

Media Fellow Report 2006

Mark Rodgers – Selected THES cuttings

Headline: Poor less likely to study for PhD
Source: The Times Higher Education Supplement
Issue Date: Friday August 04, 2006
Byline: Mark Rodgers
Page: News 7
Word Count: 475
Story Text: A career in academe may become the preserve of the rich, research suggests. Mark Rodgers reports

Future academics are likely to come predominantly from wealthy backgrounds as fear of debt deters students from taking postgraduate degrees, a report warns this week.

Two separate studies suggest that students from poor backgrounds are much less likely to consider postgraduate study, including PhDs - the first step in an academic career.

Simon Felton, general secretary of the National Postgraduate Committee (NPC), said: "Debt is a major concern for students, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who are academically able but particularly fearful of debt or the possibility of debt."

The comments follow the findings of a joint survey by the NPC and the graduate jobs website Prospects. It found that 77 per cent of potential postgraduates from working-class backgrounds said that financial considerations and concern about debt had a very strong influence on their decision whether to enter postgraduate study. This compared with 33 per cent of those from upper middle-class backgrounds.

Mr Felton said: "We won't necessarily see the implications of this for ten or fifteen years, when the current crop of academics retires and we are unable to fill academic positions or we fill them with those not reflecting the diversity of wider society."

The findings of the survey, which included responses from 1,046 prospective and current postgraduate students from 126 institutions, will be presented at the NPC conference this week.

The findings are supported by a separate paper by Paul Wakeling, a researcher at Manchester University's School of Social Sciences. This study found that among graduates with a first-class honours degree, those from the highest social classes were nearly three times more likely to progress to a research degree than graduates from the lowest social classes.

Mr Wakeling, who is presenting an overview of research on participation in postgraduate education at the conference, welcomed the NPC survey.

"Their finding that less well-off students cite debt as a discouraging factor mirrors similar findings for access to undergraduate study, with the added complication that such people now have real debts," he said.

Mr Wakeling added that his findings suggested that social class did affect participation in postgraduate study. "This is particularly true for research degrees, where what little evidence we have suggests some underrepresentation of those from working-class backgrounds."

He said that there was a risk that future academics would come primarily from the highest social groups, but he added that academics today did not reflect the diversity of wider society.

Janet Metcalfe, director of the UK GRAD programme, said: "The UK does not have a widening-access policy for postgraduate researchers. Given the ageing and skewed demographics of our academic community, we need to look at ways to encourage more able students from all backgrounds to consider postgraduate study."

Headline: Research boost will bring jobs bonanza
Source: The Times Higher Education Supplement
Issue Date: Friday August 11, 2006
Byline: Mark Rodgers
Page: News 1
Word Count: 470
Story Text: Europe's ambitious targets mean that research students have 'never had it so good'. Mark Rodgers reports.

Young academics will benefit from an unprecedented Europe-wide boom in research jobs, postgraduates heard at their annual national conference last week.

Research students were told that their employment prospects were the best ever - as universities and businesses struggle to fill the estimated 700,000 jobs needed to meet Europe's ambitious goals to boost research spending over the next five years.

Teresa Rees, honorary president of the National Postgraduate Committee, informed delegates at the NPC conference that the European Union's commitments to research spending would mean that "700,000 more researchers will be needed in research and development" and that "this is a good time to be doing postgraduate research".

Professor Rees, pro vice-chancellor for student/staff issues at Cardiff University, added: "If everybody who is trained in engineering, science and technology in Europe went into R&D, there still would not be enough (researchers)."

The comments could not have contrasted more with the conference's theme - "postgraduates under threat: underrepresented, underfunded, undervalued".

But they were echoed by Ian Haines, another keynote speaker and director of the Graduate School at London Metropolitan University. Speaking about EU plans to increase overall spending on R&D to 3 per cent of gross domestic product by 2010, Professor Haines said there would be "increased employability, without a doubt". He added: "There's never been a better time to be a postgraduate student."

