

the pay-to-rent ratio was harsh,” she says. “In Singapore, it works out.” She says that her postdoc salary is about double what she received in San Francisco, and she’s paying about 1,000 Singapore dollars a month for a room in a three-bedroom flat that she shares with two other people.

TAKE HOLD OF YOUR FINANCES

Roberts advises scientists to research the costs of living when considering a career move. Once settled on a destination, she says, they should check out online groups, including Facebook, or university websites to find short-term housing options, whether that is a room in an flat or a campus dormitory. “That helps with the transition of going to a new city and grappling with a new market,” she says. Researchers need to understand all the housing options before committing to a long-term lease.

Those who think that they’ve found an affordable place can still run into trouble if their pay rises don’t keep pace with housing costs. “You might think you’re doing OK in the first year in a new city, but things could get tighter in year five,” Roberts says. When raising the issue with a supervisor, offer data, she advises. “If you say, ‘My rent has gone up 10%, but my stipend went up by 3%, they might listen,’” she says. “Give them real numbers.” Junior researchers also

“We’ve had people say, ‘There’s no way I can come and work with you, because it costs too much’.”

shouldn’t hesitate to talk numbers with their peers, Roberts says. It can help them to work out if they are getting value for money or to hear about other

options. Such a strategy helped Roberts to make two moves during her graduate programme that significantly reduced her rent.

Of course, choosing to work or study in a relatively inexpensive city could relieve much of the pressure. St John Smith says that he had no trouble affording a flat in Berlin while he was a postdoc at the Max Delbrück Centre for Molecular Medicine. “The science is great, and you can have a high quality of life as a normal academic.”

But with a little planning, young scientists who land a prime position in an expensive city don’t have to let housing costs get in the way of their ambitions. Ang says that she plans to return to pricey San Francisco after finishing her postdoc in Singapore. And Klamser says that she never hesitated to move to Paris. “I knew the environment here was good for research, and there was no question of dropping it because it’s expensive,” she says. “You just go.” ■

Chris Woolston is a freelance writer in Billings, Montana.

TURNING POINT

Tenacious chemist

Elena Tobolkina, from St Petersburg, Russia, followed a PhD in Switzerland with a move in 2015 to the University of Oxford, UK, for her dream postdoc in chemistry. But just one year later, the high costs of UK housing and childcare drove her out. Now she is trying to forge a career in industry.

How did your career path lead you to Oxford?

After I got my undergraduate degree in physical chemistry at St Petersburg State University, I moved to Switzerland to do my PhD in bioanalytical chemistry at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL). I published eight papers and received a patent for a mass-spectrometry technique. I completed my PhD in three and a half years, and was eight months pregnant when I graduated. While on maternity leave, I got the opportunity to work with the chemist Ben Davis at Oxford. It was a dream to get there, but a very difficult decision as my husband had a full-time job in Switzerland. We decided I would go and that we’d determine later whether he would join me or I would return.

What did you study during your postdoc?

My project was in cooperation with the French cosmetics company L’Oréal. We were creating a methodology to develop products and detect age-related skin changes from their use. I can’t overstate how much I loved my project.

Why did you leave after a year?

My postdoc salary was around £1,900 (US\$2,470) a month. Most off-campus housing requires you to rent a two-bedroom flat if you have a child, but I managed to get a one-bedroom for £1,650. That was still double what my lab-mates paid to rent a room in a large home, but with a 5-month-old I couldn’t be in a loud place. Then I needed to find childcare. As soon as I committed in March 2015 to going to Oxford, I applied for the nursery on campus — but they were full, and it would have been £1,100 per month. So when we moved in May 2015, I arranged for a nanny from Russia to come with us. But she was deported during the Christmas break. I ended up sending my daughter to my parents in Russia and flew to see her once a month. It was impossible to live on my salary and was a very stressful, difficult time. I terminated my three-year contract after one year.

What was your adviser’s response?

When I explained all my financial difficulties and that I had a child, he was shocked and extremely helpful. He suggested I write official



letters to the university, and he wrote a letter of support. He wanted me to continue but couldn’t raise my salary much.

What was the university’s response?

The big issue for housing is that postdocs are considered staff, not students, so there simply is no way to access affordable student accommodation through campus housing. The university said it was trying to increase the number of places in the nursery and was thinking of building other nursery schools, but that it would take time. As I wrote last year in *Times Higher Education*, it felt like I had to choose between my postdoc and my child.

What did you do after you left Oxford?

I worked on clinical trials related to Parkinson’s disease at the EPFL, but I left in June and started as an associate scientist at the tobacco company Philip Morris International in Neuchâtel, Switzerland. I determine whether chemicals in future liquid smoking products will be harmful for people.

Have you explored other opportunities in industry?

I was losing my motivation after leaving Oxford, but then I remembered my patent and have decided to try entrepreneurship. I took business and management classes while I was at the EPFL. My goal now is to launch a company and produce affordable technology that will help pharmaceutical or biomedical companies to run quality controls on their samples. Right now, I’m trying to create a business plan, put together a strong team and secure financing. It’s all new to me. ■

INTERVIEW BY VIRGINIA GEWIN

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.