



Issue 31 - June 2022

Marie Curie Alumni Association

Newsletter



Science Diplomacy

Guest edited by
Radenka Krsmanović Whiffen
and Mostafa Moonir Shawrav

Meet the new Board

MCAA Annual
Conference and
General Assembly

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Message from the Board

Dear MCAA members,

Last March another page of our Association was turned with the election of a new Board for the next two years. We can't thank the outgoing Board Members enough for their dedication and hard work, and for their continuous support that is making the transition so much easier. We are eager to continue the previous path to bring the MCAA to the next level in science policy, in career development support to members, and in creating a community that spreads a positive impact on society.

In addition to the Board election, the MCAA General Assembly (GA) approved two important documents: the [MCAA Code of Conduct](#) (CoC), and the [Ethics Committee Regulation](#). The CoC, available for open discussion to all MCAA members since last year, is therefore now officially adopted and will guide us to inspire adequate behaviour of all members, including members of the Board and others in leadership roles. It also serves as a basis for remediation when violations occur. An Ethics Committee (EtCom) to be constituted soon will advise in case of violations to the CoC. All MCAA members wishing to nominate candidates for the EtCom please submit a motivation letter and short CV showing relevant competences and experience to i.volunteer@mariecuriealumni.eu indicating 'EtCom application' as the subject. Of note, this recently created email will be widely used in future calls for volunteers, in the context of the Board's engagement to involve all members in the life of the Association. A [Suggestions Box](#) for members was also recently created – we want to hear your ideas for the MCAA!

At the annual GA a [proposal to update the Articles of the Association](#) was also presented

to comply with new requirements in Belgian law. Additionally, we propose some flexibility, such as introducing the possibility to maintain online GA's and online voting, currently only possible due to a temporary exception by the Belgian authorities introduced in response to the pandemic's restrictions. The final voting will take place at the [extraordinary GA](#) that will take place online on the 22 May 2022. We call all members to participate and vote. The Board, with the support of a legal team, will be happy to answer any questions from the members in a [discussion forum](#) dedicated to this important step of updating the Articles of Association (AoA).

As many of you may be aware, the current EC grant that has sponsored most of MCAA's activities for the last year will come to an end next month. EC-funded services such as the Microgrants and many of the Chapter's and Working Groups'-driven activities will be on pause until the next funding scheme is in place. We are hopeful to be in a position to start resuming these and many other activities after the summer break. The Board and all the MCAA volunteers are looking forward to more events, activities, and resilient planning in a hopefully post-COVID world.

Wishing you a pleasant lecture using the great articles prepared for you by the Newsletter team.

Fernanda Bajanca
On behalf of the Board

Editorial

Science Diplomacy - What to Expect in Complex Times?

Guest Editors: Radenka & Mostafa

We all now live in a globally interconnected world that is **fractured**. From the COVID-19 pandemic to disinformation, from global warming to the war in Ukraine, we live in tough times and face challenges that are as uncertain as anyone can remember. In a situation like this we, as researchers, all ask questions, most notably: What can we do? How can we help? What impact do our choices really have? Our position in society enables us to proactively seek to address the issues of what, where, how and why. One of the tools that has re-emerged to help us in those demanding tasks is Science Diplomacy.

But then, maybe things are not as strange or novel as we might imagine. Modern parallels with the Cold War Era do not seem so very distant from our current experience. Past times of suspicion and distrust, of gathering in and closing down, does not seem far from our present time where we feel the threat of both real and potential war on our doorstep. As we all seek to make sense of the chaos surrounding us, Science Diplomacy seems to offer grand solutions to the grand challenges of our times. But at a point when we surely

need more Science Diplomacy not less, our actions appear to fall short of our rhetoric. Trying to understand why is part of the purpose of this special issue of the MCAA Newsletter.

Whether we realise it or not, the MCAA has always been a Science Diplomacy actor. Our mission to build connections, support research, and represent our diverse membership across the world is de facto Science Diplomacy, it is **Science Diplomacy in action**. Many of our members are actively engaged as unofficial ambassadors both for their research and for their home countries. They keep sharing, exchanging and mutually benefiting their hosts and their home nations. One clear example is the MCAA Western Balkan Chapter created in 2019. MCAA members from countries with a history of conflict came together to support the common goal of spreading research and science around the region, promoting collaboration and highlighting MSCA opportunities. The result is now a lively Chapter with over a hundred members.

Naturally, our interest in the mechanics and impact of Science Diplomacy in challenging



Photo by Radenka Krstanović Whiffen

Photo by Mostafa Moonir Shawrav




times is particularly strong. That is why, since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the MCAA has taken several steps, including issuing a [joint statement with Eurodoc](#), starting a [dedicated fundraising campaign](#) and a [support group](#) among [many other initiatives](#), and especially [organising a special session at the MCAA Annual Conference](#) at the end of March this year where MCAA members affected by the conflict could share their challenges.

In line with the vision and mission of the MCAA, this special issue gathers together a number of Science Diplomacy actors, from researchers to practitioners to stakeholder representatives. The aim is to explore the potential and limits of Science Diplomacy. We seek here not to prescribe solutions, but to open up a space for debate around the role and effectiveness of Science Diplomacy in our unprecedented times in Europe and beyond. By asking questions, offering perspectives and exploring opinions, we hope this special issue provides a rounded and grounded overview of where Science Diplomacy stands today and its potential pathways moving forward.

Scientists and researchers are being encouraged to contribute to Science Diplomacy either through the impact of their research, by sharing their scientific expertise or by

transitioning to a career in the Science Policy field. Looking at the specific case of Europe, pathways for scientists and researchers to contribute to Science Diplomacy are not straightforward. One possible way to fill this gap might be the introduction of **Science Policy and Diplomacy Fellowships**, that would be similar to [AAAS Science & Technology Policy Fellowships](#). Such a programme could allow researchers to spend time at European organizations that are active in the policy & diplomacy arena, such as the European Parliament or the European Commission, and help translate the expertise of researchers into real impact on diplomacy for society. On that note, over recent years, one of the editors (Mostafa Moonir Shawrav) has discussed the possibility of introducing such fellowships in Europe with several key stakeholders, including funding agencies and Knowledge4Policy (K4P). It's great to see that [MSCA Unit](#) and [K4P](#) took the [first step](#) by organising the matchmaking event at the end of May 2022. In addition, the same idea was briefly discussed at the SAPEA "[Science Advice Under Pressure](#)" side event organised by [Science Europe](#) and the [MCAA](#). However, there is still a need for more organisations and stakeholders to come forward and engage with this in order to realise the full potential of this idea.

In the end, we believe that we need more and better Science Diplomacy: better understood, better targeted, better trained, and better communicated.


Radenka Krsmanović Whiffen 

Guest Editor

Founding Chair of the MCAA Western Balkan Chapter

MCAA Science Diplomacy Task Force

radenka@gmail.com

Mostafa Moonir Shawrav 

Guest Editor

Former Chair of the MCAA

MCAA Science Diplomacy Task Force

mostafa.shawrav@mariecuriealumni.eu

Science Diplomacy

When science serves the greater good: Discover science diplomacy

You are currently finishing your PhD, or postdoc, and you want to make a difference outside the lab. You are also deeply convinced that science must benefit society above all, but you're not entirely sure where to start. Well, you are probably destined to become a science diplomat! Here are a few things to know about this fascinating and rapidly evolving discipline, thanks to the speakers who were invited at the webinar organised by the MCAA Switzerland Chapter.



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Photo by Melody B. Burkins



Melody B. Burkins, in her own words

I am the director of the Institute of Arctic Studies, senior associate director in the John Sloan Dickey Center for International Understanding, and adjunct professor of Environmental Studies at Dartmouth (United States). In January 2022, I was also honoured to be named the Arctic Chair in Science Diplomacy and Inclusion. Trained as a polar scientist, my scholarship and practice are related to Arctic and global science diplomacy, climate change, sustainable development, gender equality and inclusion.

Rasmus Gjedssø Bertelsen, in his own words

I am Danish and living in Iceland as a child gave me a deep personal and professional interest in the Arctic and North Atlantic. I have studied and worked in Denmark, Iceland, Switzerland, Netherlands, UK, France, US, Japan and now Norway. From October 2020 to December 2021, I was guest professor at Sorbonne University with the EU H2020 Inventing a shared Science Diplomacy for Europe and visited Friedrich-Alexander-Universität in Erlangen from October to November 2021. Transnational flows of knowledge are a major research and personal interest for me.



Photo by Rasmus Gjedssø Bertelsen

Ask experts what the definition of science diplomacy is, and you'll see that answers might differ substantially. Melody describes science diplomacy as work at the boundary and intersection of science policy and foreign policy, whereas according to Rasmus, it is related to the use of research and research cooperation for foreign policy purposes.

"It is important to see 'science' in the complete German 'Wissenschaft' or Scandinavian 'videnskab/vitenskap/vetenskap' sense comprising humanities, social science, natural science, technology, health sciences, etc. The English term 'science' only comprises natural sciences and technology and is too narrow," Rasmus explains.

Both our interviewees agree that science diplomacy is a discipline of absolute importance. "Global challenges facing our people and planet are multidisciplinary and have no geographic boundaries. Therefore, the science, policies, and actions we take to tackle those global challenges – be it climate change, renewable energy, biodiversity loss, or peace and security – must also be informed and developed across disciplines and boundaries," says Melody.

Rasmus agrees that humanity is facing pressing complex coordination challenges in areas such as nuclear arms control, space security, climate change and cyber security, which require very advanced knowledge across humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and technology to manage.

Becoming a science diplomat

For the attention of researchers willing to become science diplomats, our interviewees have specific recommendations. For Melody, openness is key.

"Interdisciplinary understanding of when a question is a case of humanities, social science, natural science, technology, etc. is important. If a problem is a game theory coordination problem such as climate change, then technology will only be a solution if it changes the game," adds Rasmus.

To develop such skills, future science diplomats must combine practice and theory. According to Rasmus, science diplomats must pay close attention to other disciplines. "Know your own limitations. Ask carefully if a question falls within your own disciplinary competence or within another discipline."

Melody highlights the importance of cultivating one's own path. "It is key to volunteer with local community organisations, serve on public boards and committees, take time to step outside of the research ecosystem and understand the incentives, motivations, and interests of those in other roles (elected officials, community organisers, business owners, finance leaders) as well as the interests of youth, women, and other underrepresented groups in global science and diplomacy networks," she advises.

Successful agreements thanks to science diplomacy

Both our interviewees note that a relevant use of science diplomacy can lead to successful agreements.

Rasmus mentions the Cold War nuclear arms control as a positive example: "It kept humanity from extinction because of an advance combination of many disciplines from game theory (Thomas Schelling received the 2005 Nobel Prize in Economics for his work at the basis of mutual deterrence) to physics to geosciences and further," he says.

Melody sheds light on a more recent event, the so-called 'Fairbanks Science Agreement' – formally the [Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation](#) – signed in 2017 by the eight Arctic nations and agreed to, through consensus, by the six Arctic Indigenous Peoples organisations (or permanent participants) of the Arctic Council.

She explains: "The agreement not only confirms the work of all parties to continue to invest in cooperative scientific coordination for

environmental conservation and sustainable development throughout the circumpolar north, it ensures that all scientific activities will respect, and endeavour to include indigenous traditional and local knowledge in all scientific planning and research activities. It is a model of inclusive science diplomacy and one that can, and should, be emulated in global scientific agreements."

Evolving with society

Melody and Rasmus envisage a bright future for this science diplomacy discipline, keeping in mind potential limitations. "There are countless forces in higher education and research driving students and researchers into narrow silos," says Rasmus.

Melody emphasises the importance for this discipline to evolve. "An optimistic future is predicated on science diplomacy becoming much more inclusive, grassroots and responsive to community and local interests as well as diverse knowledge systems and voices, including youth and indigenous peoples of the world. If science diplomacy restricts itself to existing systems and hierarchies of academia and policy making, it will not attract the knowledge, trust, nor leadership needed for effective transitions we need for a more sustainable, equitable, and just future," she concludes.

Aurélia Chaise
MCAA Editorial Team

Science Diplomacy

Science diplomacy in difficult times: Learning the language of Realpolitik



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Radenka Krsmanović Whiffen, co-Guest Editor of this special issue, interviews three prominent figures in the study and practice of science diplomacy: Tim Flink, scientific advisor to the Committee of Education, Research and Technology Assessment of the Federal Parliament of Germany; Jan Marco Müller, Science & Technology advisor in the European External Action Service (EEAS); and Elke Dall, senior expert at the Centre for Social Innovation (ZSI) in Vienna, Austria. Here, they offer their personal views on the role and status of science diplomacy in the context of an ever-changing world, and assess the potential pathways, and limitations, of this field of study moving forward.



Tim Flink



Jan Marco Müller



Elke Dall

Bionotes of the interviewees

Tim Flink works as a scientific advisor to the Committee of Education, Research and Technology Assessment of the Federal Parliament of Germany. He is an affiliate member of the Robert Merton Center for Science Studies at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, where he worked as a postdoctoral researcher, lecturer and coordinator of the Master's program Social Studies of Science. Tim is a leading international expert on science diplomacy and pioneered with the first conceptual and empirical study in 2010. His works cover a wide range of research and higher education policy making issues, e.g., research integrity, university governance, EU research policy making, and science policy advice. He also wrote the first history of the European Research Council.

Jan Marco Müller*. Following his PhD in Geography, Jan Marco Müller's career included research management positions at the German Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research (UFZ), the former JRC Institute for Environment

and Sustainability in Ispra (Italy), and the UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology. After having served as assistant to the Director-General of the Joint Research Centre (2009-2012), he managed the office of the chief scientific adviser to the President of the European Commission (2012-2015) and then joined DG Research and Innovation to help set up the Commission's current Scientific Advice Mechanism. From 2017-2020 he worked for the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) near Vienna as coordinator for science diplomacy and acting chief operations officer. Since August 2020 he has served as Science & Technology advisor in the European External Action Service (EEAS).

Elke Dall is a senior expert on science and innovation policy, internationalisation and science diplomacy at the Centre for Social Innovation (ZSI) in Vienna, Austria. She studied sociology and is deeply involved in projects funded by the European Commission related to international research and innovation cooperation. She coordinated the project '[S4D4C – Science for/in Diplomacy for](#)

* The views expressed are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the European External Action Service.



Addressing Global Challenges’ and was the founding chair of the ‘European Union Science Diplomacy Alliance’. She currently focuses on strengthening R&I cooperation with the Western Balkans.

Radenka Krsmanovic Whiffen: Given the turbulent nature of the modern world and the effects of, for example, the invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 crisis, what role do you believe Science Diplomacy can play in seeking to address global issues? How would you characterise the idea and position of Science Diplomacy as an emerging set of practices in this context?

Tim Flink: Practices pertaining to science diplomacy have responded to various crises and, as regards the war in Ukraine, the international higher education and science community have been reacting in two ways. Firstly, universities, research institutes and higher education as well as research funding organisations have immediately started offering refugee students and scholars places to study and to keep doing research. While some observers were quite surprised by how rapid actors could implement these support measures, one should not forget that the higher education and scholarly community is highly interconnected internationally and that it has learned – unfortunately throughout numerous wars and anti-academic purges over the past decades – how to offer shelter to refugee students and scholars. Some initiatives and organisations can even look back at a rather

long history, e.g. the Council for At-Risk Academics (CARA), which was founded in 1933 to help scholars that fled from Nazi Germany.

Secondly, the war in Ukraine also illustrates that science diplomacy can mean that institutional relations between scientific organisations can be suspended, for symbolic political reasons and for the sake of not supporting a technological advancement of autocratic regimes. While these measures might sound like a foregone conclusion, tragically, they are likely to impinge on trustful interpersonal scholarly relations and collaborative work. Apart from such personal dilemmas that we are currently observing, the institutional freezing of scholarly collaborations is also detrimental to the common scientific goals of tackling global challenges – in any case this truly is a tragedy.

This leads me to various ongoing crises we usually euphemise by the concept of **grand challenges**. Here, science diplomacy actions have shown how important international scientific relations are in order to provide trans-boundary scientific advice for political decision-making. **Cross-border exchange of scientific evidence** has been key to understand the complex nature of problems, to provide advice and guidance to actors in science and politics rapidly, and to communicate to citizens worldwide, regardless of political poll ratings and particularistic national interests.

However, one should not forget the limits of science diplomacy. Take for example its soft power engagement, in terms of international scientific relations, i.e. the stupendous funding initiatives to strengthen learned societies and scientific institutions. These could not avert autocrats from keeping up the oppression of the freedom of expression, suffocating democracy-aspiring civil society, and from starting wars, such as in Ukraine since 2014. Needless to say, science diplomacy, understood as scientific advice, does not prevent top-level political decision-making from serious misconduct and irresponsible

behaviour with regard to the current and future living conditions on this planet. For the science diplomacy community, especially its entrepreneurs who keep celebrating the concept, it is necessary to remain realistic and prove empirically where science diplomacy is useful or simply cheap self-advertisement.

