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No end in sight to jobs gloom

FOUR years ago (Vol. 253, p. 79) we looked at the fluctuations in job opportunities in British universities since 1960. Now is a suitable time to bring the record up to date. The graph shows in a schematic way numbers of tenured posts available up until the end of 1978.

The technique used is the same as that employed in 1975. The classified advertisements in *Nature* for two weeks, in May and November, of each year were examined. Posts at or above the level of lecturer at a British university scored one. Temporary posts scored half. The figures for May and November were added together. Various objections can be raised; that not all jobs will be advertised in *Nature*; that the method of measurement, though consistent, is crude; that many universities have research-council establishments attached to them which perhaps should also be included; that there are large research-council and other establishments not attached to universities but which offer at least a semi-academic environment. Nonetheless, it is likely that the graph is a moderately good guide to the ups and downs of employment prospects for the academically inclined.

The enormous spike in the mid 1960s need not detain us long. This was the time when new universities were rapidly coming on stream and recruiting with immense enthusiasm. This cohort of new-university staff is now largely in its 30s and 40s and unlikely to retire for some time. In the late 1960s recruiting seemed to return to its old level but then in 1974 many university posts were 'frozen', owing to a major economic crisis.

What has happened since then? There has been no obvious rebound; it must be assumed that many of the frozen posts have never re-appeared. In fact the level of recruitment in the past four years looks unmistakably down on that of the early 1970s, for which the present low-level of retirements from universities must

take part of the responsibility. Nor is there much comfort just over the horizon. The numbers of students choosing to do science at university is certainly not growing quickly enough to warrant major increases in staff; indeed in recent years numbers have often declined. And the demographic signs are unmistakably that young people of university age will be substantially less in number in ten years' time than they are now, so teaching opportunities are hardly likely to increase.

At present a large and growing number of post-doctoral research workers find themselves caught in the trap. Tenured posts are few and far between whilst short-term contract research merely delays the day of decision and offer no security. The recently formed Association of Researchers in Medical Sciences, intended to articulate the concern of medical researchers thus trapped, could easily have a counterpart in other branches of science.

No one simple solution will emerge to this very serious problem. The encouragement of early retirement is likely to increase, and will help, at least temporarily. Specific initiatives have helped in some particularly difficult circumstances. But in the long run the responsibility may lie as much as anywhere on those tenured university staff who take on new graduates to study for a Ph.D. In the flush of satisfaction at having found just the right person to solve the problem in hand, it is all too easy not to make discouraging noises at the same time about long-term job prospects. Research students should be told in no uncertain terms that a Ph.D. is no longer a guarantee of entry into the academic world and in some circumstances over-qualifies for non-academic jobs and so could even be a liability. Any research supervisor who fails to make potential students think twice about the path on which they are entering is failing in one of his most important responsibilities. □

