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Forcing the market

A report by the National Science Foundation, issued on 24 November, paints a picture of a slowly declining US science workforce. The document, called *The Science and Engineering Workforce: Realizing America's Potential*, points to a steady slide in student enrolment for maths and physics over the past few years, projects mass retirements in key science and engineering areas over the next two decades, and predicts a decline in the number of foreign scientists who are willing — or allowed — to pick up the slack.

After reading this report, someone with no conception of the realities of the PhD job market might react with dismay, and agree with some of the conclusions that the report draws. The US education system is somehow failing. There won't be enough skilled scientists to meet the demand for qualified positions. The US 'dominance' in science and engineering is threatened — and that this a grave thing, indeed.

A cynic or a sceptic, however, is more likely to say that actually this a positive thing, because it might drive salaries up and improve conditions for PhDs. It might hurt people who rely on cheap and plentiful postdoc labour in the short term, but why should they be continually rewarded for exploitative practices anyway? And as for the perceived shortage of people willing to come to the United States — they're not to blame if a restrictive visa policy makes them consider alternative locations.

The reality is that market forces are contributing to the decline of young people taking degrees in science and industry — not just in the United States but in Europe as well. Not to worry — market forces will sort out the situation, with the best talent going to places that are willing to let them work there with a minimum amount of immigration hassle, pay them fairly and provide the infrastructure to attract and keep them there.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



Contents

CAREERS AND RECRUITMENT

The developing role of
HIV/AIDS research p736

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Career centre
Information on the
scientific job market

FOCUS

SPOTLIGHT

RECRUITMENT

ANNOUNCEMENTS

EVENTS