

Experiences at a 'most prestigious' US institute

Hire and Fire



Photo: iStock/RFried

Renowned for its reputation as an elite Genomics Institute, Peter Uetz was delighted to have successfully applied to the J. Craig Venter Institute for a position as group leader. However, far from being the promised step-up in his career ladder, Peter Uetz was brought down to earth with an almighty bump.

“I was given half-an-hour to clear my office and leave the building!” Peter Uetz suspected nothing in August 2010 as he set off to the next meeting. At the time, he was an associate professor at the J. Craig Venter Institute (JCVI) in Rockville, Maryland, where, as lab leader, he and his group were researching the functional ability of protein interaction. However, all this was suddenly history after the meeting. Instead of discussing project financing, as expected, he was handed his immediate notice.

“I was absolutely gob-smacked! Never for a moment had I expected that. I questioned what was to become of the lab, where I had five employees; it was no longer my problem, came the flippant answer. It was forbidden to communicate with my colleagues – I wasn’t even allowed into the lab to at least inform them. It was like in a bad film.” Half-a-year later, Peter Uetz still recalls his experience with a tone of incredibility. “A security guard was assigned to me to ensure I neither phoned nor talked to anyone. And that’s how they threw me out in the blink of an eye!”

Beginning of an adventure

What had been the run-up of events? Uetz’s American adventure began in 2006, when the Institute was still called TIGR (The Institute for Genomic Research). It had been founded in 1992 in Rockville, Maryland by genomics guru, Craig Venter, whose genomic sequencing career then made rapid progress. For example in 1995, TIGR researchers successfully sequenced the first genome of a free-living organism, the bacterium *Haemophilus influenza*.

In 1998, Craig Venter left TIGR to be managed by his then wife, Claire Fraser, who later employed Peter Uetz. Meanwhile, Venter and laboratory-ware supplier, Applied Biosystems, founded Celera Genomics with the intention of providing privately funded competition, pitting with its “sequencers” against the publicly financed human genome project.

With the TIGR-established “Whole Genome Shotgun Sequencing” methods his goal was to sequence the human gene faster and cheaper than any of his colleagues, who had been working on the existing human genome project for the past eight years. Instead of first concentrating efforts on generating gene maps, Venter and co. wanted to rearrange the millions of randomly generated sequences of the human genome correctly at the computer.

Craig Venter’s triumph on the human genome

His concept was successful: in 2000, Craig Venter and Francis Collins, leader of the public human genome project, together with the then US-President Bill Clinton, announced that the human genome had been decoded.

In 2001, Craig Venter and an entire page of co-authors published “The Sequence of the Human Genome” (*Science* 291 (5507): 1304–51). Francis Collins and co. published their version at the same time in *Nature* (vol. 409: 860-921).

Following Venter’s dismissal from the parent company Applied Biosystems in 2002, he drew several institutes together in 2006, including TIGR, to establish the major project “J. C. Venter Institute



(JCVI)", which has since attracted biologists and information scientists from around the world. At the two American locations in Rockville, MD and San Diego, CA emphasis is mainly on the genomic aspects of infection biology, human hereditary diseases, environmental genetics and synthetic biology, as well as bio-informatics and software development.

The Institute continues to specialise in high-throughput sequencing. In 2010 alone, groups at the JCVI published over a hundred papers – four of these in *Nature*, one of which, for example, on the genome of the fresh water polyp *Hydra* (vol. 464(7288): 592-6), and five in *Science*, such as the paper on equipping a bacterial cell with a synthetic genome, which received high-profile media attention (vol. 329(5987):52-6).

And so it followed that with the Institute's reformation, Uetz and others transferred automatically from TIGR to JCVI; his new director, Claire Fraser, left the Institute in 2007. "I always assumed that Craig disliked me because his ex-wife had employed me," Uetz commented on the personal complications at JCVI – one aspect that could plausibly have contributed to his dismissal, he believes.

