SCUOLA NORMALE SUPERIORE

cosmos centre on social movement studies

The long bottleneck

Academic freedom and precarity in the Italian university

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Precarity and university

- A global phenomenon, with strong cross-national heterogeneity
- Globally linked to
  - the neoliberal transformation of universities
  - the transition from structural public funding to a grant- and project-based mechanism
  - the logic of "publish or perish" competition
- It manifests itself in the duration, remuneration, protections, and greater subordination that characterise some employment contracts
- It takes on different characteristics depending on the labour market
- Particularly pronounced in Italy, especially post-2008.

The professors
are the enemy.

Precarity and academic freedom

- Precarity as a tool to manage austerity within universities

- Precarity as a significant threat to academic freedom
  - Lower degree of autonomy
  - Difficulties in developing research trajectories
  - Stronger dependence on hierarchically higher figures
  - Stronger dependence on grants
  - Stronger dependence on academic market trends
  - Lower capacity to resist political pressure

The Italian university system

- 1% of GDP dedicated to universities (the OECD average is 1.5%)
- 21 students/academic staff (the OECD average is 15)
- The oldest academic staff in the OECD: 56% are over 50
- Only 38% of academic staff are women (the OECD average is 45%)

- An undermanned, underfunded, old and male university system

Servizio | Universita

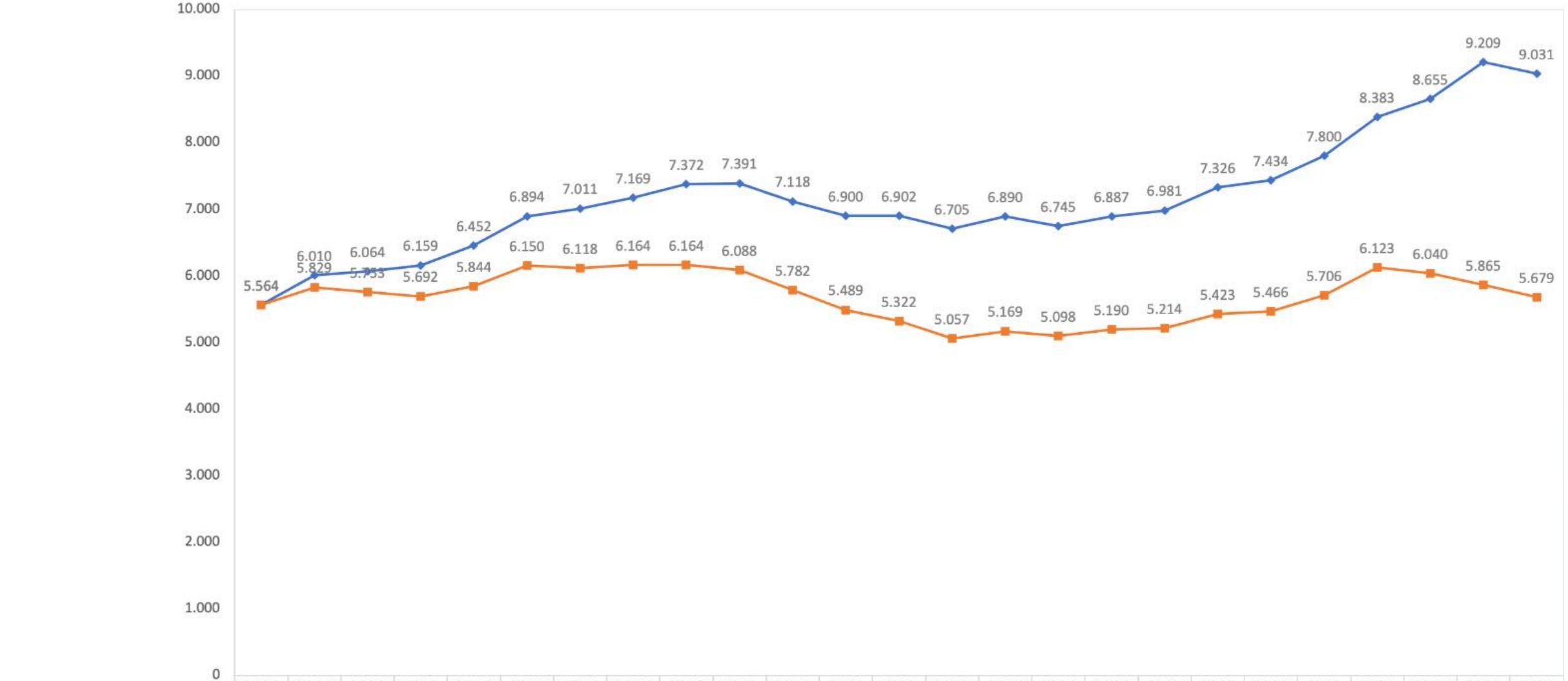
Bandi Erc, Italia seconda per cervelli premiati ma la fuga continua: su 55 solo 30 restano

di Eu.B.

