

NEWS

Scientists in Ireland face up to pay cuts

Thousands of scientists across the Republic of Ireland winced when they opened their January payslips. As a result of government measures announced on 9 December, their salaries had been slashed by as much as 15%.

The cuts are part of emergency financial measures in this recession-plagued country, where the deficit is expected to mount to €22 billion (US\$30 billion) this year. Decreases in tax revenue and an expensive government programme to recapitalize the banks are largely to blame.

In an effort to stabilize public budgets, the federal government passed legislation to reduce the public-sector pay bill by €1.3 billion. State-sector salaries, including those of more than 4,000 scientists employed by universities and research institutes, have been reduced by 5–15%, depending on their gross earnings.

The cuts affect researchers employed on permanent and temporary contracts alike, regardless of where their funding comes from. But, fearing cancellation of contracts, the Irish Universities Association (IUA), whose members include more than 20 universities, colleges of education and institutes of technology, has urged the government to exempt several hundred contract researchers

funded by external grants such as those from the European Union (EU) and other foreign funding bodies.

The average postdoc in Ireland earned about €40,000 in 2009. EU stipends start at around €30,000 (see *Nature* **457**, 750–751; 2009). Before the cuts, the base salary for a Marie Curie fellow in Ireland was about €61,000, some 20% above the EU average. Costs of living have dropped considerably over two years of recession, with rents down 40%.

Even so, scientists are upset by the salary reductions. “It’s quite frustrating that I got a pay cut before I even started working,” says Liam Shiels, a 28-year-old research assistant at University College Dublin’s School of Biomolecular and Biomedical Science.

Shiels, a British *in vivo* imaging technician, moved to Ireland from a UK health-care company in January. His nine-month term in Dublin is funded by Science Foundation Ireland, a government-funded grant-giving agency.

He signed a contract on 7 December, but by the time all the details were sorted out in

mid-January, his salary for the nine-month period had dropped from an initially agreed €31,000 to just below €29,500.

“What’s particularly frustrating is that I signed my contract just two days before the law passed,” Shiels says. “Else, I would have tried to negotiate a higher salary in the first place.” All salaries are affected regardless of when the contracts were signed.

Meanwhile, 200 or so young scientists funded by the EU’s Marie Curie mobility programme, and 25 or so funded by the European Research Council, the UK Wellcome Trust, the US National Science Foundation and the US National Institutes of Health, should be exempted from the salary cuts and get their January reductions reimbursed.

“On legal grounds, there can be no deduction in the salaries of externally funded scientists,” says Conor O’Carroll, director of research at the IUA and national Irish delegate to the Marie Curie programme. The IUA has explained the situation to the ministry of finance, and expects the rules will be revised. ■

Quirin Schiermeier



M. KULKA/CORBIS

PROSPECTS

A step towards transparency

The lot of women scientists would improve with more openness in policy and practice, argues **Jan Bogg**.

Policy-makers and university administrators have long wrangled over the barriers that hinder women’s advancement in science. But there is one clear and obvious step many at universities and in industry could take in short order: improve transparency so that both the statistics of those who advance, and the process itself, are readily apparent.

My recent work, part of a project called *Breaking Barriers*, found that women, especially those at junior and mid-level grades, believe they do not experience sufficient transparency of information, policy and practice. The project included quantitative and qualitative interviews with more than 5,000 UK women working in various science posts, including research scientists, academics and health professionals.

Women in academia wanted transparency in terms of teaching load and its impact on research time. They also wanted consistent career-progress information from senior staff that reflected university policy — for example, if a human-resources document states that “an international reputation” is required to reach senior levels in academia, what does this

really mean? Is it referring only to high-impact journal publications? Or are there more wide-ranging criteria?

Take one example in which providing statistics could help inform current and prospective female employees. In the United Kingdom, the General Medical Council has recognized that academic medicine is failing to attract and retain women, and that very few women reach the sector’s highest levels.

Currently, almost 60% of UK medical students are female. But the higher the level, the rarer women become. Around 40% of lecturers are women, 28% of senior lecturers and 13% of professors. The number of women in professorial posts has increased by only 2% since 2004.

Reporting on the number of women in senior positions may seem a crude practice, but it does provide transparency and a basis for identifying blockages in the system. If the proportion of women in senior positions in an organization does not reflect the proportion in the grade below, then there is a need to investigate why this might be the case.

Change is happening, yet figures from many UK professional bodies demonstrate just how slow the progress is — with the number of senior women rising at a snail’s pace. For example, the *Sex and Power* report, produced by the UK Equality and Human Rights Commission, examines women in the top positions of power and influence across the public and private sectors. It estimates that at the current rate it will be 73 years until there are equal numbers of men and women among the directors of the 100 leading companies on the stock exchange.

More needs to be done. Institutions should offer training in an attempt to alter attitudes, and should consider sanctions for managers who provide inadequate performance reviews or poor mentoring. Only by addressing such issues now will the next decade focus on real progress for women in science careers. ■

Jan Bogg is director of Breaking Barriers, a European Commission-funded programme addressing equality, diversity and career progression for women at the University of Liverpool, UK.