Suddenly kicked-out after years

After four years at the JCVI, Uetz suddenly found himself on the street. He explains, the Institute offered no permanent employment. A so-called "offer letter", in which amongst other things, the salary was stated, replaced a contract of employment. In this way, anyone could be kicked out at any time – hire and fire – not an unusual employment practise in the USA. "Of course, I was aware of this", Uetz says, "but I assumed that my position was relatively secure, as long as I was securing my salary through grants."

One of the official reasons for sacking him was that, besides two grants from the NIH (National Institutes of Health) and one from the US Army, Uetz had also received money from the EU. "That made no sense, at all. Firstly, JCVI was informed about the EU project, secondly, it had never been a subject of discussion. If the EU grant had been a problem, I would have phoned them and explained that I couldn't accept it." However, Uetz suspects that a much greater intrigue lies behind his dismissal.

Peter Uetz relates that during the four years prior to his sacking, everything actually went swimmingly well. His projects were financed: he had received one grant from the NIH for mapping the *E. Coli* protein network and a second from the NIH to finance a bioinformatics project on the ontology of bacterial mutant phenotypes; and the US Army was paying for a basic research project dealing with the interaction of effector proteins in *Burkholderia* bacteria with human proteins. "The *Burkholderia* grant had only just been set up as I was fired," relates Uetz.

Finances and financing at JCVI...

Grants are essential at the JCVI. "The JCVI expects one to self-finance through grants. Ideally, this should be 100%. At the time, I had covered about 80% and this was fairly normal," recalls Peter Uetz. "The Institute is quite prepared to finance 15 or 20%, which more or less corresponds to your salary. They justify this accordingly by ensuring that approximately 20% of one's time is actually spent on grant-writing."

Uetz gained the EU grant that finally sealed his fate in a roundabout way, "I had applied for the EU funding in order to cover the remaining 20% and, of course, also for scientific reasons." Before Uetz began at the JCVI (then TIGR), he had worked

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at the Karlsruhe Institute for Technology (KIT); he was even employed parallel by both Institutes over a two-year period. It was during this time that he first applied for money from the EU project, “AntiPathoGN”, which was aimed at developing antibiotics to block protein interactions.

For his part Uetz had to map these protein interactions. He recalls, “That worked out quite well at the time and I informed the Venter Institute, accordingly, that I was still actively running the EU project. That was about a year ago. We then tried to have the money transferred direct to the JCVI. But due to administrative reasons this wasn’t possible; apparently, the EU wasn’t keen to do that.”

Therefore, a pragmatic solution had to be found to gain access to the money. “We subsequently set me up with a 20% position in the lab of one of our AntiPathoGN German partners, the Munich biotech company *proteros biostructures*.” The problem arose because, meanwhile, Uetz was no longer employed by the KIT in Germany, “That meant I couldn’t transfer the EU money to Karlsruhe for use there. Finally, I offered the money to a colleague at the German Cancer Research Centre (DKFZ) in Heidelberg, who was doing similar research to us. He accepted this funding, whereby the EU then transferred the money to Heidelberg.”

... and the tricks to further funding

So, despite a confusing series of events, the EU money finally landed in Uetz’s account. “This was EU funding but independent of JCVI,” he emphasises. “For this money, I offered to mentor PhD students in the USA. And indeed, a doctorate from Heidelberg spent almost a year at the Venter Institute and I received a portion of the EU money as a form of salary. That was all discussed and agreed with the JCVI. It was just unfortunate that the direct transfer of the grant never worked out.”

So much to the financial faux-pas!

The second reason, according to Uetz’s letter of notice, was that he had, without permission, used the JCVI logo on the homepage of his reptile data bank (www.reptile-database.org). Uetz and his team log taxonomical information on all living types of reptile into this database, such as snakes, lizards and tortoises. Uetz set-up this database when he was still a doctorate at the Heidelberg EMBL (European Molecular Biology Laboratory) and he continues to do this work voluntarily. Depending on Uetz’s current home base, the database was formerly called EMBL-, then TIGR- and finally JCVI Reptile Database.

