

GRADUATE JOURNAL

Future echoes

Although I have at least a year left until I finish my PhD, going to the graduation parties of my friends has got me reflecting on my future. The happy faces and reminiscent moods of my colleagues make me think about what life might hold after my thesis.

The biggest decision for me and my colleagues is choosing between academia and industry. Universities have their attractions, but the grey zone between completing a PhD and becoming a full professor makes me hesitate. I believe that these years of uncertainty turn a lot of excellent people away from academia.

I feel that, if there are risks in the early stages of an academic career, I might as well take an even bigger chance and try to start a company. If that doesn't work out, I could consider a job with an established biotech or life-sciences firm. I could even see myself working in a totally different subject — as long as the people are nice and I find the work challenging and exciting.

I might not be tied to an academic future, but it nevertheless dominates my present. Before I think too far ahead I need to work on my analysis and get more content for my thesis. ■

Philipp Angerer is a second-year PhD student in biotechnology at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in Zurich, Switzerland.

Young genomicists get connected

PhD students and postdoctoral fellows around the world struggle with the same everyday problems. What technique shall I use? How do I analyse these data? Where do I find this article? Is there a course on that subject? And their advisers are often too busy to provide an immediate answer. Arguably, life would be much easier for students and postdocs if they could share their questions, insights, new ideas or problems with scientists in the same career phase. After all, their colleagues are likely to have the same problems — and maybe even the same frustrations.

In the Netherlands, the Genomics Network for Young Scientists (GeNeYouS) was set up to make such interactions happen. As a result, young researchers from all over

the country and from all parts of genomics research gather both in person and on the Internet.

The Netherlands is a small country but there is genomics research under way at more than ten universities and a range of institutes — all of which have their own specialities and expertise. As the greatest distance between any two academic institutions takes about four hours to travel, it is possible to meet people from within the network regularly.

But for everyday business, a four-hour drive is still too long. Then the GeNeYouS website is the place to be. It provides a quick reference to courses on different topics given in different institutions, an up-to-date overview of career possibilities, a calendar with GeNeYouS and genomics events, and a forum to reach out to other young researchers. It also offers a search engine for jobs.

Currently the network has more than 330 members. The website is the backbone of the network, with all information about activities freely available. In addition, the network sends out a monthly digital newsletter to all of its members.

This January, GeNeYouS held its first symposium. Lectures and workshops led by experts in the field helped the 120 young researchers gathered there to make some tough everyday decisions: how to set up a genomics experiment, how to make your academic career successful, how to get funding. Once again, young researchers from all over the Netherlands struggled with some everyday problems. But this time they did it together. ■

Simon Mooijaart is a PhD student at the Leiden University Medical Center, the Netherlands, and is the founding chairman of GeNeYouS.

♦ www.geneyous.nl

MOVERS

Paul Cataford, president, University Technologies International, University of Calgary, Canada



When the venture-capital market dried up a few years ago, Toronto-based investment banker Paul Cataford considered returning to university. "I was actually thinking about going back to school and doing some PhD research on technology transfer," he says. Instead, Cataford last month found himself at the helm of University Technologies International (UTI), the University of Calgary's technology-transfer office.

Researching the position was a valuable lesson in itself, Cataford says. When he got the initial job offer, he

examined the activities of several technology-transfer offices at Canadian universities. He found that few had launched successful spin-off companies — especially compared with the United States or Britain.

After more digging, Cataford decided that most Canadian universities had technology-transfer offices that were held closely by the university. UTI, on the other hand, was a wholly owned subsidiary but was kept "at arms length" by Calgary.

As a result, Cataford decided that UTI spin-offs would be more malleable to the influence of a technology-transfer office, just as start-ups can be shaped more by early-stage venture-capital firms than by later entries.

The switch from private to public wasn't the first drastic career change that Cataford has undergone. After first completing an engineering degree, he went into sales and marketing of computer equipment. But his penchant

for business led him to an MBA and, from there, to a finance career starting in investment banking, moving into private equity and ending up in venture capital.

Cataford realizes that the UTI job will be different from his earlier venture positions. He will have a much broader list of 'constituents' than simply investors and funded companies, including the university's faculty, its economic development board, other UTI employees and potential US partners.

And Cataford knows he faces a challenge in trying to develop a technology cluster when the region is small compared with, say, the US Bay Area. But Cataford is confident that by specializing in engineering, medical devices and global positioning technologies — all areas of expertise for Calgary — and by finding partners in the United States, UTI's arms-length relationship with its parent university will enable him to succeed. ■

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2001–02: Executive managing director, BMO Nesbitt Burns Equity Partners in Toronto
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