

MOVERS

Fotis Kafatos, chairman, scientific council of the European Research Council



2005–present: Chair, insect immunogenomics, Imperial College London

1993–2005: Director-general, EMBL, Heidelberg, Germany

1982–present: Professor of biology, University of Crete, Greece

1972–82: Professor of biology, Athens University, Greece

1969–94: Professor of biology, Harvard University

Being the leader of the scientific council of the European Research Council (ERC) when it launches later this year will give biologist Fotis Kafatos the chance to pass on a favour.

One of the ERC's aims is to support independent careers for early-stage investigators; Kafatos credits mentoring by an early adviser, Tom Eisner, a Cornell University chemical ecologist, for helping him become an expert in the molecular study of developmental biology and comparative genomics.

Kafatos, who survived malaria as a child, went on to lead the consortium that sequenced the mosquito genome in 2002 and continues to work on malaria.

"A lot of what I became was due to Tom's vision of how evolution permeates all of biology," he says. "He also taught me how important it is to be a mentor to others. You give and you receive, as an exchange not with one person but with a community."

The other goals of the ERC also resonate with Kafatos and his career. One of the ERC's initial programmes is to fund established researchers' work at the interface between fields. As a young professor at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he knew that advancements would be made with interdisciplinary approaches.

"I wanted to do research in insect metamorphosis," he says. "But I realized the field would only be cracked with the help of molecular biology, and that wasn't the vision of the time. I learnt molecular biology late, but it paid off."

Kafatos hopes the ERC will help keep good researchers in Europe and lure them back from abroad, as a part-time job at the University of Athens did for him. For many years, he divided his time between there and his tenured post at Harvard. He went on to build a department and research institute in his native Crete and then to lead the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) in Germany.

When his term at EMBL ended last year, he moved to Imperial College London. He also turned 65, but that didn't mean a lot to him. "After my so-called 'retirement', I couldn't wait to get back into full-time research," he says.

Yet, even though it would require more administrative duties, the ERC job was too good to turn down. "It was a personal challenge and an opportunity to contribute to a project of vital importance for science in Europe," he says. Luckily, it will still allow for more research time than he had at EMBL, where he went on to the lab after a working day.

"I believe passionately in the ERC," he says. "That's why I'm giving it more time than I really have!"

Janet Wright

SCIENTISTS & SOCIETIES

A meeting of biomedical minds

Science is truly an international enterprise. Never was this more apparent than at the World Life Sciences Forum BioVision in Lyon, France, last April. Occurring once every two years, this meeting brings together scientists, businesspeople and policy-makers for discussion and debate on the top issues in life sciences.

Attending that conference was one of the most memorable experiences of my young scientific career. Not only did I enjoy talks by world-renowned speakers on topics ranging from agricultural sciences to vaccine development, but I also got to meet and talk to several Nobel laureates and become inspired by their remarks.

But the most mind-blowing part was being one of the 100 young PhDs and MBAs from around the world chosen to participate in the conference as BioVision.Nxt fellows. During a day-long meeting before the conference, we had stimulating discussions on current issues such as the role of pharmaceutical companies and non-governmental organizations in research and the growing global threat of bioterrorism. It was wonderful to listen to the wide range of international perspectives offered by the fellows and to hear about the fantastic things they are doing to push life science forward.

I met and befriended people such as

Gaell Mainguy, a scientist in France who is the president of the World Academy of Young Scientists. This organization seeks to increase access to science for individuals in developing countries, an issue that has always been close to my heart. I was also able to discuss the possibility of future ventures in biotech with business consultants who advise life-science companies on financial matters.

Indeed, the tremendously positive and uplifting interactions I had with the fellows and our many discussions about future directions of research encouraged me to continue striving to improve global health through my ongoing research on cancer and AIDS. I left with a greater appreciation for my role as a member of an international community of young life scientists. I stay in frequent contact with several of the fellows, sharing experiences and advice, and hope to count them as future collaborators. I would recommend any recent PhD or young biotech entrepreneur to attend this meeting and take part in the programme.

Tshaka Cunningham is a postdoctoral fellow at the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Maryland. For more information about applying to be a BioVision.Nxt fellow, contact Abigail Gemo at abigail.gemo@biovision.org.

GRADUATE JOURNAL

PhD survival guide

If you type the words 'survival guide' into any Internet search engine you will find that among many web pages dedicated to surviving the wilderness or various travel destinations, pages about making it through graduate school occur perhaps all too frequently.

Survival guides on a given topic exist because people have attempted to 'survive' the associated challenge — and have overcome significant obstacles during their quest. Based on the number of web pages dedicated to surviving graduate school, finishing a PhD is no walk in the park.

Much like climbing a mountain peak, completing a PhD will always be strenuous but, depending on the weather, the difficulty in reaching the summit will vary. Before you set out, you should check the weather forecast and make sure that your guide knows the mountain — or you may suddenly find yourself on a slippery slope. You should also make sure that you get along with your guide and that the two of you understand each other. If not, it is likely to be a very long climb to the summit — or you might not reach it at all.

With graduation in sight, it is probably no coincidence that my adviser, who is a mountaineer, has invited me to join him on an expedition to climb the world's highest active volcano the month before my dissertation defence. Andreas Andersson is final-year PhD student in oceanography at the University of Hawaii.