

Brendan Orner, a chemical biologist at King's College London, often felt alienated during his six years as an assistant professor at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. "Students called me 'Sir' and wouldn't enter the room if I held the door for them," he says. "That was quite amusing, but the problems I had with superiors were less so." In one instance, he tried to get feedback on a failed grant application. But the university research-support officer thought that Orner was asking for the names of the reviewers. "I couldn't tell him that he had misunderstood me because that would have been an impossible affront," he says.

Confucian tradition, which is influential in Singapore, holds that senior people are not supposed to be challenged publicly. Westerners often find Asian restraint unsettling — whether in business meetings or in the seminar room. "You have to tell Asian students again and again that it is OK to challenge authorities," says Ekert. "But they are beginning to embrace Western concepts of discourse — and not only in science."

Barry Halliwell, the British-born deputy president for research and technology at the NUS, regularly has coffee or lunch with new recruits to get a sense of how they are getting on, and to help to settle any problems related to research



"Things can change overnight, but if you get a good job in science, it is definitely worth going."

Neal Copeland

administration, employment contracts or lab space. "Most settle in easily," he says. The odd problem — with lab space not being ready, for example, or with missing clearances for animal experiments — can normally be resolved in a short time.

Many foreign scientists will find a stay in Singapore a scientifically rewarding and character-building experience. "We have benefitted from the opportunity to work in a culturally diverse entity like A*STAR," says Karen Mann, who maintains productive collaborations that she started in Singapore with scientists in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand.

Thompson is not yet sure where her inquiries into the nature of reality might lead her. "But Singapore," she says, "is nothing I'd wish to leave behind quickly." ■

Quirin Schiermeier is Nature's Germany correspondent.

TURNING POINT

Laura Deming

Laura Deming was working in a research lab at the age of 12. Two years later, she was admitted to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge and, at 16, she won one of the inaugural Thiel Fellowships, which encourage students to leave university and pursue business. As her fellowship winds down, Deming, now 19 and a partner at a venture-capital fund, remains devoted to pursuing anti-ageing therapies.

What prompted your interest in finding a cure for ageing?

When I was eight, my grandma had this wonderful spirit and wit, but she couldn't run around and play. I thought about all these people I know who have arthritic joints and disease, and whether there was anything that could be done to help them. If there was a way to make that happen, I wanted to work on it.

What was your first career turning point?

E-mailing molecular biologist Cynthia Kenyon at the University of California, San Francisco. She studies ageing, and I was reading about her, and thought, holy cow — someone is working on this stuff. So I contacted her and said, I'm 12, but I have to see if I could work in your lab. She was struck by my interest and let me come in as a volunteer. I experimented on genetically mutated strains of the roundworm *Caenorhabditis elegans*. Cynthia was my first mentor — she taught me how to think and be creative. She thinks as if there are no rules. Watching her changed how I am as a scientist in a very deep way. And working on this thing that I am passionate about changed my life.

What did you get from the Thiel Fellowship?

The fellowship — launched in 2010 by Peter Thiel, co-founder of PayPal — requires you to leave school and develop your business ideas with mentors in Silicon Valley, California. There is a lot of talk about human health in academic labs, but so many people in academia don't understand how the outside world works. Even graduate students don't have a picture of what happens once you make a discovery and how that could be developed into a drug. The fellowship was an extraordinary opportunity to see what happens from the venture perspective after the drug leaves the lab.

Will you return to MIT after your fellowship?

I'm a partner in the Longevity Fund in San Francisco, California, and I am going to stay in venture capital. My passion is to see that I'm getting therapies to market that will extend the



CHRISTOPHER RASCH

human lifespan. I could remain in academia and rely on a grant to support my research into those therapies, or I could see whether that research already exists, and do my best to help drugs to market.

Have you encountered age discrimination?

No. I have actually been surprised by the number of people I encounter who take me seriously. If you meet someone you might want to work with, the most important thing is that you're competent and have a good idea.

Should you take a lot of risks?

There is no downside to trying something. When I e-mailed Cynthia, the worst case was that she would read my e-mail and forget it, but the best case was that it would change my life.

What's the most effective way to network?

Find the best person in your field, think of a way that you can help them and get in touch. And don't overlook your friends. I worked with a graduate student at MIT who treated me like a true colleague, and I felt much more motivated as a result.

How can you get the most value from mentors?

Trekking out on your own is extraordinarily stupid. The best way to get ahead is to find the smart people and learn everything that you can from them. Apply those insights to what you're doing. You will avoid a lot of mistakes.

Do you have other advice for young scientists?

Be clear with yourself about what exactly you want to do in the long term. Know how you want to affect the world and what you are passionate about. Ignore boundaries and pursue what you want most to do. ■

INTERVIEW BY KAREN KAPLAN