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NEWSLETTER

SPECIAL ISSUE ■

DIVERSITY IN RESEARCH



Guest-edited by Gian Maria Greco and Valerie Bentivegna

The MCAA has been promoting diversity through numerous initiatives. Discover the Rainbow Pills Series, a call to fight intolerance and LGBTQ+ phobia.

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“Refugees in Higher Education” is a task force that was led by the MCAA Policy Working Group to help displaced researchers. Andreina Laera tells us more about it.

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EDITORIAL

LOOKING AT DIVERSITY IN RESEARCH: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE MCAA

As the factsheet of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) reads, since its establishment in 1996, the programme has “provided grants to train excellent researchers at all stages of their careers – be they doctoral candidates or highly experienced researchers – while encouraging transnational, inter-sectoral and interdisciplinary mobility.” In more than 20 years, the MSCA programme has funded projects on the most diverse topics of the knowledge spectrum, provided an opportunity for researchers – especially those at an early stage of their career – to work at renowned institutions, and promoted cultural and disciplinary cross-contamination.

If we look closely, we can see that at the core of the MSCA programme lies the official motto of the European Union: Unity in Diversity. Through its actions, the MSCA programme has been slowly but steadily creating a community where diversity is a value, not a stigma. After all, unity in diversity is the very mission of the research endeavour: to better ourselves by improving knowledge, and in so doing let society flourish. It is through the richness in diversity of people, ideas, and methods that we have been able to challenge dominant paradigms, elaborate new theories, address problems, develop solutions, and ultimately foster knowledge and further society.

However, research is carried out by humans in a social context. The

research community is not an ideal one, but a very much real one. It is infused by the same social struggles that pervade in society. In some cases, these struggles are even aggravated by its very features. The research perspective gives us a great advantage. We are already very familiar with the importance of diversity. Research endeavours value the diversity of ideas. However, with great advantage comes great responsibility. We must value the diversity of people as well. Discrimination – from gender to race, from disability to sexual orientation, from culture to religion – is very much present in our community. We must acknowledge and face the problems within our community, in order to lead by example.

Science diversity – the richness of research ideas – is grounded upon human diversity. Only by embracing human diversity, can we foster science diversity.

This is the first special issue of the MCAA Newsletter. Over the years, thousands of researchers who benefited from the MSCA programme have been gathering around the MCAA, joining their forces to promote and foster the values of the

programme. It is a unified community that continuously tries to make the diversity of its members its major strength. It is no coincidence that we chose diversity as the topic of the first special issue of our newsletter. This issue collects personal stories and successful practices. Voices that need to be heard. Voices that testify to the struggles many deal with every day, and show us the challenges that lie ahead, and hint of possible avenues for addressing them. Struggles and challenges that we, as researchers, must hurry to face. Struggles and challenges that we, as MCAA members, are only beginning to address.

Let us conclude with a heartfelt thank you to: all the authors who shared their stories and points of view; the MCAA Editorial Team for the hard work they put into this special issue; Valentina Ferro, vice-chair of the MCAA, for suggesting this special issue in the first place; and to the MCAA Board for their support.

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MESSAGE FROM THE BOARD

Dear members,

This newsletter is a little different. But I guess 2020 has trained us for the different and the unexpected. So, just for this one time, indulge me while I tell you a story.

It was a sunny afternoon in May. Seattle in summer is green and colourful. Despite the work-from-home disrupted routine, I was planning to enjoy some time on social media while looking at the dogs playing in the park outside my window.

However, outraged people and large manifesting crowds populated my social feed. It was about the death of George Floyd, another African-American man killed by the police. As an outsider in the US, I did not understand. And I thought I could not. That day, however, I tried. I searched for the video of Floyd's assassination and pressed the play button.

I cannot fully express how I felt. As the minutes were passing with the police officer on Mr Floyd's neck, the sunny day outside turned dark. I could not hear the dogs barking anymore. I could not move. I felt the most pungent discomfort I had ever experienced. And anger, disbelief, pain.

How could we let *this* happen?

The discomfort of that day follows me since. And I am grateful for it. Thanks to this discomfort, I can

improve every day. The first step involves understanding, opening my eyes, "pressing the play button" and watching what would otherwise pass me by. Stories of people who are not privileged, who worked 10 times as hard for the same opportunities, who could not breathe.

The MCAA board wanted this special issue of the newsletter to reflect these stories. It is a megaphone to amplify the voice of minorities and to celebrate diversity. MCAA is the best community to share these stories. MCA alumni share a set of values that resonate with this topic. From the need to adapt and integrate in a different country due the mobility involved with the MSCA, we have learned to love and appreciate different cultures and the enrichment that comes with embracing them. By being nomad strangers, we have grown into loving and respecting who is different from us. Mobility, interculturality and inclusion are, indeed, the pillars on which our membership thrives.

2020 brought us one challenge after the other, but through challenges we grow, as individuals and as society. The COVID-19 pandemic has inspired many acts of kindness, with medical personnel and delivery drivers putting themselves at risk to save others. Fire outbreaks in the Amazon Rain Forest, followed by wildfires in Australia first and California later, have once again opened the debate on climate change, and large international corporations have finally pledged to



become carbon-neutral in the next few decades. The tragic death of a man has ignited the largest global movement to combat racism.

As researchers, we have to be actors of change. With MCAA, we have the power to do it. For example, we have been advocating to reduce the cutbacks to MSCA funding, especially after the economic impact of COVID-19. In a passionate statement written by MCAA chair Mostafa Moonir Shawrav, and supported by the rest of the board, we discussed subsidising research and innovation to make actual progress in mitigating climate change and advancing healthcare. We presented the disastrous results that these cuts would have to job markets, almost unavoidably affecting first the

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minorities as it often happens in case of economic crisis. We also highlighted that MSCA funding is more balanced than other funding programmes when it comes to gender equity, with the highest relative percentage of women being awarded an MSCA scholarship.

It is not by chance the first MCAA Virtual Conference focuses on "Research and Democracy". The conference is a testimony of what it means being citizens and scientists, using our critical skills to fight for equality and human rights. We will talk about inclusivity and diversity. Two sessions will discuss the future of society, with innovation and artificial intelligence (AI). We will look at open science and why it is so important that research is available to the wider community. And we will explore the role of scientists in the democratic process, how to communicate effectively and how to use social media responsibly.

This is a journey that will continue at the 2021 MCAA Annual Conference and General Assembly, on the theme "Research in times of crisis". The event will focus on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is an opportunity to look at how intercultural and worldwide collaborations were fundamental to produce the fastest vaccine trials in the history of humanity. But also to reflect more broadly on the large-scale consequences of the pandemic — how the world will change after it and how we have already changed.

In the next few months, MCAA efforts to support researchers' careers and provide fair opportunities independent of one's skin colour, nationality, gender will be more obvious, with the launch of more MCAA resources and services. Like the LinkedIn Learning platform, where members can find resources for professional development, or the reviving of MCAA Academy, the

mentoring platform where young researchers can benefit from the stellar expertise of MCAA network.

For how much the board is proud of MCAA efforts and progress, it is the time for me to quiet down and leave you to the amazing content this special issue of the newsletter has to offer. From reports about MCAA's initiatives on displaced researchers, the ResearchAbility project or GEDI's Rainbow Pills, to researchers sharing their stories of resilience, integration and intersectionality.

Time for us all to pause. And listen.

VALENTINA FERRO,
ON BEHALF
OF THE MCAA BOARD

MCAA'S STATEMENT

BLACK LIVES MATTER IN RESEARCH AND HIGHER EDUCATION TOO!

Over the last few months, the Black Lives Matter movement has spread over the globe. Starting in the US, people took to the streets to demand the right to be considered and given equal chances no matter their ethnic background. Soon, European populations joined the cause, and discussions about Black populations have emerged. One area has barely been touched upon: the equal opportunities for Black individuals to succeed in their professional endeavours when it comes to research. On Twitter, several campaigns and accounts have emerged to have started to highlight work of Black researchers in specific fields, starting with [#BlackAFInSTEM](#) and [#BlackBirdersWeek](#), and now expanding to other field including [#BlackInAstro](#), [#BlackInChem](#), and [#BlackInNeuro](#). In addition, several members of the scientific community participated in [#ShutDownSTEM](#) on 10 June, taking that day to amplify Black voices, educate themselves, and participate in a [Wikipedia editathon](#) to add and improve biographies of Black researchers on Wikipedia.

The [MCAA](#), representing over 16 500 researchers, works to support the careers of researchers regardless of their ethnic background or any other

individual characteristic. Indeed, the MCAA thrives on international and collaborative science, and acknowledges that many scientific and academic achievements that shape our world and our society would not be possible without the countless achievements of Black and ethnically diverse researchers. Black women such as [Katherine Johnson](#), were instrumental in space exploration, working as “Human computers” at NASA, physician [Mae Jemison](#) was the first African American woman to go to space, [Charles R. Drew](#) was instrumental in the development of large-scale blood banks, and what would modern cell biology be without the cells that were taken, without her consent, from [Henrietta Lacks](#). Equal opportunities, non-discrimination, and dignity for researchers at all stages of their careers are values pursued by the association. These are also values put forward by the European Charter for Researchers, which clearly demands the respect of the non-discrimination principle by employers, and states that employers need to provide opportunities for growth and favourable working conditions to all. The Code also requires that employers ‘facilitate access for disadvantaged groups’ (see Recruitment)¹.

Despite these declarations and formal charters, the situation of researchers from diverse ethnic backgrounds is not necessarily well addressed today and Black researchers have [more hurdles to overcome](#). While [Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions \(MSCA\)](#) enables researchers to access mobility and European networks and welcomes researchers from different horizons, it is not sufficient to guarantee that the rights of researchers are equally respected and little information is available on the success and difficulties of researchers from various backgrounds. The European Charter is not always familiar to researchers who focus on respecting codes of research integrity, which means they do not take on all issues faced by Black researchers or researchers who are other ethnicities. The MCAA launched several initiatives to support researchers with difficulties: a scheme to support refugees was implemented in 2017 and [REFERENT²](#), a mental health peer-to-peer support network, was created in 2019 to help researchers in distress no matter their background. Current work is also taking place on the possibility to have an Ombudsman to protect and defend research fellows from any kind of discrimina-

¹ <https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/jobs/charter/european-charter>

² <https://www.mariecuriealumni.eu/news/referent-mentoring-initiative-msca-early-career-researchers>

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tion/harassment based on individual characteristics. Such actions are important, but are not enough to address the needs expressed in Black Lives Matter. ***The next step is to shed light on researchers from different backgrounds and to be active promoters of inclusion in research labs and higher education.*** More actions are required, from each of us individually and from MCAA as a collective.

WHAT CAN WE DO AS INDIVIDUALS?

- Let your voice be heard.
- Hold people accountable in regards to the European Charter. Use your influence to create diverse inclusive and Black-friendly (or welcoming) labs and research groups.
- Include diversity in teaching material and discussions in class.
- Educate yourself and others about systemic racism and discrimination. Read stories about the experiences of Black STEM professionals, check out the hashtag [#BlackInTheIvory](#).
- Diversify your timeline, follow people who have different back-



grounds and experiences on social media. One way to start is to check out @BlackAFinSTEM.

- Find other ways to contribute here: <https://blacklivesmatters.carrd.co/>

WHAT CAN WE DO COLLECTIVELY?

