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Marie Curie Alumni Association

Newsletter



Mental health in academia

Guest edited by: Pooja
Khurana, Ana Paula Miranda
Mendonça, Andrey Zhylka

Meet the new
Chapter Chairs

Table of contents

Message from the Board	4
Shun the stigma, normalise mental complexity!	6
News from the MCAA	
The MCAA Africa Chapter: Meet the new Chair	11
The MCAA Benelux Chapter: Meet the New Chair	13
The MCAA Hungary Chapter: Meet the New Chair	14
The MCAA Sweden Chapter: Meet the New Chair	16
The MCAA Germany Chapter: Meet the New Chair	18
The MCAA Turkey Chapter: Meet the new Chair	20
A new era for the MCAA Ireland Chapter	22
Special Issue: Mental Health in Academia	
The problems of a postdoc	24
When the academic dream turns into a nightmare	27
Understanding and overcoming the mental health crisis in academia	31
The mental health pandemic in academia that PhD students should be aware of	34

Breaking the silence from the top down	37
Providing support for researchers and scientists includes good management	40
Peer-to-peer coaching: a novel way to tackle researchers' stress	43
Determining domains of improvement in academic mental health support	47
Driving change with data	51
Institutional career development- A model for improved academic mental health	55
Accessibility Statement	60

Message from the Board

The MCAA actively participates in various initiatives and professional-social activities. With this letter we would like to keep you informed of the latest initiatives and encourage you to take a proactive role.

Dear members,

The international community is facing challenging times at various levels, at times with personal and nation-wide safety and freedom being under attack, as experienced first-hand by many of our members.

This issue of the MCAA Newsletter issue is devoted to the topic of mental health in academia. The MCAA has always paid attention to this issue. We look forward to getting to know more details of the new program anticipated by EU President von der Leyen in her 2022 [State of the Union Address](#) where she talked about “a new initiative on mental health”, highlighting the need to “take better care of each other. And for many who feel anxious and lost, appropriate, accessible and affordable support can make all the difference.” Mental health and wellbeing are determined by a number of different factors. For researchers and scientists for whom mobility has been a must this is even more so. Work uncertainty, the need to reinvent oneself, geographical and economic instability, to name but a few, are factors that contribute to feeling under the water and anxious. The MCAA is committed to provide support for its members, directly and indirectly. A case of direct support is REFERENT, a peer-to-peer support initiative, together with the many initiatives and events on mental health organised all over the world by the MCAA Working Groups and Chapters. As for indirect support, just consider [RUMO](#), a company launched by one of our members,



for which he was awarded the 2018 MCAA Social Impact Award, and [ReMO](#), a COST Action promoted and managed by many MCAA members that everyone is welcome to join. We have also looked into different ways to translate this support into action. Over the last mandates the Board has made it an increasing priority to support MCAA members by providing access to courses and networks that would facilitate upskilling and transition to/from the academic path.

At the time of writing this letter, our thoughts are with countries where political instability directly affects the well-being of citizens within their borders and abroad.

Together with our partners, the Board has been encouraging and endorsing activities in favour of those parts of society that are living under dangerous circumstances. We have been closely supporting scholars from Ukraine via some initiatives launched globally. We salute the [MSCA4Ukraine](#) programme that the European Commission has recently launched under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions to support displaced researchers from Ukraine. MSCA4Ukraine will provide fellowships



The 2022-2024 MCAA Board during the October meeting in Brussels. From left to right: Fernanda Bajanca, Marina Rantanen Modeer, Corinne Portioli, Mariana Rosca, Pavlo Bazilinskyy, Gian Maria Greco, Alexandra Dubini, Donata Iandolo, Giulia Malaguarnera, Gledson Emidio. Not in the photo: Charlotte Ndiribe.

for doctoral candidates and post-doctoral researchers. The past few months have also seen the surge of the Iranian population led by its women following the atrocities experienced by women and students, sadly symbolised by the killing of Mahsa Amini (Kurdish name Jina Amini). At the end of November, the North America chapter organized [an initiative to discuss the crisis](#) in Iran from the perspective of two female academics. We are looking into ways to gather the needs of our Iranian members and other researchers to provide support to scholars within the country and abroad. More information will be available on our social media and during the Annual Conference in February 2023.

Talking about **the MCAA Annual Conference**, it will take place on **23-24 February 2023 in Córdoba** (Spain). Many MCAA members, led by Alexandra Dubini, are actively working towards a rich program around the theme "**Challenges in Science Diplomacy & Sustainable Development**." Applications for [Micro-Grants](#) are now open, while the call for [MCAA Awards 2022](#) will open soon. As usual, the conference will comprise panel discussions and presentations, but also some new activities. Most notably, the conference agenda will include some short workshops that will target

specific needs of our members, and even more importantly a one-day immersive training on science communication that will be held the day before the conference, 22 February. During the conference, we will also host a European Science Diplomacy Alliance meeting.


On a separate note, the MCAA Board met in person in October. It was the first in-person meeting that was attended by all the current eleven Board members, and we also had the pleasure to have with us the Chair of the Benelux Chapter.

The board is also happy to share with you the news that the Coordination and Support Actions (CSA) has officially started. The CSA is a crucial support by the European Commission that will contribute to making the MCAA a financially and organisationally sustainable association moving towards more professional support for its members and our strategy.

While we are writing this Letter, we are taking care of the last details before launching the pilot phase of our mentoring platform.

Last but not least, we would like to take this opportunity to wish everyone happy winter holidays, hoping to see each other in person at the annual conference in Córdoba and at many of the activities organized worldwide by our active members.

Engage in our activities and suggest new ones! Only together can we shape the MCAA and further its impact.

Donata Iandolo 

On behalf of the MCAA Board
donata.iandolo@mariecuriealumni.eu

Editorial

Shun the stigma, normalise mental complexity!

Forever and a day 'mental health' has been a taboo topic. The prohibition and restriction surrounding mental well-being is not a cultural or sectorial issue but one that has plagued societies beyond national borders, lifestyle choices and personal ideologies. The concatenation of the above has spilled over all aspects of civilization, hindering human potential and progress.

Mental health stigma, a vicious cycle

Even before developing a mental health disorder, it is possible to adopt a strong public stigma and the negative beliefs surrounding it. Societal stigma breeds discrimination, which, when perceived internally, induces feelings of blame, shame, anxiety and insecurity (The Lancet, 2016). And while emotions like 'shame, guilt and anxiety' are ubiquitous and have been attributed to play a protective role for a functional society (Fessler, 2004), when experienced consistently, can promote aversive effects of social rejection (Leary, 2015).

Toxic shame (Dolezal & Gibson, 2022) fosters feelings of unworthiness, diminishing the sense of self and confidence. When people get consumed in a vortex of self-pity and self-rumination, it gets easier to harbour negative and even violent urges, ceasing social ties,



Photo by Asmi Tyagi

and thereby exacerbating insecurity (Stöber, 2003). Unsurprisingly, insecurity often elevates uncertainty and has a bidirectional relationship with mental illnesses like anxiety and depression (Massazza et al, 2022).

The stigmatisation of mental disorders decreases societal awareness, understanding, and tolerance. The **lack of understanding** could also manifest feelings of fear and shame, often projected onto others in the form of anger and/or resentment. Such social rejection or neglect enhances the

reluctance of marginalised groups battling mental disorders, from seeking help, thus feeding into the vicious loop of stigmatisation (Dolezal, 2022).

Mental health in the context of Academia

Academia has been inundated with hierarchical and systemic challenges. Issues like career and financial precarity, discrimination against underrepresented groups, and high dependence on 'results-driven' and 'publish-or-perish' culture, have continued to make academia a 'high-stress' environment (Orr, 2017). And while some may contest that such **precarious and stressful work conditions** are not limited to academia, what makes **these** 'high-stake' issues for early-stage researchers (ESRs), is the duration of investment, commitment and sacrifices they make to feel **accepted** and **succeed** in this sector.

For university researchers, the aphorism, '**publish or perish**' has been one of the strongest determinants of **academic success** (Rawat & Meena, 2014). The pressure to publish research work, that too, in high impact factor journals, has also been the prerequisite for attaining postdoctoral or higher academic positions. Although publishing is considered a moral requirement and often assists in promoting open science, results' reproducibility and keeping society informed, while also justifying the righteous use of generous funding and taxpayer money, it has been reported to have a deleterious impact on the researchers' wellbeing and research, itself. The pressure to publish translates to even longer working hours and stress for academics; a **quantity-over-quality** mentality; and at times even tempering data to make it **publishable**-reducing scientific integrity; defying the purpose of publications altogether. Not to undermine **its** effect on the '**sense of failure**'

many researchers feel and internalise, when their research commitment and hard work do not result in a publication (Nature, 2019).

On average, it takes about twelve or more years from graduating high school to earning a PhD degree, which is usually followed by a couple of years of postdoctoral experience in a traditional academic route. So, by the time ESRs enter the 'real job market' (although they are highly skilled experts with decades of specialised training and experience), **many** of them are- in their 30s, financially unsettled, with additional familial responsibilities and no permanent jobs. The sudden shift in **priorities** combined with financial and career insecurities creates insurmountable turmoil and distress (Silverman et al, 2016), which **may** affect certain groups of society even more than others (Llorens et al, 2021).

Traditionally, academia has glamourised long-working hours with low pay scales by selling the **dream** of 'doing the greater good' for society. Although some very generous funding schemes are in place (like the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, Erasmus+ and European Research Council fellowships), this isn't the case for most academics. However, in challenging times of global health crisis and economic inflation, even a strong 'passion for societal good' **can run dry**; resulting in phenomena like the '**great resignation**', 'leave academia' trend and the more recent, '**work-to rule**' (also known as quiet quitting).

Unequivocally, mental health issues are complex and reforming the **foundations** of the higher education system is extremely challenging; but in a rapidly evolving society, academia has to adopt contemporary changes to protect, inspire and support its workforce, and preserve fundamental research from being completely overtaken by the private sector.

Reforming academia, every little counts

In addition to the stressors mentioned earlier, some ESRs (especially internationals) may miss having a support network within their universities. The lack of structural and guided support can easily enhance the distress and self-doubts experienced by vulnerable academics making them susceptible victims of **bullying, harassment** and **abuse** by those in positions of power (Moss & Mahmoudi, 2021).

Programmes like 'The European Charter and Code for Researchers (2005)', 'The Concordat (2019)' and 'Reforming Research Assessment (2022)' promise improvement in this state of affairs. While these are brilliant initiatives and pave the path for significant reforms, it can be difficult to implement their principles and validate their efficiency at an institutional or individual 'research group' level. Therefore, in addition to the above, having university-led initiatives like providing well-being and trauma-informed support; counselling, and guided career development, can facilitate addressing fears and concerns, and safeguarding the mental well-being of academics.

An effective systemic change calls for **action(s)** by all its stakeholders, including the funders and policy-makers, institutions/ universities, supervisors and researchers. Stakeholder-specific initiatives that can contribute to promoting better research, well-being and work culture, encompass the following:

Funders to-

- Include requirements which promote diverse, equitable and inclusive (DEI) work culture and value researcher well-being in grant proposals, policies, and terms and conditions

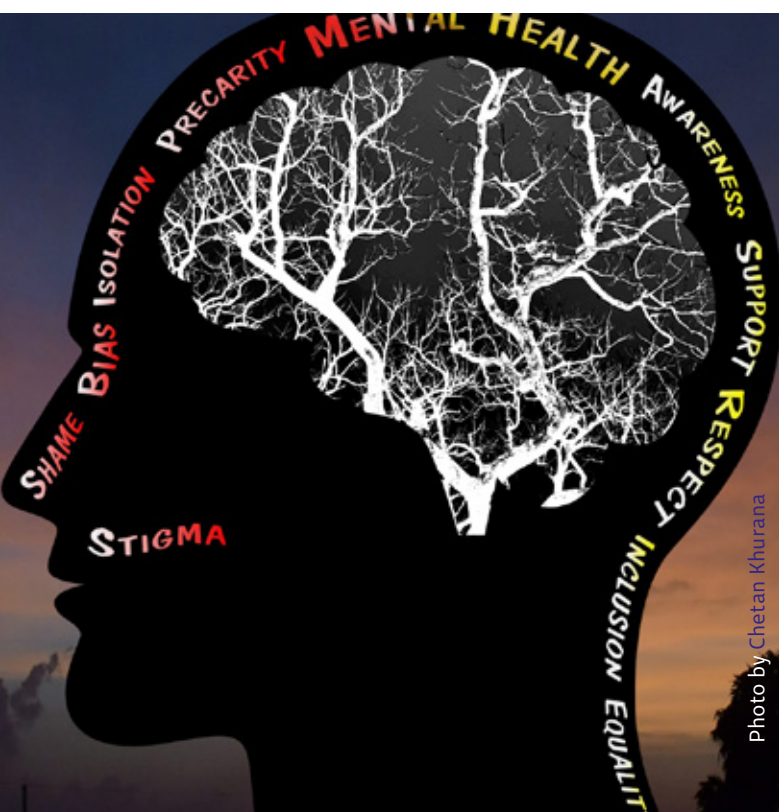
- Ensure equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups (like women, people of colour, neurodivergent, people with visible and hidden disabilities, LGBTQ+ and others)
- Include short-term courses for researchers with a focus on career development, mental welfare and resilience

Institutions and Universities to-

- Ensure that their policies are inclusive (DEI), transparent and well-communicated to staff, supervisors and researchers (these could include additional training)
- Promote good mental health practices through efficient people management skills, and provide platforms for supporting, reporting and addressing issues
- Regularly conduct reviews by seeking feedback and adopting appropriate reforms
- Facilitate career development to train, upskill and empower ESRs to prepare for careers within and outside academia
- Provide independent mentors (other than their direct supervisors) so researchers can seek guidance and support in a confidential manner
- Promote **reverse mentoring** to enhance engagement, new perspectives and active listening with a bottom-up approach
- Address job precarity by considering effective redeployment and open-ended contracts (based on performance and progress reports)

Supervisors/ line managers to-

- Undertake training about DEI principles, people management and empathic leadership
- Create a culture of high research integrity by promoting data transparency, encouraging quality over quantity and healthy competition, while redefining 'success and failure' in research



- Support researchers through initiatives like job-share, flexible or hybrid work options (where appropriate) and signposting them to relevant resources
- Encourage an open-communication culture that enhances mental well-being; where researchers feel comfortable sharing everyday challenges and failures and seeking professional support (either within or outside the university)

Researchers to-

- Work by their institution's principles and values
- Create a supportive and inclusive environment, particularly for new members of the group (including activities like peer-support sessions, coffee catch-ups, lab meetings focused on well-being, having group representatives who regularly check in with team members etc.)
- Report incidents of abuse, bullying, discrimination, harassment or other forms

of research misconduct to the appropriate authorities

- Where possible, actively participate in policy development and reforms
- Set realistic expectations, share and normalise research failures, and focus on balancing priorities within and outside research
- Take active measures to prioritise their mental and physical well-being
- Share work amongst colleagues (where possible) and promote team welfare

Learning from adversity

Ensuring society's health, safety and happiness is a collective initiative. It seems not only unfair but unrealistic to put the onus of addressing 'mental health' issues afflicting society, on leaders, institutions, systems or sectors alone. While several academic issues **do** require bold measures by stakeholders including governments and policy-makers; and some **do** have more responsibility than others, transforming '**research culture**' and promoting the '**mental health of academics**' requires a joint effort.