5 settembre 2025

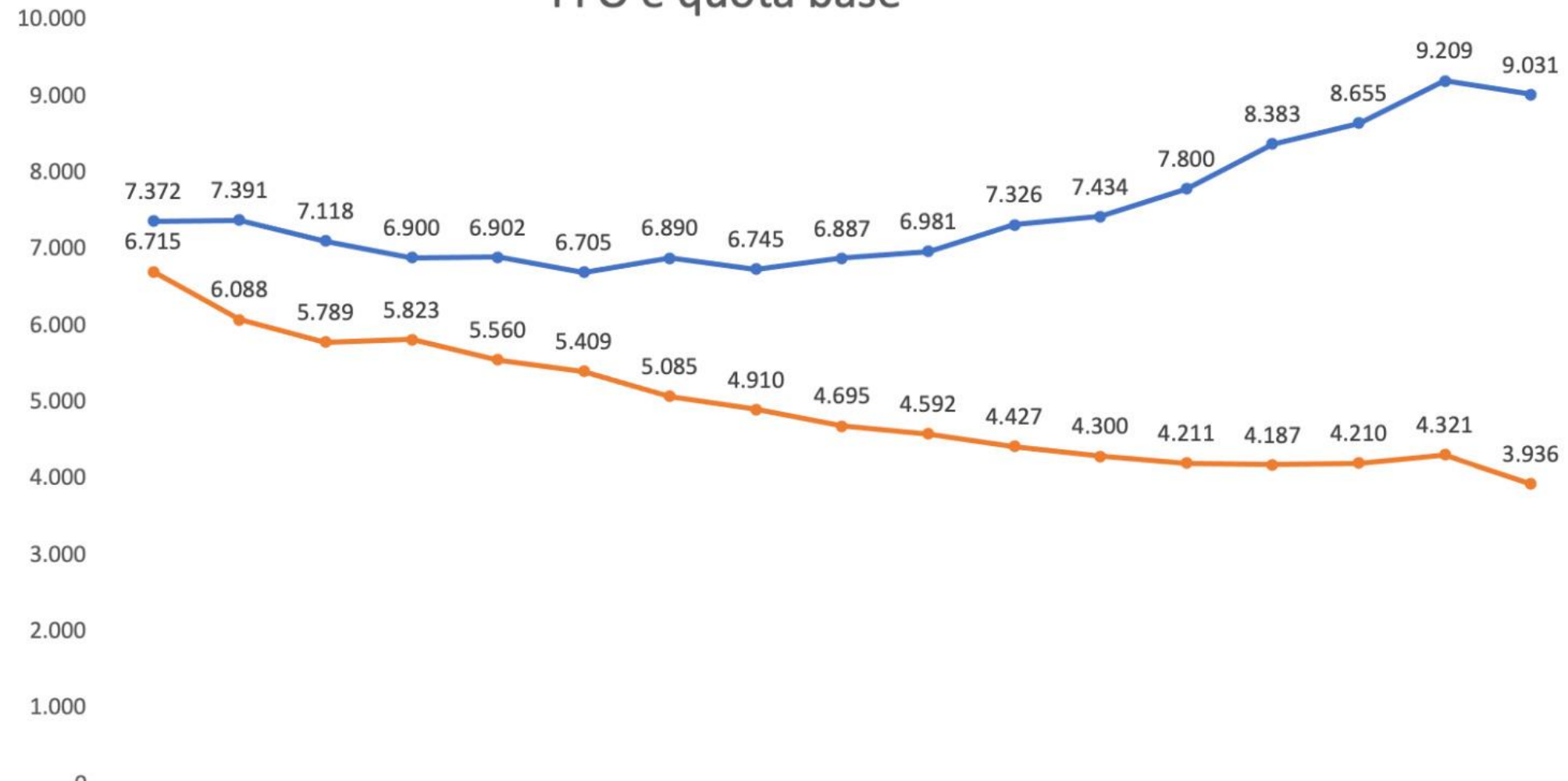
How did we get here?

FONDO FUNZIONAMENTO ORDINARIO



	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
valore assoluto	5.564	6.010	6.064	6.159	6.452	6.894	7.011	7.169	7.372	7.391	7.118	6.900	6.902	6.705	6.890	6.745	6.887	6.981	7.326	7.434	7.800	8.383	8.655	9.209	9.031
valore attualizzato al 2000	5.564	5.829	5.753	5.692	5.844	6.150	6.118	6.164	6.164	6.088	5.782	5.489	5.322	5.057	5.169	5.098	5.190	5.214	5.423	5.466	5.706	6.123	6.040	5.865	5.679

