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naturejobs

Speaking in tongues

The recent case of a Chinese graduate student who was almost expelled from Yale University and sent home despite passing her qualifying exams (see *Nature* **438**, 278-279; 2005) raises some difficult questions. How much responsibility should foreign students shoulder to ensure that they are prepared for work in their temporary home? And to what extent should the host institution put itself out to ensure their guests' success?

Academic credentials and scientific skills are clearly prerequisites for visiting students, but what about language skills? To find out more, *Naturejobs* conducted a swift survey of its readers. The vast majority of respondents (79%) said the onus should be on the students to improve their language skills, with 39% saying that the visitors should take an intensive language course before heading abroad. Only 11% believed that foreign graduate students should ask their adviser or their peers at the host institution for help overcoming the language barrier.

At first glance, it seems reasonable to expect incoming students to bone up on the language they will be working in before they arrive. But the question really centres on the

social contract between an institution and its students. In many instances, universities not only provide education for foreign graduates, they also benefit from the relatively cheap research and teaching support these students provide. In addition, institutions in the United States and Europe are increasingly viewing foreign scientists as a key component in their success — so it seems only fair for the students to get help acclimatizing in return.

Some places already take this approach in terms of scientific acumen. The European Molecular Biology Laboratory in Heidelberg, Germany, for instance, attracts students from many different education systems, and works to bring everyone to the same scientific level within their first year. Maybe institutions should now be doing the same sort of thing for language and teaching skills.



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)

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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
 75 Varick Street,
 9th Floor, New York,

NY 10013-1917
 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