Academia alone did not breed 'mental health stigmatisation'. Yes, there are fundamental issues that contribute to exacerbating the stigma within the academic structure; but the narrative used to address the prevailing mental health issues in society has set a **toxic** precedent.

As responsible beings, it is imperative to **understand** and **accept** the responsibility of belonging to a diverse world with-gender, sexual, language, race and cultural differences, neurodivergence, disabilities and a plethora of belief systems. Awareness increases the possibility of understanding and tolerance, which in turn, increases the probability of accepting and respecting others.

Consequently, this MCAA December Special Issue is our collaborative initiative to respectfully, yet strategically dissect and discuss systemic issues; learn from our collective experiences, and methodically pan out robust solutions, while representing and supporting multiple perspectives. And for this, I would like to thank all authors for their contribution in this initiative, my fellow guest editors- **Ana Paula Miranda Mendonca** and **Andrey Zhyika** for their invaluable support and hard work, and the entire MCAA newsletter editorial team for their assistance.

A society can only progress if it is mentally and physically healthy. Our moral responsibility is to uplift and support each

other, irrespective of our h-indices, academic titles and monetary affluence. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, **"We but mirror the world.....We need not wait to see what others do". Let's be the change, we want to see in the world!**

Pooja Khurana

Co-Guest Editor of the December 2022 Special Issue

MCAA Newsletter, Editorial Board Member

poojakhurana.official@gmail.com

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News from the MCAA

The MCAA Africa Chapter: Meet the new Chair

Precious Ekwere, a personal account

My name is Precious Ekwere, and I am a researcher. I completed my PhD at Sensor Laboratory University of Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa and some aspects at the Autonomous University of Madrid (AUM), Spain. I am a recipient of prestigious PhD scholarship awards, such as (i) the Junior Research Exchange Fellowship Award (2019) under the European Union H2020 RISE INFINITE-CELL-DVL-777968 project; and (ii) the National Research Foundation (NRF) – The World Academy of Sciences (TWAS)/ African Renaissance Doctoral Scholarship Award (2018 – 2021). My area of research interest and expertise is in the designing and development of electrochemical energy storage/generation cells based on high-efficiency graphene nanomaterials. While at Sensor Lab, I served as the health and safety officer in the energy laboratory, ensuring that laboratory rules are adhered to by providing training, supervision and guidance to lab users. I have been actively involved in lectureship, mentorship and human capacity development at both the undergraduate and the MSc levels. Another area of interest for me is bridging the gap between natural and social sciences through collaborations between policymakers, diplomats, and scientists/researchers.



The MCAA Africa chapter provides a platform for me to collaborate, develop my career and assist in building a bridge between natural and social science by encouraging networking and collaboration among researchers and with policymakers

Why did you decide to run as Chair of the Chapter?

After completing an exchange program in Europe through the European Union's H2020 RISE INFINITE-CELL-DVL-777968 project, I joined the MCAA in 2020. I was eager to join the organization because its vision and mission resonated with me. To begin, MCAA envisions a future in which knowledge will benefit society, which piqued my interest. As previously stated, I am interested in bridging the gap between natural and social sciences through collaborations among policymakers, diplomats, and scientists/researchers. This tenet was also very visible in the core of MCAA. Among the pillars of MCAA are networking, science policy, and science communication, all of which are directly tied to my interests. I had been a member for about a year and felt I could add more value if I took on the challenge of leading the chapter because its values are values I am passionate about. I ran for the position of African chapter chair in order to

contribute to the realization of this vision. I hoped that researchers, particularly those from the African continent, could connect, engage, and communicate regardless of discipline.

What will be the objectives of the Chapter under your tenure?

As the new MCAA Africa chapter Chair, my priorities will be inclined towards three major areas; 1) self- development of African researchers and the effective communication of science in Africa; 2) networking among members of the MCAA Africa Chapter; 3) global participation of the Africa Chapter group in The MCAA events.

I want to encourage and assist the Africa Chapter in promoting researchers' careers, as well as contribute to the creation of a forum for Alumni to exchange ideas and work on projects. I would like to help the MCAA Africa Chapter (a) establish itself as an important "voice of researchers" within the AU-EU Research Policy, and (b) guide alumni through funding opportunities in order to provide options for future career development and training. Because I am interested in researchers' well-being and mindfulness, I want to facilitate dialogue and training aimed at developing healthy and prosperous researchers. I also intend to use this opportunity to enhance public awareness of African research and to establish links within the global research and innovation community, with a particular emphasis on the MSCA experience of international and inter-sector mobility. I aspire to accomplish these goals through conducting meetings, debate forums, professional development programs, joint events with national/regional/global partners, and social events that promote networking and collaboration for societal benefit.

What is the role of the Chapter within the MCAA community?

We contribute to and support the advancement of knowledge in Africa by

organizing webinars that are tailored to an African audience. We represent the MCAA in global events happening in Africa, for example the AU-EU Innovation Agenda Stakeholders Event in Nairobi, Kenya in November 2022 and the World Science Forum that will take place in South Africa in December 2022. We also provide insight to the African perspective of advancing scientific research communication, research funds and science policy.

Do you already have plans for events and activities? Can you tell us some?

Yes, we do. For instance, the Africa Chapter hosted an event on November 11th, 2022 called "Funding Options for Early Career Researchers". The African Chapter, in collaboration with Euraxess Africa, held a webinar on the 17th of November, with the theme "Horizon Europe: Opportunities for Sub-Saharan African Countries".

How will you cooperate with other Chapters and Working Groups?

We intend to participate in activities planned by the various Chapters and working groups, as well as get them involved in our planned activities, by updating our web page with those planned activities, and using other means of advertising. We also plan to have a physical presence at the MSCA General Assembly & Annual Conference to meet other members and start effective collaborations.

What would you say to members who are considering joining the Chapter?

I encourage new members to join and we will be happy to welcome them into the group. I will also encourage them to be active in the group as there is a lot we can do together to push the objectives of the group forward.

Precious Ekwere 

MCAA Africa Chapter Chair

africa.chapter@mariecuriealumni.eu

News from the MCAA

The MCAA Benelux Chapter: Meet the New Chair

Farah Islam,
a personal account

My name is Farah, and I am from Montreal, Canada! I am currently working as an Early-Stage Researcher based at KU Leuven University in Belgium. As a PhD student specializing in Patient Related and Public Health Research, my research aims to evaluate new triage protocols for older adults seeking unplanned care in Belgium.

Meet Farah Islam, the new chair of the BeNeLux chapter! Find out more about her plans for the upcoming future of the chapter.

Why did you decide to run as Chair of the Chapter?

As an MSCA fellow, I was eager to become the Chair for the Benelux Chapter because I wanted to become more involved in the community as well as encourage other MSCA fellows to join and connect within our growing network.

What will be the objectives of the Chapter under your tenure?

My main aim as the new Chair is to improve networking and collaborations between MCAA Benelux members. Furthermore, I will also like to stimulate conversations among members of the community and help foster an open space for exchange and communication.

What is the role of the Chapter within the MCAA community?

Our key goals are to improve collaboration within the MCAA community including other chapters and relevant working groups. We also aim to increase our presence at local events as well as create meaningful connections with our partner organizations.

Do you already have plans for events and activities? Can you tell us some?

We are already in the process of organizing a few interesting events for the Benelux chapter, also with some of our fellow chapters and working groups. Please keep an eye out for more details about our upcoming events over the next weeks!w

What would you say to members who are considering joining the Chapter?

We are a group of fun and like-minded individuals who are always eager to meet new and engage with other MSCA fellows in the community. Come join us!

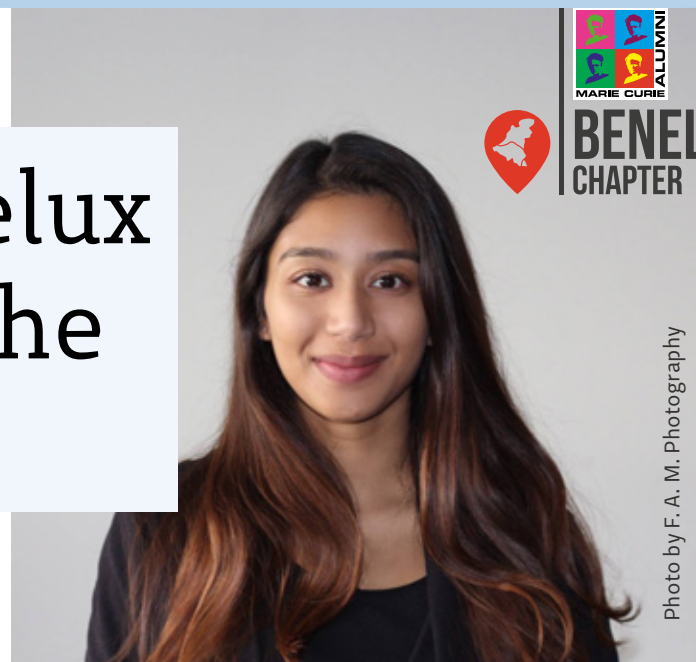
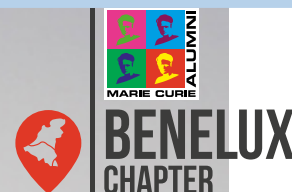


Photo by F. A. M. Photography

Farah Islam 

MCAA BeNeLux Chapter Chair
farah.islam@kuleuven.be

News from the MCAA



Photo by Rita Simonné Halász

The MCAA Hungary Chapter: Meet the New Chair

The 3Cs (Community, Connections, and Credibility) to focus on in the upcoming period of the Hungary Chapter.

Béla Fiser, a personal account

My name is Béla Fiser and I am a Research Fellow and sub-unit leader at the University of Miskolc (Hungary) and Associate Professor at the Ferenc Rakoczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education (Ukraine). From October 2022, I am a Visiting Professor at the University of Lodz (Poland). I am a member of the Marie Curie Alumni Association and chair of the Hungary Chapter. I served as a secretary of the Hungary Chapter before the pandemic and joined the community in 2016 after I received my PhD in chemistry from the University of the Basque Country (Spain) where I was a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Early Stage Researcher. I am a keen supporter of science communication and I believe that science is for everyone.

Why did you decide to run as Chair of the Chapter?

I served as the secretary of the Hungary Chapter before the pandemic and when I learned about the elections, I felt that I had to restart my activities. I would like to work together with my fellow MCAA members to build a stronger scientific community both in Hungary and abroad.

What will be the objectives of the Chapter under your tenure?

The pandemic has seriously affected the community and trust in science has also been severely weakened. Therefore, the main objectives of the Chapter under my tenure are to rebuild the community, strengthen connections, and reinforce trust in science.

What are your plans for the development of the Chapter?

I am planning to increase the offline and online presence of the Chapter as much as possible. Hopefully, we will be able to attend various meetings and attract new members. Furthermore, a Chapter advisory board will also be created which will include former chairs and respected scientists with experience in scientific organizations. We will rely on our Advisory Board's expertise in various aspects of the Chapter's development.

Do you already have plans for events and activities? Can you tell us some?

For the time being, I am assessing the needs of the members and trying to gather ideas from them for different events and activities. Several concrete suggestions have been made, such as soft skill courses and team building events. Stay tuned! However, I would be more than happy to hear your suggestions as well. Feel free to contact us at hungary.chapter@mariecuriealumni.eu.

What is the role of the Chapter within the MCAA community?

The main role of the Hungary Chapter is to connect MCAA members based in Hungary. Furthermore, the Chapter also serves as a point of contact with other parts of the MCAA community.

How will you cooperate with other Chapters and Working Groups?

Fortunately, there are several Working Groups and Chapters which include members with ties to Hungary. I am planning to approach them and strengthen the cooperation between their chapters and ours. Furthermore, I would like to invite all of you who are reading this interview to contact us if you see any possibility to cooperate with our Chapter.

What would you say to members who are considering joining the Chapter?

If you think community, connections, and trust in science is important, join the Chapter and let's work together as a team!