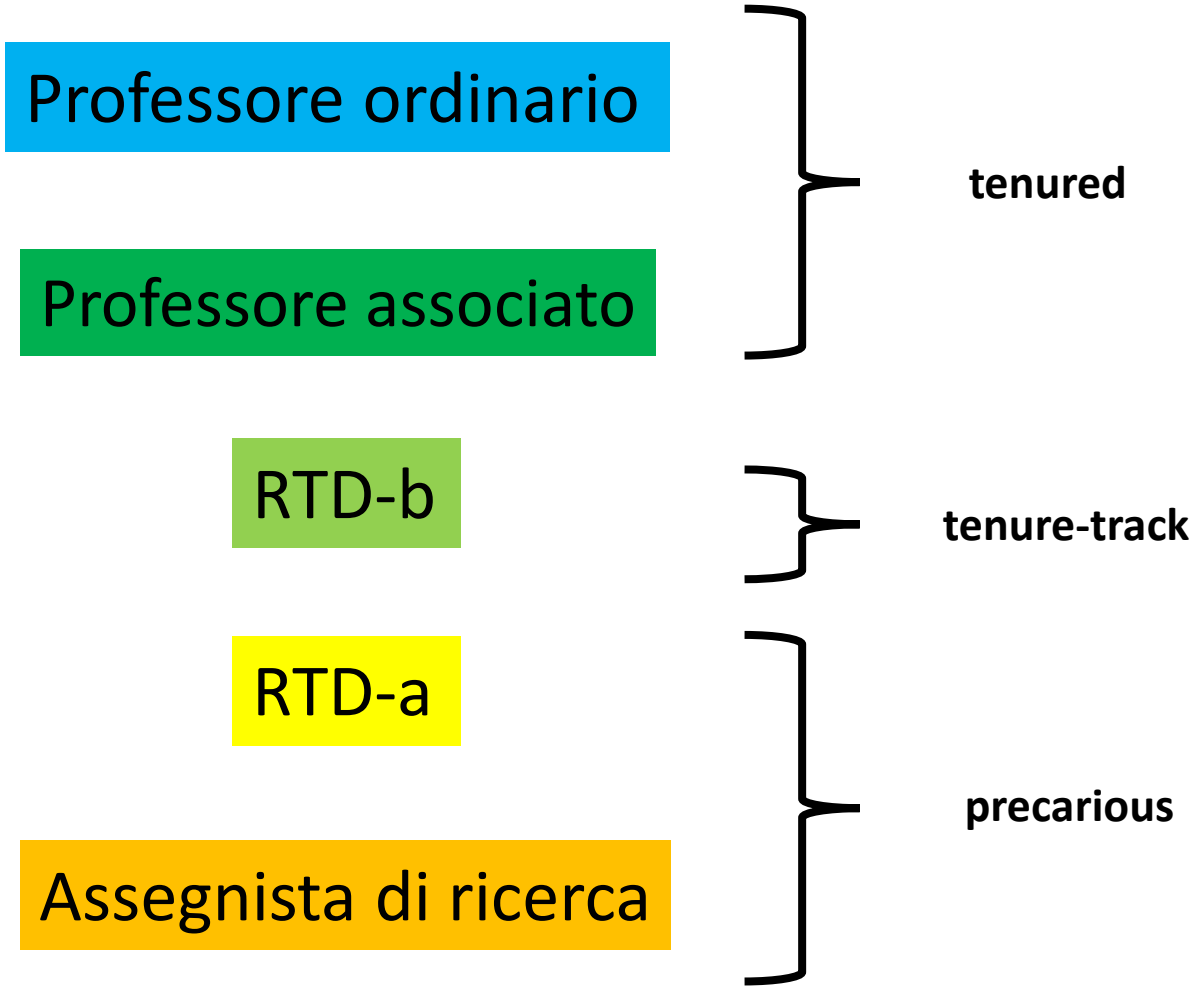
FFO e quota base

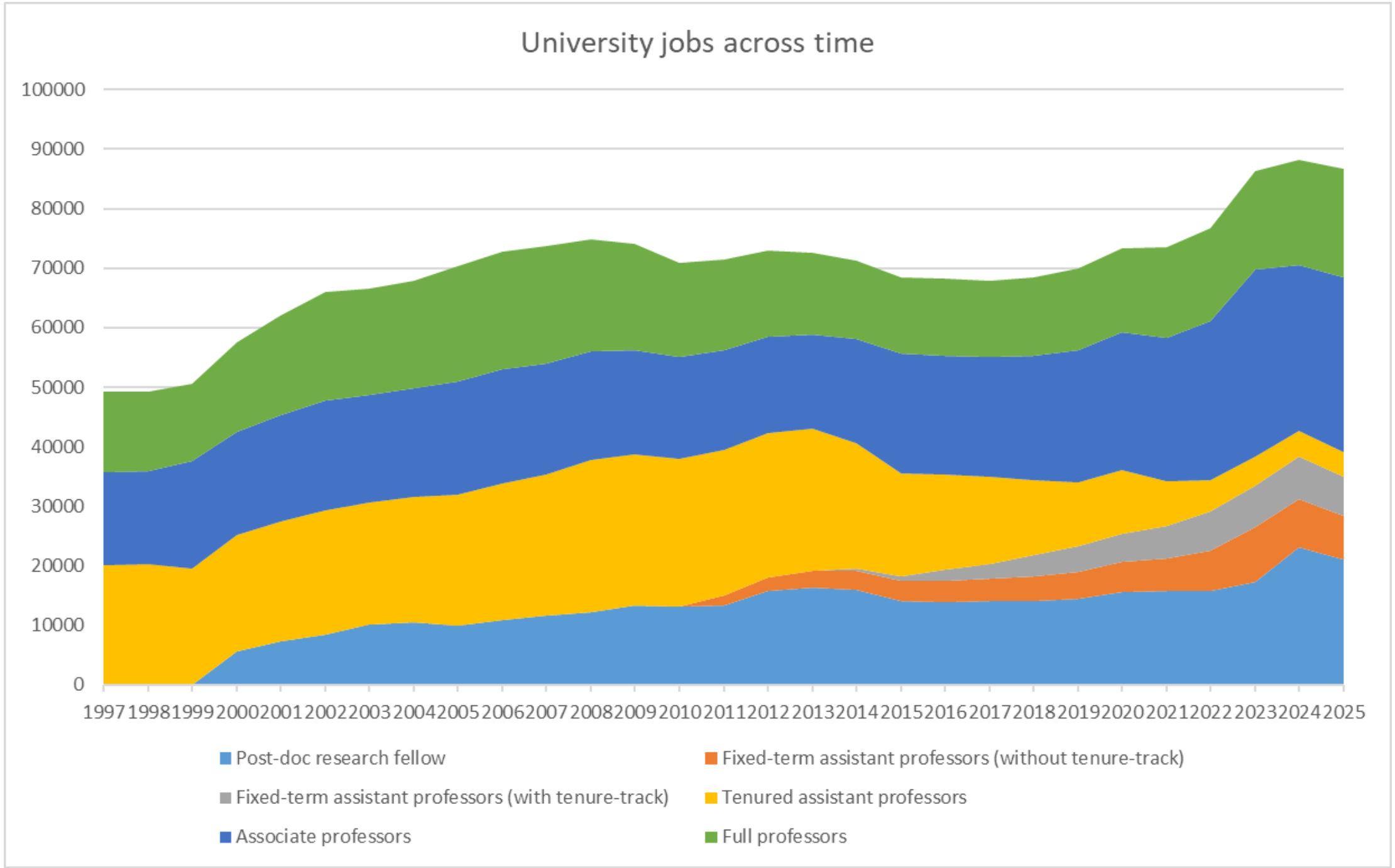


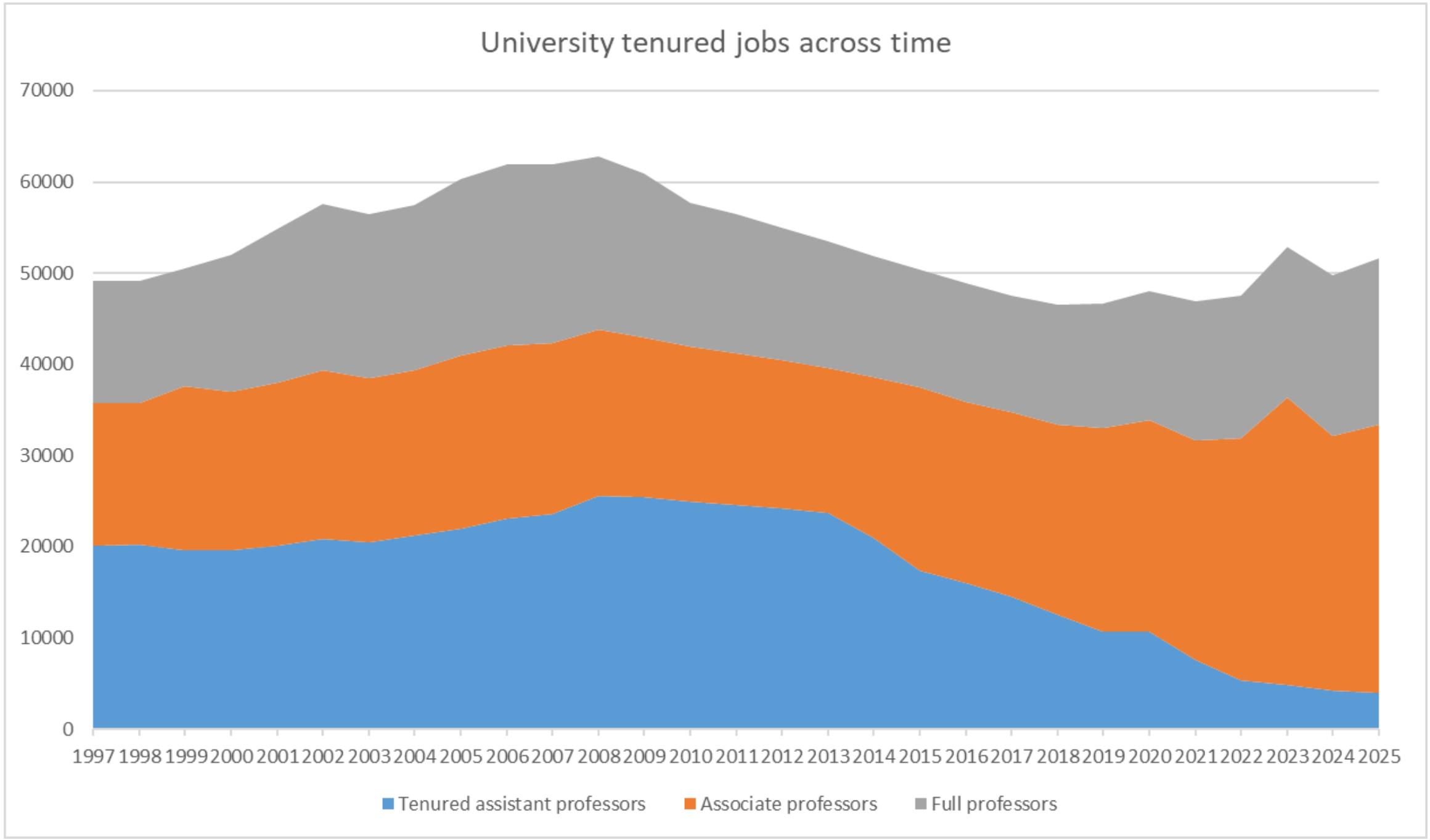
	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
FFO totale	7.372	7.391	7.118	6.900	6.902	6.705	6.890	6.745	6.887	6.981	7.326	7.434	7.800	8.383	8.655	9.209	9.031
Quota base	6.715	6.088	5.789	5.823	5.560	5.409	5.085	4.910	4.695	4.592	4.427	4.300	4.211	4.187	4.210	4.321	3.936

