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Interview

An Interview with Dr. Yuri Shavrukov

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Dr. Yuri Shavrukov

Dr. Yuri Shavrukov, Adjunct Professor, Senior Research Associate, College of Science and Engineering (Biological Sciences), Flinders University, Adelaide (Australia).

Dr. Yuri Shavrukov graduated from Novosibirsk State University in 1981, specialising in Plant Genetics. After that, for all his life, both in Russia and in Australia, he has worked only on plants in the area of genetics, genomics, genotyping and molecular markers.

1. What is Your Main Research Area? How Did You First Become Interested in It?

I still work within the same areas of plant genetics but now I am more specialised and interested specifically in the development and application of different methods of plant genotyping. It is hard to say why I focused on this area. Probably, I needed to conduct genotyping of my plants, and in doing so, I found that there are a lot of options to modify, develop and improve such methods. I always like something new and unusual. Therefore, I am exploring the further development of new methods in plant genotyping and their application.

2. Do you Offer Training or Further Education in Your Area at Your University?

Yes. We have an excellent relationship with Kazakhstan and currently, two Fellows, Ms. Sholpan Khalbayeva and Dr. Gulmira Khassanova, are working in our laboratory for one year. Sholpan and Gulmira were granted fellowships from the prestigious International Research Fund called 'Bolashak' and are supported by Kazakh Ministry of Science and Education. In Figure below with some people from our Plant Biology group at Flinders, the young lady in the blue cap between Prof. Kathleen Sole and me (both in national Kazakh costumes), is Ms. Sholpan Khalbayeva from Kazakhstan and it is she who brought these national costumes with her for us to wear during our Welcome Party for Sholpan.

Bolashak is very important, but it is not the only National or International Fund available. We can accept all (or almost all) applicants who wish to have training or a Scholarship in our laboratory at Flinders. However, it is only possible to start any discussion if the applicant can find appropriate funds. Plant genetics and molecular biology is a very expensive area and, therefore, this is only possible in the presence of external funds.

3. What Are the Biggest Roadblocks and Challenges in Your Research Work?

I want to answer this question more broadly. The biggest challenge for all researchers with a non-English background in coming to Australia is … English! Even if you have fluent every-day English and can communicate with colleagues using scientific English, it is impossible to have perfect English unless, for example, you are able to stay in Australia for a very long time and from childhood. Therefore, it is not surprising that even after 22 years of life in Australia, my children, who started their Primary School education in Adelaide, still correct me: "Dad, what you said by phone is understandable but actually is wrong! You have to say something like…". The situation is similar in our laboratory. My English is OK for communication, understanding, reading and writing. However, not one important document will go without editing by one of my friends or colleagues. English is a very complicated language…

Another big challenge is suitable communication and relationship with a Supervisor. Any person who ignores this point will be in trouble sooner or later. During my life in Australia, I have had several Supervisors who differed in principles, ambitions and behaviour in relation to other staff. However, my current Supervisor at Flinders University, Prof. Kathleen Soole is the most superior one. I am very happy not only with our perfect administrative relationship, but also our complete understanding of each other that I liken to musical instruments working together 'in unison'. One time, I visited Kathleen's office, but before I even began to talk, Kathleen said to me: "Yuri, you do not need to talk now. I know what you want to say because ***all is written on your face***". Yes, I am a very emotional person, but I never believed it possible for a person to be so shrewd as to read my thoughts on my face! Since that time, we both understand each other from 'half a word' or even without words at all. I know now that this is an excellent example of a relationship with a Supervisor, and it always helps in my life. I hope all others can find, support and work happily with such a Supervisor and use this to your advantage for future success in science.

4. Besides Your Research, Could You Please Share Us Your Publishing, Reviewing and Editing Activity?

Nobody is born a good writer. Of course, there are abilities that we inherited from our parents and progenitors. However, I want to say that our natural abilities have to be developed. Without constant exercise and efforts, no talent can be progressed. Therefore, everything is in our own hands, including attempts to write and improve our skills in manuscript preparation. There is no other way.