We, as the MCAA, commit to continue educating ourselves and speaking up for justice and equality. We will actively speak against any form of discrimination, including discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, religion and country of origin. We believe that our strength as a community lies in our diversity. We will actively strive to show more and better representation through

outreach activities to show that anyone can pursue a career in science. We can use our influence within the European community to take an active role in stopping racism and injustices, to call for more economic support for the Black community to achieve their goals. We will strive to be an active network of allies and active promoters of change.

Join us in this endeavour! We call on everyone from all ethnic backgrounds to share their story, information and scientific achievement with the MCAA by contacting blog@mariecuriealumni.eu.

We call all researchers who want to make a positive impact in this direction to contact MCAA's Working Groups on Gender Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (GEDI@mariecuriealumni.eu) and Policy (policy@mariecuriealumni.eu) to learn about projects that foster mutual respect, diversity and inclusion in current and future research and higher education.

WHEN THE MCAA PROMOTES DIVERSITY

THE MCAA RAINBOW PILLS SERIES

2020 was the year of diversity advocacy, and within the MCAA the GEDI Working Group mobilised and created the Rainbow Pills Series, a call to fight intolerance and LGBTQ+ phobia together.



2020: THE YEAR OF DIVERSITY ADVOCACY

As we approach the end of the year, it is now time to look back and reflect upon everything that happened in 2020... What a crazy year! Many will remember 2020 as the year the COVID-19 pandemic shook the world and revealed all that's good, bad, and wonderful about us. But we also would like to

remember it as the year of "Diversity": the year of insurgence for civil rights and social justice, the year of the democratisation of the "Me Too" movement worldwide and across fields, the year the "Black Lives Matter" movement shouted "we are fed-up of racism and police brutality," and the year (despite lockdown and social distancing) the fight for LGBTQ+ rights continued and pride manifestations (in June 2020) continued on the streets and on social media and on the internet.

THE MCAA GEDI WORKING GROUP

The MCAA Genders, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (GEDI) Working Group advocates for a better and fairer research environment. We have a firm belief that embracing diversity as well as providing a safe and nurturing research and academic environment to all researchers irrespective of any individual characteristic (e.g. ethnicity, cultural

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and religious belief, gender, sexual preference etc.) are key to achieve excellence in research.

There is a need now more than ever to stand up for LGBTQ+ rights and demand acceptance, visibility, equal opportunities, and equal treatment for LGBTQ+ students and researchers in research, both in industry and academia. GEDI decided to collect and share messages from role model LGBTQ+ researchers and allies.

THE RAINBOW PILLS SERIES

In a very short time, the team mobilised and created the "Rainbow Pills" Series. Each "Pill" enclosed a short video and represented one of the colours of the Rainbow flag (Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Violet), the symbol of diversity and

LGBTQ+ community. The Rainbow "pills" are a call to fight intolerance and LGBTQ+ phobia together.

The first video was posted on 24 June on GEDI's Facebook and Twitter accounts. We shared a new video each day following the countdown until the International LGBTQ+ Pride weekend held on 28-30 June.

In each video, each guest's contribution was triggered by three questions:

1. What is diversity for you?
2. Why is it important for LGBT QI+ researchers to be visible?
3. What advice would you give to a younger LGBT QI+ researcher?

The messages collected from our guests inspired us, moved us to tears, made us laugh, and made us feel very proud and hopeful. Most importantly, they resonated with our audience and followers on social media, where we received heart-warming reactions and reviews. The series also ignited a lot of internal discussions in our association and among our group members. Is LGBTQ+ visibility still an issue in research in industry and academia? Is it harder for individuals identifying as female, non-binary or gender fluid to come out in research environments? Do we dare stand up as LGBTQ+ role models in STEM?

THE RAINBOW PILLS TEAM

The success of this campaign is owed to the passion and hard work



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of our terrific "Rainbow Team," formed by Magda Theodoridou, Brunella Balzano, Nadia Metoui, and Tania Romacho. We would also like to thank our brave, charming and inspiring guests: José Gámez, Tania Romacho, Aurelio Hidalgo, Tanja Vuckovic-Juros, Riccardo Maddalena, Enka Blanchard, and Maurice O'Brien, who had the generosity to share wise and uplifting messages to encourage the new generation of LGBTQ+ researchers. This would not have been possible without their contributions.

Finally, we would like to thank Ahlem Metoui, our video editor and sound engineer who volunteered to make the videos look and sound even more amazing (you can support her



© Ahlem Metoui

by following her work on Instagram [@ahlem.metoui](https://www.instagram.com/ahlem.metoui)).

LGBTQ+ diversity in any field of research in industry and academia.

Our hope is that the Rainbow Pills series becomes an MCAA tradition for the coming Prides and we count on fellows to help us advocate for

Watch the Rainbow Pills videos posted on Twitter @gedi_mcaa:

- 🐦 [Red Pill by José Gámez "Research is to make something unique to give to the world"](#)
- 🐦 [Orange Pill by Tania Romacho "Diversity is an asset in research"](#)
- 🐦 [Yellow Pill by Riccardo Maddalena "Follow your dream, be a Researcher!"](#)
- 🐦 [Green Pill by Enka Blanchard "The importance of being visible regardless of our marginalization"](#)
- 🐦 [Blue Pill by Aurelio Hidalgo "We will keep on fighting to increase the number of LGBTQ+ friendly labs and research institutions"](#)
- 🐦 [Purple Pill by Tanja Vuckovic Juros "Society's stock photo of the family should be updated to reflect the diverse lived realities of the society's members"](#)
- 🐦 [Flag!! By Maurice O'Brien "Diversity challenges dominating traditional public perception of what a scientist is: very often, male, white, and heterosexual"](#)

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THE MCAA RAINBOW PILLS SERIES: THE VOICE OF PARTICIPANTS

The Rainbow Pills series was created as a call to fight intolerance and LGBTQ+ phobia. Ruben Riosa caught up with several participants to find out more about this initiative.



© Ahlem Metoui

This year, the MCAA Genders, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (GEDI) working group created the "Rainbow Pills" series, in which each "pill" displays a short video and represents one of the colours of the Rainbow flag (Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Violet) – the symbol of

diversity and LGBTQ+ community. The "Rainbow Pills" were created as a call to fight intolerance and LGBTQ+ phobia together.

To learn more about it, Ruben Riosa of the MCAA Editorial Team interviewed several organisers and

speakers of the Rainbow Pills series: Tania Romacho, Aurelio Hidalgo, Enka Blanchard and Riccardo Maddalena. Who better than this group to help us unravel what the Rainbow Pills series is and how it can play an important role in promoting diversity in science.

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INTRODUCTIONS

Tania: I am the secretary of the MCAA GEDI working group as well as a Spanish postdoctoral researcher in the Life Science area. My work consists in discovering and developing novel therapies for diabetes. I am passionate about science: teaching it and advocating for it. I love hiking with my dog and enjoying music, cinema, and cuisine with other humans.

Aurelio: I am an assistant professor at the Autonomous University of Madrid (Spain). I am the principal investigator (PI) of the HT Discovery Lab at the Centre for Molecular Biology "Severo Ochoa" also based in Madrid. My area of research is enzyme biotechnology, especially enzyme discovery and engineering. I did my BSc, majored in biochemistry, and did my PhD in microbial bioremediation. I am passionate about enzymes, of course, but also musicals, sci-fi movies (good ones), curling (yes, the sport!) and food/wine.

Enka: I'm a French transdisciplinary researcher, with a scientific background (mostly mathematics), although I now mostly work on social subjects. This means I work on projects ranging from geography of disability to voting systems, but also queer theory and digital humanities. Currently, I am a postdoctoral researcher at the Digitrust Consortium (France).

Riccardo: I am a Lecturer in Civil Engineering at Cardiff University (UK) as well as a member of the GEDI working group. I enjoy travelling

around the world (though COVID-19 is making it challenging), squash, cycling (though it's quite a new interest), and I am a big believer/fighter for equality for all the protected characteristics.

What's special about the Rainbow Pills series?

Tania: We had this last minute idea: since there would be no physical Pride Parade this year, we had the need to find a way to demonstrate. It came as a response to the very ugly wave we were, and still are, facing in terms of intolerance, homophobia, and, overall hate speech.

Aurelio: The Rainbow Pill series was a great initiative. I was hesitant at first, but then I went in all the way. It made me realise the relevance of scientists, and in particular PIs, being publicly 'out', acting as role models, providing a more real (and diverse) picture of scientists. Yes, there are LGBTQIA+ researchers out there, just like anywhere else. Science is also something for us.

Riccardo: It was great! The most exciting part was recording the video: recording, playing and deleting so many times! But the true excitement was when it was shared on social media. The huge support I received from friends and followers was heart-warming.

What will we gain by becoming more diverse?

Why is it important?

Tania: As I explain in the video, diversity is an asset. A more diverse

science is an enriched science. Diversity brings in multidisciplinary approaches. A broader vision to face scientific challenges can only speed up success.

Aurelio: In my experience as a PI, diverse teams are stronger teams. They have different points of view, different approaches, and their members complement one another.

Enka: I tend to be the diversity token, as I'm non-binary and disabled (among other things). But just being aware of the issues that those communities face and talking to them already impacts my work, with positive outcomes. For example, by trying to work on accessible voting systems for blind voters, we ended up creating a system that is more usable and secure for everyone (whether they are disabled or not). Often enough, trying to include everyone from the start gives great results (instead of tacking on inclusion issues after the fact).

Riccardo: Gain: look at our day-to-day world from a different perspective. Important: if you were to be on the other side (that is, being LGTBQA+), you would soon realise how important it is to be recognised and treated with dignity.

Gender diversity in academia: what's the situation?

Tania: It is not good enough, and please, I would rather speak about 'genders' diversity. We still need more diversity especially in leading positions.

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Aurelio: Unfortunately, pyramid-like, with decreasing female presence as you go up the tiers of academia. The number of female PIs and professors is still under about 40 %, from what I remember. Further positive action is still needed in terms of career moves and deadlines for grants, for example. Although some efforts are being made, probably because those policies cost nothing. Practical measures, such as day-care, hiring extra personnel, or having specific funding to prevent severe career breaks (from which it is hard to return) cost money and I guess that is why they are not widespread. In my humble opinion, practical and political measures need to go hand in hand.

Enka: As for gender diversity in academia, I come from a field that's quite poor on this front, and where sexism and transphobia are still very present. That being said, I've been very lucky in having supervisors who were not only fine with it, but stood up for me. My first advisor's stance for queer inclusion (out of principle) was what pushed me to come out to him, knowing that I would find an ally.

Riccardo: In the UK we have taken huge steps forward but there is still a long way to go. Peer-support is paramount in ensuring gender equality.

What's one thing we can do to positively impact diversity?

Tania: Request funding agencies and academia to re-evaluate our standards and definition of 'excel-

lent research.' If we make rules to let only a minority succeed while others are discriminated based on individual characteristics, science will never be diverse.

Aurelio: Measures need to be taken across the board because this is a multi-dimensional problem. From the institutional point of view, we need diverse panels at all levels (experts, evaluators, conferences, journal editors, reviewers, governing bodies etc.). From the executive point of view, we need more practical measures including diversity hires. Finally, from the societal point of view, we need more visibility of this diversity to educate and show the younger generations that science is also for them, regardless of gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation.

Enka: I think the one important thing to do is to actively broadcast one's support (as long as it's sincere), instead of going from the assumption that people will know one is an ally. Especially in contexts in which there is institutional pushback, fighting for inclusion (as someone not necessarily directly concerned) protects those who have less power, and creates a welcoming environment.