FFO totale Quota base

Italian university 2010-2022

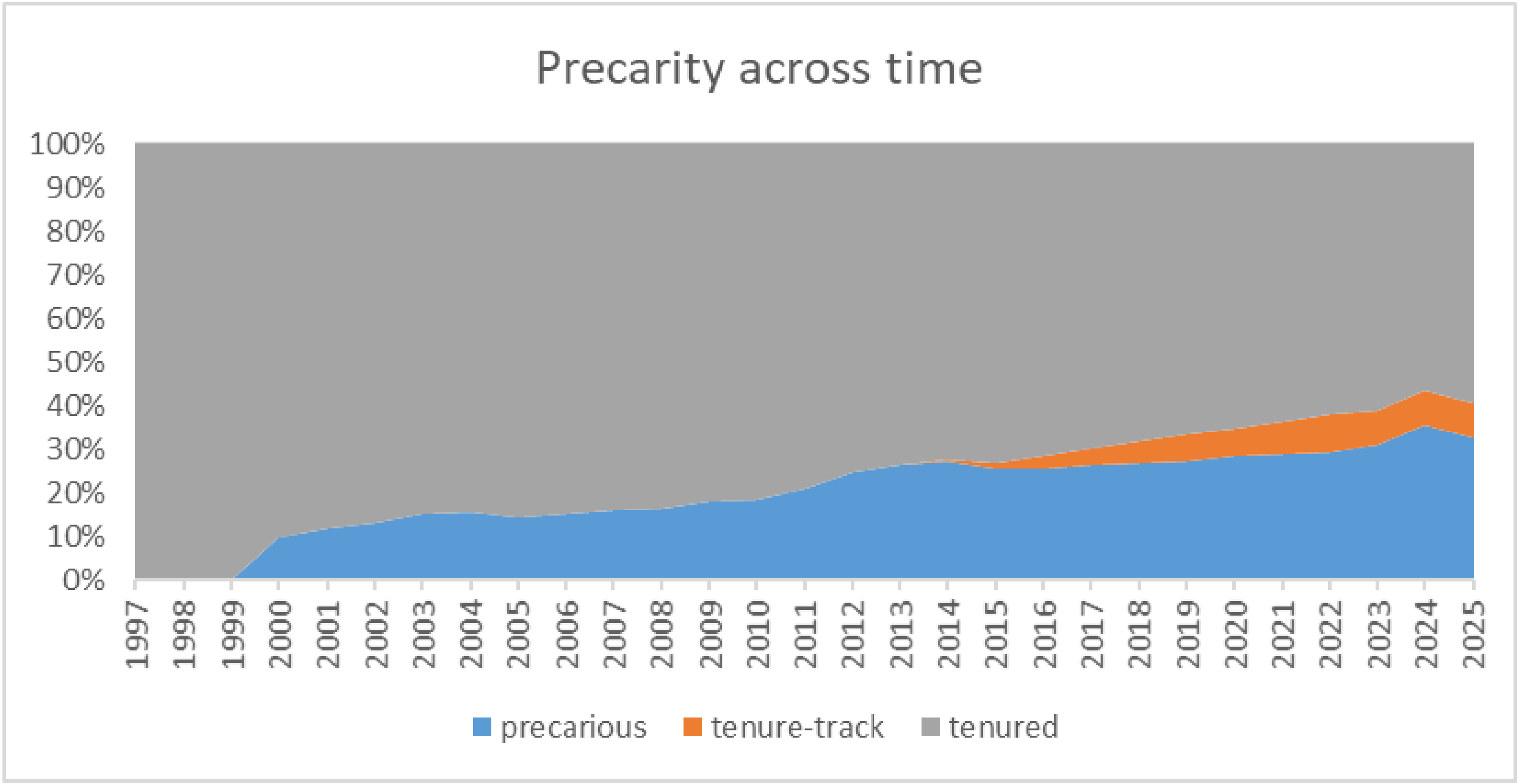



University jobs across time
100000
90000
80000
70000
60000
50000
40000
30000
20000
10000
0
1997 1998 1999 2000 2001 2002 2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016 2017 2018 2019 2020 2021 2022 2023 2024 2025
Post-doc research fellow
Fixed-term assistant professors (without tenure-track)
Fixed-term assistant professors (with tenure-track)
Tenured assistant professors
Associate professors
Full professors


University tenured jobs across time
70000
60000
50000
40000
30000
20000
10000
0
1997 1998 1999 2000 2001 2002 2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016 2017 2018 2019 2020 2021 2022 2023 2024 2025
Tenured assistant professors
Associate professors
Full professors

	PO	PA	RU	RTDb-RTT	RTDa	Assegnisti
2000	15026	17259	19668			5549
2001	16891	17875	20090			7252
2002	18130	18503	20900			8416
2003	17957	18097	20426			10102
2004	18070	18103	21229			10391
2005	19274	18967	22010			10005
2006	19843	19086	23045			10831
2007	19623	18735	23571			11689
2008	18929	18256	25583			12090
2009	17880	17567	25435			13226
2010	15854	16955	24939			13109
2011	15242	16611	24596	7	1540	13370
2012	14522	16143	24264	20	2247	15747
2013	13890	15810	23746	116	2809	16280
2014	13263	17541	21035	300	3266	15909
2015	12878	20043	17433	704	3411	14042
2016	12973	19923	15982	1891	3466	13946
