Running mad at the TAE Trainees Day 2017

Round table session with Professor Tom Solomon
by Jessica Neubauer

“All of you actually chose to talk to me?” Professor Solomon seemed honestly surprised to see the seven of us sitting around the table. Our little group consisted of men and women on almost every stage of the career path there is. A university lecturer from Cardiff; two PhD students from Italy, and Sri Lanka; a medical doctor from London; two physicians from Nigeria, and Germany, and myself a First year undergraduate student, also from Germany. All of us were very eager for Professor Solomon, who quite quickly became Tom to us, to share his piles of wisdom.

After our communal confusion about how to do this - it was his first round table session for all of us - we decided to collect a few questions and then answer them according to topic. The questions varied, just like our experience did and yet they could all be boiled down to one: How do I get what I want? Get a job, grants, acknowledgment for my work, more dime for myself and my family.

Tom shared with us what he considers to be the most important aspects to focus on along our career paths.

When first applying for a job don’t be shy to be yourself. Obviously a certain amount of professionalism is required, but if you want to get noticed show who you are and what you can do. A cover letter for instance should be the main focus of your application, it should tell your future boss about your biggest achievements and qualities and should be more than just the boring standard phrases everyone already heard far too often. As Tom liked to emphasize: “Don’t be a clone!” That also applies to your resume. The necessary basics should be well covered, but beyond that there is room for extras, which should be thoughtfully filled. Go explore and take opportunities, especially abroad (ERASMUS and other exchange programs are highly recommended), however make sure you focused, finish what you started and don’t stray too far from your subject. Extra skills, i.e. when working in the public health sector having additional experience in microbiology, can help you go forward in your career.

What we often forget in this digital age, is that even though E-Mails are quick and comfortable to write, they often get lost in the sea of messages and sometimes get ignored. So when applying, try to do it in person if possible or simply send it by post.

If you are thinking about doing a PhD, make sure to choose carefully. You will be stuck with your topic, research team and supervisor for quite some time and if you don’t enjoy it or the support you have isn’t sufficient an already difficult task will become that much harder.

And even if your supervisor is great, don’t hesitate to find mentors. Get as much advice as you can and listen to people who most agree with you.

Supervisors and mentors can also be of help when it comes to publishing papers, which in Tom’s opinion is more worth than making posters. When publishing papers there is always the question of who becomes 1st, 2nd and 3rd author. Here it is important to know your place. Seniority is not as crucial as who’s idea it was and who delivered the data. This person usually earns 1st author. After that it can go two ways: either the other authors get listed by name, in which case you are either very lucky or very unlucky; or the authors will get listed according to how much work and time they put into the project. If you feel like you’ve been cheated of your rank, feel free to approach the person responsible, but be careful not to get
on the wrong side of somebody. It's a give and take, and friends are more important than rank.

In case you are not able to publish any papers yet or help with research, write anyway, even if it's just a little blog article about a round table session with a funny professor.

Now to do all of this work, obviously one needs money. That's where grants come in handy. To get one of those you need to show the people in charge that you are worth the money. Again published papers can help with that, as well as other previous approved financial helps such as travel grants, fellowships or prizes. If that doesn't help try to become a co-applicant with a mentor, supervisor or colleague. If possible set aside money from previous grants to finance novel ideas.

After you applied for a position, got to do some research, published a few papers and got grants to support all this, a completely different kind of problem will emerge: guilt. An academic career in particular is very work intensive and you must find a way to balance research, teaching and your private life, while not feeling guilty about possibly neglecting any of it. This can be very tricky, especially if you have a family. Tom’s tip was to try to keep a schedule and have certain times when you just switch off (even you phone!).

Tom was absolutely wonderful about giving us his advice and the atmosphere was so relaxed, it felt like having a cup of coffee with a friend.

So here is a big thank you to Tom Solomon, the not so mad running Professor.

And also thank you to William W. Hope from the table next to us, who also gave us a little piece of his wisdom: “Don’t listen to what the strange man is telling you.”