Improving job prospects ahead?

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The long-awaited upturn in the UK job market could be in sight. But graduates may be faced with a limited choice.

THE latest forecasts for UK graduate job prospects in 1984 show a cautious growth in demand. The oil and chemical industries are showing some signs of improvement, while general engineering, manufacturing and civil engineering may be picking themselves up from the doldrums and increasing their intake of graduates. In the service sector there seems to be some further growth in demand for jobs in retailing, although banking, accountancy and central and local government, all major recruiters, seem to have stabilized their intakes. Higher education still has few jobs for new graduates and postgraduates; those that do appear are still predominantly short-term contracts.

It is the electronics and computer industries which continue to be the growth sectors, with some major UK employers doubling their number of graduate vacancies in 1984 when compared to the "flat" years of 1981-83. For example, one of the multinationals is increasing its planned intake from 200 to over 500. While electronics graduates are profiting the most from this upturn, there is a spill-over effect as employers widen their net to include physicists and mathematicians. Employers are also seeking small numbers of chemists and materials scientists. In computing, demand is still growing, and most of the vacancies are likely to be available to graduates from any discipline. It must not be forgotten, however, that some major companies were unable to find sufficient recruits in 1983.

The slight improvement in demand has to be set against the continuing increase in the number of new graduates seeking jobs. The number graduating with first degrees from the universities is expected to fall for the first time in 1984, down by perhaps 3 per cent to about 65,000. The polytechnics, however, still have a growing number of graduates, around 25,000 in 1984, to whom should be added over 20,000 postgraduates and another 10,000 from the other colleges of higher education, the Open University and so on. In total there could well be more than 120,000 students graduating in the United Kingdom in 1984, an increase of about 2 per cent over 1983. Within the total, about one in four will have a science degree, slightly more than engineering degrees. Some 10,000 graduates from 1983 and earlier will still be seeking first appointments.

Of course not all this year's graduates

Fig. 1 Destinations of science graduates from UK universities in 1982.

will be seeking jobs. In recent years, one in three UK university graduates with a first degree in science has gone on to some form of further training or research, while another one in eight has returned overseas, or otherwise been unavailable for work. In total an average of about 40 per cent have gone directly into employment. Of the 1982 science graduates, most went into industry (10 per cent), the public service (7 per cent) and education (3 per cent) while commerce accounted for 10 per cent (Fig.1). Only a few, however are likely to get jobs directly using their scientific knowledge (see *Nature* 306, 410; 1983). The polytechnic graduates show broadly similar destination patterns.

While a sixth of this year's science graduates may still be unemployed six months after graduation, a pattern echoed in many countries, they are still likely to have fared better than those leaving school or further education. In salary terms, however, over the past seven years they have slipped slightly behind the growth in average earnings. In 1975, the average basic starting salary for a new graduate was £2,475, which represented about 78 per cent of average earnings. In 1983 the figure was just over £6,000, an increase over the

period of over 140 per cent, but a decline to 69 per cent of average earnings (see Fig.2). Until the mid-1970s, most graduates tended to receive broadly similar starting salaries, but since then market forces have come more strongly into play. Starting salaries now are often differentiated by subject, type of job, location, industry, and of course by the more personal factors. Not unnaturally, the biggest differentials tend to be between those industries where demand outstrips supply and those where it does not. In 1983, salaries ranged from under £5,000 to over £7,000, with those entering electronics-related jobs often getting well in excess of £7,500. Those going into jobs involving extensive further training often received nearer £5,000. Allowances for London working ranged from £1,000 to over £1,600, but some employers offered no such differential.

For postgraduates, a quick scan of *Nature's* job advertisements shows salary ranges of £5,500 to £8,000, with those lucky enough to get lecturing posts starting at just over £7,000, although these often require relevant experience as well as a higher degree. Outside the academic world, and research where postgraduate qualifications are normally regarded as essential, employers are usually far less interested in higher degrees and postgraduates have to compete in the graduate job market. While some employers may pay an increase on the basic starting salary of perhaps £200 for each additional year of study many give them no special financial recognition and in many jobs prefer a first-degree graduate.

The market reality for 1984 is, however, that UK graduates' main priority will continue to be that of finding any "suitable" employment. Only a minority will be able to select between interesting jobs with career prospects and to have any real say in their starting salary. □

Fig. 2 Graduate starting salaries and average earnings in the United Kingdom from 1975 to 1984 (forecast for 1984).

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