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Another British invasion?

The Beatles, The Rolling Stones and The Who took the United States by storm in the 1960s. Pulp, Blur and Suede failed to follow in their footsteps in the 1990s. Now, physicists, chemists, biologists, engineers and mathematicians look to be the next wave of prospective invaders — but as yet, the outcome is uncertain.

There are various signs that the British are heading west. Within the past year, for example, the British Embassy has tripled to 12 the number of science and technology officers posted in the United States. And an organization, British Expats in Life Sciences (www.belsgroup.com), was quietly established in the Boston area. In addition, a survey by the Royal Society found that in 1999, 12% of the society's fellows questioned were working in the United States.

The knee-jerk reaction is that Britain is losing its scientists to a brain drain. But the reality is more complicated. According to one UK government report on science and technology, released this summer, the past few years have seen a wave of scientists head for the United States. But at the same time, Britain experienced a net gain of 5,000 scientists from other countries.

And the exodus across the Atlantic may be helping Britain to establish a technology-transfer beachhead. The results of such endeavours have been mixed. For example, a plan to set up a joint institute between the University of Cambridge and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was met with optimism, but has recently been criticized for a lack of tangible results (see *Nature* 420, 256; 2002). A less ambitious programme, announced this summer, to foster links between Rice University and Imperial College in London still holds promise. The way to judge such efforts may be not by how many UK programmes and scientists establish links in the United States, but by what they eventually bring back.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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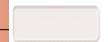
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