Blavatnik Awards for Young Scientists expand into UK and Israel

Prizes of £80,000 in unrestricted funding up for grabs for best junior principal investigators

A prestigious US award scheme for junior scholars is coming to the UK and Israel, offering three exceptional researchers in each country a prize of $100,000 (£80,000) in unrestricted funding.

The Blavatnik Awards for Young Scientists have been running in the US since 2007, and started as a regional competition for outstanding postdoctoral researchers in the New York, New Jersey and Connecticut area, funded by the Blavatnik Family Foundation. In 2014, the foundation launched a national award for faculty-rank researchers in the fields of life sciences, physical sciences and engineering, and chemistry, with prize money of $250,000.

Over the past 10 years, more than $4 million has been handed out to recognise the promise of outstanding junior scholars.

Ellis Rubinstein, president and chief executive officer of the New York Academy of Sciences, which administers the programme, said that expanding to the UK was the “next logical step”.

Under the scheme, promising principal investigators under the age of 42 can be nominated by their university or research institute to be in with a chance of winning.

Each institution can nominate up to three researchers, one in each category of life sciences, physical sciences and engineering, and chemistry. Nominations open in early May and will run until late June. The winners will be announced in January 2018.

In the UK, a specially convened scientific advisory council will also be able to make nominations. Its members include John O'Keefe, the Nobel laureate and professor of cognitive neuroscience at University College London, and Jackie Hunter, former chief executive of the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council.

The winners in each category, known as Blavatnik laureates, will be selected by a jury of distinguished scientists. In the UK only, two finalists in each category will get $30,000.

Mr Rubenstein said: “The United States and United Kingdom have a long history of collaboration in science. Expanding the Blavatnik Awards to the United Kingdom, with its vast pool of rising scientific talent, is the next logical step for the next decade of the programme.”

In Israel the awards are being run in collaboration with the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities.

Past winners in the US have used their winnings to fund their research, and to start businesses and scholarship schemes.
Ruslan Medzhitov, the Sterling professor of immunobiology at Yale University who won a regional Blavatnik award in 2007, said that the accolades were “very special” because they were “given at a stage of a scientific career when recognition is most meaningful and has a long-lasting impact”.

“This was certainly the case for me,” he said. “The award given at the early stage of a scientific career not only recognises past accomplishments, but also the future promise. This provides a powerful motivation to deliver on that promise.”