

lifesciences @work

A GENOMICS@WORK SPECIAL, MAY 2010

Enjoy the buzz

Winning the Venture Challenge creates a positive vibe

“Put your money where your mouth is”

Kees Recourt urges politicians to show long-term commitment

No helpdesk, but willing to help

BioGeneration Ventures provides more than money

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Dear reader,

The Dutch life sciences community is as bustling as ever. Upcoming small companies, large-scale public private partnerships, world leading academic groups, established industries, specialised research institutes and innovative government programmes together create a stimulating environment for groundbreaking research into topics that matter to us all: health, food and agriculture, safety and sustainability. But not only for research.



The Dutch life sciences environment also offers ample opportunity for generating new business activities. The knowledge generated in the various programmes and projects could and should be used to deliver new products for patients, consumers and companies. It is this process of turning research findings into tangible applications that offers a wealth of possibilities for entrepreneurs, whether established or aspiring. Even though the opportunities are there for the taking, building a successful life sciences business is a serious challenge. The combination of top-level research, substantial investments, complicated regulatory and quality requirements, long time to market and overall high risk of failure does not suit everyone. However, we are convinced that there is plenty of entrepreneurial potential. Creative, intelligent and motivated people, in many cases academic or industrial researchers, who just need some support to take the first steps towards setting up their own business.

It is for this group of people that the Netherlands Genomics Initiative (NGI) has initiated LifeSciences@work; a comprehensive programme of activities that offers support to start-up companies during the various stages of development. Starting with formulating your idea into a robust business plan, LifeSciences@work

can help you all the way through to your first dive into the world of venture capital. And we cannot emphasize this enough: LifeSciences@work is open to anyone who aims to start a life sciences company. Links with a NGI-related activity are not required.

In this LifeSciences@work special, we present the various start-up support activities through background articles, interviews and columns. Who knows, they might just give you that final push towards starting your own company. Whatever your plans are, we love to hear and look forward to helping you along the way.

Chrétien Herben
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lifesciences

Starting up a company is tricky in any sector. It is particularly tough in one that is as fast moving as the life sciences sector. The Netherlands Genomics Initiative (NGI) fully recognises this difficulty and has put together LifeSciences@work – a coherent support programme for life sciences starters. The programme initiates a series of activities and partners with existing start-up programmes. LifeSciences@work covers aspects such as coaching/training, financial support and networking activities.

www.lifesciencesatwork.nl

Find out how we can help you!

I have an idea for a new business,
What should I do next?

Get coaching!



I need to improve my business skills,
What are my options?

Get training!



I have a (draft) business plan,
How do I get my business started?

Get financing!



I have just started a company,
Where can I get answers to day-to-day issues?

Get connected!



@work

New Venture

A business plan competition to support innovative start-up companies.

The New Venture business plan competition encompasses three rounds in which you start with a solid description of your idea in round 1, followed by a feasibility study in round 2 and finally a business plan in round 3. Depending on the competition round, the preparation track includes presentation training, seminars, workshops and coaching.

www.newventure.nl

Venture Challenge

Pave your way to success

A 'must-do' opportunity for all life sciences entrepreneurs, it is the way to receive coaching and advice on essential elements of setting up a business. In two 3-day workshops, the facilitators and other 'competing' teams will challenge you to focus your business idea to create optimal customer value, and you will learn to pitch your business case. At the end of the Challenge, the team with the best venture plan and pitch is awarded €25,000.

www.venturechallenge.nl

Masterclass BioBusiness

For starting entrepreneurs

The Masterclass BioBusiness is an executive educational programme, specifically developed for starting entrepreneurs in Dutch life sciences. The one-year programme is a balance between developing general management- and entrepreneurial skills and learning specific life sciences business-related topics.

www.nyenrode.nl/Education/executive/

Life Sciences Pre-Seed Grant

Start tomorrow's company today

However promising the results and patents from your fundamental life sciences research may be, you will still need to convince other investors and demonstrate the business opportunities of your new technology before you can get a new company effectively off the ground. The Life Sciences Pre-Seed Grant could be your stepping stone towards commercial viability. www.preseedgrant.nl

Mibiton

Investing in equipment and facilities

The three Mibiton investment funds provide the financial resources that enable SME companies and knowledge

institutions in the life sciences sector to make use of the equipment and facilities that they require. www.mibiton.nl

BioGeneration Ventures

Investing in next generation start-ups

BioGeneration Ventures (BGV) is a seed fund for the next generation of life sciences companies. The BGV team is specialised in evaluating and managing early-stage companies. The involvement goes beyond the financial investment. BGV works closely with scientists, academic institutions, entrepreneurs and industry experts to accelerate the development and to optimise the commercial potential of the portfolio company's technologies.

www.biogenerationventures.com

yels.net

Meeting point for life sciences entrepreneurs

Yels.net is a private network of start-up and early stage life sciences companies and organisations that provide expertise or services that are relevant to this business group. As such, yels.net provides a unique environment for 'young' entrepreneurs in the life sciences to not only meet each other, but also come into contact with the established life sciences industry, investors and relevant service providers. www.yels.net

The Venture Challenge is the perfect opportunity to work on your business plan in a critical, yet stimulating atmosphere. But the benefits go beyond an improved plan. Participants also get the opportunity to build their network and raise their visibility.