The demand for researchers will increase pressure on universities to improve training conditions for staff, amid concerns that PhD students and fixed-term researchers are not being paid enough.

Simon Felton, general secretary of the NPC, said financial obstacles to developing a career in research remained. "The impact of debt and the limited funding support available make it a decision not to be taken lightly," he said.

Meanwhile, a report published by the research councils has revealed that despite increases in PhD stipends over recent years, senior academics are still unwittingly limiting pay for younger researchers.

Louise Ackers, author of the report, said: "For postdocs themselves there is a dilemma of wanting or needing a higher salary, and the fear of costing themselves out of a job altogether." She added: "Principal investigators want to pay their postdocs enough to retain them, but not so much that they risk losing out on getting the grant."

The report by Research Councils UK found that recent increases in postgraduate stipends to Pounds 12,000 a year and improved postdoctoral salaries have helped to recruit and retain

young academic research talent across many disciplines. But there remain concerns over skills shortages in subjects such as economics, engineering and statistics.

Research councils are encouraging universities to apply for higher salaries and stipends when making grant applications.

Headline: Life for PhD students is 'on the up'
Source: The Times Higher Education Supplement
Issue Date: Friday August 11, 2006
Byline: Mark Rodgers
Page: News 3
Word Count: 552
Story Text: Elizabeth Barlow is one of the lucky ones, writes Mark Rodgers.

Dr Barlow is a research fellow in the School of Physics and Astronomy at Southampton University and she said that she was surprised to find that she could live comfortably on the tax-free grant available when she was a PhD student.

Crucially, she also experienced a smooth transition when she finished her PhD and secured her first postdoctoral position.

Dr Barlow's positive experience reflects that of many young researchers, according to a new report by Research Councils UK that reviews the progress made in boosting stipends and salaries - recommended in the 2002 Roberts report.

Overall, the lot of the young university researcher has improved enormously over recent years, according to the review.

PhD students and contract researchers were once the poorly treated foot soldiers of academe, but they are now increasingly seen as the future lifeblood of the sector.

Unlike many PhD students, Dr Barlow was not funded by a research council, but she benefited from an equivalent stipend. "I started in February 2003 and received Pounds 9,000 plus a mature student allowance of Pounds 1,000,"

Dr Barlow said.

Like many respondents to the RCUK report, she was initially concerned about whether the money would be adequate to support an acceptable quality of life.

"I was very reluctant at first, but was persuaded by the project and the assurance that the stipends were set to increase over the next three years."

The stipend grew to Pounds 9,500 in September 2003, to Pounds 11,000 in 2004 and finally to Pounds 12,000 in 2005.

"This is tax free and, at Southampton, postgraduates can earn about an extra Pounds 1,000 a year doing demonstrating and marking duties," Dr Barlow added. "The department seemed very sympathetic to the needs of postgrads in this respect."

This overall increase in doctoral maintenance awards - to Pounds 12,000 a year - is generally considered to be adequate, according to the report.

The report says that while pay and security are of critical importance to researchers, they are unlikely to compare their pay in a direct way with the private sector or salaries abroad.

It adds that they are more interested in whether the pay and security they receive is adequate to achieve an acceptable quality of life. In many cases it is not and this is why they consider leaving university.

One of the most serious problems, the report says, is the transition from doctoral to postdoctoral research - traditionally a period of financial uncertainty for researchers.

Dr Barlow said: "I was lucky enough to be able to finish my thesis just as my funding ran out at the end of January 2006 and started a postdoc in the same project immediately.

"You do have to be organised at the end of your funding, which is difficult when you're concentrating on writing up, but I found that it gave me a good incentive to finish on time."

The report can be found at: <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/rcd/salariesstipends.pdf> Features, page 18

'You have to be organised at the end of your funding, which is difficult when you're concentrating on writing up, but I found that it gave me a good incentive to finish on time'

Headline: Materials science hit by decline in students
Source: The Times Higher Education Supplement
Issue Date: Friday August 18, 2006
Byline: Mark Rodgers
Page: News 8
Word Count: 371
Story Text: Materials-based subjects are the Cinderellas of the sciences, faring far worse than subjects such as physics and chemistry, suggests research published this week.

