

TURNING POINT

Patrik Rorsman

Physiologist Patrik Rorsman accepted a prestigious 7-year, Can\$10-million (US\$10-million) grant to serve as the Canadian Excellence in Research Chair in Diabetes at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. But last autumn, after seven months in the post, he returned to the University of Oxford, UK, forgoing the generous funding.

What persuaded you to accept the Canadian Excellence in Research Chair?

I'm a bit of a gypsy as a scientist. I had made two other big moves before settling at Oxford. So when Alberta approached me with significant funding and plans to spend millions expanding their facilities, I was easily seduced. A former postdoc and valued colleague of mine, Patrick McDonald, is now a research star there, and the prospect of working with him again was appealing. Alberta has access to human pancreatic islet cells, which are the focus of my work. And my children would be finishing school in the United Kingdom in a few years, so my family and I thought it was a good time to move.

Describe the challenges you faced at the University of Alberta.

I had no complaints about the university or the faculty; our problems were more related to human resources. My wife, who had been promised a job in university administration, had problems negotiating holiday time — which was important to her, given that our children were to stay in the United Kingdom. Ultimately, she did not accept a position. And although my staff members were told that their immigration would be fast-tracked, several people were experiencing difficulties.

Was it a difficult decision to return to Oxford?

Yes, for several reasons: my salary was significantly higher in Canada, for example. But I enjoy being on the same continent as my wife, and she didn't want to sacrifice her career. It is unfortunate that she and the university couldn't come to an agreement. It would have been a great experience and opportunity. And, because I am Swedish, I was looking forward to being near mountains and snow. Part of me regrets that it didn't work out.

Did you create a safety net at Oxford in case it didn't work out in Canada?

Not deliberately, but a few factors left the door open. I had decided to take a year of leave from Oxford so that my family could stay in our UK home for the first year that I



was in Canada. And although I had never intended to come back, I had submitted a grant application to the Wellcome Trust biomedical research foundation before I left, as a goodwill gesture to Oxford, and ended up getting it.

Do you plan to continue collaborating with colleagues at Alberta?

I certainly hope we will continue working together in future. For example, one of my postdocs, Matthias Braun, with whom I've published almost 30 papers, came to Alberta with me, and decided to stay.

Would you encourage other nations to start a research-chair programme like Canada's?

Yes. But it takes a lot of courage, because it involves federal dollars and there will always be opposition from people who want to see the money used in other ways. But if you feel that the science needs an influx of new ideas and people, this is the programme you need. It will help to get some really good people — you need significant funding to draw international talent.

What advice would you give to people considering offers from foreign universities?

It depends on who you are and your domestic situation, but I encourage colleagues to take advantage of this perk of our profession — the thrill of living and working in a different place. One of the big problems in science is that there is too little mobility between countries. But it is important to make sure that you negotiate the most favourable terms possible. It is such an upheaval to move from one country to another. ■

INTERVIEW BY VIRGINIA GEWIN

SWEDEN

Basic-research boost

One of Sweden's largest private research funders has awarded the first 30 grants in its early-career fellowship programme. The Wallenberg Academy Fellows initiative of the Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation in Stockholm aims to "kick-start" Swedish science, especially basic research, says Göran Sandberg, the foundation's executive director. "Sweden is still performing well, but we need young people to focus on science," he says. At least 250 fellows across all disciplines will be funded. Researchers in and outside Sweden are nominated by Swedish universities, which will hire them as faculty members if they are selected. Grantees receive 7.5 million kronor (US\$1.1 million) over 5 years, with the potential for a 5-year renewal. Applications for the next round are due by 1 March.

UNITED KINGDOM

Visa policy warning

A fall in the number of students entering the United Kingdom could cause problems for graduate courses in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM), warns Universities UK (UUK) in London, which represents more than 130 institutions. According to the Office for National Statistics, 8.2% fewer international students arrived in the country in the year to March 2012 than in the previous year. The UUK says that the drop may be linked to changes that make visas harder to get. Jo Attwooll, a policy adviser for the UUK, notes that UK graduate STEM classes have tended to include a lot of non-European students. "Immigration policy could affect the number of students taking these courses and thus their viability," she says.

UNITED STATES

Graduates can go abroad

The US National Science Foundation (NSF) has expanded an international collaboration initiative for its graduate fellows. Fellows may now apply to spend 3–12 months at an institution in Norway, Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Japan, South Korea, Singapore or France, with a living allowance from the host nation and travel subsidized by the NSF. "In this era of science with more international collaboration and interdisciplinary work, we want to encourage our graduate students to step into those environments," says Maria Zacharias, a spokeswoman for the NSF. Applications must be in by 1 February; awardees will be told in April.