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## Job-swapping could relieve academic stagnation

ACADEMICS in mid-career might consider exchanging posts for a period of up to five years. Those who scan the classified advertisement columns every week are only too aware that jobs for scientists in British universities are very scarce at present. As a result of low levels of retirement, disappointing recruitment of students into the sciences, and continued financial stringency which makes every new appointment subject to the closest scrutiny, there are no more academic jobs on the market in the late 1970s than there were in the early 1960s, before the great university expansion.

The plight of those at the bottom of the academic ladder has been well publicised over the past year or two — they are finding that if they are lucky they can subsist for a few years on postdoctoral fellowships before obtaining a permanent post, but without such fortune even highly capable young people may simply have to give up any aspirations to an academic career.

Less well publicised is the problem of the person in mid-career. Remarkably few academic positions are advertised at this level, because remarkably few academics are at present vacating their posts because remarkably few academic positions are advertised because . . . . Those jobs that are freed because their holders move to professorships are largely filled internally because almost every department is experiencing heavy pressure for promotion in the ranks. The result, as is well known, is stagnation as everyone holds tight to the job they have. And stagnation ultimately leads to demoralisation.

Dr Colin Clarke, of the School of Biological Sciences in the University of East Anglia puts forward a simple proposal. He writes:— ‘A simple, admittedly imperfect and partial solution to this problem would be that of direct academic exchange. Thus a lecturer in, say, genetics in University A might exchange his position, and possibly his house, with a similar person in University, or even Research Institute, B with great potential advantage and stimulation to both individuals involved and their departments. At its simplest this scheme could be largely informal and need not involve more expenditure than that of mutual visits and removal costs. House exchange, rather than house purchase, might avoid further financial problems. I suggest that for both academic and family reasons there would need to be a minimum period for such exchange, of perhaps 3 or 5 years. A permanent, or longer

term, exchange could then follow, but only if both partners and both departments were satisfied with the arrangement.

‘This scheme has the advantage that it allows for the exchange of people whose scientific interests are not exactly matched, in some cases to the clear advantage of particular pairs of individuals or departments. Thus someone working in, let us say, applied plant genetics might exchange with another person whose interests are recombination in bacteria, depending on the existing interests and staffing of the two departments involved.

‘The above scheme might operate via a personal advertisements section in *Nature*. Below is a sample advertisement, of the type envisaged, which I have written for myself. There will, of course, be objections to this scheme, not least perhaps from universities if the persons contemplating exchange are not on identical salaries. The present national academic situation is, however, so stagnant that solutions of the above type are highly desirable and their advantages to individuals and departments far outweigh administrative objections.

### EXCHANGE SOUGHT

Reader in Microbiology, University of East Anglia, Norwich, research interests in Microbial Mutagenesis and Bacterial Morphogenesis, general interests in many aspects of General Microbiology and Microbial Genetics. Extensive teaching experience mainly Microbiology and Genetics. Exchange over 5-year, or longer, period for Sept 1982 onwards with like person in University or Research Institute, perhaps in Midlands or Scotland. Please contact Dr Colin Clarke, School of Biological Sciences, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ (Phone 0603-56161, extn. 2232). It may be possible to arrange a housing exchange involving 4-bedroom, detached house with garage and gas c.h. in Norwich.

Would it work? Dr Clarke will be able to tell us fairly soon. The record of the civil service, which tried out a similar mobility scheme a few years ago, is no encouragement. Interest in temporary exchanges was insufficient to warrant continuing the scheme after a year or two. But maybe academics are different. And maybe there is a growing awareness of the importance of sideways moves. If so, then *Nature* will be glad to support such a scheme. □