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Marie Curie Alumni Association

Newsletter



Reflections from the 2023 MCAA Annual Conference

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Message from the Board

Dear MCAA members,

It was a great pleasure to meet many of you at our Annual Conference which took place at the Palacio de Congresos in Cordoba on the 24th and 25th of February 2023. We hope you enjoyed it as much as we did!

The conference opened with interventions from several special guests, starting with Themis Christophidou, Director-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture of the European Commission; followed by Teresa Riesgo Alcaide, Secretary-General of Innovation, Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation; Maria José Polo Gomez, Vice-rector of the scientific policy of the University of Cordoba, and finally Carlos Morais Pires, member of the cabinet of the Commissioner Mariya Gabriel.

In total, 20 sessions were organised with themes ranging from science diplomacy to sustainability, from how to write an ERC proposal to how to balance family and career, without forgetting mental health, researchers' wellbeing, and scholars at risk. We also hosted as keynote speakers Sir Peter Gluckman and Stefan Kuhlmann who gave inspiring overviews about science diplomacy and sustainability in a theoretical but also practical way.

Sir Peter Gluckman, President of the International Science Council, opened a plenary session that saw the participation of Martin Adler, President of the Initiative for Science in Europe, who presented the [Manifesto for Early Career Researchers](#), co-drafted by the MCAA, joined by several MCAA members who are involved at high-level policy discussions in Europe, namely Renaud Jolivet, ERA Forum Representative for Individual Researchers Stakeholder Group;

Karen Stroobants, Vice Chair of the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (COARA); and Mostafa Moonir Shawrav, Co-Chair of the EU Science Diplomacy Alliance, and MCAA Chair Fernanda Bajanca, who co-chairs the EU Science Diplomacy Alliance as well. Finally, we were honoured to host the European Commission MSCA unit led by Claire Morel, and her team members Lucy Swan, Senem Sanal Erginel and Anouk Lafortune as well as Sybille Luhmann who joined online, each of them actively participating as speakers in several sessions. The conference was closed by the interventions of Claire Morel and Jose Luis Quero, General Director of International Projects of the University of Cordoba.

This year, the MCAA Annual Conference was preceded by satellite events hosted on the 23rd of February. Three events took place in parallel: 1) a theatre show about Marie Skłodowska-Curie's life aimed at the general public, performed by a group of children and their teachers from Tenerife, Spain, combined with interactive experiments from Circonciencia; 2) a [EU Science Diplomacy Alliance meeting](#); and 3) a full-day intensive training workshop on Science Communication promoted by board member Gian Maria Greco and Communications WG chair Ruben Riosa with the support of the European Citizen Science (ECS) project and the University of Cordoba.

We were delighted to offer such a diverse conference, and that is thanks to you! It would not have been possible without the MCAA members, so we want to thank you for your participation, your involvement in submitting, coordinating, speaking at and attending sessions as well as lively engaging with them. Our heartfelt thank you goes to all the volunteers and their non-stop commitment to the organisation of the conference. We also wish to acknowledge the support from our official sponsors: the [University of Cordoba](#), [Baden Wuerttemberg International](#), [Venus Roses Labsolutions Ltd.](#), and [EuroScienceJobs](#).



Most of the activities of the conference were supported by the European Commission via the newly funded Coordinated Support Action (CSA) MCAA-New-Horizon Project.

Finally, congratulations to all the MCAA awards winners for their respective work, namely Senol Piskin, for best innovator, Oleksandra Ivashchenko for social impact, Renaud Jolivet for career, and Ruben Riosa for MCAA outstanding contributor. And of course, congratulation to the winners of the best poster awards: Chidera Winifred Amazu, Mengyang Liu and Beatrice Musi; and winners of best Lightning talks: Davide Barone, Shaoshan Mai, Houda Birwa and Dora Keller, plus two honorary mentions: Süreyya Akyüz, and Pablo Emiliano Tomatis.

Now, some numbers, as a hybrid event we registered 275 onsite people and 147 online. During the 20 sessions offered, 73 speakers intervened. 34 posters were also exposed for two days while we had 37 lightning talks. The 20 sessions were recorded and will be hosted on MCAA's channels soon together with the photo album of the event. Finally, 88 members

participated in the General Assembly, which was held on 25 February afternoon.

As you can imagine we are happy to have concluded the first year of our mandate as a Board on such a positive note, and we look forward now to hearing back from you and carrying on working with you all. This year the Board will dedicate its time to strengthen the internal organisation of the Association with the help of several service providers (including Mostafa Moonir Shawrav as the newly appointed executive director).

Soon, you will hear about the call to organise next year's Annual Conference. We look forward to discovering where we will meet next year.

Until then, thanks to all the MCAA members and see you soon!

Alexandra Dubini

Vice-chair

On behalf of the MCAA Board

alexandra.dubini@mariecuriealumni.eu

Editorial

Dear MCAA members,


Like many years before, February is the month in which we host the Annual Conference (AC) of the MCAA. This year's event focused on the increasingly important subject of science diplomacy and sustainable development.

The topic of science diplomacy was often raised by the MCAA in 2022, largely due to the outbreak of war in Europe. This time, we have looked at the topic in a much broader perspective. On its own, science diplomacy is a way to raise and use our voice as a tool to facilitate a knowledgeable decision-making process. Like many other soft skills, it is a skill that can be practised, mastered and applied at various scales, ranging from everyday debate to lobbying or even representing organizations at an international forum. Likewise, the topic of sustainability did not focus on commonly associated environmental issues, but on how we, as individuals and as a society, can meet our own needs for personal development and growth without compromising future goals (personal or professional). While 67% of PhD students prefer to stay in academia, only 30% of them stay in the field 3 years after the defence (e.g., as a postdoc). In the case of postdoctoral researchers, this statistic is even lower, with a slim 3% making it to the first tenure track position, as [reported by the University of Leiden](#). Therefore, sustainable personal development can mean very different things to an academic, depending on his/her career stage. He or she may be seeking a better work-life balance while striving for a deeply desired breakthrough in the academic career. On the other hand, it may mean finding a sustainable personal development plan after



one leaves academia, or finding a way to grow personally after the MSCA. It may simply mean accepting the fact that one size and one career template does not suit everyone.

As broad as these topics are, the MCAA was able to cover nearly all of them in one of 20 high-quality parallel sessions that took place on February 24 and 25. Therefore, in the current issue of the MCAA Newsletter, we take a look back at the annual conference and reflect on how topics discussed at the event can help us advocate for the values we stand for and build a sustainable career.

Oleksandra (Sasha) Ivashchenko 

Editor-in-chief of the MCAA Newsletter
newsletter.editor@mariecuriealumni.eu

Twitter: @OleksandraIvas3

News from the MCAA

The MCAA Innovator Awards 2022, Senol Piskin: an innovative life

Senol Piskin, the 2022 MCAA Innovator Award winner, talks about what helped him get to his current university position as well as his future plans

Senol Piskin, a personal account

Senol Piskin is currently an Assistant Professor in Turkey and runs a lab named Modeling, Simulation and Extended Reality. He was an MSCA Individual Fellowship recipient. He worked as a postdoctoral research associate and a lecturer at the University of Texas, USA. He currently works in the field of scientific computing with applications in healthcare technologies and develops solutions by coupling augmented reality, wearables and machine-learning techniques. A part of his research focuses on understanding the mechanisms of brain disorders to predict vascular and cognitive diseases at early stages. Senol has several patents to his name and several papers in journals of international repute.



Photo by Istinye University

How does it feel to win this award?

Winning this award from the MCAA is an incredible honour and a privilege. I feel grateful, humbled, and proud to be recognized by such a prestigious and influential organization of like-minded peers. This award is a testament to the hard work, dedication, and impact that I have achieved in my field of innovation. It motivates me to continue pushing boundaries and making a difference in the world. This award is not only a personal achievement, but it also reflects the contributions of my team, collaborators, and mentors who have supported and inspired me throughout my journey.

What road/journey led you to this award?

My journey to this award has been characterized by curiosity, perseverance, and collaboration. I have always been fascinated by the power of technology to solve complex

problems and improve people's lives. From an early age, I have been tinkering with gadgets, exploring new software, and learning from online resources and communities. I pursued formal education in STEM fields, worked on research projects, and gained industry experience in various domains. Along the way, I met mentors, colleagues, and friends who challenged me, encouraged me, and inspired me to think outside the box and pursue my dreams. I have also learned from my failures, setbacks, and criticism, which have made me stronger and more resilient. Ultimately, winning this award is a validation of the value of my journey and a motivation for me to continue exploring new frontiers.

How will this award propel you in your future endeavours?

This award serves as a motivation for me to continue pursuing my passion for innovation and pushing the boundaries of what is possible. It is also an opportunity to showcase my work to a wider audience and attract more support, funding, and partnerships for my future endeavours. I believe that this award might open doors for me to connect with new innovators, industry leaders, investors, and policymakers who share my vision and can help me bring my ideas to fruition.


