More PhDs stay at home

Summary of the Biochemistry Graduate Employment Survey 2003

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The initial destinations of first-degree and Masters graduates were very similar to the previous year, but there were marked reductions in the proportions of PhD graduates choosing to work abroad (down from 9.3 to 1.4%) or to move outside science (down from 6.5 to 1.8%). There was a corresponding increase in the proportion of PhD graduates undertaking research in UK institutions (up from 40.7 to the unusually high figure of 50.7%).

The proportion of first-degree graduates who continued biochemical training was consistently in the range 30–35% in the second half of the 1990s. In 2001, the figure slipped just below 30%, and it dipped again in 2002. The 2003 value (27.5%) was essentially unchanged from 2002. The fraction of First Class Honours graduates who chose to study for a research degree (53.8%) remained low compared with the figure in the 1990s (consistently between 60 and 70%). For graduates with class 1 or 2 first degrees from pre-1992 universities, research in industry (7.2%) was the most popular biochemical employment. A smaller proportion of graduates from post-1992 universities continued biochemical training (24.4 compared with 29.5%), but relatively more moved to research in industry (12.2%) or hospital laboratory work (7.9%). The incentives on offer for teaching a shortage subject seem to have made little difference to the small proportion of biochemistry graduates choosing school teaching as a career (3.1%). Overall, just over half the graduates from pre- or post-1992 universities remained in science. After plateauing for several years, the proportion training or working outside science increased slightly from 19.8 to 21.7% in 2001, and stayed between 22 and 23% in 2002 and 2003.

The proportion of Masters graduates continuing biochemical training (39.7%) was similar to the 2002 figure, which was typical of that seen in the late 1990s. Of those entering biochemical employment, equal proportions (9.9%) researched in academia or industry, while slightly smaller numbers moved to work in hospital or public service laboratories or to science-based non-laboratory work. The proportion of PhD graduates continuing academic research has characteristically been in the range 41–45% over the years, so a figure of 50.7% is unusually high. Part of the increase may be due to some PhD graduates being put off starting postdocs in the United States by visa restrictions introduced following the terrorist attacks of 2001. The proportion of PhD graduates moving to research in industry retained the 2002 level (13.4%), while the proportion moving to non-science-based employment decreased notably. Overall, the proportions of Masters and PhD graduates remaining in science (73.7 and 78.4% respectively) were a little higher than in 2002.

The proportions of genuinely unemployed (not travelling, etc.) first-degree, Masters and PhD graduates (3.5, 3.0 and 1.4% respectively), while being a little higher than in 2002, compared favourably with the figures...
As noted last year, the high values appear to be due to HESA specifying that ‘first destination’ data collected by universities have to be obtained from the graduate directly and not from a third party. The high figure for first-degree graduates, in particular, means that the proportions indicated for other career destinations may be underestimated.

In recent years, these surveys have drawn attention to the fact that good graduates appear to be shunning research. The situation appears to have stabilized in 2003, with an unchanged proportion of graduates continuing biochemical training, the proportion staying in science as the first destination being maintained, and no higher a proportion starting training or work outside science than in 2002. The increase in proportions of Masters and PhD graduates staying in science also suggests that careers in academic or industrial research are still seen as favourable options. This despite the widespread concern within the science community over non-competitive salaries and uncertain career structure in academic science.

This article presents an overview of the survey results. The full report can be found at the Society’s website (www.biochemistry.org)