

Welcome to INAF?

Beyond Research:

The Realities of Being a Foreign Scientist at INAF

To be presented at meeting *Oltre i Confini*, Bologna 5-7 May 2025

INAF - Istituto Nazionale di Astrofisica

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Initiative

January - February 2025: A Survey on Welcoming Practices for Foreign Personnel at INAF

The idea of this survey originated from the EU project “Euraxess - Researchers in motion” online seminar where one of the authors was participating. There are examples of European Research Institutions with good practices for welcoming foreigners, students, and staff personnel.

Puzzling about the conditions of foreign colleagues in INAF we started asking ourselves how we felt, and the obvious subsequent road to follow was to take a look at the whole national institute.

We conducted a search and identified 285 probable foreign candidates, then distributed our questionnaire via email. After more than one month of harvesting, we received (only) 73 answers. But in the (only) 73 forms, there was a manifold of situations, problematics, with pro and cons of being a foreigner in our institute. Here is an extended report which completes the presentation given at the workshop “Oltre i Confini” held in Bologna, May 5-7 2025.

Thanks to the entire community for helping to explore this aspect of the INAF universe.

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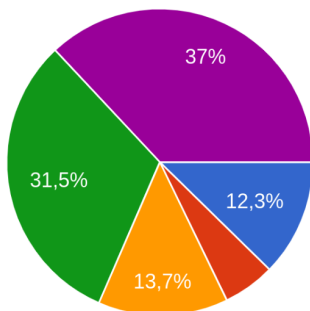
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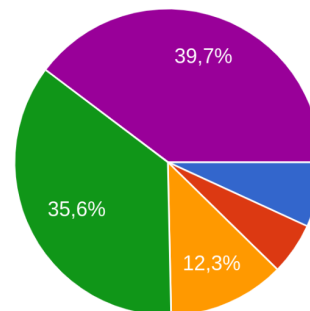
Practical and Administrative Aspects

A. Professional Context

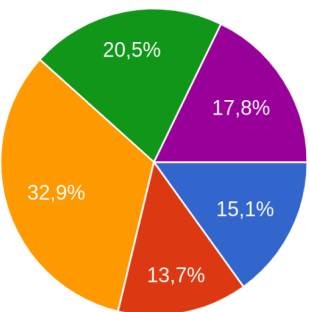
Assistance in participating in international collaborations
73 risposte



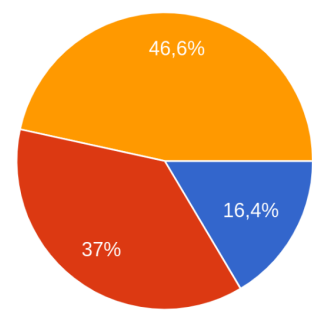
Opportunities for participation in international conferences
73 risposte



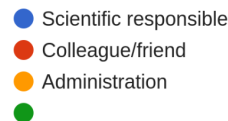
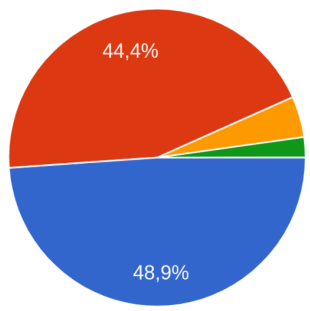
Career progression opportunities
73 risposte



Did you receive adequate information about career development paths?
73 risposte



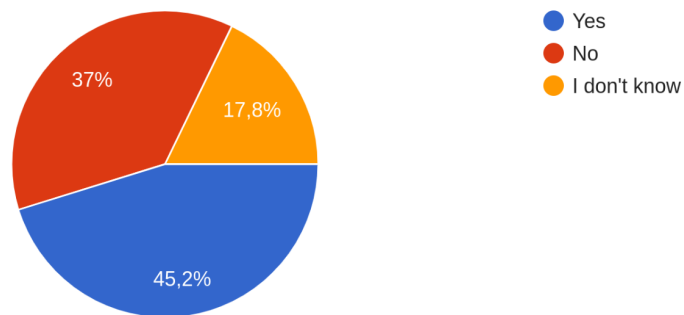
If "Yes" or "partially" who provided the information
45 risposte



(Rate from 1 = Very Difficult to 5 = Very Easy)

