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nature jobs

Thinking big

If consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, as Ralph Emerson had it, then Europe's purveyors of career information are definitely broad-minded. European data on scientific careers are all over the place. The information is hard to understand because it differs from country to country, and varying definitions confound it further still.

But a workshop in Madrid last week aimed to cut through that inconsistency. 'Research careers for the 21st century' was sponsored by the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Spain's science and education ministry, and it offered some solid proposals for clarifying career options for young scientists in OECD countries.

In kicking off the workshop, Nobuo Tanaka, director for science, technology and industry at the OECD, said that future career trajectories may stretch beyond the standard path that most prospective young scientists are offered. Institutions should think "outside the traditional linear pathway", Tanaka said. Many still see academia, industry and government jobs as distinct paths, and such barriers offer a challenge, he added.

Another barrier is posed by the quality of career data currently on offer. Ulrich Teichler, of the University of Kassel's International Centre for Higher Education Research, jokes that it is an "absolute disaster" trying to compare career data for European scientists. He points out that the age at which students enter PhDs varies from country to country, as do definitions of when these degrees are complete and when a scientist is considered independent. Despite these difficulties, Teichler has drawn some solid conclusions about European scientists: only about 22% of doctorates go on to tenure-track careers and the average age at which academic scientists reach independent status is 40 to 42 years old.

These figures may vary according to discipline and country, but they are consistently worth communicating to young scientists early in their careers.



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