Jan Marco Muller: Both the Russian aggression in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic have put science diplomacy to the test on whether it can also make a real difference in times of 'hot' war and crisis. There is no doubt that science diplomacy has its merits and can also help keep communication channels open in difficult times, but science diplomacy has to learn the language of Realpolitik as well. COVID-19 is a telling example: while scientists managed to deliver a wide range of vaccines in record speed thanks to cross-border cooperation and data sharing, the inequities in the distribution of vaccines demonstrate the need to take geopolitical factors into account. Likewise, the Russian aggression in Ukraine has shown

that science diplomacy as a soft power has its limits while arms are speaking and when formal ties with a military aggressor are cut, including universities and research institutions themselves. While the solidarity with, and support for, Ukrainian scientists is urgently needed and very laudable, it is clear that global challenges cannot be solved without major players being on board, especially considering Russia's role in Arctic research. Therefore, it will be important to keep people-to-people contacts alive, without putting counterparts living in a totalitarian state in danger. The same applies to major scientific undertakings such as the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER), which is dependent on in-kind contributions from Member States to reach its goal. In fact, it is likely that we are going to see a renaissance of science diplomacy-driven research institutions like the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) in Vienna, through which cooperation on issues of common concern can still happen. Such contacts must be used to plant the seeds



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through which science diplomacy can again do its magic, rebuilding trust once the arms are silent.

Elke Dall: I believe that the current crises are illustrations that we can very suddenly 'find ourselves in a science diplomacy interaction space' – whether we want to or not. Certain stakeholders are explicitly dealing with science diplomacy, science attachés in embassies for example or international officers in large research infrastructures. Others are very aware of its needs and potential, and here I am thinking for example of stakeholders working on the Arctic or with the International Panel on Climate Change. But now a lot more stakeholders and scientists need to understand how geopolitics influence their work. Power structures have become visible and there is a demand that people take sides. The message is still the same. Therefore, to address the threats of climate change, we need to work together across borders despite the difficulties, but this is becoming more complex. Scientists around the world need to collect and analyse data and support policymakers to draw conclusions from their results. Evidence-based recommendations need to be formulated and the different sectors of academia, businesses, governments and civil society need to work together for necessary and desired changes. But then, there is a war – and we have to ask if we can give support to refugee researchers, if we should stop cooperation with one side in the conflict, if we have been naïve about sharing results with people who might have been foreign agents rather than genuine cooperation partners, and so on. This adds a new set of practices to the scientific process – including those that seek to address global challenges.



Radenka Krsmanovic Whiffen: Science diplomacy is in many ways still in its infancy. Looking at its development and potential impact, what do you see as the path forward for this field of scholarly investigation? What would you highlight as the potential benefits or pitfalls of the practical application of science diplomacy in the future?

Tim Flink: I do not think that science diplomacy is still in its infancy, whereas its public discourse over the last 15 years seems rather new and caters to the politicisation of international academic relations. Altogether, policymakers, academics and research managers have become aware that organising and funding cross-border academic collaborations is non-trivial, surprisingly political and relevant for foreign politics. The community of practitioners and scholars of foreign politics, on the other hand, has received a wake-up call by the science diplomacy discourse and have come to realise that foreign politics goes beyond its traditional themes of international trade and security: because science, technology and innovation crossbreed with all aspects of society. In this regard, after a hype, I (want to) see a [consolidation phase of science diplomacy](#). While its scholarly community have indicated, often by practicing some kind of norm-driven verificationism (i.e. single case studies) that science diplomacy was important and good for science, politics and society, it's time to engage in a more robust research programme. There is still a lack of empirical and comparable knowledge about the many governance arrangements of states and international organisations regarding variations of science diplomacy. Needless to say, history must be combined with analyses of current developments. Thus, we need more structured and comparable studies carried out by critical scholars who remain vigilant about the general relation between politics and science. In this regard, science diplomacy should be studied in combination with other collaboration- and competition-oriented concepts at the intersection of science, technology and innovation policy and foreign affairs. Finally, the community of scholars who investigate the relation of politics and science, should carefully balance and reflect on its own position of providing analyses and critical meta-reflections as opposed to food for particularistic agenda-setting interests. The challenge for any meta-researcher is to observe those boxes one is actually living in.

Jan Marco Muller: I do not agree that science diplomacy is still in its infancy. While the term may be new and hyped to a certain extent, science diplomacy has been there in all its dimensions for decades, if not centuries. However, what we have seen in past years is significant progress in conceptualising science diplomacy, developing its methodologies, and creating training material to develop related skill sets, leading to the development of a community of scholars and practitioners. Nevertheless, the Achilles heel of science diplomacy is that it is still largely supply-side driven, while the demand side remains underdeveloped. While the world of diplomacy is cognisant of the increasing complexities and interdependencies of the world we live in and the geopolitical dimension of emerging technologies, science and technology, advisors are still a rare breed in diplomatic services. "Let's ask a scientist" is still not a natural reflex of diplomats, while many scientists lack an understanding of how the world of diplomacy works. Hence, more efforts are needed to develop the interfaces and create the spaces in which the interaction between science and diplomacy can happen. Special attention should be given to the role of science in embassies and delegations – as it is especially in the dialogue with difficult partners where science diplomacy can be a very valuable tool in the diplomatic toolbox on the ground. The recent decision of the Council of the European Union to task the European Commission and the European External Action Service to develop a European Science Diplomacy Agenda has the potential to provide guidance and identify synergies between EU Member States, while defining European added value.

Elke Dall: I'd like to compare it with the scholarly investigation of social innovation, where the process of looking at a rather abstract phenomenon with the methodologies of the social sciences is probably a little more advanced. The empirical analysis in both cases represents a niche that aims to understand a phenomenon, the stakeholders, the contexts, the challenges and opportunities, and so on.

The concepts of scholarly investigation are new, but the terminology moves through different fashions and as a process they have existed for a long time. In respect to social innovation, institutions have promoted, taught and funded it since the 1990s. Science diplomacy is in an earlier stage of a trend with the AAAS/Royal Society definition from the 2010s starting a process with several projects now being explicitly funded under this umbrella. In some contexts, both social innovation and science diplomacy become very normative, as approaches to work 'for a better world' – although it is not the case that every social innovation or science diplomacy intervention is always for a greater good. We can observe now that excluding certain countries from Horizon Europe funding is certainly a science diplomacy move – but is it positive or negative, for whom and who decides about this? Furthermore, in both fields, there are many practitioners, stakeholders and individuals who 'do' it without analysing with scholarly lenses. Neither social innovation nor science diplomacy are institutionalised in academia, but there are some thematic journals and grey literature with both areas being practical, transdisciplinary, cutting across disciplines and relevant for different fields. Both concepts and practices should be practically relevant for any research performing and research funding organisation and applying such lenses can bring benefits to their governance and impacts on a broader scale.

Radenka Krsmanović Whiffen  

MCAA Task Force on Science Diplomacy
Founding Chair of the Western Balkans Chapter
radenka@gmail.com

Science Diplomacy

Strengthening the public role of faith-based communities in environmental protection

Antonino Puglisi, coordinator of the MCAA Task Force on Science Diplomacy, reflects on the role of faith-based organisations in environmental protection.¹

Science diplomacy has become an area of growing interest in both the scientific and diplomatic communities. According to the Madrid Declaration on Science Diplomacy, science diplomacy refers to 'a series of practices at the intersection of science, technology and foreign policy [...] where a greater scientific voice could add value to bi- and multi-lateral discussions and decisions about our shared global concerns' (S4D4C, 2019).

Science diplomacy has emphasised the need to identify and involve other actors alongside professional scientists and international

Antonino is a researcher at the Department of Nanobiotechnology at BOKU. After his Masters and PhD in chemistry in his native Italy, he went on to do a postdoc in the UK and subsequently joined an Oxford-based biotech company. Through a Marie Curie Fellowship, he then moved to Turkey for an independent research project at Istanbul Technical University. In 2020, Antonino joined BOKU with a Lise Meitner Fellowship. He is also an active member of the Marie Curie Alumni Association where he coordinates the Association's science diplomacy working group.

Photo by Antonino Puglisi

1. This article is a revised version of a presentation delivered at the [InsSciDE Open Conference](#) held in Erlangen (Germany) on 24-26 November 2021.

institutions to fully deploy the power of science in addressing major global challenges. In particular, the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic and the current environmental crisis have served as a stark reminder of the need for global cooperation across national borders, diverse cultural backgrounds, and all generations.

As we explore the role of interculturality in 21st-century scientific action and societal engagement, we are urged not only to take into account different cultures but also to unpack the role of various religious beliefs and values in this context. On 12 May 2020, at the very peak of the pandemic, the UN Secretary-General addressed the world's religious leaders on the specific role of faith communities in the pandemic: "We are all vulnerable, and that shared vulnerability reveals our common humanity." He then added that the current crisis "lays bare our responsibility to promote solidarity as the foundation of our response." (Guterres, 2020).

But are faith communities relevant nowadays in the discourse about the future of our modern societies?

A 2012 report by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life estimated that 5.8 billion people were religiously affiliated, representing 84% of the 2010 world population (Hackett et al., 2012). Many of the most important cultural heritage sites around the world are deeply rooted in local spiritual and cultural traditions, within which they are considered holy places (Verschuuren et al., 2012). Religious institutions own more than 7% of Earth's land surface, and a further 8% has religious connections (Hillmann & Barkmann, 2009). Moreover, a recent report by the Global Impact Investing Network has found that "while there are no specific figures estimating the total assets held by faith-based investors, there is strong evidence that illustrates vast accumulation of wealth and most likely represents trillions of global assets under management." (GIIN, 2020).

In the light of these figures, Guterres' words are not surprising as international institutions are increasingly recognising the importance of working together with faith-based organisations (FBOs) to foster sustainable development, particularly with regard to the environment.

The World Wide Fund for Nature has launched the Sacred Earth program to better articulate ethical and spiritual ideals around the sacred value of Earth and its diversity (WWF, 2021). In 2010, the United Nations created the Interagency Task Force on Religion and Sustainable Development (UNIATF-Religion, 2019) and, more recently, in 2018, the Multi-faith Advisory Council. The purpose of those bodies is to provide strategic policy guidance around engagement with FBOs and so to deepen the UN's understanding of the intersections between religion, development, human rights, and peace.

In 2015, the Catholic Church launched 'Laudato Si' which has been hailed as one of the most important interventions among 21st-century campaigns for environmental justice. Around the same time, an Islamic Declaration on Climate Change was launched in Istanbul and, more recently, the more comprehensive document 'Al Mizan' sponsored by the United Nations Environment Programme represents a covenant for all Muslims around the world on the environment.

At COP 26 – the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference held in Glasgow – I personally witnessed how FBOs were visibly present. They were catalysing action with their advocacy power through various statements and informal negotiations fostering alliances for nature conservation (WCC, 2021).

Recently, religious leaders have increasingly shown great convening power around the theme of the preservation of our planet through strategic diplomatic actions, including issuing a pre-COP26 appeal on climate change signed by all major faith leaders in October 2021 (Pullella, 2021).

To conclude, for the majority of people on our planet, spiritual values are key drivers of individual and communitarian behaviours. Through their emphasis on wisdom, social cohesion and interrelatedness, FBOs represent a strategic partner for science diplomacy to ensure effective sustainable development. In the context of the current environmental crisis, FBOs show the potential to effectively mobilise people on the ground in response to climate change as well as motivate large sections of society.

Antonino Puglisi 

Coordinator of the MCAA Task Force
on Science Diplomacy

University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences,
Vienna (Austria) & Faculty of Theology and Religion,
University of Pretoria (South Africa)
antonino.puglisi@outlook.com

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Science Diplomacy

Science diplomacy for sustainable development

Irene Castellano Pellicena is a Scientific Project Officer in Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) where she manages the Sustainable Development Goal Challenge. In this article, Irene summarises the main issues surrounding the role of science diplomacy for sustainable development.

The Marie Curie Alumni Association is an active member in the science diplomacy field and as such it is part of the EU Science Diplomacy Alliance since its conception in 2021.



The Marie Curie Alumni Association (MCAA) has been involved in capacity building and training of members in science diplomacy (SD) since 2018. A session on 'Science Diplomacy for Sustainable Development' was organised during the 2022 MCAA Annual Conference. In this session, Mostafa Moonir Shawrav (former MCAA chair), moderated a panel of three

experts in SD: Peter Gluckman, Julia MacKenzie and Melody Brown Burkins.

Peter Gluckman is the President of the International Science Council. He gave his point of view on the important role of SD for sustainable development by showcasing several examples:

- The weak state in which health diplomacy was before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic made the response to the crisis extremely difficult. The world witnessed the clash between private and public good, the low authority of the World Health Organization as well as the weakness of international health regulations and institutions.
- Climate diplomacy is key to persuade society to do assessments on climate-related risks and vulnerabilities, which will develop resilience and will support decision-making in a complex scenario (Gluckman & Bardsley, 2022). The world cannot rely on technological advance alone anymore, but environmental and societal transitions need to be considered too. Otherwise, issues such as reducing emissions in the global north versus the global south will continue to be recurring topics in the climate change agenda. The encouragement of real transdisciplinary research could be a way to finally tackle the current climate crisis.
- The high speed of technological development in today's world represents a challenge for SD. Transdisciplinarity research will enable a fast adoption of new technological developments to solve current challenges. However, transdisciplinarity represents a challenge in itself for the research community. Intergovernmental bodies, such as UNESCO, national agencies and different actors interested in addressing big challenges such as the Sustainable Development Goals agenda, are developing new mechanisms to encourage transdisciplinarity research. One of these mechanisms is the challenge and/or mission oriented research and innovation, (Miedzinski et al., 2019) which is a solution-focused approach to direct research and innovation towards addressing ambitious societal problems collaboratively.
- Finally, SD will have to respond to new challenges while others are still not solved. Nowadays, this new challenge is the war in Ukraine. While there is an immediate need

to support refugees, SD should develop a strategy on how to interact with scientists in Russia. Maintaining the dialogue with scientific organisations in Russia could be instrumental to ensure a sustainable future in the region and in the world, similar to what happened during the Cold War.

Julia MacKenzie is chief program officer of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). She focused on the increasingly important role of informal (or track 2) diplomacy for sustainable development. Informal diplomacy is a type of SD led by non-state actors who could influence SD practices at the state level. The AAAS is an interdisciplinary scientific society with many international members which deploys informal SD actions. AAAS ensures high quality science is placed at the heart of actions taken on behalf of society. Some practical examples of AAAS actions as a non-state actor in SD shared by Julia can be found below:

- The tensions between US and China highly influence the weak response of the US government to the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, while scientific evidence was pointing towards the need of a much more serious approach. Scientific journalists of the AAAS did a lot of work to showcase the scientific evidence coming from China as well as the opinions of scientists working in China. The use of masks as a health prevention measure against COVID-19 was introduced by the US Government just after an interview done by the AAAS, where Chinese scientists showed their shock in relation to the lack of policies or rules about mask wearing in the US.
- The AAAS have developed a much more local focus in the context of climate change to deliver more practical actions. In this local context, AAAS promotes a bidirectional dialogue between scientists and civic intermediaries and hopes to end the traditional dialogue between scientists in their ivory tower. As part of this new

strategy, the AAAS created a programme to connect journalists with local scientists, ensuring well-informed news. This is a high priority and a big challenge due to the rise of nationalist movements guided by feelings instead of facts.



Melody Brown Burkins is the director of the Institute of Arctic Studies where she specialises in inclusivity in SD.

She exposed that we live in a system where researchers share science unidirectionally. The exclusivity of both science and SD makes it difficult to practice inclusivity in these two fields. While challenging, the only way to have a more equitable and inclusive future for all, is to develop an inclusive approach to sustainable development today.

- As the director of the Institute of Arctic Studies, Melody is trying to ensure sustainability of the north by including all types of knowledge. In particular, she focuses her efforts on the inclusion of indigenous communities of the north in the plans for the future of the region.
- The voice of youth is also a critical one for sustainable development. SD needs to be open to younger generations to engage with novel ideas. Melody has also worked with UNESCO on a report on inclusivity in higher

education (Parr et al., 2022). This report concluded that higher education has a very important role to play in developing more inclusive approaches for global sustainability and to develop a more inclusive knowledge system.

The audience's interest in different topics encouraged a rich discussion. In conclusion, the panel highlighted the importance of real transdisciplinary research to achieve the sustainable development goals (SDGs), the relevance of SDGs in every country – independently of national characteristics, the requirement of an increased coordination between stakeholders (governments, industry, financial services and/or international organisations) in order to increase preparedness for future challenges as well as to optimise current outcomes on the SDGs, the opportunities towards inclusivity that the COVID-19 pandemic brought, mainly in the form of hybrid working and the increase in open science practices. Finally, all panel members suggested that both a top-down and bottom-up approach are needed to achieve the SDGs.

Irene Castellano Pellicena  

MCAA Task Force on Science Diplomacy and
MCAA Research Funding Working Group

Scientific Project Officer, Science Foundation Ireland

irenecastellano22@gmail.com

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Science Diplomacy



Science diplomacy in a global network - COST Association: An interview with Katalin Alföldi



Photo by Katalin Alföldi

The necessity to integrate scientific knowledge into global policy, diplomacy, and the international relations environment have become crucial as European societies face more interdependent concerns. Science diplomacy is a significant notion in this context, and it focuses on maximising the benefits of open science, internationalisation, and responsible research and development. Within this context, the COST networks are valuable and important ecosystems.

