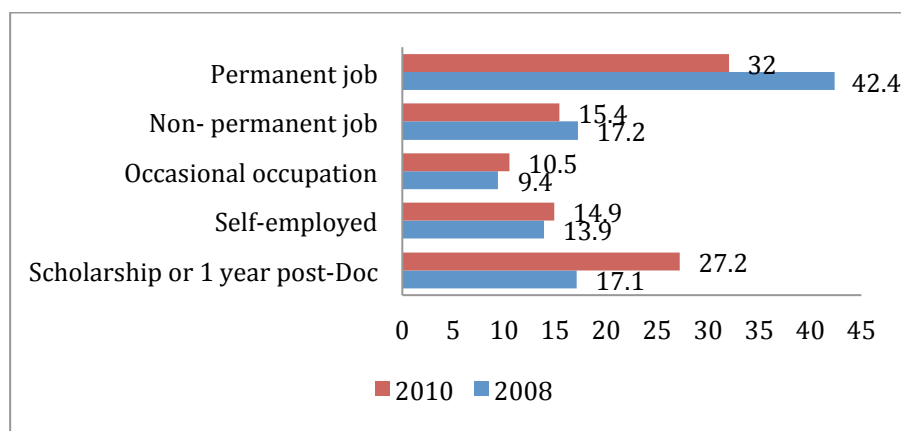
**Table 1 - The employment situation of Italian PhDs at 2014**

<i>Discipline</i>	<i>2008</i>		<i>2010</i>	
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Hired before completing PhD</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Hired before completing PhD</i>
<i>Civil Engineering and Architecture</i>	94.7%	38.7%	92.4%	40.8%

Source: Authors' elaboration based on a study by ISTAT (2015: 4)

However, only 17% of PhDs who completed their doctoral education in 2008 and 27% of those who completed it in 2010 achieved a position, temporary or contract-staff position (post-doc), within the university system (Table 2)<sup>3</sup>.

**Table 2 - Type of PhDs occupation at 2014 (%)**



Source: Authors' elaboration based on a study by ISTAT (2015: 5)

### *The current situation of Italian academia*

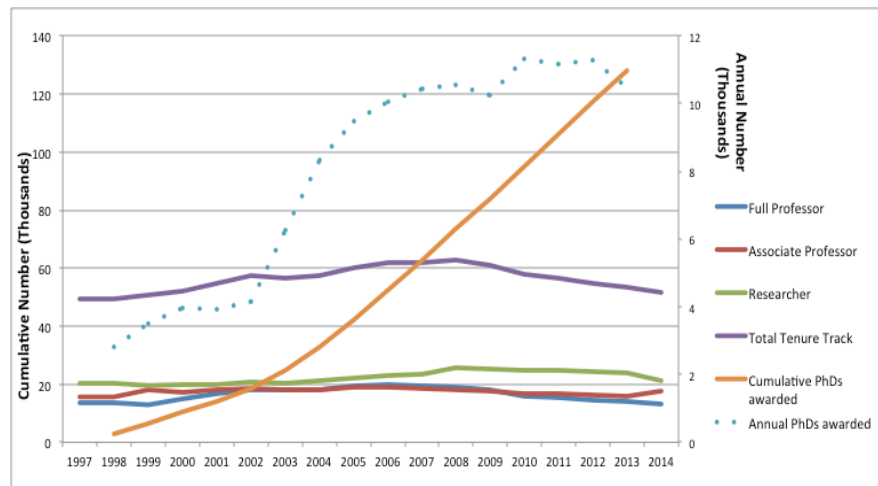
Data from the MIUR database (MIUR, 2015a; 2015b) show the currently reduced opportunities for new doctors to enter academia and pursue an academic career (Fig. 1 and Table 3). At the national level for the period 1997 through 2014, concerning all faculty staff with a tenure-track position - researcher, associate professor, full professor - in all disciplines, Figure 1 shows a steady increase in

---

<sup>3</sup> A more recent research conducted by Almalaurea in 2015, with a survey on 2,400 PhDs from different fields, finds a rate of 19% for PhDs with a post-doc position.

hired faculty staff until 2008 which is followed, after the economic crisis through 2014, by a marked and steady decrease in all faculty staff positions at 1999-2000 levels. Figure 1 shows that the increase in PhDs is unsustainable for the current situation of university institutions<sup>4</sup>.

**Figure 1 - A trend comparison between total tenure track positions and annual PhD titles**



Source: Authors' elaboration on data from MIUR database (2015a).