Enjoy the buzz

Participating in the Venture Challenge provides useful exposure for starting companies

“Within half an hour of being named winner of the Venture Challenge, we were approached by a technology scout from a large pharmaceutical company”, says Stefan Braam, member of the winning Pluriomics team, a spin-off from the Leiden University Medical Centre (LUMC). “We also immediately made the news on the LUMC intranet site, which created a very positive vibe. The LUMC Board of Management, the LURIS team (Technology Transfer Office of Leiden University, ed.), everybody responded positively and that really helped us in getting things done.” Fellow team member Robert Passier, associate professor at the LUMC, agrees: “Especially during that first phase,

we received a lot of support. Winning the Venture Challenge definitely had a positive influence on internal discussions. It gives a certain amount of credibility to your plans, it shows that you’re not just playing around, but have the drive to make it work. What struck me is that people really appreciate the fact that you take the step towards developing an application and starting a company.”

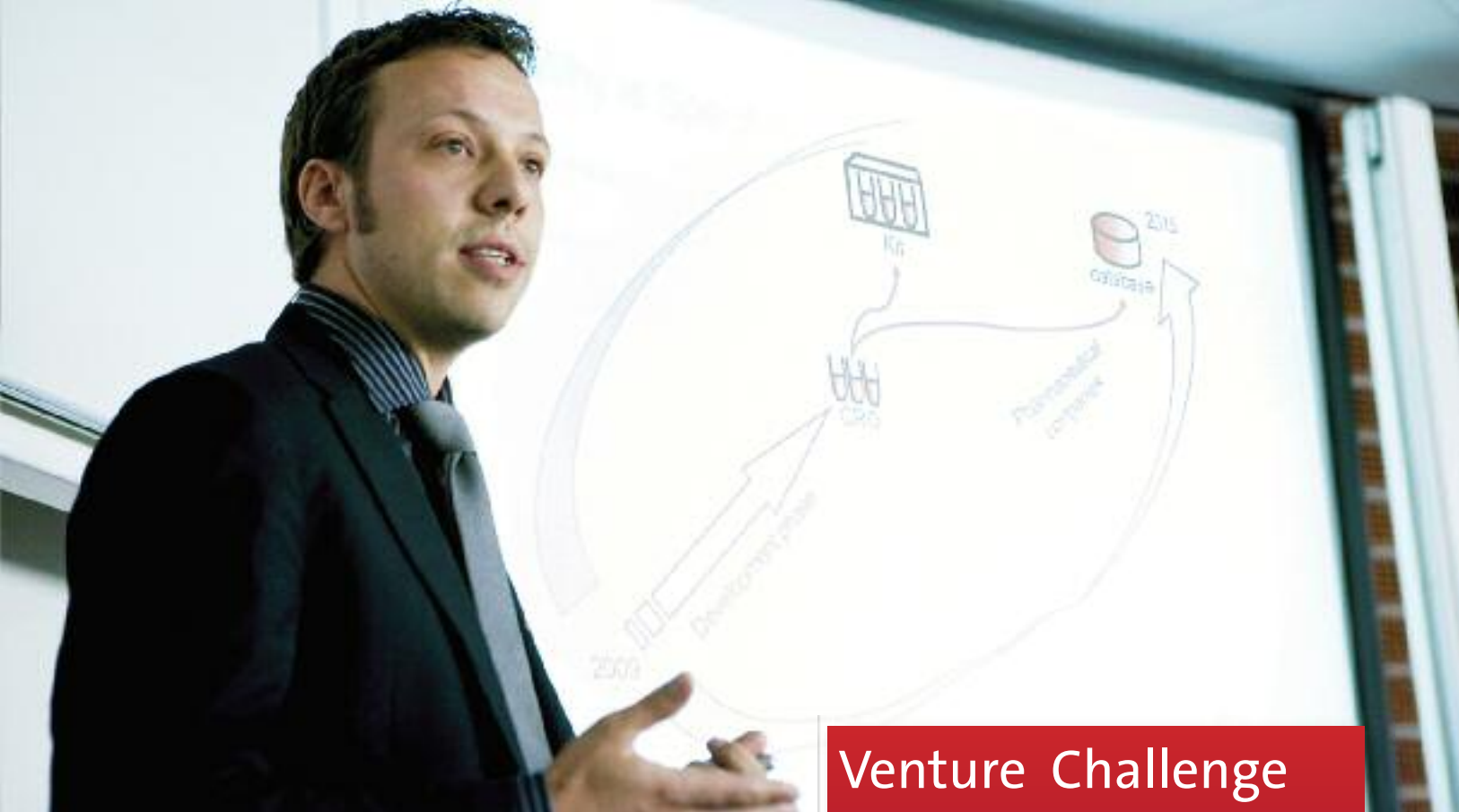
Share the drive

Pluriomics develops predictive human cardiotoxicity assays, which can be used in clinical drug development. Braam’s PhD research on embryonic

