

# Policy matters

Supporting Excellence in the Science Base

## The Society lobbies government on research careers

The summary of the most recent Graduate Employment Survey (*The Biochemist*, Feb 2002, p. 41) bore the headline 'More good graduates shun research'. When the Survey report was being written, the Society was conducting its first on-line consultation of members, seeking views on the key factors that influence the recruitment and retention of biological scientists. The results of the two surveys armed the Society with the hard facts needed to lobby the government to introduce changes to make research careers more attractive.

**by Mike Withnall**  
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Peter Downes, Chairman of the Biochemical Society, sent the two survey reports with an explanatory letter to the Science Minister, copied to the Minister for Higher Education, the Chief Scientific Adviser and the Chairman of the Commons Science and Technology Committee. Peter listed the key evidence from the Employment Survey demonstrating a disturbing trend that some of our best young biochemists are shunning research.

- The proportion of graduates with first-class honours degrees electing to start research degrees decreased by 18% between 1998 and 2000.
- The proportion of graduates with 2.2 degrees among those starting research degrees increased from 7% to 12%, consistent with there being less competition for funding.
- The proportion of PhD graduates moving to academic post-doctoral positions decreased from the normal 40–45% range to 36%. The proportion starting

industrial research also decreased from 14% to 8.5% in 2 years.

- In contrast, the proportion of PhD graduates moving to careers outside science increased from 3% to almost 10%.

The consultation of members elicited very clear views on why graduates may be turning away from research. Of the respondents, 89% consider that poor academic pay and job insecurity are key factors, and 88% reckon that the ability to take up well-paid jobs outside science is important. There is also a strong

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belief (by 76%) that accumulated student debt is a contributory factor. These views were shared by members of all ages, whether they work in academia or industry. Members also believed that more ‘career scientist’ positions need to be created in universities (87% support), and that young post-docs should be given improved career

guidance (70% support) in order to reduce the fallout of post-docs from academic careers. Both male and female members (77% support overall) called for more family-friendly policies to be introduced in academic life.

Peter notes that the Society’s findings complement reports from research funding bodies and anecdotal evidence from PhD supervisors that the overall quality of PhD applicants is declining and, from a variety of sources, that many university departments are struggling to recruit staff of the appropriate calibre.

Since the letter was sent to government ministers, two further reports have highlighted the need to improve research pay and conditions. The Academy of Medical Sciences called for increased

recognition of the contribution made by contract researchers, considerably improved careers guidance for them, and greater opportunity to move to ‘career scientist’ positions. Sir Gareth Roberts, who conducted a consultation for the Treasury in late 2001, concluded that a large increase in funding for researchers of all levels is essential if UK science



is to remain competitive. He focused on the need to reduce the number of researchers on short-term contracts by providing better training and advice to enable them to move down one of three parallel career tracks: (i) the standard academic pathway; (ii) specializing in a particular technical area of research in 'career scientist' positions; or (iii) moving outside academia, e.g. into industrial research.

It is to be hoped that all of this will contribute to the Office of Science and Technology and the Department for Education and Skills making a successful case to the Treasury's forthcoming Spending Review for substantial new funds to improve the career structure for research scientists.

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### **UK Life Sciences Committee (UKLSC) effective in mobilizing scientific opinion**

While drafting a response on behalf of the UKLSC to the Commons Science and Technology Committee inquiry into Scientific Learned Societies, it struck home how effective UKLSC has been in mobilizing other organizations behind particular causes in the 5 years of its existence. The purpose of the inquiry is to assess whether the Royal Society and the Royal Academy of Engineering, which receive substantial funding from the government, provide good value for money. As part of this, the Committee is examining what is achieved on limited (non-government) budgets by other learned societies.

The following were among the examples used to illustrate UKLSC's success.

### **Postgraduate Training Working Party 1999**

UKLSC brought together a Working Party chaired by Sir Brian Follett, which had members from the Wellcome Trust, the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), the Medical Research Council (MRC), the Royal Society, UK Council for Graduate Education and the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry (ABPI). Its report contributed to the OST (Office of Science and Technology) decision to increase stipends for Research Council-funded PhD studentships.

### **Foresight Associate Programme 2000**

UKLSC was the driving force behind this Associate Programme, which included representatives from the Academy of Medical Sciences, the Institute of Biology, the Royal Society of Chemistry, the UK National Committee for Microbiology and the ABPI. The Programme argued the need for the UK to establish a centre of excellence in biomedical informatics and organized a symposium that brought together the leading players in the current BioBank large-scale population genetics study (the Wellcome Trust, the National Health Service and the MRC). The Programme also campaigned for a new programme of cross-disciplinary PhD studentships in biology and chemistry. The scheme introduced recently by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council goes some way towards achieving this objective.

### **Animal Science Group (ASG)**

This has become recognized as the principal voice that represents the interests of researchers on issues of animal science and welfare. It invites a number of other organizations with overlapping interests to attend its committee meetings and actively seeks collaboration. Those attending currently include the Royal Society, the Wellcome Trust, the Academy of Medical Sciences, the Association of Medical Research Charities, ABPI, the Research Defence Society, BBSRC, the Laboratory Animals Veterinary Association and the Laboratory Animals Science Association. The ASG caused a stir in 2000 by organizing an open letter to the Science Minister signed by 110 leading biomedical professors. The letter drew attention to the effect on UK competitiveness of excessive bureaucracy and delay in the processing of animal licence applications by the Home Office. This led to a review of the system. The ASG uses the expertise on which it can draw to assist the Home Office in this area. In 2001 the Home Office Minister accepted an invitation to talk with UKLSC and to tour the animal facilities at a leading UK university. The Chair of the ASG was also invited to present evidence orally to a Lords Committee inquiry into the use of animals in scientific research in 2001, and representatives of the ASG participated in discussions with the Science Minister as part of the Pharmaceutical Industry Competitiveness Task Force.

The Biochemical Society is a founder member of the UKLSC and currently provides its Committee Secretary (Mike Withnall). If you would like to contact Mike regarding science policy please e-mail him at

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