Riccardo: We need to educate people, talk to them and work with them.

Any additional thoughts?

Tania: I was very moved by the engagement of everyone involved in the Rainbow Pill campaign. Everyone joined efforts to launch it on time, in spite of the very short time.

I was also very impressed by the positive reaction of the people on the campaign in social media. So far, most reactions were very positive! I want to show my gratitude to everyone who participated. I would like to encourage fellows to help us gain diversity in the next campaign. I hope it becomes a MCAA 'classic.'

To conclude, I would like to thank Tania, Aurelio, Enka and Riccardo, for taking the time to be interviewed and for sharing with us their personal experience within the MCAA "Rainbow Pills" series.

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RESEARCH AND HARASSMENT

SPECIFIC ACTIONS NEEDED TO SUPPORT RESEARCHERS WHO ARE VICTIMS OF HARASSMENT



This is part of a formal petition (No. 1132/2020) that Celia Arroyo-López submitted to the European Parliament for the creation of a European office to effectively cope with harassment in higher education and research and innovation sectors.

I AM A SURVIVOR

I am a survivor of harassment in higher education. It took me years to openly speak out about it. Reporting abuses is not an easy task. We are all afraid of retaliation, but

keeping silent also has consequences. You cannot explain a big gap in your employment records and list of publications unless you tell the truth. Your self-esteem is compromised as well as your mental health. You can also face economic issues if you do not find a

position due to your bad recommendation letters [1] or a poor résumé.

Searching for support, I realised that working conditions in higher education and research are completely unknown to the general public. There is an idealised image of a

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“bookworm” male fellow surrounded by notebooks, formulas, and hundreds of boiling flasks, immersed in his tasks. However, away from the public eye, the academic field can be a toxic environment where predators can roam freely. An unknown number of unethical individuals are now inhabiting academic institutions targeting and harassing individuals or groups with impunity. I will call them “bullies” [2].

ACADEMIC HARASSMENT, BULLYING, AND MOBBING

There is not yet a common international agreement about the definition of workplace bullying and mobbing. Both are considered forms of harassment. The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines workplace bullying as ‘an offensive, cruel, malicious, and humiliating behaviour perform to undermine a single individual or a group of employees.’ Mobbing is defined by constant negative remarks, isolation, defamation, and gossiping about a person in a working context [3].

The European social partners recognise that harassment and violence can potentially affect any workplace and any worker, irrespective of the size of the company, field of activity or form of the employment contract or relationship. However, certain groups and sectors can be more at risk’ [4]. Not too many people know that doing a PhD or Postdoctoral research is in fact a job. As a job, you can also be a target of harassment. While bullies can be employees and students at different levels of the academic institutional hierarchy,

around 72 % are harassers from higher ranks [5, 6] as supervisors. Protected by academic freedom, bullies can display active, subtle or inactive conducts [5], from isolated unconscious or conscious events, micro-aggressions to flagrant intimidations [7].

The list of abuses is long. I will cite just some I had to face as undue pressure to produce work. This list includes: undermining of abilities, verbal abuses, denying access to necessary information in order to complete tasks [8], threatening conduct, humiliations, intimidations or sabotage, isolation of victims from other co-workers and continuous delays on deadlines, discriminatory salaries, irregular appointments, authorship usurpation, articles unexpectedly blocked at the journal, bad-mouthing or blackmailing [2].

CASES UNDERREPORTED: ‘MOVE ON, THERE IS NOTHING YOU CAN DO’

Cases of bullying in higher education and research and the innovation sectors (RIs) are underreported because moral harassment is normalised, accepted, and positively associated with higher standards of academic productivity and success. Based on the normalisation of this behaviour, victims do not dare report their situation. They fear no one will believe them or that they will be fired or they will get bad reference letters, or the usurpation of their authorship in the publication. These are several of the most cited reasons. This situation is aggravated and perpetuated due to the de-

pendency on supervisors for career development, the publication and dissemination of results and recommendation letters [1], VISA and appointments’ extensions or salaries and wages, as examples.

What’s more, victims do not feel either well supported by the institutions or governmental regulations. There are no appropriate regulations, guidelines, and tools for correctly assessing and managing harassment, mobbing and bullying, in academia and research sectors. It seems as though we belong to another sphere of workers. I have heard more than once the term of “minions” or “slaves” being used in an apparently funny way.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF ACADEMIC HARASSMENT

Academic harassment impacts the physical and psychological performance of the victims, affecting their productivity and the institutional climate [9]. It generates economic consequences for targets, academic institutions, governments, and health systems. Working under these conditions affects the standard of quality of scientific productions, ultimately inducing fraud. It also promotes the evasion of students and scientists from the scientific field due to the toxicity of the environment.

It is estimated that around 30 % of the victims experienced post-traumatic stress disorder [10], and about 70 % of them leave the organisation [11]. Other consequences include: being removed from their job positions, the termination of

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their academic lives through retirement, suicide, mental breakdown, and cardiovascular diseases due to the high level of stress [12]. These are some examples of how harming academic harassment can be [2]. Good mentors are also victims since they too face unfair competition where research seems to enhance and empower misconducts rather than to reward ethics and good practices.

LACK OF EFFICIENT MEASURES AND COMMON EU GUIDELINES

There are not enough efficient policies and guidelines to properly address harassment in higher education, and in the research and innovation sector. This makes victims feel unprotected and socially isolated. Institutional measures are perceived as contrary to employees' interests, mostly focused on protecting institutions and bullies rather than victims [10]. Simply denouncing this situation is insufficient unless the problem is correctly addressed [13]. Victims who dare to file a grievance have to wait for overlong processes of investigations, deadlines (in case

of existing) might expire, and your complaint may not be considered if you are no longer employed by the institution involved, or simply, you can be directly ignored. In my experience opacity and secrecy usually surround the processes of investigation, affecting the mental health of the victims, jeopardising job opportunities and facilitating retaliation.

WHY WE NEED A EUROPEAN OFFICE FOR ACADEMIC AND RESEARCH MATTERS

Having viewed the particularities of working in research, and the lack of substantial support for victims of labour abuses, there is a need for a European office specialised in managing questions from academia and RIs. This office should provide external and independent supervision, collaborating with authorities and stakeholders for the development of effective specific policies against harassment, bullying, and discrimination in academia and RIs. Decision-makers should contemplate the particularities of the sector related to working conditions, the temporality of the ap-

pointments, the high mobility [14], the high number of international fellows ignoring local regulations, the length of dependent relationship between mentors and mentees even when their appointments are over (letters of recommendations, authorship issues, writing and publishing results, conferences, reference etc.).

In my opinion, the European office for academic and research affairs should:

- Be warrant of healthy working environments and ethical performances in European academics and institutions for research and innovation especially those that are publicly funded, controlling that the existing policies of working rights are followed;
- Be a reference for victims and survivors to reach out to in case of need, maintaining websites and online resources to provide psychological support, guidance, and ultimately protection to victims and survivors;
- Raise awareness about academic and RIs harassment issues with an appropriate promotion of good practices, developing programmes for the improvement of the working research and academic environment in the European Union;
- Tackle academic and research workplace harassment, bullying, and mobbing, helping in the identification of risks, consequences, and effective methodologies to assess the prevalence of harassment;

RESEARCH AND HARASSMENT

- Collaborate with stakeholders in the establishment and update of policies and guidelines for working in academia and research, defining harassment types, the mechanism for reporting abuses and frauds, and guidelines for a correct institutional management of the cases;
- Provide specific juridical information and support about authorship rights, for authorship usurpations, alteration of authors order, and related issues;
- Provide training for institutions and investigators about good practices, strategies for managing teams, tools for stress man-

agement, and healthy habits to prevent potential mental issues associated with the job;

- Stay up to date on new forms of bullying, mobbing, or labour abuses in academia and RIs field, to propose effective strategies.

utilisation of public funds and resources. It will avoid the high number of well-prepared individuals who leave the academic and research fields due to the toxic working conditions. It would empower those engaged in good practices, and ethical productivity.

CONCLUSION

Developing common strategies to deal with harassment at the workplace in academic and research environments would enhance environmental working places, a better

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DISPLACED RESEARCHERS

MAKING THE VOICE OF MIGRANT ACADEMICS HEARD

[Andreina Laera](#) dealt with displaced researchers through the [MCAA Policy Working Group](#). She shared with us initiatives undertaken to enhance migrant academics' integration.



Andreina, in her own words

I am Italian and I did my studies in the engineering field in Italy. After my master's, I conducted research as a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions PhD fellow, mainly based in France. In May 2019, I obtained a PhD degree in Environmental Biotechnology.

I am currently working in France as a renewable energy advisor at the Chambre d'agriculture du Cher.

During my doctorate, I was a member of the MCAA Policy Working Group and led the **Refugees in Higher Education** task force.

”

***Being more diverse
means being able to
avoid conflicts.***

Andreina defines her commitment as rooted in her personal convictions: “Since I was at the university, I used to live with students coming from different countries,” she says. It became therefore obvious for her that cross-cultural cooperation

should be enhanced in all sectors. “We can learn from others and teach others. Such exchanges can enrich the society and create new pathways of social development. To me, being more diverse means being able to avoid conflicts,” she muses.

Andreina is proud of the actions undertaken by the MCAA Policy Working Group in helping refugees in higher education. “Several statements, articles, workshops, conferences were organised to raise

people's awareness on displaced researchers,” she explains.

The task force she led conducted a survey to identify the obstacles faced by displaced researchers and best practices of integration adopted in higher education institutions. The survey was addressed to past and current MCAA fellows, as well as other networks like EURAXESS, Scholars at Risk, Academics for Peace and EURODOC. Results are available [online](#).

DISPLACED RESEARCHERS



To raise awareness about the problems of displaced researchers, the Working Group also conducted diverse sessions at conferences, like the MCAA Annual Conference 2019 and the EuroScience Open Forum, for example. MCAA invited refugees at risk to the MCAA Annual Conference and offered fee waivers. What's more, several blog posts and articles dealing with this topic were also published.

THE BRIDGE II INITIATIVE

Andreina mentions the BRIDGE II project among the undertaken initiatives. "It is funded under the Horizon 2020 call Science4Refugees - Support for highly skilled refugee scientists. This project provides training for academic and non-academic mentors and researchers in danger. BRIDGE Step II also provides stipends for internships for research-

ers in danger. It supports dual career and gender equality measures, by introducing a quota and piloting a dual-career study for refugee researchers," she explains.

Members of the MCAA Policy Working Group sit on the Advisory Board of the European-funded project BRIDGE II for researchers in danger going to Europe, and they promote their activities on MCAA's social media channels, as well.

"MCAA HAS AN IMPORTANT ROLE AS INFLUENCER."

Andreina thinks that more can be done to help displaced researchers. "I think there is a need to make Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) Fellowships more available to displaced researchers. First of all, the budget allocated for MSCAs should increase and then spe-

cific fellowships should be allocated to displaced researchers by taking into account all eligibility criteria for a researcher in danger," she says. In this scope, non-governmental organisations and coordinators of European-funded projects who work in promoting the integration of displaced researchers in higher education could help in establishing eligibility criteria.

Andreina concludes: "MCAA has an important role to play as an influencer of a wide public (researchers, industrial, general public and policy-makers). The MCAA Policy Working Group should continue to talk about integration of displaced researchers and students in education, to not lose young generations and to promote tolerance within the society."