The European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) is a funding organisation for the creation of research networks, called COST Actions. These networks offer an open space for collaboration among scientists globally and thereby give impetus to research advancements and innovation.

Science diplomacy has been identified as a critical instrument for addressing global concerns by bringing policy, diplomacy, and international relations together. In this context, COST's expertise, accumulated over 50 years of connecting interdisciplinary research networks, has a lot to offer and may make a significant contribution to the growing relevance of this area. The open (new partners can join at any time during the Action's lifetime) and inclusive (partners from all relevant fields and backgrounds) characteristics of COST Actions translates the potential for these collaborative open spaces to increasingly feed discussions and add concrete experience and knowledge to existing practice in science diplomacy.

For the past year, COST has been focusing on specific activities that promote science diplomacy, and it is committed to continuing to look for ways to contribute further. The

dedicated workshops are a positive step forward, and they build on the specific experience of numerous COST Actions whose research activities serve and contribute to science diplomacy's purpose.

As a result, in this interview, we asked Katalin Alföldi, COST policy officer, a few key questions

on how COST is transforming and engaging with science diplomacy worldwide. The COST network, its influence, and its function in research and diplomacy are the subject of the questions. Katalin's expertise and viewpoint on this topic will, we believe, resonate with a broad audience and provide an insightful look into the institutional perspective.

Katalin Alföldi began her career as a member of one of the negotiator teams for Hungary and the European Commission on the 'Acquis Communautaire' concerning environment and nature conservation. She was a member of the Research and Innovation Framework Programme Committee. Katalin worked at the European Commission's Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, contributing to designing the international Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) collaboration strategy. While working at the Hungarian Permanent Representation to the EU, Katalin negotiated various council conclusions and the European Institute of Innovation and Technology's Budapest seat arrangement. She holds a Master's degree in international relations and economics. Katalin Alföldi is currently a policy officer at the COST Association where she leads the 'Global Networking' and 'Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation' tasks.

COST's role in science diplomacy

Murat Gunes: For 50 years, the COST organisation has been offering support and funding to set up collaborative interdisciplinary networks of researchers and innovators across Europe and beyond. How can this knowledge help COST to play an important role in science diplomacy in Europe and around the world?

Katalin Alföldi: COST is one of the longest-running research funding organisations in Europe addressing challenges in an intergovernmental approach. COST's core mission is to act as a funding organisation for the creation of research networks, called COST Actions. These networks offer an open space for collaboration among researchers and innovators across Europe and beyond, growing their ideas in any science and technology field and sharing them with their peers.

The COST Programme is operated by the COST Association with 40 members, including Turkey and the countries of the Western Balkans, with

Israel as a Cooperating Member and South Africa as a Partner Member. The two COST members who most recently joined are Georgia and Ukraine.

Openness and inclusivity are the strongest assets and the most relevant characteristics of the COST Actions, enabling them to contribute to science diplomacy. These features allow for the development of solid and long-lasting relations among scientists, researchers, and stakeholders, providing strong global networks for almost any scientific topic. Being open and inclusive also means reaching out and connecting with less connected researchers, resulting in highly interdisciplinary and open COST Actions, (e.g., CA16202, CA16123, net4age, transport automation) further contributing to the internationalisation process of research and innovation.

The work and results brought by the COST Actions are addressed to decision-makers, including foreign policy and international organisations.



Photo by PopTika on Shutterstock

COST's activities with regards to science diplomacy

Murat Gunes: COST has organised several workshops, seminars, and webinars on science diplomacy. What are the general motivations and the purpose of gatherings? If you would like to summarise these events with one or two main achievements, what would be the takeaway?

Katalin Alföldi: Science diplomacy is well-tailored to the different types of COST Actions. These include networks with strong regional relevance, those addressing global challenges, or those focusing on academic aspects of foreign affairs. There are also those networks with topics that are indirectly linked to science diplomacy. However, where the collaboration is built and the cooperation established is important to researchers from countries

whose state-level cooperation is experiencing difficulties in enabling experts from outside Europe to become trusted partners in their field.

COST undertakings in science diplomacy have also resulted in acknowledgment from practitioners, such as the [S4D4C project's Online knowledge resources](#) and the collaboration with the [European Science Diplomacy Alliance](#) as well as from policymakers such as the input paper by the [SFIC Science Diplomacy Task Force](#).

COST also organised its activities and held a workshop, as well as training on science diplomacy, addressed to COST Action Chairs.

COST is committed to further exploring its contribution to science diplomacy as a topic and offers COST Actions as platforms for this

purpose. It can happen either as an unintended but existing added value, stemming out of the collaboration or as a clear research topic to focus on.

Science diplomacy is not the core concept of COST, but the COST concept resonates well with the needs and objectives of science diplomacy. It creates the platforms necessary for science to meet and understand (foreign) policy needs and realities in a mutually beneficial way.

Katalin Alföldi's diplomatic perspective

Murat Gunes: You are an experienced policy officer and task leader with important achievements in the context of European research policy. In addition, you work in a multicultural and continuously changing/adapting environment. Previously, you were a science counsellor at the Permanent Representation of Hungary to the EU. From a diplomatic perspective, how have you seen the intersection between science, technology, and policymaking, especially foreign policy, change over time?

Katalin Alföldi: The emphasis is on the notion of intersection, as science diplomacy is the intersection of science, technology, policymaking, and foreign affairs. The creation of new and use of existing knowledge and how to best utilise it to serve national, regional, or economic interests makes the intersections unique.

Working at this intersection gives a special perspective, belonging to neither side but knowing both, being able to recognise the results and facilitate the communication. It allows observation of how the different communities get closer to each other, while better understanding the needs of all of them.

COST and the work it is performing is positioned at the intersection described above. It creates platforms for collaborations aiming to find scientific answers and address global

challenges. These platforms build trust and provide the necessary safety, allowing failure and offering a chance to restart in a low-risk and secure way, creating a fertile breeding ground for the development of much-needed new ideas, approaches, and solutions.

On a personal note, one of the most interesting parts of my career is composed of representing the interests of my home country coupled with cooperation with other colleagues, creating alliances on variable geometry, depending on the topic and the interest. It's never been boring.

Murat Gunes

Founding Coordinator of the MCAA Task Force
on Science Diplomacy

Chair of the MCAA Bridging Science
and Business Working Group

Assistant Professor, Department of Physics,
Faculty of Arts and Sciences, EBYU, Erzincan, Turkey
mgunes@gmail.com

Science Diplomacy

Meet Pascal Griset and Claire Mays

Coordinators of H2020 InsSciDE, and Co-Chairs of the European Union Science Diplomacy Alliance (first semester 2022).

Interview by Theodota Lagouri and Antonino Puglisi

You have coordinated the Horizon 2020 project 'Inventing a Shared Science Diplomacy for Europe'. What has this 4 ½ year multidisciplinary research revealed?

PG: InsSciDE created a community of historians and archaeologists, Science-Technology-Society scholars, political scientists, and communication and training specialists. Together we have illuminated how science diplomacy has taken shape and played out and could develop in Europe. In June 2022 we will hold our concluding conference in Paris at the Sorbonne and UNESCO, with the label of the French Presidency of the European Union. That's when we will present our book of about 30 historical and sociological case studies. These range across 250 years and five thematic areas: heritage, health, security, environment and space. InsSciDE also looked at two cross-cutting themes: power with science diplomacy, and science diplomats themselves.

CM: Our cases show how science diplomacy often sprang from the curiosity and ambition of scientist-explorers, or from the pragmatic act of managing transborder crisis, or from actors



Photo by Pascal Griset



Photo by Claire Mays

at all levels angling for a role and the power to address national or common-good objectives. We show how science diplomacy can happen without planning, and how it sometimes runs in parallel with great struggles: to define futures in the image of sociotechnical imaginaries; to compete for primacy in innovation; to defeat neo-colonialism and restore voice. We show

how infrastructure such as data systems, or how social media, or how other diplomatic objects such as a research nuclear reactor or a space vehicle are enrolled, with or without success, to channel influence.

All in all our casebook makes for a great read. And our political scientists have collaborated to offer more food for thought and strategies for how Europe can gather this capital of experience and leverage it.

You hosted two editions of the 'Warsaw Science Diplomacy School', hosting scientists and diplomats from Europe and beyond, in which several MCAA members participated.

CM: Yes, our summer schools were the place where we engaged our InsSciDE researchers to teach, interact and debate with early career professionals, to grow more understanding of science diplomacy's subtle diversity, and create a network of thinkers and practitioners. The pandemic obliged us to transform the intensive 5-day June 2020 pilot Warsaw Science Diplomacy School (WSDS) session

online and we rose to the challenge – with the fantastic opportunity to include learners from across the globe, selected on the strength of their inspiring essays. We had a team of students clustering around each of four cases, conducting strategic analysis. We had yoga breaks and even danced the Timewarp. In June 2021 we did it again, with four new cases, and meditation to the sound of live flute rather than yoga.... One of WSDS's innovations was to bring senior figures to recount the risk, safety and security dimensions of science diplomacy, which is not always just about cooperation and common goals.

In April 2022, with the money saved by online implementation, we held a face-to-face alumni reunion hosted by our partner European Academy of Diplomacy in Warsaw. Here we had the pride of hearing a dozen WSDS alumni – including some MCAA members – lecture and moderate group discussions to initiate the European Academy of Diplomacy, EAD's Academy of Young Diplomats to science diplomacy. We believe they sparked some vocations amongst the trainees.

Access materials through www.science-diplomacy.eu

If you want a taste of WSDS, several taped lectures are accessible on [InsSciDE's YouTube channel](#). Many more training materials as well as our Issue and Strategy Papers, and even our sister project S4D4C's MOOC, are available via the European Union Science Diplomacy Alliance: <http://www.science-diplomacy.eu> ("Science Diplomacy Resources" menu).

Visit InsSciDE's highly illustrated casebook, downloadable case-by-case. The cases are structured for teaching and reflection, with takeaways, study questions, and further reading.

See Mays C, Laborie L, Griset P (eds) (2022) *Inventing a shared science diplomacy for Europe: Interdisciplinary case studies to think with history*. Zenodo. 10.5281/zenodo.6590097

Trace all of InsSciDE's activities on www.insscide.eu

With the experience gained through InsSciDE research and reflection, what are your thoughts today on the challenge to scientific community and diplomatic relations, broken by the war on Ukraine?

CM: The murderous war perpetrated by Russia on the Ukrainian people and territory is abhorrent. Pascal Griset expressed his thoughts on science-diplomacy.eu: and circulated this message to our large community.

Statement by EU SD Alliance Chair Pascal Griset on 25/02/22

The present situation of unjustified aggression against the Ukraine may lead us to doubt the meaning of our actions. How can we invest hour after hour in our research and academic exchanges when war is in Europe? I am writing these few lines to share with you the sense of disarray and my determination to overcome it. Our work, however small it may seem in such a context, is not in vain.

Science diplomacy seems derisory in the face of the brutality and cynicism deployed against our eastern neighbours in the last few days. Many questions arise and discouragement may appear. However, it is precisely in such periods that it is necessary, more than ever, to affirm the strength of dialogue and exchange, the strength of science and cooperation. Believing and continuing remains for our collective the only option, whatever the sadness, the anguish and the feeling of powerlessness that at times can penetrate us.

We linked to the letter denouncing the war signed by Russian scientists and science journalists, in Russian, French and English, and Pascal concluded:

By making our voice heard, InsSciDE and the EU Science Diplomacy Alliance will contribute on their own scale to make our initiatives known, with the hope that women and men of science will be empowered to contribute to a solution to the present tragedy.



Very early on in the conflict we saw a clear policy distinction that has arisen worldwide. It juxtaposes the preservation of relationships and funding for work with individual scientists, and authoritatively breaking off institutional relations and knowledge transfer with Russia. We've contributed to discussing this with the science diplomacy community, for example in an EU SD Alliance workshop at the SAPEA conference '[Science advice under pressure](#)' in April 2022. Our colleague Pierre-Bruno Ruffini wrote an opinion on the potential effects of such sanctions, which appears [here](#) on the Alliance website.

Does scientific diplomacy have a role in case of conflict?

PG: Science diplomacy produces its effects in the long term and a priori it's not specifically adapted to respond to emergency situations in a context of armed conflict. It is also necessary to characterise the situation of the European countries with regard to this conflict and to compare it with previous situations. No member of the European Union, and more broadly no European country, is engaged in this conflict as a belligerent. However, these countries, as well as the Union, unanimously consider Russia as the aggressor and support, in a relatively homogeneous way, Ukraine against Russia. A total halt to scientific relations with Russia was not the case, as historiography has shown, in the context of the Cold War. This decision is part of the implementation of sanctions against Russia, which allow European countries, along with the United States, to put pressure on the aggressor without engaging in actions that could lead them to be considered as co-belligerents. Only personal relations with Russian researchers, this perimeter being very delicate to define and implement, remain tolerated. What we do not yet know is to what extent personal links are really active, whether they allow information to be passed on and this kind of invisible link with Russia to be maintained. One of the stakes of scientific diplomacy is indeed to prepare for a future, however improbable and distant it may

seem at the moment, which would see Russia and the western countries return to the path of cooperation. It therefore includes an element of discretion that contributes to its effectiveness.

How can the scientific community play a role in helping Ukraine? Is it diplomacy?

PG: The scientific communities are also active in supporting Ukraine. These forms of action are diverse, to a large extent humanitarian, and concern in particular the help given to people who have had to flee their country. In addition to the aid offered by the States, specific aid is given to researchers, and especially to women researchers since often the men remain to defend their country, so that they can find safe harbour and a job in the research organisations of European countries. An action of this type signifies that Europe intends to consider Ukraine as a full partner, able to bring its talents to European research and that this hand outstretched is also beneficial for European research, which will thus benefit from new skills. In the medium term, this system should lead to cooperation with a Ukrainian research establishment that is once again fully reconstructed and active, through encouraging the return to their country of the temporary exiles. They will be de facto excellent agents for joint initiatives. Their return home will diminish any risk of 'brain drain' in favour of western Europe. Initiatives to directly support Ukrainian institutions have also multiplied. The support offered to safeguard scientific data, but also Ukrainian cultural heritage, far from the bombardments, enhances the value of scientific action by the countries offering their help and is immediately useful for the Ukrainians.

What specific role can the European Union play?

PG: History invites us to consider not only the relations of European countries with the countries involved in the conflict. During the First World War, the 'War of the Manifestos' underlined the importance of images delivered to third countries. On 3 October 1914 a group of German academics took a stand for the Reich



by publishing the 'Manifesto of the 93'. Its authors justified it as a reaction to unjust accusations against Germans. In fact this text denied the legal and moral basis of Allied condemnation of Germany, by denying the violation of neutral Belgium as well as the horrors committed there by the German army. This manifesto was not addressed directly to Germany's enemies but more particularly to third countries that were not involved in the conflict, starting with the United States.

A kind of inverse parallel may be drawn with Europe's communication today. We learn that a unified image, translating the spirit of a shared moral and legal position, is an essential element of public diplomacy. European scientists and academics condemn Russian aggression and the horrors committed against Ukraine and this is fully ratified by European publics. However, we must realistically recognise that public opinion among non-European powers may not share that judgment. Here, importantly, the European Union can defend on the global stage the specificity and sincerity of European action in the context of the war in Ukraine. The EU can coordinate the Member States, promoting a coherent European position towards third countries, and ensuring that any sort of competition among states to emerge with stronger visibility as

supporters to Ukraine does not project the image of a very disordered Europe.

CM: In this light, scientific relations and science diplomatic approaches could be among the dimensions to be discussed at European level to settle their coherency. Conducting that exercise now could contribute also in peacetime to forming a united front, where that is appropriate, to defend Europe's interests and values.

Theodota Lagouri
Chair of MCAA Swiss Chapter

Antonino Puglisi
Coordinator of Science & Diplomacy Task Force
of MCAA Policy Working Group



Meet your new Board

Fernanda Bajanca, Chair – Keeping all the members engaged and motivated



Photo by Fernanda Bajanca

Fernanda Bajanca has been very active within the MCAA since 2016. Having dealt with significant activities, she is now taking the reins of the Association. With her team, she intends to get everybody on board!

Fernanda Bajanca, in her own words

I am currently responsible for managing clinical research on a rare disease at a children's hospital in France. The humane aspect of my current function is personally very rewarding, on top of the intellectual component that no professional researcher can live without!

My main area of expertise is developmental biology, the area where I have done my PhD and later my Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action (MSCA) Individual Fellowship project.

Actually, I worked most of my career in fundamental, academic research, but as many former MSCA Fellows, I have experienced all types of mobility: International - Intersectoral - Interdisciplinary.

This diversity of experiences was enriching and comes from intrinsic curiosity and getting easily bored with routine, but also contributed to continuous professional instability, an issue that so many researchers know so well.

We can only be impressed when looking back at Fernanda's MCAA journey which started in 2016. She successfully organised MCAA's representation at EuroScience Open Forum 2018 (ESOF 2018), won the award of the Best Working Group the same year, won the MCAA 'Outstanding Contributor Award' in 2019 and worked as one of the MCAA vice-chairs from 2020 until 2022. Thanks to all this experience within the Association, Fernanda is now ready to wear the Chair's hat.

