

Group Leaders vs PhD Students

ISEH Headquarters

May 11, 2017

Making the Right Choice: Group Leaders vs PhD Students

Selection period has started! As a group leader, like Eirini Trompouki for instance, you wish to recruit the best graduate students. So you will have to ask yourself: *Whom of all those candidate students should I choose for my lab?* On the other hand, as a graduate student, like Stylianos Lefkopoulos, you wish to earn a PhD and need to choose the appropriate supervisor and lab. Thus, you would have to ask yourself: *Whom of all these mentors should I trust for my education and training?* Although the choices on both sides might sometimes be difficult and tricky, there are certain general criteria that could help you choose the right candidate or supervisor. **GROUP LEADERS** As a group leader you essentially always look for the following features of your future graduate student:

Motivation/Passion: No matter what you decide to do in your life, you 'd better be passionate about it, for only then do you have chances of succeeding and satisfying both yourself and the people you cooperate with. Given this together with the persistence that research demands, you should look for a graduate student who loves research and science and really wants to do a PhD. Candidates who are seeking to obtain a PhD as a stepping stone for an alternative career, have low chances of succeeding, because their drive and ambitions are related to something else than research. **Creativity and logic:** In science, it is all about being creative and able to think, as we call it, "out of the box". Should you consider all the amazing scientific discoveries so far, it is evident how important it is for a graduate student to be able to think and muse on the project question and take it one step further to the answer. This certainly demands a broad way of thinking. At the same time, logic and common sense are equally important, to keep things solid, under control and focused. **Organizational skills and independence:** These two features are crucial for a successful graduate student. Organization leads to efficient time management and avoidance of past mistakes and repetitions. Independence, on the other hand, can assure you that science will progress even in the absence of your mental or physical interference. It also builds trust between the graduate student and the supervisor, which is important for your professional relationship and interaction. **Team player/personality:** Working with a group of people means that not only you as a mentor should get along with the people in your lab. They should also get along as a group, both regarding the common good of the lab and their individual work. Choosing a joyful personality with a mentality, more or less, close to the one already established in the lab, will keep things balanced and create a happy working atmosphere in your team. **STUDENTS** But, what if you are on the other side, being a student looking for a lab to do your PhD in? As for every kind of relationship, a professional relationship is always bi-directional. So, what are the criteria you, as a candidate graduate student, take into account while searching for a prospective mentor? **Knowledge in the field/Successful past work:** After you have chosen your scientific field of interest, one of the major things you should take into account before starting your graduate studies is the

present and/or past contribution of your future mentor to this field. As a graduate student, you wish to evolve and succeed in your chosen field, in order to render your presence in the field and thus be able to aim for high goals in the future. Your mentor will play a crucial role in this since she or he will be your guide in this endeavor. Thus, your supervisor needs to be a scientist that you trust and admire regarding their knowledge and scientific impact. Admiring the person you work with will also highly motivate you and them, resulting in a constructive collaboration and successful work. **Open mind/Willingness to discuss new ideas:** Even though you are a trainee, your passion for science and basic knowledge acquired during bachelor/master studies may often lead you to the point where you come up with an idea of your own. Although this should be a feature highly appreciated by your supervisor, sometimes it happens that they might be particularly set in their ways and not open to new suggestions. Look for a supervisor who will be willing to discuss your new ideas and either allow you to explore them or explain to you thoroughly and with good reasoning why these ideas will not contribute to your project progress, so you can always benefit from it – remember, you are still a trainee. **Teaching skills/Interest in training:** Although teaching and training should be taken for granted, you might not be the high priority of your supervisor –sometimes not a priority at all. PIs balance between their and your success, which do not always go together (especially in big labs, where the mentor might rely on 3 or 4 people to perform). It is, therefore, understandable that some of the group leaders cannot keep this balance, often neglect students who need help, and invest more of their time in experienced scientists (e.g. postdocs) who will produce more data and faster contribute to the lab progress. But you, as a graduate student, need someone who will be willing and eager to train you, spend time on you, believe in you and teach you thoroughly all you need to learn to gain experience. As such, it is of crucial importance to pick the right person.

All in all, making the right choice is very important for both sides. Apart from the criteria listed above, there are numerous other factors that one could take into account, like communication between the mentor and the graduate student, which at the end of the day might just be a matter of personality and mentality. The important thing to keep in mind, however, is that trying to make your choice by strictly sticking to your criteria list, might not be a very realistic solution. Most of the time, people you meet will only fulfill some of these criteria. Thus, estimate the situation on your own, based on the overall image of the person, the alternative choices you have and ... your instinct!



Eirini Trompouki, PhD

ISEH Publications Committee Member

Group Leader

Max Planck Institute of Immunobiology and Epigenetics

Stübeweg 51, 79108

Freiburg, Germany <http://www.ie-freiburg.mpg.de/trompouki>



Stylianos Lefkopoulos

PhD Student

ISEH Member

Max Planck Institute of Immunobiology and Epigenetics

Stübeweg 51, 79108

Freiburg, Germany