2017	12890	20144	14555	2422	3782	14124
2018	13185	20784	12601	3643	4049	14105
2019	13685	22283	10698	4276	4484	14459
2020	14177	23147	10698	4616	5192	15489
2021	15150	24155	7554	5343	5590	15701
2022	15725	26565	5328	6621	6878	14948
2023	16571	31485	4844	6952	9273	17208
2024	17696	27848	4272	7140	8208	23050
2025	18215	29339	4044	6694	7355	20962

	Di ruolo	Tenure-track	Precari	Di ruolo (%)	Tenure-track (%)	Precari (%)
2000	51953		5549	90,35%		9,65%
2001	54856		7252	88,32%		11,68%
2002	57533		8416	87,24%		12,76%
2003	56480		10102	84,83%		15,17%
2004	57402		10391	84,67%		15,33%
2005	60251		10005	85,76%		14,24%
2006	61974		10831	85,12%		14,88%
2007	61929		11689	84,12%		15,88%
2008	62768		12090	83,85%		16,15%
2009	60882		13226	82,15%		17,85%
2010	57748		13109	81,50%		18,50%
2011	56449	7	14917	79,10%	0,01%	20,89%
2012	54929	20	18014	75,30%	0,03%	24,67%
2013	53446	116	19205	73,57%	0,16%	26,27%
2014	51839	300	19475	72,69%	0,42%	26,89%
2015	50354	704	18157	73,50%	1,03%	25,47%
2016	48878	1891	19303	71,69%	2,77%	25,54%
2017	47589	2422	20328	70,07%	3,57%	26,36%
2018	46570	3643	21797	68,12%	5,33%	26,55%
2019	46666	4276	23219	66,78%	6,12%	27,11%
2020	48022	4616	25297	65,50%	6,30%	28,21%
2021	46859	5343	26634	63,76%	7,27%	28,97%
2022	47618	6621	28447	62,60%	8,61%	28,69%
2023	52900	6952	33433	61,27%	8,05%	30,67%
2024	49816	7140	38398	56,47%	8,09%	35,43%
2025	51598	6694	35011	59,58%	7,73%	32,70%


