

naturejobs

**JOBS OF
THE WEEK**

The much celebrated rise of interdisciplinary science has an intuitive appeal. Institutions have been foolish and shortsighted, goes the rationale. Disciplines have been isolated for too long. Discoveries happen at the margins, where biological principles need insights from physicists and chemistry problems require input from biologists. Flouting convention is key.

Yet some are sceptical about the true value of interdisciplinary centres. They argue that interdisciplinary is little more than a buzzword and that, as Rogers Hollingsworth, a science historian at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, put it: "Large research organizations have an enormous amount of inertia, and individuals have a great vested interest in the way they were trained, and what they were doing yesterday" (see *Nature* **451**, 872-873; 2008).

As part of an infrastructure 'arms race', institutions run the risk of building cutting-edge interdisciplinary facilities to attract attention, funds and talent, but that produce little sound or novel science. Peer-review panels may not so readily recognize interdisciplinary accomplishments; tenure committees may turn away candidates who have not specialized in a traditional field. As this week's feature details, young scientists looking for interdisciplinary training face various challenges, despite new graduate-school programmes (see page 422).

But this view presumes that the primary track for young interdisciplinarians is academia. This is increasingly not the case. The number of academic positions has fallen in many countries, whether interdisciplinary or otherwise, yet unemployment for scientists is at an all-time low. Those with science degrees are readily employable outside academia (see *Nature* **452**, 777; 2008). Positions in policy, industry and elsewhere need scientists; and a knowledge of how fields intersect can be advantageous. Increasingly, societal problems that are linked to science — such as alternative fuels or vaccine development — require interdisciplinary points of view. Alumni of interdisciplinary centres may have ample opportunities. If so, such centres could prove to be much more than a fad.

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