

## the EMBO corner



### A way forward for women in science

*EMBO's mission to promote excellence in the molecular life sciences means more than simply funding the best researchers. Improving the quality of research requires attention to the environment in which science is performed and an awareness of any obstacles that might prevent scientists from fulfilling their potential. This targeted approach takes many different forms across EMBO activities but one important example is the organisation's Women in Science Activities.*

EMBO has been following developments in this area for some time and the statistics speak for themselves. While over 50% of life science PhD graduates in Europe are female\*, the higher echelons of science paint a different picture. The majority of senior positions are occupied by men, with an average of only 15% of full professorships in Europe held by women\*. EMBO's Women in Science Activities make efforts to address this deficit, paying particular

attention to the impact of gender and family on participation in its own activities.

Continual analysis of EMBO's programmes has resulted in changes that bring greater flexibility to female applicants and more family-friendly working conditions for all scientists with children. For example, EMBO Long-Term Fellowships now include paid maternity leave and crèche support, while women returning to the bench after a break for child-care are able to take advantage of more flexible working hours. EMBO's most recent study in this area looks at the career progression of male and female applicants to the EMBO Fellowship and Young Investigator Programmes. The results of this study will be published in the coming months.

EMBO also works closely with other scientific organisations. One major example is the EC-funded SET-Routes initiative, co-ordinated by EMBL in partnership with CERN and EMBO. SET-Routes will send female science 'ambassadors' into schools and universities in an effort to encourage young women to pursue scientific

careers. As a launch pad for the new ambassadors programme, EMBO is organising an international conference. This meeting will follow on from an earlier EMBO conference, 'The Glass Ceiling for Women in the Life Sciences'. While that event took stock of the situation and gave a voice to scientists' concerns, the SET-Routes conference will take a more concrete look at how to move forward and invoke real change.

'The Way Forward' will analyse the latest findings in gender research with talks on gender stereotypes and the origin of bias, as well as discussions on quotas and committee culture. The conference will also present initiatives that are already helping women make their way in science. The most promising of these focus on changing the institutional environment to better cater for the needs of women scientists. The institutions involved are already seeing a higher retention of female scientists, as well as the added benefit of an improved working environment for all staff. The conference will also help prepare the SET-Routes ambassadors for their motivational role in Europe's schools and universities.

– Gerlind Wallon

[www.embo.org/gender](http://www.embo.org/gender)

\*European Commission: *She Figures 2006*

**SET-Routes Women in Science Conference**  
*'The Way Forward', 9-11 May 2007*  
EMBL Heidelberg  
[www.set-routes.org/conference](http://www.set-routes.org/conference)

## Tips from the experts for predoc writers

**D**emands for changes in the education system are usually effective at least a generation of students later – not so at EMBL. A recent survey among EMBL PhD students showed a strong desire for communication training, and now funds from the Marie Curie E-STAR grant allowed a first round of predocs to participate in a course on scientific writing and publishing on 21-23 March, entitled 'Effective Writing for Life Sciences Research'.

The course was organised by Matthias Hauray of EICAT together with E-STAR coordinator Britta Schläger and Julia Willingale-Theune of ELLS. "We tried to tailor it specifically to the need of PhD students and included interactive sessions on how to write a good paper, together with information on fellowship applications, and the publishing process," says Matthias.

The tutors were Jane Fraser, a freelance scientific writing trainer, Executive Editor of EMBO Journal and EMBL Group Leader Pernille Rørth, EMBO Fellowships Programme Manager Jan Taplick, and

L-r: Yawen Chen, Lukas Niedhart and Kasia Oktaba get down to a writing exercise during the course



Photo: Fabian Filipp

Guntram Bauer, Director of HFSP Fellowships. Practical sessions covered style, writing and editing exercises, different ways of presenting information, and a mind-mapping exercise.

Jane Fraser, who guided the students through abstracts, tables and figure legends, said: "It's important to get insight into scientific writing at quite an early stage of your career. You will need these skills wherever you end up in science." She taught that concise and clear writing makes the reader feel comfortable, even if he does not agree with the data. A manuscript about a huge scientific finding might end up sitting around, just because it is not written well. As key features of clear writing style are

good structure, the active voice and short sentences (15 to 20 words), she speculated: "In twenty years we will probably speak 'Globish', which will consist of a small, restricted set of 1,500 English words that everybody knows, plus specific scientific vocabulary. It will probably make language more boring, but definitely more understandable."

On the last day Pernille Rørth discussed the publishing process in scientific journals, while Jan Taplick and Guntram Bauer gave valuable guidelines on how to write a successful post-doc fellowship application. The course was very much appreciated by all attendees, and EICAT is planning more such events in the future.

– Fabian Filipp