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Perceptions about postdocs

During his interview with *EMBO reports* (Wiesel T (2004) *EMBO Rep* 5: 747–750), Torsten Wiesel referred to postdoctoral fellows as “students” and “postdoctoral technicians”. We take issue with this notion, as we believe this does not adequately describe the important role of postdocs in research and because it sends the wrong message to prospective employers outside academic science. It is still widely assumed today that a postdoctoral job is an irreversible commitment towards an academic career and that any deviation from this path is the result of scientific failure. Thus, an adequate description of postdocs is crucial to promote their integration into a wider job market. The interview with Torsten Wiesel illustrates a growing awareness of this problem, and, at the same time, an apparent lack of appropriate action to improve the situation. We do not necessarily believe that referring to postdocs as “students” who are managed by an “advisor” reflects a lack of appreciation for postdoctoral researchers. However, the use of such infelicitous words is indicative of a loose academic terminology: referring to postdocs as students gives a wrong impression, which hinders attempts to

improve their professional status and pave the way towards a non-academic career.

The reality is that in many European countries, non-academic employment prospects for postdocs are still scarce. Although companies voluntarily hire graduate students, trusting them to develop into successful managers with time, postdocs are perceived as eternal students with a lack of professional skills. This does not make sense. In our view, a researcher with an academic degree and several years of work experience cannot and should not be subsumed under the broad but finite umbrella term “student”. To take full advantage of Wiesel’s tree model of job opportunities for scientists, it is therefore essential to support those who move away from their academic home country. In other words, it is necessary to send clear signals in support of mobility to non-academic employers, especially industry. This will require a concerted effort from the whole scientific community, not just young researchers. As a first step, some conventional—and in many cases misleading—perceptions about postdocs, as reflected in the interview, should be reconsidered.

Eurodoc, the European council for young researchers, thus endorses recent moves by the European Commission to define researchers according to their professional activities. The Marie Curie Fellowship programme, for instance, regards a PhD as

an early stage of a researcher’s career. It defines these researchers as “early-stage researchers”, and after four years of working experience as “experienced researchers”. If such an action can be undertaken for PhD students, it makes sense to carry it on to the postdoctoral level. This new approach is not only more accurate at describing the reality of the daily activities of PhDs and postdocs, but also more likely to improve their image, status and overall job prospects in our societies.

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doi:10.1038/sj.embor.7400304