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Money worries

Last week, thousands of students marched through London campaigning for the abolition of tuition fees and the restoration of full government-funded grants. The protest followed complaints by the National Union of Students that many undergraduates are living on or near the poverty line. Finding money to pay both rent and tuition fees forces many students to take out loans — and leaves them with the opinion that they would be better off on the dole.

A spokesperson at the UK Department for Education and Skills countered these claims as untrue: “Graduates can expect to earn on average 35% more than the average — that’s an extra £400,000 (US\$570,000) over a lifetime.”

For scientific employment, reality falls somewhere in between the competing claims. Yes, graduates do eventually get higher salaries, but being heavily in debt at the end of a degree can steer people away from some career choices.

There are already some hints that this is happening. David James, chair of the department of pharmacology at the University of Cambridge, believes there are signs that students are shying away from academic careers. One of his postdocs, who was among the first wave of English undergraduates required to pay tuition fees, said that he could not consider seeking a professorship because he needed a higher income to pay off his loans. Instead, he decided to go into industry (see *Naturejobs* 4–5; 1 November 2001).

With fewer students enrolling in maths, physics and chemistry — and a wave of academic retirements on the horizon — it would seem wise to encourage students to pursue scientific subjects, which means making academic careers look as though they might be a feasible option.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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