Interview with Prof. Ritsert Jansen, our new Dean of Talent

For modern scientists, doing experiments and getting results is not enough anymore. With universities’ budgets being cut by the government, the only way to pay for your post-docs and equipment is by getting grant money. However, the competition is tough. Special training for grant applications might just give you the little bit extra you need. This is one of the reasons why the University of Groningen has started the Talent Development Programme.

The Dean of Talent Development is Ritsert Jansen, a Professor from Bio-informatics who is not unfamiliar with this new task. Jansen is involved in the University’s mentoring programme for female scientists and published the book “How to develop your talent in science?” with Cambridge University Press in 2011. His second book “Funding your career in Science” will be published this year. Jansen has an impressive curriculum vitae as a scientist, with publications in high-impact journals and success in grant applications. Jansen is a Vici Laureate. Jansen: “Writing for grants is in the first place having a great idea, but after that financing and marketing come around”. Without financing and marketing for your research, your chances are very low of getting a grant and progressing in your career. So being able to get your research financed is very important. If not, then, as Jansen says, “you will not be able to progress.”

In the talent development programme, Jansen is joined by Margot Edens from Human Resources. Together they are building a programme to assist scientists from the post-docs level up to full professors in making the most out of their career. Jansen: “We have an honours college, a graduate school, and then it stopped”. With the Talent Development Programme Jansen wants to fill this empty space, but it is not the only purpose of the programme. As he says, “We want to take the education in personal and professional skills much more serious and make it more visible”.

As said, the competition for grants gets tougher all the time. Especially because many grants are personal grants like for example the NWO Veni, Vidi and Vici grants and the ERC starting and advanced grants. To get these grants, you are not only competing with people from your own field, but also with scientists from other fields. So as a psychologist you are competing against biologists, mathematicians, or pharmacists. And the reviewing committees are just as diverse. So how do you convince them that your idea needs to get the grant? According to Jansen, writing grant proposals is the ultimate way of writing because you give your vision about the future. Jansen: “You need to phrase it in such a way that it is plausible and exciting enough, so that the reviewers think ‘We want
to know the answer, so let’s finance this project”. Part of the Talent Development Programme is to provide courses to improve grant writing skills, but also training on how to write an excellent scientific article and more.

Although the Talent Development Programme is still under construction, there are already events up on the calendar. From May 21st till 25th, Jansen and colleagues organise a Grants Week. The programme is not fully decided upon yet, but some things are already known. Jansen: “This year a science journalist will give a workshop in writing and it looks like a Nature editor might be flown in”. Also on the programme are workshops, a day during which companies and scientists can meet, and opportunities to meet Vici Laureates and member of different committees, and more.

Overall the Talent Development Programme offers modern scientist the opportunity to develop skills, which will help them in the tough competition for grants and to maximise career opportunities. Jansen: “It is crowded if you and someone else have exciting ideas. If the other is better able to put it in words in an exciting way, you end up empty handed”.

For more information about Grants Week: www.umcg.nl/EN/Research/Events/Events/Pages/Grantsweek2012.aspx

- RENSKE BOSMAN

Website
The Talent Development Programme will have its own website up very soon. A link will be available from the University’s homepage. The website aims to improve, structure, and simplify helpful information about workshops, experts in the field, literature, etc.

Introducing new editors

> Renske Bosman

Last September I started the BCN research master’s after having finished my bachelor’s in psychology, also at the University of Groningen. In the second year of my bachelor’s, I did a research internship and this experience suddenly made continuing in research a realistic career perspective. So the next logical step on the scientific ladder was to apply for the BCN research master’s. I was so pleased that I was accepted. About a month ago I was asked to join the BCN newsletter crew, which sounded like a good opportunity to meet new people and to practise and polish my (English) writing and interviewing skills.