As a success story, Andreina mentions the "Science in Exile" project that features the story of four researchers. Learn more about this [inspiring project](#).

MCAA EDITORIAL TEAM

DISPLACED RESEARCHERS

A SECURE ENVIRONMENT FOR RESEARCHERS AT RISK

Orla Duke is responsible for managing the day-to-day activities of the EU-funded [Inspireurope project](#) and supports the growth and development of the various [Scholars at Risk \(SAR\) Europe](#) national sections in Europe. We discussed with her the case of researchers at risk and how to support them. Orla was also happy to share with us the success story of Prosper Maguchu.

Orla, in her own words

I am the Programme Manager of [Scholars at Risk \(SAR\) Europe](#); the European office of the global [Scholars at Risk \(SAR\) Network](#) that comprises 540 institutions in 40 countries and celebrates its 20th anniversary this year.

”
***The skills
and attributes
of researchers
at risk
also represent
an enormous
potential
for European
research and
innovation.***

Academic freedom should be the common environment of all researchers. However, in many countries, citizens are exposed to restrictions as regards freedom of speech and from persecutions, due to their opinions and convictions. Consequently, researchers suffer from this situation.

“Excellence in research depends upon open scientific debate, and is driven by a multiplicity of ideas, people and perspectives. The skills and attributes of researchers at risk also represent an enormous potential for European research and innovation (R&I), particularly as the continent seeks to repair the economic and social damage brought by the COVID-19 pandemic,” explains Orla. It is therefore crucial to support the career of researchers at risk, because when they are excluded from participating in the global research circuit, not only are their individual lives and careers at risk, but also the quality and the future of research.

Thanks to her work at Scholars at Risk Europe, Orla is devoted to promoting academic freedom: “We aim to strengthen our collective voice at



DISPLACED RESEARCHERS

the European level and contribute to informed policymaking for the greater protection of scholars and increased respect for academic freedom worldwide,” she says.

WHEN RESEARCHERS ARE AT RISK

Hosted at Maynooth University, Scholars at Risk Europe is based in Ireland. It supports and coordinates the activities of Scholars at Risk national sections and partner networks across Europe.

The organisation receives requests for assistance from at-risk scholars, professors, researchers, doctoral students, institutional leaders and other members of higher education communities. Three categories of risk are defined by the organisation:

- 1. Risk due to the content of a scholar's work, research or teaching being perceived as threatening by authorities or other groups.** When the development of ideas, exchange of information and expression of new opinions are considered threatening, individual scholars and researchers are particularly vulnerable.
- 2. Risk because of the individual's status as an academic or researcher.** Because of their education, frequent travel and professional standing, scholars are often prominent members of their community. Where a scholar is a member of a political, ethnic or religious minority, woman or a member of LGBTQ+ communities, an attack on an indi-



vidual scholar may be a highly visible and efficient means for intimidating and silencing others.

- 3. Risk as a result of their peaceful exercise of basic human rights,** in particular the right to freedom of expression or freedom of association.

THE INSPIRE EUROPE PROJECT

Orla is involved in the three-year MSCA [Inspireurope](#) project that aims to support researchers at risk, who are at risk in their countries of origin (due to discrimination, persecution, suffering and/or violence) or are seeking refuge out of these reasons or have recently found refuge in Europe.

Gathering 10 [project partners](#) from all over Europe, the project aims to facilitate stakeholders' cooperation to support researchers at risk, by assessing the effectiveness of existing measures within European and national R&I programmes and

by facilitating the exchange of good practices.

Career development opportunities also represent a priority, with a particular focus on access to existing European and national R&I support programmes, including MSCA, through [webinars](#), coaching and training. Researchers at risk also have the possibility to benefit from training aiming at preparing them for their new work environment when they start working in Europe.

Last but not least, cross-sectoral and cross-border initiatives and programmes are strongly encouraged. “This is the case particularly in central, eastern and southern Europe to promote the diversity of actors supporting researchers at risk” explains Orla.

According to Orla, in 2020 SAR received 500 applications for assistance and arranged 143 positions of academic refuge. “Turkey, Syria, Yemen, Iran and Brazil are the top source countries for scholars requesting assistance,” she adds.

DISPLACED RESEARCHERS

Prosper Maguchu's success story

"Prosper is originally from Zimbabwe. He holds a master's degree in Transnational Criminal Justice and a doctorate on Transitional Justice, Corruption and Human Rights. His main research interests are in financial crimes, with a poorly concealed penchant for a human rights-based approach. Prosper also teaches courses and gives guest lectures on major debates in the field of human rights, the impact of financial crimes, the role of grassroots social movements and transitional justice at universities in Africa, Europe and the United States of America. He has written and published in peer-reviewed journals as well as several book chapters in his areas of research.



Prosper previously worked as a senior project lawyer with the Zimbabwe Human Rights Forum, specialising in public interest litigation on behalf of torture and organised violence victims, as well as lobby and advocacy of human rights in general. He was targeted by authorities in Zimbabwe in relation to his research work and was forced into exile, first in Germany, before he moved to the Netherlands, with SAR support.

Prosper has spent the past two years as a visiting associate professor at Groningen University and then at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, teaching and conducting research. As a 'pracademic', Prosper combines teaching with volunteering for various NGOs working in his areas of expertise.

Following his extensive work as guest associate professor, Prosper has recently successfully obtained a full teaching position as associate professor at the Centre for the Politics of Transnational Law (CePTL) department at the Faculty of Law, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

SAR Europe would like to kindly thank all those universities that have hosted Prosper and other at-risk scholars and researchers."

Are you interested in joining the SAR Network and in potentially hosting other researchers?

Please contact sareurope@mu.ie

For information on the Inspireurope project and to join the mailing list for [Inspireurope](#) events and activities, please email inspireurope@mu.ie or follow [@Inspire_MSCA](#)

SCHOLARS AT RISK
NETWORK  EUROPE

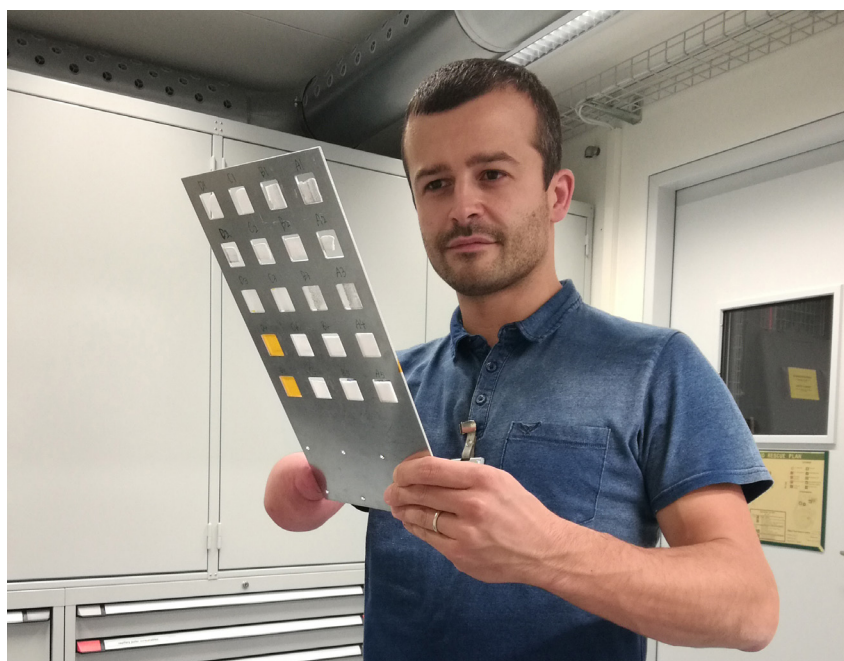
MCAA EDITORIAL TEAM

RESEARCHERS AND DISABILITIES

THE CHALLENGE OF INCLUSIVITY

What are the challenges faced by researchers with disabilities? Yahaya A. Yabo of the MCAA Editorial Team interviewed Carlo Antonini, a member of the MCAA Genders, Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (GEDI) Working Group, who shared his story, point of view and current work.

Carlo is a researcher with disability and a member of the MCAA GEDI WG. He is actively involved in the WG's ResearchAbility task force, which focuses on researchers with disabilities. Currently, he is a Rita Levi Montalcini tenure-track assistant professor and the coordinator of a recently funded MSCA Innovative Training Network (ITN), SURFICE³.



Carlo Antonini in his own words

I am concentrically Lombard, Italian and European. I am an aerospace engineer by training and, since a few years, I am working in the field of Materials Science and Technology, more specifically on non-wetting and anti-icing surfaces. I have been an MSCA fellow at ETH Zurich at the Laboratory of Thermodynamics in Emerging Technologies, in Prof. Dimos Poulikakos' group (2012-2014). I recently started coordinating an MSCA-ITN project called SURFICE.

³ <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/956703/en>

RESEARCHERS AND DISABILITIES

CAREER PATH

Carlo is currently a tenure-track assistant professor at the University of Milano-Bicocca, and a scientific advisor for the start-up ApiTech⁴ which supports innovation in SMEs. He had faced the well-known difficulties of finding a balance between mobility and family, with the need to find a long-term position. Talking about his disability, Carlo says: "I was born with a below-elbow amputation which has generally not restricted my career as an experimental scientist working in the lab. Certainly, I was fortunate to find colleagues and supervisors who supported my being different, without making me feel different."



Persons with visible and invisible disabilities may face many challenges while pursuing an academic career. Such challenges must be addressed.

DISCRIMINATION AND LACK OF POSSIBILITIES FOR RESEARCHERS WITH DISABILITIES

While discussing with a colleague about a student, who was using crutches after a surgery and was not allowed to come to the chemistry lab, Carlo realised "that a person with permanent limited mobility, e.g. using a wheelchair, may be prevented from becoming a chemist: if he/she cannot do the lab activities, how can he/she get the degree?" After this discussion, Carlo felt that "so much still needs to be done to level barriers."

In order to make research/academia inclusive, Carlo believes that, by

educating ourselves and the people around us, solutions can and must be found, if there is a specific need. He emphasises that "supporting people with specific needs does not mean favouring them, but rather creating the right conditions for everyone to succeed. Eyeglasses are a simple and perfect example: giving glasses to short-sighted people does not favour them; it simply brings them at the same condition as the others."

The University of Milano-Bicocca, where Carlo works, took some steps to address the problems of discrimination in academia by making inclusion one of its core pillars. Carlo recounts his initial reaction to this: "I

must confess the expression struck me at first: shouldn't a university aim at being 'exclusive'? Usually 'exclusive' is a synonym associated with being top ranking and cool, rather than 'inclusive'. However, inclusivity is a key factor with extremely positive practical consequences."

"At my university, once a year we have the B.inclusion days⁵ to promote awareness on diversity," says Carlo. "The university has a team of people with diverse competences, from psychology to IT, to help students find solutions for their specific needs. We, as teachers, are provided training to help successfully interact with students with specific needs. In case a student needs

⁴ <http://www.api-tech.it/>

⁵ <https://www.unimib.it/eventi/binclusion-days-2019>

RESEARCHERS AND DISABILITIES

help, I know what to do and there is a whole team that can support me.”

DIVERSITY AS A STRENGTH IN THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

Carlo’s definition of diversity is straightforward: “we are all differently equal.” Although he works and collaborates with people in a diverse research community, he feels that “the Italian academy certainly needs a generational turnover to develop a more diverse environment.” Having different needs and experiences, including a diverse education background, is a strength: “over the past few years, in my university, having an international MSc has certainly become beneficial, because it means exposing everyone, from professors to students, to different languages and cultures.”

