

ISMB Retreat, 30 June and 1 July 2015

The Institute of Structural and Molecular Biology (ISMB) was established in 2003 to foster collaboration between researchers in University College London and Birkbeck who work in molecular and structural biology and allied disciplines. It has established two series of biannual research meetings designed to grow these collaborations, inspire research excellence and encourage new ideas. The ISMB retreats, held in odd years, are dominated by talks by postgraduate students and young postdoctoral researchers from its core departments.

The ISMB's 6th biennial ISMB Retreat was held on Tuesday 30 June and Wednesday 1 July 2015, the fourth of its kind to take place in the tranquil surroundings of Robinson College, Cambridge. It was attended by around 120 students, post-docs and academics mainly from UCL and Birkbeck, with attendees from the Department of Biological Sciences, Birkbeck; UCL's departments of Structural and Molecular Biology, Chemistry, Computational Biology, Neuroscience, Physiology and Pharmacology and Division of Medicine; and from the NIMR's Divisions of Physical Biochemistry and Molecular Structure. Ten members of Science-related non-academic companies also attended.



The programme of science included three keynote lectures by senior researchers: Professor Roger Williams from the MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology, who opened the Retreat with a talk on 'Dynamics of Lipid Signalling on Membranes'; Professor Elizabeth Shephard from UCL's Research Department of Structural and Molecular Biology who opened day 2 with a presentation on 'FMOs in Health and Disease: Molecular Biology Meets Metabolism' and Professor Sarah O'Connor from the John Innes Centre, who spoke on 'Understanding and Engineering Natural Products from Plants'.

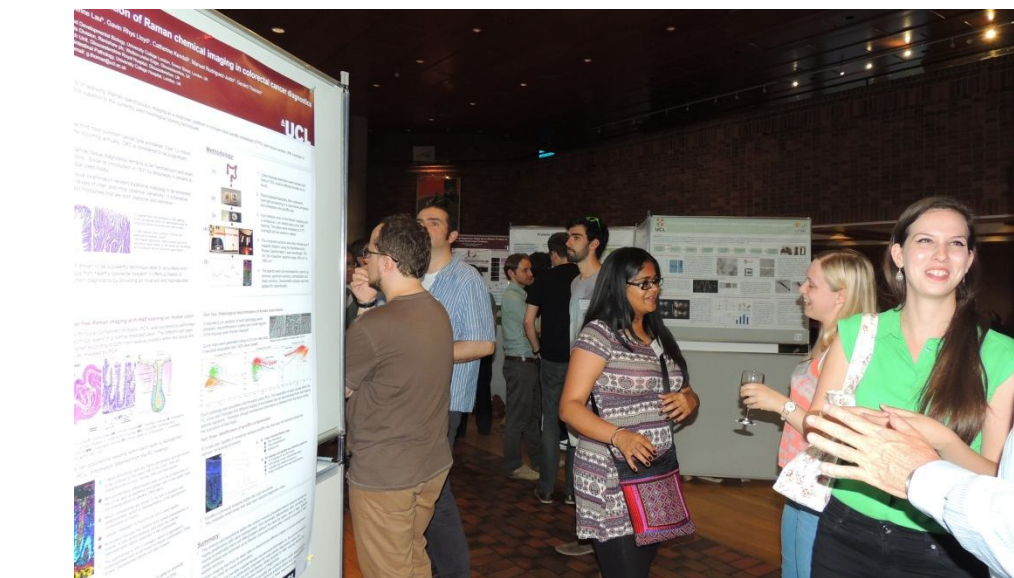


L-R: Prof Roger Williams, Prof Elizabeth Shephard and Prof Sarah O'Connor delivered keynote talks

The programme also featured ten short talks by final-year students on the ISMB's Wellcome Trust interdisciplinary PhD programme and post-doctoral researchers from the institute.

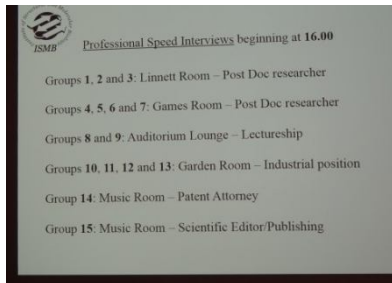


An evening poster session and an activity, "Professional Speed Interviews", which was designed to expose the younger delegates to a wide variety of careers in science, completed the scientific programme.



Professional Speed Interviews activity

During the afternoon of day one of the Retreat, all participants took part in a 2 hour activity designed to give PhD students and postdocs the chance to practice interviewing and pitching their science and skills for jobs they might be curious about for the future.



Post-docs and PhD students were asked in advance of the Retreat to select a job type from a list (using an online form) that they would be most interested in: a Post-Doctoral Research Assistant position, a Patent Attorney, a Biotechnology or Pharmaceutical Industry position, a Lectureship or Fellowship or a role in a Scientific Publishing or Editing company.

The attendees were then divided into groups based on their choice and were asked to prepare a short 2 minute statement about their research. Each group comprised of 3 'professionals' (staff members and external professionals from the industries relating to the jobs listed) and around 6 'candidates', who were the post-docs and students.

In each group, the staff members formed a panel and conducted mock 10 minute interviews for each student/ post-doc in turn using pre-prepared questions, with the other members of the group given chance to listen to the other mini-interviews, with opportunity for discussion about the answers given at the end of each.





The Retreat and the 'Professional Speed Interviews' activity received positive feedback from attendees. Students and post-docs who participated in the Professional Speed Interviews activity remarked on how useful they found it. Here are a few of the comments received.

"The panel were knowledgeable and helpful, quick to offer advice in an informal way without being overly critical. I very much enjoyed this aspect of the retreat."

"I feel like I learnt some interesting hints and tips during the professional speed interviews. It was good to be put on the spot with direct questions in an environment in which a job was not at stake."

"I think many people were apprehensive initially but with good interviewers it was actually a really useful experience."

"The interview was very interesting, as it gave us an idea of what the job would be like, and what kinds of questions we should think about if we wanted to apply for something similar. We were very fortunate to have somebody from the industry, which I really appreciated."