<sup>4</sup> The increase has been remarkable in the years 2002 to 2007. However, as the OECD shows in its report "Education at the glance 2013", Italy still has a percentage of students that graduate at PhD level (1.4%) lower than the OCED average (1.6%) (OECD 2013, p. 61). However, things change considerably if international/foreign students are not considered. In this way, the percentage is higher than countries like US, UK, The Netherland, and New Zealand. This shows a difficulty of the Italian education system to attract foreign students and consequently researchers. Argentin, Ballarino and Colombo (2014) also show a similar preoccupation with regard to employment opportunities for PhDs in and outside academia.

In addition, further data on job openings (MIUR, 2015b) highlight that since March 2013 only 13 new positions were opened in the disciplinary sector of Urban Planning and 207 for the sector of Civil Engineering and Architecture as a whole, usually referred to as Research Area 8 (Table 3). This, if compared to the about 2,000<sup>5</sup> new doctors for the Civil Engineering and Architecture sector only (Fig. 2), shows a low opportunity (about 10%) for new doctors to stay in academia, in line also with international research, specifically in the fields of science and engineering in the U.S. (Fig. 3 shows a valuable comparison although showing slightly different data from those displayed in Fig. 1).

**Table 3 – Job openings in Urban Planning by type of researcher  
(2013-2015)**

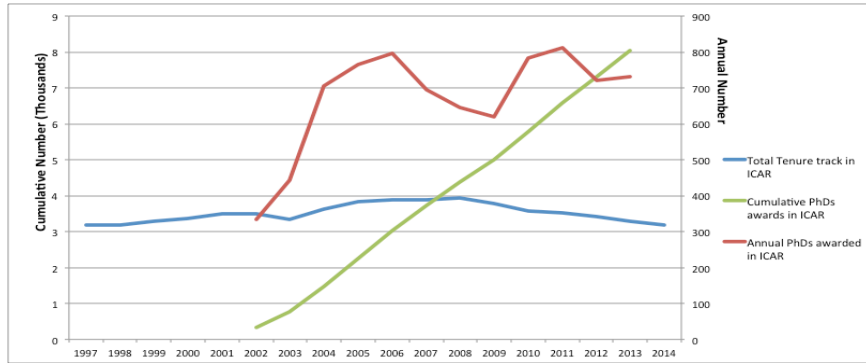
Type of job opening	All disciplines	Area 8	Urban Planning (Area 08/F1)
Researcher Type A	1763	131	6
Researcher Type B	647	75	7
<b>TOTAL</b>	2410	207	13

Source: Data from MIUR database of job openings (2015b).

---

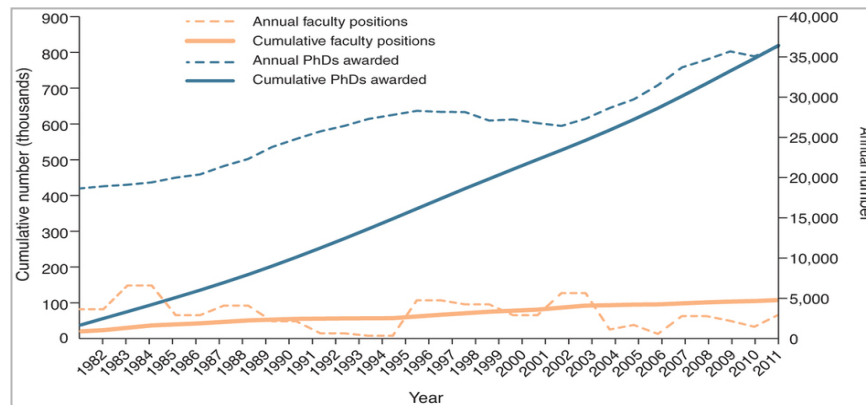
<sup>5</sup> Data for new PhDs in ICAR sector are available until 2013. However, a projection of such data to the years 2014 and 2015, with an approximation of 700 new PhDs per year, allows for an estimate of about 2,000 new doctors for the years 2013, 2014 and 2015.

**Fig. 2 - A trend comparison between total tenure track positions and PhD titles awarded in ICAR**



Source: Authors' Elaboration on data from MIUR database (2015a).

**Fig. 3 - New faculty positions versus new PhDs**



Source: Schillebeeckx, Maricque, and Lewis (2013).