"It has been a steep learning curve since I became active at the MCAA and of course the acquired knowledge is key to lead the Association. I am still learning though, otherwise maybe I would have gotten bored by now. The MCAA grew immensely, there are a lot of internal procedures and legal aspects that we need to abide by," she explains.

For Fernanda, the most important thing is to understand the culture of the Association. "We are all volunteers, and that is the biggest challenge. We can't manage volunteers as we manage employees, since there is no hierarchy weight and, in the end, my role is to keep everyone engaged and motivated," she adds.

Financial priorities

The new MCAA Chair highlights that a positive result from the Coordinated Support Actions grant application the Association submitted mid-March is the current biggest priority. "The Association grew to a point where the previous financial model was not adapted to the MCAA needs. We need a professional secretariat responding directly to the MCAA governing bodies," highlights Fernanda.



Photo by metamorworks on Shutterstock

After this, Fernanda aims to focus on all the members of the Association and work with them.

Building on the achievements of the previous Board

The past MCAA Board had organised its activities around three main pillars: policy, career development and networking. Fernanda confirms that the new Board will continue working towards this direction.

"The last Board worked on defining a clear strategy and my aim is to continue to build on that path. It was unfortunate for the last Board that the entire mandate overlapped with the two harsh pandemic years," adds Fernanda.

The new Chair recalls the MCAA's increasing impact on the research policy arena. The new Board plans to continue its efforts. "Most MCAA members do not realise how much power they can have to shape European science policy. We are now over 20 000 members, from all areas, sectors, nationalities, and career stages", muses Fernanda.

To have an impact on European research policies, the MCAA regularly surveys its members to gather data which is used to show to policymakers the retrospective or prospective impact of certain measures and situations. "We have established a network of contacts with partners and like-minded associations and together we advocate towards a better research landscape," she adds.

A new team

The new MCAA Chair is very pleased to introduce the new team. "We are a mix of members with experience at the Board, members with experience at chapters or working group level, members with established key roles at the MCAA, and a few members with no previous experience at the MCAA but very motivated and bringing complementary competences to the team," explains Fernanda.

To encourage all MCAA members to get involved within the Association, the new Board aims to develop an Alumni engagement strategy. "We have known for a long time that the website needs to be revamped to better show our members what the MCAA has to offer, and how they can get engaged and contribute. We will also need to work with the chapters and working groups; these are bubbling with members eager to contribute," she says.

For Fernanda, being part of the MCAA is a privilege accessible to only a minority of researchers. She therefore strongly invites all members to get involved. "It may change your whole career as it changed that of so many of us. Because the MCAA is about networking, peer-to-peer support, developing new skills, advocating for research... but in the end it is a big family working together for a better society and a better world," she concludes.

Aurélia Chaise
MCAA Editorial Team

Meet your new Board

Alexandra Dubini, Vice-Chair – Enhancing the independence and sustainability of the MCAA



Photo by Alexandra Dubini

Previously a Board Member, Alexandra Dubini is one of the two newly elected Vice-Chairs of the Association. She plans to work towards the independence of the Association, as well on the promotion of renewable energies and women in science.

Alexandra Dubini, in her own words

I am a molecular biologist by heart and work with green algae. Over the years, I have moved from bacteria to microalgae but have always studied hydrogen production pathways.

I combine both bacteria and algae to increase the hydrogen production rate while remediating wastewater and the production of biomass.

During my career, I obtained two Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA-COFUND) Fellowships which allowed me to work in France and in Spain on a similar subject matter.

I also worked for 10 years in the US and completed almost all my studies in the UK.

Now, I am a distinguished researcher at the University of Cordoba, Spain.

The newly elected MCAA Vice-Chair is already familiar with the functioning of the Board, as she was part of the previous team over the past two years. As a former Board Member, Alexandra underlines the complexity of the Association and is happy to be able to build on this experience.

"Being a member has provided an indispensable experience for me to be Vice-Chair. The Association has a very complex structure, and it took me a while to really understand it," she says.

Fostering the independence of the Association

Alexandra is now confident that the new Board will help take the MCAA to the next level.

"We have new exciting things waiting for us. Hopefully, the new CSA contract will be funded, and we will be able to hire experts in different areas," she adds.

The new Vice-Chair already has a clear vision of the new Board's duties. To her, independence and delegation are key to a successful MCAA journey. "I am hoping that soon we'll be able to focus on the strategy, vision and mission, and the internal governance of the MCAA," she explains.

Green matters

With a significant experience in the sector or renewable energies, Alexandra is committed to working within the MCAA to promote sustainability as well as the objectives of the Green Deal. "I'll do my best to represent MCAA in green deal type events and, when possible, participate in workshops and trainings on sustainability," she explains.

Our Vice-Chair also has ideas on the direction the MCAA should take in terms of sustainability. "In the coming years, we should try to have a seminar-type presentation that could be part of any chapter chart, and why not have an active working group on sustainability and the Green

Deal? A dedicated working group would help develop specific activities," she adds.

Promoting Gender, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (GEDI)

Alexandra would also like to dedicate her time within the MCAA to promoting women in science, as she has already been doing the past years. She will be one of the direct liaisons between the Board and the (GEDI) Working Group.

"I think one of the main activities to develop is to first put GEDI in contact with all the chapters and see how we can collaborate. GEDI activities need to be promoted in general within the MCAA and outside of course but I am not worried; I saw in Lisbon that many people were very active, men and women, and we just need to use this enthusiasm to go a little bit further," says Alexandra.

Our new Vice-Chair welcomes all MCAA members' ideas. "MCAA is like a big, diverse family. We also welcome anyone willing to dedicate time and effort to work on specific working groups or chapters. Please, check out our webpage, LinkedIn or social media. There is always something going on, and we hope to see you at some of the organised events," she concludes.

Aurélia Chaise
MCAA Editorial Team

Meet your new Board



Photo by Gonçalo Barriga

Gledson Emidio, Vice Chair – Streamline the MCAA management

Previous MCAA board member and new vice Chair, Gledson Emidio plans to continue his work towards lighter and more efficient management of the association.

Gledson Emidio, in his own words

I am a multidisciplinary scientist with a strong interest in the dynamics of knowledge creation and dissemination. I have been transitioning from a research-based career in chemistry/ pharmaceutical sciences to science support. I had the opportunity to work in Portugal as a scientific consultant, moved to Scotland to do my MSCA fellowship, and I'm currently living in Brazil.

Gledson Emidio has been volunteering with the MCAA since 2015 when he was a member in Scotland. Upon returning to Brazil, together with other fellows, he created the Brazil chapter, became its secretary, then vice-chair, and later chair. In September 2022 Gledson was nominated as an MCAA board member due to his active involvement and contributions to the

Management Working Group, and now he has been elected vice-Chair.

Management Working Group

Building upon the work he developed together with Esther Hertz on the previous Board, Gledson will be busy streamlining the flow

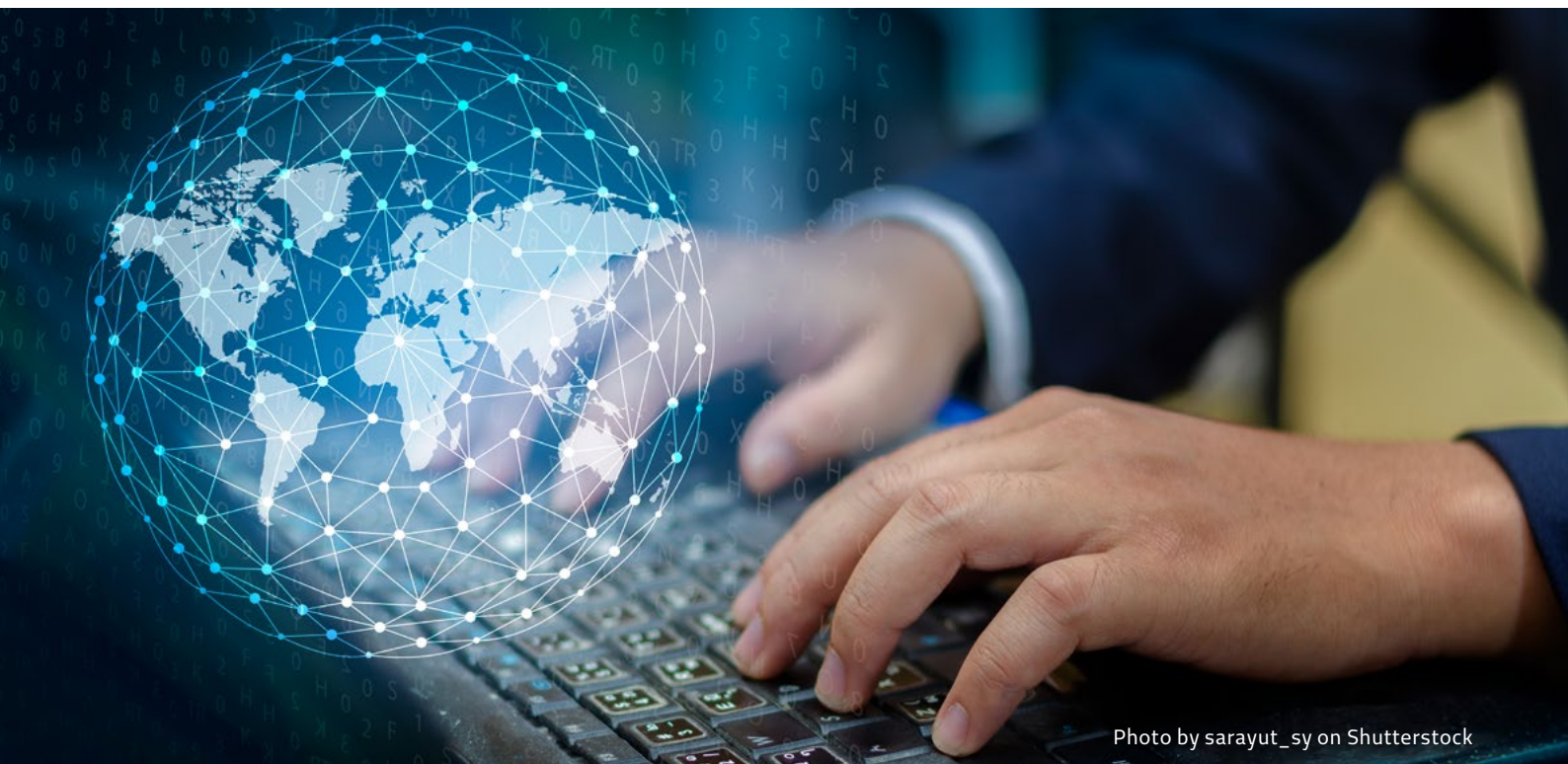


Photo by sarayut_sy on Shutterstock

of information between the Board, chapters, and working groups. 'Especially now, with the new CSA, the MCAA will have more freedom to re-write most of the rules and guidelines and remove some of the bottlenecks that hinder the communication and execution of tasks', he remarks. Gledson will also focus on the workflows for decision making in consultation with board members. He aims to ease the burden on board members and Chairs of chapters/WGs. 'People have their full-time jobs, so their time volunteering with the MCAA needs to be valued. We need simplified processes to allow more time to focus on factual contributions instead of bureaucratic or inefficient processes'.

Open Science

Gledson is also interested in research evaluation and open science. He believes we are living in a critical moment for change, in which everyone should have a voice. As a South American scientist, Gledson stresses that, 'the experiences and views of the Global South should be listened to more attentively to move to the right direction'.

Great team

Gledson considers himself fortunate to be at the MCAA during this critical transition to the CSA. 'I learnt a lot from the previous Board, especially from Mostafa Shawrav Moonir, a great mentor and leader. Now, with the guidance of Fernanda and the company of such intelligent and interesting people on the new Board, I'm sure we will have a great time building this new MCAA together!'

Ruben Riosa
MCAA Editorial Board

Meet your new Board

Pavlo Bazilinskyy, Treasurer – Towards a sustainable financial independence of the MCAA

The new MCAA Treasurer, Pavlo Bazilinskyy has ambitious goals for the upcoming two years. He plans to focus on financial independence and international collaboration to enhance MCAA's worldwide reputation.

Pavlo Bazilinskyy, in his own words

I am an assistant professor at the Eindhoven University of Technology, the Netherlands, focusing on artificial intelligence-driven interaction between automated vehicles and other road users.

I finished my PhD at TU Delft within the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) Innovative Training Networks (ITN) project HFAuto.

I focused on auditory feedback for automated driving and also worked as a postdoc at TU Delft.

For three years, I was the head of data research at SD-Insights.

I am involved with startups and was a chair of the Bridging Science and Business Working Group of MCAA and a director of the Research and Innovation unit of Erasmus Mundus Association (EMA).

I also think that mobility is a crucial component of today's world; and I exercised it from early on by studying in six countries.



Photo by Pavlo Bazilinskyy

His name might be familiar for many of the MCAA members. Pavlo has been the Chair of the Bridging Science and Business Working Group for four years. He is very proud of the achievements of the working group.

"I established a project-driven flat hierarchy in the group. It was effective and allowed us to organise four large conferences on the topics of the intersection of the worlds of business and academia and conduct a series of engaging webinars," he says.

Pavlo explains how he intends to build on this experience as the new MCAA Treasurer. "Within my new position, I aim to translate such a project-driven structure onto initiatives coming from the Board," he says.

Financially independent

One of his main goals is to reach the sustainable independence of the Association. "It is a crucial moment in the life of MCAA, which requires full support and engagement from all levels of the organisation. As Treasurer, I will supervise an efficient transition to the new scalable financial structure," adds Pavlo.

For him, resilience from the COVID-19 pandemic is another important aspect to work on as Treasurer. Pavlo hopes that the level of activity of the Association will very soon correspond to the 'pre-COVID world'.

International collaborations

Pavlo would also like to develop cooperation with other international organisations. He already has some ideas. "In my view, the young professionals-driven European Medicines Agency (EMA) is the most like-minded Alumni association for MCAA. Cooperating and working together would be fruitful for members of both associations. I will initiate a conversation on a mutually beneficial agreement of cooperation," he announces.

Originally from Ukraine, the new Treasurer values the support of MCAA. "The discussion on the future of displaced researchers is helpful and will hopefully result in concrete outcomes. The recent General Assembly served as a platform to hear the voice of academics from Ukraine, and such discussion could be continued in future events of the Association," says Pavlo.

He emphasises the importance of associations like the MCAA in post-COVID times and military troubled period in Europe. "Let's embrace our unity during the post-pandemic years to come, which will hopefully enter the books of history as the period when the whole world finally came together and defeated evil and injustice," concludes Pavlo.

Aurélia Chaise
MCAA Editorial Team

Meet your new Board

Photo by Giulia Malaguarnera



Giulia Malaguarnera, Secretary – The importance of open science in research

The new MCAA Secretary can boast of an interesting experience in working in an international organisation dedicated to research. For her, open science is key to creating an ideal environment for researchers.

Giulia Malaguarnera in her own words

I'm an Italian researcher with a PhD in Neuropharmacology in a joint PhD programme between the University of Catania and the University of Bordeaux.

My area of research was initially translational medicine, and I studied the eye as a model of the brain during my PhD training, studying biomarkers in diabetes and Alzheimer's disease.

I completed my PhD at the Institute of Ophthalmology at the University College London (UCL), where I did my first postdoc.

I moved back to Italy for four years to work on projects with clinicians and industry in a Contract Research Organisation (CRO).

I was starting to explore start-up companies and how to be an entrepreneur, so I decided to apply for the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA-IF) Sector Enterprise with a project on

gut-on-chip (Goc-MM, GA n. 845036) with the aim to create a model of intestine for growing the gut microbiota at different conditions of gas and temperature.

During that period, my company moved from Rennes to Paris, and I was one of the first to follow, after a collaboration with the Institute Curie at Orsay, where I could work on the gut-brain axis.

In parallel, I was advocated for early-career researchers, being President of Eurodoc in 2020-2021. My interest in research policy increased with a particular focus on open science and research assessment, and I decided that working on open science would be my main research focus.

This is why I am now working for OpenAIRE AMKE, one of the e-infrastructures working in EOSC Future, an EU-funded Horizon 2020 project that is implementing the European Open Science Cloud (EOSC).

Giulia already has impressive experience within the European Council for Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers.

Different roles at Eurodoc

Elected as the social media coordinator in 2018, general Board Member in 2019 and eventually President, Giulia wore several hats in this non-profit organisation, allowing her to gain solid experience on the functioning of an international organisation dedicated to research.

Looking back at this experience, Giulia feels grateful. "My experience in Eurodoc has been key in my understanding of the research policies in Europe, and I grew up a lot by working closely with early-career researchers of 28 Countries in Europe," she says.

The new Secretary is, therefore, ready to take up this new challenge of being part of the MCAA Board and the Policy Working Group. "I am curious to get to know the activities of the MCAA chapters," she adds.

Giulia praises the work done by the previous MCAA Secretary, Marina Rantanen, and plans to continue the activities she launched. "Marina started the 'Insight', an internal newsletter, and worked on the sustainability of MCAA, both activities that I wish to keep and work further," she explains.

But Giulia also has other plans, especially regarding the Policy Working Group and would like to work on research profiles and research assessment.

