

# The price of a PhD



Until a few years ago a high percentage of undergraduates that received suitable degree results went on to start postgraduate degrees, complete postdoctoral studies and stay within academic research. In some countries this trend is changing, with fewer undergraduates attempting a PhD and those who obtain their doctorate are often reluctant to stay within research and use their graduate work as a stepping stone into business, management consulting and banking, for example.

In the UK certain academic institutions have seen a consistent drop in the number of PhD applicants over the past 5 years. One prospective PhD supervisor at a research institute in London has seen the number of applicants drop from 15 to 3 in only 5 years (although the quality of these applicants remains high). However, some institutes have maintained healthy numbers of PhD students during this period, and these are usually the institutes that either offer higher PhD stipends or are perceived to have more influence within the academic world.

Institutes within the rest of Europe have also seen this trend occurring, but often to a lesser extent, whereas the outcome of this decrease in PhD numbers—fewer available postdoctoral posts—has been clearly witnessed by most of the cell biologists we talked to. In addition the USA is not immune from this problem. Although there seems to be no obvious decrease in PhD numbers, there does seem to be a smaller number of undergraduates taking biology degrees. Whether this will lead to fewer PhD students and postdocs in years to come has yet to be seen.

## MONEY, MONEY, MONEY

Why does there seem to be a shortage of students, postgraduates and postdocs in the UK and Europe? Perhaps biology undergraduate students have witnessed their contemporaries from other degree classes leaving university to accept well-paid jobs within the private sector for too long, and now want to follow the same career path. Or perhaps they are finally fed up with working long hours without getting the recognition or job security they feel they deserve.

One thing is certain: this general trend cannot be good for the long-term future of academic research. Research institutes and universities should be actively seeking solutions to this problem before the situation spreads. As one researcher points out, the people who could succeed within the world of research are often those keen to ensure job satisfaction, a concrete career structure and increased job security, and hence are those who are more tempted to leave the bench. □