



# Academic Remunerations and Careers in Europe: Challenges in Attracting Talent

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## Abstract

In 2022, the Conference of Italian University Rectors commissioned a study on the attractiveness of European university systems. The main concern was the lack of competitiveness in terms of academic remuneration in Italy. Four European countries were selected for a comparative analysis: France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom. Findings revealed that remuneration schemes and levels diverge significantly, and Italy lags far behind the other nations.

Remuneration is the primary means of attraction and retention of talent in academia. However, globally, academic salaries can hardly compete with those in the private sector and have not kept up with inflation. European salaries do not seem to compete well with salaries in the United States of America. An average full professor in the United States makes USD 140,400 a year—1.3 times more than the salary of a full professor in the United Kingdom, which has the highest remuneration level in Europe.

Therefore, an in-depth analysis in the European context is necessary. Our study aimed to compare academic remuneration schemes in four European countries, namely France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom. Germany and the United Kingdom offer higher salaries, both at entry level and for those at the top of their careers, which is a result of a negotiation process that is allowed only in these two countries. Italy is the only nation in our study where salaries are fixed; with no variable components and no possibility of negotiation, the country's academia is at a great disadvantage.

## Academic Remuneration in Europe

We focused on net salaries; however, our calculations were fairly challenging. We combined the official national data from each country's ministry of finance with the data from national tax and welfare systems, each with its own rules and specificities. Country singularities were verified through interviews with local reviewers.

Three key points emerged from our analysis. First, there is a large gap in terms of remuneration levels between France and Italy on the one hand, and Germany and the United Kingdom on the other. For example, a full professor in Italy earns around USD 62,420, which is 45 percent and 60 percent less than what their German and British colleagues earn respectively. Unsatisfactory conditions may have led academics away, thereby perpetuating the well-known brain drain phenomenon in Italy. Academic salaries in Italy are not competitive at the national level either. A useful comparative example is the salary at the Bank of Italy, one of the country's most prestigious institutions: it is on average 1.2 times higher than at universities. This makes the academic profession unattractive compared to other sectors in the eyes of young people.

If the salary level is unsatisfactory, one may argue that at least career progression is fast, and considerable salary increases are possible at higher career stages. This leads to the second key point: remuneration at different career stages does not change substantially. This is especially true for France and Italy, where professors earn only 24 percent more than associate professors. However, there is a vast difference between the two countries. In Italy, the average age of an associate professor is 52 years (the highest in Europe), whereas in France it is 34 years. This extremely young age is an outcome of a specific career track that also includes a position that can be seen as an intermediary between that of an assistant and an associate professor. Such a career track in France has considerable benefits in terms of system sustainability and expected future performance.

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The third and final driver is the presence of a variable component in the remuneration setting. It can be of three types: geographical, welfare-based, or performance-based. It may be possible to adjust salaries according to average living costs in the areas where people live and/or according to the needs, scientific productivity, and excellence, measured through publications in prestigious academic journals. For example, while a British university can negotiate better salaries to convince young engineers to opt for an academic career, a German university can offer salaries that take into account the cost of living, and a French university can adjust salaries depending on employees' family burdens. None of these opportunities are available at Italian universities.

### Concluding Remarks

The relevance of this study lies in identifying the economic aspects of a country's attractiveness, which play a crucial role. However, economic factors alone are insufficient to make a country appealing. Several other aspects, such as the quality of life, work-life balance, academic autonomy, and university prestige, contribute to attracting talented academics. Additionally, inadequate remuneration can deter the best and the brightest from pursuing careers in academia and discourage them from engaging with certain national higher education systems.

Among the countries examined in this study, the Italian university system stands out as the only one without an explicit provision for a "mobility package" aimed at attracting young talent from other European countries. In an era when talent, particularly talent seeking international opportunities, is considered a scarce resource and universities are seen as drivers of development and potential solutions to the limited growth of Western economies, it becomes evident that some European systems are better positioned to enhance their attractiveness. However, there may be a glimmer of hope as the Italian government currently has the opportunity to make improvements through funds from the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, although this will require time and additional resources.

The attractiveness of academia is an exhaustible topic. It would be interesting to study other countries within and outside Europe to gain insight into their remuneration schemes. Policymakers should be aware of the factors that affect academics' career decisions to create attractive options for them. ▲

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