The Node: a virtual coffee break for developmental biologists

Development, one of DMM’s sister journals, has recently launched a new community website to connect scientists interested in developmental biology or related fields. The website, called ‘the Node’ (http://thenode.biologists.com/), is in one sense a virtual coffee break, providing an ideal space for developmental biologists of all levels to discuss a controversial paper or exchange ideas after an exciting meeting. In another sense, the Node is a dynamic online notice board, informing the community on everything from new funding sources to employment opportunities.

When Development surveyed its readers in 2009 about the strengths and weaknesses of the journal, they were surprised by an overwhelming request for a more interactive website. So, the Development editorial team held onto this thread and began to build the tight-knit community website that developmental biologists had requested. The Node, which held its launch party at the Gurdon Institute in Cambridge, UK, in July 2010, is already showing signs of success, having received thousands of visitors.”

DMM Direct Travel Grants

An important part of a junior scientist’s career development is presenting their work at leading conferences. To support this aspect of training, DMM’s not-for-profit publisher, The Company of Biologists, helps to bring students and junior postdocs from around the world to conferences in their areas of interest through providing travel funding in the form of Direct Travel Grants.

Successful applicants can use their funding to attend a conference to give an oral or poster presentation. Alternatively, grants can be obtained to carry out a visit to another research laboratory in order to learn a new technique relevant to the applicant’s research project. Depending on whether the travel is local or international, grants range from £250–£500.

DMM would like to congratulate the recent recipients of Direct Travel Grants, who were able to attend disease-relevant meetings as a result:

- **Cheryl Cero**, to attend the 7th FENS Forum of European Neuroscience in the Netherlands (2–7 July, 2010).
- **Elysse Knight**, to attend the International Conference on Alzheimer’s Disease in Hawaii (10–15 July, 2010).
- **Abdelali Agouni**, to attend the ADA 70th Scientific Sessions in Florida (24–29 June, 2010).
- **Anita Somborac**, to attend the ATS International Conference in New Orleans (14–19 May, 2010).

For more details on Direct Travel Grants and other funding opportunities available to graduate students and junior postdocs through The Company of Biologists (which include Research Presentation Grants and Travelling Fellowships), visit http://www.biologists.com/ or email charity@biologists.com.

**Government of Canada announces ‘Superstar’ Banting Postdoctoral Fellowships**

**David Kent**

This summer, Canada’s Prime Minister Stephen Harper rolled out a new programme designed to attract the best and brightest postdoctoral fellows from across the world to complete their research in Canada. The Banting Postdoctoral Fellowship programme will distribute 70 new awards each year worth $70,000 CDN (£43,800; €52,300) annually for 2 years. These...
fellowships are established to complement the Canada Research Chair (www.chairs-chaires.gc.ca/) and the Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship (www.vanier.gc.ca/) programmes, which benefit principal investigators and graduate students, respectively.

For the Banting Fellowships, both Canadian and international applicants are eligible to apply, and up to 25% of Canadian awardees can be hosted at a foreign research institution. The fellowships are available from each of Canada’s main research councils – NSERC (www.nserc.ca), SSHRC (www.sshrc.ca) and CIHR (www.cihr.ca) – and will be available for the next 5 years for those who have completed a PhD within the last 3 years. If you have an excellent CV and would consider relocating to (or remaining in) Canada to undertake postdoctoral research, this is certainly a promising funding opportunity.

Good for some, but not for all
When successful candidates undertake their fellowship duties, they should be prepared to encounter some disgruntled colleagues, as the current situation for Canadian postdoctoral fellows is less than rosy. According to data released by the Canadian Association of Postdoctoral Scholars (http://sites.google.com/site/canadapostdoc/) in November 2009, Canada has nearly 6000 postdoctoral fellows in labs across the country, with an average salary around $40,000 CDN (£25,000; €29,900) that is fully taxable. The Banting Fellowships are a clear improvement on such low average salaries; however, they will be awarded to less than 2% of postdoctoral fellows.

Short projects only?
The Banting Fellowships are unusual in that they last for just 2 years, despite the fact that many research projects last for substantially longer periods of time, especially in the laboratory sciences. The timeline of these awards is particularly short considering that most medical science faculties at major Canadian universities require 3 or more years of postdoctoral experience for tenure-track professor positions.

Furthermore, when the fellowship expires part way through postdoctoral research, the supervisor must either convince their star candidate to take a radical pay cut of up to 40-50% to complete their research, or find extra money to maintain a wage that is well above that of a standard postdoctoral fellow – so far above that the supervisor could afford nearly two new postdoctoral fellows at the average Canadian level.

V-shaped career path
There have been 340 Vanier scholarships over the first 2 years of the programme and 1800 Canada Research Chairs over the last 10 years (170 and 180 per year, respectively). When compared with the 70 Banting awards per year, it seems that half of the best and brightest Vanier scholars disappear at the postdoctoral stage and then re-appear at the Canada Research Chair stage.

Laboratories: not professional sports clubs
Research breakthroughs occur in small increments through the hard work and dedication of teams of scientists. Governments and trainee funding bodies must understand that recruiting postdoctoral fellows is not like bringing in talent to a major sports club, where recruiting a superstar can change the fate of an entire team. Conversely, the outcome of the Banting programme is that 98% of postdoctoral team members must complete the same job as their peers while getting paid half the amount.

Overall, postdoctoral fellows in Canada are long overdue for an increase in the amount of available funding, and the Banting Fellowships will achieve this for some. Hopefully, these awards are only the first step in restructuring the entire postdoctoral fellow cadre of researchers, and Canadians in these positions will soon have better average salaries, established minimum salaries for postdoctoral fellows paid from a research grant, and scaled wages based on the number of years of research experience. This is the type of system that already exists under some smaller funding agencies in Canada (notably, the National Cancer Institute of Canada) and in numerous other countries (e.g. the United Kingdom).

In summary, although headline-grabbing ‘superstar scholarships’ might make for great politicking, they are destined to do little practical good if the majority of postdoctoral fellows working in Canada are under-supported and under-appreciated.

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