

Postdoctoral Researcher Conference (EPS & LES) 2018

Conference Review

On Wednesday 20th June 2018, more than 100 University of Birmingham postdocs and research staff from the Colleges of Engineering and Physical Sciences (EPS) and Life and Environmental Sciences (LES) assembled in the Nicolson Building of the Winterbourne Gardens in Birmingham for a one-day, research conference organised by the Post-doctoral and Early Research Career and Development and Training (PERCAT) team for EPS and LES.

LES postdoc Rian Griffiths welcomed the Head of EPS, Professor Andy Schofield to open the conference. Andy offered encouraging advice, wisdom and perspective as he described his own journey in academia, including the time he spent as a postdoc. This was followed by the first scientific session of the day chaired by research fellows Alex Wilson and Doug Browning which saw the delivery of three exciting 10 minute research talks from Postdocs Yvette Eley (School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences-GEES), Paul Roberts (School of Mathematics) and Twana Haji (Schools of Engineering).



Dr Juliet Coates, Senior lecturer in Plant Molecular Genetics in the School of Biosciences (UoB), gave an insightful, amusing and personal presentation on balancing the pressures of work and family. Juliet was followed by excellent research presentations from postdocs Genora Joseph, Erik Hughes, Mary Wood and Amaury Triaud in the Schools of Engineering, Chemical Engineering, Chemistry, and Physics and Astronomy, during the second session of the day, chaired by Stefano Tommasone and Paul Roberts. Over lunch, there was a vibrant poster session, with 25 postdocs presenting their project work.



Research Fellow and Group Leader Dr Farhat Khanim introduced the Keynote Speaker, Dr Anne-Marie Coriat who is Head of Research Careers at the Wellcome Trust. Anne-Marie's presentation, "A career in research – What's ahead and how to navigate your way," gave an illuminating and insightful description of future UK and EU funding programmes with the world famous charity. There were extremely useful strong words of advice and wisdom about the do's and don'ts for researchers when applying for funding.

In the final academic session of the day chaired by postdocs Rian Griffiths and Mary Wood, research fellows Doug Browning from Biosciences, Ananda Jadhav, from Chemical Engineering and Sandra Agyapong-Badu from the School of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation Sciences delivered presentations on a range of diverse topics including recombinant protein production, Bulk nanobubbles, and the physiological effects of daily sedentary and sports activities.

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Interspersed between the research talks throughout the day were presentations about postdoctoral careers and experience from Dr Zoe Schnepf from Chemistry, Dr Alex Wilson from Physics and Astronomy, who described their postdoc journeys working in the UK and abroad. Dr Pete Noy and Dr Veemal Bhowruth from the College of Medical and Dental Sciences and from UoB Enterprise respectively, discussed their experiences of developing non-academic careers within the University. The final careers and experiences session was chaired by postdocs Sarah Lee and Anne-Marie Labandera Nadeau.



The Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research and Knowledge Transfer, Professor Tim Softley (FRS), closed the conference by describing his time as a student, a Harkness Fellow working abroad, and his more recent academic journey. Tim's presentation was honest, realistic and motivating for anyone wishing to pursue a successful career in academia. Postdoc Stefano Tommasone was on hand to help Professor Softley in the final, prize-giving, event of the conference. *The Judges Choice, Poster Award* was awarded to Michaela Gkantou from the School of Civil Engineering for her poster entitled, "Response and Design of High Performance Steel Structures." *The Delegates Choice Poster Award* was given to Michael Clancy from the School of Chemical Engineering for his poster, "Raman Spectroscopy and Traumatic Brain Injury." Both Poster Prize winners were presented with a £175 gift voucher. Genora Joseph from Civil Engineering won the *Second Prize Oral Presentation Award*, and a £100 gift voucher, for her talk, "Gone with the Wind, Understanding crop losses due to wind and rain." Postdoc Amaury Triaud delivered a fascinating description of exoplanets and the hunt for active biological processes around far away stars and was awarded *First Prize* and a £300 gift voucher for his oral presentation "The Quest for Universal Life."



Clockwise from top left: Professor Tim Softley presents certificates to Michaela Gkantou, Michael Clancy, Genora Joseph and Amaury Triaud.

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The take home messages from the presentations and personal perspectives? There is no one path to success, everyone's career path is different. Success does not mean having to work 14 hours a day, 7 days a week but that effective time-management, focus and efficiency are essential. Maximising opportunities, especially the unexpected ones, networking and advertising yourself are a key part of career progression. Importantly, establishing work:life balance are essential to a healthy, long-term, sustainable career.

We would like to thank the PERCAT Conference organising committee, especially lead coordinator Jennifer Thomson for her hard work and commitment, and all the presenters and participants who contributed to making the day a resounding success! The standard of the science was outstanding and the passion of the research fellows and students was clear to see. Whilst we acknowledge that careers in academia are highly rewarding and challenging, we hope that it is clear from the day that there is a large support network available to help early stage researchers to achieve their career goals, you just have to ask!