What are your future goals?

My future goals are to continue innovating, collaborating, making a positive impact on people's lives, particularly in areas that address pressing societal challenges such as health, sustainability, and social equity and contributing to society. Innovation is not an end in itself but a means to address pressing challenges and opportunities in various domains, such as health, environment, education, and economy. Therefore, my focus will be on identifying problems,

engaging stakeholders, designing solutions, and evaluating impact. To achieve these goals, I plan to continue collaborating with like-minded individuals and organizations, seeking out new opportunities for learning and growth, and being open to new ideas and perspectives. I also aim to inspire and empower the next generation of innovators, especially in underrepresented and marginalized communities, by sharing my experience, resources, and networks.

What is your advice for the MCAA?

My advice for the MCAA is to continue its excellent work in fostering a community of innovative and passionate individuals who are committed to making a difference in the world. I would encourage the MCAA to prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion in its activities and initiatives, ensuring that all members feel welcome and supported. Innovation requires creativity, curiosity, and risk-taking, but it also requires a supportive and inclusive environment that values diversity, equity, and inclusion. Additionally, I would suggest the MCAA focus on identifying and addressing critical societal challenges that require innovation and interdisciplinary approaches. Finally, I would recommend the MCAA continue providing opportunities for networking, mentorship, and skill development, which are essential for supporting the growth and success of its members.

Andrey Zhylka 

MCAA Newsletter, Editorial Board

Postdoctoral researcher

The Netherlands Cancer Institute

zhylka.ai@gmail.com

News from the MCAA

Photo by University of Amsterdam



MCAA Social Impact Awards 2022, Oleksandra Ivashchenko: “It’s an award for the contribution of the #ScienceForUkraine”

Oleksandra Ivashchenko, the winner of the 2022 MCAA Social Impact Award, tells the story of the #ScienceForUkraine and how the award is going to be used for good.

Oleksandra Ivashchenko, a personal account

Oleksandra V. Ivashchenko is a clinical medical physicist of radiology and nuclear medicine at the University Medical Center Groningen (Netherlands). She joined the MCAA shortly after completing her ESR fellowship within the MSCA-funded ITN at TU Delft. She is an active member of the MCAA and has served as Editor-in-Chief of the MCAA Newsletter since October 2022. In February 2023, she received the 2023 Social Impact Award for her contribution to the volunteer initiative [#ScienceForUkraine](#), focusing on information centralization and lobbying for insider support for students and scientists affected by the war in Ukraine.

How does it feel to win this award?

I am very grateful for this honor from the MCAA, but I do not see it as an individual award. The Social Impact Award was presented for the contribution of the #ScienceForUkraine volunteering initiative, of which I have been a member since the very beginning, in supporting scientists and students affected by the war in Ukraine. I am therefore very happy with the recognition that the organization has received, but certainly do not see it as an individual honor.

What road/journey led you to this award?

Shortly after processing the news of the start of the war in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, I had to do something different, I had to act. So, I have turned to things I know how to do best apart from my actual work: the power of networking. I went on all social media and started looking for activists and ways of

supporting Ukrainian people. Purely by luck, Twitter post of Sanita Reinsone, founder of #ScienceForUkraine, was shared with me. This passionate scientist from Latvia was calling for re-direction of overhead funds from various research projects, so that they could be used to host scientists and students fleeing the war in Ukraine. I joined the call, and, on February 28, a "huge" team of 4 scientists-activists that never met in real life, started collecting Twitter posts and emailing research groups, universities, and funding agencies all over the world, asking for emergency funding. As the only Ukrainian within the group at the time, I took on the task of Ukrainian outreach and communication with international scholarly organizations. For the first month, many of us worked 24/7 and the team grew exponentially; there were 170 S4U volunteers in April 2022. We've created the website, structured the team, created a help communication line for displaced scientists. Within 2 weeks, help requests started flooding in. By 3 months, we were able to assist in employment and academic transfers of over 1000 people fleeing the war. Since #ScienceForUkraine is a highly flexible and a non-bureaucratic organization, we were also able to learn and adjust very fast. Due to this experience, we started getting invitations to share our experience and understanding of the situation with higher level stakeholder groups, including the [International Science Council](#), [Philipp Schwartz](#) and [Inspireurope Stakeholder Forum 2022](#), arranged regular communication line with the Ministry of Science and Education of Ukraine, and many more. The initiative grew and transformed into a well-known forum and a large search agent for many Ukrainian scientists, the role it still holds now. We have organized over 20 online webinar-trainings, helped organize 3 online conferences, our UK-team started remote mentorship scheme, national member-groups launched international non-residential fellowships, and many more.

How will this award propel you in your future endeavours?


One year after the 24th of February 2022, the Ukrainian topic was pushed to the second page in many news outlets. It is getting more and more difficult to find funds to support the #ScienceForUkraine initiative, yet the war is still very much going on. #ScienceForUkraine is still standing strong and able to provide support and organize various personal development or research visit initiatives. Thanks to the Social Impact Award from the MCAA, we will be able to help a few more researchers still based in Ukraine via online courses. The details will be worked out in the weeks to come, but the award will digitally "travel" from the room in Cordoba, where it was granted, and will reach a few scientists in Ukrainian bunkers. As weird as this sentence sounds, it puts a huge smile on my face.

What are your future goals?

That is very difficult to say, because we have to constantly adapt our activities to the ever-changing situation in Ukraine. You never know what is in store for you, one day you are looking for temporary academic transfers, while a few months later you are trying to help with the energy generators. I just hope that we can stand the test of time and provide long-term support, even a small one, to scientists and students affected by the war.

What is your advice for MCAA?

I have no advice, just would like to thank the MCAA for their support and the way the organization has grown and transformed into an international advocate for equality and diversity in all areas of research.

Andrey Zhylka 

MCAA Newsletter, Editorial Board

Postdoctoral researcher

The Netherlands Cancer Institute

zhylka.ai@gmail.com

News from the MCAA

The MCAA Career Award, Renaud Jolivet: On a doorstep of the new career phase

Renaud Jolivet,
a personal account

Renaud Jolivet is Full Professor at the Maastricht Centre for Systems Biology, and Chair of Neural Engineering & Computation at Maastricht University. He is the nominated representative for individual researchers and innovators at the European Commission's ERA Forum, and an elected member of the Board of Directors at the Organization for Computational Neuroscience. He is a member of the Science & Technology Committee of EBRAINS, the European research infrastructure for neurosciences, and is a 2023 Neurotech Fellow of the Foresight Institute. He also holds a courtesy appointment at CERN, the particle physics laboratory. He has previously served on the boards of the Initiative for Science in Europe and Marie Curie Alumni Association. He has worked in Switzerland, Japan, the Netherlands, and the UK. His work focuses on the brain's heterocellularity and on neurotechnologies to interface with brain tissue.



Renaud Jolivet who received the 2022 MCAA Career Award speaks about his path and MCAA's contribution to it.

How does it feel to win this award?

I have been involved with MCAA for almost a decade, and in that decade, MCAA has really played an important role in my professional development. Within the same decade, I also moved from being a Postdoc to (recently) being a Full Professor. It thus felt great to receive this award, as a kind of capstone to this first half of my professional life, and as the starting point for new adventures to come.

How will this award propel you in your future endeavours?

I am not sure. I think it's too early to say... This is the first significant award that I have received.

What road/journey led you to this award?


I have been involved with MCAA since the association was created and I have served MCAA in various ways. I founded a Chapter and was a founding member of several Working Groups. I also served on the board for one term. My involvement at MCAA also propelled me to other science policy fora. At the same time, I was developing as a leader in academia, and both professional experiences reinforced each other. I am really grateful to MCAA for all the opportunities the association offered me.

What are your future goals?

As mentioned above, this award comes as the perfect conclusion to the first part of my career, shortly after having been promoted to Full Professor, and shortly after having been nominated to the ERA Forum to represent individual researchers and innovators. In a way, I am now free to explore new directions. There are some specific research projects that I have been wanting to focus on since the beginning of my career that I will now have the time to explore. My team is also involved in several technological projects, and I am interested in entrepreneurship. As for my science policy career, I plan on remaining involved with the ERA Forum for at least its first 3-year cycle. After that, I am not quite sure what direction I will take. I have a grand plan, in which all these strands will be merged, but it's too early to talk about it.

**What is your advice for MCAA?**

I think that MCAA is a fantastic organisation that has come a long way towards professionalism. This is perfectly illustrated, I believe, by the current involvement of many of our members with some of the most important European science policy initiatives, and in the leadership of other similar organisations. My advice for MCAA is thus to keep up the good work! It is a great setting to develop as a leader. Beyond this, I think that MCAA is in a unique position, with its extensive worldwide network, to become a centre of soft power for Europe, but also more pragmatically to collect data on early career researchers to draft evidence-based policies. I think that there is a bright future for MCAA at the heart of the European R&I ecosystem.

