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from the members

The naked truth of postdocs in Spain

With this letter we intend to bring light to the general and distressful situation of postdoctoral researchers within the Spanish Research & Development system. There are many variations within this group, but typically Spanish postdocs are scientists in their 30s or even 40s, who after finishing their doctoral thesis went abroad with their first postdoctoral fellowship to later return to Spain thanks to another (national) postdoc, perhaps from a program, such as the “Juan de la Cierva”, intended to lure scientists abroad to return home. With any luck, they may hold a third or even fourth postdoc position thus prolonging their “training period”, which is how the postdocs are categorized revealing a clear undermining attitude.

Entering the postdoctoral phase in Spain is like entering an obstacle course. The short-term duration of the fellowships (typically 2-3 years) makes difficult (or even makes impossible) the acquisition of funds to carry out independent projects as lead researchers or to supervise PhD students. This is not the case in other European countries, such as Portugal, where postdocs are initially supported with 3+3 year fellowships and are encouraged to lead national projects; unlike in Spain, early postdocs are actively driven towards reaching independence. Despite being essential for the training of a scientist, the postdoctoral period in Spain is excessively long and researchers in this phase are obligated to wobble around without being able to find the stability necessary to engage in their intellectual activity. Not even the Ramón y Cajal program, which was originally created to attract researchers and to permanently hire them after 5 years (the closest to a tenure-track position) is a means to a stable job since in many cases, despite academic excellence, the promised hiring never occurs (Pain 2012a). Finding a job in Spanish universities is also extremely difficult. These institutions are still prone to academic incest (Soler 2001) and suffer from an obsolete hiring system that thwarts competitiveness and excellence, now exacerbated by the drastic

budget cuts in research and reduction in positions available in public research institutions (Pain 2012b). Thus, today, Spanish scientists embark in a desperate search for a stable position. The situation is especially worrying for biogeographers since, like most ‘blue sky’ science, this discipline has little demand in the private sector. All of this takes place in what must be considered the most productive stage for a scientist (Jonesa *et al.* 2012), a period where the focus on one’s research should be at maximum.

Attractive returning plans such as the “retours de post-doc” program in France would help promote postdocs in Spain. And a genuine tenure-track system similar to the one that exists in USA, in which stability is contingent upon passing a scientific (and teaching) evaluation, is peremptory for the Spanish scientific system. Universities should foster research profiles in their new candidates to move towards academic excellence. Measures like these would bring some short/medium-term opportunities for postdocs in Spain and would slow down the ever more increasing trend of losing the most qualified researchers.

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