According to Carlo, diversity can be a driver for inclusion: “belonging to a minority, or having specific needs, helps people to develop awareness about diversity, as well as to understand that others may see things differently and may have different needs.” As a scientist, Carlo had the opportunity to live in different countries (Germany, United Kingdom, Switzerland and Canada): “although I did it in a privileged position as an exchange student first or as a highly qualified professional later, I have learnt what it means to be far from home and a foreigner. This increases

my empathy for people with a different background than mine, even now that I am back home, in Italy.”

FROM AN MSCA FELLOW TO AN MSCA COORDINATOR, OR SUCCESS STORY

Carlo is currently coordinating the MSCA-ITN SURFICE project, about which he has this to say: “as a proud MSCAAlumnus, I am enthusiastic to lead a consortium in which we will train 13 PhD students to become the next generation of EU scientists and possibly innovative entrepreneurs. Together with a couple of colleagues, we started to plan the proposal in late 2017. Such a long time to write it and then have it granted. But patiently working on it was well worth it.”

WHAT CAN WE DO TO SUPPORT RESEARCHERS WITH SPECIFIC NEEDS?

“I think mentoring and advice from peers is a key element within the association,” says Carlo while referring to how MCAA members support each other within the Association. At the EU level, he believes that we should all advocate for a uniform regulation on health support. This is because “national health systems are so different, and some disabilities and specific needs may not be

recognised, when moving from one country to another. This can be a tremendous barrier for researchers’ mobility within the EU. We need to have a more uniform and recognised disability scheme at the European level.” A quick way to render some support in the meantime would be “providing support through a specific insurance scheme. Some specific financial support, like the MSCA Special Needs Allowance, may help the transition too.”

The MCAA can play a key role in promoting the value of diversity and inclusion in research: “the MCAA represents the current and the next generation of leaders in science. It is important to educate all of us to promote diversity and inclusion, through events, meetings and panel discussions. We must create awareness on the unconscious biases we all have, so that we can go back to our institutions and promote a bottom-up change in our daily business.”

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DIVERSITY AT WORK

THINKING INDEPENDENTLY, TOGETHER

We caught up with the MCAA South East Asia Chapter's Chair [Jenny Lind Elmaco](#) to discuss her commitment and experience in promoting diversity at work.

Jenny, in her own words

I was born in the Philippines but have always had a global mindset. I have a Master's Degree in Peace, Security, Development and International Conflict Transformation from the University of Innsbruck (Austria) and the Universidad Jaume I (Spain). A European Commission scholarship enabled me to earn a second Master's Degree in Global Studies from the University of Vienna and the University of Leipzig.

I graduated from Silliman University in the Philippines with a degree in Political Science in 2002. I also participated in a one-year exchange programme at the International Christian University in Japan where I interned at the United Nations. I was an awardee of the Ayala Young Leaders, the Jose Rizal Model Student of the Philippines and the Ten Outstanding Students of the Philippines.

I earned my International Doctorate in Peace, Conflict and Development Studies from Catedra UNESCO de Filosofia para la Paz, sobresaliente cum laude.

I am a geek at heart and fascinated with business. This is why I continued my studies in business while working for an international corporate foundation. I earned an MBA from the EAE Business School in Madrid, Spain, with a specialisation in Big Data and Business Intelligence. I graduated with honours.

Prior to that, I was part of the Junior Research Group on Civil Society and Multi-level Governance sponsored by the German Ministry for Science and Technology and housed in the historic city of Muenster. I was also part of the Cluster of Excellence of the European Center for Information Systems for the Project, Network e-Volution in Germany. I have been a Visiting Fellow of the Vienna School of Business and Economics for their Non-Profit Management Team.

DIVERSITY AT WORK

My first job was with the Office of the President. I had met then Philippine President, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo during the awarding ceremonies for youth leaders and she offered me a position as one of the youngest members of the Presidential Staff. I was Project Director for Youth Affairs in the Office of the President, Malacañang Palace as well as in the Office of the Chief of Staff and the Presidential Management Staff. I have also worked with non-profits including Women without Borders in Vienna and co-founded SPARK, an NGO for the economic and political empowerment of women in the Philippines.



I was the only non-European/non-White person on the team.

Passion is what drives Jenny's commitment in promoting diversity. "I served as Social and Gender Development Consultant at the Asian Development Bank and continue to be connected with the International Federation for Business and Professional Women, which I represent every year at the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women in New York," she says, linking her personal commitment to her professional activities.

Jenny also notes how she also benefited from inclusive policy. "When I was part of the research group of the University of Muenster, where I was the only non-European/person of colour, there was strategic support coming from the administration and from my colleagues."

She appreciated the involvement of the Rectorate Committee for Diversity, which advises the Rectorate on matters of diversity and equal opportunity with respect to all members of the University. According to Jenny, the Rectorate Committee is part of the University's proactive, anti-racist diversity policy committed to ensuring equitable participation of all university members regardless of their social background, ethnicity, age, gender, (dis)abilities, religious affiliation or sexual orientation.

This support contributed to her personal experience in promoting good practices in favour of diversity. "When I worked for Fundacion SERES in Madrid which is an umbrella organisation on corporate social responsibility programmes of over 140 companies, we worked closely with a lot of multinational companies and we facilitated the exchange of their best practices when it comes to Diversity Management.

I was the only non-European/non-White person on the team and so I knew my voice needed not only to be heard but also to be understood as well as amplified," explains Jenny.

EMBRACING AN INCLUSIVE CULTURE

Quoting Malcolm Forbes who said that diversity is the art of thinking independently together, Jenny notes the following: "If an organisation embraces an inclusive culture, mindsets, and processes to ensure that everyone feels that they belong and that they are treated fairly, then it allows the organisation to maximise its gains from the potentials that have been unleashed because there are no barriers to expression and creativity. People tend to be more productive when they are content and happy with what they are doing."

Diversity drives also innovation, as it is broadly recognised that companies with policies that promote workers across sexual orientation or gender spectrum are more innovative and productive. "The take-home message here is that a business which relies on innovation will benefit significantly from supporting diversity within its organisation." Here,

DIVERSITY AT WORK



Jenny quotes Richard Warr along with Roger Mayer of NC State, and Jing Zhao of Portland State University, and their results published in a study called “Do Pro-Diversity Policies Improve Corporate Innovation?” in the journal Financial Management.

What’s more, diversity improves Total Quality Management (TQM). “When employees feel involved, respected and connected, employers can tap into a greater richness of ideas and problem-solving approaches. This also helps companies to respond effectively to customers, attract and retain high performing employees, empower

teams to collaborate, raise productivity, future-proof their businesses, and, ultimately, deliver sustainable growth,” explains Jenny.

Most millennials, the future workforce, consider diversity as a core value when they weigh career opportunities. Jenny points to the findings of a study conducted by PwC in 2015, which suggests that 86 % of female millennials take a careful look at employers’ policies on diversity, equality and inclusion before applying.

Better business performance is the result of inclusive decision-making, concludes Jenny, who also refers

to a study carried out by Cloverpop. These findings show that inclusive teams make better business decisions up to 87 % of the time.

In addition, decisions made and executed by diverse teams deliver 60 % better results. “Diversity makes smarter teams,” concludes Jenny.

MCAA EDITORIAL TEAM

DIVERSITY AT WORK

EMPOWERING YOUNG ENTREPRENEURS

Passionate about sport, [Christina Makoundou](#) is currently working in Bologna on a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) project that aims to develop sustainable, accessible, safe, resilient and smart urban pavements. With her, we talked about the role of youth in creating a more diverse world and about the importance of solidarity through #Blackunity.

Christina, in her own words

I am Christina Makoundou, a French PhD fellow working in Italy, in collaboration with Swedish institutions. I graduated from Sorbonne University (Material Chemistry) in 2018, and I had the chance to join the University of Bologna as the youngest early-stage researcher part of the Horizon 2020 – Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions “SAFERUP” project (Sustainable, Accessible, Safe, Resilient and Smart Urban Pavements).

In addition to science, I am incredibly passionate by sport, either as a player or instructor. Besides, I was lucky enough to live my passion in the framework of international or young exchanges and volunteering projects around the world.

Short, general-public-adapted speech is the form of communication I love to use while sharing my research's work. I am proud of my multidisciplinary background linking chemistry, materials sciences and high-level sport skills.

As a PhD student, I am currently working on the following question: Can roads be made of recycled materials and save lives at the same time? My project encompasses various aspects like reactions or materials, people and their safety, along with the future of our environment. This project is a part of my life goal aiming to find a solution to tackle today's problems, to make the future better for all.



I have an incredible chance to have a double culture. This opened me to the world at a very young age.

DIVERSITY AT WORK



Christina believes in the positive impact that youth can have on the world no matter from where they are from. Involved in various volunteering activities, she is continuously looking for opportunities to meet her peers and, above all, to learn. “I tend to be extremely active as an international volunteer in the framework of sports events, European solidarity corps, European voluntary service, etc. During these volunteering activities, I have met amazing young people from several continents,” she says.

ONE YOUNG WORLD SUMMIT

She recently became aware of the One Young World Summit whose purpose is to identify, promote and connect the world’s most impactful young leaders to create a better

world, with more responsible and effective leadership. Christina is looking forward to participating in this summit hopefully in 2022. “I follow the event communications and the discussions they propose very closely. I really would like to attend this summit one day and to meet brilliant individuals from everywhere. I can say that my position as an MSCA fellow now allows me to meet international researchers, inspirational people,” adds Christina with enthusiasm.

While waiting for the summit, our fellow had the opportunity to attend a discussion led by the One Young World Africa network/community: “The objective of the discussion was to point out some problems linked to the history mainly, and to enhance the entrepreneurship behaviour of the young generation, to be aware of their capabilities and to empower

the ideas or projects coming for Africans or African descendants,” explains Christina.

Should the concept of #Blackunity (and #Unity) appear as a solution to tackle systemic racism and inequalities? “I think we reach the point where we should not differentiate people because of borders. If we aim to work together, everyone is a strength, no matter if the person is based in Nigeria, Canada, Brazil, Spain, New Zealand or Japan. I think the #Blackunity and unity, in general, is the definition of this state of mind,” answers our fellow.

INSPIRATION

Rooted in a “double culture” (from France, the country where she was born and raised, and from the country where her parents were born), Christina considers this situation

DIVERSITY AT WORK

Black or African entrepreneurs who inspire me

Moussa CAMARA, Founder and President of «[Les Déterminés](#)», which aims to help and support people with entrepreneurship/professional projects.

Marie DASYLVA, Founder of [Nkaliworks](#), an empowerment/coaching agency supporting the victims of discrimination, microaggressions or even denial of skills.

Thione NIANG, Founder and CEO of [GIVE1PROJECT](#) and JeufZone Farms, diplomat, lecturer and social entrepreneur. He notably worked with Barack Obama when he was president and received several awards.

Gloria ADE and **Gipsy ILUNGA**, Co-founders and CEOs of [Japade&co](#), a cooperative working with small producers and labs in Africa.

Denis MUKWEGE, Gynaecologist, Founder of the [Panzi Foundation](#) and [Mukwege Foundation](#). He received in 2019 the Nobel Peace Prize for his effort and action against wartime sexual violence.

Fatoumata KEBE, Astrophysicist and educator specialising in space debris and author of the book *La lune est un roman* (The moon is a novel). She was a student at Sorbonne University.

as an advantage and a pride: “I have an incredible chance to have a “double culture”. This opened me to the world at a very young age.”