Precarity across time
100%
90%
80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
1997
1998
1999
2000
2001
2002
2003
2004
2005
2006
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2009
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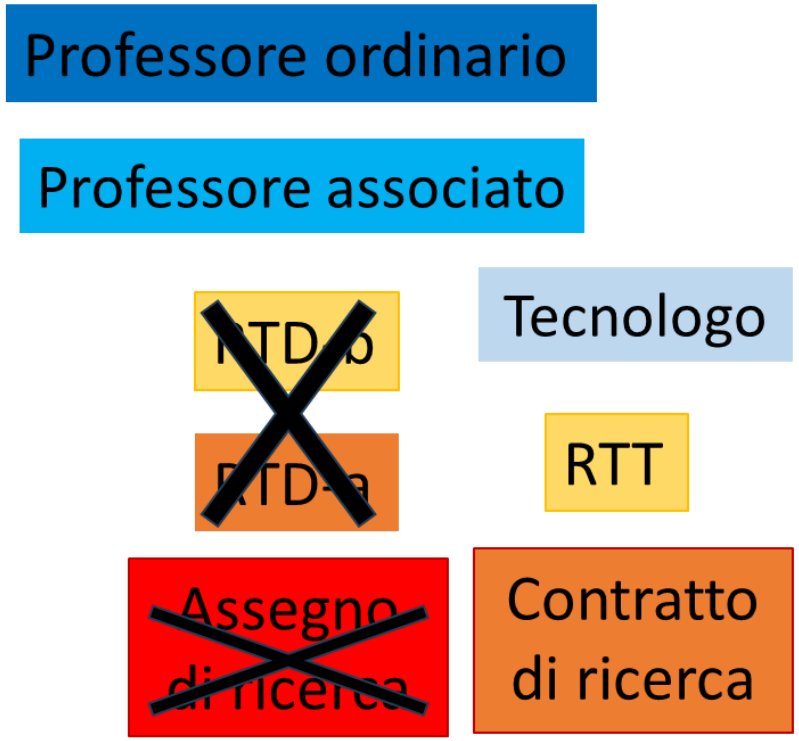
2013
2014
2015
2016
2017
2018
2019
2020
2021
2022
2023
2024
2025
precarious
tenure-track
tenured

2017	number	F %
PO	12856	23,00%
PA	20119	37,5%
RU	14610	48,3%
TOTALE DI RUOLO	37,1%	
RTDb	2435	41%
RTDa	3692	43,3%
Assegnisti	14124	50,3%
Borsisti	8961	54%
Docenti a contratto	26869	38,4%
Co.co.co.	8095	49,6%
Altri	1504	49,47%
TOTAL PRECARI	62,9%	

- After the Gelmini laws, 10 years of campaigning and protesting
  - Too few jobs
  - Too long precarity

- Demands:
  - Tenure for precarious researchers caught in the post-Gelmini years
  - National plans for regular and cyclical recruitment
  - Only one type of fixed-term contract, with rights and decent wage
  - Increasing funding to the university

The reform of 2022



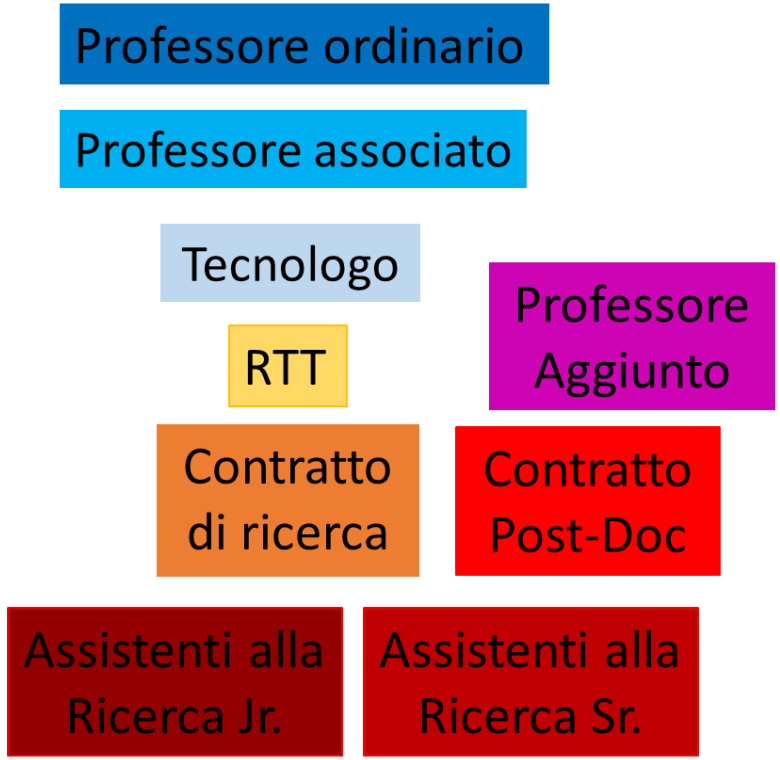
PRESIDENZA DELLA REPUBBLICA ITALIANA

The Meloni government

- October 2022, new government: postponement of the abolition of the research fellowship until the end of 2023. Then, new postponements until the end of 2024.
- 2022-2024: a series of special programmes, funded by the previous government under the NRRP, dramatically increases the number of RTDa and research fellows.