Béla Fiser 

MCAA Hungary Chapter Chair

hungary.chapter@mariecuriealumni.eu

News from the MCAA



The MCAA Sweden Chapter: Meet the New Chair



Zhihan Lyu, a personal account

I am a lecturer, an engineer and a researcher in virtual reality, digital twins, and metaverse with a major in Mathematics and Computer Applied Technology. My research application fields widely range from everyday life to traditional research fields. I did my PhD in Computer Applied Technology from Ocean University of China in Qingdao. I was fortunate to get a chance to work in various countries, including University in Umea (Sweden), Event Lab at University of Barcelona (Spain), Qingdao University in Qingdao (China), and the University College London (UK). Currently, I hold a senior lecturer/associate professor's position at the Uppsala University (Sweden).

Zhihan Lyu, Senior Lecturer of Uppsala University, is the new chair of Sweden Chapter. He tells us his plans about Sweden Chapter.

Why did you decide to run as Chair of the Chapter?

I would like to activate the Sweden Chapter since it's inactive because of COVID-19 and also know more Marie Curie Alumni and fellows in Sweden and other countries which may extend my collaboration. The reactive Sweden Chapter can also bring opportunities to the members for getting to know each other. In addition, researchers usually focus on their research while MCAA can broaden their vision.

What will be the objectives of the Chapter under your tenure?

To make the members of the chapter know each other better. Ideally, members can have some collaborations to some extent in different fields such as education, science, and business.

What are your plans for the development of the Chapter?

I will organize a few activities every semester, so that the members can have a chance to meet and discuss.

Do you already have plans for events and activities? Can you tell us some?

Yes, first of all, the face to face interaction is important for members to know each other, secondly, I plan to have several online meetings as I consider them useful for members to get more familiar with each other.

What is the role of the Chapter within the MCAA community?


To be a communicator between the members of the chapter and the board, permitting the members to be united around the board. To achieve these, the Chapter should frequently communicate with members and board, by organizing activities for members and applying activities from board.

How will you cooperate with other Chapters and Working Groups?

I will try to co-organize some activities with other chapters and WGs.

What would you say to members who are considering joining the Chapter?

We invite you to join MCAA and, if you're based in Sweden, to join the [Sweden Chapter](#). Currently there are 20533 registered MCAA users, from 151 nationalities and counting. The Sweden Chapter has 80 members and is calling for new ones. You are welcome to join us either if you are an Alumni, a Fellow, or a Supervisor.

Zhihan Lyu 

MCAA Sweden Chapter Chair

sweden.chapter@mariecuriealumni.eu

News from the MCAA

Photo by <https://www.foto-studio-hirsch.de/>

Ehsanul Alam, a personal account

I am Ehsanul Alam and I come from Bangladesh. Since 2014 I have been residing in Germany. After I finished my Master in Engineering Rheology, which was supported by the Erasmus Mundus Scholarship, I did my doctoral studies through the Marie Curie fellowship. After my PhD I have made a transition to industry. I am currently working for Wella Germany GmbH. I have been recently elected as the chair of the MCAA Germany Chapter. My mandate started on 1st September and I can already feel a sense of responsibility in my new position..

The MCAA Germany Chapter: Meet the New Chair

Why did you decide to run as Chair of the Chapter?

I have been involved in the MCAA's activities since 2015 when I was an ITN fellow ([CoWet/607861](#), [CORDIS](#)). Together with some enthusiastic researchers, I felt the need for an MCAA Chapter in Germany to cater to the fellows who were working in Germany. We established the chapter in June 2015 and soon the members started to join in. During our first Chapter event we discussed topics such as the taxation system in Germany, career paths outside academia, entrepreneurship, and writing articles. Many of those topics are still relevant and regularly discussed on many MCAA venues. The Germany Chapter has witnessed many chairs leaders who took the activities of the Chapter to a new level. It is my belief that to work on common good one must attain a position of leadership. I have been preparing myself for the role of a Chair and I felt ready to take up the challenge.

What will be the objectives of the Chapter under your tenure?

Under my tenure, my objective will be to institute a mechanism by which many

members will be ready to run for leadership positions of the Germany Chapter as well as of the MCAA. The process to achieve this is to increase engagement among members via networking events, discussion platforms and local meet-ups.

What is the role of the Chapter within the MCAA community?

My vision is to make the chapter play a pivotal role within the MCAA by mobilizing talent within the chapter by ensuring participation in the discussion for science diplomacy and policy. The chapter will discuss topics and issues within its capacities and give regular feedback to the board and also disseminate news and information within the chapter that come from the board.

Do you already have plans for events and activities? Can you tell us some?

As a start, together with the Middle-East Chapter, we are organizing a seminar on 'Research culture and Career perspective,' where we will talk about researchers' mental health, career options for researchers, and brain drain. Since it will be a hybrid event, the participants will have the possibility of meeting fellow researchers during the networking session. The event will take place in October. In November, the Chapter will organize the first of its biannual meetings, where, the Chapter members will be made aware of the plans and the Chapter board will get feedback from the members to

address topics and issues for future events. In December, there will be a local meetup to encourage networking and collaboration in different regions of Germany. During the first half of the next year (2023), the Chapter will organize a career event in Munich and the second chapter meeting.

How will you cooperate with other Chapters and Working Groups?

Keeping to its tradition of collaborating with other MCAA Chapters and Working Groups, the present board is collaborating with the Bridging Science and Business Working Group and Policy Working Group to organize some webinars. The Germany Chapter will also reach out to external organizations such as Euraxess Germany and the Humboldt Foundation network to organize joint events.

What would you say to members who are considering joining the Chapter?

The next two years will be crucial to set the path towards which the Germany Chapter will be led in future. None of this will be possible without active participation from the members. The new board is ready with its plan and what it needs from the members is action.

Ehsanul Alam 

MCAA Germany Chapter Chair

germany.chapter@mariecuriealumni.eu

News from the MCAA



The MCAA Turkey Chapter: Meet the new Chair

Ebru Aydın Gol,
a personal account

I am a computer scientist working as a faculty member at the Middle East Technical University (METU). I focus on design and verification of cyber-physical systems using formal methods. I work both on developing new theories within the formal methods field, and on applying the formal methodology in other domains such as disaster management, use of electrical vehicles for smart grid and controlling signalized intersections. I received a BS degree from METU, Ankara, a MSc degree from Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, Switzerland and PhD degree from Boston University, USA. After I finished my PhD, I moved back to Turkey and had my Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action (MSCA) Individual Fellowship (ID: 798482) via the reintegration panel. My project was on automating the design of timed automata, which is used in modelling real-time critical systems.



Photo by Ebru Aydın Gol

The new chair of the Turkey chapter talks about her plans to enhance local networks via organizations and grow our chapter.

Why did you decide to run as Chair of the Chapter?

The MCAA organization and our chapter board have been doing a fabulous job on bringing our community together and supporting the career development of the members. As a member of this great community, I wanted to be involved in the organization's efforts as well.

What will be the objectives of the Chapter under your tenure?

My main objective is to connect more members via our chapter. Reaching more MSCA fellows who live in Turkey or have the

fellowship in Turkey and informing them about the MSCA activities (both the chapter and the global network) will help to gain more active chapter members.

What are your plans for the development of the Chapter?

Even as a young chapter, we have members from different fields. It would be great to create events for our members to share their expertise effortlessly. For this, I believe local networking is quite important. It will also allow us to connect to more members and to grow our chapter. In the short history of our chapter, all our previous chairs were from Istanbul. I'm the first chair from Ankara. I would therefore like to use this opportunity to organize local events in Ankara.

Do you already have plans for events and activities? Can you tell us some?

First, I would like to organize a local event to meet other chapter members in person. The event announcements would hopefully lead to new members as well. In addition, I would like to organize an information session to bridge science and business. Scientific research can have a greater impact on society through academic-industry partnerships. MCAA is already working along these lines and there are strong working groups with this vision. It would be great to collaborate with them to organize an event to inform the members


about these topics and to help those who want to take a step in this direction.

How will you cooperate with other Chapters and Working Groups?

I see two directions of cooperation. The first one is sharing the events organized by other MCAA Chapters and Working Groups within our Chapter. The second one is actively collaborating with the Working groups for the events that we plan to organize. We will get in touch with the related Working Groups once we start working on a focused event.

What would you say to members who are considering joining the Chapter?

There is no need to think twice! MCAA is a strong global association that takes an active role in enhancing the knowledge flow across different disciplines and countries. There are great opportunities for personal development and networking.

Ebru Aydin Gol 

MCAA Turkey Chapter Chair

turkey.chapter@mariecuriealumni.eu

News from the MCAA

A new era for the MCAA Ireland Chapter

Ireland has a great science and innovation landscape. I believe it is an excellent country to learn and develop your skills as a Marie Skłodowska-Curie researcher. My vision for the Ireland Chapter is to create a useful space where members develop their full potential and support each other.

Why did you decide to run as Chair of the Chapter?

I started my scientific career when I began pursuing my PhD as part of an MSCA ITN project CLaSSiC (cordis.europa). Since then, the MCAA has always been supporting my career development.

At first, it gave me the opportunity to participate in a broad range of high-quality training, such as data analysis or science communication. I also found information sessions on scientific career paths extremely useful. These sessions gave me a broad perspective on career options outside academia. In 2020, I secured a fellowship to work in a research funding agency in Ireland. At the same time, I got involved in MCAA working groups, specifically the Research Funding Working Group and the Science Diplomacy taskforce of the Policy



Photo by Irene Castellano Pellicena

Working Group. Navigating a career change was challenging. During this time the MCAA believed in me. It supported me to organise and moderate sessions at the MCAA Annual Conferences. This really helped to build my confidence again.

Academic life is hard. Early career researchers can feel very lonely, and a lot of insecurities may arise along the way. I decided to run as Chair of the Ireland Chapter to create a supportive environment for researchers at a local scale in Ireland. I hope the MCAA could help you in a similar way it helped me.

What will be the objectives of the Chapter under your tenure?

- The main objectives under my tenure are:
- Organising social events and creating an MCAA community in Ireland.
- Organising networking events.
- Supporting MCAA members in their career development.
- Creating awareness of the different scientific career pathways that exist in Ireland beyond academia and providing examples.
- Increasing the profile of the MCAA in Ireland.

What are your plans for the development of the Chapter? Do you already have plans for events and activities? Can you tell us some?

I want to run the Ireland Chapter by listening to its members, understanding their needs, and offering solutions. With this spirit, during the first months of my tenure, I created questionnaires and polls for members to express their opinion and preferences on different topics.

Based on members' feedback, my priority is to organise social events. These events will play a key part in creating an MCAA community in Ireland.

Another priority is to support the career development of Chapter members. While there are some issues shared between MCAA members only, career development and sustainability of research career issues are shared with all early career researchers in Ireland. Therefore, creating collaborations will be important for the Ireland Chapter. In this context, I am planning some career development events in collaboration with local universities. I am also in contact with the MSCA National Contact Point in Ireland to identify areas of shared interest.

How will you cooperate with other Chapters and Working Groups?

I believe that MCAA Working Groups are a great opportunity to learn more about a specific topic. Participation in Working Groups gives a global view beyond what is the norm in your own country. This diversity creates the perfect environment for new solutions or ideas to flourish. I am already part of the Research Funding Working Group and the Science Diplomacy taskforce. I encourage

members of the Ireland Chapter to join the MCAA Working Groups that most resonate with them, and I will be happy to make links. It would be ideal to have an Ireland based MCAA member represented in many of the Working Groups.

What would you say to members who are considering joining the Chapter?

I encourage all Marie Skłodowska-Curie researchers in Ireland to [join](#) the MCAA. They can then join the Ireland Chapter through the MCAA website. They can also follow our [Twitter account](#) to stay updated. I share all information with members through both channels.

MCAA members from any Chapter or Working Group, including the Ireland Chapter, can also contact me directly. I am always happy to listen to new ideas and collaborate with new people.

Irene Castellano Pellicena 

MCAA Ireland Chapter Chair

ireland.chapter@mariecuriealumni.eu

Twitter: @MCAA_Ireland

Special Issue Mental Health in Academia

The Problems of a Postdoc

Do you ever feel like you're surviving instead of thriving in your research career? The underlying cause may be the cultural issues in our research environment. This article explores how productivity pressures, power dynamics and toxic work environments can be detrimental to our mental health, and what collective action can be taken to address that.

PhD to Postdoc

While an exciting opportunity to master skills and gain expertise, undertaking a PhD is essentially a litmus test for survival. If you can endure the PhD marathon and make it across the finish line, then you are probably suited to academic life. Following my PhD, I pursued a career in research, mainly because I am a curious person and interested in gaining a better understanding of how and why things work (or don't work). For me, it was a natural progression to take the skills and experiences acquired during my PhD and use them to carve out my own research questions. Currently, in my third year as a Postdoctoral Researcher and in the first of my two-year Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action (MSCA) fellowship (grant agreement no:101027911), I have learned that there are certain expectations that come with a postdoctoral role.



Photo by Patrick Browne of Brownes Photography

Conventionally, we are expected to be good scientists and undertake various tasks and projects. Depending on the research setting, postdoctoral responsibilities may include supervising students; writing/reviewing funding applications; building relationships with other academic or industry partners, and joining committees. This, of course, is all in addition to core tasks like keeping abreast of the literature, writing/reviewing manuscripts, and building research networks. Like a black hole in space, the to-do list of a postdoc seems to be forever expanding. While stress-inducing, we assume these extra roles because we recognize that responsibilities naturally increase as we climb the research ladder. When I undertook my postdoctoral role, I knew I would face new challenges and responsibilities. Unfortunately, I now see some assignments as stress-inducing, and

have ended up trying to survive instead of working to thrive in my chosen profession.

