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Lessons in career planning

Faced with a glut of science PhDs and a shortage of teachers in both elementary and high schools, the US National Research Council (NRC) has taken the logical step of using one problem to solve the other. In a report released on 30 July, the council advocates the creation of a fellowship programme to draw PhDs into teaching. As well as solving the present supply-and-demand problems in both areas, the report says, the programme would improve the quality of science and maths education across the United States.

The NRC proposes a two-year programme that would pay new PhDs a stipend of \$35,000 a year, which is competitive with the funding received by some research postdocs. It would also include the training needed to qualify as a teacher.

But the report doesn't fully answer one crucial question: do recent PhDs want to make the transition from research to teaching? Although the NRC anticipates "a high level of interest" for the programme in the short term, it fails to explore the long-term ramifications for the PhDs' career paths.

As proposed, the programme could very well hamper PhDs should they want to return to research. New PhDs who do not publish much early in their careers tend to have a difficult time securing research posts later on. Such problems are already faced by PhDs who consider postdoc positions that emphasize teaching at universities (see *Naturejobs* 5; 28 February 2002).

What, then, is a sensible alternative? Perhaps a more flexible programme that splits a new PhD's time between a research institution and a high school. Such an arrangement would allow the PhD to keep a foot in the scientific world that, ostensibly, should enhance their teaching ability. And, in turn, it would keep their career options open for when their two-year term is up.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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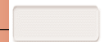
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