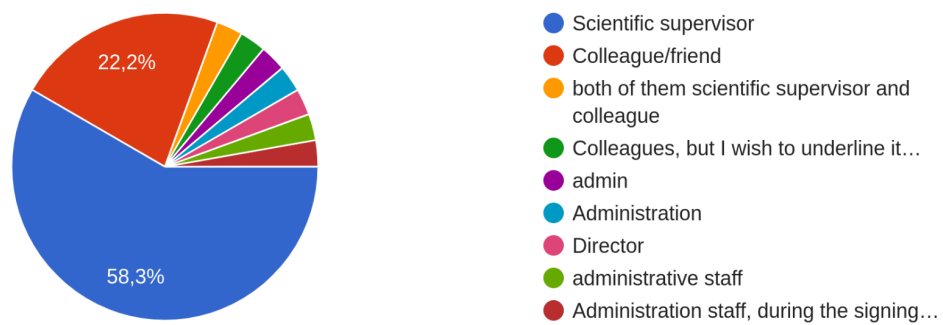
Did you receive adequate information regarding the type of contract (rights, responsibilities and benefits) you hold?

73 response



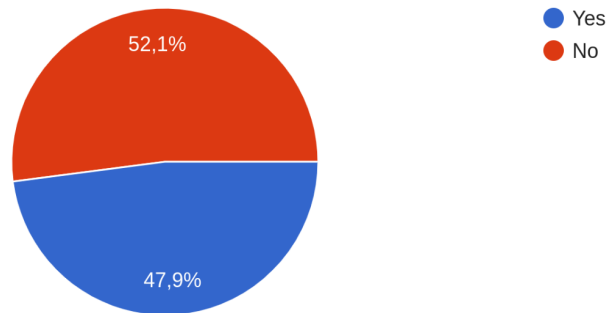
If "Yes" who provided the information?

36 response



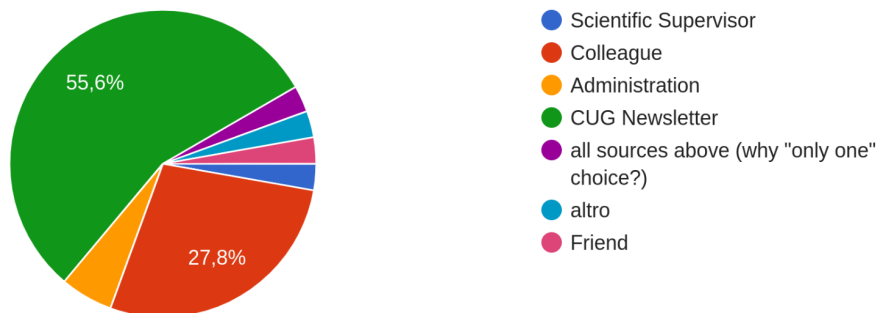
Are you aware of the CUG (Comitato Unico di Garanzia) of INAF?

73 risposte



If Yes how were you informed of its existence?

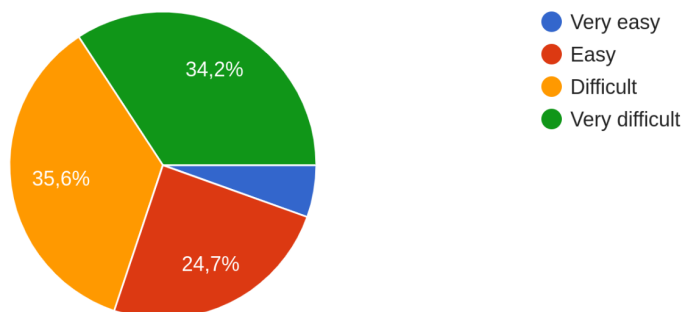
36 risposte



B. Housing and Transportation

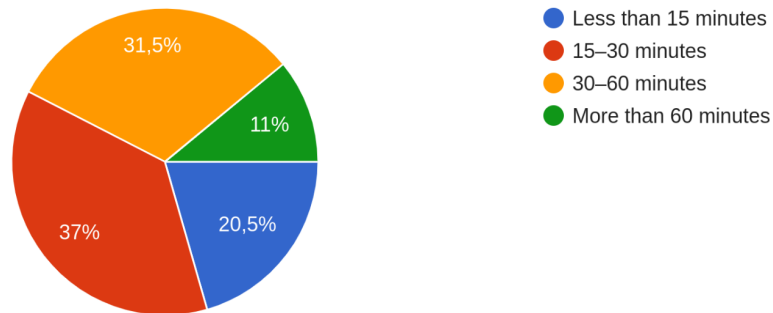
How easy was it to find housing after moving to Italy?