Among others, Christina’s inspirations come from black or African entrepreneurs.

What’s more, Christina is pleased to share with us the [list of the 100 most influential young Africans](#) that was released on 4 November 2020.

EMPOWERING IS KEY

According to Christina, empowering young, female, African and black

entrepreneurs is vital in enhancing diversity. This should be done by highlighting and contributing to the discussions to praise the numerous initiatives they launch. She mentions, amongst other actions, [Afrogenius](#), which aims to spread scientific knowledge and the Instagram account [tous.afro](#), whose purpose is to raise awareness about African traditions, cultures and languages.

Christina highlights how important it is to recognise the work done by African and black entrepreneurs and gives a few tips on how to impact diversity positively: “Consider black people when they apply to grants,

scholarships, positions... consider their education, let them express themselves when they are and feel concerned.” Moreover, “Don’t/never hide negative/harmful/toxic behaviours behind humour or habits/usual practices” she adds.

“The world of tomorrow starts today, and no matter our skin colour, our citizenship, our field, we should all be actor of the positive change”.

MCAA EDITORIAL TEAM

DIVERSITY AT WORK

INTEGRATING INTO A NEW RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT

Integrating into a new environment can be challenging. How does diversity influence the process of integration? Yahaya A. Yabo, an Early Stage Researcher (ESR), talks about his experience and what can be done to support researchers through the process of integration.

INTRODUCTION

Integration is key to achieving a successful research outcome especially for non-indigenous researchers. It is one of the key indicators for measuring the suitability of newly recruited researchers and could be used as the basis upon which their contracts may be extended beyond the probation period. Integrating very well into a team and having a good working relationship with all members improves the mental health of researchers. However, the process of integration could be very difficult for some researchers, especially those working or studying in a new

country. For some people, it may take more than the typical six-month probation period to fully integrate into their new working environment. Working culture and conditions differ from one laboratory to another, in some cases even indigenous researchers need some time to acclimatise to their new laboratory.

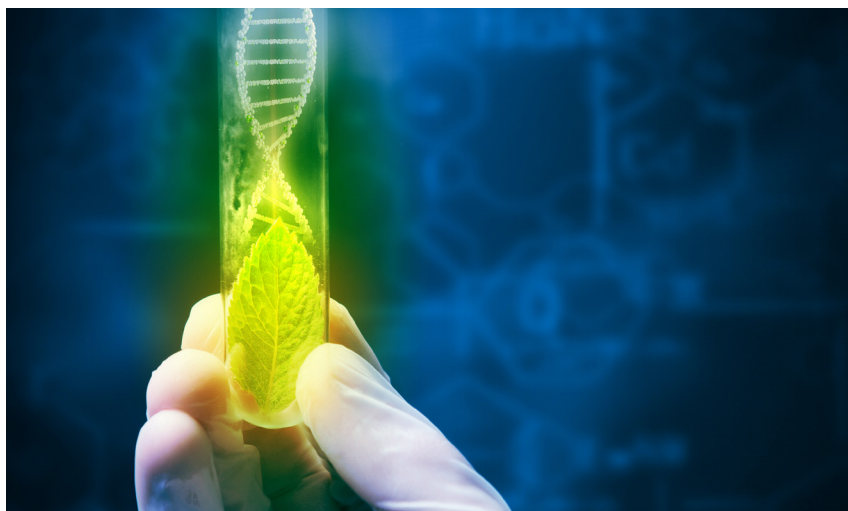
MY BACKGROUND

In addition to my basic and secondary education, I trained as a veterinarian in Nigeria. Then, I did my master's in Molecular Biology in Brussels. Currently, I am an MSCA ESR, doing a PhD at the intersection

between Molecular Biology, Bioinformatics and Neuro-Oncology at the Luxembourg Institute of Health and the University of Luxembourg. My doctoral project is part of the MSCA Innovative Training Network (ITN) called GLIOTRAIN⁶.

WHY AN MSCA ESR FELLOWSHIP?

I applied for an MSCA fellowship because it is one of the most prestigious and generous fellowships that give so much attention and funding to the training of ESRs. With the training opportunities attached to the fellowship, I hope to bridge the knowledge gap I have especially in transferable skills. Working in an MSCA project also provides a huge life-long networking opportunity as well as the chance to travel across Europe and beyond. In addition to doing research, I am also very passionate about travelling around the world. All these points informed my decision to apply for an MSCA PhD grant.



⁶ <http://www.gliotrain.eu/>

DIVERSITY AT WORK

COPING WITH THE CHANGE IN ENVIRONMENT FROM YOUR HOME COUNTRY AND SETTLING IN EUROPE

Studying and/or working in Europe is quite different from what I was used to in Nigeria. Unlike Nigeria, doctoral students in Europe have all the necessary resources and support for their studies or work. In terms of research, they have access to state-of-the-art equipment and have leading scholars as mentors. These are all aspects that make studying and working in the new environment a bit easier.

The most difficult part for me was adapting to the weather, particularly the short cloudy winter days with little sunlight. The cosmopolitan nature of most European cities entails the possibility to meet people from

different cultures. Socialising in this multicultural setting was a bit difficult at the beginning.

BENEFITS OF BEING PART OF AN MSCA FELLOWSHIP AND BEING A RESEARCHER IN EUROPE

Being part of an MSCA ITN means working with many talented students and exceptional supervisors from both academia and industry. Meeting annually to discuss the different projects within the ITN is an important part of being an MSCA fellow. The secondments also provide an opportunity for ESRs to have industry experience. Having first-hand experience of working in both academia and industry helps ESRs to ponder with more skills and knowledge about which career path to follow.

DIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE

Working in a diverse environment speeds up the process of integration and reduces a lot of mental stress associated with imposter syndrome. Although, in my own experience, most people are generally nice to newcomers, having someone around with a similar background who faced similar chal-

lenges is priceless. The cultural gap between the researcher's country of origin and Europe may pose a communication barrier between the newcomer and the insiders. I believe that having more people from every part of the world will help in putting newcomers through, for example, the complex administrative processes they might encounter for the first time. Thanks to the diversity in my institute and the buddy system that pairs newcomers and insiders, my integration process was less cumbersome.

ONE THING WE CAN DO TO POSITIVELY IMPACT DIVERSITY

The first step is to open the space for more diversity. Starting from the recruitment stage, there is the need to understand the enormous challenges faced by students from developing countries. Conducting online interviews will improve the participation of people from different parts of the world. For instance, without the opportunity of having an online interview, I would not have had the chance to take part in the selection process. The same applies to other ESRs in my ITN project, who were not residing in Europe at the time of the selection.



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DIVERSITY AT WORK

CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE ALL VOICES MATTER

How to promote diversity and inclusion at work? We met Manuel Wachter, CEO of [EqualPlus](#), a consulting company specialised in this field. For him, tackling bias and encouraging a sense of belonging are key to building an inclusive environment.

Manuel, in his own words

I am the founder and CEO of EqualPlus, a London-based consulting company providing inclusive performance solutions globally. I am from Guadeloupe, and my background played a significant role in my early interest in diversity and inclusion. Like many Guadeloupeans, my family heritage includes West Africans sold into slavery in the Caribbean, Central Africans lured to the region as indentured labour, and also West Europeans who ran sugarcane and coffee plantations, using slave labour when that was the law of the land. The legacy of that segregated history is still evident in today's Guadeloupe, in private and professional interactions alike. I grew up trying to be a bridge-builder and fostering a sense of shared belonging in the diverse groups I was a part of, then and now.

I moved from Guadeloupe to the Paris area for my higher education, first studying literature in a French “classe préparatoire” and then international management at ESCP Europe. As part of the programme, I enjoyed experiencing life, studies and work placements in the UK, Spain, Morocco, Turkey and Brazil.

Upon graduation, I worked in financial services initially, and I volunteered in my free time at a Paris-based research institute of psychoanalysis that specialised in bias. I decided to reconcile my double interest in managing diverse teams and studying bias mitigation by going into leadership development and joining the World Economic Forum in Switzerland on a Fellowship.

DIVERSITY AT WORK

After a few projects supporting gender equality, LGBT executives, refugee workers and race relations at work, I started EqualPlus in 2016. My ambition has been to combine all those learning experiences and author a methodology that would foster a shared sense of belonging and sustainably higher levels of performance at any organisation. Today, I am blessed to be part of a 30-person team operating in 13 countries and counting.

”

I grew up trying to be a bridge-builder and fostering a sense of shared belonging.



ate an environment where all voices matter – that is the winning combination that makes me come alive. The work is deeply personal to me.”

TACKLING BIASES TO PROMOTE INCLUSION

One of the first steps towards inclusion is to challenge biases, which are cognitive shortcuts likely to bring us to the wrong conclusion. As Manuel explains: “We have a responsibility to pay attention to what biases we have about other human beings.” It is therefore paramount to take a moment to review the facts before making a decision, so that we can collaborate better with others who are from different backgrounds.

This is why [EqualPlus Ltd](#) proposes to coach organisations committed to adopting inclusive practices. “Every organisation that reaches out to us starts by explaining how they are unique,” says Manuel, when he explains the methodology. Once the profile of the organisation has been clearly defined, the strategy is formulated. It is based on the following three pillars:

For Manuel, the decision to specialise in diversity and inclusion was the result of his personal journey. “I have always known that when you don’t belong in the dominant group, you need to deal with the extra mental strain of trying to fit in, navigating and anticipating microaggressions, etc,” he explains. “This is a losing game for teams not being able to leverage the full talent of certain members, and also for the individuals themselves, whose sense of be-

longing, mental and physical health, as well as their future career prospects all get impacted as a result.”

According to Manuel, promoting inclusion and diversity can help create an environment where people can not only work better together, but also increase their level of well-being. “When everyone can deconstruct stereotypes, attribute talent and credit where they are due, and cre-

DIVERSITY AT WORK



1. Getting the data (through quantitative and qualitative research) to identify the specific structural and cultural barriers to inclusion in the organisation;
2. Delivering training on conscious inclusion (understanding what bias is, where it comes from and how to mitigate it);
3. Ensuring the new inclusive culture sticks over time (by redesigning the processes, monitoring the data, and coaching leaders as role models of inclusion).

What makes this type of service unique is the wide spectrum of nationalities and languages represented by EqualPlus's consultants. "We often work with organisations span-

ning various countries and cultures, and we make sure to deliver the service through our local experts, who have an intimate understanding of the culture and the language. This idea of global reach and local service is absolutely core to how we approach the work. It is about respecting and appreciating the local diversity," explains Manuel.

'IF YOU CAN NAME IT, YOU CAN TAME IT'

The best practices to enhance inclusion and diversity at work can start with considering the data before taking a decision. "The general idea is to figure out ways to make more deliberate decisions. This can include removing all sorts of triggers to our biases, for example by

anonymising CVs, if we are hiring. It can also mean leveraging tricks from behavioural design research, in particular around perspective-taking," says Manuel.

Appointing a person who will help consider all aspects and avoiding groupthink before making a collective decision is another solution proposed by Manuel. "My general motto is 'if you can name it, you can tame it'. If we find ways to name any assumption at play, conscious or not, we are much more likely to end up making evidence-based decisions. I'll add that our willpower gets tired quickly, so the more we can tweak our processes so we are nudged toward deliberate thinking, the better," he concludes.

Interested?

