



AFTER YEARS OF EXTENSIVE RESEARCH,
I HAVE CONCLUDED BEYOND ANY
DOUBT THAT I NEED MORE GRANTS!

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“CAREERS IN THE LIFE SCIENCES” REPORT ON EMBO/ELSF MEETING HELD DURING SEPTEMBER 2002

“What about Europe’s forgotten young researchers”?

This provocative question was put forward during an opening keynote talk given by Gottfried Schatz at the recent EMBO/ELSF meeting on “Careers in the Life Sciences” held in Heidelberg from 11th – 13th September 2002. The sentiment behind this question is clear and may be held by a significant proportion of our current members. I, for one, have personal experience of many of my University peers and friends leaving research, not out of desire but out of frustration with “the system”. What are the contributory factors to the presently observed stunted progression in professional terms of many high-quality researchers?

I will attempt to tackle this question throughout the report from the point-of-view of individuals having completed a Marie Curie Fellowship. The report itself will be embellished by comments and observations made by some of the 42 delegates of the above-mentioned EMBO/ELSF meeting. Delegates came from a variety of backgrounds, including academic and industrial research, as well as major funding organisations and other interested parties, such as the MCFA (with myself as the representative!), Wellcome Trust, Human Frontier Science Programme, EMBO, and Science Next Wave.

Why was this meeting held? Frank Gannon of the European Molecular Biology Organisation (EMBO) provided the background. He indicated that European science is at a point of transition, with there being a pressing need to attract and retain

bright young scientists into research. While the primary core of EMBO activities involves the enhancement of science through training (e.g. Short- and Long-Term Post-Doctoral Fellowships), there is an increasing focus on the scientists themselves. Current activities specifically address issues that affect scientists, such as women in science, science and society etc. The main principle behind such EMBO initiatives is to identify the bottlenecks connected with pursuance of a career in research. In my view, EMBO perhaps represents the best role model organisation with respect to the long-term career development of life scientists. One caveat, however, is the primary restriction of EMBO assistance to essentially only the top tier of molecular biology researchers in Europe. In addition, the funding model for EMBO is completely different than that presently found at the MCFA, with the finances of the latter not incorrectly stated as being “in the doldrums”.

Julio Celis of the European Life Sciences Forum (ELSF) indicated the main aim of the ELSF is to bring together life scientists so as to facilitate the united expression of common viewpoints to governmental and other relevant structures. For example, the ELSF has been actively involved in interacting with and lobbying on the format of the upcoming 6th Framework Programme. ELSF also debates numerous ethical and policy issues.

Significant discussion was given over during the meeting to the topic of academic structures, with the current bottlenecks in career paths from post-doc to senior professor being tackled in great detail. It was clear from the meeting that considerable differences exist across Europe with respect to professional advancement. Obviously, since the MCFA represents a mobile researcher pool, this topic is of specific interest. Across Europe, major overhauls are taking place within academic organisations regarding the format of employment and promotion. It is crucial that the MCFA is in a position to put forward a unified opinion regarding such academic entry and downstream promotional routes. Many of our members have been and some still are caught in the post-doc to post-doc trap. For our organisation to be truly effective in this arena, we need perhaps to combine our efforts with other relevant organisations, such as EURODOC, to tackle apparent stumbling blocks.

While it was generally agreed that the dismantling of existing, archaic academic structures might prove difficult in the short-term, Julio Celis suggested that a vision for the future should be created. In keeping with this concept, an ideal career track system should be designed taking into account the best traits from various European and non-European academic structures. To implement any such

developed trans-European initiatives fully, is there a pressing need for an overseeing, common European Research Council? Again, the experiences of MCFA members could come into play here. We, as a group, have experienced the full spectrum of European research, as well as having had to cope with inter-country variations in academic, social and cultural life.

The issue of mentoring was also discussed at length. It is not always clear to developing researchers as to the optimum route to follow to meet one’s ambitions. Furthermore, it is useful to have an objective point-of-view and sometimes a “shoulder to lean on” at certain times during career progression. Again, the MCFA perhaps offers emerging researchers an ideal opportunity to communicate with peers who have gone through it all before, as well as those still under the same pressures as oneself.

Pay, pensions and benefits are always hot topics when two or more MC Fellows get together, and these issues were also addressed during the meeting. Tom Wilson, of the trade union NATFHE, presented data derived from the OECD (www.oecd.org) indicating that scientists are specifically disadvantaged compared to other professions. Again, the data is highly variable across Europe, with interpretation being further clouded by inter-country variation with respect to taxation and non-pay benefits. The data collected by the MCFA poll may also be a useful addition to discussion on pay and other benefits in the European context.

Several recommendations were given at the end of the meeting. Firstly, career transitions should be made clear within academia – one should know what to expect in advance. Secondly, greater tolerance of movement between academic and industry should be encouraged in both sectors. Thirdly, there should be widespread and routine implementation of career guidance and mentoring. Fourthly, compensation packages should be more clearly defined, and take into account the specific needs of mobile researchers (e.g. child care, pensions). Finally, checks should be put in place to prevent leakage of dissatisfied individuals from the system.

My daily trip to EMBO up the winding, wooded and secluded road on the outskirts of Heidelberg reminded me that the choices and routes open to a scientist along a career path are many and varied.

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