

Gradline aims to inform and entertain members in the early stages of their career in microbiology. If you have any news or stories, or would like to see any topics featured, contact **Jane Westwell** (e j.westwell@sgm.ac.uk).

PhD – what's next?

You've almost finished your PhD or maybe you've already started a postdoctoral contract. Are your thoughts turning to the future? Are you considering your next career move or maybe even the one after next? **Jane Westwell** shows how to maximize your chances of success.

More than 150 PhD students and early career postdocs were thinking about their careers when they attended the *PhD – What Next?* session at the recent SGM Meeting in Manchester. Our focus was employability or using the skills developed during research to move on in your career. Joanna Verran, Convener of the SGM Education and Training Group, chaired the workshop which started with a plenary talk on employability by Belinda Bray who is the Project Officer for UK GRAD NW Hub based in Manchester.

Employability tactics

Belinda pared down the concept of employability to getting a job and talked about the key points to consider: what type of job do you want, what skills and experience do you have already, and what skills do you need to develop to get the job you want? She emphasized the importance of reflecting carefully on what you might want from a career – likes and dislikes about work, what you are good at, what makes you get up in the morning and, importantly, what you want to avoid. Belinda then highlighted the direct skills that a PhD researcher develops and identified key transferable skills that may not be immediately obvious (troubleshooting, strategic planning, and project management). She encouraged the audience to take time out to develop skills by taking full advantage of the postgraduate development courses that all universities offer and also going on a GRADschool course. She also suggested strategies to acquire new skills such as teaching,

presenting work at conferences (by volunteering for the oral rather than poster presentation) or maybe through voluntary or part-time work. Belinda rounded off her talk with some hints on finding work and making applications. Her talk is available as a PowerPoint presentation from www.biocareers.org.uk/res.htm

Case studies

Three short presentations followed from microbiologists who have fairly recently made their next step from PhD research.

Paul Hoskisson (a recently appointed lecturer at University of Strathclyde) shared his experiences as an academic researcher. He outlined his career pathway and the actions he took to progress it. After graduating with a BSc in Applied Microbiology from Liverpool John Moores University, Paul spent 18 months working in industry. He then went back to Liverpool to do a PhD. During this time he realized that molecular biology would be a key element of microbiology in the future and decided to focus on this area. For his first postdoctoral position he identified a big research group and used email and networking to approach them. His choice of second post was guided by several considerations: what skills he needed to develop, which group had the funding to make appointments and whether or not to work overseas for a period of time. Again, networking (at an SGM meeting) helped to secure a job. Paul gave an honest assessment of the pros and cons of postdoctoral research and advised on how to make the most of it – have a purpose, don't drift into it and take advantage of any opportunities offered. Paul's talk illustrated how an enthusiasm for research coupled with planning and balanced decision-making can result in an academic post.

Our next speaker, Anne Kjerrström described the career choices that led to her current post at Pfizer Global Research and Development in Sandwich. Her school and university education was in Sweden – a different system to the UK – but the approaches she used to develop her career would work well in any situation. Anne took every opportunity throughout her education to gain research experience and followed her MSc with a 3 month project in Japan. After working for a PhD with an industrial focus at the Karolinska Institute and a 6-month postdoctoral position in Sweden, she went to a Marie-Curie funded position at Pfizer in 2003. This led to a permanent position the following year and her current post in antiviral research in 2006. Anne advised delegates to find a career that really interests them and look for opportunities; she also emphasized the need to build up a network of contacts and the advantages of having a career mentor to offer unbiased support.

Lucy Chappell (Press and Communication Officer, HPA) rounded off the talks from the perspective of a researcher who made a definite decision to move from a PhD at the Institute for Animal Health to a career outside the lab. She outlined her current role and described the variety of work it involves (dealing with press enquiries, briefing journalists, organizing interviews with experts, writing press releases, articles and reports and editing technical pieces for a non-technical audience). Lucy identified the skills she developed during her PhD (writing, presentation and technical, practical skills) and then found ways to gain some diverse non-research based experience that would help in her future job-hunting. She became a Researcher in Residence – developing teaching and communication skills to a school



audience – which led to further schools liaison work. She also wrote non-technical articles for the *IAH Bulletin* and got involved in Biotechnology YES which developed her business awareness, presentation and marketing skills. Lucy also took the opportunity to organize the IAH exhibit at the 2006 Royal Agricultural Show. Lucy's talk highlighted the importance of identifying the skills needed to change career and gave examples of how to make the most of opportunities available to many PhD researchers. She also encouraged the audience to think of ways to enhance their own skills and experience to make their application really stand out from the competition when applying for jobs.

Q, A & supper

Following the presentations, our speakers and chair formed a panel to answer questions from the audience. They were joined by three more experts: John Peberdy (Biotechnology YES), Fillipa Vance (Science Programme Manager, Wellcome Trust) and Sarah Ashworth (Postdoctoral Development Officer, University of Manchester). After some lively discussion, workshop delegates and speakers carried on networking over a buffet and wine reception. The External Relations Office is very grateful to our chair, speakers and panel members for their contribution to the success of this event and to ScienceCareers.org for their sponsorship.

Further information

www.grad.ac.uk – resources to support postgraduate researchers and information about GRADSchools

www.sciencecareers.org – job postings, career tools from NextWave, grant information, CV database, workshops and career events

www.biotechnologyYES.co.uk

www.researchersinresidence.ac.uk/trit/