

Young UK scientists fear a bleak future in the academic world

London Three new reports on the situation of British research students paint a gloomy picture of a community worried about salary and career prospects in science. Two, published today by the Wellcome Trust, reinforce the widely held view that many young scientists are leaving the academic world because they have been put off by poor salaries and career structures.

The reports point out that those who have benefited from generous PhD stipends provided by the trust subsequently experience a drop in take-home pay when taking on most academic postdoctoral positions. Many of those who had earlier been supported by the trust expressed "considerable disillusionment" with the academic world. The reports are available at <http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/students>.

Meanwhile the pressure group Save British Science has produced its own report on issues concerning science students in UK higher education. A survey of research students showed that many felt the PhD stipend of around £6,500 (US\$10,300) a year to be too small. Students were also unanimous that at no stage was enough information provided to enable them to make good career choices.

European Union agrees to 'benchmark' timetable

Lisbon Leaders of the European Union agreed on a timetable for introducing a benchmarking system for member states' research policies at their summit in Lisbon last week. The system was proposed by research commissioner Philippe Busquin (see *Nature* 403, 696; 2000). Indicators for assessing performance in different fields, especially the development of human resources, will be ready by June.

Ministers also agreed to establish a 'European innovation scoreboard' by June 2001. In addition, up to 16.5 billion euros (US\$16 billion) will be made available in concessionary loans by the European Investment Bank to universities, schools, research organizations and companies to foster research and development in information technology. This will allow projects with a total value of 50 billion euros to proceed.

Scientists support GM food technology

Washington More than 1900 scientists, including two Nobel laureates, have signed a declaration in support of agricultural biotechnology that was released last week as protesters converged on a Biotechnology Industry

Organization conference in Boston. The declaration says that signatories support "the use of recombinant DNA as a potent tool for the achievement of a productive and sustainable agricultural system".

The organizers of the declaration, which can be found at www.agbioworld.org, began collecting signatures via the Internet in mid-January. In the first three days, they gathered the names of 600 scientists in academia and industry. "I'm very heartened," says C. S. Prakash, a professor of plant molecular genetics at Tuskegee University in Tuskegee, Alabama, who first conceived of the project to coincide with January's biosafety protocol negotiations in Montreal.

Human genome project is 'on track' for completion

Washington The publicly funded Human Genome Project has passed the two-billion-base-pair mark, and is on track towards completing a rough draft of the human genome in June, Francis Collins, director of the US National Human Genome Research Institute, announced in Boston this week.

Both the public project and the competing private version have established, passed and subsequently publicized meeting several markers. Celera Genomics, of Rockville, Maryland, announced last October that it had successfully sequenced a billion base pairs; the HGP said it reached the same goal a few weeks later, although the public project formally celebrated the achievement on 23 November (see *Nature* 402, 331; 1999).

Allègre ousted to calm angry teachers

Paris Earth scientist Claude Allègre has been dropped as minister of national education, research and technology, in a government reshuffle this week. Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, a lifelong friend of Allègre, made the decision after Allègre's unpopularity among schoolteachers reached crisis point, culminating in massive street demonstrations calling for his resignation.



Allègre: unpopularity reached crisis point.

Research and education are now split into separate ministries, each headed by politicians. The research minister will be Roger-Gérard Schwartzberg, a left-wing member of parliament and legal expert, who was secretary of state for education in the early 1980s. Jack Lang, a former minister of culture and one of France's most popular politicians, will be education minister.

Nobel prize-winner tipped as Taiwan's prime minister

Tokyo Taiwanese Nobel laureate Lee Yuan-tseh is believed to have been offered the post of prime minister last week by Taiwan's newly elected president Chen Shui-bian, leader of the Democratic Progressive Party. Although Lee would not comment on his intentions, he has been appointed to chair an ad hoc advisory committee that is drawing up a blueprint for the next government and criteria for selecting the new cabinet.

Lee, who recently resigned as president of Academia Sinica, won the Nobel Prize for chemistry in 1986 with Dudley Hershbach of the United States and Canadian John Polanyi for work on the dynamics of elementary chemical processes. A key supporter of Chen in the presidential elections, he is widely seen as being well placed to handle negotiations with the People's Republic of China.

Stirling to take over as synchrotron director

London William Stirling, an experimental physicist from the University of Liverpool, has been appointed as the next director general of the European Synchrotron Radiation Facility (ESRF) in Grenoble. His research interests include X-ray investigations of the magnetic structures and phase transitions of magnetic materials, areas that are among the core activities of the ESRF.

Stirling is well acquainted with the Grenoble research environment, having worked at the nearby Institut Laue Langevin between 1973 and 1987. He will succeed Yves Petroff from 1 January 2001, on a contract that lasts until 2006.

Ukrainian marine biologist takes up US post

London Ukrainian marine biologist Sergey Piontkovski arrived at Stony Brook University in New York state last week, after an ordeal that started last October, when he was accused of exporting state secrets from the Ukraine. Charges of illegal currency operations and 'organized crime' were withdrawn last month (see *Nature* 404, 10; 2000).

Friends and colleagues had organised a campaign to halt the prosecution and Piontkovski received high-level support from various non-governmental organisations.

Piontkovski says he is relieved that the "nightmare" of the investigation by the Ukrainian Security Service is over. But, with his wife and son, he went through what he describes as a "last farewell" from the security services two weeks ago. Shortly before their flight to New York departed, passport control officials detained the family for five hours. They were later released and allowed to leave the country.