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What were the highlights of your PhD – and why?

I have had a lot of great experiences during my PhD, so a lot comes to mind. I have had the opportunity to expand my network and knowledge in my field of research while seeing new places by going to conferences and during my research visit abroad at NIH. My PhD project required me to expand my skill set and acquire new techniques. I have loved the challenge and the chance to learn these, but also I found that I enjoyed teaching these to others. However, the biggest highlight of my PhD was all the colleagues and friends I got to make. Sometimes, we forget how much our work is impacted by the people around us. Completing a PhD is tough, but having colleagues and friends who support you, laugh with you, take time to help or teach you, or be your sounding board (and sometimes feed you) makes everything easier.

How have you handled challenges and setbacks in your career, and what have you learned from these experiences?

As I mentioned, a PhD is tough! I struggled to transition from being mentored during my studies to becoming an independent researcher. Moreover, the pressure of how your career depends on your project is intense. I found that honestly communicating these struggles and worries and asking for help enabled me to find solutions to the challenges. Especially discussing and matching expectations of my PIs or collaborators alleviated a lot of stress as it gave me clear goals and often a shorter to-do list!

How have collaborations with different colleagues and mentorship relations at DANDRITE influenced your career development?

My colleagues, mentors, and PIs I've worked with during the years have always been open to giving me advice and helping me identify my strengths and interests. I have also had a great mentor, Szilard Sajgo, who was a postdoc and my daily supervisor in Keisuke's lab. Besides equipping me with a diverse technical skill set, Szilard also taught me what kind of researcher and colleague I want to be. Together, this has made me confident in the career choices I make and in my skills. Having a great network of friends, colleagues, and mentors has also led to new collaborations and career opportunities.

Describe your new job?

I've started my new job as a postdoc in Miguel Holmgren's lab at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in the US. Miguel's lab uses multidisciplinary techniques to explore the structure, biophysics, and mechanisms of ion channels and pumps. My role is to study the disease mechanisms of the Na⁺/K⁺-ATPase using a mouse model. Although I still work with mice, I've chosen a lab with different research focus, techniques, and tissue from what I know. This is definitely a challenge but also fun, as I like learning new things.

In what ways do you think the skills and experiences acquired during your time at DANDRITE contribute to your current position?

I have gained a lot of skills during my PhD and my time at DANDRITE; working in different labs have taught me technical skills, teamwork, and collaboration while the various meetings, journal clubs and poster sessions have improved my communication and way of presenting. The PhD itself has also developed my skills in project management, mentoring, teaching and becoming an independent researcher.

As I am in a new field of research, I have drawn mostly on the latter skills, although I have been able to apply some of the same techniques at my new position. Since DANDRITE labs work within neuroscience but focus on different topics and methods, I've come to rely on this expertise when designing or carrying out experiments. I learned this the hard way, when a colleague from a behaviour lab pointed out that all my video recordings of different behaviours could have been analysed automatically, had I used the correct settings. As I am currently learning brain slice electrophysiology, which is also a new technique in my lab, I therefore ask knowledgeable people around me and at DANDRITE for guidance instead of "trying to reinvent the wheel (or in Danish: den dybe tallerken)".

Where do you see yourself professionally in 5 years?

It is hard to tell as most of my career opportunities have arisen quite suddenly and coincidentally.

Currently, I like working in academia, so I have tried to keep my options open by taking a postdoc position abroad. Apart from senior positions in academia, I am also considering lab manager positions, as I automatically merged well into the role during the last years when Keisuke started his lab in Japan in parallel with running the DANDRITE lab.

For now, I have my three year contract here at NIH.

What advice would you give to others pursuing or wanting to pursue an academic career in Denmark, based on your own experiences?

My advice, no matter where in the world, is to ensure that you will fit in and enjoy the place and work by asking questions and learning about the culture, work environment and people you will be joining.

For students considering pursuing an (non-)/academic career, I want to emphasise that there is rarely no "right" or "wrong" path to the career you want. During my first years of studies, I thought my program defined which career options I had, and that I had to follow a certain path to pursue them. However, while working in the different labs, I met many colleagues with different types and degrees of education and work experience who had reached the same goal as me.