

# naturejobs

**THE CAREERS  
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SCIENTISTS**

**W**hat happens when a country produces too many postdoctoral students? The answer, sadly, is that the students' career prospects suffer. When a particular field is flooded with postdocs, the students often end up trudging from lowly paid fellowship to lowly paid fellowship — with permanent positions proving elusive at best. Some students even countenance the unthinkable: abandoning science altogether, despite the years of education and work they have invested.

This is what was happening in the United States seven or eight years ago — especially in molecular biology. Ominously, it looks likely to occur in Japan very soon. Japan has some 10,000 postdoctoral fellows living either at home or in the United States, and does not seem to have sufficient capacity to give them secure employment, especially in academia.

Japanese postdocs should be able to head off impending problems by taking a lead from their US counterparts. US postdocs formed grassroots associations, which allowed them to pool their resources and learn about alternative career paths. As a result, many have become more flexible and mobile, both geographically and in terms of switching between sectors. So far, only eight such associations exist in Japan — although there is a chance that more may be on the way.

But Japanese students have to overcome some additional obstacles compared with US postdocs. They face a greater stigma if they leave academia for industrial research or off-the-bench careers, for example. And they may be more constrained by language limitations, as most international labs operate in English.

Nevertheless, this generation of Japanese postdocs has some advantages over those in the United States, many of whom were caught off-guard by sudden career restrictions. The Japanese postdocs can see the problem coming and prepare for it. The pioneering scientists who overcome the cultural and linguistic constraints of pursuing non-traditional science careers could well end up more secure than those who opt for the long, uncertain road to tenure-track positions.

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