Andrey Zhylka 

MCAA Newsletter, Editorial Board

Postdoctoral researcher

The Netherlands Cancer Institute

zhylka.ai@gmail.com

News from the MCAA

The MCAA Outstanding Contribution Award, Ruben Riosa: the way of Outstanding Contributor, reflection and the look ahead

Ruben Riosa,
a personal account

Ruben Riosa is an Associate Medical Communications Manager for Excerpta Medica with the tasks of providing scientific and strategic support and guidance to several medical communications projects for a variety of clients. Previously, he successfully completed the European Joint Doctorate Degree in Molecular Animal Nutrition (MANNA - Marie-Curie Fellowship, ITN). Ruben is also the Chair of the Communication Working Group of the MCAA.

How does it feel to win this award?

Winning the MCAA Outstanding Contributor Award feels great and I was very honored to have been awarded this prize. It was unexpected but at the same time it underlines that the work I've been doing within the MCAA together with the Communication Working Group (WG) in the last years is highly appreciated by the whole community, and that is probably what makes me enjoy this award even more.

Ruben Riosa, Chair of Communication Working Group, reflects on receiving the 2022 MCAA Outstanding Contributor Award.



Photo by Excerpta Medica

What road/journey led you to this award?

I would say that the journey started almost 5 years ago. I joined the MCAA soon after having started my PhD in October 2018. At that time, I didn't know much about the Association, but I was getting interested in Science Communication thanks to the work I was doing within my ITN. Needless to say, I soon joined the Communication WG and I found some amazing people (namely: Valerie Bentivegna, Gian Maria Greco and Valentina Ferro), who were managing the Communication WG. It took a very short time for me to become an active member, and then the Vice-chair. All the first years helped me understand all the needs of the MCAA, the workflows and how important the Communication part is. Gian Maria, Valerie, and Valentina taught me a lot and day after day I got more knowledgeable about the various tasks. In 2021, I was elected Chair of the Communication WG, and I simply tried to keep up the good work that has been done in the previous year, trying to bring some innovations and trying to engage even more members of the WG but also other chapters and WGs. Today, as I am almost reaching the end of my mandate, I can say that I have built an amazing team of people who actively support the WG. Finally, the help I received (and keep receiving) from Nicoleta (vice chair), Gian Maria, and Sasha (Editor in Chief) has been fundamental for me to be able to manage all the different activities within the WG.

How will this award propel you in your future endeavors?

It will definitely push me even more in keeping up the good work that myself and the Communication WG have been doing to make sure that all the content, workshops, and events we will create in the future, will always be of high quality and relevance for all our members, but also for all the researchers and people who are connected with the MCAA. The game is definitely not over yet, within the Communication WG we have many other


ideas that we want to pursue. So we will make sure to make them happen in the best way possible.

What are your future goals?

As I said, I still have many ideas for the future, so I am definitely looking forward to making them become reality. The project that I am most excited about is our new Podcast, The Curi(e)ous Mind, which is happening very soon thanks to the support of Shanmugapriya Periyannan. So, definitely stay tuned for that! Moreover, I think that I have done a lot as a Chair of the Communication WG, and I have started so many different projects that I will be happy to leave the space to someone else to lead the group and to keep doing great things and keep making the WG grow. Needless to say, I won't disappear once my mandate is over, I will simply be involved within the MCAA in a different role.

What is your advice for MCAA?

The MCAA needs no advice in reality, we are an amazing community led by an amazing group of people. To do great things, we just have to look within our membership list, we have experts for basically every subject in the STEAM curricula which can permit us to unlock great potential. We need to keep doing what we are doing, and become even more 'professional' in the very literate sense of the term. There are many services that we can support, such as training, being a publisher, and we can become an even more valuable partner for many different EU projects to just name a few. We are ready for all of this, and I am sure we will achieve great things in the next years, and one thing is sure, the Communication WG will always play a key role.

Andrey Zhyalka 

MCAA Newsletter, Editorial Board

Postdoctoral researcher

The Netherlands Cancer Institute

zhyalka.ai@gmail.com

News from the MCAA

Solidarity and resilience in times of crises, a SAPEA event

What is a crisis, and how do we ensure we provide adequate support – social, economic, health and wellbeing – to those in need? How can societies distribute the burdens, as well as the benefits, fairly and equitably? How can a sense of solidarity help as a guiding principle, and how do we build resilience and resilient communities?

On 31st January 2023, the European Group on Ethics (EGE), Science Advice for Policy by European Academies (SAPEA) and Academia Europaea (AE) hosted a webinar named “Putting people first: how do we care for each other, build resilience and solidarity in a world in crisis?”. It was chaired by Ole Petersen, Vice-President Academia Europaea, and brought together a panel of experts to discuss the critical issues of solidarity and resilience in society, particularly considering both topics in the context of current crises and what is needed for the future. This event comes as a part of the outreach programme for the work of the European Scientific Advice Mechanism on Strategic Crisis Management in the EU. The Scientific Opinion of the Group of Chief Scientific Advisors was handed over to Commissioner Mariya Gabriel and Commissioner Janez Lenarčič in November 2022, and was supported by [SAPEA’s Evidence](#)



Photo by University of Oxford

Review Report. The European Group on Ethics published a statement at the same time.

On our panel, we had the privilege of hosting members of the EGE, the SAPEA Working Group on the report, and the German Ethics Council:

- Barbara Prainsack MAE, Professor for Comparative Policy Analysis, University of Vienna; Chair of the European Group on Ethics,
- Professor Ortwin Renn, Member of the SAPEA Working Group on Strategic Crisis Management in the EU
- Professor Nils-Eric Sahlin MAE, Professor and Chair of Medical Ethics, Lund University, Vice-Chair of the European Group on Ethics
- Professor Sigrid Graumann, Professor of Ethics and Rector of Protestant University of Applied Sciences Rhineland-Westphalia-Lippe, Member of the German Ethics Council and Chair of the Council’s working group on ‘Normative Issues of Dealing with a Pandemic’

During the webinar the panellists explored the role of values, scientific communication,

transparency in policy-making, and economic incentives. The take-home messages were as follows:

- Values guide decision-making in policy, particularly at times of crisis.
- The process of policymaking has to be clear and transparent about the values that guide it and what scientific data is used to support it.
- Resilience is a key value that has to be applied on a societal level to prevent discrimination against individuals.
- Solidarity is one of the main criteria in strategic management, yet in recent crises it has been perceived as a punishment by some sectors of the population.
- Values have been influenced by economic perspectives of efficiency and effectiveness.
- Values and their interpretations have to be re-assessed to properly address current crises and developments.

- Many societal problems come from a lack of reflection on what the underlying assumptions and values are that underpin certain policies, especially economic ones.

If you are curious and would like to find out more, a recording of the webinar is available on [YouTube](#), and a briefing paper that collates and elaborates on these key themes is available at aecardiffknowledgehub.wales. If you find this topic interesting, please keep an eye on the SAPEA website (<https://sapea.info/>) for more events and expert discussions.

Rafael Carrascosa Marzo 

Postdoctoral Research Assistant

University of Oxford

CarrascosamarzoR@cardiff.ac.uk



Image by Midjourney, prompt by Fabrizio Martina

News from the MCAA

Unpack more than just your suitcase, experiences of researchers on the go

As exciting as it sounds to be an international researcher in a prestigious programme, it comes with its own set of hurdles. We carry hopes for a better life, but being a researcher with multiple travel commitments can be mentally taxing. I would like to share with you my journey towards developing a strong emotional support system in a foreign land.

Sneha,
a personal account

Sneha is currently an Early Stage Researcher in the MSCA ITN project 'LIVE-I'. After graduating from Indian Institute of Technology and having gathered over a couple of years of engineering experience, she decided to pursue her industrial doctorate in Europe during the pandemic through the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions H2020 project. She is currently enrolled as a doctoral candidate at Technical University of Darmstadt in Germany and also works with industrial partner Powerflex SRL in Italy.

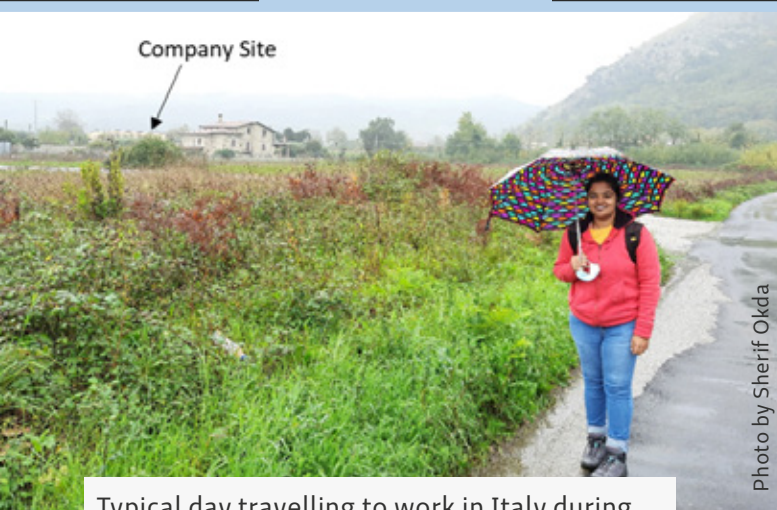
How did it all start? The Foundation Stone

For me the H2020 Marie-Curie ITN Program meant an industrial experience combined with the safe learning environment of academia. During the peak pandemic phase of July 2020, I got accepted as an Early Stage Researcher (ESR) for project LIVE-I at Technical University of Darmstadt in Germany [[CORDIS ID 860243](#)].



