

# Market economy for scientists

Changes in environment and location are a part of all professional careers and particularly suit the international nature of scientific research. Young scientists often undertake their post-doctoral positions at different universities in an attempt to carve out a niche in a competitive arena, and established senior scientists regularly advance their careers and improve their research by moving between institutes.

However, in many cases the decision to move is based not on 'noble' motives, but simply on a bigger pay cheque. This should not come as a surprise. Why should the financial interests of scientists differ from those of any other profession? We live in a society in which bills must be paid, material wealth gives status, frequent holidays are almost a civil right, and the quality of healthcare and education increasingly depend on one's ability to pay for 'extras'. There are, quite obviously, real advantages to earning more money—a fact that has not escaped the attention of scientists.

Yet there still lingers an image of scientists as dedicated individuals interested only in 'higher' goals and the pursuit of great truths, rather than the more 'profane' matters of salary and financial gain. Indeed, and perhaps because of this, scientists often deny any interest in material matters. This attitude, despite the sincerity with which it is held, might ultimately be misguided. Science cannot afford to send out the message that the most qualified minds should expect to be the most poorly paid in comparison with their peers. Clearly the *status quo* does not provide fair remuneration for committed scientists—on whom the future of the world's biggest economies depends. Even

scientists who genuinely see research as a vocation might not disagree with their non-scientist spouses on what constitutes a fair salary and how to make adequate provision for their retirement.

Along with today's materialistic attitude to status comes the development of a real market for high-flying scientists, driven by universities and research institutes on the prowl for talent. Their reasoning can be quite diverse: some institutes want to spot a potential Nobel prize-winner, such that the honour shines on the institute as well as the individual; some regions or countries want to jump-start research activities by attracting the best minds; and others simply know that a quality performer can boost the ranking of an institute and result in more research funding.

However diverse the reasons, the basic motivation is the same: institutes or departments work in a competitive arena and their strategy is to buy the best 'players'. Indeed, the analogy of the transfer markets in professional sports is particularly appropriate. Wealthy clubs can afford good players and the results are success and greater riches. The same is increasingly true of research institutes.

On the surface, this might seem to be a win-win situation. For the scientist, the move to a new job usually means a higher salary, an improved lifestyle and better financial support to tackle more challenging research projects. For the receiving institute, there is a measurable increase in its competitiveness and a new source of income through grants and overheads. In addition, the presence of a 'star' is sure to attract other skilled researchers, thus raising the overall quality of research throughout the institute.

However, what is left out of this win-win calculation is the fact that the gains of one institute are inevitably the losses of another. The researcher who leaves might take with them personnel, grants and prestige, all of which have a knock-on effect on the institute and its remaining staff. For a small institute—or, indeed, country—struggling to strengthen its research, the departure of even one crucial scientist can be devastating. The feeling of unfair competition with rich universities is certainly justified—indeed, in contrast to player transfers in professional sports, no compensation is paid to the 'team' that loses the crucial researcher.

The increasing enthusiasm for portable grants in Europe should therefore be regarded with some caution, if only because they might lead to these types of problem if left unregulated or unchecked. It is conceivable that portable grants will increase the already significant 'brain drain' by encouraging senior researchers to leave poorer regions. This is certainly not in the long-term interests of Europe. University rectors and managers of research institutes should therefore be forewarned of the increasing trend of a market economy for scientists and take better care of their crucial staff. Those in a position to provide moral, financial and emotional support for their researchers should do so, or they might lose their most valuable assets: their scientists.

If the market economy for researchers stimulates such pro-active reactions, its overall effect will certainly improve the image of science as both a noble and financially rewarding profession—which might not be such a bad thing after all.

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