Open science in the spotlight

Open science represents a big priority for Giulia. "I believe that open science, with its principles and values, has the power to change our research culture," she says.

For her, there are many benefits in encouraging an open science culture. "The quality and the

reproducibility of the research can increase, the research is shared in the time the research is performed (reducing misconduct), and more. In general, we believe that open science pushes researchers into a more collaborative environment," she explains.

Therefore, the new MCAA Secretary hopes to advocate for open science within the Association and train the MCAA members in this field.

"I would bring to MCAA more training activities on policy-related policies, best using open science tools to meet the funders requests, research data management, research assessment and tips and tricks for moving into a narrative curriculum for the researchers," emphasises Giulia.

Of course, Giulia would like to thank all the members who voted for her and encourage them to get in touch with her. "If you are curious about the research policy or you would champion new tools for open science, I am always up to have a chat with you and listen to you," she adds.

Aurélia Chaise
MCAA Editorial Team

Meet your new Board

Photo by Donata Iandolo



Donata Iandolo, Board Member – Developing the MCAA Academy

Donata Iandolo is starting her second mandate as a Board Member. She intends to concentrate her efforts on mentorship, which is crucial to preserve researchers' well-being. She also wishes to develop collaborations with 'sister organisations'.

Donata Iandolo, in her own words

I am an Italian researcher working in the field of Bioelectronics. I am currently based in France.

I was awarded an Individual Fellowship in 2016 with the project Smart-Bone. The project aimed at developing an in vitro model of bone based on bioelectronic material and devices.

Since my PhD, I have been living in different countries to carry out my research activities, in Sweden, Singapore, France and the United Kingdom. The Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowship gave me the opportunity to work both in France and the UK in two prestigious institutions (the Ecole des Mines de Saint-Étienne and the University of Cambridge).

Starting her second mandate as a Board Member, Donata looks back happily on her prior adventure. "Being part of the previous Board has been an interesting experience with also

some challenges. I have also got to know much more about the Association and its potential," she explains.

Donata is now confident that she knows how the Association works and has a deeper understanding of its structure and needs.

The MCAA Academy

Her number one priority as a newly elected Board Member will be to focus on the MCAA Academy, a mentoring programme she has contributed to setting up, together with Fernanda Bajanca, the new Chair of the Association. "I would like to see this programme up and running and available to our membership," she explains.

For her, having this objective in mind is crucial for the mental health of researchers. "I believe that our mentoring programme as well as the other mentoring and peer-to-peer initiatives to support researchers and Alumni, in general, contribute to researchers' well-being. Giving support to such initiatives and to those organised at a local scale will be my way to contribute to this important theme," she says.

Setting up partnerships

Donata also has other plans and wishes to work on establishing and creating partnerships. "The role of partnership is to liaise with sister organisations and find common actions of interest and fields where we can support each other," explains Donata.

The new Board Member highlights the flexibility of the MCAA and emphasises that new ideas are always welcome. She, therefore, openly invites all the members to get in touch with the Board. "By being active and connecting to others, we can really stir changes in areas we believe are important and need transformation," she concludes.

Aurélia Chaise
MCAA Editorial Team



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Meet your new Board

Charlotte Ndiribe, Board Member – A ‘suggestions box’ and a focus on ecology



Photo by Charlotte Ndiribe

Starting her mandate as a Board Member, Charlotte has a plethora of ideas to enhance the MCAA members' involvement within the Association. As a plant ecologist, she also hopes to foster the collaboration of the MCAA with high-level international organisations.

Charlotte Ndiribe, in her own words

I am from Nigeria. I am a phylogenetic ecologist and currently a senior lecturer in ecology at the Department of Cell Biology and Genetics, University of Lagos, Nigeria. I am a former recipient of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Early Stage Research Fellowships (FP6-IIF Incoming International Fellowships) under the project title 'European centre for biodiversity and conservation research'. At the time, the fellowship enabled my employment at the Faculty of Biological Sciences and studies at the Department of Biodiversity and Conservation, University of Leeds, United Kingdom. It was in this same department that I saw the advertisement for my doctoral research programme in Lausanne, Switzerland.

My research projects focus on plant phylogenetic and pollution ecology. I investigate the ecological and evolutionary interactions that shape plant distributions, at various spatial and temporal scales. This is context dependent on human land use and climatic change scenarios. Also, as part of my research, I am merging ecology and technology to develop eco-friendly utilities to tackle the waste and pollution crisis confronting humanity.

I am chair, convener, secretary, and member of several organisations. A few are the African Biogenome Project, where I am Chair of the Open Institute for Genomics & Bioinformatics, and Chair of the Partnerships & Fundraising Committee. The British Ecological Society (BES), where I am a Board Member of the BES Memberships Committee, and the International Representative of the BES Climate Change Ecology Special Interest Group.

I'm currently on the scientific committee of the Italian Society of Electoral Studies (SISE) and a member of the Italian Journal of Electoral Studies (QOE/IJES) editorial board.

My main research is about political parties, elections, intra-party democracy, political communication and populism.

Newcomer to the MCAA team, Charlotte is eager to start working within the Association as a Board Member.

Helping the MCAA member

With clear objectives, Charlotte plans to strengthen the Career Development Working Group of the MCAA. "I have a vision to foster the honing of career prospects and continued learning among members, especially by promoting personal awareness and skills acquisition. That is why I have already come up with the idea of an electronic '[Suggestions Box](#)' to initiate constant intelligent inputs from our members to know what they want and let their voices be heard," she explains.

MCAA webinars are also in the spotlight, as Charlotte would like to improve their quality and make them more engaging for the members. In her opinion, MCAA webinars should be aligned with MCAA members' preferences and commitments.

"My objective is to infuse new ideas and innovations into knowledge advancement, member networking, research collaborations, and life stability for all MCAA members. For this, I intend to employ creativity and novel engagement strategies to ensure all MCAA members benefit from our existing services to the community. I am optimistic that as I serve, I will find 'vacant niches' to occupy and prioritise for the good of MCAA members," she adds.

An MCAA forum on ecology

Charlotte is a plant ecologist. She therefore foresees great collaborations with organisations such as the United Nations

Environment Programme (UNEP), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) or the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), among others.

Why not having a forum dedicated to MCAA ecologists or other specialties? "This will ensure greater networking among our members, including the exchange of new ideas for general progress. Note that this is transmissible to other disciplines as well, such as MCAA chemists, MCAA physicists, MCAA microbiologists, and so on," she says.

Above all, Charlotte would like to thank the MCAA members for having voted for her. "I look forward to your continued support to serve you better. Our future is bright!"

Aurélia Chaise
MCAA Editorial Team

Meet your new Board

Corinne Portioli, Board Member – Fostering MCAA's awareness at the local level

Corinne Portioli joined the MCAA two years ago and is strongly motivated to contribute to the newly elected Board. On top of her agenda: organising events, increasing membership and raising awareness about the Association.



Photo by Corinne Portioli

Corinne Portioli, in her own words

I hold a Master of Science (MSc) in medical and pharmaceutical biotechnology and a PhD in Neuroscience, and I am currently working at the Italian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Italy.

I have been granted a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action - Individual Fellowship (MSCA-IF) (2019-2021) between the United States and Italy.

Currently, I am an MSCA-COFUND researcher. For a long time, I have been interested and guided by passion to find new drugs to tackle neurological diseases.

I am also a Prince 2 certified project manager, which completes my scientific profile between neuroscience, nanomedicine and drug discovery.

I am part of Women in Bio (WIB) (Texas chapter) to promote diversity and inclusion of women in life sciences, and I look forward to sharing insights and collaborating globally.



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Corinne has been an MCAA member since 2020. When she decided to join the community, she was happy to be able to access numerous training courses and learning platforms that are at the disposal of the alumni.

Having benefited from these advantages and willing to do more for the Association, she decided to apply as a Board Member in December 2021 and was successfully elected. "Being a Board Member is an honour, a pleasure, and an invaluable occasion to share my background of international experiences and global mindset," she explains.

Getting active within the Board

As a new Board Member, Corinne already has diverse ideas on how she will contribute. "I will play an active role in promoting the benefit of science in a society that needs to be diverse, unbiased and inclusive; I will be an advisor of MCAA's mission to spread scientific knowledge, to involve more members in the

network, and to improve and expand MCAA local chapter activities," she says.

More specifically, Corinne will dedicate her time organising events (hybrid and in person), annual meetings and thematic sessions. What's more, she would like to focus on members' engagement as well as membership's promotion.

The importance of the local level

Based in Genoa, Italy, Corinne also plans to foster awareness of MCAA at the local level. "I noticed that there is no MCAA Italy chapter satellite at local level, although there are scientific realities of national relevance that attract many MSCA Fellows. Representing the point of contact with the MCAA community, I would like to contribute to gathering our members, to share experiences and to promote and diffuse the concept of being part of a worldwide community," she explains.

In her opinion, her international experience will help her to achieve her goals within the Board and she is looking forward to starting work with the other members, without forgetting to have fun at the same time!

Like her other colleagues on the MCAA Board, Corinne strongly believes that the participation of all MCAA members is essential to make the community lively. "To MCAA members I want to say to actively join this community and to keep in touch with the Board Members, fostering progress with inputs and suggestions for an always better and more effective MCAA," she concludes.

Aurélia Chaise
MCAA Editorial Team

Meet your new Board

Previous MCAA Secretary and new Board Member, Marina Rantanen Modeer, looks forward to working with the new team. Building on solid experience within the Association, she plans to strengthen its strategy and to improve transparency in grants' selection processes.

Marina Rantanen Modeer, Board Member – Transparency in the spotlight

Marina Rantanen Modeer, in her own words

Currently I am a scientist in systems engineering, researching and developing modelling methods of various autonomous systems in industry. I recently moved back to Sweden, where I am from, after living in Germany for just over five years. I did my MSCA project on cyber-physical systems modelling at the Technische Universität Dortmund and feel so very fortunate to have had the chance to stay within the same area of research as my PhD, also now after leaving TU Dortmund. Before I moved to Germany, I lived a couple of years in Leiden in the Netherlands as I worked at the European Space Agency as a robotics engineer.

Marina's journey within the MCAA has been quite intense so far. She started as the Chair of the Germany chapter, volunteered as the Secretary of the MCAA for the past two years and is now ready for a new mandate as a Board Member.

A promising new team

Confident as regards the next steps, Marina is eager to start collaborating with the new MCAA Team. "I have an understanding of what the



Photo by Joni Mätkki

MCAA is, what it does and what it potentially could become and do in the future. As I've gotten to know the Association and some of the Board Members, I can safely say that the MCAA is in very good hands with our new chair Fernanda Bajanca," she says.

She considers herself fortunate to be able to support the new chair and the rest of the Board to achieve new goals for the MCAA with the experience she has gained over the past few years.



Photo by Kirasolly on Shutterstock

Transparency and communication

Marina is keen to help develop MCAA's transparency, internal governance and strategy. "I have always been interested in clear and good communication and will help out in some capacity there too. Mainly I will work towards transparent and clear criteria for selection processes for our various resource grants, an inspiring strategic vision for the Association and supportive internal structures," she explains.

As the previous MCAA Secretary, Marina focused her efforts on communication, both within the Board and outside. She is confident that the new Secretary will continue the work towards this direction. "Giulia Malaguarnera and I have already had discussions on how to carry on some of the work on internal communication that we started on the previous Board and I will no doubt keep supporting that work in the future," she says.

Ethics Committee

Marina was also happy to share with us that she will carry on the work with the Ethics Committee. "The Ethics Committee is currently our main support mechanism for situations that are challenging to deal with both in urgent matters and more long-term issues. The

goal is to have an outside assessment that is trustworthy in sensitive situations that might blur our ability to make the right decision," she explains.

Marina highlights all the numerous benefits that her involvement within the Association brought her. She therefore invites the MCAA members to contribute as well. "Get involved and active in the MCAA! You will not regret it, but if you do you can quit! It gave me completely new horizons to work towards and I got in touch with a world full of things I had never seen up close before, such as science policy. It can potentially change your entire career." Are you ready to shake up your professional path?

Aurélia Chaise
MCAA Editorial Team

Meet your new Board

Mariana Rosca, Board Member – Enhancing inclusion

Conducting research on social integration of religious minorities, Mariana Rosca thinks that diversity is key in an association such as the MCAA. We met her to see how she plans to get involved as a new Board Member.

Mariana Rosca, in her own words

With a Bachelor's in economy and sociology from Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova, I received a Master's degree in advanced European and International Studies in 2007 from the Institut Européen des Hautes Études Internationales (Nice, France) and a Masters in Global Development and Social Justice in 2012 from St. John's University (New York, US).

Later, I was enrolled in two PhD programmes: PhD in Social Philosophy at the History Institute (Chisinau, Republic of Moldova) and the PhD programme on Human Rights: Ethical, Social and Political Challenges at the University of Deusto (Bilbao, Spain).

Now I have two PhDs, and one with international mention.



Photo by Mariana Rosca

Newcomer to the MCAA Board, Mariana already has a significant background. "I think my experience can be useful for the MCAA. I was working for the regional and national public administrations, where I got experience in policy development, strategic planning and drafting and implementation of the action plans, as well as preparing and implementation of various transnational projects," she says.

What's more, Mariana has been active in various academic networks, such as the [International Migration Research Network PhD Network](#) as well as in a volunteering association, in which she drafted projects' proposals and was in charge of projects' implementation.

Getting inspired by the MCAA teamwork

Having attended the MCAA General Assembly in 2018, Mariana explains that her motivation to get involved within the Association came from the inspiration she took from the members.

"I was impressed by the MCAA, the team and their work," she says with enthusiasm.

Mariana joined several chapters simultaneously, which sparked her interest in getting involved more deeply. "The friendly talks, combined with the activities, strengthened my interest and subsequent decision to join the Board," she adds.

As a new Board Member, Mariana plans to consolidate the work done by the previous Board, but she is willing to develop new ideas too.

Focusing on diversity

With her research focused on the social integration of religious minorities, Mariana hopes to work on this topic within the Association as well. "As my research passion is linked with diversity (cultural, religious, etc.), I would like to contribute to the MCAA by making it a place where all can feel part of a place of belonging and as inclusive as possible," she explains.

In a nutshell, Mariana sees her election as an MCAA Board Member as an opportunity, as well as a challenge. Nevertheless, she warmly thanks the members for having voted for her!

Aurélia Chaise
MCAA Editorial Team



Meet your new Board

Gian Maria Greco, Board Member – Strengthening diversity and communication within and about our community

Editor-in-Chief of MCAA publications and co-lead of the ResearchAbility Initiative, Gian Maria Greco looks forward to working in his new role as a Board Member.

Gian Maria Greco, in his own words

Currently, I am a senior research fellow at the University of Macerata (Italy), where I recently moved after spending some years around Europe. I hold a PhD in Philosophy and a PhD in Translation Studies and my research focuses on theoretical and practical issues in access and accessibility studies, especially in relation to human rights, the media and translation.

I also have extensive experience as an accessibility consultant and accessibility coordinator for public institutions and private organisations regarding policies, live events, museums, and cultural heritage.

Gian Maria is a newcomer to the Board, but not at all new to the MCAA community. For years now, he has been providing key contributions to the development of our association, for example, as the editor-in-chief of the MCAA Newsletter and IRRADIUM magazine and the co-lead of the ResearchAbility Initiative. He is ready to bring his experience and passion to his new role as a Board member.



Photo by Rebecca Arnold

Facing the challenges ahead

While honoured to start a new experience as a Board member, Gian Maria is also conscious of the responsibility of this position. 'The MCAA is at a critical juncture and will soon have to deal with what probably is the greatest challenge it has faced so far. Its management and financial procedures will change radically over the next two years'.

He is looking forward to working with the other Board members and says that he is 'confident in their skills and commitment'. He adds that, 'Under the leadership of the new Chair Fernanda Bajanca, I am sure that the Board will rise to the challenge and lead the MCAA community into a new chapter of our history'.

The value of diversity

Gian Maria has a strong interest in the issue of diversity, which comes from his research expertise as well as life experience, and he sees it as a specific character of our organisation. 'Diversity is not only a core value of the MCAA community, but also one of our most distinctive traits,' says Gian Maria, 'Our members come from the most different backgrounds. We have a profusion of languages, cultures, and social contexts, but also of disciplines and approaches. This gives the MCAA a fantastic opportunity to look at society and research. This is why, during his tenure as a board member, he wishes 'to further make diversity one of our strengths. The MCAA voice is unique because it is a multitude of voices. I wish to work with the Board and our community to increase this wealth even more and make it visible on the research agenda'.

The importance of communication

Gian Maria has been working intensively on the MCAA communication outlets, and he is ready to take his commitment one step further. 'Last year, I led the expansion of the MCAA into book publishing and we are now a proper publisher. So far, we have published only the Book of

Abstracts of the 2021 poster sessions, and we are currently finalising two more books: the 2022 Book of Abstracts and the Proceedings of the 2021 Annual Conference. Besides these, our publishing side has been on hold. Ruben Riosa, the Chair of the Communication Working Group, and Valentina Ferro, former MCAA Vice-Chair, and I are working hard to develop this new venture', he says. Gian Maria believes that this could be a strategic path for the growth of the association: 'the MCAA is widely acknowledged as an important actor in many areas, such as science diplomacy and science policy. As a book publisher we could provide our members with the opportunity to strengthen our positioning with focused, well-tailored books, as well as the opportunity to publish on other subjects'.