And the winner is...
Pluriomics!
From left to right
Chrétien Herben of
NGI, Anja van de
Stolpe, Ronald Dekker,
Robert Passier, Stefan
Braam and Kees
Recourt



Investors listening to Venture Challenge final



Arjan Brenkman presenting a Venture Challenge pitch

heart stem cells, in the group of Christine Mummery, forms the basis of the new venture. “Roughly two years ago, the feeling emerged that my findings offered commercial potential, that we could develop a concrete application”, Braam explains. The business side of science already had the interest of both Braam and his supervisor Passier. While the latter planned to move to industry after returning from a post-doc project in the USA, it became an academic position at the LUMC instead. According to Passier, the opportunity to set-up a new company offers the ideal solution. “I really like the combination of academic research and commercial product development. ►

Venture Challenge

- Take the first step towards establishing a new enterprise
- Hands-on atmosphere: you work on your own real-life plan, no case studies
- Two 3-day workshops
- Final pitch to expert panel, winner takes €25,000
- Excellent preparation for submitting Life Sciences Pre-Seed Grant proposal
- More info: www.venturechallenge.nl





And when you team up with people who share your drive, the whole thing really takes off”, he says. Besides Braam and Passier, the Pluriomics Venture Challenge team consisted of Anja van de Stolpe (Philips Research), Ehud Hauben (LURIS) and Ronald Dekker (Philips Research/Delft University of Technology). Just recently, Herman Spolders, former CEO of Oncomethylome Sciences, joined the Pluriomics team. Participating in the Venture Challenge 2009 was Braam’s idea. “You grab every opportunity to learn about the process from turning an idea into a company, a topic that is not addressed in the academic environment.”

Get introduced

For Jeroen Voorham and Fiebke op de Macks, both students at Delft University of Technology, the Venture Challenge 2009 offered a welcome introduction to the life sciences field. “The fact that it is specifically organised for the life sciences was the main trigger for us to sign up”, says Voorham, who is finalising his studies in Aerospace Engineering. Their venture MAXAM Medical addresses the need for better diagnosis and treatment of pelvic floor dysfunctions through the combination of an invasive probe that measures muscular activity, developed by the LUMC, and a read-out device for signal analysis and display. How did two engineering students get involved in developing a medical device? Voorham explains: “I followed a course in the Mechanical Engineering programme, the professor of which was involved in the hardware development of this probe. Coincidentally, my mother was involved in the project from the LUMC side and through her I learned that they needed a tool to analyse the data registered by the probe. I decided to take on the challenge as part of the course. While developing the software for data analysis and visualisation, I quickly realised that this could become an interesting business opportunity.” He decided to team up with Industrial Design-student Fiebke op de Macks, who is responsible for developing an easy-to-use interface for specialised physiotherapists to work with.

Interesting contacts

“The idea of starting a company always appealed to me”, says Op de Macks, “and while working with Jeroen on his plan, the content itself also got me interested.” The Venture Challenge was brought to their attention during discussions with the LUMC.

They did not expect to learn much, after having completed a course on writing a business plan organised by YES!Delft. “We had already done a lot of work and our plan was in an advanced stage, or at least so we thought”, Op de Macks admits. “But during the Venture Challenge everything was turned upside down again. We were confronted with numerous aspects that we hadn’t really considered. Thanks to the questions asked by the facilitators Hans and Matt and the other participants, all the gaps and loose ends in our plan came to light.” And although they did ►

Invest in training

Stefan Braam of Pluriomics, winner of the Venture Challenge 2009, will use part of the prize money to participate in the Masterclass BioBusiness to gain more insight into the daily practice of running a life sciences company. A good example of how the various LifeSciences@work start-up support activities complement each other.

Next step: Pre-Seed Grant

The Life Sciences Pre-Seed Grant offers a great opportunity for researchers associated with a Dutch university or research institute. Worth up to €250,000, the Pre-Seed Grant offers superb prospects for those involved in applied research and who are looking to exploit their fundamental research commercially by starting up a new business. A great way to prepare your proposal is to participate in the Venture Challenge, as is clearly demonstrated by the recent success of both Pluriomics and MAXAM Medical in securing a Pre-Seed Grant. For more information, check www.preseedgrant.nl

Fiebke op de Macks
(left) and Jeroen
Voorham of MAXAM
Medical



not win, the Venture Challenge really got things going for MAXAM Medical as well. Voorham: “We won the New Venture round 2, which is focused on writing a six-page venture plan. Without participating in the Venture Challenge we would not have done so well.” He also points to the network they have started to build. “For us, it was a good introduction to the life sciences field. We have established many interesting contacts, some of which already helped us out with some concrete issues.” “Among these new contacts are potential investors as well”, Op de Macks adds. “For most investors it is still too early, but once we have established proof of concept, we will contact them again. It is important that we have already taken the first step.”