73 risposte



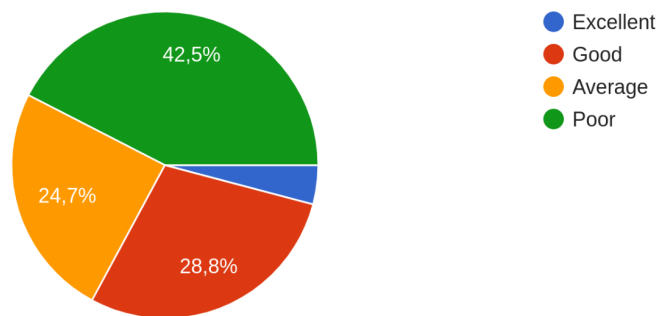
How much time does it typically take you to reach your workplace?

73 risposte



How would you rate the local public transportation options (e.g., buses, trains)?

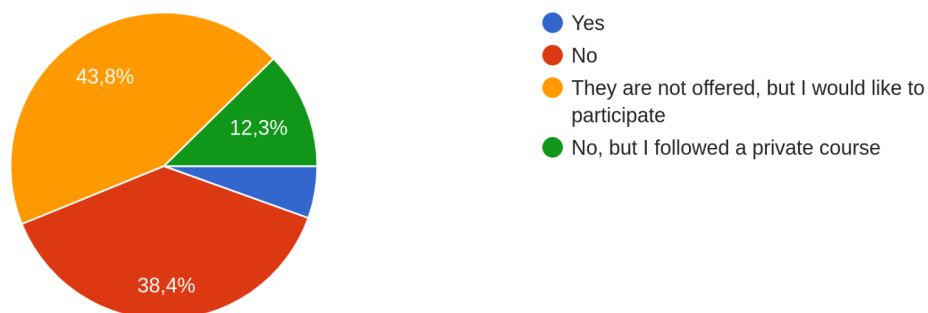
73 risposte



C. Events and Language Support

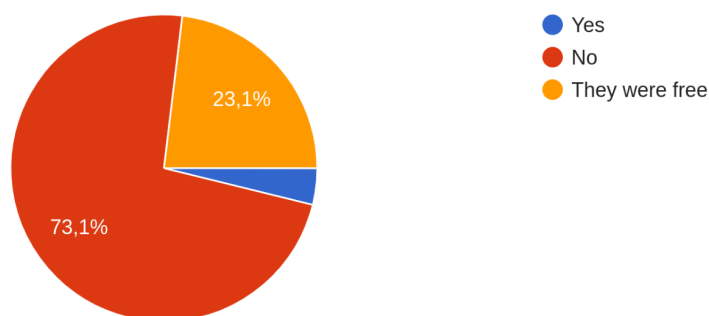
Have you participated in any Italian language courses offered by INAF?

73 risposte



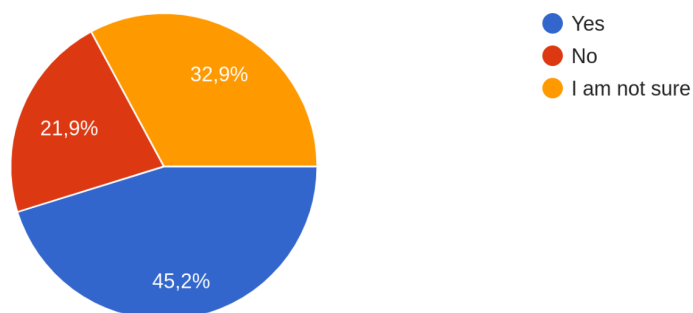
If "Yes" did INAF cover the cost of the course?

52 risposte



Are there enough opportunities to engage in community events (e.g., workshops, social gatherings)?

