

“Alive” with a Scientist

by Maria João Leão



A unique partnership was recently established between IGC and Everything is New, promoter of “OptimusAlive!08Oeiras”, an international music and art event held just outside Lisbon, in Algés. The IGC was present at this event with a considerable number of scientists and this partnership also resulted in the sponsorship of two research fellowships for recent graduates in Biodiversity, Genetics and Evolution.

This initiative involving the scientific community, the private sector and the public in general aims to establish alternative sources of funding for research in Portugal and to contribute to a closer interaction between research centres and the Portuguese society.

At the IGC pavillion, just opposite the main stage, science, music and art mixed in an unusual way. Around eighty scientists from IGC volunteered to “speed-dating” with the visitors as a way of breaking down stereotypes of scientists, encouraging new careers in science, and involving the public in direct participation and active contribution to research. Other activities included molecular cooking with the “Cooking Lab”, interactive games and sci-art installations.

Approximately 1000 people visited this space dedicated to science and researchers. Simultaneously, at the different stages of the event plenty of music, for all ages, by outstanding bands and performers; from Gogol Bordello, Rage Against the Machine, Bob Dylan, The Do Lab, and others.

The majority of the 700 visitors answered the IGC survey. From the questionnaires returned, a large part of the visitors were between 20 and 29 years old (51%, average age of 24) or between 10 and 19 years old (30%, average age of 17).

But this partnership was about more than the three days of the event. “Everything is New” sponsored the “OptimusAlive08 Oeiras-IGC” research fellowships in Biodiversity which aim to promote crucial research for the sustainability of our planet and to secure private funding to encourage graduates to take up careers in research.

The call for these fellowships had 74 applications from young graduates around the country. The fellowships were awarded to Alexandre Leitão, 23 years old, a Biology graduate from “Faculdade de Ciências da Universidade de Lisboa” and to João Alves, 24 years old, a graduate in Applied Biology from “Universidade do Minho”.

The project that Alexandre Leitão is already working on, in the Evolution and Development team supervised by Élio Sucena, aims to tackle the evolutionary origins of immune system in collaboration with King’s College in London.

João Alves, supervised by Lounes Chikhi in the Population and Conservation Genetics team, aims to study the impact of habitat fragmentation on the genetic diversity of endangered species. This project will have collaborations with “Universiti Malaysia Sabah”, Danau Girang Field Centre and Cardiff University.

The opinions were unanimous: “this initiative was a success” and “we hope it happens again”.

GAMeets 2008 – swimming ‘home’

by Ana Godinho

At the risk of ruining the pun in the title, here’s what GAMeets actually stands for: ‘Gulbenkian Alumni Meeting’. Sometime between Christmas and New Year, former students of the Gulbenkian PhD programmes gather for a mix of socializing, scientific catching up and to discuss key issues in research and science policy.

GAMeets 2008 was about alternative careers in science, following ‘fulfilling biomedicine in Portugal’, ‘inbreeding’ and ‘deciding to return to Portugal’ in previous years. This year’s theme broadened the discussion beyond the lab walls, to the start-up, the editorial desk, big pharma, the consultancy, public health fieldwork in Mozambique. Six life science PhD’s explained their reasons for moving ‘laterally’...and one told us about

her reasons for leaving the traditional job market to become, and remain, a scientist.

A common thread ran through all the talks: that going through a PhD empowers you to look for, and conquer, equally (yet different) challenging and rewarding careers. This notion was taken up and explored during the round-table discussion. The IGC director, a McKinsey and Company consultant, the head of the biotech Biotechnol, and a COTEC executive agreed that, despite the difficulties, there are many opportunities in Portugal for ‘lateral’ career moves for PhD holders. However, the panel stressed, PhDs need to be more aggressive in approaching companies, to ‘cash in’ on the growing perception, in Portugal, of their need to industry and other areas.