Passing vibe

For both Pluriomics and MAXAM Medical, it is now essential to maintain the momentum. In spite of all the exposure and positive response, getting a new business off the ground takes dedication, persistence and time. Especially when the first buzz is gone, the Pluriomics team has noticed. “During the first weeks after the Venture Challenge, everybody was really cooperative. Of course, the fact we won helped us in international discussions, but also in establishing contacts with the pharmaceutical industry, for example”, says Robert Passier. “However, that positive vibe has passed and now it boils down to the nitty-gritty details. Different parties have different interests, which makes the current negotiations a tedious process. We really want to take concrete steps and get things done, but unfortunately, it is not that easy.” Pluriomics is not the first spin-off from the LUMC, doesn’t that help? Braam. “Yes, it does, but it is also clear that the whole process is not yet a routine affair.”

But they remain positive. Passier: “After all, going through a process like this is a big learning curve for all of us.” Whatever may become of Pluriomics, he will cherish the experience. “I have become much more aware of the opportunities. If Pluriomics does not meet our expectations, I am confident that, thanks to this experience, I will pick up on new leads in the future and try again. Or maybe grab new opportunities right now.”

Face the feedback

Back to the Venture Challenge. All four starting entrepreneurs featured in this article are highly positive about the set-up of the programme and the overall atmosphere. Braam: “It is very stimulating to work with your team on your plan for two periods of three days. You’re continuously confronted with critical questions and that really helps to clear things up. After a while, the road ahead appears to be much easier.” Op de Macks mentions the focus on improving your pitch. “Over and over again you have to quickly prepare your pitch, perform while being recorded and subsequently face the feedback. That really works.” When asked if they would recommend the Venture Challenge to others, Op de Macks reacts immediately: “Even better, we already did! To a group called DAISY, also students from Delft. They have developed a way to perform much more accurate measurements of the degree of squinting in children to aid eye surgery.” Another interesting topic that goes to show the diversity of the life sciences field and the scope of the Venture Challenge. Venture Challenge is organised twice a year, more details are available on www.venturechallenge.nl

Entrepreneurial human capital requires long-term investments!



Kees Recourt

Investment Manager, Mibiton
Owner of Recourt Life Sciences

By 2016, 30% of new businesses in the Netherlands should consist of innovative start-up companies. This is one of the ambitions unfolded in the recently published Dutch 'Kennisinvesteringsagenda 2011-2015' (Knowledge Investment Agenda) and an essential step in getting the Netherlands back in the top-5 of most competitive economies worldwide. Present figures however indicate that the share of innovative start-ups has dropped from 21 to 17%. Obviously, we are moving in the wrong direction. How can we turn the tide?

When talking about innovative new companies, there are three elements to consider, which I always refer to as 'man, plan, poen'. Who is running the company (man), what is its business concept (plan) and where is the necessary financing coming from (poen)? Starting with the latter, we currently have around 25 investment funds operating that are either specialised in or also open to life sciences start-up companies. Together, these have invested in approximately 90 companies so far. All in all, I feel that financing start-up companies is not the most important bottleneck right now.

Moving on to the next element: the plan. It is well known that the knowledge base in the Netherlands is strong. And with the development and professionalisation of organisations like Technology Transfer Offices, we now also have the tools and services in place to turn that knowledge into new economic activities and counter the 'Dutch knowledge paradox'. Clearly, the quality of TTOs still varies considerably, but role models could help to professionalise less experienced teams.

With 'plan' and 'poen' in place, the conclusion is clear. Our highest priority should be 'man/women'. We need more people who are capable of getting innovative companies off the ground. How? Training. We need more tools for training and education of academic researchers. Courses should be about hands-on training, dealing with the practical side of setting-up new, research-driven companies and in which the trainers are people who talk from their own daily practice. An example of this type of training is the Masterclass BioBusiness, which we brought back to life about two years ago. I say 'back to life', because after a number of successful editions in the years 1998 - 2004, the plug was abruptly pulled when subsidies were terminated. To me, this is a demonstration of a typical Dutch phenomenon, in which every new initiative has to become self-supportive in a very short time. But it doesn't work that way.