Get in touch with Manuel and find out which EqualPlus [inclusive performance solution](#) will help you foster a sense of shared belonging among your employees.

MCAA EDITORIAL TEAM

DIVERSITY AT WORK

CROSS-BORDER RELOCATION: AVOIDING A CULTURAL VOID



Cross-border mobility is a unique experience shared by the vast majority of MCAA members. While its professional benefits are clear, it also entails a high degree of cultural integration into a new country, which can be mentally challenging. Sasha Ivashchenko, MCAA Editorial Team member, explores the benefits and downsides through her own relocation experience.

Cross-border relocation of researchers is automatically associated with Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions and is widely considered an inseparable part of one's scientific career. It goes without saying that such a move includes many benefits.

ADVANTAGES OF RESEARCH MOBILITY

Firstly, it is an adventure. And who does not like an adventure? With

the world rapidly changing around us, more and more people are keen to explore new places and experience new cultures. No matter what background you are from or what you are striving to achieve, you will most certainly want to indulge in the multicultural boiling pot of foreign experiences. After all, every research starts with a desire to explore. There is a bit of Indiana Jones in everyone who is reading this Newsletter!

Secondly, it is no secret (it's actually a proven fact) that cross-border relocation within academia benefits careers. Research mobility allows you to open new horizons, see your field from a new perspective, learn new techniques, experience alternative research styles, and learn from the best. According to a recent study published in the *Journal of the Royal Society Interface*⁷, research mobility results in an average of 17 % increase in the number of research

⁷ Petersen et al., *J R Soc Interface*, 2018.

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citations. One in four Nobel Prize recipients performed his/her award winning research in a foreign country. So, why shouldn't you?

THE DISADVANTAGES OF RESEARCH MOBILITY

The list of possible advantages from cross-border mobility seems never ending. However, what people often do not mention out loud is that this relocation is a bit different from a holiday abroad and can be mentally challenging. This article is part of a special MCAA Newsletter devoted to the subject of diversity and discrimination. When I hear those terms, the first image that comes to my mind is gender- or race-based discrimination. However, in a highly multicultural scientific world, there is at least one more dimension scientists are judged on: the degree of their cultural integration into the country they are working.

Cross-border mobility, especially at an early stage in your career, makes you look at everything from a different perspective. For most of your life, you perfected your academic and social skills, making sure you will be sharp, fast, creative, and to the point. Each of these skills, even the mastership of occasional chit-chat at the coffee machine, influences the probability of one's promotion and strongly differs from country to country. In the case of cross-border relocation, just overnight, you become



a cultural minority, and these skills may need to be (re)mastered from scratch. Even though cross-border mobility is very common, the majority of researchers will move only once or twice in their life⁸ before settling down. In the 11 % of cases, this move will even result in complete re-scission of research connections or collaborations with their country of origin⁹. Therefore, social integration into the new "home" will be of critical importance.

MY OWN RELOCATION

In February 2013, I moved to the Netherlands to start a PhD project. I was accepted for an Early Stage Researcher (ESR) position within an EU consortium called Trace'nTreat. I was going to work on the topic I always dreamt about and my supervisor was a well-acclaimed expert in the field. Back then, being a young and restless 24-year-old Ukrainian,

I could not be happier and more excited about the change. I had three years to finish the project. I knew that it would be difficult, but I was up for the challenge. Two small suitcases and one flight later, I landed in Amsterdam.

I don't think that I need to explain that Ukraine and the Netherlands are very different countries. I am not talking about economics or history, these differences are to be expected. The cultural shock I experienced was different from anything I could have imagined.

I was born and raised in a small town of about 20 000 people. One can look at my upbringing as challenging, but I feel blessed. I am from a multi-cultural family. I was raised by a single mother who set an excellent example as a strong woman and always stressed the importance of education. Looking back, I never had stereotypically "normal" hobbies

⁸ Deville et al., *Scientific Reports*, 2014.

⁹ Petersen et al., *J R Soc Interface*, 2018.

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and had a rather peculiar style. Yet, work “weird” did not exist in our home. I discovered the beauty of physics at an aeronautic summer camp when I was 11. After that, all my free time was filled with private physics lessons. I studied at the top university in the country on a full scholarship. There was a lot of competition, but we (students) loved it. Until moving to the Netherlands, all my days were filled with studying, work, and some necessary rest.

I would love to say that I instantly integrated into Dutch society and made many Dutch friends, but the reality was a bit different. First, my research group and the entire department was predominantly Dutch (probably about 90 %). A simplified version of how I saw a typical Dutch lifestyle at that point can be summarised as: work hard, party hard, and find a balance between the two. My colleagues often had scheduled lunches and coffee breaks. Those breaks strated on the same time every single day, independent of whether you wanted to take a break or not. Work-related conversations were forbidden during the breaks, yet they would openly share details I could only discuss with my GP. There were regular after-work drinks, yet we rarely met during our free time (e.g. on the weekend). My colleagues frequently switch to 100 % Dutch around the coffee table, yet avoided using it while talking to foreigners directly. None of these things were making any sense to me, and my world was literally turned upside down. From a scientific point of view, I was achieving great individual results. At the same time, organisation of collaborative experiments and projects was way more challenging

for me, compared to other Dutch colleagues. I knew that the core of the problem was in cultural integration, but I did not know how to fix it.

THE CULTURAL VOID

For the vast majority of my PhD, I was constantly switching between two social interaction modes. On the one hand, I was trying to blend in by mimicking the Dutch behaviour (as recommended by cultural integration courses). On the other hand, I would ricochet to an extreme Ukrainian version of myself, probably as a compensation for the failed Dutch act. Neither of these tactics helped, and I just ended up being stuck somewhere between the two. I found myself stuck in a cultural void, where I did not know anymore where to place myself or how to act. My project consortium provided a lot of professional training to boost my technical skills, but none of those courses was targeting the issues I was really struggling with.

FILLING THE VOID AND BRIDGING THE GAP

After a few years of living in the Netherlands, probably also after getting a bit older, I finally started to accept the fact that I was moving further and further away from my Ukrainian roots. At the same time, I realised that I would never

become Dutch. The vast majority of my adult life was spent in the Low Lands, where I learnt how to find a better balance between work and leisure time. I learnt the value of daily meaningless chit-chat with colleagues, that help to maintain good connections, as well as better group dynamics, which actually do help me in my work. A lot of things that did not make sense to me started making sense. Some still do not. Once I stopped forcefully trying to blend in and tried to understand from where people are coming, I was able to bridge the gap over the void between the two cultures. At last, the solution to my problem was not in trying to turn myself or other people into something they are not, but in accepting and respecting our differences. Sounds obvious, but it is often overlooked.

What have I learnt from my experience? What can I share with other MCAA members, especially ESRs? Each ESR will spend at least several years in a foreign country and will face challenges similar to the ones I faced. The years of your PhD project are intense, both academically and mentally. There will be many ups and downs and there will be times you feel you are on a roller coaster. So, just make it easier on yourself. Stay open-minded and try to find a good support team, because there will be things to complain about.

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INTERSECTORAL DIVERSITY

PROVIDING A SAFE SPACE FOR LGBTQI+ MIGRANTS

Alice Onor acts in favour of migrants through the association [Arcigay Arcobaleno](#), which aims to promote lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning (or queer), intersex (LGBTQI+) persons' rights. She told us about the activities she conducts and the challenges she faces.

Alice, in her own words

I am 29 years old, born and raised in Italy. I have lived abroad, in Ireland and France, for work and study-related reasons.

I have a bachelor's degree in Translation and Interpretation, as well as a master's degree in foreign literature. I am currently working as an English teacher, both in public and private schools.



There is no typical work day for Alice at the Arcigay Arcobaleno association. "Every person who knocks at our doors has a unique situation and different needs; usually we are contacted by someone who wants to meet us, then we set up a meeting to get to know each other and we try to figure out how we could help them best," she explains.

Operating in the area of Trieste and Gorizia, Arcigay Arcobaleno gathers volunteers who work to promote LGBTQI+ persons' rights. Activities encompass a large spectrum, from organising cultural events to spreading information related to sexual diseases like HIV/AIDS. Above all, the

association provides safe spaces for LGBTQI+ persons.

A VULNERABLE GROUP

Arcigay Arcobaleno also takes care of migrants, as LGBTQI+ persons are particularly vulnerable within this group. According to the association's website, 72 countries criminalise LGBTQI+ persons (detention, death penalty). What's more, being LGBTQI+ represents one of the main reasons people are forced to flee their country. The association aims to give support to LGBTQI+ migrants during their asylum procedure and to cooperate with NGOs dealing with refugees.

Being LGBTQI+ isn't the same experience everywhere in the world, and people like me are privileged and don't really understand what people from other contexts might have had to go through.

INTERSECTORAL DIVERSITY

“We try to provide guidance to migrants who come to see us and often don’t know how to deal with their already complicated situation; many people are afraid of being exposed within their own communities, many need support, looking for Italian classes or finding safe places to interact with others,” says Alice.

Challenges are multiple, as Alice highlights: “I am a volunteer, we all are, and we try to do our best where we can. I had to ‘learn on the job’ in many instances. What’s important is being a support to people who often have no one to talk to, and then take it from there.”

Language can also be a barrier. “Talking to people who come from a completely different environment can be tricky,” she adds.

Moreover, the diversity of situations covers realities that western Europeans are sometimes unable to conceive. “Being LGBTQI+ isn’t the same experience everywhere in the world, and people like me are privileged and don’t really understand what people from other contexts might have had to go through,” muses Alice.

In spite of the difficulties she faces on a daily basis, Alice underlines

positive outcomes. “Sometimes we keep in touch even after they don’t ‘need’ us anymore,” she says. A few people previously helped by the association became “helpers” themselves, acting for example as interpreters to connect the association and other migrants in need of support.

HELPING AND LEARNING

For the attention of those willing to help this specific group of vulnerable persons, Alice recommends to never judge and always listen. Recognising one’s own weaknesses can also be an asset: “I do my best to help out in every way that I can, but I also try to keep in mind that there are things that I cannot help with; in those instances I either find someone who can, or if even that isn’t possible, I still strive to be an emotional support,” says Alice.

The helper shouldn’t forget to be a learner at the same time: “It is important to look for information on the political and social situation of the country of origin of every person asking for help, to be better able to understand them and their journey. At the end of the day, we are all human though, and if everyone is willing to do so, there is always a way to connect with one another,” she concludes.



MCAA EDITORIAL TEAM

ACADEMIC DIVERSITY

TALES OF A EUROPEAN RESEARCHER COMING FROM A CHALLENGING BACKGROUND

In this article, [Dora Koller](#) explains how receiving a Marie Skłodowska-Curie action broadened her horizons.



BEFORE MY MSCA PHD FELLOWSHIP

Academia is usually not a possible career path for people from lower and lower-middle classes. I went to

high school in a little town in southern Hungary, where I knew only one person who was interested in science. Then, I went to university in the capital, Budapest. In my circle of student friends, I was the only

one who came from a very modest background — and actually a troubled family. I often felt left out because of working two jobs to make ends meet, and so, I could not attend any social events. I heard phrases like “but it was your decision to work, why are you complaining about being tired and not having enough time to study?”, “why don’t you come to have lunch with us?”, or “why didn’t you travel anywhere during summer?”, and many others along those lines. All the time.