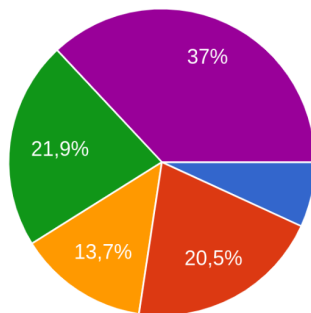
73 risposte



D. Paperwork and Permits

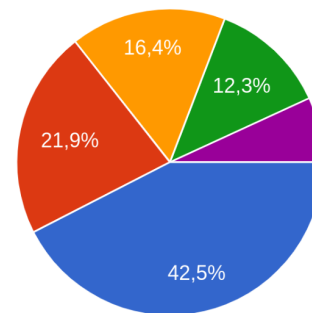
Having a tax code (codice fiscale) issued

73 risposte



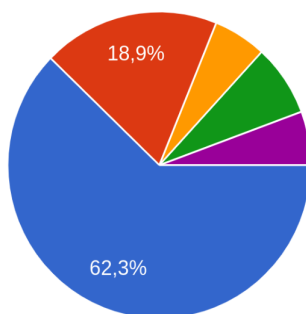
Insurance and health coverage

73 risposte



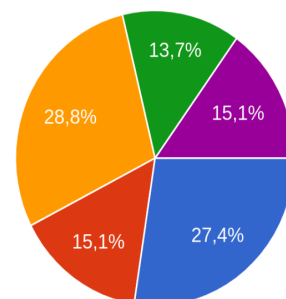
Residence and work permits (for non-EU personnel)

53 risposte



Bank account setup

73 risposte



How would you rate the ease of handling the following administrative tasks?

(Rate from 1 = Very Difficult to 5 = Very Easy)

Would you like to share any other comments, experiences, or suggestions?

Financial and Housing Challenges

- Salaries for PhD students and postdocs are insufficient, given the cost of living and rent in large cities.
- No support from INAF for housing.
- A lack of institutional agreements with local accommodations creates difficulties, especially for short visits.

Bureaucratic Hurdles

- The permesso di soggiorno (residence permit) process is lengthy, requiring yearly renewals and limiting international travel.
- Health insurance coverage is unclear and expensive (~€2000 per year), with long waiting periods for access.
- Opening a bank account as a non-EU researcher is difficult without a residency permit.
- The administrative process for joining INAF is time-consuming, and institutional guidance, in some cases, is lacking.

Lack of Institutional Support

- Foreign researchers rely on colleagues to guide essential tasks (bank accounts, phone SIMs, housing).
- INAF provides little structured help with grant applications, such as the Marie Curie EU postdoctoral fellowship.
- Short-term contracts add to job insecurity and administrative burdens.

Integration and Representation

- International researchers feel excluded from decision-making processes at INAF.
- The new "Foreign Office" might not be effective if it does not address local administrative problems.
- Many researchers did not receive the survey directly, indicating a lack of communication about international personnel.
- There is no formalized mentorship program to help new arrivals navigate the bureaucracy.

Proposed Solutions

- INAF should establish local administrative support at each institute.
- A structured onboarding document or webpage with essential information for foreigners should be created and updated annually.
- A central Foreign Office should not just focus on administration but also assist with project management for EU funding.
- INAF should advocate for multi-year residence permits to reduce bureaucracy.
- Health insurance processes should be streamlined, and immediate coverage options should be available for new arrivals.
- INAF leadership should acknowledge these issues and ensure foreign personnel are informed of any actions taken.

Final notes: While INAF is scientifically an excellent workplace, the long-term career path is unclear, and bureaucratic inefficiencies make life challenging for international researchers. Many appreciate this initiative and hope for concrete improvements, though expectations for immediate change remain low.

Positive Experiences and Practices at INAF

Supportive Work Environment:

- Many respondents praised the friendly and helpful colleagues and a generally relaxed and positive work atmosphere.
- Some researchers highlighted personal support from supervisors and young staff members, particularly in helping foreign postdocs navigate administrative processes.

Efforts Toward Inclusivity & Gender Equality:

- INAF was noted for gender equality, which some respondents considered better than many other European institutions.
- There were mentions of positive initiatives such as outreach events and events for women in science.

Administrative Assistance:

- Some experienced good administrative support, particularly with documentation, opening bank accounts, residence certificates, and health insurance.
- A few individuals were accompanied by administrative staff to complete bureaucratic procedures, which they found very helpful.