Building human capital takes time, more time than the rotation times of policy and politics. Since 2000, thanks to substantial government investments, the life sciences field has built an impressive reservoir of knowledge. If we want to capitalise on those investments, we need to continue investing in the people who can generate economic value from that knowledge reservoir. Give new initiatives time to grow. Training and education are constantly needed to stimulate new generations of tech-starters and stakeholders to elevate the entrepreneurial life sciences community as a whole. Long-term commitment is needed and I really hope we will finally create stability and continuity in this respect. Politicians: put your money where mouth is. Or otherwise, please stop bothering us about reaching the top-5 of the world's most competitive economies.



Edward van Wezel

In the life of a starting company, the ongoing search for sufficient financial resources is a fact of life. Once the stage of government subsidies and starters grants has been passed, it is time to take the step towards investment funds like BioGeneration Ventures. Edward van Wezel, Managing Partner of BioGeneration Ventures, explains their investment criteria and provides tips on how to ‘sell’ your plan.

the new company. If there are problems we cannot address to our satisfaction, we may still refrain from investing however promising the technology may be.”

The general feeling is that good scientists do not necessarily make good managers as well. Do you often need to actively change the management of a venture?

“In our experience most scientists much rather keep to their academic base and dedicate part of their time to the new company. What we do see though is that sometimes researchers lack a certain amount of self-criticism. They do not always ask themselves whether their work is really as unique as they think. And they do not always realise that an investment is not a research grant. When we come on board, the environment changes. We make detailed budgets and are strict when it comes to progress reports and milestones. Getting your

How do starters get their hands on ‘your’ money?

“We look for innovative technologies that promise a successful exit for BioGeneration Ventures within a reasonable amount of time, approximately four to five years. And a successful exit usually means that a large industrial party acquires the technology and the company.”

Next to the potential of the technology, are there other aspects crucial to your investment decision?

“If we are convinced of the technology, we set out to review all other aspects of the company, such as management, organisational structure, IP issues, existing contracts with a university etc. To be honest, it is very rare that on all of these topics we find an ideal situation and in general, we will actively engage in building

Money for nothing?

BioGeneration Ventures looks for innovative ideas supported by hard data

Interview with Edward van Wezel,
Managing Partner of BioGeneration Ventures

work published in Nature is great, but not the main priority anymore. It is not always easy for researchers to get used to the new situation.”

So once the big bad investor enters, the fun is over?

“Well, let’s just say that we are not into ‘polderen’, no endless discussions to gain consensus. But when we get on board, the interests of the start-up and the investor become the same. It is definitely in our interest that the company becomes successful, because after all, we have put our money in.”

What is your view on the various NGI start-up support activities, such as the Venture Challenge and the Pre-Seed Grant?

“What I like about the Venture Challenge is that it helps starters to gain insight into the investor’s perspective and that really helps when you try to sell your plan

later on. The Pre-Seed Grant is a great instrument to enable starters to perform the essential proof-of-concept studies. This is a crucial step in the development of a new company. However attractive and innovative your idea, you really need solid data to support your claims. That is where the Pre-Seed Grant can help out. For us, this stage is generally too early to make an investment.”

Then what is the right time to knock on your door?

“That varies, but let me first emphasize that we are always interested in hearing about new ideas, even when they are still in a premature stage. Provided the idea is attractive, we are always willing to provide advice on the best approach and the mistakes to avoid. However, when it comes to investing, you need to be able to supply hard data that demonstrate the added value of your idea.”

Does this mean that every start-up can contact BioGeneration Ventures?

“Yes, you can contact us to discuss your ideas already at an early stage and we really like to stay informed on your progress. However, we are not a helpdesk that deals with everyday issues in the life of a starting company.”

**BioGeneration Ventures:
Investing in the next
generation life sciences
companies in the
Netherlands**

BioGeneration Ventures, founded in 2006, invests in Dutch start-up and early stage companies in the life sciences field. The fund is backed by NGI and NWO (the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research). ABN AMRO Capital and the holding of Leiden University act as lead investors. BioGeneration Ventures collaborates closely with Forbion Capital Partners. www.biogenerationventures.com

“A good working relationship with a company goes a long way”

Interview with Angus Livingstone

One million to get things moving

VIRGO Consortium's 3-way strategy to create a multiplier on their Valorisation Award money

The all-rounder

Valorisation Managers on their range of responsibilities

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More than just IP

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Eric Claassen explains how the
VIRGO Consortium will use the
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The all-rounder

Three Valorisation Managers
present their activities

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Dear reader,

In the life sciences field, success in business is often associated with exclusivity. It is about a strong intellectual property position, about control and about closely guarding your territory.



At the same time, the complexity of the valorisation process in the life sciences makes it impossible to do it all on your own. You need partnerships to tap into external resources, whether they are technical, organisational or financial in nature. Counter-intuitive as it may feel, exclusivity and an open attitude go hand in hand.

In this second issue of *genomics@work*, the valorisation magazine of the Netherlands Genomics Initiative (NGI), Angus Livingstone warns against a dominant role of intellectual property. Also in the other stories the need for an open mind and a willingness to share and learn pops up from different angles.