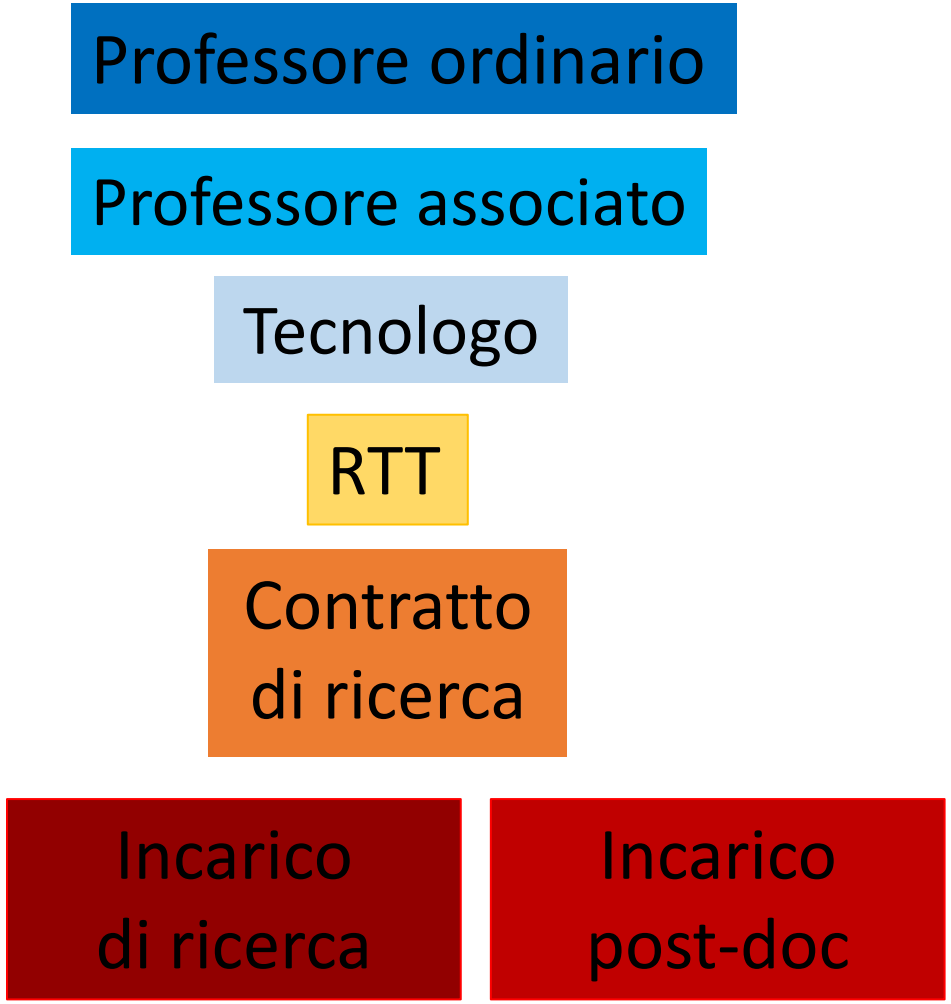
- “Why don’t we bring the *assegno* back?”

Ddl 1240


Professore ordinario
Professore associato
Tecnologo
RTT
Professore Aggiunto
Contratto di ricerca
Contratto Post-Doc
Assistenti alla Ricerca Jr.
Assistenti alla Ricerca Sr.

CONTRO TAGLI GUERRA
E PRECARIETÀ
SCIOPERA TUTTA L'UNIVERSITÀ

Galliani amendment



The general university reform

- Furthermore, the government is proposing a general reform of university, dealing with:
  - Internal governance of universities
  - Recruitment of professors and researchers
  - Juridical and economic status of university staff
  - Academic autonomy of universities
  - Student welfare
  - Etc.

- The reform is being written with the contribution of a working group

Conclusions

- Comeback of austerity => the government finds the tools to manage it in precarity and reform, just as it did between 2008 and 2010 with Laws 133 and 240.
- The gap between "winning" and "losing" universities is growing, even in employment contracts.
- The combination between reform and cuts narrows the bottleneck and results in the expulsion from the system of thousands of researchers

Conclusions

- Precarity as a bargaining chip between the government and universities to manage cuts
- In the background, two phenomena:
  - the global culture war on universities
  - a much more narrow-minded idea of the university, in which selection, evaluation, and certification play a much greater role than teaching, research, and the third mission, and in which much is delegated to for-profit e-learning entities=> creeping privatization
- Alternatives: what is the social role of universities?

Thanks!