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nature jobs

Where East meets West

After several years of decline, the number of foreign students enrolling in US graduate schools rose by 1% this autumn, according to the latest report from the Council of Graduate Schools. But it is not yet clear whether this represents a true reversal in fortunes.

The influx of foreign students is an important indicator because it offers an insight into the scientific workforce of the future. In the United States, that workforce has become increasingly international as the number of US students pursuing graduate studies has steadily declined — especially in the hard sciences. This fall was readily balanced out by foreign students, particularly from China, coming to the country to study. But after visa restrictions were tightened in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 2001, there were signs that foreign students were looking elsewhere: Chinese applications for study at US graduate schools fell by 45% between 2003 and 2004.

Of course, visa restrictions are only part of the story. China, Japan, Singapore and South Korea have all cranked up the competition in recent years. China is building research institutions at its major universities

and is undertaking a recruiting drive to match. Korea is using its freedom from US stem-cell politics to attract interest and establish itself at the forefront of that technology. Japan is strengthening efforts to help postdocs find jobs on its soil. And Singapore is drawing on international collaborations to attract attention, and has recently hosted the first Keystone conference to be held outside North America.

Such increased competition is a positive thing. It will force Western universities to keep their programmes vital and lead them to look for more ways to make foreign scientists feel welcome, rather than taking them for granted. And the changes in the East offer fresh alternatives to scientists who once saw the West as their only option for study and work.



Paul Smaglik, Naturejobs editor

CONTACTS

Publisher: Ben Crowe
Editor: Paul Smaglik
Assistant Editor: Corie Lok

European Head Office, London
The Macmillan Building, 4 Crinan Street
London N1 9XW, UK
Tel: +44 (0) 20 7843 4961
Fax: +44 (0) 20 7843 4996
e-mail: naturejobs@nature.com

Naturejobs Sales Director:
Nevin Bayoumi (4978)
European Sales Manager:
Andy Douglas (4975)

Natureevents: Sille Opstrup (4994)
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Evelina Rubio Håkansson (4973)
France/Switzerland/Belgium:
Amelie Pequignot (4974)
Germany/Austria/The Netherlands:
Reya Silao (4970)

Advertising Production Manager:
Billie Franklin
To send materials use London
address above.
Tel: +44 (0) 20 7843 4814

Fax: +44 (0) 20 7843 4996
e-mail: naturejobs@nature.com
Naturejobs web development: Tom Hancock
Naturejobs online production: Niamh Shields

European Satellite Office
Germany/Austria/
The Netherlands:
Patrick Phelan
Tel: +49 89 54 90 57 11
Fax: +49 89 54 90 57 20
e-mail: p.phelan@nature.com

US Head Office, New York
345 Park Avenue South,
10th Floor, New York,

NY 10010-1707
Tel: +1 800 989 7718
Fax: +1 800 989 7103
e-mail: naturejobs@natureny.com

US Sales Manager: Peter Bless

Japan Head Office, Tokyo
Chiyoda Building,
2-37 Ichigayatamachi,
Shinjuku-ku,
Tokyo 162-0843
Tel: +81 3 3267 8751
Fax: +81 3 3267 8746
Asia-Pacific Sales Director: Rinoko Asami
e-mail: rasami@naturejpn.com