Reaching out to the life sciences community at large, NGI has set up the *LifeSciences@work* programme – a collection of start-up support activities that are open to anyone who wants to create new business in the life sciences. *LifeSciences@work* encompasses new activities, but also partners with existing start-up programmes that are relevant to the life sciences community. In our view, sharing expertise and learning from each other is the best way to stimulate innovation and develop

an overall entrepreneurial spirit. This issue of *genomics@work* therefore features *lifesciences@work*, a special on the various start-up support activities.

Just turn the magazine around to change the perspective. I hope that the various stories will inspire you to reach out to new possibilities and allow your perspective to be changed every now and then.

Chrétien Herben
Manager Valorisation,
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“Valorisation is not a cash cow”

Angus Livingstone, Managing Director of the University-Industry Liaison Office of the University of British Columbia, Canada, and a member of the NCI Valorisation Advisory Board.

Angus Livingstone, Managing Director of the University-Industry Liaison Office of the University of British Columbia, Canada, and a member of the NGI Valorisation Advisory Board, has longstanding experience in the valorisation of scientific results. “Valorisation is in an evolutionary stage of development right now. Seen from a global perspective, it is in its adolescence”, he says. “We have certainly passed infancy, but we are still a long way from a mature situation. Successful elements have been created independently at institutions all around the world and what we need to do is to bring those elements together.”

More than just IP

Angus Livingstone on building human capital and the importance of good working relationships

Learn from others

According to Livingstone, the role of universities in the innovation economy comprises five channels: people, knowledge, collaborative research, intellectual property (IP) and entrepreneurship. “A successful valorisation strategy creates an innovation ecosystem, tailored to the needs of the region and sector, which supports all of the innovation channels. These channels are not mutually exclusive.” He emphasizes that all the various elements have their place within the overall innovation chain as well as within a given sector or project. “Emphasis on any single channel will vary but you

need them all for success. Therefore, what we need to do is to assemble a toolkit of instruments and approaches, develop the human capital with the skill and judgement to recognise opportunities and apply the most appropriate tools, and give them the authority to operate.” Building that human capital takes time, because building experience takes time. That is why Livingstone underlines the need for networking. “It is important to draw in successes from elsewhere and to learn from other people’s experiences. To be able to do that, you have to build networks.” ►

Avoid micromanagement

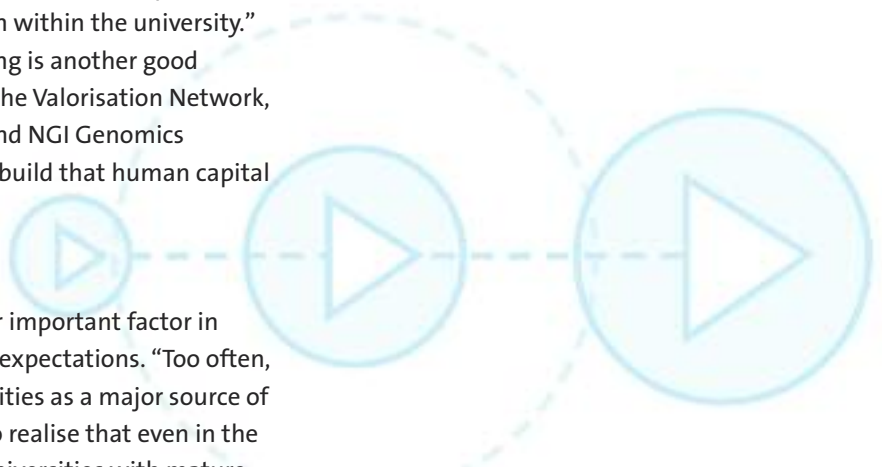
Building the necessary human capital is also a hot issue in the Netherlands right now. What are the main points to address? “It all starts with the top, meaning that you need the buy-in from university boards and management.” This obviously implies supporting Technology Transfer Offices (TTOs) through sufficient budgets for staffing and operations, but that is not all. “It also means granting them the freedom to operate. That is very important. What we often see is that TTOs are hampered in their operations because university boards are actually redoing all their work. This micromanagement wastes time and creates a serious obstacle to working with industry and investors.” Livingstone likes the NGI approach in which the NGI Genomics Centres are granted the freedom to devise their own valorisation strategy and use ‘local’ TTOs, which helps to strengthen the position of the latter. “It is a very clever strategy of NGI for various reasons. First, it recognises the great diversity between the various NGI Genomics Centres. Each consortium is allowed to devise a strategy that suits their situation best. It is also very sensible that they build on the existing expertise available within the TTOs of the respective universities that are partners in the consortium. Especially as most NGI Genomics Centres have a fixed lifetime of four or perhaps eight years, it is unwise to try and build all the expertise from scratch. Buying services from the local TTO helps them to acquire and build new expertise, which reinforces their position within the university.” The strong focus on networking is another good choice by NGI, he says. “Take the Valorisation Network, which brings together TTOs and NGI Genomics Centres. Networking helps to build that human capital we need.”