Photo by Aman Kumar

Moving to a country where the first language wasn't English was the first of the hurdles that were to come. Unfortunately, my German classes were all online, which made my learning more passive and made it difficult to assimilate myself into the new culture. I was homesick and exhausted from the pandemic, as all my experiences of moving to a new country had only been limited to the walls of my house. Spending quality time with friends and family online, going out on walks with my roommates, learning and comparing cultures was mostly what kept me going. This was the period that formed the foundation of my emotional and mental support system. I made a conscious decision to move in with culturally diverse roommates so that I could learn something new from them every day. Unfortunately, this formula does not work for many international students, who prefer to stay with people who are similar to their culture and are looking for groups to integrate into. I did not just unpack my two suitcases when I first came to Germany, but also my fears of starting afresh in a foreign land leaving behind friends and family in India.



Typical day travelling to work in Italy during my industrial secondment.

The Move and Test

In industrial projects, candidates are expected to spend half of their contract time in academia and the other half with an industry partner. The move was quite disappointing as I relocated to a town called Caserta in Italy during the summer of 2021, where it is rare to come across English speaking people. It is quite a challenge to find accommodation with students in a city if you have an industrial assignment. I could hardly convey my thoughts to people in broken single words of Italian and English. It felt like I was back to the person who landed from India not knowing how to greet or talk. The support system I had built in Germany was no longer there. This time I was homesick for Germany more than for my family back in India. With limited people to interact with, I noticed my mental health declining. I was tired of the monotony of work and two-dimensional virtual interactions with friends and family. At this point I had unpacked the insecurities and loneliness along with my bags.


My friend from Germany recommended that I meet with the university counselling team. I was assigned to a Counselor who would meet with me remotely every two weeks, discuss my issues and help me explore methods to organize my work and emotions. Not all methods worked for me, but it challenged my mental barrier of trying to incorporate new changes in my life.

This phase was certainly a test of the foundation of my mental support system that I had built on a foreign land, and when I went looking for something similar in another I was unsuccessful in complementing it with new people.

It's a long journey ahead...

Now that I am back in Germany and the pandemic has receded, I have found solace in keeping up my physical fitness and ensured a proper schedule to plan my PhD path. Life in the last couple of years was about fitting things and emotions in the two suitcases I've brought with me from home. Each time I unpacked my stuff in a new city, it was also an offload of huge expectations of a new phase of life. What I learnt from this experience is to be patient with oneself and recognize that sometimes, an open conversation with a confidante could lead you to the right emotional support seeking path.

Today, universities have a well-organized system to take care of mental health issues discreetly. Challenges still remain when international students get into a short-term mobility assignment. They're mostly moving around without any immediate family and emotional support, and in some cases all alone. Attempting to appoint a dedicated welfare representative on the part of the Marie Curie Association to assist researchers through such difficult transitions would be a breath of fresh air for the candidates. I share here my experiences with a hope to start a conversation among the project officers and peers having similar experiences during their doctoral phases. Being part of such a prestigious program has shown me its own set of accolades and challenges. But seldom do people know the depths of enriching experiences and hurdles that one goes through in discovering themselves.

Sneha Rupa Nampally 

Early Stage Researcher

Technical University of Darmstadt

sneha_rupa.nampally@tu-darmstadt.de

MCAA Annual Conference 2023

Science blog: a way to uncover emotions behind data

Scientists are usually excited about effectively communicating their research to the public, and are curious about writing scientific text in a simple way-. Such curious researchers joined the science communication training workshop at the MCAA annual conference onsite or online. What are their learnings and reflections from the workshop?

Good stories drive humans – they engage, empower, and are memorable. Why not communicate good stories about science? Several researchers find communicating science challenging, but sharing stories through blogging is one of the effective solutions for sharing narratives that combine evidence with authenticity. To make scientists more comfortable in sharing their stories, the European Citizen Science project organized the training workshop, “Science Communication: How to create a successful research blog,” in collaboration with the MCAA Communication Working Group, the University of Córdoba and guided by Science Matters.

The workshop happened on a sunny day in Córdoba, but in a cold room of Palacio de Congresos. Amongst chocolates, group activities, and canvas templates, Greta Faccio, the mentor of the on-site workshop, highlighted that “Science blogs are still powerful tools to help scientists increase career exposure and build their persona.” Greta is an expert in science communication who earned a PhD in Genetics and currently works with intellectual property and scientific consultancy. She introduced the topic, describing that a

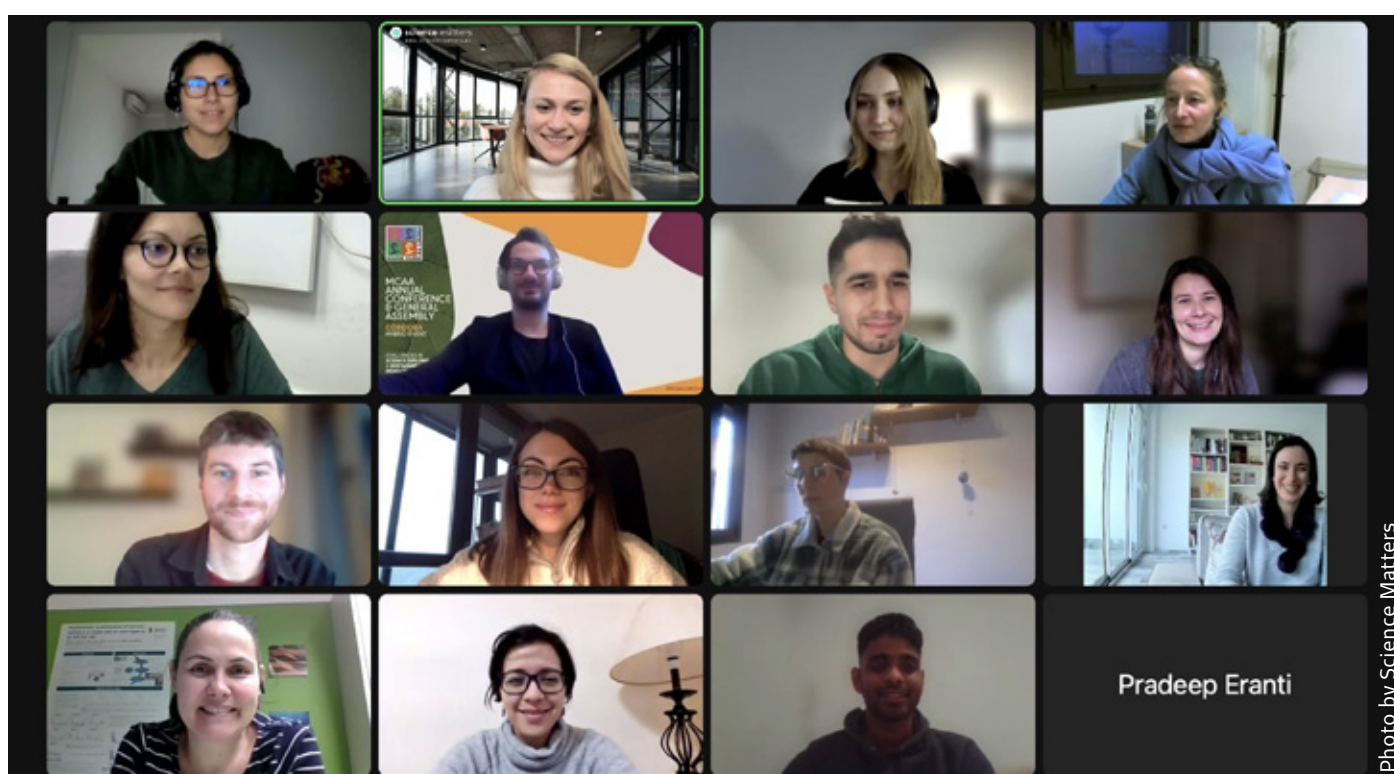


Photo by Science Matters



Photo by Gian Maria Greco

research blog not only raises your visibility in the scientific community, but also facilitates science collaboration and positively influences science budgets. Nadine Bongaerts, the cofounder of Science Matters, led the training of the online version of the workshop.