Productivity pressure

Researchers are familiar with the “publish or perish” aphorism. To prove competency and to have a successful academic career, as students we quickly learn the importance of building academic credit – and that publications are the dominant currency. Recognizing the limitations of a single scientific reporting metric, emphasis is now being directed toward acknowledging a broader range of achievements as valid research outputs. A growing number of research institutes are adopting the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), which recognizes contributions to general knowledge, society, the wider research community, and the development of individuals. For me, this approach has been a double-edged sword. While initiatives like DORA offer more flexibility to researchers and encourage scientists to be more creative, I believe they can exacerbate the productivity pressure that has become part of our research culture (Haseltalab, 2019). The pressure to undertake every new opportunity presented to us and meet these multiple metrics is enormous. Ironically, nobody really knows how much work is enough, and so we produce as much content as we can. We believe that a heavy workload is a norm. Along with the ubiquitous job insecurity in our profession, we feel pressured to ensure that we remain competitive with other postdocs while seeking coveted research funding opportunities and contracts. As a result, we succumb to productivity pressure. We end up working more than our contracted hours, working late into the evenings or at the weekends. We also overextend ourselves to counteract the imposter phenomenon, and to avoid feelings of guilt and insecurity

associated with the thought of not meeting those standards and not keeping up with this unrealistic pace.

Power dynamics

A power dynamic exists naturally within the hierarchical structure of the research setting, which at times, can work quite well. For example, as PhD students, we benefit hugely from our superiors – trusting their expertise and guidance as we embark on our own research journey. Although we contribute and take charge of the course of our PhD, ultimately, we rely on those in higher positions to show us the way. On the other hand, power dynamics can often exacerbate cultural issues prevalent in the research environment that are harmful to our mental health. These include research misconduct or questionable research practices. Evidence from existing literature and surveys of researchers suggested that researchers in lower academic positions are less likely (than researchers in senior positions) to report alleged misconduct (Horbach et al. 2020). A prominent underlying reason for not voicing concerns was a fear of retaliation or negative consequences e.g., losing future opportunities from those in higher positions. Others cited a belief that certain individuals were being protected due to their social position, and that reporting any concern would not result in anything productive. Interestingly, power dynamics are also intertwined with other issues such as a toxic work environment. Passive-aggressive communication, cliques and gossipy behavior, an expectation to be on-call all the time, harassment or bullying behaviour, and feelings of unease or fear at the thought of going into your office – these are all common signs of a toxic workplace (Woolston, 2020). When the dynamics between the chain of command or the power balance between peers is disrupted due to such behaviours, an environment of fear and mistrust breeds. People no longer

feel safe and happy in their workplace, and their mental health suffers.

Maybe I need to give the PhD-postdoc transition period a little longer? Maybe I need to accept that productivity pressure, power imbalance and toxicity are just the problems of a postdoc. Or maybe we need to take collective responsibility. If 51% (n>7,600) of respondents from a recent Nature Postdoctoral Survey stated that “they had considered leaving science because of mental health concerns related to their work” (Woolston, 2020), then we need to realize that we have a problem and that our culture and practices need to change.

A way forward


For now, I continue to navigate the postdoctoral tightrope. Along the way, I have taken some steps to mind my mental health. These include:

- Building a supportive network. Sometimes a chat over coffee with a family member or friend is all you need to voice your worries. Whenever I feel like I need a little more guidance, I turn to professional counselling services and speak with mentors who work outside my primary research area.
- Setting time aside (alone or with others) to do something enjoyable that is not related to work. Whether it's swimming, hiking, board games, or dancing, finding something that you enjoy can help give

you a new perspective and space from your professional roles.

- Recognizing the warning signs of a toxic work environment, I have sifted the positive from the counter-productive, directing my time and energy to the people I want to work with and setting boundaries with the people I see as conducive to that.
- Wanting to be part of the solution to mental health issues in academia, I recently joined the Researcher Mental Health Observatory (ReMO) European COST action. At a systemic, institutional and individual level, ReMO aims to develop policies to monitor, improve and maintain well-being in research environments.

While there are steps we can take as individuals to mind our mental health, accountability and action at a top-down level is essential. As scientists and future leaders, we need to hold current leaders accountable and voice our concerns about the cultural issues at play. We also need to support people raising awareness about mental health issues in academia. Progress is challenging and will take time.

Rebecca Power 

MSCA Fellow,
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign,
and Postdoctoral researcher,
South East Technological University
rebecca.power@setu.ie

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Special Issue Mental Health in Academia

Photo by Cali McNicol



Simone Lackner, a personal account

Simone Lackner is a multidisciplinary scientist with a degree in Molecular Biology, a Ph.D. in Systems Neuroscience and postdoctoral training in Complexity and Computational Social Science. As a ReMO Ambassador and the founder & team lead of Soapbox Science Lisbon, Simone is an empathic advocate for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Wellbeing in academia and beyond. With her new project [The Empathic Scientist](#), she wants to create a collective, a safe space for discourse and develop interventions that improve well-being in academic research culture with impact on organizational policies.

When the Academic Dream turns into a Nightmare

'Another failed experiment! My paper was not accepted! My grant got rejected! I worked all weekend!'

When frustrations accumulate, stress response cycles (Ron & Reznick, 2015) are not completed, balanced nutrition is neglected and the need for caffeine, nicotine and alcohol consumption increases, perfect conditions are created for anxiety and insomnia that impact cognitive and physical capabilities. Add to this toxic mix financial instability, uncertainty of career progression, difficult relationships with teammates or supervisors, and a lack of support system, and you have all the ingredients for a mental health crisis. The Academic Dream turns into a Nightmare.

The Academic Dream

The Academic Dream can be understood as the privilege of securing existential needs while focusing on lifelong learning to discover the unknown and build human capital for society. This dream attracts ambitious, self-disciplined and out-of-the-box thinkers that, with burning curiosity and inexhaustible commitment, have a strong

personal desire to get to the bottom of important questions. Researchers quench their thirst for knowledge while serving humanity with solutions to unsolved societal problems. These challenges, especially within cutting-edge science and high-risk/high-gain projects, can be extremely inspiring, self-motivating and rewarding to work obsessively long hours, weekends and even holidays with the downside that work-life balance and well-being is not always cared for. Competing for a small percentage of public funds, the Academic Dream promises life-long intellectual freedom for individuals that persevere.

More individuals than ever are starting out to pursue a Ph.D., but less than 4% attain permanent academic positions and even fewer (< 0.5%) are privileged to win full professorship (The Royal Society, 2010). Despite this precarity of job opportunities within the ivory tower, 56% of graduate students still believe in the Academic Dream (Woolston, 2019). Unsurprisingly, reported symptoms of anxiety, depression, imposter syndrome, burn-out and suicidal ideation are on the rise (Satinsky et al., 2021).

Evans et al (2018) reported that graduate students (39%) worldwide are **more than six times** as likely to experience anxiety and depression as compared to the general population (Evans et al., 2018). There is increasing evidence through numerous social surveys at different institutions around the globe that there is a mental health crisis in academia.

A mental health crisis in academia?

It's possible that people prone to anxiety and depression are just six times more likely than others to pursue PhDs. But that seems unlikely, especially when we have a closer look at the available data highlighting the causes of the mental health crisis in academia.

Since 2011, the Journal Nature has been running a survey across 7 continents and in 6 different languages on early career researchers, identifying predictors for well-being and mental health issues (Woolston et al, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2021; Russo, 2011, 2013):

- Bullying, Sexual Harrassment, Discrimination, all forms of [Microagression](#)
- Supervision
- Inclusion of Diversity
- Equity
- Social support system; especially for international students
- Competitive research landscape - "publish or perish" culture
- Precarity of contracts - financial instability and uncertainty
- High competition for subsequent academic jobs

Not surprisingly, historically marginalized groups - the minorities of academia - such as women, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, students from low-income economies, first-generation academics and members of the LGBTQ+ community, seem to be affected the most (Satinsky et al. 2021).

The Nightmare

On average, according to [Irrsinnig Menschlich](#), **it takes 8 years to seek help**. Self-degrading neural patterns manifest in the brain during this period, jeopardizing career advancement due to negative thinking loops, toxic behavior, imposter syndrome, burnout, and in the worst case scenario, suicide. As a consequence, people suffering from the impact of mental health issues fostered by our research culture are more prone to leave academia.

How to combat the mental health crisis in academia?

Researchers must become increasingly aware of what they can do to build resilience, keep

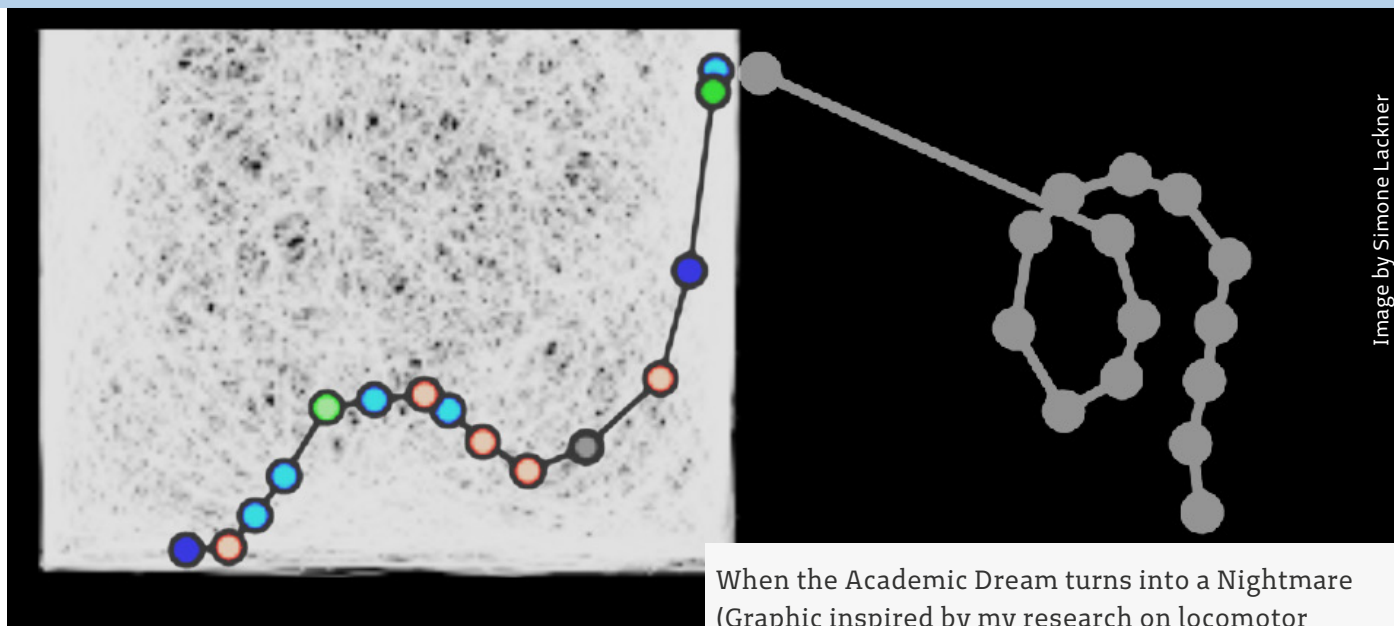


Image by Simone Lackner

When the Academic Dream turns into a Nightmare
(Graphic inspired by my research on locomotor
behavior of larval zebrafish in response to changes in
illumination)

their life balanced and sustain their well-being. However, there is only so much an individual can do for their own well-being. It is not only the researchers, but also faculty and stakeholders who lack awareness of how their own behavior, attitude and leadership style feeds into a dysfunctional and toxic research environment that impacts researchers' mental health and consequently their career progression.

Without targeted interventions to change and improve cultural structures and organizational policies of academia, the concept of the "leaky pipeline" will be sustained. Ultimately, this will lead to the loss of highly-trained talent and culturally diverse thinkers essential for identifying and addressing global scientific challenges (Mori, 2022).

Academic mental health should not only matter as a public health concern but also for research policy and society as a whole.

Some advances have been made, and most institutions have already reacted by offering access to coaches and psychologists to address individual issues of mental health. But that is not enough! This bottom-up approach is treating anxiety and depression induced by research culture as an individual health issue rather than a systemic health issue. It's time to take a top-down approach

and ask the uncomfortable question of how our academic system and culture contribute to these issues.

"When one person has asthma, that person should see a doctor. But when 40% of people have asthma, and 80% of people have breathing problems, something is wrong with the air." Barbara W. Sarnecka in "The Writing Workshop: Write More, Write Better, Be Happier in Academia."

Academia urgently needs to take responsibility and invest in 1) institution-wide interventions that systematically monitor and promote well-being and mental health, 2) independent and neutral conflict management officers that mediate interpersonal relationship problems, bullying and sexual harassment and last but not least, 3) on-site career development officers, who not only support graduates but also faculty and research staff to grow "soft" skills for personal development and self-knowledge, that is essential for healthy team work, cultural-sensitive leadership, and individual career progression in academia and beyond.


The building blocks of a successful research institute are its scientists. In order to nurture well-trained and confident scientists who

can collaborate with respect, tolerance, trust, unity, inclusion and equity, and contribute their unique talents to tackle the world's biggest challenges; the career development of each member, as well as their well-being and mental health, must be cared for.

