

# naturejobs

**JOBS OF  
THE WEEK**

I remember a 1980s political-science lecture in which US President Ronald Reagan's concept of a 'flexible freeze' to rein in the US budget deficit was mocked. The professor rightly labelled the phrase as "weasel words" and an example of Orwellian doublespeak — it's a paradox both to freeze a budget and allow it room to grow flexibly.

So it was with some trepidation that I read the European Commission's new policy on creating more stable science jobs in the European Union (EU) using a concept it calls "flexicurity". The goals of this curious word sound noble: to create greater job security, but allow scientists to change jobs more easily. The policy advocates job security by eliminating short-term contracts and flexibility by making grants more portable.

Unlike Reagan's flexible freeze, these two goals aren't mutually exclusive. But under Europe's multi-tiered funding system, it might be difficult to achieve on a large scale. The EU can mandate its policies only on funds that it distributes, which make up only a fraction of research costs for most member states. It cannot tell individual state funders, such as the Max Planck Society in Germany or the UK Medical Research Council, what strings to attach to their grants.

Like the term flexible freeze, flexicurity hides the real challenge. In both cases, it's the same thing: a realistic budget to match the goal. The EU wants member states to spend 3% of their gross domestic product on research and development (R&D) by 2010. With less than two years to go, the average R&D expenditure lingers at around 2.5%. Without increased funding, there can be neither broad flexibility nor job security for European scientists. The current economic problems in the United States, which resemble those of the Reagan era (high budget and trade deficits), have kept research budgets relatively flat over the past several years. This might offer a boost to the EU's goal of attracting back some of the 100,000 or so EU-born scientists now working in the United States. Ironically, round two of the flexible freeze in the United States may help Europe accomplish the aims of flexicurity.

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