Some time ago, one of my colleagues informed me that he always declined all invitations to review manuscripts for any journal. To my question "Why?", he replied that this is a waste of his time. I personally disagree with him because, in general, regardless of the journal, each manuscript must be evaluated by two Reviewers. Therefore, somebody has to be a Reviewer. In this regard, I never decline the invitation and always review all manuscripts (Actually, only recently I changed my rules, just because there are too many invitations for reviewing). Yes, the reviewing process requires a lot of time, but I receive a very positive outcome too. In each manuscript, I can see how the authors prepared, described, and presented their results and text. Some manuscripts are excellent but unfortunately, these are a minority. In contrast, so many manuscripts are moderately or poorly written. In such cases, I always try to help and, if possible, make comments that can help the authors to improve their manuscript and see it published. When I am writing, I need some time to 'switch'

over my brain and read my own manuscript as a Reviewer. Importantly, this Reviewer's duty helps me a lot with writing my own manuscripts.

Regarding editing, several years ago, Prof. Rana Munns, former Editor-in-Chief of the journal 'Functional Plant Biology' (IF=2.81), shared news that she was retiring from the Editor position. I commented that I could never be a good Editor because every manuscript rejection would be a struggle for me, since I can see such a lot of hard work done by the authors. Rana agreed that this is really very hard, but it is an important and unavoidable duty to reject all manuscripts with low quality. Therefore, to be an Editor of a journal is not my 'favourite duty'.

5. As an Experienced Researcher in This Field, What Do You Consider to Be Key Aspects of Research That Apply to the Practice?

Plant Genetics is a very important area of research. Our advanced and customised methods for plant genotyping can, I hope, be directly applied for practical crop breeding. Sooner is better than later. Our research and results could be used to improve breeding programs, speed-up the selection of advantageous plant genotypes and make it cheaper. It could result in more and better foods, animal feed and plant products for pharmaceuticals and other purposes. Breeding companies have limited budgets for such study and the Government's priority is for medical research, meaning Plant Biology is always in the last position. However, to develop good methods and technologies for practical application in crop breeding, we always need a budget. We are lucky now, with good external Funds from Bolashak for two Fellows from Kazakhstan. However, it is remains unclear what will happen next, but I can only hope that the financial situation will be improved, sooner or later.

6. What Are Your Future Plans and Long-Term Research Goal?

My goal is to make a new generation of researchers who can continue our research and look beyond the current 'scientific horizon'. I am also happy to establish any research collaboration and make of that all that I can, using all my power to support it. I will appreciate and support each applicant that comes to our laboratory and in Flinders University in general.

7. What Are Your Secrets of Success for Your Life, Job and Research?

I have no particular 'secrets' for success, but in my response, I want to illustrate it in an unconventional way. This is an episode from one story that I remember from my childhood and remembering this episode always helps me.

A lady was appointed as a new Ambassador and she arrived in the destination country, for example in Sweden. On the day of the official ceremony, all new Ambassadors were to stand in line and be introduced to the Swedish King. Each Ambassador had the opportunity to say one or two sentences to the King during the handshaking. Traditionally, these were phrases like "It is very nice to stay in your country", but when the King reached the lady-Ambassador, she said something very different to him. "I visited your National Gallery, and I was very surprised to see an excellent example of embroidery made by you, Your Majesty", she said. "I also gently lifted the exposed embroidery stitches and looked on the reverse side, which is usually invisible to other people", continued the lady-Ambassador, and finally she concluded. "I found not one knot even on the reverse of the King's stitches, and I would like to establish similar smooth relationships without any

'knots' between our countries". The King was very flattered and surprised that somebody found his hobby of embroidery so attractive, but the King was more impressed how the lady-Ambassador made her important proposal to improve their relationship based on the King's embroidery stitches without knots. As a result, the mission of the lady-Ambassador was very successful.

In my life, I always tried to follow this story by making my relationships, research and teaching as smooth as possible without (or at least with minimal) unwanted 'knots'. This is perhaps the 'secret' of my life and research and I wish for all people to think upon and follow the same story.