It is worth reminding that these progressive reductions of academic positions are the result of various laws and reforms which



established the so-called “turnover reduction<sup>6</sup>” within universities. Since the “Tremonti Law” n. 133/2008 to the Legislative Decree n. 69/2013, commonly named “Letta”, the opportunities to access the academic system were progressively reduced in order to comply with rigid criteria of spending review and cuts. Nowadays, according to Voltattorni (2014) there is a real exodus from Italian universities and this happens because the "turnover" policy has de facto expelled about 93% of Italian researchers.

Within such a context, a diverse doctoral training which embraces not only academic skills but also the "development of professional expertise" might represent a way to overcome the current employment crisis within universities, extending future options for PhDs in social sciences.

Nonetheless, according to Ficco (2012) the number of PhD programmes that have established courses or initiatives in order to support professionalism is very limited. Although a wide differentiation of types of educational training could improve employment opportunities in general, it is worth considering the benefits of this “formative innovation” in disciplines that are usually engaged in both practical and theoretical fields. This is the case for the planning and urban studies sector. Nowadays, the narrow space within the academic system (Fig. 1), that is common to all disciplinary areas, is reflected also in the planning sector making such an innovation even more compelling. A need for innovation that, however, should concern not only the university system, the

---

<sup>6</sup> This refers to a reduction of new positions and hired faculty staff in the replacement process of retired faculty staff.

PhD programmes themselves and the training they provide. Private businesses and public administrations should also be involved in a process that reconsiders the way the PhD title is valued and considered in the job market in general, as Bartoloni (2015) and Associazione Dottorandi e dottori di ricerca Italiani (ADI, 2015) underline.

So, it is necessary to ask what the PhD in Italy is really for. We strongly believe that it is a way to increase critical knowledge, research skills and problem-solving capacity in multiple and interactive domains. Likely, the topic of PhD education should be treated in "cross-boundary" tables, inviting academics, PhDs, private sector businesses and the government in order to define a sort of "new deal" for a fruitful training process and future opportunities. Understanding the current weaknesses of education programmes is the first step to propose better connections between doctoral education and the job market, satisfying both the PhDs' need for an acceptable future and the demand of suitable expertises from the private and public sectors. This issue tries to do so by focusing on one side of the story: the one of PhD candidates and freshly awarded PhDs. All authors in this issue have sought to deal with this question through different perspectives and have emphasised important themes and aspects of PhD education that are worthy of being discussed.

#### **EDITORIAL NOTE**

Di Giovanni and Fontana in "The doctoral path in urban studies in Italy: between personal expectations and institutional goals" address the issue of PhD education in urban studies through an analysis of the relation between PhD candidates' expectations, motivations and

reasons to start a PhD degree and the institutional goals of 15 Italian doctorate schools. This might fuel a general discussion around the role and kind of training doctorate courses in contemporary society should offer. In order to explore the topic, the authors use a questionnaire survey which they submitted to the candidates of Urban Studies PhD programmes within the cycles XXVIII, XXIX and XXX (last three years starting respectively in November 2012, 2013, 2014). The results and answers received (over 100) tend to confirm the general trend in which PhDs aim to continue their career as researchers, even though consultancy work, either in the public or private sector, is also a possibility. However, the worlds of public administration as well as consultancy require particular skills and knowledge that often PhD training does not aim to provide. Interestingly, with regard to access to the job market, third year students tend to be more pessimistic than first and second year students, highlighting a sense of preoccupation and uncertainty for their future careers. As regards their motivations to start a PhD programme, it seems clear that the main motivation is to enhance cultural education and be engaged in research activities. The authors also stress that PhD education is not seen as a job per se, confirming perhaps the Bologna process that sees doctoral education as the third level of university education.

After the investigation of expectations and motivations, Prisco in “Exploring the Mobility of Italian PhD Students of Urban Studies” acknowledges the relevance of international networks and its influence on quality of training, development of new skills and professional opportunities. The author underlines that the international mobility of PhDs has become a pillar of contemporary research activity. In order to analyse the benefits of a research experience in a foreign university, Prisco investigated the Italian