The number of full-time undergraduates in materials science fell by 24 per cent between 1996-97 and 2004-05, according to an analysis of data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency.

Over the same period, there was a 20 per cent decline in the number of chemistry undergraduates and a 6 per cent drop in those studying physics, according to the analysis by Hywel Jones of the Materials and Engineering Research Institute at Sheffield Hallam University.

This compares with a 17 per cent overall increase in undergraduate numbers over the period.

Dr Jones said that physics student numbers were better than expected, but that the chemistry and materials situation was "dire".

"These are subjects in crisis. The situation in materials is at least as bad as chemistry, but you don't hear a peep about materials departments closing," he said.

"Let's get this Cinderella subject back in the headlines."

There are 17 departments in the UK providing accredited materials courses compared with 22 in 1994, according to the Institute of Materials, Minerals and Mining.

James Busfield, senior lecturer in the materials department at Queen Mary, University of London, said departments had closed and merged as a result of the decline in student numbers. "We have to sell ourselves hard to get people to study with us," he said.

Dr Busfield added that he would welcome a higher profile for materials science. "If it encourages a single extra student to turn up in clearing this year, I'll be thrilled," he said.

Richard Brook, of Oxford University's department of materials and director of the Leverhulme Trust, agreed that attracting students to materials-based subjects could be difficult.

"Students choose a subject partly because they find it fascinating and partly because they would like it to lead to a career," he said. "Materials is intellectually fascinating, but it doesn't obviously lead into a career like law or medicine do."

Professor Brook stressed that materials departments needed to remain flexible to encompass areas such as polymers and biomaterials as they replaced traditional fields such as metallurgy.

Headline: Bias blamed for pay gap
Source: The Times Higher Education Supplement
Issue Date: Friday September 15, 2006
Byline: Mark Rodgers
Page: News ?
Word Count: 381
Story Text: Salary differential can be explained by sex discrimination, a survey has concluded. Mark Rodgers reports.

Almost a quarter of the pay gap between male and female scientists in UK universities is due to discrimination, says new research released this week.

Sara Connolly of the University of East Anglia's School of Economics presented an analysis of 4,282 responses to the Athena Survey of Science, Engineering and Technology (Asset) at last week's British Association Festival of Science.

The findings suggest that 23 per cent of the difference in pay cannot be explained by factors such as age, seniority, type of institution or subject area.

"Women are about £1,500 a year worse off on average," Dr Connolly said. "We've taken into account the obvious things that might explain the pay gap, but these explain only about 80 per cent of it. What remains I suppose we would call discrimination."

She added that private-sector employers had been more active than universities in taking measures to reduce pay differentials between men and women.

"Action needs to be taken. Some higher education institutions are better than others, but the sector needs to learn from other types of employer," she said.

The analysis also found evidence to support the notion of a glass ceiling for female academic scientists between the senior lecturer and professorial grades. "Whether the subject is (perceived to be) predominately male or female, women are underrepresented at the higher levels," Dr Connolly said.

Sally Hunt, joint general secretary of the University and College Union, said: "We have said for years that women are discriminated against at every level, and this research sadly backs that up.

"There is no reason why more women should not be in the top jobs in our universities and being properly paid for their work.

"Fair, open and transparent recruitment and promotion procedures are in everyone's interests. Women want equality now, rather than wait until their daughters and granddaughters start work."

Jocelyn Prudence, chief executive of the Universities and Colleges Employers' Association, said: "The sector is taking equal pay very seriously, and there are a number of measures in place. The situation is improving, but there is some way to go."

She said the new pay framework agreements in universities were designed to deliver equal pay for work of equal value.

The 2006 Asset survey was launched on September 5 and will run until October 20.
Details: www.surveys.athenaproject.org.uk/asset2006