Ruben Riosa
MCAA Editorial Board

Special coverage:
General Assembly and
Annual Conference

2022 MCAA Annual Conference – What they said



Photo by Gledson Emidio José

Some of the members responsible for organising the conference discuss the challenges of running a large-scale hybrid event and how they overcame them.

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For new MCAA Vice-Chair Gledson Emidio, who played a leading role in the successful organisation, they faced a few challenges in organising the conference. "Because of the last MCAA contract transition, we started the organisation very late, which can be problematic, especially for a hybrid conference on the fringes of the COVID pandemic". Gledson highlighted that their priority was on the safety of the participants, which required different procedures and steps for each decision made. "Luckily, the conditions were much better in terms of the pandemic, allowing us to have a first-rate, safe conference." He stresses that they managed to successfully organise a safe conference thanks to a small but active team of volunteers spread around the globe.

Newly-elected MCAA Chair Fernanda Bajanca agrees with Gledson on the biggest difficulty. "Luckily, we have professionals in the organisation that work with us, because otherwise it would have been a lot more

difficult. But I think that every obstacle and problem we faced came from the fact that we couldn't start organising the conference early as usual. For example, we couldn't contact sponsors ahead of time. But I think that in the end, it looks like it's been quite successful."

Gian Maria Greco sits on the Editorial and Managing Boards of the IRRADIUM magazine and the newsletter. On the one hand, he believes the mix of live and virtual complicated matters. On the other, it presented its own rewards. "It's been a very challenging transition because it was a hybrid event. Last year, the challenges were different because it was a fully virtual event. This year, with the hybrid nature, it was obviously challenging, but also very nice because we were finally able to meet and see friends, colleagues and people with whom we share this passion for the MCAA. Last time we saw each other in person, and were this many, was before the pandemic. So, this has been challenging, precisely because of the hybrid makeup and the need to coordinate the different aspects. However, it was also very rewarding because the agenda and the programme were brilliant."

As one of the organisers and persons in charge, Gian Maria uses the poster session as an example of the hybrid event's benefits. "There was a live poster session, but also six parallel online poster sessions. In this way, people were able to really take advantage of the possibilities of the cloud."

Traps were also avoided. "There was also this risk of thinking that just because it was online made it easy, you just click and everyone can attend, it's free, and so on," says Gian Maria. "You need to have the infrastructure in place where you live, and we needed to be aware of this."

Fernanda doesn't want to rest on their laurels. She's looking ahead to 2023. "We have already started asking around our different chapter chairs who would be available to host the next conference. So, usually what we do is get a

chapter, let's say, responsible on site, but then there is a whole structure behind it. There is a chapter that builds an initial proposal, and then we select the winning bid and take it from there."

"I think what was special about this year's conference was the fact that in the last two years there was no conference, so this was a new way of online conferencing," says Esther Hegel. "This is the first hybrid event since 2019 – Vienna – so there were different and new challenges in organising it. As always, there were pressing time constraints, and I was very happy that Gledson took the lead on basically all aspects and really pushed this forward. It was a very professionally organised hybrid event that ran smoothly. I see it as a big success."

Esther considers the event somewhat of a best practice. "I hope notes were taken so we can repeat it in the same way next year."

Jerry Stamatelos
MCAA Editorial Team

Special coverage: General Assembly and Annual Conference

2022 MCAA Annual Conference – What they learned

Several members share their thoughts on what they gained from the conference.

Ruben Riosa is Chair of the Communication Working Group that managed to cover all the conference sessions. Together with Vice-Chair Nicoleta Spinu, Ashish Avasti, Arturo Castro Nava, Maria Montefinese and Pradeep Eranti, they provided precious insight for those who weren't able to attend specific sessions. For him, it was all about collaboration. "We have seen in many sessions that collaboration is key. Working as a team is the secret to improving our research and making the world a better place. We have seen in many sessions all the effort that the EU is doing to support and help researchers, and I think this is, and will likely always be a key point: collaboration is the key to success."

Ruben believes the main added value was the possibility of members to physically join the event. 'This increased the networking between different members and allowed them to meet up with different people that they might have known for years simply by email. Another added value was the high-quality sessions covering a huge variety of relevant topics and top-level speakers.

Gian Maria's main takeaways ranged from voting to personal growth. "First of all, this was an election year for us. We re-elected a new

Board, which means a new phase for the next two years. So, we're going back home with a vision for the future. At the same time, I personally really looked forward to all the knowledge and insights from the different topics. Let's not forget the human side. We really believe in the values and mission of the MCAA, so every time we get together, either virtually or physically, I become enriched, come away a better person, because I really feel all this energy around me."

Diversity was a game changer for the event, explains Gian Maria. "The fact that there were so many sessions on so many different topics. As a result, this year we were really able to have a broad look at our research environment and the life of researchers. A very broad look, but we were also able to go into great detail with the different sessions. The added value is something that we have already been building over time, and this year there was even more diversity. I think the key is diversity; you could see the people, the faces, the backgrounds, the different expertise around you. All this was fantastic, and the way we are working towards making diversity a core factor of the MCAA is fantastic. I think this year it really came through."

Fernanda believes the MCAA outdid itself this year with the quality of the speakers. "We've always had several high-level speakers, but I think this really was the year where we had more such speakers that bring a perspective and richness to very different fields. So, when you start with some names that everyone knows and wants to hear, then that attracts other high-quality speakers, and so on. Overall, I think this conference, from this aspect, was very successful."

Building community was the conference's added value, says Fernanda. "It's been two years since we last presented an event. This was something we really needed. So, what I see here now is this rebuild around all these causes we are all interested in. Science policy, problems that we address together, no matter where we come from, Russia, Ukraine, working together and trying to find solutions for researchers and students that are affected. It's really encouraging because it means that we're able to do something positive. It's really this community building or rebuilding, because these last two years it was difficult to keep the pace we've always had."

Gledson's main takeaway was a practical one: start organising as early as possible! "I recommend starting the first week after the conference because there are too many things to be done. Of course, some things can only be done later, but some aspects should be done in advance to have an easier process, especially if we don't have a contractor working with us."

The event's added value had to do with sharing in the broader sense, explains Gledson. "The conference is a unique experience because we are a multi-disciplinary association with 20 000 members in 150 countries from all kinds of knowledge fields. People who attend exchange ideas with others who aren't in their field. They engage with people that have a really wide range of knowledge and career expertise. There's a great mix and match of topics and themes, so it's a great experience

for networking and meeting people and exchanging ideas outside the box."

For Esther, the main takeaway was that the hybrid form works well and the MCAA should definitely repeat it. In addition, she found connecting with others to be key, both professionally and personally. "At in-person events, networking is so important for us members. I came out of this with lots of new ideas personally – how to develop, how to move forward – but also for my professional life. It was very stimulating and motivating catching up with all those people, networking, and seeing how important it is. I wouldn't ever like to go back to those strictly online conferences because the above points would be missing. I feel that this is what helps our members, and it's also very important for the Board to get us to work together in a fruitful way."

Esther's biggest added value was professional development. "I think this applies to all career stages. Both young and experienced researchers had fruitful discussions, and there were people that could also guide you in your personal growth." She also shares Fernanda's view about the speakers. "I feel that the content has really improved over the past years. If you look at the speakers now, we were able to secure very high-level speakers, and this really gave us a big push. It gives us more visibility, more credibility, but also more professionalism. I'm very proud to see this development from a smaller scale conference. I feel that every year it goes a bit better, and this is very nice to see."

Ashish Avasti is richer for the networking opportunities. "I did quite a bit of networking, and I'll return home with a lot of connections. That's the biggest takeaway and the most important one."

Jerry Stamatelos
MCAA Editorial Team

Special coverage: General Assembly and Annual Conference

The MCAA is “a network with sufficient influence”

Photo by Gonçalo Barriga



Former European Research Council (ERC) President Jean Pierre Bourguignon received an Honorary Recognition award during the 2022 MCAA Annual Conference. In an in-depth interview, Honorary Prof. Bourguignon has a lot to say about Europe’s main competitors in science, frontier research in tackling global challenges and diversity among the scientific community.

You were the ERC President from 2014 to 2019. How have the scientific and research landscapes changed over the years in terms of challenges and opportunities?

During these years, there was in particular something that was already happening before, but that has really become more evident. It was the remarkable improvement of the investment on research in Asia, and in particular China. If you look at articles written by Chinese scientists in China, they used to represent 1% of the most cited papers. This became 2% in 2000, and 20% in 2020. Clearly China has invested huge amounts of money, not only more money, but also more quality. So this is a reality.

Regarding Europe, this is something you cannot be oblivious to. China is the biggest challenger. During this time, the United States has also decided to invest large amounts of money. Therefore, two of Europe’s main competitors, the United States and all of Asia, but in particular China, have really made very significant investments.

I must say I was truly disappointed that at the July 2020 summit there was this big cut – 15% – in the Horizon Europe budget because we were in the middle of the pandemic. Clearly, science and research had been playing a role in developing the vaccines, and at the same time, the challenge coming from the United



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States, Asia and all the other big players had significantly increased.

What has changed is the fact that Europe's other clear competitors have really taken significant steps forward. At the same time, all key stakeholders in Europe stated that the minimum amount for the Horizon Europe budget should be EUR 120 billion. Others claimed the minimum should be 150, but 120 would be sufficient. We finally settled on 95.5, which is very far from 120. This is one thing you would have hoped changed over that period, given the evidence of the importance of research during the pandemic.

Another change which is quite different and something I find in a sense challenging, is the fact that now many EU countries have identified that there are really fundamental transitions to be made for climate change, digitalisation and health. For all of them, it is clear that the solution will be coming from research and technology. Although this is acknowledged, you don't see it translated. So, even though at a political level people have finally accepted that these transitions were essential, and you couldn't ignore them, the fact that they are completely backed by more research or more technology has not been acknowledged and recognised. In a way, we would have thought

that we would be in a better position, but actually that has not materialised. It shows that scientists altogether have to make major progress in the way they interact with society at large, and in particular with politicians. For the moment, people keep saying this, but I don't see any concrete development. People recognised the necessity, but what do we do? What are the steps to be taken? How can we achieve that? Recognising that these transitions have to happen should put us in a much better position to defend investment in research.

You were also Interim President for one year from 2020 until 2021, during the peak of the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic shone a light on the fact that bottom-up frontier research is key to preparing us for the next major crisis. How will frontier research achieve this?

I am a researcher, a mathematician. Why do I do research? Typically, the basis of research is that you want to understand how the world functions, how things happen, what is behind the phenomena that you see. So, in the case of, for example, mRNA vaccines, what was necessary before you arrive at a vaccine was to actually understand the role of mRNA and how you can transfer mRNA from one place to the other without destroying it along the way. This was the challenge because in a sense people knew what mRNA was, but if you want to use it as a means to induce a reaction, you need to bring it to the right place. That was the difficult part, and to do that you had to understand some very basic phenomena, and this was achieved over a long period of time. At that time, some people actually thought that it could become a new vaccination method, but nobody was sure of that because it was a really open-ended thing. The fundamental aspect of that research was to understand the process. That is a typical situation.

A very interesting example is the case of Ugur Sahin who received an ERC grant not to deal with the pandemic, but with specific forms of cancer. The advantage of mRNA for specific

kinds of cancer was precisely this flexibility, which was very important. Therefore, he got the grant to work on this type of vaccination. But of course, the fact that for some people working in this area the flexibility of this vaccine was already available made him convince the BioNTech board to decide to look into whether they could develop a vaccine for the COVID infection. This happened on 20 January. For the company, which was not very big, this meant that they had to decide to start something completely new because they had access to the COVID sequence and wanted to see whether they could do something. Then they started their activities and needed to carry out tests very quickly. This meant that they needed to gather new advance money – they didn't have a lot of money available – and as soon as it became clear that [the outcome] could actually be efficient, they had to look for an industrial partner. An obvious industrial partner – I can't give you the name – is a company with which they had collaborated for a number of years. This company finally said, "No, it's too risky, we don't want to do it," and that's how they ended up with Pfizer.

People very often say that these companies [developing vaccines] wanted to make money, but that was not the case. It was not clear whether it would work. It was a really big gamble. This shows that you have to develop new fronts for access to completely new approaches to a number of things. You can always improve what you have. Some people thought that this would work, but you need to explore some entirely new avenues, and this is a long-term effort. What is really remarkable is that Ugur Sahin and people working with him, particularly his wife, have really managed this. From the very beginning, not only did he need new scientific knowledge, but also needed to develop the technology to transform this new scientific knowledge into something that could become an action, which is a remarkable vision.

How could the MCAA contribute to the Commission's plan to revitalise the European Research Area?

As you know, research is really done by people, so it is extremely important that all people, such as MSCA Fellows, really are a very high-quality group. They have already been selected, come from many different disciplinary and national backgrounds, some of them even professional backgrounds. Many feel that their time as MSCA Fellows is time well spent: they get good support and access. It is very interesting that there is this network that exists and functions, and they can bring up a diversity of opinions, a diversity of situations. One of the Commission's greatest difficulties has always been to accept this diversity. Diversity is something that bureaucrats don't like because they like to have a one-size-fits-all solution. Unfortunately, in many cases this just doesn't work because you have to accept diversity. If you have a network with sufficient influence, like the MCAA network, then you are able to put on the table that what you are proposing is too simplistic. The Association, if it functions well – that is if it really gathers a very significant group of fellows and also a very diverse cross-section of fellows – can bring exactly what is needed. The EU wants to simplify, it wants to harmonise all the time. Bureaucrats around the world are always doing that; they just want to see one head, but the MCAA has many heads, which reminds them that it is more complicated because you have to deal with several cases, and what you are proposing is not going to do the job. You need more diversity.

Another thing I observe about the fellows is that I don't see the world of researchers as a world that is detached from the outside. I really like the fact that among the MSCA Fellows, there is a number who don't stay in academia or in research. They go to companies or they establish their own. In a sense, it is interesting that if you look at the dynamic of the process, people at some point spend a significant amount of their time doing science, doing research, being in academia or sometimes in industry with the support of an MSCA grant. But there are also people who are involved in other domains. Having these people with this experience in the other

domains is interesting because they can also report to the Commission. If you are serious about stimulating the presence of researchers in industry, for example, you have to be aware that there are some cultural shocks that people don't accept. For me, there is the size, the diversity, the diversity of dynamics, and as long as we have not succeeded in viewing research training as a normal situation for so many people in industry too, we are not going to win. If research is just confined to academia, it is not going to work. You need to have porosity between the two domains. The fact that there are so many people among the fellows who have moved from here to there gives you a good chance of getting a feeling if there are obstacles, detecting the obstacles, and then trying to make them disappear.

Jerry Stamatelos
MCAA Editorial Team

Special coverage:
General Assembly and
Annual Conference

Photo by Gonalo Barriga

The European Commission and MSCA: Today and in the future

As deputy head of the MSCA Unit at the European Commission, Lucy Swan is uniquely placed to discuss Horizon Europe's effect on researchers, to tackle MCAA members' concerns and to consider the MSCA's future role.

What are some of the changes and major developments for the MSCA under Horizon Europe that will benefit the researchers of today and tomorrow?

Regarding some of the main changes, first of all, we've tried to make an effort to demand management because the trouble with the MSCA is that it is very much oversubscribed. There are so many applications, and unfortunately, we fund very few of them, so we've tried to introduce demand management measures. For example, to prevent resubmissions of proposals that have a low evaluation score. We've also introduced a

'scientific age' for post-doctoral fellowships, so this is limited to researchers that have less than eight years of research experience. There are exceptions, of course.

The other novelty I should mention is that we are pushing for more intersectoral mobility and are really encouraging this in the MSCA. One of the ways we do that is by providing an additional six-month period for post-doctoral fellows to undertake a placement in a non-academic sector. So, this is an additional six months on top of their fellowship.

We continue to promote and communicate the MSCA and the important work that researchers

do to the general public, particularly young people. We are also trying to attract young people to scientific and research careers.

MSCA members have expressed concerns about COVID-19 impacting their work and career development. What is the Commission doing to mitigate this impact?

Of course, the Commission saw the impact on researchers across the world, not just under the MSCA. However, under the MSCA, we took unprecedented measures in order to help fellows during this difficult time. Measures ranged from being able to do part-time work to delay the start of projects. We also encouraged research institutions to utilise unused personnel and to fund extensions for researchers. So, we took a really wide variety of measures to try and help researchers as much as possible. In addition, we were continuously available to answer questions. The European Research Executive Agency received many questions from affected researchers, and they were very willing to try and find solutions as best they could.

The MSCA recently celebrated its 25th year of existence. What role do you believe this programme will play both in Europe and around the world in the future?

I think that it has already built up an incredible reputation over the last 25 years. I also believe it can only grow in terms of continuing to support researchers, adapting to the new environment, trying to support greater intersectoral collaboration and to improve brain circulation across the whole European Research Area. I think these are the main directions where we see the MSCA going. It is a very successful programme, so we wouldn't want to make major changes, but just try to reinforce it, and hopefully, also reinforce the budget that it receives in the coming years.