Thinking of writing as a problem to be solved, we can divide the challenge of writing a research blog into parts: defining the topic of the blog post, the message to communicate, and the audience is the first and foremost step, followed by a rational structure with a clear title, introduction, main body, and conclusion. When deciding the content, we should use storytelling to keep the reader emotionally connected to our story. Consider the side of the audience and your motivation for writing a piece. Trainers advised that the introduction “needs to be specific, brief, and interesting” to grab the reader’s attention.

One of the proposals in the workshop was to write a short blog with a maximum of 400 words under the trainers’ guidance. It was challenging to suggest the blog’s goal, expectations, and target audience during the exercise. Still, it was nothing compared to translating complex scientific terms into simple concepts anyone could understand.

Sometimes oversimplification of the message can lead to misunderstanding and transmitting wrong information to the reader, so it must be done carefully.

But how to make sure your text is comprehensible to any audience? There are plenty of services on the internet you access for free, like Read-able.com or Hemingway Editor. Both of them determine what grade reading level your text belongs to based on its complexity. Another suggestion for an accessible research blog is to avoid jargon but use metaphors, similes, and analogies to describe something which is more familiar to a lay audience.

In addition to the text, the layout of a blog post is another crucial aspect of its attractiveness. We live in a visual world surrounded by colors, lights, and unique patterns, which also need to be reflected in the communication piece. Proposing titles like “Everything You Need To Know About” or “No One Will Tell You” blog post titles can bring more readers to your blog and increase the audience, since the beginnings are hard when you start a new blog. To make the data easier to understand, scientific graphics can even be incorporated into a text creatively. All

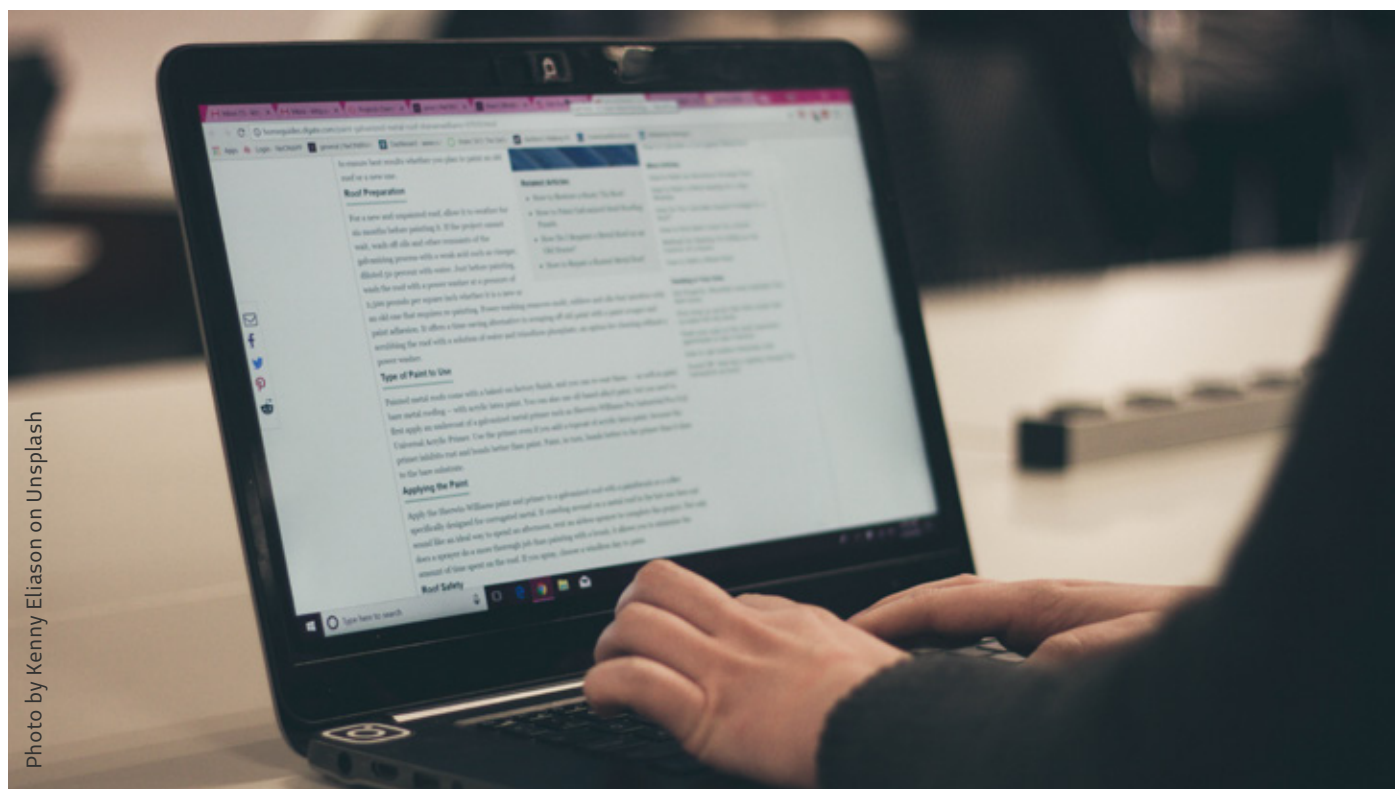



Photo by Kenny Eliason on Unsplash

the recommendations for writing a successful blog come with the practice of writing. The constant exercise of writing will make your blog a success.

The organizing team was amazed by the outcome of this training session and invited workshop attendees to submit their learnings during the workshop to be published on the MCAA blog for interested scicomms. The attendees immediately appreciated the idea: "I really welcome the opportunity to publish our content as part of a MCAA blog series. It is a great way to encourage people to continue with their blog writing and to communicate our science! A simple but great idea!" Another attendee shared: "I have been thinking about writing a blog post but don't know how to start, or you don't feel confident to do the first steps, this workshop is the right place. You will acquire the skills needed to start."

Science matters, and so does its communication. How we interact with others


can change the meaning of the information and make people trust the scientist. Blogging can be an excellent beginning for those who want to advocate for an important cause. Peer reviews are essential to share scientific data between scientists, but showing our contribution to society is easier with good stories. **Everyone has their own story, and it's time to share yours.**

Ana Paula Mendonça 

MCAA Newsletter, Editorial Board

ana.mendonca@unipd.it

Twitter: @ana_paulamm2

Pradeep Eranti 

MCAA Newsletter, Editorial Board

Early Stage Researcher, Université Paris Cité

Twitter: @pradeeperanti

MCAA

Annual Conference 2023

Highlights of the sessions "Sustainability of research management: Challenge + opportunity" and "How can we reward researchers for open access?"

During the first day of the MCAA Annual Conference 2023 in Cordoba, parallel sessions 4 and 7 on the sustainability of research management and the process of rewarding researchers for open access were held. This article provides some key takeaways from both sessions. Although these sessions addressed different topics, they were interconnected by a common discussion on definitions, challenges, and recognition.

The first session on sustainability of research management was partly organised by members of the Research Management Working Group chaired by Jonas Krebs. It had the objective to address how developing research management can contribute to making research institutions a better place to perform research.

This session was chaired by Hakim Ferria, vice-chair of the Working Group and Projects Manager in France, who focused the debate around very relevant questions such as:

- What are the duties and tasks of a research manager? And their qualifications?
- How is research management structured?
- What is the significance of research management today, and in what ways can it help address various issues?
- What are the challenges faced by research managers in Eastern Europe compared to Western Europe?
- How do people envision the future of research management and what recommendations can be made for the future?

The panel was composed of Zlatuše Novotná (CEITEC Masaryk University, Alliance4Life), Eitan Segev (Hebrew University), Nik Claesen (European Association of Research Managers and Administrators - EARMA), and Irène Arrata (University of Strasbourg) research managers from diverse regions and with various backgrounds, which allowed for a wealth of pertinent and well-considered responses.



Chair and members of the panel PS4: Irène Arrata and Zlatuše Novotná (online), Hakim Ferria, Eitan Segev, Nik Claesen.

Photo by Valentín Gámiz

One of the main challenges identified is the lack of recognition of the profession, which affects the recruitment of qualified personnel. Research management involves multiple tasks and requires skills such as communication, empathy, and intercultural intelligence. The discussion also covered the need for professionalisation and training to cover various tasks such as recruitment, updates, contact with institutions, and planning workshops or training. It was also noted that the role of research management became more and more essential during the pandemic because of the need for numerous modifications in the project planning and the need for adaptation to the ongoing conditions. The panellists recommended building networks for research managers locally and internationally. They highlighted the importance of making the role of research management more visible, advocating for more recognition of the profession, and emphasised the problem of short contracts. The project [RM ROADMAP](#) together with local initiatives are notably participating in this change. Finally, recommendations for the future focused on the system recognizing the

value and need for real change. The members of the panel, together with the interacting audience, recommended translating the good results from initiatives into policy making and ensuring the voice of the research management community was heard.

The second session "How can we reward researchers for open access?" raised awareness on the well established, yet sometimes incoherent, way of rewarding the choice of open science by researchers.

