Finding your postdoctorate position
Jacqueline Rowarth and Pam Green

In the 'good ole days', finding a post-doctorate position depended upon who your supervisors knew. Your supervisor contacted previous students and colleagues elsewhere. Arrangements were made often in ways mysterious. Such ways of working were termed shoulder-tapping and using the 'old-boys network'. It was effective in so much as capable students achieved good positions.

Networking is still the key to finding good post-doctorate positions, but now you, the student, can and should play active part. In doing so you show yourself to be industrious, prepared, motivated and so on - all those factors that impress future employers. Add to that the fact that you have completed your research successfully in a timely manner within budget, with publications, and you will be a good prospect for a postdoctorate position.

So how do you do the networking? Become visible.

Attend Departmental or School, Faculty and University seminars. Join the Society or Association of your appropriate discipline - most have a student subscription rate. Attend the local branch meetings and become an active participant (without getting involved in roles such as secretary or treasurer which can be rather more time-consuming than rewarding). Meet and talk with the senior people in the branch or committee. Discuss with your supervisor whether it is appropriate to consider offering a contribution from your work when the national conference of the organisation is announced. The local branch and national association or society may offer financial assistance to students intending to present papers at the conference - apply. Being known in the group may help a favourable decision to be made; some groups actually have 'interaction with the group' as a criterion.

Once at the conference, take time to meet people. Collect business cards and keep notes about who was who. Give out your own card if you have one or at least follow up after the conference via email- follow up with questions, requests for papers and the like. At the conference, ask questions of those who have given presentations related to your work - not in the conference session itself, but afterwards at a refreshment break when the speaker is feeling more relaxed and you will not be quite so exposed. You will be more relaxed and you will have a chance to swap details and generate a discussion.

After one or two national conferences, you may be ready for international exposure. Some societies offer funding to attend an overseas conference. The Royal Society of New Zealand does this for your first international conference. Check out the closing dates for applications - plan in advance.

When the conference programme arrives, identify the major players with whom you would like to work in the future. If you intend to follow the same line of work in your postdoctorate as in your PhD, you will know who the key people are from your literature review - they are the names that are repeated. Look up the website of the institute or university which employs them. What are their current interests? Are there any job vacancies being advertised? Do supervisor know the people and could they contact appropriate contacts to mention that you will be at the conference? Be upfront about asking for such access benefits and contacts.

At the conference, meet people, as you have done at the national conference, and talk with them. The benefit of having done the national conferences is that you will know people at the international conference, and will have people with whom to interact. Make a point of introducing yourself to the people with whom you would like to work in the future. Express interest in their work and ask about the potential
for a postdoctoral position with them. Indicate that you can add value to their work (so make sure that you have thought about how you would do this in advance). This is where the 'in time and in budget with publications' becomes very important - how much quality research can you achieve in a given time? Also indicate how you would benefit by working with them - the skills and techniques you would gain, for instance. Rampant modesty and credible flattery is required; both mean doing your homework.

Homework is also important if you are contacting somebody 'out of the blue' as e-mail messages saying 'I am very impressed by your work and would very much like to work for you. Please will you send me all your publications and do you have a scholarship' are not likely to impress the recipient - but they are common. However, genuine requests for information after even momentary meetings at a conference are more likely to prove advantageous.

Even though the researcher might not have funding immediately, the fact that you have made contact puts you in their mind. Remember that many positions are not advertised, (or are advertised within a tight timelines), so the more realistic feelers you can put out, the better.

Some positions are advertised and you should register on the appropriate list-servers. Your discipline Society, association or tertiary organisation may also advertise postdoctoral positions in their newsletters or on their websites - make sure that you look on a weekly basis. And, of course, read Education Review for more inspiration. Talking with people who have held post-doctorate positions may also be useful in terms of motivation but also tips for writing applications, and in making the right contacts as well as further explicating the timely, significant area of work that you would push forward via the position.

Altruistic funding is available from some sources: funding for research where the main aim is to benefit the country rather than the employer per se. This is funding that goes to excellent students for very good projects proposed by the student rather than the funding agency. AGMARDT fund postdoctoral fellowships connected with primary resource science. The Foundation for Research Science and Technology manage fellowships in broader areas. For both organisations, information can be found on criteria and closing dates on the appropriate websites (www.agmardt.org.nz and www.frst.govt.nz). Applications will require you to have identified the area for your future research, the people with whom you will work, and how it will benefit the country. A particular aspect that you should consider in your application is how the proposed research will extend you and your skills - an extension of your doctoral research is unlikely to score as highly as a project that adds to your skills and abilities.

Your postdoctorate is the next step in building your CV and your career. It deserves as much, and in many cases more, time and effort in laying the foundation as would be involved in applying for a job.