PhD candidates' mobility. Based on a survey of 23 doctorate schools, the author aimed at understanding: a) whether or not a visiting period during the PhD is an occasion to establish new collaborations between Italian and foreign universities; and b) the potential opportunities in terms of further post-doc and employment that can come from it. Only in a few cases the visiting period triggered new collaboration agreements between the two universities/departments. Nevertheless, it seems that a period in a foreign institution is able to increase the possibility for a future academic career. In fact, according to Prisco a research stay abroad is essential to gain further skills useful for both PhD education and future employment, which postgraduate education solely in Italy could not have provided. The relevance of knowledge exchange between different university contexts is generally acknowledged as a core of research activity. However, this study raised further and valuable considerations regarding the perception of Italian PhDs on the usefulness of a period in a foreign University. Due to the lack of adequate job opportunities within Italian university, building relationships with international universities is recognised as a good way to deal with the current shortage of positions. In the light of the latter consideration, it is perhaps worth reflecting on whether or not a visiting period in a foreign university should be included as a compulsory element of Italian PhD education, which is already the case for some schools.

The internationalization process of PhD programmes in urban studies in Italy is explored under a different lens by Ahern, Gogishvili and Kizildere in "The International PhD experience in urban studies in Italy. Here the authors emphasise the perspective of international students that decide to start an Italian doctorate. The analysis takes into account 12 PhD programmes where English is the

official working language. Through a questionnaire survey, the authors investigated whether Italy can be considered a destination with a sort of “research appeal” for international student. The majority of interviewees are satisfied and rate as good the quality of teaching, research and international networking. However, this last category has the highest number of dissatisfied students with 5 out of 22 rating it as poor. Moreover, the authors identified in the widespread availability of national government funded scholarships the main attractor for foreign students. The authors claim that funding, in effect, contributes to quality and internationalization by increasing the openness of the Italian higher education system. Nationally funded scholarships are therefore a remarkable opportunity for everyone who wishes to be fully engaged in research training.

After investigations into motivations, expectations and internationalisation processes at a national scale, Saleh and Alberti in their works focus on specific PhD programmes as single case studies, respectively at Iuav, Venice and Sapienza, Rome. Saleh in “The multidisciplinary PhD course: A history and a way forward” discusses the changes occurred in the PhD programme in Regional Planning and Public Policies at Iuav by focusing on three specific years: PhDs who started in 2008, 2009 and 2010. The changes occurred in the PhD scientific board and coordinator in 2010, and consequently a new approach, produced a transition phase, which proved to be harder to manage than expected. The author investigated different aspects with candidates among which: professional training including seminars; opportunities for international networking; participation in seminars and conferences; literature and research methodology. Even though there was little participation to the survey (5 respondents out of 22 PhDs), the author

was able to identify needs and suggestions that regarded for example: closer mentoring and collaboration with supervisors; specific seminars dedicated to research methodology and writing of scientific papers; setting of deadlines and requirements for publications of peer reviewed articles; organization of seminars by candidates themselves; guidance for future job opportunities. Such needs and suggestions, however, can be assumed as shared by PhDs candidates in general, not only the ones in Venice. Saleh therefore raises important questions as to the necessity to closely consider the needs and challenges faced by PhD candidates while designing research and training activities as parts of a PhD programme.

Alberti, in “The hard work of preserving the value of doctoral education. The case of the Ph.D. in Regional and Urban Planning of Rome”, first discusses the evolution and changes in PhD education in Italy and the planning discipline in Europe as a result of European processes (e.g. the Bologna process and a “European” debate on spatial planning) to then move on to the definition of what she terms the “added value” of doctoral education. By defining the added value of doctoral education as more than just disciplinary training and acquisition of specific and high-level knowledge, the author focuses on the attitude and ability to pose questions, explore new issues, and ultimately produce new knowledge and insights. On the basis of such a background, Alberti investigates, through literature review and interviews, the changes that have happened in the last 15 years in the PhD in Regional and Urban Planning at Sapienza, Rome, so as to determine their impact on the PhD programme itself. The description of top-down, nationally determined and imposed institutional reforms as well as changes in the PhD programme training and research activities highlight that the added value of the PhD in planning might run the risk of being lost.