This session was chaired by Giulia Malaguarana, Secretary of MCAA and open science ambassador. She firstly gave the floor to Brian Cahill, former chair of the MCAA and EuroScience Board member to present the [Open and Universal Science Project \(OPUS\)](#), the project at the genesis of this session. He pointed out that according to him "Open science is the only way to do science."

The panel was composed, besides Brian Cahill, of Sebastian Dahle (Eurodoc), Claire Viney (Vitae), Gareth O'Neill (EOSCF), all partners of the OPUS project and open

Photo by Valentín Gámiz



Chair and members of the panel PS7 : Giulia Malaguarana, Brian Cahill, Sebastian Dahle, Claire Viney (online), Gareth O'Neill (online)

science ambassadors, which allowed for well-argued discussions on indicators and metrics to reward open science.

However, one challenge was emphasised: it is important to define a matrix and framework for the rules on publishing and open access propositions. Additionally, there was a discussion about the inequalities in costs and how this can come back to the assessment of research. There are many free open access journals out there, yet many are disregarded by universities purely based on their impact factor. This can lead to researchers being hesitant to publish in them, effectively stimulating submissions to and, as a result, sales of large commercially profitable journals. It's important to promote and reward open access publishing in all forms, including the development of new assessment metrics of their research impact.


About this, it was shared that:

"Research assessment should take several activities into account, such as teaching. The assessment system shouldn't be focused on numbers but should always be qualitative" and "Academia is focused on metrics that

don't have a value in the real world, so we need to find a way that researchers are rewarded for scientific excellence but also transferable skills."

It was great to see that the attendees were engaging through an interactive questionnaire with the topic of open science and discussing the various challenges and opportunities associated with it.

Overall, it's clear that there is still work to be done to fully realise the potential of open science in research. This work needs to be approached from multiple perspectives, including that of researchers, publishers, and funders. It's encouraging to see that discussions around open science are taking place and that efforts are being made to improve the current system.

Christina Makoundou 

MCAA Newsletter, Editorial Board

Twitter: @Christina__Mak

MCAA

Annual Conference 2023

Balancing Family & Career: Can the MSCA pave a better way?

Many researchers struggle to start a family. This is often exacerbated by mobility. Providing a family-friendly environment and working conditions have several advantages, e.g., attracting female talent and improving mental health in academia. This session addressed such issues and investigated how can the MSCA, through science diplomacy, lead by example and pave the way to a better research work environment.

"Mobility aspect is an extra challenge for all of us with a family," stated Magdalini Theodoridou at the session. She is one of the founding members of the Genders, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Working Group. The MSCA will launch a series of events, where everyone can report on conditions individuals encounter at a host location to help MSCA to come up with enhanced guidelines for participating institutions. Also, the MSCA now follows an inclusive definition of a family, including various forms of living together.

Gender equality is a core European value

To apprise the audience of the attitude of MSCA, Senem Sanal-Erginel, a policy officer at the Unit in charge of the MSCA at the European Commission (EC), presented current strategies. "Gender equality is central to the European Commission's agenda and a core European value. Within the Horizon 2020 scheme, the MSCA are supporting a growing

number of women, currently on average 44%. However, women are still underrepresented in higher academic and decision making positions," described Senem. According to the latest survey, female researchers tend to be less mobile, especially those with children. Also, they often leave academia for industry and many women report limited family/child support from host organizations.

"Therefore, Horizon Europe (2021-2027) is fully considering all gender aspects, including gender balance as a core criterion on all levels for transparent recruitment. Now, all institutions need the Gender Equality Plan to be eligible to apply in MSCA calls with deadlines in 2022 and onwards. The MSCA is requiring measures promoting equal opportunities, including equal pay, work-life balance, broader definition of family recognizing LGBTI+ couples and families ensures full access to all allowances, part-time work, or long-term leave and special needs allowances, even if the status changes within the duration of the project.

Likewise, MSCA is promoting female role models. Next, outreach actions stimulate the interest of children, youngsters and in particular girls and women in research careers. [New MSCA Guidelines for Supervision](#) encourage safeguarding of personal well-being, healthy work-life balance, and informing about available support systems," describes Senem' plans for improvement.



Members of the panel (from left): Harihar Jaishree Subrahmaniam, Stéphanie Gauttier, Senem Sanal-Erginel, Magdalini Theodoridou.

Happy researchers perform better

Stéphanie Gauttier is an assistant professor at Grenoble Ecole de Management and a vice-chair of the COST action ReMO (Researchers mental observatory). "If you have any caring responsibility, you are twice at risk of a mental health disorder," shared Stéphanie. "Conflict between workload and a personal life makes you less motivated for your work and your performance decreases. Therefore, if we want our researchers to be happy, we need to help them to accomplish their caring responsibilities," continues Stéphanie.

Caring for someone, not only children, further complicates mobility as well as short-term contracts within the MSCA scheme. "Our survey showed that if people with responsibilities fulfil them, it will satisfy them. Based on our survey, marriage is beneficial for mental health," summarizes Stéphanie and admits that so far they have problems without solutions. "However, if we enable human beings to flourish, they will be better researchers in the end," she concludes.

We are all human beings in the end


Being a first generation academic, Harihar Jaishree Subrahmaniam has been an active supporter for children and women education through working with various NGOs. Jaishree is currently MSCA individual fellow in Denmark and a chair of the MCAA Policy Working Group.

"Only if we understand, can we care. Only if we care, will we help. Only if we help, we shall be saved." Jaishree quoted Jane Goodall with the idea that: "We are all human beings at the end of the day and we have to consider things that go beyond our own research."

"We, as researchers, should not only be advancing our careers, but also contribute to improving the academic culture", Jaishree adds. "To do so, we need to help researchers to understand policies. The role of MCAA should be bridging the gap between the level of European commission and individual researchers. There must be a good implementation strategy. The commission's rulebook should be available in the accessible language, understandable, with known methods, channels etc, but also visible for researchers to be able to use it", points out Jaishree.

Share your stories

To conclude the panel, Magdalini commented: "We should highlight the benefits and the challenges of mobile researchers with family for all countries. If, for instance, parental leave is not inclusively available in specific geolocations, then this should be communicated clearly so that our researchers can choose accordingly, before finding themselves in a difficult situation. Communicating the current situation should bring motivation for participating countries to improve their conditions". But what are the next steps that EC should follow and how to enhance the rulebook? Everyone is encouraged to contact [Magdalini Theodoridou](#) directly or via a [questionnaire](#).

Eliška Koňářková 

MCAA Newsletter, Editorial Board

Postdoctoral fellow

Twitter: @EliskaKonarik

MCAA

Annual Conference 2023

Careers after MSCA: Your career path should work for you, not the other way round

What are your career options? And how can you benefit from your MSCA experience? It's inevitable to see a cloudy road when researchers need to decide the next step of their career, and so, the MCAA opens the stage to discuss Careers after MSCA, sharing their stories and providing insights, suggestions and motivation.



Photo by Monstera on Pexels

Being a scientist nowadays is just one of the careers to follow. Nevertheless, the MSCA fellowship is an important step for most researchers. "Over 90% of all former fellows considered that the MSCA fellowship had a good or very good impact on their professional development," stated Anouk Lafortune, policy officer at the European Commission, quoting a recent report on the results of surveys conducted with former MSCA fellows (1). And continued: "A majority of them continue to work in academia after their MSCA project, but many pursue a career in other sectors, including in industry, international or public administrations. Unsurprisingly, the highest share working outside academia after their fellowship is found among employed graduates from the ITN European Industrial Doctorate programmes"

Linear careers are not as common

Ornela Bardhi completed her industrial MSCA doctorate, and later worked one year as a scientific advisor for the Ministry of the Ministry of Health and Social Protection in Albania. Currently, she is a real-world data analyst and researcher in a private company, and Chair of the MCAA Western Balkan Chapter.

For Ornela, the process of choosing the next step has its drawbacks. Ornela asks: "Who

is the owner of the property rights? PhD students typically know nothing about such an issue, especially in a new country". On the other hand, she agrees that many skills are very much transferable, especially soft skills: management of projects, contacting partners or coordinators. "It is just about switching the mindset. And a couple of webinars helps, too", Ornela advises. "Even though the MSCA PhD did not help me to acquire specific skills to work for the government, the MCAA network helped me to get all the extra information through the co-organization of online classes attended by alumni", she explains.

Ornela finished her speech with a couple of ideas and motivations: "MSCA fellows tend to have very diverse career paths. You are allowed to change your mind, to update your career plan. But prepare for life after PhD already during the PhD. Your career path should work for you, not the other way round. Linear careers are not as common as before, take advantage of obtaining inside knowledge from other sectors".