Jerry Stamatelos
MCAA Editorial Team



**SUSTAINABILITY
AND THE
POST-PANDEMIC
WORKPLACE**

**MCAA
ANNUAL
CONFERENCE
& GENERAL
ASSEMBLY**

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MARCH
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Special coverage:
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“Research is also about satisfying curiosity”

European Research Council (ERC) President Maria Leptin took office on 1 November 2021 at an important crossroads. We caught up with Leptin at the 2022 MCAA Annual Conference to discuss the EU’s new seven-year funding programme for research and innovation, frontier research’s role in overcoming global challenges and curiosity.



Photo by Gonçalo Barriga

The crucial transition from Horizon 2020 to the new Horizon Europe has taken place. What challenges do you face?

I think the challenge is always how to convince politicians and citizens of the value of fundamental research, and that costs money. There are many more good applications to the ERC and to other programmes that should and could be funded, and so much more money is needed.

With challenges come opportunities. For example, the ERC budget will see an increase under Horizon Europe. How do you plan to use this very positive development to the ERC's advantage for funding excellent frontier research?

The Scientific Council decides on how the money is distributed among the calls, and there's always a strong wish to favour young researchers with [Starting Grants](#) [up to EUR 1.5 million for five years]. However, we also have the [Synergy Grants](#) [up to EUR 10 million for six years] that are very successful. So, the Scientific Council decides each year on where the money goes. They look at the success rates – there's a desire to have the success rates amongst all types of calls equal – so one has to do some guessing because the rate depends on the number of applications versus the amount of money. Therefore, they're trying to get the success rates equal across the calls, at the same time making sure that enough goes to young researchers.

The pandemic has taught Europe that it needs to be more resilient and sustainable to tackle global challenges. One of the ERC's main aims is to support frontier research. What role will frontier research play in addressing global challenges?

Frontier research does exactly that. It prepares us for things that might come, and we don't yet know what they are. This is why we need basic research. We've heard it again and again. The COVID vaccine was one such case. I've

seen it also with climate change. We don't even understand how the world fully works, so how can we try and change the world and respond to challenges like that if we don't know the basic principles? So, for all of these, we need to know basic principles. A lot of new technologies have come along in the last 5 to 10 years in terms of data handling, simulation and AI for learning. Scientists have access to all this, to use and to understand all this data. Understanding is essential, because if we want to manipulate the world, we need to know how it works. And who knows what challenge we'll face in five years? We certainly don't.

You have to remember that we always ask what research is going to do for society, and I think that's justified because society puts tax money into it, and we need researchers for solutions to a better life.

However, we need to remember that research is also about satisfying curiosity. Everybody is curious. We find it incredibly exciting when a probe lands on a comet very far away. We like to send things out and peer into space. Why? It's not going to do us any good to look billions of years back. How does it help us to know what a black hole looks like? But we find it really exciting. So, this is true for many other things as well. Let's take archaeology as an example. We just care about what our ancestors did, and evolution doesn't help us with anything, but we just want to know. So, that is important to remember. Even though frontier science may help us to do something, to respond to a crisis in the future, it also has a completely different function; it's a cultural function of satisfying curiosity. That is something I want everybody to remember.

Jerry Stamatelos
MCAA Editorial Team

Special coverage: General Assembly and Annual Conference



Photo by Gonçalo Barriga

Researchers, let your voices be heard

The MCAA is a member of the **Initiative for Science in Europe (ISE)**, an NPO established in 2004 to make the voice of the scientific community heard in science policy issues. The MCAA collaborates with the ISE through its Policy Working Group. ISE President Martin Andler shares his thoughts on researchers being at the forefront of developments in research policy.

How can researchers get better informed about and/or involved in major policy issues at various levels?

To be involved, it is very important that scientists of every age, from the youngest PhD students to the more senior professors or directors of institutes, make their voice heard on policy issues at the national and European level. And to some extent, we scientists have mostly not done that enough in the past. So, again, I think it is very important that we do get involved, and the way to get involved is by participating in various kinds of organisations that defend or speak for scientists. One clear example is the MCAA, where there is obviously a strong tradition of young scientists being involved in science policy issues of various kinds. The MCAA does a remarkable job of this, of getting young scientists involved.



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What can the MCAA do to make its voice heard even louder in a number of policy issues and positions?

Obviously, one advantage that the MCAA has over learned societies is that its members tend to be a lot younger, and younger people are more energetic, and they tend to be louder, too. So, they are less worried about how it would look if they spoke their mind. I think this is very important because we scientists, generally speaking, are very hesitant to appear to be critical of the government, of the Commission, or whatever, and this is not how it works. In a democracy, when you don't agree with something, you say it out loud, you have to remain polite, but you say it out loud. This is how democracy works, and we should be less worried about what people are going to think of big scientists speaking in such and such a way. Young scientists don't have these kinds of hang-ups. They speak their mind, it's easier.

The second thing is that younger scientists are closer to the student body, and there are millions of students in every country, about 20 million students in Europe. This has a huge political weight, so I think that MSCA Fellows are in a rather unique position to be able to connect with students and to show how important it is for the quality of education that there's excellent research in universities.

Jerry Stamatelos
MCAA Editorial Team

There are other ways, too. Members of the ISE are mostly learned societies, like the European Physical Society, the European Geological Union or the European Association of Social Anthropology. As you can see, they are very broad and different kinds of sciences. These organisations, some of them quite old, usually represent national organisations which can be 150 years old, publish journals, they look at the role of their field in the more general context of the development of science, and this is also a way of being involved. So, you can do it typically in organisations like the MSCA, you can do it in a learner's society, you can do it, of course, in both. These are ways of being involved. And then you learn by doing, right?

Special coverage:
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MSCA Senior Global Fellow Cristina Blanco Sío-López was one of the presenters of the 'After the MSCA Fellowship - What next?' parallel session. Unfolding your potential and consolidating your agency are not what you expect to hear when listening to advice on the journey that begins after a fellowship. Cristina explains why these and other unfamiliar terms and expressions are important.

“Writing your
own script for
your future
essentially
implies
drafting your
own unique
voice”

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You talked about how important it is to ‘be in the moment’ in order to move forward. Can you explain what you mean?

Asking yourself ‘what’s next?’ after your MSCA Fellowship might initially feel like a daunting question. However, one of the more reassuring ways around it lies in understanding that any future pathway is just slowly and progressively drawn by building the present, step by step and day after day.

Therefore, there is no need to coldly jump into unknown waters because the first step towards any future comes precisely from looking how far you have come, from carefully thinking about what you have learnt and from daring to decide not just the professional, but, most importantly, the person you want to become. Indeed, that first move towards that future implies taking a quiet moment of reflection that is not, in any sense, a conversation based on seeking or worrying, but a time for pausing for a little moment, of breathing, of being in the now. And, in our current challenging contexts on so many levels, such as health challenges, arbitrary legal dispositions, socio-economic hardships, conflict, violence and displacement, this also entails an invitation to re-learn kindness to oneself and self-compassion as a key to moving forward.

To create our future, you want us to write our own script. How do we do that?

Asking yourself out loud who you would like to become comes with the responsibility (and the freeing joy) of writing your own script. Indeed, it is important to remember that you should not let anybody override the script you want to enact for your lifetime. It is your own unique life, and building your future is a right that cannot be stripped from you. In this respect, even when social constraints appear as too powerful and impactful, you always have your mental capacity to imagine and propose how you want to carve your space. One way of approaching this fundamental exercise lies in a willingness to constantly learn, evolve, adapt,



Photo by Cristina Blanco Sío-López

transform yourself and give form to your own unique voice.

Against the backdrop of an open future, the fact that you do not hold yourself back is of utmost importance, as well as that of not falling into the trap of letting yourself believe others’ clichés and prejudices.

Another step in the journey is about unlocking potential, what you call unfolding potentialities.

The next step is then that of essentially unfolding your potentialities. This means to unlock all your capacities, aspirations, skills, groundbreaking initiatives, frontier projects’ ideas, hopeful change proposals for a personal and a collective better future and fulfilling actions. In short, it entails all that is compressed in the question ‘who do you want to become as a person beyond your professional self?’ and invites you to transform a blank slate into a space for cumulating actions to unravel the potential you hold still unrealised within yourself.

Nonetheless, a word of caution would be in order when unfolding your personal and professional potentialities because some doors to your future, such as jobs and professional development opportunities, can be actual

gateways while some other seeming 'doors' can be outright traps. Some examples of such traps might include an impossibility to negotiate salaries for women and women not accepted for senior positions. In this particular case, I would advise that we fight not just to have 'women on board' in our projects and organisations but to have women on 'boards'. In the unfortunate case that we bump into a seeming door that ends up revealing itself as a trap, it is important to keep in mind workable 'ways out'. These might involve reaching out to kind, sincere and dedicated mentors from any realm or organisation, reaching out to relevant networks, confidential advisors and legal services to give us a representative voice, as well as health experts. In this respect, it is fundamental to keep in mind that asking for help is always courageous, as it is a gift of trust you offer to your safety nets with a determined willingness to move forward towards your very own future.

What is the role of the knowledge gained during an MSCA Fellowship?

Steps forward imply a capacity to implement the new knowledge you have been consciously and unconsciously accumulating throughout your MSCA Fellowship years, either by explicit research and training activities in your field and beyond or via personal contacts, informal conversations and activities, and other forms of expression and fulfilment outside of your discipline (e.g., artistic creativity, community building). These experiences offer you the possibility of attaining a grounding stature as a unique expert in your field and as part of the scholarly community overall. They also offer you an invaluable capacity to disregard your own rigidities and to discern a mindset that does not just look for the 'what' but also for the 'with whom' to implement initiatives and for the identity-driven 'why' you are undertaking any project at a given time in a given context. In this way, you will be able to focus not simply on your own visibility, but on more performative forms of discoverability, allowing you to project all that you are beyond your work.

You also refer to 'agency' when planning our future. What does this mean?

Writing your own script for your future essentially implies drafting your own unique voice and consolidating your agency. You are not a subject of changing circumstances, but an agent of change within your present and the main actor of your own life. For this reason, you should not simply take for granted where you are being placed, what you are asked to do or how you are to be defined externally. Consolidating your agency entails educating your environment and your employer on all these issues. You are the one who is aware of your potential, skills, knowledge and capacities. Therefore, you are the only person who can set your boundaries. Indeed, never wait to be told how you fit or 'who you are'. Instead, dare to bend your realm to the 'you' who wants to thrive, not just to survive, in changing ecosystems. And, most importantly, do fight the constant 'juniorisation' and the 'post-doctoralisation' of young scientists by becoming the senior expert you designed yourself to be. A fundamental aid in this venture will be the soothing gift of baby steps. You have come this far and your best is yet to come, day after day.

Jerry Stamatelos
MCAA Editorial Team

Special coverage: General Assembly and Annual Conference

Gianluigi's work deals with privacy and profiling issues concerning the technological influence over the decision-making process and the related legal validity of the consent. He recently began connecting this area to neuroprivacy – how to protect the brain and the mind from unregulated influential brain-data processing in the context of brain-computer interfaces and wearable brain-stimulation devices.

What does the Best Innovator award mean to you?

I didn't expect to be awarded because I personally feel that humanities remain a bit underrated, and not really considered in the scientific discussion and in the wider public opinion, especially when it comes to innovation. So the news came out of the blue and it was as exciting as it was unexpected. I felt particularly flattered and honoured, and still feel a sense of duty to pursue the path to innovation, although sometimes it's hard.

Indeed, exploring new, interdisciplinary areas isn't always so welcomed in doctrinal debates – despite appearances – because it often involves rethinking previous consolidated conceptual paradigms, approaches and mindsets. Sometimes it's frustrating being reviewed by peers that actually don't have a real insight into the specific interconnection between two distant fields. This also requires much more effort and explanatory sacrifices when talking to a heterogeneous, interdisciplinary audience. I'm very happy and grateful that these sacrifices have been recognised and I'll do my best to keep being worthy of this award.

“Innovation is in my DNA”

Gianluigi Riva received the Best Innovator award at the MCAA 2022 Annual Conference. A researcher and lawyer, he specialises in contracts, IT law and data protection. He was an MSCA PhD Fellow at University College Dublin where he obtained his doctorate in privacy, ethics and new technologies.



Photo by Gianluigi Riva

How did you get involved in these fascinating fields?

Since I was young, I've been dealing with interdisciplinarity. My mother was a biologist and my father an executive. So I grew up with inputs from both humanities and science. I studied law, but I have always held a passion for science and curiosity on matters beyond my knowledge. Indeed, soon after my graduation, I started to combine my legal background with neuroscience and AI.

This eventually drove me to join an ITN programme to address privacy, ethics and human-computer interaction (HCI), adopting an intersectoral approach to investigate issues concerning new technologies. The ITN was itself a multicultural environment focused on mental health. In this melting pot of cultures and stimuli, I have developed the desire to address the unexplored critical questions that 'classical' scholars usually consider with a legal perspective only. These multidisciplinary questions concern social consequences of the technological influence over the decision-making processes.

My research path has evolved to consider fields related to HCI, genetic and biometric profiling techniques and their implications for our society, as well as the data economic models behind the exploitation of personal data, bridging usually distant domains such as law, computer science and economy.

How do you bring together innovation and law?

Innovation is the ability to connect isolated fields and create new knowledge from unexplored perspectives. However, innovation is also often perceived as a concept primarily belonging to technological advancements or STEM research, while humanities remain somehow underrated concerning 'innovative' considerations. Nonetheless, even law produces innovation when it comes to developing intersectoral approaches

for governing new social phenomena. A remarkable example is the importance of novel legal conceptions for regulating AI systems and designing policies for trustworthy and fair algorithms. My research captures precisely these undervalued forms of 'legal innovation'. My doctoral research has highlighted the current data protection regulatory gaps, while proposing a novel legal-design method (Privacy on Demand) for programming user interfaces ethically to embed regulation by design in the HCI development phase of interfaces, apps, or online services.

My unconventional research has also explored the fascinating connections between quantum mechanics and law – via social physics – to propose a solution (Quantum Law) for overpassing the interpretative limits of AI systems applied to computational legal codifications.

In addition, I also addressed the emergence of data cooperatives as novel entities aimed at disintermediating personal data processing, and I created in my thesis a theoretical legal framework that reconstructs privacy personhood rights as collective goods (commons) to enable a diffuse protection, for example via class actions.

My current research, for which I received the European Commission's Seal of Excellence, follows this path, and addresses mental privacy by analysing how brain-computer interfaces impact individuals' most private and autonomous sphere: the mind. This also opens new areas of investigation in the realm of neurolaw, human enhancement and bioethics.

Innovation is in my DNA, and my peers' recognition of the many efforts spent on this innovative 'humanistic' mindset paid back all the sacrifices.

Jerry Stamatelos
MCAA Editorial Team

Special coverage:
General Assembly and
Annual Conference

The MCAA Social Impact Award 2021



Alexandra wishes to thank Mostafa Moonir Shawrav for the continuous support in the creation and evolution of the RA initiative from the very first moment when the idea was born during a chat over lunch at the ESOF conference in Toulouse (2018).

Photo by Gonalo Barriga

Disability inclusion and diversity advocate Alexandra Nothnagel received the Social Impact award during the MCAA 2022 Annual Conference. A biochemist by training, a disability prevented her from pursuing a career in neurobiology. She turned this barrier into a driving force for leading transformation towards accessibility and inclusion.

In 2018, Alexandra founded ResearchAbility (RA), a multi-association initiative she has been leading since then to [support the careers of students and researchers with disabilities](#) and to [promote research and awareness on disability, accessibility and inclusive culture in academia and beyond](#). Through RA, Alexandra implemented a working group to provide training sessions at the French national student

federation [100% Handinamique](#) so that young people with disabilities can succeed.

In 2019, RA became a subgroup of the Diversity & Inclusivity Task Force within the MCAA Genders, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Working Group thanks to the key support of Mostafa Moonir Shawrav, former MCAA Chair.

“The overall aim is to support the careers of students and researchers with disabilities and assist in making their professional ecosystem accessible and inclusive,” explains Alexandra. RA is grounded on four pillars: provide individual support; educate the research ecosystem; promote research and expertise; and drive change by networking and policymaking.



Photo by Gonçalo Barriga

Workshop on disability awareness during the MCAA conference in Vienna (2019) with trainers from the RA team: (l to r) Ibrahim Khalil Hamzaoui, Alexandra Nothnagel, Madina Karsakpayeva.

Alexandra aims to change the culture and policy framing to achieve an inclusive society and accessible work environment for researchers with impairments. This will break down attitudinal, procedural and environmental barriers that limit their activities and hinder full and effective participation on an equal basis with their colleagues. "Change is a tedious and slow process paved by challenges," Alexandra says. Her vision for furthering this process is using best practices of change management and organisational transformation based on policy, in combination with continuous accessibility and inclusion training.

2022 promises to be busy for RA with a dedicated webpage, a conference on universal accessibility and inclusion for university studies and careers, as well as external conference participation at a UNESCO side event in Barcelona.

