Consequences of Nepotism
Struggle for Employment: Anti-Nepotism Laws in the Academy

Anti-Nepotism laws were difficult for many female academics, but they are not baseless. The following is a 2011 newspaper article about universities in Italy, which have no anti-nepotism policies.

Gifted flee to foreign fields as Italy is strangled by blood ties

The University of Bologna is one of the world's oldest higher education institutions and the best in Italy. Yet despite such distinction, it still languishes outside the top 200 of the Times Higher Education World University Rankings.

One reason for the poor performance of Italian institutions in world league tables may be nepotism, it has been suggested.

The practice has been blamed for a "brain drain" that has seen many of the country's best researchers move to the US or the UK after failing to progress at home because of their lack of connections.

This is an open secret in Italy. The news magazine l'Espresso and newspaper La Repubblica have reported that in Rome's La Sapienza University, a third of teaching staff are closely related. Questions were raised after the wife, son and daughter of Luigi Frati, La Sapienza's chancellor, were hired by its medical faculty.

At the University of Bari in the southern region of Puglia, Lanfranco Massari, a professor of economics, has three sons and five grandchildren who are colleagues in the same department. And at the University of Palermo, Angelo Milone, a professor in the architectural faculty, works alongside his brother, son and daughter.

Italy's universities are 10 times more likely than other places of work to employ two or more members of the same family, according to The Independent newspaper.

Of course, not all of this can be attributed to nepotism. But the predominance of family connections in Italy's academic institutions is revealed by a computer analysis by a researcher at the University of Chicago.

Stefano Allesina, assistant professor in the department of ecology and evolution's Computation Institute, compared the frequency of last names among lecturers in a number of fields, including medicine, engineering and law.

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His findings were reported in a recent paper, "Measuring Nepotism through Shared Last Names: The Case of Italian Academia", published in the online journal *PLoS ONE*.

**What's in a name?**

Professor Allesina examined a public database created by the Italian Ministry of Education, Universities and Research that included the first and last name as well as other information on more than 61,000 tenured teachers from 94 institutions, along with their department and subdiscipline.

He ran a simple analysis of last-name frequency in the database, testing whether certain names appeared more often than expected in a given field. He also programmed a computer to test 1 million random samples from the pool.

Of the 10,783 faculty members working in medicine, 7,471 distinct last names were found. But in the random test from the full pool, the paper states that Professor Allesina never observed "a lower number of distinct names out of the million drawings: the paucity of names is extremely unlikely to be observed at random, indicating a very high likelihood of nepotistic practices".

"It's very basic; anybody with a laptop can do this analysis," Professor Allesina said. "I found that in many disciplines there are [far] fewer names than you would expect to find at random, indicating a very...high probability of nepotistic hires."

He ran the analysis for 28 academic fields and found the highest rates of suggested nepotism were in industrial engineering, law, medicine, geography and pedagogy.

Fields with the distribution of names closest to random - and thus with the lowest likelihood of nepotism - were linguistics, demography and psychology.

Professor Allesina also looked at the geographic distribution of nepotism across Italy. His analysis unearthed a stark north-to-south gradient, with the probability of nepotism increasing as one moved south, peaking in Sicily.

This mirrors a north-south divide in social indicators including infant mortality, organised crime and suicide rates.

"For an Italian, this is not that surprising," he said. "It is a narrative of two separate countries, where in the public sector we have more problems in the south."

He said that nepotism was a major factor in the "enormous" brain drain suffered by Italy. His report adds that the practice is seen in the country "as a cancer that has metastasized, invading many segments of society".