Call to Action

I am a voluntary [Ambassador](#) of the Researchers Mental Health Observatory ([ReMO](#)), which is a Horizon 2020 European-funded COST-Action programme, that brings together an international European community of early-career researchers, faculty, academic human resource managers, coaches, trainers and practitioners for higher education, as well as science policy stakeholders. It is a growing network of over 240 members that collaborate across different scientific disciplines to identify

which practices and actions are effective at creating research environments that foster well-being to prevent the development of mental health issues at the workplace. With our [Manifesto](#) we call on all stakeholders in the research ecosystem to develop policies to monitor, improve and maintain well-being and mental health in research environments. We have three different [Working Groups](#) that are based on a typology of levels that are identified in the literature where action can be taken: on systemic, institutional and individual level. [Join us!](#)

Simone Lackner 

COST Action - Researchers Mental Health Observatory,
Soapbox Science Lisbon, Independent Scholar
lacknersimone@gmail.com
Twitter @MagSimal

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Special Issue Mental Health in Academia

Understanding and Overcoming the Mental Health Crisis in Academia



Pavanee Annasawmy,
a personal account

From humble beginnings in Mauritius Island as a first-generation student, to a COFUND BIENVENUE MSCA postdoctoral fellow, Pavanee Annasawmy has been navigating academia in the United States and Europe for the past 10 years. She is a biological oceanographer studying the physical mechanisms influencing biological processes in deep-sea ecosystems using a wide range of methods and techniques. Her COFUND BIENVENUE postdoctoral project, FINZWIO, looks at the fine-scale distribution of micronekton and will help in our understanding of why sub-mesoscale structures are attractive sites for lower trophic level organisms and subsequently for higher trophic level predators which support local fisheries.

While the challenges faced by academics are not new, years of career stress, competitive culture, egocentric mentalities and lack of kindness among peers have contributed to the adverse mental health of academics. To reverse the trend of the 'Great Resignation' in academia, strategies and policies must be implemented to improve the well-being of academics and set an example for society.

History of mental health within academia

Concerns about mental health within academia have been growing in recent years. A significant number of students and researchers meet the threshold for depression and are at a high risk of developing psychiatric disorders and suicidal thoughts than in other highly-educated groups (The Graduate Assembly, 2004). Transgender and/or genderquestioning people are also likely to experience anxiety and depression (Evans et al., 2018). Most students facing mental health issues struggle on their own without receiving appropriate care and treatment. Within five years, the higher education workforce

in Australia, North America and the United Kingdom is predicted to be reduced by half or two-thirds due to retirement, burnout, or job dissatisfaction (Heffernan and Heffernan, 2018).

Importance of addressing mental health

Academics may experience feelings of frustration, anger, exhaustion, psychological and emotional withdrawal and suicidal ideation, leading to their early departure from academia and/or hospitalization and death. We need to pause and reflect on why many academics face mental health distress and develop concrete solutions and actions to help them. Society would feel the adverse effects if highly trained and talented individuals within academia continue to fall into depression or burnout.

Factors within academia that negatively impact mental health

Several academic career stages or experiences such as thesis defense, high competitiveness of research positions, repetitive job search after temporary contracts, applying for tenure-track positions and funding, and many more, can be extremely stressful and take a toll on a person. Students who experience financial hardships and food insecurity are also more likely to experience anxiety, sleep deprivation and depression. Increasingly, academics have reported that they have experienced a lack of kindness, understanding and compassion, even bullying, harassment and discrimination in academic settings (Loissel, 2020). University students from ethnic minorities have reported discriminatory encounters.

It is unusual for supervisors to have professional experience in managing trainees with mental health struggles. As a result, mental health struggles often stay unnoticed for an extended period of time, without

getting appropriate peer support. In a highly competitive, and at times toxic, academic environment, early career researchers (ECRs) often feel that they are on a running track with peers to secure grants and/or tenure. As a result, some ECRs compromise their physical and mental well-being and work-life balance in favor of their career. Some feel trapped, unsupported, and replaceable in the current academic system.

Despite major progress in response to the gender balance requirement of EU funding schemes, many areas of research are still dominated by men, and there is significant imbalance in senior academic positions. The gender gap in academia grows progressively from the start of university years to the postdoctoral career stage and principal investigator positions. Working hours can be long and irregular. Without strong institutional support or supportive families, women may struggle to keep up with the increasingly important role of international mobility in scientific careers and, for those who want it, the opportunity and time to start their own families. One is expected to publish or perish and that leaves little room for a healthy work-life balance. Because postdocs often have to move for a new job, they can leave their emotional support behind, leaving their mental health increasingly vulnerable.

While many senior academic members have a stable job and financial security, even they struggle with the added responsibilities of departmental leadership, administrative work, mentoring, teaching, grant acquisitions as well as maintaining their own research agendas. With salary compression and reduced funding, many academics further feel overworked and under-compensated.

Potential solutions to improve mental health within academia


It is important to consider how scientists in different career stages can be supported from

an institutional perspective. Those taking on new supervisory or teaching responsibilities should be given the opportunity and time to undergo training aimed at recognizing and supporting students and ECRs with mental health issues. During university orientation week, the range of mental health support available, from individual and group therapies, hotlines, telehealth, self-paced mobile and desktop applications and online resources, should be brought to the attention of students, and early career and senior university recruits. Formal or informal support groups (such as peer meetings, mental health ambassador programs and support networks; Loissel, 2019) and wellness programs such as mid-day yoga sessions, and other stress-reducing activities can be generalized across institutions. While some universities in the USA and in Europe have opened food pantries to support students facing food insecurity, this has not been generalized across all institutions. Increasing the pay scale in accordance with the rising cost of living would alleviate some of the mental health burden on academics. Greater diversification within mental healthcare provision could ease the feelings of ethnic minorities students of being marginalized and misunderstood by healthcare professionals within universities. Often, abusive behavior by academic members is not condemned by academic institutions, thus favoring a culture of inappropriate behavior within the system. Faculty and administrators must punish

abuse, and set efficient and mindful work ethic and self-care standards (e.g., setting boundaries by allowing more work-free times) in order to move from toxic environments to a healthier work and education environment. Institutions and funding agencies such as COFUND programmes should prioritize the mental health of their recruits and allow telework for those who cannot relocate for personal reasons. This has the added advantage of opening the job application to a wider global cohort.

Conclusions

The current academic culture can instigate and exacerbate mental health struggles in students, ECRs and staff at varying career stages. While academia is attempting to shift from the mindset that mental struggles are an individual's concern, much work remains to be done to understand the breadth of mental health issues and to develop concrete actions to create safe and healthy environments.

Pavane Annasawmy 

Postdoctoral Research Associate
Université de Bretagne-Occidentale

pannasawmy@yahoo.com

Twitter: @Angelee_Pavane

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Special Issue Mental Health in Academia

The mental health pandemic in academia that PhD students should be aware of

Noelia Do Carmo proposes awareness as the first step to tackle common mental-health issues in academia. By doing so she invites us to question some usual behaviors in the research practice.

Noelia Do Carmo Blanco, a personal account

A therapist and neuroscientist, Noelia Do Carmo has devoted her research to diverse fields in cognitive and clinical neuroscience, by using behavioral and electrophysiological techniques. She is a former Fulbright scholar and a current Marie Skłodowska-Curie postdoctoral fellow.



Mental health issues in researchers are widespread and worrying. The CACTUS Mental Health Survey Report (Cereyo et al., 2020) revealed that over 50% of the 13, 000 responders have experienced depression or anxiety symptoms related to their careers, with 37% of researchers from different career stages having reported seeking help. This survey indicates academics work in a highly competitive environment, with a heavy workload and low stability. On top of that, it also shows that different forms of abuse of power, such as discrimination or bullying are not uncommon (van Scherpenberg et al., 2021). Such working conditions can induce stress, burnout and other mental and physical health issues. Accordingly, the mental health problems in academia surpass those in the general population (Urbina Garcia, 2020; Levecque et al., 2017), which has a huge impact on science. For instance, it explains, in part, why some labs are struggling to find qualified postdocs (Woolston, 2022).

Given the high prevalence of mental health issues and work dissatisfaction, prevention seems the most viable strategy for tackling the situation and promoting the needed

change in the current state of affairs. Increasing awareness of the potential stressors that affect a scholar's mental health could be the first step in prevention. Training in coping skills like resilience and independent mentoring support should also be provided.

Researchers suffer from stress at all stages of their careers. Postdoctoral fellows and faculty are not immune to high pressure to publish and peer-comparison among many other stressors. The aforementioned survey gives a broad perspective of the situation. In the second part of this article, I focus on PhD students as one of the most vulnerable groups in the academic ladder. The aim is two-fold:

- prevention of mental health issues in PhD students by increasing awareness
- helping faculty to reflect on their own behaviour and practices

What I wish I knew when I started my PhD

I am sure you have started your PhD with great enthusiasm. Maybe you have the goal

of contributing to the world, or maybe you are passionate about learning new things. Your PhD should be a fulfilling experience. Yet, if you start feeling anxious, depressed or stressed by your PhD, there are some questions you should ask yourself. Here are a few of them:

How does your advisor treat you? Are they benevolent or authoritative? Do they care about your interests and career goals? Do they make time for you? Do you want to keep a distance from your advisor, or do you feel neglected? Do you feel overwhelmed frequently? Have you been told that if you do not do what your PI wants, you will not get a good recommendation letter? Do you feel pressure to publish at any cost? Are you often expected to work longer hours than stipulated in your contract? Do you get credit for your job when things flourish? Are you reminded that it is 'your' PhD when things are difficult? Do you feel you know very little and maybe you are not good enough for the programme? Do you feel at the mercy of your advisor? Do you feel discriminated against because of your ethnic minority or gender?



Illustration by Clay Banks on Unsplash

If some of these points resonate with you, maybe you are not in the nurturing environment that one would need to thrive in academia. Be kind to yourself. Burnout mostly happens when someone cares about their job. Try to get some perspective. This might be complicated, but without distancing from the cause of stress, one cannot think clearly or take any action. Remember that your symptoms might represent some dysfunction in your working environment. You should not have to cope alone. Seek support from those around you and from professionals. You might fear social stigma, but when you reach out to your peers, you will find out that your experiences are not isolated. Some people consider that stress, anxiety and overwork are normal in research. This should not be the case.

Do not listen to self-limiting thoughts. Remember that high levels of stress lead to low self-efficacy. One does not need to be the most prolific scholar to thrive in science. Take things slowly when you need to. Think of what makes a PhD worthwhile for you, and enjoy the journey without focusing on the results. Be intentional and present, while allowing yourself to regularly disconnect from the programme. This can be attained by participating in community activities in a compassionate and safe environment.

Re-assessing the high pressure, publication-focused and outcome-driven research work-culture would definitely benefit science. As such, quality should be encouraged over quantity. This would not only help to address the current replication crisis in many fields, but would also impact job satisfaction.

Fortunately, some staff are supportive and allow autonomy to junior fellows, which fosters their psychological well-being. Similarly, certain universities have offices dedicated to institutional equity as part of the effort to tackle discrimination and harassment. More initiatives should promote the creation of psychological support spaces where one can speak freely, without the fear of retaliation or negative impact on their career.

N.B. A stressor can be defined as a factor perceived as threatening by a subject.

Burnout can be defined as a state of physical and/or mental exhaustion due to continuous stress.

Noelia Do Carmo Blanco

Postdoctoral fellow, Hospital Vithas, Valencia, Spain
noelia.docarmoblanco@fulbrightmail.org

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Special Issue Mental Health in Academia

Breaking the silence from the top down

Challenging those at top leadership positions to open up about their failures, so as to promote psychologically safe learning and working environments at universities and beyond.

What is “FAIL! - Inspiring Resilience”

Talking about one's own failures is hardly an experience anyone would look forward to. And even less appealing would be the prospect of doing so in front of a room full of strangers, with a camera menacingly pointing at you, ready to deliver your speech to the eternal memory of the internet. Yet, this is precisely what happens at “FAIL! – Inspiring Resilience” events.

The word “failure” comes with a great weight attached to it, a sense of shame and finality, and, often, a direct connection to our sense of self-worth. Reframing our personal and collective attitude towards failure, letting go of these connotations, and coming to regard it as a teachable moment instead has the power to greatly increase our resilience towards setbacks and make individuals more daring in their pursuits.

FAIL! is an international community created by students and postdocs who share the desire to counter the prevailing mentality that “failure is not an option” and hopes to

Eleonora Ricci, a personal account

I graduated in chemical engineering from the University of Bologna, Italy, and obtained a PhD from the same university in 2020. In 2021 I moved to Athens, Greece, where I am working as an MSCA-IF postdoctoral fellow at the National Centre for Scientific Research “Demokritos”, applying machine learning algorithms in molecular simulations of carbon capture materials. When I am not fighting one-sided arguments with my codes, I like to put on my hiking shoes and go exploring the great outdoors.



provide support and inspiration to others during adverse times. FAIL! organizes events, in-person and online, during which not only renowned academics, but also entrepreneurs, athletes and journalists share stories of challenging times from their personal and professional experiences. These events are recorded and typically feature 4 or 5 speakers, each one presenting their story in 15-20 minutes “reverse TED talks”, followed by a moderated Q/A session, where the audience is invited to participate with their thoughts and questions for the speakers.

The goal is to encourage more open and honest communication across the academic hierarchy and cultivate a community accepting of personal struggles, vulnerabilities, setbacks and their psychological impact. This set-up is designed to help combat imposter syndrome and alleviate the feeling of isolation that can be often experienced during difficult times. At a broader level, FAIL! hopes that the seeds of these values, planted during the university years, will blossom in a variety of professional environments, promoting a culture of experimentation, creativity and growth.

A grassroots beginning

The project started in 2018 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), an epitome of a hypercompetitive environment, where a higher-than-average suicide rate [was sadly registered](#) for several years in a row¹. These tragic events have prompted the birth of several initiatives to raise mental health awareness and combat the stigma attached to it. FAIL! is among those and since then, it has become a stable presence in the MIT events calendar, with a foray into an online format during the pandemic. The effort was spearheaded by members of the then-newly founded Visiting Students Association (VISTA), which was a key element in the evolution of the project. A large number of people initially involved with FAIL! were hosted at MIT for a short

period and soon returned to their institutions. Afterwards, while continuing to provide support for further initiatives at MIT, they worked towards the expansion of the project to other venues, recruiting friends and colleagues into the community.

