

# naturejobs

**THE CAREERS  
MAGAZINE FOR  
SCIENTISTS**

**A** survey of 109 UK universities says that academic life is getting sweeter. The study, conducted by Hampshire-based Incomes Data Services for the Universities and Colleges Employers Association, says that academics are contracted to work fewer hours, have more holiday time, and better child-care policies, pension plans and sick pay than elsewhere in the public and private sectors. A related report also says that academic pay has improved in recent years, with a 30% increase between 2002 and 2007 putting the average salary at £42,588 (US\$85,000) in 2007.

This sweet spin on academic employment has left a sour taste in some mouths, however. In the *Times Higher Education Supplement (THES)* in London, Sally Hunt, general secretary of the University and College Union, said that the report used data on contracted hours rather than actual time worked, thus painting a "misleading picture". Other surveys show that academics work some 50+ hours a week, rather than the 35 hours a week the survey provided as the contracted average. In a related blog, several *THES* readers agreed, saying that they put in far more than the contracted weekly hours and often forgo holiday time in order to catch up. And when they do take leave, they often take work with them. As far as salaries go, Hunt agrees that academics' pay has increased — but she says that it still lags behind equivalent positions in the private sector.

Is this just envy speaking? Perhaps, given that academic positions are highly sought after. Some might point out that academics don't have to put in the extra hours — in return, researchers would argue that unpaid overtime is mandatory if you are going to get published and win grants.

The report did find some negative spots. It warned of annual budget uncertainties that affect research staff and the proliferation of short-term contracts. These are the real factors that need addressing. Otherwise, there will be fewer academics in permanent positions left to quibble about their hours and more researchers working longer and harder to fight for less funding. ■

**Paul Smaglik moderates the Naturejobs Nature Network career-advice forum.**

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