

Contacts

Publisher: Ben Crowe
Editor: Paul Smaglik
Marketing Manager: David Bowen

European Head Office, London

The Macmillan Building
4 Crinan Street
London N1 9XW, UK
Tel +44 (0) 20 7843 4961
Fax +44 (0) 20 7843 4996
e-mail: naturejobs@nature.com

Naturejobs Sales Director:

Nevin Bayoumi (4978)

UK/ RoW/ Ireland:

Matt Powell (4953)
Andy Douglas (4975)
Frank Phelan (4944)

Scandinavia/ Spain/ Portugal:

Evelina Rubio Håkansson (4973)

Natureevents:

Sille Opstrup (4994)

France/ Switzerland:

Amelie Pequignot (4974)

Production Manager:

Billie Franklin
To send materials use London
address above.
Tel +44 (0) 20 7843 4814
Fax +44 (0) 20 7843 4996
e-mail: naturejobs@nature.com

Naturejobs web development:

Tom Hancock

Naturejobs online production:

Stefan Hales

European Satellite Office

Germany/ Austria/ Italy/

The Netherlands/ Belgium:

Patrick Phelan, Odo Wulffen
Tel + 49 89 54 90 57 11/-2
Fax + 49 89 54 90 57 20
e-mail: p.phelan@nature.com
o.wulffen@nature.com

US Head Office, New York

345 Park Avenue South,
10th Floor, New York, NY 10010-1707
Tel +1 800 989 7718
Fax +1 800 989 7103
e-mail: naturejobs@natureny.com

US Sales Manager:

Peter Bless

Japan Head Office, Tokyo

MG Ichigaya Building (5F),
19-1 Haraikatamachi,
Shinjuku-ku,
Tokyo 162-0841
Tel +81 3 3267 8751
Fax +81 3 3267 8746

Asia-Pacific Sales Director:

Rinoko Asami
e-mail: r.asami@naturejpn.com

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Election returns

The victory of George W. Bush over his Democrat challenger John Kerry in the US presidential election this month suggests that the United States is becoming an increasingly divided country both politically and culturally. But it may also signal that the country is losing its status as a premier place to launch a scientific career. A week after the polls closed, a survey by 122 US graduate schools showed that enrolment by foreign graduate students across the board had dropped by 6% — the third consecutive decline. The slide in numbers began after the Bush administration tightened visa restrictions following the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001.

This decline may well continue — Bush's re-election is likely to reinforce perceptions that the United States is difficult to enter. This was evident from the recent survey, even though the Department of State has tried to streamline the visa application process and some US universities have taken a more active role in securing visas for prospective students.

In the sciences and engineering, foreign students make up about 50% of enrolment in the United States. Even before the Bush era, domestic enrolment in many of these fields had been declining. For the scientific job seeker in the United States, this could mean that it will be easier to get accepted at a top institution and get funded.

The potential long-term effects are harder to see, but are perhaps more significant. Intellectual property and spin-offs tend to come from the best research institutions, fuelled by bright young scientists. If this enrolment trend continues long-term, scientific jobs may shift to countries offering a more open visa policy — as long as they can also match the funding and infrastructure offered by the United States. And that would leave the United States playing second fiddle.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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