International Collaboration & Language Support:

- The presence of many international researchers was seen as a positive aspect.
- Some administrative documents and webpages are translated into English, but more effort is needed.
- English-speaking colleagues and professionals made it easier for non-Italian speakers to work at INAF.

Scientific Opportunities:

- Opportunities for young researchers to present their work were appreciated, with suggestions to expand such initiatives.
- The INAF grants for Ricerca Fondamentale were praised, though some suggested making them more accessible to non-permanent researchers.

Institutional Initiatives & Social Engagement:

- Meetings with directors were found to be helpful but should also be conducted in English.
- Social activities, such as Christmas parties and gender equality workshops, were appreciated.
- The CUG (Comitato Unico di Garanzia) activities and gender parity workshops were seen as valuable initiatives (however, ~50% of the participants didn't know CUG's existence and its role).

Health Insurance & Accommodation Support:

- Covering health insurance expenses was noted as a helpful practice (note: this is for non-EU citizens).
- The availability of guest rooms for visiting researchers was appreciated, though improvements in their quality were suggested.

Areas for Expansion & Improvement:

- Some individuals expressed disappointment over a lack of structured support for foreign researchers.
- Bureaucratic processes, particularly regarding visas and residence permits, remain significant hurdles.
- While individuals and specific administrative staff members were helpful, there was little institutionalized support.
- Some respondents felt that inclusivity efforts, such as multilingual meetings and translated documents, need improvement.

Final notes: Overall, while INAF has a welcoming scientific environment with friendly colleagues and some supportive initiatives, there is a strong need for better institutionalized assistance, particularly for foreign researchers navigating administrative hurdles..

Summary of Challenges Faced by Foreign Researchers at INAF

Implicit Bias & Exclusion

- The assumption is that foreigners don't understand things as Italians do.
- Exclusion from meetings and scientific activities due to language barriers.
- Some competitions are tailored for Italian candidates.

Language Barriers & Communication Issues

- Most emails and official communications are only in Italian.
- Many administrative staff and colleagues are unwilling to speak English.
- Some meetings on work policies and equity are conducted exclusively in Italian.
- Bureaucratic Complexity & Lack of Support
- Navigating Italian bureaucracy (permits, taxes, contracts) is difficult, with no clear guidance from INAF.
- Foreign researchers often rely on other foreigners for bureaucratic advice.
- Different INAF locations have inconsistent administrative procedures.

Health Insurance Issues

- Foreign postdocs (especially EU citizens under Italian-funded grants) must pay ~€2000/year for health insurance, unlike those with EU-funded grants.
- INAF refuses to cover health insurance for many researchers, leading to financial and healthcare insecurity.
- No clear information is provided about healthcare access before signing contracts.

Residence Permit & Housing Challenges

- Residence permit (permesso di soggiorno) process is unclear, slow, and requires in-person visits to offices where no English is spoken.
- Finding housing is extremely difficult, with no support from INAF. Some researchers experienced scams and xenophobia.

Recognition of Foreign Degrees

- Many grants and positions require expensive (~€500+) and time-consuming recognition (equipollenza) of foreign PhDs and master's degrees.
- INAF does not provide financial or administrative support for this process.

Lack of Onboarding & Institutional Support

- No welcome package or structured introduction to administrative procedures, work culture, or available benefits.
- New hires struggle to understand their rights and obligations.
- Foreign researchers feel isolated and uninformed upon arrival.

Hostile or Unwelcoming Work Environment

- Some researchers reported dismissive attitudes toward foreigner concerns.
- Administrative staff sometimes ignore or delay responses to foreign researchers' requests unless a supervisor intervenes.
- A researcher reported being placed in an office with a Russian colleague against their wishes due to geopolitical tensions.

General Workplace Culture & Structural Issues

- Information is often shared informally (e.g., during coffee breaks) rather than through official channels.
- Meetings are sometimes poorly structured, with unclear communication and conflicts between staff members.
- A general lack of organization and transparency in administrative and scientific processes.

Mental Health & Well-being Concerns

- Some researchers faced stress, anxiety, and exhaustion due to administrative struggles.
- Limited support for mental health issues, with some relying on supervisors who were unsympathetic.