Time vs. money

Livingstone mentions another important factor in supporting TTOs: Set realistic expectations. “Too often, people view valorisation activities as a major source of income. It is therefore good to realise that even in the case of the most successful universities with mature programmes that have been operating for 10 to 15 years, revenues from valorisation amount to just 3-4% of the university’s overall research budget. It is not a cash cow and shouldn’t be approached as such. TTOs should not be too aggressive; it is much more important to quickly conclude negotiations and get to work rather than taking an awful lot of time to get

more money out of it.” This also implies that IP should not be the sole focus of the negotiations. “In many cases, IP has become an inhibitor of innovation instead of the enabler it’s supposed to be. In general, only 2% of an IP portfolio generates substantial revenues. “ IP should not become a deal-breaker. At the University of British Columbia, they therefore keep discussions on IP completely open. Livingstone explains: “All forms are possible, from a complete transfer of IP to assignment, to licences, either exclusive or non-exclusive. Always keep in mind that the value of the relationship is much more important than the perceived value of IP. A good working relationship with a company goes a long way. It provides opportunities for students to perform internships, for graduates to be hired and, when the company is successful, for sponsorship of academic activities.”

Whatever you do, do not forget that the valorisation process itself needs constant innovation as well. Livingstone: “Keep in mind that we are still on a journey of discovery and that we need to explore and learn. That is why it is very important to reward organisations that try something new. University boards should back their TTOs in the search for new strategies. Because in the end, if you cannot innovate the way you go about innovation, then you’re not leading by example.”



How to spend 1 million?

VIRGO Consortium unfolds ambitious 3-way strategy

The winner of the Valorisation Award 2009, VIRGO Consortium, has no shortage of plans to spend their prize money of €1 million. Eric Claassen, Valorisation Manager of VIRGO, explains how the money will be used towards getting a new institute off the ground, as well as providing support for entrepreneurial scientists and speeding up the development of new anti-viral drugs. Ambitious? “Yes, certainly”, says Claassen, “but we expect to realise a multiplier of 3-4 times on the award money.”



Eric Claassen, Valorisation Manager
VIRGO Consortium.
Foto: Levien Willemse

The VIRGO Consortium focuses on infectious diseases in humans and animals, with particular emphasis on respiratory tract infections like influenza. The intricate link between the health of humans and animals, both domestic and wildlife, is becoming increasingly clear. “But so far, wildlife health has been largely ignored by veterinary medicine, which has created a huge gap in our knowledge”, says Claassen. “We will use one third of the prize money to set up a new research initiative, the European

Wildlife Health Research Institute. Here, wildlife biologists, epidemiologists, pathologists and virologists will collaborate on research projects that combine knowledge from the various fields to deliver new insights on the relationship between wildlife health and the occurrence of disease in humans and domestic animals.” Will €300,000 be sufficient to set up a whole new, autonomous institute? “It is a challenge, but we are confident that this amount will provide ►



Erica Terpstra (right) member of the NCI Valorisation Advisory Board, presents the Valorisation Award 2009 to Ab Osterhaus (left) and James Simon (middle) of the VIRGO Consortium.

a good basis to obtain the necessary funds through European programmes and industrial sponsoring.”

Spark industrial interest

The second item on the list, called Vaccelerate, concerns consultancy activities to support scientists in speeding up the track from an idea to a concept that can spark industrial interest. Claassen explains: “The value chain for

vaccine development is very complicated and we see many scientists struggling to take the right steps. Bringing your idea to a point where industrial parties can be convinced of its potential requires quite a different approach than, let’s say, creating a scientific publication. With Vaccelerate, we can help people to make the right decisions sooner, which will hopefully speed up the overall development process.”

Make connections

Finally, VIRGO will use its extended industrial network to support academic groups and small companies in finding partners for the development of new anti-viral drugs. “Generally, anti-viral drugs are neglected by industry. There is a very limited flow of new anti-virals, even though we are confronted with new viruses all the time. To stimulate this area it is very important that parties are



NGI Valorisation Award

To reward excellence in valorisation, NGI has established the Valorisation Award – a yearly prize of €1 million for the NGI Genomics Centre that has demonstrated an outstanding valorisation performance.

As valorisation can take many forms, each year a specific theme will be defined. For 2009, the theme was 'excellence in deal making with industry' and the VIRGO Consortium delivered the best performance. For 2010, the theme is 'excellence in establishment and growth of spin-off companies'.

brought together at an early stage. VIRGO is in an excellent position to take the lead in this respect. We have close relationships with almost all established and starting companies in this field and we also know the academic arena very well. We thus have the ideal position to actively bring groups into contact." This service will be open to everybody active in anti-viral drug development. Claassen: "If parties need support in

identifying potential partners or making contact with industry, VIRGO can help out. After all, we did win the Valorisation Award for our deal making with industry."

