

15 August 2001

The Situation of PhD students in Poland

It is difficult to evaluate the graduate education system in Poland because its associated rules and structure keep changing. In 1999, Poland began a major reform of its higher education, but two years later Parliament has yet to put the final law into effect. By taking their time, politicians leave young Ph.D. students, like the two of us, uncertain of their present and future situations. Indeed, as the law stands today, we are neither employees nor officially recognised as students.

So, what does it mean to be a graduate 'student' in Poland? First we should point out there is a distinction to be made between students studying one of the natural sciences, like biology, medicine or veterinary medicine, which involve experimental work, and those studying the humanities, e.g. history, literature, economics, etc. Regardless of your subject, however, graduate education usually lasts a minimum of four years, with the possibility to extend into a fifth year. In our field of study - biotechnology - this time scale is possible, but requires a certain amount of luck a lot of hard work. So often, however, the initial plans of a project are changed as work progresses; sometimes the subject turns out to have been a bad choice, sometimes the supervisor changes the direction of the project, and often the source of funding dries up before the project is complete. Supervisors are constantly under pressure to apply for research grants and become full-time fund-raisers, which turns their attention away from scientific guidance. Those students who decide to embark on a graduate education should be aware that the scholarship they receive is insufficient to provide a decent standard of living - over a four year period it works out to be worth \$200 a month, and the average salary in Poland is three to four times this value. The scholarship is exempt from taxation, but at the same time it contributes nothing into a pension scheme. Furthermore, neither students nor university employees enjoy reductions, like half-price train and bus tickets.

The Polish graduate education system produces skilful, multi-purpose workers. Being a student also entails being a technician, teacher, scientist and secretary, all at the same time. We do experimental work, take care of undergraduate students, do paper work, order laboratory equipment, and often clean the glassware and prepare the solutions. Although these are time consuming activities, their diversity helps produce workers who are unafraid of any laboratory task. As graduate students, however, our work should be aimed primarily at exploration of the scientific concepts of our research projects. This requires unrestricted access to computers and the Internet, and here we face another problem. Most Ph.D. students rely on using computers at the university; they cannot afford their own for it would cost them more than four times their monthly allowance. We do have access to, and make good use of, computers in our laboratories, but there are always long queues for these. The faculty offers computers, too, but these must be shared amongst undergraduate and graduate students, and within restricted time periods. We have yet to hear about initiatives to sponsor computer systems in higher education, despite being common at secondary schools. Perhaps nobody has tried. The Internet provides the best means to reach the latest science news, recent publications and other necessary data, and although our faculty library tries to keep up to date, it can provide access only to the major journals and textbooks (there is not the money to buy new ones).

One may ask the question: why do so many young students choose to enter graduate school and pursue a Ph.D. degree? The answer is that there are many intelligent and skilled students who simply like this challenge. In addition, there is the possibility to participate in research programmes at laboratories all over the world. In many cases becoming a Ph.D. student is the only chance young biotechnologists, for example, have to continue studying and expanding their knowledge. On finishing university, a young person must decide whether to practice his/her profession or to earn a high salary. The latter usually means becoming a sales representative, because the life science companies present in Poland concentrate only on selling their products here, they do not invest in research and development. For this reason many graduates leave Poland to look for a better standard of living abroad. Sadly, in other countries there are still more opportunities than Poland can offer. We continue to hope that this situation will improve in the foreseeable future. Our government and politicians must understand that well-educated Polish scientists would wish to work in Poland, but they need to be guaranteed a stable future.

Andrea Ciesielska

Marcin Lipinski

Department of Molecular Virology

Intercollegiate Faculty of Biotechnology

University of Gdansk and Medical University of Gdansk

ul. Kladki 24, 80-822 Gdansk Poland
E-mail: marlip@biotech.univ.gda.pl