Final notes: Foreign researchers at INAF face significant challenges, particularly regarding bureaucracy, health insurance, language barriers, and lack of institutional support. These difficulties affect their professional integration, well-being, and ability to work effectively.

Summary of Feedback and Recommendations for INAF: Improving Support for International Researchers

Bureaucratic Challenges

- Permesso di soggiorno (Residence Permit):
- The process for obtaining and renewing a residence permit is lengthy (up to 7 months), with travel restrictions during this waiting period, preventing researchers from attending international conferences or collaborations.
- Recommendation: INAF should advocate for more efficient processing with local Questuras and ensure early reminders for renewal deadlines.

Health Insurance:

- International researchers often face difficulties in obtaining adequate health insurance. There are delays in coverage, complicated procedures for domiciliation, and the need for private insurance, which can be costly and burdensome.
- Recommendation: Establish clear guidelines for obtaining health insurance and explore options for institutional agreements with insurance providers.
- Contract and Taxation Issues:
- The process to sign contracts with INAF is complicated, requiring unnecessary steps such as diploma equivalence verification by the Ministry.
- Recommendation: Streamline the contract process and simplify any unnecessary paperwork that causes delays.

Lack of Institutional Support for International Researchers

Foreign Office:

- Current support for international researchers is inadequate, with a lack of dedicated staff and a clear point of contact for administrative and practical issues.
- Recommendation: Establish a central Foreign Office at INAF to assist with the bureaucratic processes, housing, health insurance, and general onboarding for international researchers.

Mentorship or "Tutors":

- New international researchers often feel isolated and lack guidance on essential tasks such as opening bank accounts, securing housing, and navigating the healthcare system.
- Recommendation: Assign a mentor or local "tutor" to new foreign researchers for at least the first 2 months to assist with practical issues and administrative procedures.



Housing and Cost of Living

- There is a significant gap between the cost of living and researchers' salaries, particularly in cities with high demand for housing in larger cities. This causes financial stress.
- Recommendation: INAF could explore partnerships with local housing providers or establish temporary accommodation options for incoming researchers.

Support for International Collaboration and Career Development

- Lack of Career Progression Support:
 - Many researchers (~25%) feel there is little support for career development or international collaboration opportunities at INAF.
 - Recommendation: INAF should offer clearer career progression pathways and better support for international research collaborations, including funding for conferences and workshops.
- Marie Curie and EU Project Support:
 - Support for applying to EU-funded projects like Marie Curie Fellowships is minimal, with researchers only receiving feedback after submission, rather than assistance during the application process.
 - Recommendation: Develop a dedicated office to assist researchers in writing and managing EU-funded project proposals, which could also benefit INAF as a host institution.

General Administrative Issues

- Information for Newcomers:
 - There is a lack of centralized information for international researchers, leading to confusion and stress when navigating daily life in Italy.
 - Recommendation: Create a comprehensive "Newcomer's Guide" that includes step-by-step instructions for tasks like opening a bank account, obtaining a codice fiscale, securing housing, and enrolling in health insurance. This guide should be regularly updated and available online.

Feedback and Transparency

- Lack of Communication Regarding Changes or Initiatives:
 - Many researchers feel disconnected from decision-making processes, and feedback about institutional changes or support structures is not consistently communicated.
 - Recommendation: Regularly share the outcomes of surveys and feedback from international researchers with the wider community and ensure transparency regarding the actions being taken.



Final notes: The feedback highlights the need for INAF to address **critical** administrative and support gaps for international researchers. By implementing these recommendations—such as establishing a central Foreign Office, providing mentorship, and simplifying bureaucratic processes—INAF can improve the overall experience for foreign researchers and enhance its reputation as an inclusive, supportive research institution.

Insights and Critical Recommendations for INAF to Improve Support for International Researchers

Financial and Housing Challenges

- Critical Issues:
 - Salaries and Housing: PhD students and postdocs are underpaid, especially in cities where the cost of living is high.
 - No Institutional Housing Support: There is no financial assistance for housing, and researchers struggle to find accommodation, often encountering scams or xenophobic experiences.
- Recommendations:
 - Increase Salary Support or Housing Stipends: INAF should reconsider compensation packages to ensure they are competitive with the local cost of living.
 - Establish Institutional Housing Options: Partner with local landlords or institutions to provide affordable housing for incoming researchers. Temporary accommodations should be prioritized for short-term visits.
 - Offer Financial Assistance for Housing: Explore the possibility of providing short-term financial support to help with housing costs, especially for those on short-term contracts.

