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Upping the ante

A bold move by the Russell Group, which encompasses 19 of Britain's largest universities, could make the country a more attractive place for scientists. The group, which includes Cambridge, Oxford and Imperial College London, last month called for an increase in the salary scale for high-level appointments at its members' institutions. Such a move, if enacted, could halt — or even reverse — Britain's brain drain by offering competitive salaries to elite scientists.

The group's plan is not without precedent. Science Foundation Ireland's infusion of funds into the country for both research infrastructure and grants, for example, has shown that higher salaries can help to lure the elite to your shores.

But the Russell Group's vision is contentious because it would mean that students at those institutions would have to pay higher fees. It could also cause resentment from professors at colleges not in the group who would still be receiving the lower national salary scale. The plan may be successful if it drives up the national salary scale or at least makes it more flexible — few would argue with the idea that top scientists should be paid their market value. But it could fail if it spreads the wealth disproportionately to a few high-fliers, while leaving the bulk — both within and outside the Russell Group — with lower pay.

The problem, as always, is finding the money. Who will finance the market-value salaries? Putting the burden on students — who are already strained by taking on student loans — seems unfair. But the government surely doesn't have an unlimited amount of cash for university salaries. Perhaps a system of private endowments, which have buoyed private US universities such as Harvard and Stanford, could help. Although professors may find that the market value for their skills could be just as volatile as the price of stocks.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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