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Looking for a fast track

If you are a young scientist, time is not on your side. In the United States and many parts of Europe, the average length of PhD study has been increasing. Meanwhile, many young scientists have found it necessary to do multiple postdocs in order to gain enough publications to secure a professorship. Making that next step, to independent investigator, results in the biggest lag of all. Following postdoctoral fellowships, many scientists end up taking one short-term position after another in the hope of eventually landing permanent employment.

These issues have at last caught the attention of policy-makers. In the European Union (EU), the 'Bologna process' aims to standardize PhDs into four years across its member states, but the countries remain unsure how to meet this goal. In addition, researchers in Britain are worried that an EU rule on the length of temporary contracts might actually jeopardize job security (see *Nature* 431, 6; 2004). And in the United States, the National Academy of Sciences has done a good job of reporting on the plight of the postdoc, but it has yet to address the length and number of fellowships young scientists must take to succeed.

Of course, it is easy to identify problems — it is much harder to present solutions. So, over the next two months, *Naturejobs* will attempt to do both in its 'Fast Track' series. The first instalment, published this issue, takes a look at PhDs (see overleaf). As well as examining the general trends and challenges faced by young scientists, the series will highlight examples of scientists who have swiftly navigated the various stages of their career.

Even if institutions do go ahead and reform each stage of the scientific career process, young scientists might do well to look to these examples and plot their careers accordingly. Institutions might place themselves on the fast track eventually, but today's young scientists don't have time to wait.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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