GRADUATE JOURNAL

Seeking perspective

Most researchers get their first career tips from their supervisors. But that can be limiting — supervisors tend to skew their advice towards their own research area. Senior colleagues at meetings and conferences are another source of advice, but this relies on your networking skills and depends on who you meet.

A more formalized approach to mentoring can be beneficial. I remember a session with a professional adviser I had after I finished my undergraduate degree. He analysed my interests and abilities, and then recommended a few career paths likely to fit my personality. Unfortunately, such sessions tend not to be available at European universities. Some students are changing that, through regional clubs or international student organizations, such as the Young European Biotech Network.

With some effort, these organizations could help to promote mentoring offices within universities or organize occasional career panels with scientists from various areas. Tapping into university alumni working in industry to advise graduate students on opportunities could save work. Making those experiences available from a central source would result in a broader spectrum of subjects and therefore provide a better perspective on career options. ■

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BRICKS & MORTAR

The Partnership for Structural Biology

Partnered for proteomics: the synchrotron light source at Grenoble.

Structural biology in Europe is getting a boost from a new partnership of international laboratories all based in Grenoble, France.

The European Synchrotron Radiation Facility (ESRF), the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL), the Laue-Langevin Institute (ILL) and the Institute of Structural Biology (IBS) are combining their expertise and instruments to create a single centre for structural proteomics — the Partnership for Structural Biology (PSB). A 3,600-m^2 building, which should be built by the end of 2005, will house integrated PSB teams as well as a new institute for structural virology financed by the Joseph Fourier University in Grenoble .

The partnership brings together EMBL's expertise in molecular biology with the investigatory powers of the ESRF's third-generation synchrotron radiation source, the ILL's high-intensity neutron flux capacity and the facilities at the IBS for nuclear magnetic resonance and electron microscopy.

"Today's high-throughput structural biology requires robotics and new instrumentation. No single organization has all the necessary expertise or technology," says Stephen Cusack of EMBL and current chairman of the PSB.

The ESRF is contributing a highly automated macromolecular crystallography beamline to the partnership. "Researchers will have more time to concentrate on the science if they can be freed from tedious jobs through automation," says Sine Larsen, life-sciences director at the synchrotron.

Through the PSB, all of the participating institutes are increasing their commitment to structural biology to meet modern challenges in the field. For example, the ILL plans to increase its life-sciences research from the current 5–10% to 25% of its activity. ■

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http://psb.esrf.fr

MOVERS

William Chia, director, Temasek Life Sciences Laboratory, Singapore

When developmental biologist William Chia returns to Singapore this May, he is hopeful that his previous experience in the city-state will help him to distance a resurrected institute from its fractious past.

Temasek Life Sciences Laboratory (TLL) arose from the wreckage of the Institute of Molecular Agrobiology (IMA) in August 2002. Once located on the campus of the National University of Singapore, the IMA was forced to close in September 2001 amid criticism that the country — which imports most of its food — did not need agricultural research and should instead concentrate on biomedicine. Advocates of the IMA in the research community argued that the fundamental research covered more than just applied agricultural research, and many outside observers saw the episode as a clash of egos among some of Singapore's scientific élite. The IMA's 24 principal investigators were caught in the middle. In the end, half of them merged with the Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology and the other half came together to form the TLL.

Chia hopes that his combination of experience with Singapore's culture and his international perspective, gained from working in London, will allow him to help the TLL to start anew. His goal is to shape a research community that is open and keen to collaborate with researchers within Singapore and elsewhere. "I wanted to do something worthwhile for like-minded scientists," says Chia.

Chia says that the TLL has broad-ranging fields of research: "We will focus on cell biology, development and the interface between the two." To do this, TLL researchers will use "model systems across the board", Chia says. He is clear about how to avoid the ambiguity that plagued the IMA. "We will have plant research, but it is certainly not an agrobiotechnology institute," he explains.

The TLL is still recruiting, as Chia plans to expand it from the current 16 groups and 148 researchers up to 25 groups and about 200 researchers. With all this ahead of him, Chia still hopes to continue his research into the development of the nervous system. "It's a tremendous opportunity," he says. "All the resources are here." ■

CV

2001–2004: Wellcome Trust principal research fellow and professor of developmental genetics at the Medical Research Council's Centre for Developmental Neurobiology, King's College London
1998–2001: Deputy director, research and academic matters, Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology, Singapore
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