“I spoke to the IT staff at the time and installed the database at the JCVI. Okay, it wasn’t official but neither did it bother anyone,” said Uetz, still surprised. “The database was run for four years like this – and suddenly it was supposed to be a problem?”

It’s not surprising that Peter Uetz doesn’t believe that he was sacked simply because of the money or the logo. He suspects that it’s rather due to a personal score, “Someone close to Craig Venter and director of a department at the JCVI, didn’t like me. I suspect that this person was the ultimate instigator behind my dismissal.”

This is not the J. Craig Venter Institute. But the answer to our request for press pictures of the building was: “Typically, we don’t provide images for stories with which we haven’t participated. Also if it’s someone who no longer works at the institute then it doesn’t seem appropriate to illustrate with many images of a former workplace. I’m sorry we can’t be of more help.”

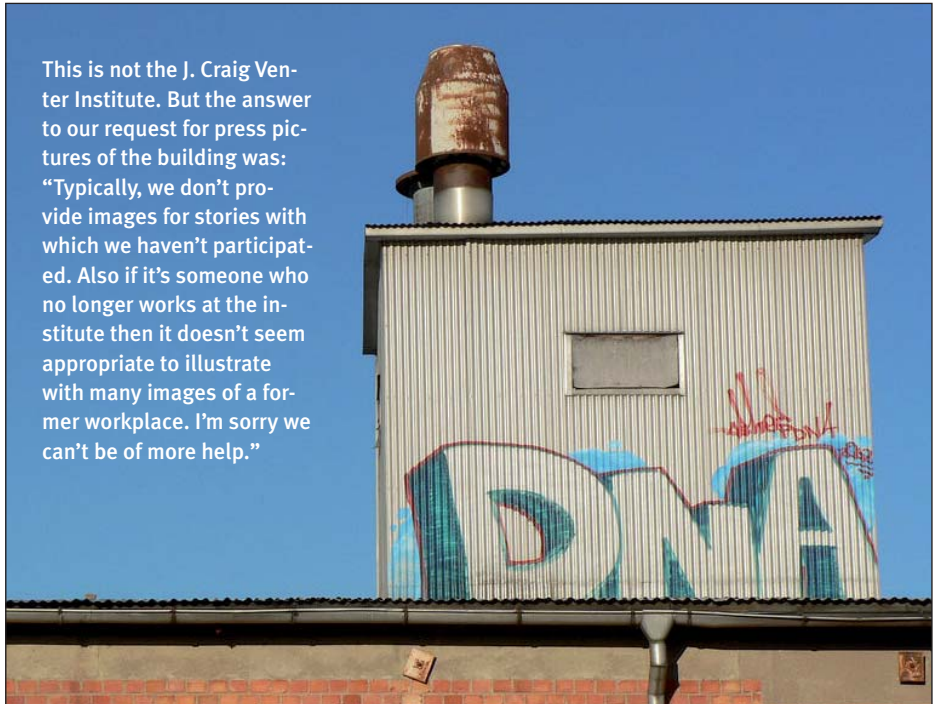


Photo: inoneear via flickr

The accused, Scott Peterson, was the then director at the PFGRC (Pathogen Functional Genomics Resource Center), an independent institute within the JCVI. Uetz reveals, “Originally, under TIGR and then JCVI, over a ten-year period, Peterson had received US\$ 100 million from the NIH, in order to build up a resource centre. In this centre, Peterson and his colleagues were supposed to perform microarrays and clone open reading frames (ORF) from pathogen bacteria and offer the results to the community. For that amount of money, they had, in my opinion, relatively little to show. Sure, they cloned ORFs and made them freely available to the community. But apparently, no-one was aware of that. Whenever I asked around at meetings, no-one seemed to have heard of PFGRC! The bottom line is, Peterson and co. had indeed taken the entire NIH money – but the Community had *de facto* no benefit because it simply wasn’t publicised.”