In the 5 years that the project has been running, FAIL! events have been organized at MIT, at Technical Universities in Mexico, India and Portugal. These have also been hosted outside of academia, at a series of entrepreneurial conventions in Italy and at the European Union Blue Book Trainees Commission. This was possible thanks to collaborations with various local organizations invested in mental health awareness. The talks, given in three different continents and in five different languages, are featured in the [FAIL! Youtube channel](#), which has garnered 1200 subscribers and more than 80,000 views to date.

Impact: off-stage, on-stage, and behind the scenes

The presence of high calibre speakers has always attracted good participation, with hundreds of attendees at every event. The atmosphere is engaging, and the discussion is animated by thought-provoking questions. From the audience feedback, it is clear that there is a widespread need to have these conversations, and the attendees believe that



Photo by John Werner

taking part in this initiative has had a positive impact on their perspective of failure and success.

Some of the speakers have reported that preparing for their talk and engaging with the community, during and after the events, has heightened their sensitivity towards the mental wellness of their students, both in classrooms and in labs. This is a step towards the cultural change that motivated FAIL! from the beginning.

Last but not the least, FAIL! has undoubtedly and positively impacted its members. Engaging in the conversation about mental health in academia is a chance to continually assess your own beliefs and mentality. Actively trying to contribute to making things better is a fulfilling and rewarding experience. Moreover, the community built around the project has become a safe space where the members have allies in their own struggles with issues like perfectionism, imposter syndrome and insecurities, throughout their graduate and postgraduate years.

Challenges

Since the project was born at MIT, majority of the participants come from a STEM background. So, what business do a bunch of engineers, physicists and mathematicians have organizing mental health-related actions? To this, we answer that FAIL! was created by students and for students, in an effort to address a situation that we were all experiencing firsthand.

One of the most pragmatic challenges associated with FAIL! has been to find ways to sustain the momentum of an initiative led by PhD students and postdocs, given the fast-paced turnover at a given institution.

Institutional support is a real game changer, and we have experienced both very positive

and very cold receptions when pitching the initiative in different contexts. The FAIL! chapter at MIT has received significant financial and infrastructural support through various channels, but mostly through the MindHandHeart initiative. This has allowed the initiative to consolidate and continue to develop. At other institutions, university counselling services expressed scepticism about the existence of distress specific to the PhD students and post-doctoral fellows and so they did not offer support for these kinds of initiatives.

In recent years, the attention given to these topics has increased in general. However, in the US there is a higher baseline of engagement within academia. Possibly as a reflection of this, invitations to speak at FAIL! were always received with great enthusiasm and declined only with schedule conflicts. No speaker ever asked to be compensated for their contribution (participation in the events is always free for the audience).

Outlooks

The push towards change in the academic culture is becoming stronger by the day, and as more members of the academic community actively participate, the closer we get to achieving a positive transformation. The FAIL! project aims in this direction, by engaging the community simultaneously at the top and at the bottom, to promote more awareness and support, create closer relationships, and inspire strength and empathy.

Eleonora Ricci

Postdoctoral Fellow, National Centre for Scientific
Research "Demokritos", Athens, Greece
e.ricci@inn.demokritos.gr

Special Issue Mental Health in Academia

Providing support for researchers and scientists includes good management

Stress while working in academia can quickly become overwhelming, putting many researchers' well-being at risk. Without good management from team leaders and institutes, the mental health support needed for researchers will remain incomplete.

Dureen Samandar Eweis, a personal account

Dureen Samandar Eweis is currently a Junior Consultant at the International Science Council. Her curiosity about understanding living things led her to do a PhD in developmental cell biology at Institut Curie in Paris. She has been an active member in student representative organizations in different countries. Following her PhD, she carried out a Bluebook traineeship at the Directorate General of Research and Innovation of the European Commission to launch her career transition into science policy.



Photo by Majdouline Abu-Ghali

Recent governmental efforts encouraging open science and research assessment policies are paving the way for an improved academic system. This is great news! The world of research, however, involves many other factors that heavily impact the pressure a researcher faces. On a day-to-day basis, researchers must cope with an overload of work, failing experiments and pressing deadlines, all in a limited time-frame. Therefore, if we expect creative minds to bring knowledge and innovation in order to lead our societies into a brighter future, the high stress researchers face should not be normalized. Good working conditions need to be provided for researchers if institutions desire to keep the best minds. We must also reflect on how we expect younger generations to be inspired to pursue careers that can be quite stressful. It is becoming clear that if we seek sustainable academic systems, much must be implemented to reduce the uncertainty

of a researcher's career. Among the issues that I genuinely believe must be addressed urgently, include safeguarding and improving mental health support for researchers at the managerial and institutional level.

Since the types and availability of permanent positions in academia vary from one country to another, the call for mental health support presented in this article is focused on young researchers or postgraduate researchers (PGRs) who have limited contracts. This includes PhD students, postdoctorates, engineers and technicians. While institutional support is needed for all researchers, the vulnerability of PGRs due to short-term projects and power imbalance makes for more particular cases.

Institutional support must be made accessible to young researchers. This can be done by encouraging the team leaders to talk about mental health in order to normalize the conversation and prompting researchers to seek support. Research institutes and universities should establish a systemic approach by creating and providing the space and resources for having communities where issues faced by PGRs can be discussed. A recurrent concern of many young researchers is the relationship with their supervisor, typically the principal investigator (PI) of the team. There can be a lack in the alignment of a young researcher's personality and the management style of the PI. This can potentially be explained, since PIs are mainly assessed on their excellent research and innovation skills when starting a new team, but are not judged on their managerial and interpersonal skills. While support from friends and colleagues can comfort a young researcher, research institutions need to adopt a systematic approach to ensure a healthy and respectful relationship between the PI and their researchers. This can include various strategies, such as providing communication training for both

supervisors and young researchers, providing management courses for PIs and advising regular evaluation meetings where feedback can be shared. While supervisory relationships can be improved, an essential policy lacking here is making good management one of the top requirements in PI applications, since it is the main responsibility of a team leader. In more vulnerable situations where young researchers are facing harassment or risk of scientific integrity due to scientific misconduct by colleagues or the researcher's own supervisor, institutional support is essential. Young researchers need to feel safe to report such behavior, which means they need to trust institutional management. Clear protocols must therefore be put in place by institutions that can be followed in order to find solutions while protecting PGRs. Research institutions must have guidelines that clearly state who to contact and what can be done in difficult situations that have a direct impact on the work and mental health of young researchers.

On a positive note, approaches and strategies for targeting mental health support for young researchers have been incorporated in some labs, institutes and universities. An interesting article published in January, 2022 summarizes and evaluates some interventions and practices implemented at the institutional level to support mental health of PGRs and lists recommendations that institutions can adopt (Watson & Turnpenny, 2022). A few examples of mental health support that can serve as inspiration include:

- An impressive effort carried out in the UK called the HEFCE Catalyst Fund dedicated £1.5 billion to 17 projects that aim for mental health support for PGRs. Durham university was one of the institutions to be awarded a grant to develop an online educational resource supporting the mental health of young researchers. The course


consists of four modules which cover different aspects of PGR mental health as well as PGR supervision in the context of mental health difficulties (Durham University, 2022).

- Some doctoral schools and universities in Paris, France, launched workshops on time and stress management dedicated to PhD students to help them manage their projects while also managing the stress that a PhD candidate endures (ADUM Paris Sciences et Lettres, 2018).
- A team leader at Columbia University in New York City was inspired by the idea of lab manuals and created her own in which she explains her research and work-life balance. She also lists concerns that she expects her trainees may have and provides examples of helpful tools and resources that could be useful for them (Aly, 2018).

It's hard to say what's the best way management can provide mental health support, but these efforts are undoubtedly great!

If one were to imagine an academic system in the future where a majority of young researchers are guaranteed financial and career stability, will the stress of a young researcher become a concern of the past? It would be tempting to believe that resolving these significant issues would

lead to healthier mental well-being among young researchers. Yet, the direct impact management has on a researcher's mental well-being has to be recognized even in a world where researcher career precarity is radically reduced. The fact is, research work is largely independent. Clear guidelines from management and systematic approaches to complicated problems are needed if we are to save the researcher from spinning around their own axis to find a solution. PhD students, postdocs, technicians and engineers make up the majority of employees in most research institutes. The current exodus from academia is a warning sign. While progress for improving the system is happening slowly at national and international levels, there is a major role for research institutions in managing the future of academia.

Dureen Samandar Eweis 

Consultant, International Science Council,
Paris, France

d.samandareweis@gmail.com

Twitter: @DSamandar

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Special Issue Mental Health in Academia

Peer-to-peer coaching: a novel way to tackle researchers' stress

Stefano Zucca,
a personal account

Stefano is a neuroscientist interested in understanding how our brain integrates and uses sensory information from the outside world to guide our instinctive responses. He obtained a PhD in Neuroscience and Brain Technologies in Italy, at the Italian Institute of Technology. He did a postdoc in the department of Experimental Psychology at University College London (UCL) and he is now a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow at University of Turin. In the past years he has been involved in activities aimed in raising awareness and promoting discussion about Mental Health in academia. In 2019 he became a Mental Health First Aider. In 2020 he developed and implemented at UCL a scheme based on coaching skills (Peer-Coaching Group) to support researchers and improve their well-being. He has delivered several talks and workshops at national and international conferences speaking about stress in academic environments with a major focus on stressors among underrepresented groups in research. Stefano strongly believes in the importance of expanding and improving the dialog on academic mental health across all career stages in research. Only by acting all together will it be possible to build a better and more supportive research culture.



Photo by Stefano Gatti

Looking for a novel way to support your colleagues? We implemented peer-to-peer coaching groups, a method to tackle researchers' work-related issues.

"...Suffering is seen as a badge of honour..."

These are the words of Cassie Hazell, lead author of a recent study reporting graduate students had twice as high a risk of developing severe anxiety compared to the general population in the United Kingdom (Hazell et al., 2021). The results perfectly match what was previously reported by other groups investigating mental health issues among academics (Levecque et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2018; Satinsky et al., 2021).

What makes being a researcher so challenging?

Recent surveys show that researchers experience recurrent and high levels of stress. Almost 40% of researchers globally and up to 60% in western countries experienced being overwhelmed fairly or very often (CACTUS Global Foundation, 2020). The working conditions are such that more than one-out-of-two researchers have received or would like to receive help with their mental health (Wellcome Trust, 2020).

These data call for prompt intervention and for the development of new strategies to improve researchers' well-being. Research institutions and universities usually offer counseling services to students and staff members. Despite being extremely important and useful, these services are often overbooked, and not always specifically developed or easily accessible for researchers. At University College London (UCL), we have implemented an additional supporting scheme to help researchers deal with work-related issues. Thanks to a

collaboration with a group of scientists at Sainsbury Laboratory Cambridge University and the support from the UCL Wellbeing Team, we have implemented "**Peer-to-peer coaching groups**." Researchers run this scheme for other researchers and rely on the creation of supportive groups to help each other by using coaching skills.

What is coaching?

Coaching is a process that aims to unlock a person's potential to maximize their performance by developing realistic strategies to achieve specific goals. Coaching is based on a simple concept: each person has all the answers and skills required to deal with their issues and achieve their goals. The role of the coach is to help people find their own best solution. It differs from mentoring as a mentor gives advice and shares personal experiences, whilst a coach helps a person to define their goal and achieve it in their way. This approach is particularly powerful in academic environments, where people come from different scientific and cultural backgrounds.

What is a peer-to-peer coaching group?

A peer-coaching group is where researchers, who are the main players, learn and improve how to support people while sharing and discussing their issues. The aim is to create a supportive network for reciprocal help by applying coaching skills. After receiving basic training in coaching, researchers then manage the scheme by themselves.

To create a peer-to-peer coaching group, only a few steps are required:

- Gather volunteers: a stable group is fundamental, as the scheme relies on creating a safe space where people feel free to express themselves.



Logo by Stefano Gatti

- Arrange a training session to learn about coaching and coaching skills.
- Establish a set of mutually accepted ground rules.

The group is now ready to start!

What does a peer-to-peer coaching session look like?

Each session follows a scheme that can be modified, depending on the group's needs. The session starts with a check-in round, where each person briefly tells how they felt in the previous days, and if they encountered any issues at work. Participants are then split into small groups where everyone has a defined role of either a coach, a coachee, or an observer. The session lasts for about 40 minutes, during which roles can be swapped. The aim is to help a researcher set a goal and create a realistic plan to achieve it. Each session ends with feedback from the observers.

Implementing peer-to-peer coaching groups during the COVID-19 pandemic

In January 2020, we tested the scheme by setting up a pilot group. We first received training on coaching skills, arranged and developed by the UCL Wellbeing team, which consisted of a 4 hours session introducing the basis of coaching and training on active listening and the GROW (Goal, Reality, Options, Will) model. The COVID-19 pandemic forced us to switch to a remote version of the scheme, but we realized that online peer-to-peer coaching was extremely effective, especially in a scenario where social isolation became mandatory. Everyone in the group was able to apply and improve their coaching skills. The group ran for over a year, meeting every two weeks. Throughout the year, the group developed continuously based on the needs of the

participating researchers. New members joined in and we introduced some mentoring elements, as we soon realized that many of the struggles were shared amongst the majority of researchers. We understood that the most powerful aspect of the peer-to-peer coaching group was to teach people how to listen properly. This made everyone feel heard and comfortable in sharing their issues. Shared issues and the plan to tackle them in a supportive group setting make the scheme effective, boosting everyone's performance while improving their mental health.

Was the peer-to-peer coaching group useful?