The all-rounder

Valorisation Managers embody the diversity of the valorisation track

Scout new leads. Manage IP portfolios. Formulate strategic approaches. Create awareness. Stimulate scientists. For a Valorisation Manager, it's all part of a normal working day. Three Valorisation Managers from NGI Genomics Centres shed light on their role and responsibilities.

Gionata Leone

Valorisation Manager, Centre for BioSystems Genomics (CBSG)



Bernd van Buuren

Valorisation Manager, Netherlands Metabolomics Centre (NMC)



Frans van der Ouderaa

Valorisation Manager, Netherlands Centre for Healthy Ageing (NCHA)



What is your role within the Centre?

"I have been involved in the CBSG since the centre started in 2002-2003 and valorisation has been a strategic priority from the outset. In my role as Valorisation Manager I have formulated the valorisation strategy and contributed to the CBSG business plans. Alongside my activities at strategic level, my main responsibilities include training and education, aimed at creating awareness of valorisation among the researchers. Not only through 'formal' training activities like workshops and masterclasses, but also by talking informally to researchers as much as possible. Helping them when they have ideas or plans for an application and bringing them into contact with

"My role is to coordinate all aspects of the valorisation process, which includes process management, but also everything related to the output itself. In a collaborative process, together with the TTOs of the partner institutions and other partner organisations like TNO, we discuss the best approach in each particular case. All in all, it involves a lot of talking. Another important task is scouting and stimulating researchers to pick up on potential leads as soon as possible. As Valorisation Manager, you are still very close to the research itself and that enables you to quickly steer the process in the right direction, which improves the chances of success. But the NMC is still relatively young,

"The NCHA has been active for 1.5 years and while various activities have been initiated, we don't have any new insights yet that are suitable for valorisation. My main activity at the moment is finding new partners to expand the consortium. I orchestrate the meetings with potential partners, set the agenda and contribute to the consortium presentation to ensure that we hit the right note with the other party. It is very important to find out where the overlap is between the 'science sphere' of the NCHA and the 'R&D sphere' of the industrial partners. In addition, my role is to approach valorisation from a more strategic level. We aim for valorisation in three ways. First, economic valorisation with the

interested industrial partners. Other tasks include scouting new leads, managing the CBSG IP portfolio and supporting the consortium partners on valorisation issues. It is a diverse set of tasks and a dynamic field of activity. For each project, there are new aspects to be discovered and organised.”

so it is also a matter of exploring and trying new approaches to find out what works best.”

primary focus on IP that will be employed by our partners. Second, social valorisation in which we will transfer new insights directly to users and consumers, for example, through training programmes for health care professionals. Third, training activities for PhD students to educate them on IP, business aspects of science, etc.

How does your role relate to that of a Technology Transfer Office and what is the added value of a Valorisation Manager?

“What I see as the added value of the Valorisation Manager is that he operates from an independent position. My commitment is to the consortium and as such, I am less subjected to constraints or targets from the individual partner organisations. Generally, my role offers a broader perspective for action compared to that of a TTO.”

“What we have noticed so far is that when we have a technology-related lead, the contact with industry is best initiated by the NMC, because our researchers already know who to talk to. When the lead concerns a product-related application, in many cases the TTO is the right party to take the lead. We are closer to the technology, which also means that the Valorisation Manager can spot potential leads at a much earlier stage than a TTO. But as I said before, we are still new at this, we are now entering the phase where we can actually set our approaches in motion.”

“The Valorisation Manager has a more proactive role and works from a broader perspective, whereas a TTO will come into action once a researcher presents a potential lead. A TTO is more focused on the legal aspects and the technicalities of valorisation, which makes it a perfect fit with the activities of a Valorisation Manager. For the latter, it is important to be able to use the legal expertise available within a TTO.”

Do you benefit from the NGI Valorisation Network?

“Yes, the network is very useful. You meet colleagues who deal with the same type of problems, which makes sharing experiences worthwhile. But I have to say that recently the network has expanded enormously, which sometimes makes it hard to have efficient meetings. It is therefore very wise that every now and then we have dedicated meetings in smaller groups to focus on specific NGI-related issues. Another point, less serious though is that being the only ‘plant man’, I sometimes feel like the black sheep, or rather the green sheep, of the group.”

“Yes, it enables you to get to know people in your field of work, which makes it easier to approach them later on. It is also nice to meet people you already collaborate with in a different setting. And it is a great source of information.”

“I have been working abroad for 28 years, so for me the network is very useful to learn about the current situation in the Netherlands with respect to grant schemes, funding programmes etc., and to get up to date on the latest developments within NGI. It is also the right environment to exchange information on the best people to approach within industry. That is typically the kind of confidential information you need to hear through personal contacts.”