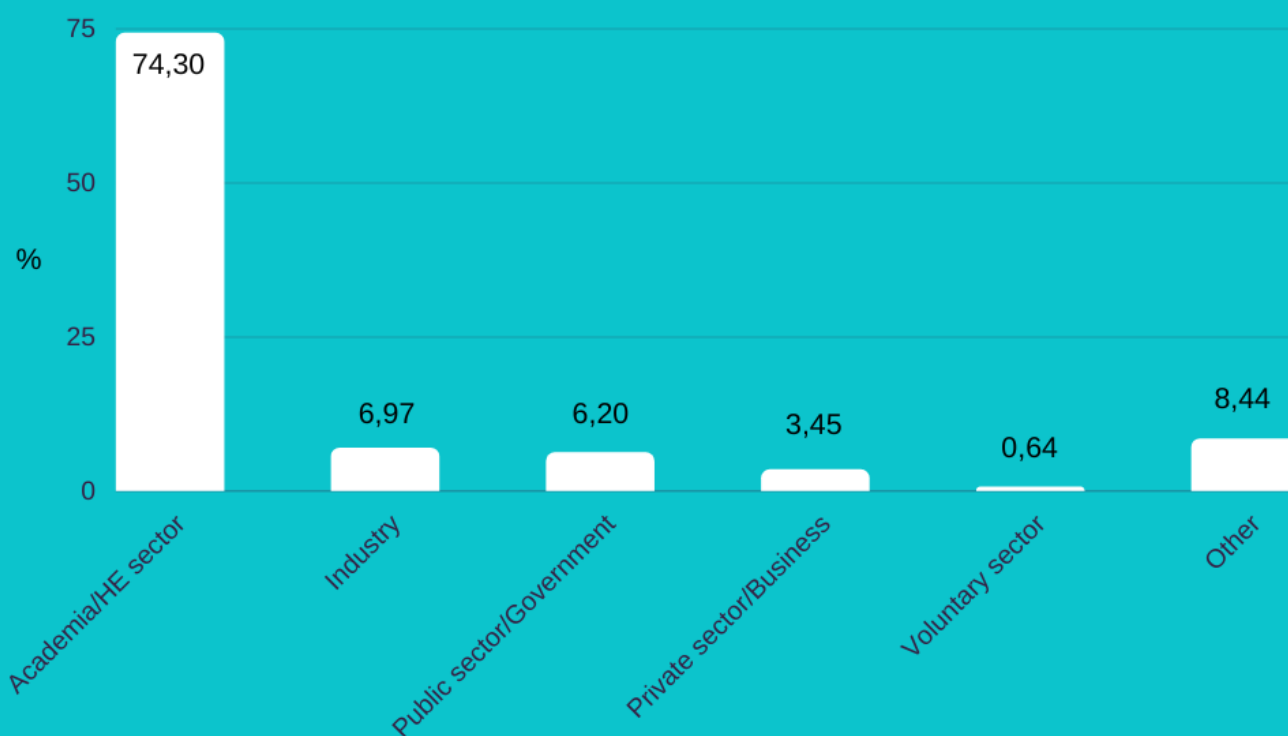
Prepare an action plan

Joaquín Capablo Sesé studied chemical engineering at the University of Zaragoza, with an Erasmus experience in Germany and an internship at Bosch. After his PhD, he became an MSCA fellow in Italy. Afterwards, Joaquín was recruited by the Bosch Group in Spain. "In academia, you are often aiming for 100% quality. However, in the industry 95% is fine, especially when achieved one week in advance", he summarizes his experience.

Currently, Joaquín is working for Campus Iberus and is the Chair of the MCAA Spain-Portugal Chapter. He depicts common challenges: "Researchers need a perspective, contracts longer than 2 or 3 years. Also, they would benefit from workshops on time management, grant management or work-life balance. They need to know how to deal with their supervisors". Joaquín presented examples of good practice used in the MSCA COFUND Iberus Experience where they help incoming international researchers with integration.

SECTORS OF MAIN PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITY BASED ON 1564 RESPONSES

Alumni employment according to the MCAA Major Survey 2020 (HE - Higher education)





Joaquín Capablo Sesé
- panel member

Joaquín also gave several pieces of advice: "Think about your personal career development plan, about self assessment. Look for opportunities outside of academia, define the skills you need to improve. If you want to reach a goal, prepare an action plan. If you leave academia, you can go back. Even though you typically do not publish in industry, you learn other sets of skills". With this said, Joaquín also adds that we should change the system of evaluation in academia.


Spending time abroad opens mind

Corinne Portioli is a biotechnologist by training who worked on multidisciplinary neurological projects. She started in Genoa and afterwards she received a MSCA global fellowship to work in Houston, USA. Later, she joined the MSCA-COFUND programme. "In

this project, I could unify all my background topics - neuroscience, biotechnology and drug delivery. Also for me, networking on an interdisciplinary intersectional level was important. And for global IF (Individual Fellowship) - it opens your mind when spending time abroad, you do not get this with national fellowships", she points out.

Corrine is both, MSCA alumnus and fellow. Both projects helped in her professional career and so far she has chosen to stay in academia. "IF the project gives you more autonomous possibilities. On the other hand, in COFUND, the PI has more power as a grant holder", she compares both experiences. Corinne is also an MCAA board member and a certified project manager.

When we decide to become scientists, we are inspired by the stories of others. Therefore, promoting a dialogue about new pathways for scientific careers shows us other perspectives and different ways to reinvent. The results of the MSCA fellows surveys and the panel discussion, showed the MSCA experience has a strong impact on the career trajectories and employability.

Eliška Koňářiková 

MCAA Newsletter, Editorial Board

Postdoctoral fellow

Twitter: @EliskaKonarik

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MCAA

Annual Conference 2023

One size does NOT fit all: Reality of a diverse world

The socio-economic disruptions experienced by the world today have exposed the fragility of societal cooperation and crisis management, magnifying the vulnerabilities of our complex and divided world. As humanity continues to face global challenges, it calls for a fresh take of unified solutions from multilateral sectors and diverse communities.



A French-born American novelist, Anaïs Nin, once said: **"We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are."** We can look at the same things but see them differently. We can hear the same language but understand different meanings. **Our perception of the world is inevitably coloured by our cultural experiences.** While cultural diversity increases societal complexity, it enhances the scope of human understanding and appreciation of unique issues and offers a window of opportunity to seek innovative solutions. Just as a country's culture unifies its people and sets societal expectations; the academic institutions bear the responsibility of inculcating diverse and inclusive values in the education system.

During the MCAA 2023 Annual Conference, I moderated a session on the importance of

cultural diversity in the context of science communication led by Joana Moscovici, research culture by Karen Stroobants and science diplomacy by Mostafa Moonir Shawrav.

Communicating science effectively, can improve behaviours and channel societal progress. However, as stated by Joana, providing **fair access** to available information is instrumental in **"building bridges and integrating diverse representation."** Likewise, as Karen mentioned, "an international research culture is a strength of science." The diverse pool of talent inspires ideas and creativity, not just within academia, but society, as a whole. And as emphatically quoted by Mostafa, **"understanding cultural differences, i.e., people's unique needs, mindset and communication styles,** are key to every diplomatic negotiation."

A diverse society not only dispels negative stereotypes and biases, but broadens our understanding, enriching society with values of empathy and compassion, driving societal innovation and economic growth. However, **diversity and complexity** are like yin and yang. One cannot exist without the other, and both contribute to the society equally.

The inability to comprehend differences in people's ideologies and needs can create misunderstandings and conflicts. In academic environments, such conflicts may harm individuals, hamper projects, research quality, collaborations, evoke toxic behaviour and abuse. In global diplomatic situations, the stakes are higher and unresolved conflicts can even result in wars or socio-economic crises.

Although the research culture landscape is slowly turning, creating acceptance around academic cultural diversity remains challenging. This is because the academic career progression remains independent of the academics' people-skills (such

as communication, collaboration, and networking), and instead, focuses on results, publications and funding successes. Embedding values- and people-based training as a part of compulsory curriculum and increasing accountability, could shift the power dynamics and create equity. While we cannot appease everyone, identifying and addressing our inherent biases and developing skills to communicate differences with respect, is a start.

The way we 'communicate science' can also promote (or restrict) cultural diversity. As pointed out by Joana, over 75% of the world does not speak English. But as most publications are in English, it starkly reduces the reach of scientific endeavours, globally. Communication is about creating a dialogue, which implies that as researchers disseminating science, we need to be more inclusive. This entails being sensitive about language, images, font, resources etc., which would enable more people to access, utilise and interact with the published information.



Panellists during PS11 (from left): Mostafa Moonir Shawrav, Karen Stroobants, Joana Moscovo and Pooja Khurana.

