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Sizing up the odds

Size or growth? That's one of the judgements a job seeker has to make, regardless of whether they are looking to switch academic department or country of employment. Opting for a small scientific department with no growth prospects could be stifling, although if it looks set to undergo sustained growth it could be liberating. A large department, on the other hand, might give you resources but could see you getting lost in the crowd — especially if it grows too fast. And a big department that suddenly loses its grants could leave you facing disastrous consequences.

The same considerations come into play when picking a country, as events at a dinner held in Washington DC earlier this month by science lobby group Research!America indicated. The gathering was in honour of the science-funding advocates who had helped to double the budget for the National Institutes of Health to more than \$25 billion in the five years to 2003. But virtually all of those present were bemoaning the flat budgets handed to the agency since then. This flattening is made evident by the lack of new jobs and grants available — especially compared with the bounty available when the budget was on the upswing.

In contrast, Britain's science and technology budget is set to double from its 1997 level to about £5 billion (US\$9.3 billion) in 2008. And Ontario in Canada is investing some Can\$1 billion (US\$820 million) in infrastructure and recruiting now (see page 676). So which would a job seeker prefer? A country with a US\$28-billion life-sciences budget but relatively few new jobs or grants, a country with a science budget projected to grow to less than a quarter of that total, or a much smaller region that is creating new jobs, but whose numbers are dwarfed by the other two enterprises?

In all cases, perhaps choosing which way to go should be based not just on size or growth, but on opportunity and sustainability.

Paul Smaglik

Naturejobs editor



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