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Career prospects in Europe

“Europe’s forgotten young researchers.” “Pay, pension and benefits: why should scientists be disadvantaged compared with other professions?” With compelling talk titles such as these, a conference in Heidelberg this September, sponsored by the European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO) and the European Life Science Forum (ELSF), served as an opportunity to pick apart the career structure of European life scientists.

And what conclusions did the 40 or so attendees, who ranged from young investigators to administrators, come to? “The fact that there is no real career structure was the main focus,” says Luc Van Dyck, executive coordinator of ELSF and one of the event’s organizers. Another was “the fact that there is no real tenure-track program similar to the US,” he says.

One of the main problems identified was the variation within Europe, with some countries such as the United Kingdom having more flexible pathways through academia compared to others’ more rigid systems. This disparity discourages mobility within Europe. Combined with lower pay for academics than in the United States or in industry, this creates a “leaky pipeline” where promising European scientists leave for the US or opt for another career.

So what can be done, now that the issues have been identified? EMBO and ELSF will issue recommendations by the end of the year, which will include educating students about careers in science beyond academia. But if universities are to prevent the best European students from slipping away, they will need to pay more and create incentives to enter an academic career, rather than building obstacles. If these changes aren’t made, the next conference will have sessions entitled, even less optimistically perhaps: “Where have all the young scientists gone?”

Paul Smaglik



Naturejobs editor

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