Bureaucratic Challenges

- Critical Issues:
 - Residence Permit Delays: Obtaining or renewing the permesso di soggiorno is a prolonged process, which limits the ability to attend international collaborations or conferences.
 - Health Insurance and Financial Barriers: Health insurance can cost up to €2000/year, and there are no clear institutional guidelines or support for acquiring it. Opening bank accounts is difficult for non-EU researchers without a valid permit.
 - Complex Administrative Processes: The process of joining INAF is bureaucratically heavy, especially with contract negotiations and diploma equivalence procedures.
- Recommendations:

- Advocate for Multi-year Permits: INAF should advocate for multi-year residence permits to reduce the frequency and complexity of renewals.
- Streamline Health Insurance and Administrative Processes: Collaborate with insurance providers to create clear, institutionalized processes for obtaining health coverage. Simplify the process of opening bank accounts for non-EU researchers.
- Reduce Bureaucratic Steps: Simplify the contract signing process and eliminate unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles, especially the diploma equivalence verification.

Lack of Institutional Support

- Critical Issues:
 - Insufficient Guidance: Foreign researchers often rely on colleagues to navigate practical tasks (bank accounts, housing, etc.), as there is no centralized support system.
 - Limited Career Development Support: There is little institutional support for career progression, and grant applications like the Marie Curie Fellowship are not sufficiently assisted.
 - Short-Term Contracts and Job Insecurity: Many foreign researchers experience job instability due to short-term contracts.
- Recommendations:
 - Create a Centralized Foreign Office: Establish a dedicated Foreign Office at INAF to assist foreign researchers with administrative procedures, housing, and health insurance. This office should also provide project management support for EU grants.
 - Implement Structured Mentorship Programs: Assign mentors or "tutors" to new foreign researchers for at least the first 2 months to help with onboarding and practical issues.
 - Career Support and Mentorship: Develop clear career development paths and provide support for international collaboration, including financial support for conferences, workshops, and grant applications like Marie Curie Fellowships.

Integration and Representation Issues

- Critical Issues:
 - Exclusion from Decision-Making: International researchers feel excluded from important institutional decisions and lack representation.
 - Language Barriers: Most communications and meetings are in Italian, which hinders integration and access to essential information.
 - Lack of Consistent Support: The new "Foreign Office" may not be effective if it does not address local administrative problems. The absence of a structured onboarding process also causes confusion for new foreign researchers.
- Recommendations:

- 
- Inclusive Decision-Making and Feedback Channels: INAF should actively involve international researchers in decision-making processes, possibly through a formal committee or representation in staff meetings.
 - Enhance Language Accessibility: Increase efforts to provide multilingual support, including English translations of official communications, documents, and meetings. Consider offering Italian language courses for researchers.
 - Comprehensive Onboarding: Create a structured onboarding program that includes practical information and guidance on integration, such as an updated "Newcomer's Guide."

Suggestions for INAF's Action Plan

1. Establish Local Administrative Support: Each INAF site should have a dedicated administrative point of contact for international researchers to address local issues promptly.
2. Simplify and Centralize Administrative Processes: Create centralized resources for researchers that include essential documentation, grant application processes, housing, health insurance, and bureaucratic guidance.
3. Offer Clear Career Support and Development Pathways: INAF should facilitate career progression for foreign researchers by offering clearer pathways for advancement and stronger support for international collaborations.
4. Transparency in Institutional Initiatives: Regularly update the international researcher community on actions taken to address their concerns and ensure clear communication regarding any changes or initiatives at INAF.

Conclusion

While INAF offers a positive and supportive scientific environment, foreign researchers face significant challenges, particularly in navigating Italy's complex bureaucracy, securing housing, obtaining health insurance, and experiencing career progression. By implementing the above critical recommendations—such as creating a Foreign Office, offering financial and housing support, improving language accessibility, and advocating for systemic changes in bureaucratic processes—INAF can significantly improve the experience for international researchers, enhance inclusivity, and strengthen its international reputation.

