Relative deprivation of Civil Service scientists

SENSIBLE negotiators will use the breathing space provided by the British Government's £6-a-week pay policy to seek solutions to their long standing industrial relations problems. One such problem is that of the pay and careers of Civil Service scientists, including those employed in research councils, the UK Atomic Energy Authority and other closely related areas of employment.

Civil Service scientists are highly discontented. They have become more frustrated since the hopes raised by the Fulton Report on the Civil Service that equal opportunities would be given to specialist staffs have been seen to come to naught. It is difficult to recall a time in the past 30 years when they have so resented the comparative injustices which they suffer.

Why should this be so? The best point at which to begin is with the recruitment of staff. The Civil Service recruits graduates with a First or Upper Second Class Honours degree—and, perhaps, a second degree—separately to the two main groups, Administration and Science. Although in both cases recruits will meet the academic requirements, there is very little doubt that in practice the scientist will be the more highly qualified.

After a year or two of service the administrator, at every grade level he reaches below £12,000, at which point there is unified grading, will be paid more than his science counterpart. The difference is of the order of 3.5–5.5% at comparable salary maxima. The relationship is similar in respect of A-level entrants to each of the groups.

But this is far from the whole story. The salary differences—themselves impossible to justify and a constant source of irritation—are aggravated further by the fact that career progression in administration is greatly superior to that in science. Consider the example of the high quality graduate, with a First or Upper Second Class Honours degree. The scientist will get to Higher Scientific Officer in his late 20s (only 2.3% are under age 25), to Senior Scientific Officer in his 30s (8.6% under age 30) and to Principal Scientific Officer (£7,205) in his late 30s (0.7% under age 30). A handful will get there more quickly.

Compare this with the high quality graduate administrator. He will become a Principal (£7,450) between the ages of 28 and 32. It is hardly surprising that he gets there more quickly than most scientists. There is an additional grade (SSO) in the science structure. The administrator will, as a matter of virtual certainty, progress to Assistant Secretary (£11,000) in his early 40s.

Thus the high quality graduate administrator can normally expect to progress to a salary level some £4,000 above that of the scientist. The ratios of promotions above Assistant Secretary (£11,000) for the administrator are broadly similar to those for the Principal Scientific Officer (£7,205) on the science side but, of course, at each stage at one step higher.

The career earnings of the administrator are thus very much more than those of the scientist, as the pattern illustrates. For the situation in which neither the administrator nor the scientist progresses further than indicated—and the chances of doing so are marginally greater for the administrator—a comparison of their career earnings between the ages of 21 and 60 shows that the best administrator will receive 34% more than the scientist. A comparison for average staff shows the administrator with a 24% advantage.

In 1974 there were 1,100 vacancies for science graduates in the Civil Service proper. Posts were offered to 1,415 applicants, but only 661 actually took them up. It is very unlikely that lack of job interest or of good facilities for research were the explanation for this. There can be no doubt that pay and career prospects played a major part in the decision making. In fact, scientists would all be better off financially if they entered the Civil Service as administrators.

Yet, odd as it may seem, very real obstacles are placed in the way of scientists who wish to transfer, later in life, to administration, in spite of the good intentions of the Civil Service Department. In this the Civil Service differs from industry which draws heavily on scientists to fill posts at large.

Civil Service scientists are not obsessed with jealousy of administrators. They do not at all begrudge administrators what they have. But scientists do not see themselves as in any way inferior. They consider that the intellectual contribution of the scientist is worth at least as much by way of pay and career prospects as the contribution of the administrator. They ask no more than that there should be equality of opportunity for all Service recruits of equal ability. Could not all of us agree about that as a reasonable objective? As things are at present scientists are not even in the same race as administrators.

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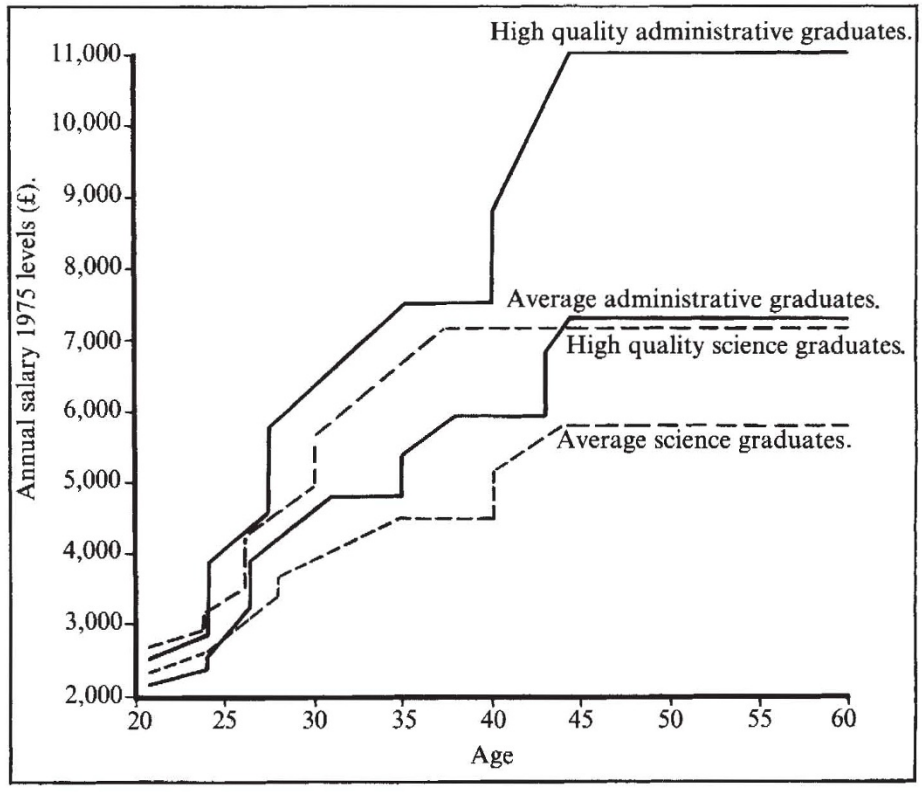

Salary expectation in UK Civil Service