Being busy in order to provide for myself, I did not have the best grades during my undergraduate studies and therefore felt inadequate and had all the symptoms of impostor syndrome. When I started my master’s at Pázmány Péter Catholic University, I found a completely different environment. It was very supportive, so I was motivated to do better. Not to mention the financial help they provided to students with a high GPA (which I had as I did not have to work as much anymore) and suboptimal social status. I could even go for an internship abroad!

I was fortunate enough to get hired as a lab assistant (with a salary! Very modest, but still a salary, which is not common in academia) at Semmelweis University. Here they discovered my talent fast and supported

ACADEMIC DIVERSITY

me to grow as a researcher. I had two international colleagues, one of them had a Marie-Skłodowska Curie Actions (MSCA) PhD fellowship. He told me all about it. When he encouraged me to apply, I replied that I wouldn't even try because I was not good enough for such a prestigious grant. However, I finally started to apply and got awarded a fellowship in Madrid, Spain.

AFTER MY MSCA PhD FELLOWSHIP

Since the time I was awarded the MSCA PhD fellowship, a whole new world opened to me with endless opportunities. In my own and other MSCA networks, many people did not know their options and privileges of having this grant. The management of our network was not spot on, but the ones who wanted could get information/help through other MSCA platforms. I went to all MCAA conferences as well as a scientific conference in the United States thanks to an MCAA micro grant. After each MCAA conference, I always returned to work very motivated and enthusiastic. I liked that the conferences dealt with very important but often overlooked topics, such as mental health in academia, gender balance and grant writing. And I liked how, through the annual conference, the MCAA creates a very supporting community. At the conferences, I had the chance to talk to many other fellows, to European Commissioners and to MCAA Board Members. Having an MSCA PhD Fellowship can be used for networking very easily, in case there is interest and for finding the appropriate tools to do so. Apart

from professional connections, I made friends in my own network, but even with other fellows.

Apart from the top-tier scientific projects the MSCA programme has to offer, the obligatory mobility also helps a lot in career development and personal growth. Adapting to another culture is a huge challenge, but it is definitely worth it. In only three years, I lived in Hungary, Spain and Portugal (where I spent my secondment). It was an utterly amazing experience! I defended my PhD recently and got accepted as a Postdoctoral Associate at Yale University, which I believe could not have been possible without the MSCA PhD Fellowship.

TAKE HOME MESSAGE

Many people don't have the courage to apply, because they don't think they have a chance — especially in underdeveloped regions or where the society is not supportive. Just apply! The worst that can happen is that you do not get the grant. But then you go on and on until you get one. I acknowledge that it is very hard to deal with rejections. But without rejections there is no success, and we always learn from our mistakes. I have social anxiety and ADHD, but I am constantly trying to overcome my fears. Apart from courage, many people do not

know their options. Do not wait for others to tell you your options, go after them yourself! I am always trying to follow the 10x rule — I am always taking 10 times the actions of other people, even though I am terrified of the unknown and always think I am not good enough at the beginning.

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DISCRIMINATION

ARE LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION THE ACE UNDER THE SLEEVE OF BULLY MENTORS?

SURVIVING BULLYING IN HIGH EDUCATION

Letters of recommendation (LORs) are key in the process of hiring for academic and research job positions. Subjective perspectives and bias can jeopardise scientific careers. Celia Arroyo-López, member of the MCAA GEDI and Policy Working Groups, discusses abuses and misuses related to bully mentors and their targets.

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION AND RESEARCH

In the process of hiring for academic and research job positions, LORs provide supplementary information for the selection panel not directly obtained from the applicant's curriculum vitae. Many selective processes rely on professional references, including LORs, by the applicants' colleagues and/or supervisors for the identification and selection of suitable candidates. Therefore, getting good remarks and statements from referees¹⁰ often becomes an extra source of stress and anxiety for the applicants.

Academic LORs are completed by observers describing the professional achievements and abilities of the aspirants. The information assessed generally includes educational background, skills and experience (McCarthy & Goffin, 2001),

as well as non-cognitive patterns like interpersonal communication skills and traits of your personality, thoughts, behaviours and attitudes (Borghans, Duckworth, Heckman, & ter Weel, 2008). Theoretically, the information provided must be objective, factual, verifiable and "made in good faith" (McConnell, 1993; Wright & Ziegelstein, 2004). However, most evaluation processes rely on subjective performance evaluations that influence the accuracy and reliability of the LORs (Wright & Ziegelstein, 2004).

USES, ABUSES AND MISUSES

Thus, applicants do not only need good qualifications, professional and personal skills, and a great number of high-impact publications. They also need to be liked by the colleagues and supervisors who will act as their referees. Referees who

like their targets describe them more positively. However, those who do not like their targets are more eager and motivated to provide information about the negative aspects of the target (Leising, Erbs, & Fritz, 2010). LORs represent, then, an important source of bias based on gender/LGTBQ/race/disability (Dutt, Pfaff, Bernstein, Dillard, & Block, 2016; Lin et al., 2019; Schmader, Whitehead, & Wysocki, 2007; Trix & Psenka, 2003). Lenience bias occurs when individuals are rated above their real aptitudes. On the contrary, under strictness bias, individuals are unfairly low or negatively rated (Angelovski, Brandts, & Sola, 2016). These considerations might justify the perception of the academic hiring process as opaque with no clear public, fair and equitable criteria of evaluation (Aamodt, 1999; Fernandes et al., 2020).

Getting good LORs is essential in the establishment and perdurance

¹⁰ I use the term "referee" to indicate a person who writes a LOR or provides references for an applicant. Thus, in this text, the term does not refer to the evaluators of articles in the publication system, although in some cases abusive behaviour could be carried out within this system too.

DISCRIMINATION

of our scientific careers. However, as far as I know, little has been publicly said about the misuses and wrongdoings associated with them.

THE ACE UNDER THE SLEEVE: "I WILL GIVE YOU A BAD CREDIT AND REFERENCES"

Despite the possibility of taking legal action against authors of defamatory and intentionally misrepresenting letters (Aamodt, 1999), the truth is that it rarely happens; especially when one is at a very early stage of their career, or one lacks enough funds for the litigation. Libellous letters are not rare within the research system, especially when letters are confidential (Wright & Ziegelstein, 2004), resulting in harming and jeopardising the applicant's reputation and career. It is not uncommon either to hear how abusive supervisors use LORs to intimidate their students or to retaliate against victims of labour abuse, harassment, bullying or mobbing, in most of the cases supported by the legitimisation of bully-type behaviours in the name of academic freedom (Keashly, 2019).

Under abusive supervisors and superiors, either one behaves "properly", or one will receive bad references. In extreme cases, they may even get a refusal to write a LOR. Within an abusive system, those who do not behave "properly" are considered insubordinate and troublemakers. Reporting fraud, labour abuse, bullying, mobbing or any type of discrimination can bring bad consequences to victims, survivors or witnesses in the form of

bad LORs, or the total absences of them. Even just claiming for a proper salary may be cause for abusive behaviour from superiors.

Abusive behaviour is not new in academia. It is a well-known trend generally ignored amongst faculties, peers, academic staff, students and colleagues in what Keashly and Neuman call the "power of peers". The power of peers occurs when despite knowing the existence of misconduct, the (mis)conduct is actively ignored, resulting in its continuation and maintenance (Keashly, 2019) and causing substantial damages to the victims, and ultimately to the whole research system's quality and integrity.

BRINGING LIGHT TO OBSCURITY

After dealing with labour abuses, bullying, and mobbing in academia, with no efficient support, I decided to come out and to initiate a campaign to bring to light the common cases of abuses we suffer in academic environments and the reasons why they are under-reported. As part of my healing process, I launched a small-scale anonymous survey to collect preliminary data; neither funds nor institutional support were used. Carried out between April and June 2020, the survey collected 53 responses (data not published yet). The survey was distributed using email lists and social networks like Twitter, Facebook, Slack and LinkedIn. While the great majority of respondents wanted to remain anonymous, some of them said they would be willing to go public. According to the survey's results, abuses in academia are under-re-

ported because victims and survivors are afraid of being considered "troublemakers". More specifically, 75 % of respondents considered themselves victims of harassment in academia and 39.6 % witnessed it at some point in their careers. When asked why, based on their own experience, they think harassment/bullying/mobbing is generally under-reported, and what were the victims' main fears, the majority of those surveyed mentioned the end of their scientific careers (81.1 %). 62.3 % were worried about having bad LORs or being blacklisted. Also, not being believed or being too psychologically and emotionally affected to be able to report their situation were repeated responses (60,38 %). Likewise, fearing the termination of contracts (52.8 %), being bad-mouthed (47.2 %), and a lack of trust in the institutions and/or in academia's human resources management (47.2 %) were frequent responses too. Curiously, some of them were concerned about protecting the bully and the institution from bad publicity (37.7 %). Lastly, a fear of a visa expiration or being deported was also noted (26.4 %). A visa-dependent person is more vulnerable. If one's visa status is determined by the length of their contract or host programme, dealing with an abusive supervisor might be more complicated.

In general, it is interesting to notice that the main concerns of victims or witnesses are supervisor- or mentor-dependent, and not associated with their careers, skills or abilities. However, it is also interesting to note that, despite the lack of institutional and social support, victims and survivors are still willing to talk

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and share their own experiences. It is a communal catharsis, and the beginning of a healing process.

In summary, a poor LOR, or the lack of it, might jeopardise the opportunities of getting a job in academia, despite one's scientific record. So, if our referees do not like us, or if we do not "behave properly", we are more likely to get a bad LOR. This may hint at the existence of clear bias in academic LORs. We are meant to be strong and competitive within this extremely demanding environment; however, still little is considered about the real labour conditions. Are LORs a tool for the maintenance of

the glass ceiling? I think so. In my experience, the fact of reporting discrimination and abuses has brought me defamatory LORs. Research in the era of COVID-19 and Open Science now has the opportunity to evaluate the problems concerning science, scientists and research, and to propose changes and improvements for a better science and a better future for new generations of scientists. Luckily, there is

some hope for change, thanks also to the Marie Curie Alumni Association (MCAA). The MCAA is one of the first (and sadly still few) organisations that are openly discussing bullying in academia. Hopefully, its work will be soon followed by other organisations.

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EuroScience is a European grass-roots organisation for the advancement of science. Currently, it counts more than 2 500 individual members. EuroScience members are for the most part researchers from all scientific disciplines, but also from other professions involving science and technology, such as journalists, communicators, teachers and students.

The vision of EuroScience is a scientific workforce that creates a positive change for society. However, we believe that this vision can only be realised if the professional workforce is as diverse and representative of the society it should serve. We recognise that there are many

obstacles to achieving this diversity, including organisational cultures (the values and behaviours that contribute to the unique social and psychological environment of an organisation) in the workplace that are not inclusive, supportive or designed to nurture and celebrate diverse voices and talent.

EuroScience will soon begin a set of activities that focus on highlighting

both good and bad organisational practices and culture within our broad community. To better understand its future areas of focus, the organisation is undertaking a short consultation. The [questionnaire](#) is completely anonymous, and answers should be provided in English.

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The MCAA Newsletter is the main communication channel for and about the MCAA community. It provides information about the activities of our national chapters and working groups, as well as events, projects and partners.

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Any request concerning the newsletter, including suggestions about new topics and articles, should be sent to news@mariecuriealumni.eu.

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We welcome articles on any activity related to MCAA, local chapters, initiatives, events and so forth.

We especially welcome articles on MSCA projects, where one can either provide a general overview of a project or present initial/mid/final results.

Articles should be max 750 words, written in a clear, lay language, and possibly provide one or two images (copyright-free and high definition).

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