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A decisive effort?

The UK government last month announced plans to boost the Department of Trade and Industry's budget from £2 billion (US\$3 billion) to £2.9 billion in 2005–6. The proposals for the department, which supports the bulk of UK university research, certainly caught the attention of the scientific establishment (see *Nature* **418**, 261; 2002). But the question remains, will it capture the imagination of young students who are undecided about whether to pursue science or a different career with a faster, bigger financial payoff?

In the past few years, these 'fence-sitters' seemed to have jumped, with fewer pursuing scientific careers — especially in physics and chemistry (see *Nature* **416**, 777; 2002). But given years of low stipends for both graduate students and postdocs, coupled with the recent new burden of student loans, it might be more accurate to say that they have been pushed. The new proposal might help to push them in the other direction, into the public science arena.

The funding promise provides both long- and short-term incentives. A bigger overall science budget means more money for scientific overheads, which would make prospective graduate students feel that they have a future once they secure their PhD. New funding to help researchers spin their work off into companies also helps. But the short-term incentives might be more noticeable to potential science graduate students.

Under the plan, PhD grants would grow from £10,000 to £13,000 a year, and postdoc stipends would rise by £4,000. As a percentage these numbers are massive, as a reality less so. Perhaps they could be made more enticing by coming into effect immediately, rather than incrementally. A fast hike could attract prospective young scientists' attention, whereas a slow one, which over time might not be much more than a modest cost-of-living boost, would just prompt them to jump the other way.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor

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