To assess the scheme's impact, we ran a short survey (unpublished data) among participants, and all members positively evaluated their experience in the group, finding it effective in reducing work issues. Everyone felt supported, and 80% of participants used some of the coaching skills outside the group. All members recommended the peer-to-peer coaching group scheme to support researchers. Some of them left anonymous comments on their experience:

"The coaching group has become a very important support in my daily life, especially during this period when our social contact has been reduced exponentially. There is something very special in knowing that there is a safe space where you can share your problems and know that you will get full attention, and very likely, potential solutions (or ideas for solutions) to your problem. Being able to discuss work-related issues has improved my well-being, which otherwise might have impaired my work."

"It is very useful to create a safe place to share our experiences, and sharing itself is a large part of the support. I always feel


more relieved and relaxed after the coaching session, either via helping others or receiving help."

"I found the group useful for support when I was struggling with the workload. And also, from hearing about how others have the same problems (although that's not technically part of the coaching per se). I think learning coaching and active listening skills will also be very useful."

Conclusions

The peer-to-peer coaching group is now an official support scheme available at UCL. We created a dedicated website (Peer-To-Peer Coaching Group) with instructions on how to set up the group, resources on coaching, and a shared forum for UCL members to exchange opinions and suggestions. The scheme was officially presented during the Postdoctoral Appreciation Week in January 2021 and we now hope to expand the scheme beyond UCL.

I believe in the need to develop different strategies to support academic mental health. Although support services are in place in many universities, their impact on researchers' well-being is still limited. Research institutions and universities should prioritize creating supportive and healthy working environments, rather than only meeting academic metrics. I believe that improving the research culture will not just affect researchers' well-being, but will significantly boost research productivity and quality. We have to stop losing talented minds because of bad work-life balance, high-stress levels, and poor mental health.

Stefano Zucca 

MSCA Postdoctoral Fellow

stefano.zucca@unito.it

Twitter: @StefanoZucca5

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Special Issue

Mental Health in Academia

Self-assessment survey: a quick and easy way for academic units to determine domains of improvement in academic mental health support

An independent and objective tool to evaluate how effectively an institution takes care of academic mental health and what can be improved.



Dragonfly Mental Health is a globally operating non-profit organization, formed by academics for academics. Consisting of a wide range of scientists, researchers, students and faculty from all over the world, Dragonfly aims to cultivate excellent mental health among academics worldwide by addressing education, community building and research.

Since 2019 Dragonfly Mental Health ambassadors have delivered over 200 evidence-based and solution-oriented programmes reaching more than 20,000 academics worldwide.

There is a growing mental illness epidemic in higher education where graduate students have 8 times higher rates of severe depression and anxiety, far too often resulting in suicide (Evans et al, 2018; Satinsky et al, 2021). Typically, mental well-being is assessed in institutions with a bottom-up approach and programmes created to address mental well-being are either of a peer-to-peer nature, such as Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) programmes, or are created by early-career researchers to support graduate students in need (Fam et al, 2019; Berry et al, 2022). While it helps to increase awareness regarding the importance of mental health and facilitate access to mental health and/or medical professionals, the lack of a systemic institutional approach makes these efforts sporadic and unsustainable. This leads to

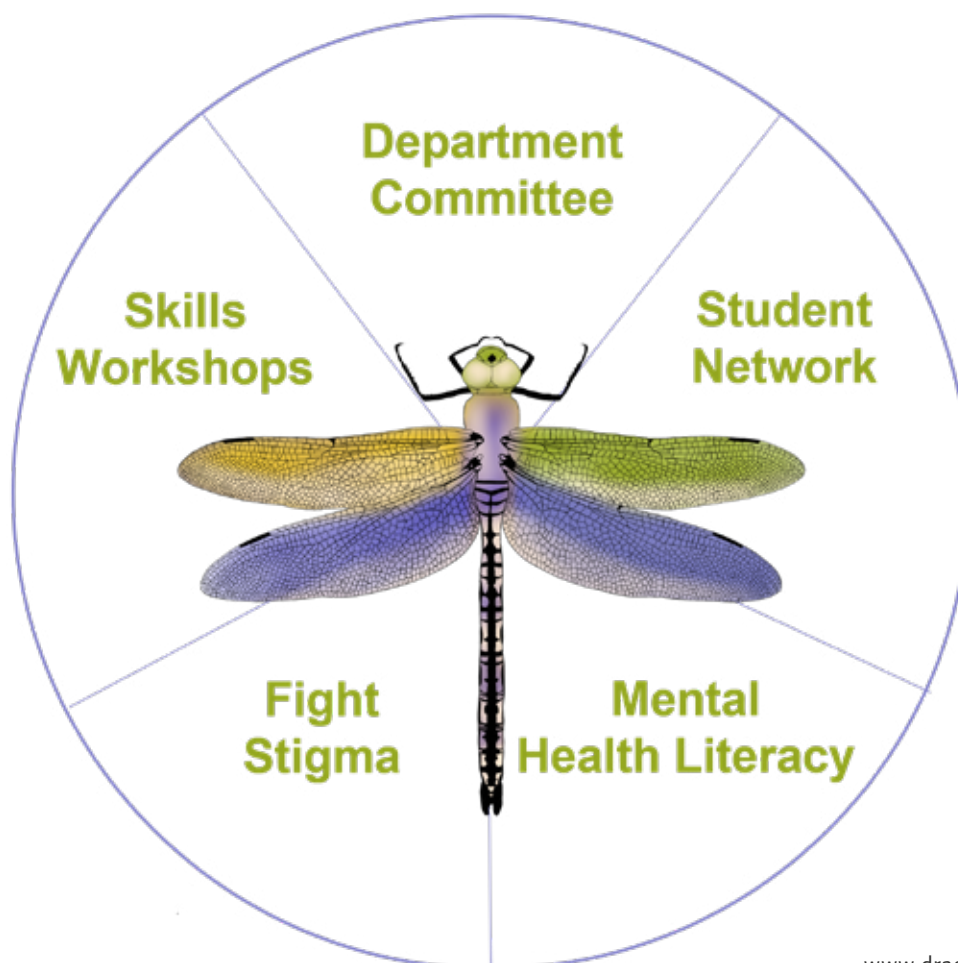
some aspects of academic mental well-being not being covered within separate academic unit(s) and campuses, an unacceptable outcome, necessitating another approach.

When devising a method to evaluate the efficacy of well-being measures taken by an institution, there are several key elements to be considered. It is important to recognize that an internal review conducted by any individual risks being subjective, as it is their institution under examination. Besides potential biases, this creates a clear conflict of interest, as it is likely the reviewer will learn various details about their coworkers, the quality of the work they do, and how

their actions contribute to the uncovered problems. For an evaluation to be undertaken with care and consideration, a certain level of expertise is required to know what needs to be assessed and the best way for that assessment to proceed.

Looking at the resources currently available (of which there are few), we concluded that the field of academic mental health needs an objective and independent tool where one can quantifiably measure which aspects of mental health support need improvement in an academic unit (Hughes et al, 2019; Blaszcak et al, 2022). To fill this gap, we developed and evaluated an efficient self-assessment

Five Domains of Excellence



www.dragonflymentalhealth.org

survey that enables academic departments and institutions to quickly assess how well they address the mental health needs of their staff and/or students, and to identify areas where improvements can be made. The survey is split into five sections, with five questions each, and takes roughly 10-15 minutes to complete.

These sections are based on a 5 pillar-system that represents a wellness wheel developed by our organization. The first and second pillars of this system address the establishment and functions of a Departmental Committee and Peer Networks; the third and fourth pillars include active efforts in delivering Mental Health Literacy and Skills Trainings; and our fifth pillar incorporates active Anti-Stigma campaigns, featuring local first-person narratives.

Each pillar has its own discrete function. For example, a departmental standing committee is focused on mental health and/or well-being and includes representation from all career levels (faculty, staff, postdocs, and students) and diverse identities (underrepresented minorities, sexual and romantic orientation, and gender minorities, first-generation students and/or those that come from low socio-economic communities, internationals, and people with disabilities). Peer networks, in contrast, are departmentally supported grass-roots initiatives for specific groups (for example, graduate students, postdoctoral, faculty, and staff) which are focused on mental health and well-being.

A staple for addressing misinformation and stigma surrounding mental health, our mental health literacy pillar includes educational programming on major and minor mental health issues and illnesses. For this to be truly effective, it is essential that programmes are hosted regularly and that they are mindful of

the intersectional experiences of community members (for example, international, LGBTQ+, URM/BIPOC, first-generation, with disabilities, and neurodiverse individuals).

Skills training is an often overlooked pillar, but it can be particularly helpful with regard to skills that are not usually taught during our academic training. Skills, such as active listening, become crucial when academics attempt to support fellow community members, as well as when they want to improve their communication with mentors, mentees or colleagues (Lutgen-Sandvik et al, 2012). Other skills, such as self-management and growth, self-compassion, anti-supremacy, and managing up skills are all equally important but need to be addressed by most academic programmes. Having these skills trainings regularly will provide academics with the tools they need to support themselves and each other.

Finally, our fifth pillar encourages individuals and institutions to actively fight the stigma that exists in their academic spaces. We use a novel approach to accomplish this, in which we launch anti-stigma campaigns that begin with talking to individuals with lived experiences of mental health struggles who are willing to share their stories with the broader community. These stories and experiences are then recorded and compiled into a custom anti-stigma film which is then shown at a viewing event and followed up with facilitated discussions.

The steps outlined within these pillars are the foundations we used to devise the five questions in each section of the survey. We believe that by tackling each pillar, an institution can address and directly improve academic mental health and well-being on a systemic level. In addition, the evaluation

survey can be performed by an employee at any level, as all employees should know the measures in place for mental well-being improvement.

In closing, you can find the survey available on our [webpage](#) under Needs assessment -> Self-evaluation survey. The questions are postulated in a way that the participant will know which steps should be taken to address the gaps highlighted in the survey answers.

We encourage readers to evaluate the efforts in their universities using our standardized questionnaire, and if they want to take action, use the questionnaire as a guidance tool to make improvements.


Acknowledgments


We would like to thank all the mental health advocates at every level for supporting us during our journey in cultivating excellent academic mental health worldwide.

Ruchama (Roo) Steinberg
Co-founder and executive director
Dragonfly Mental Health
roo@dragonflymentalhealth.org
Twitter: @RooRuchama

Wendy Marie Ingram
Co-founder and CEO, Dragonfly Mental Health
wendy@dragonflymentalhealth.org
Twitter: @pyromanticism

Sarah Wilson-Montemayor
Co-founder and chief managing director
Dragonfly Mental Health
sarah@dragonflymentalhealth.org

Victor See 
Volunteer and former Lead of
Systemic Change Working Group
Dragonfly Mental Health
victorwcsee@gmail.com
Twitter: @astrovictorsee

Olga (Olya) Vvedenskaya 
Co-founder
Dragonfly Mental Health
olya@dragonflymentalhealth.org
Twitter: @earlgrey_addict

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Special Issue Mental Health in Academia



Photo by Timotheus Hell

Jana Lasser, a personal account

Jana Lasser is a PostDoc at the Computational Social Science lab at the Graz University of Technology and the Complexity Science Hub Vienna. Drawing from her experience in nonlinear dynamical systems, her current research activity centres around emergent phenomena in complex social systems. She employs methods from machine learning, data science and natural language processing to understand a diverse range of topics in the field of Computational Social Science. Next to her research she cares deeply about how the scientific community functions and dysfunctions. Within the COST Action "Researcher Mental Health Observatory" she leads the Survey Special Interest Group together with Stefan Mol.



Photo by Daniel Vogel

Driving change with data - preparing for liftoff of the largest ever benchmark on researcher mental health in Europe

Stefan T. Mol, a personal account

Stefan T. Mol is assistant professor in organizational behavior and research methods at the Amsterdam Business School of the University of Amsterdam and chair of the Scilink Foundation, an organization aimed at providing transversal skills training to early stage researchers. Stefan's teaching centers largely on research methods, and his research on enhancing the fit between person, education, and the labor market, technology enhanced learning, the psychological contract, employability, career shocks and researcher mental health. Within the ReMO (Researcher Mental Health Observatory) COST Action, Stefan chairs the Institutional Level Working Group, and leads the Survey Special Interest Group together with Jana Lasser.

There is a moral imperative for us to help address the mental health crisis in academia. The Researcher Mental Health Observatory (ReMO) wants to drive change with data and realize the largest ever benchmark of researcher mental health in Europe – here we tell you how we are going to pull it off (spoiler alert: we may need your help!).

Academia has a mental health crisis

Since Katja Levecque and colleagues published their groundbreaking study in 2017, many of us have been distraught by the mental health crisis in academia. Researchers working in academic institutions have depression and anxiety rates that are up to twice as high as those of comparably aged and educated non-academics. Precarious working conditions and unsustainably heavy workloads are some of the likely culprits. Widespread and uninhibited harassment, power abuse, exclusion, exploitation, racism, and sexism may be others.

The many intuitive hypotheses that exist about the root causes stand in stark contrast to the lack of data at our disposal to untangle what actually contributes to better or worse mental health outcomes at the level of the individual academic. Our aim is to shed light on all these complex issues and their relation to mental health outcomes, and to guide our way to those interventions with which we can drive change. To this end, we are in the process of implementing what we aim to be the largest survey on researcher mental health and its contextual antecedents. We focus on contextual antecedents as opposed to solely addressing personal dispositions, because the former are:

- likely to be more amenable to change;
- more difficult to evidence (since next to individual variance, this requires variance in context);
- under-illuminated; and
- more likely to drive mental health outcomes.

The survey will provide a benchmark for the current state of mental health in academia and help us understand the mental health of academics against the background of their work environment. It will, furthermore, help us identify measures that research institutions might already have implemented to improve well-being. The data we gather will help us identify the best practices to drive concrete policy changes aimed at meaningfully improving the mental health of academics.

