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Academe risks losing talent

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Published: 15 February 2007

Postdocs are 'the forgotten' in UK universities, lacking adequate support and advice, reports Anthea Lipsett.

Universities risk losing the cream of young British research talent to industry and overseas unless they do more to support postdoctoral researchers, institutions have been warned.

The Foundation for Science and Technology told universities that they should do much more to improve the career path of early-career researchers or risk losing top people from the pool of future academics.

The latest figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency for 2004-05 show that more than 9,000 researchers leave their institutions but only 1,000 go to another UK university. A seminar held last week by the foundation, an independent think-tank, heard how universities were working to improve the lot of postdoctoral and postgraduate researchers but that progress was disappointingly slow.

Sir Graeme Davies, vice-chancellor of the University of London and a member of the foundation council, told the seminar that advice on the good management of researchers had not been embedded in universities.

Advice should include induction processes in the first three months, consistent staff review and discussions of career options and opportunities, he said.

"Everything is there and we know what we are supposed to do, but it's not being embedded at principal investigator (PI) level," Sir Graeme said. "We have to get the people at the coalface and in senior positions to do more."

He suggested that bonus grants could be given to encourage PIs to help early-career researchers with their career development.

Sir Graeme added that those responsible for young researchers must follow the best-practice protocols and procedures.

"Very good people are very committed early in their careers, and we've a duty to show them there's a future for them," he said.

Wendy Hall is chair of the group looking at how to improve the situation for early-career researchers as part of the Council for Science and Technology, the Government's high-level science advisory group. Professor Hall, professor of computer science at Southampton University, said that a national framework for research careers with flexible career paths was needed.

She said that researchers should be given appropriate degrees of responsibility and recognition much earlier in their careers and they should be given more advice on opportunities outside academe.

"They really are the forgotten in universities, and we assume they know what's possible for them beyond the postdoctoral research post," she said.

"It's not just about encouraging researchers to stay in academe because that's just one career pathway. A small proportion will stay on to be postdocs, but not all will be able to do that."

The Council for Science and Technology is due to publish a report on postdoctoral careers by April.

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