

UK looking overseas for science graduates

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UK companies are starting to recruit science graduates from overseas rather than rely on the home market because they have a larger pool of high calibre students to choose from, the Confederation of British industry (CBI) warned today.

The deputy director of the CBI, John Cridland, told EducationGuardian.co.uk: "We are beginning to see UK companies saying it makes economic sense to source science graduates internationally, particularly from China and India."

China is producing 300,000 graduates every year in science, technology, engineering and mathematics - three times the number coming through UK universities, said the CBI.

India has 450,000 engineering undergraduates in the current academic year alone, it said.

While in the UK figures reveal a decline in all these subjects, from GCSE through to A-level and degree level, according to the CBI.

Mr Cridland said: "A decline in science study is not yet a crisis, but will haunt us unless we address it now."

His comments sparked a backlash from Lord Sainsbury, the minister for science and innovation.

As the row broke out, figures from the funding council, Hefce, revealed that the percentage of teaching, research and widening participation funds it has allocated to universities for science subjects has remained the same for the last three academic years.

Speaking to the Royal Society, Lord Sainsbury hit back at the CBI figures, saying In the decade between 1994 and 2004, the number of graduates in computer science increased by 144%, medicine by 123% and biological science by 110%. The number of maths and statistics graduates rose by 33%.

Referring to the latest figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, he said in the same decade the number of UK students gaining first degrees in science, engineering and technology (SET) rose from 43% compared with 11% in non-SET subjects.

But the minister admitted that the number of graduates in engineering and technology fell by 10%, and physical sciences by 11%.

Lord Sainsbury, however, said the decision by Sussex University to stop offering chemistry degrees from next year failed to reflect the true national picture.

University applications for chemistry increased by 11% last year and are already up by 5% this year, he said. The minister admitted that success in science was vital to Britain's prosperity.

The funding council said the amount of money for medicine, laboratory-based sciences, engineering and technology accounted for 41% of its total allocation for three academic years, from 2004 to 2007.

A spokesman said once the money was allocated to universities it was then up to them to decide how it should be spent.

Earlier, the president of the Royal Society, Lord Rees, said schools were failing in their role to help create the next generation of scientists because they do not maintain children's enthusiasm for science beyond their early fascination for dinosaurs and space travel.

Lord Rees said higher education institutes also have a responsibility to inspire university science undergraduates to develop their skills and knowledge in research.

Unless this happens, he said, Britain is in danger of becoming an "also-ran rather than a leader in world science".

Britain was neglecting its scientific heroes of the past and today's scientists lacked the popular appeal and celebrity that soap stars or footballers attracted.

But until Britain gives recognition to the achievements of its scientists then, he said, "how can we expect future generations to follow in their footsteps".