## REFERENCES

- ADI (2015) Valorizzare il dottorato nelle imprese, nella scuola e nelle PA. Associazione Dottorandi e dottori di ricerca Italiani, ADI. Available at: <http://www.scuola24.ilsole24ore.com/art/universita-e-ricerca/2015-12-02/dalle-imprese-pa-fino-scuola-dottori-ricerca-vanno-valorizzati-così-201207.php?uuiid=ACjCfxlB>. Accessed on December 7, 2015.
- ALESSANDRINI, G. (2014) Strategie di stage e di placement nel processo formativo del PhD. *Società Italiana di Pedagogia*, pp. 79-100. Available at: <http://www.siped.it/12014-strategie-stage-placement-nel-processo-formativo-phd/>. Accessed on September 14, 2015.
- ALMALAUREA (2015) Indagine Almalaurea 2015 sui dottori di ricerca. Tra performance di studio e mercato del lavoro. Available at: [https://www.almalaurea.it/sites/almalaurea.it/files/comunicati/2015/cs\\_almalaurea\\_dottori-di-ricerca\\_ottobre2015.pdf](https://www.almalaurea.it/sites/almalaurea.it/files/comunicati/2015/cs_almalaurea_dottori-di-ricerca_ottobre2015.pdf). Accessed on September 10, 2015.
- ANVUR, (2014.) La valutazione dei corsi di dottorato. Agenzia Nazionale per la Valutazione dell'Università e della Ricerca.
- ARGENTIN, G., BALLARINO, G. & COLOMBO, S. (2014) Investire in formazione dopo la laurea: il dottorato di ricerca in Italia. Almalaurea Working Paper n. 60, Febbraio 2014, pp. 1-13.
- BARTOLONI, M. (2015) Dalle imprese alla Pa fino alla scuola: i dottori di ricerca vanno valorizzati così. *Il Sole 24 Ore*.

Available at:  
<http://www.scuola24.ilsole24ore.com/art/universita-e-ricerca/2015-12-02/dalle-impres-pa-fino-scuola-dottori-ricerca-vanno-valorizzati-così-201207.php?uuiid=ACjCfxlB>. Accessed on December 7, 2015.

FICCO, S. (2012) *Il Dottorato nel Processo di Bologna. Le antinomie di un'Università che cambia: visioni, politiche, strategie. Un'analisi comparative del Dottorato di ricerca in Spagna, Italia, Danimarca e Regno Unito*. Tesi di Dottorato. Università degli Studi di Roma "Tor Vergata" and Universidad de Granada.

GARDNER, S. (2008) "What's too much and what's too little?": The Process of Becoming an Independent Researcher in Doctoral Education. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79(3), pp. 326-350. Doi: 10.1353/jhe.0.0007.

GOLDSTEIN, H. A. (2012). The Quality of Planning Scholarship and Doctoral Education. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 32(4), pp. 493-496. Doi: 10.1177/0739456X12449484.

ISTAT (2015) L'inserimento professionale dei dottori di ricerca. Anno 2014. Istat, Statistiche, report. Available at: <http://www.istat.it/it/archivio/145861>. Accessed on September 13, 2015.

MIUR (2015a) Ufficio di Statistica MIUR. Available at: <http://statistica.miur.it/scripts/personalediruolo/vdocenti0.asp> and <http://statistica.miur.it/scripts/postlaurea/vdottori1.asp>. Accessed on October 10, 2015.

MIUR (2015b) Bandi per ricercatori a tempo determinato. [http://bandi.miur.it/jobs.php/public/cercaJobs?jv\\_comp\\_status\\_id=\\* &bb\\_type\\_code=%25&idsettore=08%2FF1&idqualifica=22](http://bandi.miur.it/jobs.php/public/cercaJobs?jv_comp_status_id=* &bb_type_code=%25&idsettore=08%2FF1&idqualifica=22)



&azione=cerca&x=159&y=28. Accessed on October 10, 2015  
OECD (2013) Education at a Glance 2013: OECD Indicators, OECD  
Publishing.

SCHILLEECKX, M., MARICQUE, B., & LEWIS, C. (2013).  
The missing piece to changing the university culture. *Nature  
biotechnology*, 31(10), pp. 938-941. Doi: 10.1038/nbt.2706.

THE ECONOMIST (2010) The disposable academic. Why doing a  
PhD is often a waste of time. Dec. 16, 2010. Available at:  
<http://www.economist.com/node/17723223>. Accessed on 14  
September, 2015.

VOLTATTORNI, C. (2014) Ricercatori italiani come panda. In dieci  
anni «scomparsi» 9 su 10. Available at:  
[http://www.corriere.it/scuola/universita/14\\_dicembre\\_04/ricerca  
tori-italiani-come-panda-ec56d23a-7bcb-11e4-b47e-  
625f49797245.shtml](http://www.corriere.it/scuola/universita/14_dicembre_04/ricerca-tori-italiani-come-panda-ec56d23a-7bcb-11e4-b47e-625f49797245.shtml). Accessed on October 30, 2015.