In addition, RA is concentrating on two long-term actions focused on policy. The principle of

free movement of workers is enshrined in [Article 45 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union](#). The legal recognition of disability can't be easily transferred from one European country to another – if at all. That's because in some countries such administrative recognition is considered discriminatory in and of itself. The non-continuity in administrative recognition is linked to risks of interruption in financial support and of workplace adjustments and reasonable accommodation. This causes insecurity and extra financial burden for the mobility of European students and workers. RA will promote the development of mechanisms to transfer such norms among European countries, thus allowing non-discrimination based on impairments and health conditions between students and workers of Member States.

RA is lobbying to have accessibility and disability inclusion policies as part of national and European education and research policies, as well as institutional policies. Policies are the

basis of accessibility and disability inclusion programmes that aim for universal design and breaking down administrative barriers for people with disabilities where possible. In this context, RA will continue to evaluate and support improvements to the Special Needs Allowance (SNA) within Horizon Europe and other European research funding frameworks. SNA is a separate funding programme for MSCA grant holders to cover the high mobility costs (up to EUR 60 000) of students, researchers and staff members with disabilities. One recommendation is to rename SNA to Accessibility & Inclusion Allowance, taking into consideration the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities definition of disability. This places at the centre the interaction with attitudinal and environmental barriers that disable a person's activity. It also takes into account the [wishes](#) of people with disabilities to be seen as humans like everyone else with needs, not using any euphemistic terms that present them as heroes and their needs as special.

"The Social Impact award will provide my work with the visibility needed to reach new goals for RA," comments Alexandra. "I hope that more researchers will be motivated to be open about their experiences, start making a change and join the RA."

Working tirelessly to creating even greater impact

Alexandra's passion for consultancy in digital accessibility and her civil society work on disability inclusion have impacted her career. Since 2021, she has successfully been implementing a structured transversal transformation programme for accessibility and digital inclusion in her daily work as Global Programme Manager for Accessibility and Digital Inclusion at Atos in France, a multinational IT and digital transformation company with about 109 000 employees in 71 countries. Her efforts earned her an [Atos award](#) from the Zero Project by Essl Foundation in February 2022.



Photo by Gonçalo Barriga

Dr Michael Fembeck (Zero Project), Beatriz González Mellídez (Atos), Alexandra Nothnagel with Zero Project award, Neil Milliken (Atos), Martin Essl (Essl Foundation).

For over 15 years, Alexandra has been striving to connect activists, politicians, diverse associations and institutions working towards the same goals aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals and to federate their activities beyond their conventional networks. She does this by initiating new collaborations between these actors. Collectively, these endeavours have created valuable impact.

Alexandra also leads networking initiatives and works with knowledge communities such as experts and scientists to foster inclusive innovations. For example, in addition to her daily role, she was project manager of the Atos GIZ joint [ICT 4 Inclusion Challenge](#) Africa edition to scale solutions for inclusive education for people with disabilities in Africa. She conceived and organised the first [Innovation in Disability Inclusion](#), a major Atos event for the International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

Jerry Stamatelos
MCAA Editorial Team

Special coverage:
General Assembly and
Annual Conference



Photo by Marco Masia

Contributing to the MCAA's vision, mission, growth and reputation

From being a member of the Board to organising the annual conferences, academic entrepreneurship expert Marco Masia has seemingly done it all since joining the MCAA in 2013. In recognition of his tireless efforts, he received the Outstanding Contributor Award at the MCAA 2022 Annual Conference.

As an innovation consultant for SMEs, NPOs and start-ups, Marco works at the intersection between research, innovation and policy. However, it's his long list of leadership positions that have given him the opportunity to contribute to governing and developing the MCAA.

Marco Masia's commitment within the MCAA**Leading the way**

- 2014-2016 Chair of Policy Working Group
- 2015-2016 Founder & Vice-Chair of German Chapter
- 2015 Founder of Bridging Science and Business Working Group
- 2016-2018 Board Vice-Chair
- 2016-2020 Board Member of German Chapter
- 2016-2020 Vice-Chair of Information and Data Access Working Group
- 2018-2020 Ordinary Board Member
- 2020-2022 Chair of Information and Data Access Working Group

MCAA community development

- 2015-2018 ideation, launch and coordination of MCAA Academy initiative
- 2015 Organised German Chapter annual meeting in Darmstadt
- 2016 Organised German Chapter annual meeting in Heidelberg
- 2017 Supported organisation of General Assembly and Annual Conference (GA/AC) in Salamanca
- 2018 Supported organisation of GA/AC in Leuven
- 2019 Supported organisation of GA/AC in Vienna
- 2019 Organised Researchers meet Innovators in Berlin
- 2020 Supported organisation of GA/AC in Zagreb

MCAA engagement and commitment

- 2014 Launch and coordination of policy webinar series
- 2016 Launch and coordination of Bridging Science and Business webinars
- 2016-2022 Ideation, launch and coordination of My Super Science Heroes book project
- 2016 Redesign and launch of new website, and administration of YouTube channel
- 2017 Ideation and launch of MCAA blog
- 2017-2022 Development of backend functionalities for better service to the MCAA
- 2018-2021 Coordination of open cloud voucher programme
- 2020-2021 Transition to Drupal 9 and redesign of portal

MCAA representation

- Presented at EuroScience Open Forum in 2014, 2016 and 2018
- Represented the MCAA at Initiative for Science in Europe from 2014 to 2018
- Represented the MCAA at the MSCA Advisory Group from 2016 to 2018
- Presented (upon invitation) at the EIT Climate-KIC GA in 2017
- Presented (upon invitation) at the EURAXESS North America event on scientific diasporas in 2018
- Participated in EIT Digital in 2018 and 2019
- Presented at DLD Tel Aviv Innovation Festival in 2018
- Member of the jury for FameLab 2019 in Brussels



Of all his achievements, Marco singles out two: **My Super Science Heroes** and **Researchers meet Innovators (RMI)**. The first is an illustrated book series written in partnership with the MCAA. The aim is to spark children's love of science and maths. The second is a two-day event targeting people from research, start-ups, NPOs and the corporate world who want to learn more about innovation and how researchers and innovators can synergistically and successfully collaborate.

"I came up with the concepts and coordinated both initiatives to find sustainable sources for funding that would work in the long term," says Marco. Two books on Marie Curie and Alan Turing have already been published, contributing more than EUR 25 000 to the MCAA. In addition, new royalties are paid every year based on book sales. The RMI meeting was very successful, and eventually showed a profit of about EUR 3 000.

From 2015 to 2021, Marco actively worked to identify and secure new sponsorship opportunities that have brought in tens of thousands of euros to the MCAA. He has established connections with other

organisations, including Vitae, the European Commission's Directorate-General for Education and Culture, EIT Health, EIT Digital, EIT Climate-KIC, the New York Academy of Sciences, EURAXESS North America and Initiative for Science in Europe.

"I feel very honoured to receive this award and consider it a great recognition for eight years of voluntary service to the MCAA," comments Marco. He credits his entire experience to developing into a mature professional. "In fact, having carried out volunteer work in many different facets of the MCAA, I have learned a lot and acquired different competencies that are now very useful in my career."

"When I joined, we were approximately 1 000 members, now we are more than 20 times that amount," he concludes. "Putting my own contributions aside, none of this could have been accomplished and maintained without the dedication and hard work of many members."

Jerry Stamatelos
MCAA Editorial Team

Special coverage:
General Assembly and
Annual Conference

Climbing the ladder: Bala Attili's outstanding career trajectory

From humble beginnings in India to associate director at AstraZeneca's Clinical Pharmacology and Safety Sciences Unit in Cambridge, Bala Attili has come a long way. It's his meteoric rise in academia and industry that earned him the Career Award at the MCAA 2022 Annual Conference.

As a child, Bala read autobiographies of scientists in his mother tongue. "The one who really inspired me was Marie Curie, the struggles she went through and what she achieved in the end is truly inspiring to me and many others."

Armed with a Master's degree in pharmacy from India's prestigious Andhra University, he set off to pursue a PhD at KU Leuven, one of the oldest and most renowned universities in Europe. In 2018, he completed his doctoral degree in pharmaceutical sciences.

In addition to being the recipient of two MSCA Fellowships, Bala received another prestigious fellowship from the University of Cambridge. "I was thrilled to work for the University of Cambridge, Cancer Research UK Cambridge Institute and patient-facing at Addenbrookes Hospital," he says. "This experience really cultivated my scientific curiosity and took it to the next level."

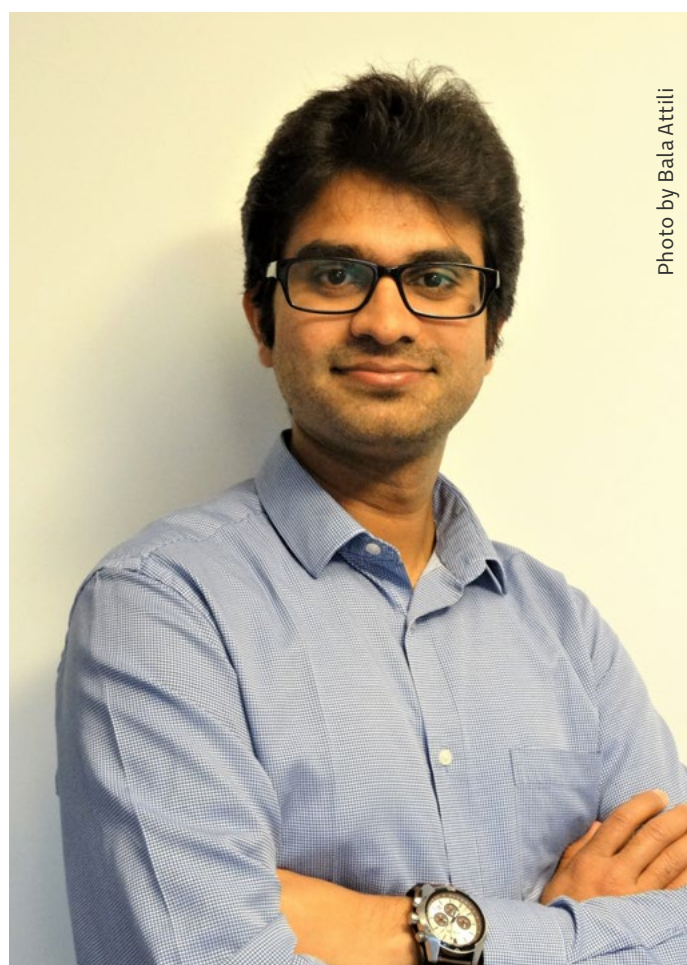


Photo by Bala Attili

While at the University of Cambridge, Bala had the privilege of working with the world's preeminent clinician scientists and research scientists. He was also a stone's throw away from the Medical Research Council Laboratory of Molecular Biology where 12 Nobel Prizes have been awarded for work carried out there. "It was a dream come true for a passionate scientist," he recalls.

From the university lab to big pharma

The switch to industry came when AstraZeneca offered Bala a senior scientist position in 2020. He was part of the Clinical Pharmacology and Safety Sciences team that worked tirelessly on the vaccine to protect against COVID-19. A year and a half after joining the pharmaceutical and biotech giant, he was promoted to associate director. He's leading advanced cancer therapies to push the boundaries of science. "My goal and vision is to turn cancer into a curable disease," he states. To achieve this, the focus has turned to novel, next-generation oncological therapies.

Bala has been an active member of the MCAA since 2013. During his doctoral training, he served as BeNeLux Chapter Chair and as a member of the Board. After obtaining his PhD, he became Treasurer and was elected to the MCAA Board as an Executive Committee member for two years.

"It was a real honour to receive the MCAA Career award. I have faced several challenges along my way, and every time I learned something more about me. This award encourages me to engage more in mentorships and career development activities, as well as academia-industry transitions for MCAA Alumni," concludes Bala.

Jerry Stamatelos
MCAA Editorial Team



Research

Towards a right-to-disconnect for teleworkers

We spend too much time behind our screens, and the generalisation of teleworking has exacerbated this tendency, since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Sofia Fernandez Guerrico, MSCA Fellow, is currently working on the [BIMH project](#) which aims to understand the connection between mental health and constant connectivity, to eventually contribute to a right-to-disconnect for teleworkers.

Sofia Fernandez Guerrico, in her own words

I am a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Department of Applied Economics ([Dulbea](#)) of the Université Libre de Bruxelles, in Belgium. I received a PhD in economics from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, in the United States. I am originally from Argentina, where I obtained a degree in economics from the University of Buenos Aires, before moving to the United States to pursue my doctoral studies.

At the Dulbea, I have been working on research projects at the intersection of labour economics and health economics. My previous [research](#) examines the effects of trade-induced economic shocks on labour market outcomes, health, and migration.

I was recently awarded a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions ([MSCA](#)) Individual Fellowship (IF) to study, together with [Ilan Tojerow](#) (Dulbea), the link between work-related ICT use after regular work hours and mental well-being.



Photo by Sofia Fernandez Guerrico



Photo by Sergey Nivens on Shutterstock

Working from home has become the new norm for a significant number of workers since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. While this situation presents some advantages, such as less time spent on transport, it can impact and blur the lines between private and professional life.

Behind our screens

Answering an email or reading a report outside working hours can sometimes be tempting, as it can be considered as 'quick and easy', but in the long term, this type of behaviour is likely to affect our mental health. "The potential effects of the additional time we spend behind screens on mental health are multidimensional because of the many ways computers and other digital devices are used," explains Sofia.

Digital devices may also affect mental health through channels other than work, such as search engines, email, virtual meetings, telehealth, social media, which may have consequences on our capacity to make decisions or on our social interactions.

Constant connectivity

For Sofia, there is a growing concern that constant connectivity to work may disrupt work-life balance and jeopardise workers'

mental well-being. "High-speed internet enables the work-related use of computers, mobile phones, and digital devices at home. The BIMH project aims to study the impact of the diffusion of high-speed internet on mental health-related disability insurance claims in Belgium," she says.

In addition, the project aims to understand mental-health related conditions and their role in the expansion of both regional and national disability insurance programmes in member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

"In the last decades, mental health has become an important driver of new disability benefit claims across OECD countries. Moreover, the consumption of anxiolytics and antidepressants—associated with mental health conditions such as depressive disorder, anxiety, and sleeping problems—has doubled in OECD countries between 2000 and 2017," explains Sofia.

High-speed internet and mental health-related disability insurance claims

In this context, Sofia and the team of researchers working on the BIMH project are currently working on data to show that these

increasing trends can be explained by changes in the time, place, and way in which we work.

More specifically, the project is studying the impact of diffusion of high-speed internet on mental health-related disability insurance claims in Belgium from 1995 to 2012.

"Using variation in the availability of internet diffusion, we will estimate the causal effect of changes in the available ICT on mental health-related outcomes—prescription medication for depression or anxiety, sick leave from work and disability insurance claims—with varying levels of severity and to explore the underlying channels," adds Sofia.

The project is in its initial stages, according to our fellow. "We have reviewed related research to define the project's contributions to the literature and chosen the appropriate empirical strategy to identify the causal link between work-related ICT use and mental well-being," she explains.

The team is currently preparing the dataset for the empirical analysis, which includes a vast collection of geolocated microdata that will allow them to estimate the causal effect of internet access on mental health-related outcomes and to explore the underlying channels.

Regulating teleworkers' rights

Sofia is confident that the results of this project will certainly raise interest. "Given the attention that work-from-home arrangements have gained in the context of the current pandemic, we expect a lot of interest in the results stemming from the project from actors beyond the academic research community. We look forward to contributing to the evidence-based debate on the rights of teleworkers and the regulation of digital platforms, among others," she concludes.

Aurélia Chaise
MCAA Editorial Team

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Accessibility Statement

The MCAA believes in a society based on diversity. A society where diversity is the norm, not a deviation. A society where diversity is a strength, not a weakness. Access barriers are created by a society that does not acknowledge the value of diversity. Diversity and access are foundational elements of the flourishing of the research endeavour.

As a community of researchers, the MCAA is committed to increase the accessibility of its products, services, and events. Under the leadership of the Editorial Team of the Communication Working Group, with the support of other Working Groups and the MCAA Board, the MCAA has been promoting a series of actions aimed at increasing the inclusivity of its community and reducing access barriers.

Since the June 2021 issue, the MCAA Newsletter has a new layout. The new design should make the reading experience more accessible by reducing a number of barriers our readers may face.

The new layout complies with many requirements of major print and digital accessibility standards and guidelines. For example, background and foreground colours were selected and paired so as to fulfil the AAA level requirements for colour contrast devised by the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.1). Colour selection and pairing also complies with requirements for colour blindness. The text is not justified in order to keep the spacing between words consistent and regular in the entire text. Line spacing and font size were revised and increased too. Each macro-section is identified by a different colour so as to provide the reader with a map of content organisation. The layout adopts TestMe, a font inspired by the Design for All principles. Last but not least, the PDF file now complies with PDF accessibility requirements and can be used by screen readers.



Editorial information



About

The MCAA Newsletter is the main communication channel for and about the MCAA community. It is a publication venue for science communication and public outreach. Its main aim is the dissemination of information about past and current MSCA projects, as well as activities of MCAA Chapters and Working Groups, events, and members' achievements.

The MCAA Newsletter is a registered publication (ISSN 2663-9483) in the Royal Library of Belgium (KBR). It is published by the Marie Curie Alumni Association, Kunstlaan 24, 1000 Brussels, Belgium.

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