Capturing the complexity

What influences mental health outcomes in academia? Kurt Lewin famously said that behavior is a function of a person and the environment. Similarly, it makes sense to assume that mental health derives from a complex interplay between context and individual dispositions. There are personal factors such as gender, nationality, care obligations, heredity, physical health, and personality. These factors are associated with our working environment and our relationship with colleagues and supervisors. Supervisors directly influence how much control we have over our daily working life and the type and frequency of feedback we get, while our colleagues might play a big role in making us feel at home and well integrated at work. In addition, the amount and style of bureaucracy, processes for assessment and available social and psychological support structures are largely determined by the institution we work at. Last but not the least,

institutions are embedded in a national context that influences for example how much funding there is for research.

A benchmark of researcher mental health

Given the many factors that might influence people's experience of working in academia, we will need to ask them many questions about their work-life as researchers. To be able to draw statistically valid inferences and break down insights along different hierarchical levels, from the individual to the country, we will need a large number of observations. In addition, the data we are collecting is very sensitive. Lastly, our questions about mental health might make respondents aware about their mental health issues. This raises several challenges for our endeavor:

- We need to pick a suitable number of questions from the almost infinite selection of interesting questions.
- To enable a hierarchical analysis design, we need to reach many respondents and our selection of respondents needs to be representative of every institution and country.
- We need to ensure the highest standards of data protection while enabling researchers to work with the data to draw conclusions that can inform policy.
- We need to identify national and institutional services, and help-lines to direct respondents to if they want to seek help for any mental health issue.

Driving change with data

Under the umbrella of the "Researcher Mental Health Observatory" (ReMO), we have assembled a group of about 30 people to

tackle these challenges. Among others, our group comprises mental health professionals, academics from the areas of social and work psychology, data scientists and people with organizing experience from workers representations. From students to early career researchers to professors, our group spans across academic groups and integrates a multitude of disciplinary, hierarchical and national perspectives. What binds us together is our interest in improving the situation regarding the mental health of academics and the conviction that the first step to drive change has to have its foundation in a solid understanding of the situation. Our integration into ReMO connects us to a large network of stakeholders interested in improving the situation regarding mental health in academia. Our results will directly feed into their efforts to develop policy recommendations and best practices across Europe.

We started our work in February 2022 and plan to launch the survey in March 2023. Once the data is collected, we will openly publish an anonymized version of the data set to enable as many researchers as possible to work with it. In parallel, we will write a high-level report that sheds light on the connections between working conditions in academia and mental health outcomes, and identifies best practices and interventions. In addition, we will support researchers in conducting studies on individual countries or demographics to drive change in specific contexts. We will enable institutions to request individual reports that tell them how they are doing within their national context and Europe.

Help us make this happen

Right now, we are deep in the trenches of getting this survey off the ground: We have

screened hundreds of academic articles about measures to promote mental health and well-being. We have developed a data protection plan that will enable researchers to access the full data including all the demographic variables in a secure way. In addition, we have conducted a first pilot study in Montenegro, teaching us a lot about strategies to reach researchers with our survey. Currently, our biggest task is to develop our outreach strategy. We aim to spread the news about the survey both "bottom up" and "top down" to maximise reach. From the bottom up, we are getting in touch with stakeholders in researcher representations and developing a social media strategy. From the top down, we are developing a strategy to get institutions on board to support and spread our survey.

Did we capture your interest? Have we motivated you to contribute to the effort? There are multiple ways you can help us right now:

- If you are an individual looking to contribute a few hours of your time, you can join our survey dissemination effort. We are looking for individuals who can help us identify and contact stakeholders in their countries.
- If you are in a leadership position of an institution and are interested in running our survey there, please get in touch to help us reach as many people in your institution as possible.
- While we focus our efforts on data collection in Europe, we welcome people and organizations from other countries to join our project and disseminate the survey in their countries.

Jana Lasser 

MSCA Fellow, Graz University of Technology, Austria

jana.lasser@tugraz.at

Twitter: @janalasser

Mastodon: mastodon.social/@janalasser

Stefan Mol 

Assistant professor

University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

s.t.mol@uva.nl

Special Issue Mental Health in Academia

Institutional Career Development- A Model for Improved Academic Mental Health



Pedro Resende, a personal account

I was born in Espinho, a coastal city in the north of Portugal. Before I had a science career, I had a sports career. I played volleyball for 17 years. I won the national championship 5 times and made it to the Junior National Team. Many things I learned during my sports career have proven to be useful in my scientific career. I have a PhD in Basic and Applied Biology (from the University of Porto, Portugal) based on the studies I performed at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies, California. I am currently leading an independent line of research in stem cell biology at the Institute for Research and Innovation in Health, Porto. I have had the opportunity to work in the academic and industrial sectors across Portugal, the UK, and the USA. I have co-founded a startup (Chaperone) and two academic associations. I have also worked as a Policy Advisor at Health Parliament Portugal and as an External Consultant at the Ministry of Health, Portugal. I am driven by transdisciplinary projects creating strong social impact. I continue to nurture my interest in sports (like surfing, capoeira and soccer) and I am a proud father of an 8-month-old baby girl named Laura.

Systemic issues like fixed-term contracts, financial insecurity, discriminatory research environment and misconduct continue to exacerbate the mental well-being of academics. This calls for an urgent, proactive, and collaborative approach between stakeholders to address these complex issues. One of the ways to assist with researchers' mental health and manage the stress caused by precarious work conditions is by adopting career development facilities at the institutional and university level. In this interview with Pedro Resende, we discuss how these facilities empower academics, enable them to succeed in their careers and achieve their full potential.

What was the source of inspiration behind your initiative with Chaperone?

My scientific career provided me with brilliant opportunities to work across several continents and institutes. However, irrespective of the cultural differences, it became apparent that researchers across all domains face similar fears of career uncertainty, which is one of the leading causes of high stress and mental health issues. My friend and colleague (now co-founder) Joana Moscoso had very similar experiences. Therefore, we were both determined to understand and solve this issue. After two years of vigorous discussions with multiple stakeholders, including institutional directors, scientists, and career consultants, we could establish that an effective solution to the problem would require a high-quality, democratized, personalized and modern systemic change. Hence, the idea of [Chaperone](#), an online platform created to empower scientists and academics in their careers by connecting them with career consultants around the world, was born.

Given your experience of working with academics from diverse backgrounds and qualifications, what are some of the most common challenges that hamper their performance?

In the past year alone, I had over a hundred one-to-one conversations with early-stage researchers from different countries and scientific backgrounds, and what stood out as their biggest challenge was the “fear of failure”. Irrespective of their discipline, the young academics feared venturing into new lines of research, different career paths, branching out of academia, or even committing to learning a new skill. It was interesting to notice their extreme desire to

be ‘productive’ in their day-to-day duties, which required a great deal of focus and energy.

Such ‘risk-averting’ behaviour not only impacts their personal growth but also hampers the overall creativity at a group or an institutional level; consequentially diminishing publication quality, research integrity and innovation. Although factors such as culture, research field and experience level play a big role, some of the main contributors to such skewed vision include—the insecurity in maintaining research careers, outdated metrics to evaluate success and the lack of career development services.

How does a lack of career development capabilities affect the mental health of academics?

Career support is certainly not the solution to a pre-existing mental health illness, and if that is the case, then academics must be guided toward psychologists/ psychiatrists or other mental health professionals. However, it is probably one of the most effective ways to prevent these problems and more research should be conducted to study the relationship between career guidance and the prevention of mental health issues. High-quality career development skills empower an individual with tools to be more productive, plan, and prototype their career successfully. It enables them to learn about healthy work boundaries, professional relationships, better supervision and leadership skills. One could argue that the relationship between career development and good mental health is similar to the one between eating nutritious food and being healthy.

They say that 'it takes a village to raise a child'. When it comes to institutes and universities, who is responsible for creating a healthy structure and environment to foster the professional and psychological development of young researchers?

In every institution, the well-being of the staff and students should be the prime responsibility of the ones in leadership roles. It starts with the institutional directors and university deans (or equivalent), who, in a top-down approach, should create and nurture an efficient structure to ensure the professional and psychological development of researchers. That said, the supervisors and PIs of Master/ PhD and Post-doctorate programmes are also responsible for managing the welfare of their group members. The human resource (HR) department, academic services and career development office are also bound by their share of responsibilities. Outside institutions, funding agencies and governments are responsible for designing policies and procedures for strategic management to ensure institutional compliance.

It seems apparent that empowering academics with career management skills would have significant implications not just for their individual health, but also for the research outcomes and societal welfare. So why do you think we still lack the resources to prioritize this issue and include it in the mandatory training provided within academic courses?

We definitely need more awareness and literacy for career development. Many decision-makers still need to understand more comprehensively how career development is promoted, its positive

impact and its importance in institutional competitiveness. Many leaders have built their careers in a context that differs from contemporary times and struggle to acknowledge the progress in this sphere. The solutions of the past do not serve the needs of the present. A growing number of positive examples reveal that we are improving. However, we have a lot to do as most of the researchers still don't have access to career development services.

Can you tell us about the European Charter for Researchers and Code of Conduct (2005)- its impact and shortcomings?

The European Charter for Researchers is a set of principles and requirements which specify the roles, responsibilities and entitlements of researchers as well as of employers and/or funders, all drafted with the goal to create a better professional environment. Created in 2005, it has since been signed by more than 13,000 research institutions from over 42 countries. Following this, an "HR Excellence in Research" award was generated to give public recognition to institutions that make good progress in their HR policies. The code clearly states that institutions hiring or funding scientists must provide career development services. However, since its inception (over 15 years ago), over 70% of scientists still remain deprived of these institutional services (unpublished data from an international survey conducted at Chaperone, which was consistent with previous findings). The failure to attain the European Charter's objectives illustrates that measures attempted in the past have not been effective and that democratizing access to career development services remains an elusive mission.

What do you mean by 'democratizing access to career development services to scientists' and what would be its implications for academic outcomes on a personal and professional level?

One of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals is to "Reduce inequality within and among countries". One way to achieve this is by imparting high-quality career support to all scientists. Currently, scientists from high-ranking and better-funded institutions enjoy these, while others are left to manage their careers themselves. Such differences are further amplified in the job market where researchers with access to CV and grant writing skills from experts end up with a greater application success rate and job opportunities. Therefore, democratizing access to empowering career development facilities could help reduce such inequalities.

I hope that a greater commitment of scientific institutions to supporting their staff, would also enhance scientific productivity and reduce underemployment, thereby generating better-qualified supervisors and mentors. This would have a profound impact on the mental health and well-being of researchers, improve standards of research culture and contribute to overall healthier societies.

At Chaperone, we feel proud that we have been at the forefront of this democratization process and that within a short span of 3 years since our launch, we have provided career development services in over 30 countries, benefiting thousands of academics. This process has further initiated a wave of change and researcher development within their home institutes and universities.

Can you highlight the main differences between the current models and future trends of career development for researchers?

All sectors are undergoing major transformations in order to adapt to a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world. Today's leadership trends suggest that employees seek more from their jobs than just a paycheck. Within scientific career development, we are witnessing a stark change from the support that was once based on "an unfamiliar person, with an old PC and a PowerPoint, giving career tips from 30 years ago", to modern, holistic and real support. Some of the major aspects of this transformation include:

- Career development is not something we need just to jumpstart our careers, but something that benefits us through different phases of our lives. Be it a young university student or an established director, there is always scope for new learning and growth for everyone.
- Embracing the importance of different specialists and their roles. Slowly, but steadily, the thought process is changing from "only my supervisor can help me" to working with career mentors, advisors, counsellors and coaches. This thought process offers the academics a well-rounded exposure and understanding of themselves and their career goals.
- Offices that are designed to respect values of diversity, inclusion and hyper-personalization. These combine internal and external services to have a wide representation of specialists with different expertise, nationalities and cultures, along with a broad knowledge of career paths and markets. They plan formal and informal training with the flexibility of in-person and digital platforms.

- Services that respect scientific evidence and recommendations for climate change issues by reducing carbon emissions contributed by unnecessary travel. The hybrid model of these services caters equally to individual needs and environmental concerns.

As you rightly mentioned, many researchers continue to depend on their PIs and professors for career advice and guidance. Do you think it would be beneficial to train PIs and others in leadership roles? How feasible would it be to implement such training in their job responsibilities?

Leadership skills can and should be trained, and academia can definitely gain from that. At Chaperone, we train in different topics around leadership for academics and work on cases that participants desire to discuss, highlighting the poor state of affairs within academia. Although I think most group leaders are interested in improving their leadership, they feel “trapped” with enormous academic and administrative commitments, with little time to spare for their own career development training. However, the academic mentality fails to identify its long-term benefits. With changing times, academia would have to create robust leadership evaluation systems and criteria when processing grant and fellowship applications. Honestly, it is hard for me to understand why we are so behind on this particular aspect.

What kind of systemic changes need to accompany individual interventions like Chaperone, for them to succeed at a university or institutional level?

Big systemic changes require interventions by policy-makers and funding agencies.

To have career support that fulfils good standards should be a mandatory criterion for institutions to receive funding from government agencies. Additionally, fellowships/ grants should always include a budget for defined career development services for the researchers. In the long term, I hope that the return on investment in making such an adaptation is evident and that most institutions in STEM adopt it in their policy model. It is quite a common practice in other professional sectors, and I am confident that such transformations will soon occur in Science as well.

Based on your experiences working with a diverse set of professionals, what is the one piece of advice that you would give academics to better manage their mental well-being without compromising their career aspirations?

Prioritize your health and well-being above everything, which is an underestimated meta-skill essential for medium and long-term success. Prioritizing means being accountable to yourself and allocating time during your week to practice activities and learn new skills that would benefit your health and well-being.

Pooja Khurana

MCAA Newsletter, Editorial Board Member

poojakhurana.official@gmail.com

Twitter: @PK_ActNow

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.

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General requests should be sent to:
newsletter@mariecuriealumni.eu

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