Latent robots and efforts to mobilise

Uetz goes on to reveal that with the NIH money PFGRC had set up a huge machine park with liquid-handling robots, which had practically never been used. When Uetz had occasion to stop by, he found the robots standing idle. “On a much earlier occasion, I had asked if I could also use the robots. However, Scott Peterson insisted that due to the strict NIH conditions, this would not be possible. So, I suggested asking NIH for permission but he refused to do that.” When a second PFGRC director, Eric Eisenstadt, also refused to relent, Uetz’s frustration got the better of him. “I put pen to paper and wrote to the NIH myself. Of course, the pair were incensed that I had gone behind their backs. And so the whole story began.”

The letter to NIH most definitely backfired. To this day, Uetz still knows nothing about the exact circumstances of his notice. “My colleagues were told by someone else. My Institute laptop was confiscated straight away and I had no chance to secure anything. Even my email account was immediately deleted.” Fortunately, Uetz had a back-up at home and purchased a new computer the following day. He sent emails to 20 people at JCVI and explained what had happened. “Within a few hours, I had been

black-listed. I was unable to send anything to JCVI and neither could they send anything to me. Totally bizarre!”

Uetz still cannot make head or tail out of it. “No-one understood what had actually happened. The JCVI neither offered an explanation nor did they take a firm stand on the issue. I had simply gone! The whole affair was completely dubious. Personally, I felt as if someone was trying to get one over on me. But I couldn’t tell you why. I had no real enemies there.” Or so he claims.

Until that point in time, Uetz was also happy with his lot. “I had my freedom. I was able to do what I wanted. The only disadvantage was that the Institute, as a whole, is completely centred around sequencing and bioinformatics. That offered very few opportunities to collaborate. At a university, on the other hand, you’ll always find people who are working directly on biological problems – you don’t really have this at the JCVI.”

And back to a Uni is probably where Uetz is likely to head, if only temporarily. At least he can take his bioinformatic grant with him, as PI (Principal Investigator). The other grants have remained in their entirety with the JCVI and were shared between his former colleagues. Mainly the PFGRC profited from this action, whose pot, according to Uetz, would otherwise have soon dried up! “That alone was a pretty suspect move: the NIH ceased funding – then they throw me out and bag my money!”

It’s almost beyond a joke for Peter Uetz that Scott Peterson, who was presumably behind Uetz’s sacking, has now taken over his *Burkholderia* project – including the grant. His main project, mapping the *E. coli* protein network, was taken over by another former PFGRC colleague, Rembert Pieper.

Communication ban on everybody

On that subject Uetz relates, “The day after I was chucked out, I heard that Rembert was to take over my job. I phoned him but he only said, he wasn’t allowed to talk to me and hung up. Rembert then wrote me an email, which he also copied to the JCVI lawyer. Supposedly a JCVI stipulation. I never heard another word from him. Mad! Rembert and co. were to take over my project, although they had no idea and weren’t allowed to talk to me.”


Smugly, Uetz adds “After a few months, the NIH rejected Rembert as group leader because he wasn’t qualified to manage my projects.” A former postdoc, Rajagopala Venkatappa, who was previously Uetz’s PhD student in Karlsruhe, is now leading the *E. coli* project. “I have regular contact with him. Interesting, since the JCVI actually forbade all employees to communicate with me.”

Whatever the case, the JCVI still seems to have a good degree of control over its employees. Following a concerted effort by *Lab Times* requesting the other side of the story, which Peter Uetz would also have been keen to hear, Rembert Pieper merely responded: “We are not authorised/entitled to have communications on the issue that you refer to.” And so it seems that the JCVI version of Uetz’s dismissal is doomed to remain a mystery.

And what about Uetz? Does he still want to remain in the US after this unpleasant experience? “I feel that it will be easier to find a job in America, although it is easier to obtain research funding in Europe. But that is of no use to me without a job!” Well then, America it’s likely to be!

Who knows, perhaps there are even more Hollywood-style “scripts” waiting for him round the corner!

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