Panellists during PS11 (from left): Mostafa Moonir Shawrav, Pooja Khurana (moderator), Joana Moscovici and Karen Stroobants

Photo by Ana Paula Mendonça




However, in a culturally diverse world, it could be challenging to communicate contextually sensitive issues (like abortion laws, animal research etc.). But as Joana articulated- **"just because it is not easy, it does not mean it should not be done."** It is important to address sensitive issues in ways that focus on building 'trust' by **sharing unpopular opinions** and participating in **active listening.**" Karen discussed the importance of being mindful of the shifting **"societal boundaries of acceptance"**. Embracing differences in opinions can unblock the rigid communication patterns and contribute towards personal and societal progress. Mostafa reminded us about the importance of 'soft power' and

understanding differences in the context of science diplomacy. **"Building bridges comes with trust, trust comes by understanding one another and the context. We do not necessarily need to agree, but 'listen' to each other."**

Interestingly, many audience questions centred around researcher well-being and conflict management. Approximately 80% indicated that they were not comfortable in communicating conflict. They raised concerns about **"lack of efficient ways of reporting conflict and abuse"** at their universities. They also felt threatened about jeopardising academic progression if they chose to 'speak-up'. The strong sentiment of "harassment and not belonging" amongst the international audience highlighted the urgent need for systemic cultural awareness, effective communication, and conflict management.

Although academics should feel safe and deserving of having their opinions heard (especially if their rights are being violated), this **must not be** misconstrued as their responsibility, alone. Tangible academic or societal changes that are culturally inclusive, are only possible with shared allyship between institutes and community members. **One Size (or solution) does NOT fit all and so, the 'context' of an issue, is as important as the 'course of action'.**

Pooja Khurana 

MCAA Newsletter, Editorial Board
poojakhurana.official@gmail.com

Twitter: @PK_ActNow

MCAA Annual Conference 2023

Brain Drain or Gain: Inventory of Challenges and Solutions

The expert panel comprised of Helena Gómez Macpherson, Jenny Lind Elmaco, Carmen Mendez De Castro and Slaven Misljncevic discuss the factors governing brain circulation, the challenges faced by researchers due to barriers in mobility and the systemic changes required to achieve equitable and sustainable brain circulation, within EU and around the world.

“Don’t ask me where I am from, ask me where I am local”

Jenny Lind Elmaco used this famous quote by writer Taiye Selasi to highlight the perspective of the global scientific diaspora. A research career involves constant learning. Mobility is a crucial instrument enabling career growth for early stage as well as senior researchers. However, this mobility can often be the cause of an imbalanced distribution of talent and can steadily erode the scientific talent in certain regions.

Helena Gómez Macpherson, moderator of the panel discussion, opened the session by reframing the concept of brain drain as brain circulation, making a clear distinction

between the benefits arising out of mobility for researchers, science and society and the challenges it poses at each of these levels when imbalanced.

For mobility to be successful, there needs to be effective communication between the incoming researcher and their host institution. Carmen Mendez De Castro emphasized that researchers do not exist in a void. An incoming researcher requires the right support system for both their personal and professional life. Researchers in turn need to be fully aware of allied issues such as financial remuneration, tax and pension laws, social support structures etc, before they can make an informed choice about moving. Initiating and mediating these conversations at an early stage can save precious time, energy and money for both the researcher and the host institution. This applies equally to those researchers considering moving back to their home country. The panel highlighted both ongoing as well as new features in Euraxess to provide reliable and user-friendly resources to facilitate mobility of researchers.

Mobility can sometimes create barriers to researchers and their career progress. The panel highlighted their own personal experiences with national barriers to mobility. Some states/institutions operate from a fear of brain drain, often imposing state service requirements for researchers leaving the country on state-sponsored mobility which acts as a deterrent. Additionally, researchers may also have difficulty getting recognition for degrees obtained in other countries. This lack of harmonization leaves the researcher locked out of opportunities and may require legal recourse. Another determinant in whether a researcher returns to their home country is the availability of opportunities and jobs that match their skill set and expertise. Society as a whole needs to be brought on board with the advantages of brain circulation. This includes everyone from politicians to businesses to lawmakers. Co-operation from all these stakeholders is

necessary to increase the attractiveness of countries to global talent pools.

Slaven Misljncevic provided a system-level view of this issue from the perspective of the European Commission. Action 4 of ERA policy agenda, which focuses on promoting attractiveness of research careers and providing balanced talent circulation, has the support of 25 out of 27 member states. For effective action, we first require effective understanding of the triggers behind imbalanced brain circulation, which the EC classifies under 4 broad categories

- Recruitment, working conditions and career progression opportunities
- System level factors such as stability of RnD funding, long term RnD strategy, lack of coordination at institutional, national and cross-border decision-makers.
- Research environment including research infrastructure, training etc.
- Research excellence factors that foster recognition

Socio-economic factors can be especially resistant to change and require significant political will and financial investment to overcome. The horizon Europe budget has increased support to MSCA actions with incentives to boost inter-sector cooperation

and balanced brain circulation. Existing instruments like MSCA and Euraxess are being supplemented with new initiatives such as the RESAVER pension fund, which creates a European pension fund to foster mobility of researchers. An observatory of research careers is being developed along with OECD to gain a comprehensive understanding of the issues affecting brain circulation. ERA hubs, makes EU funding available to member states for the development of local ecosystems that are interconnected and harmonious across borders, to help reduce disparities across countries.

At the end of the day, brain circulation is a complex issue that spans all the levels from an individual and goes up to national and international levels. Each of these levels are interconnected and therefore require a concerted and comprehensive approach. It starts with the recognition of the positive impact that cross-border dialogue, exchange of views and expertise can have not only on science but society as a whole. There is a significant will to find a solution, however, we need to sustain this momentum to truly make a difference.

Namrata Iyer 

MCAA Newsletter, Editorial Board



Maria Pérez Lloret and the expert panel featuring Helena Gómez Macpherson, Jenny Lind Elmaco, Carmen Méndez De Castro and Slaven Misljncevic (joined virtually)

MCAA Annual Conference 2023

Researchers' Mental Health and wellbeing: the dialogue has started, but a long way ahead!

The problem is systemic, and we can do better

In the academic research environment, we often hear many anecdotal experiences that it is not all well. We often notice that people come to work with suboptimal moods, underperform, or do not cheer up. Does it need to be like this? Can we do something to change the status quo?

A session was organized at the MCAA's annual conference to discuss how researchers and research communities can contribute to local research environments to improve wellbeing. Gabor Kismihok moderated the session with panelists Mathias Schroijsen, Stéphanie Gauttier, Stefan Mol, Mayya Sundukova, and Christian Weber. The panelists shared insights and activities from Researcher Mental Health Observatory (ReMO) COST Action and related European projects: Online, open learning recommendations and mentoring towards Sustainable research CAREers (OSCAR-AI) and Advancing sustainable research careers for graduate students through training in mental wellbeing, open science, and communication skills (OEduverse).

Research shows that around 32-42% of people working in academic environments are at risk of having or developing a common psychiatric disorder (Levecque et al., 2017). Some of the common factors linked include the work-family interface, job demands and job control, the supervisor's leadership style, team decision-making culture, and the perception of a career outside academia. Gabor Kismihok, ReMO Chair, presented quotes from a recent survey among Hungarian PhD students, more or less revealing the kind of research environment we are in; the students think: "I feel guilty and anxious all the time because I feel like I'm not doing my work well enough," "I feel that after the PhD I will have almost no knowledge of anything that is useful in the job market," "Even my extended family or close circle of friends fail to recognize the value of research work," "My working hours are not flexible. In the evening I put my children to bed, then I have time for my "intellectual" tasks, but either I fall asleep or I can manage them, but then after 2-3 hours of sleep the clock is already ringing, because at 8am I have to be ready in my work uniform at the Institute. It's very soul-crushing", and "There is no differentiation on

the basis of results/performance, which is not a motivating environment" (Kismihók, 2021). These observations point toward the systemic nature of the problem. We need to act now to change this status quo.

Career development could be a positive direction/solution

When we think about mental health and wellbeing, training is one of the essential components to focus on. Training should be personalized and also focus on mental health and career development. How can we provide accessible training opportunities to all researchers? OSCAR-AI's eDoer platform, an Erasmus plus project, provides courses and mentoring with three main pillars: personalized AI-based recommendations platform to aid researchers in career development skills, facilitate reflection sharing on the career development, and provide psychological support to mitigate the stressful aspects of the academic environment. The free access eDoer platform is available as a web-based and mobile application for users to train on stress

management, personal goal setting, work-life balance, and career planning. OEduverse (<http://oeduverse.eu>) is another ErasmusPlus project that provides training material to take control of one's mental health situation and have agency over the suboptimal environment.

Voice out your opinion

One of the essential steps to solving a problem is to understand it. Are mental health problems brought about primarily by systemic, cultural, or individual factors? Can we indeed attribute most of the causes of burnout to the organization, as some claimed? To answer these questions, among others, ReMO Survey SIG (Special Interest Group) will collect data and evidence as to what are the working conditions within institutions across Europe; they set themselves the goal of launching the largest-ever benchmark on mental health in European academia (and beyond) through ReMO's COST action network spanning 40 countries. This survey aims to explore the state of mental health across institutions and countries, the steps



Photo by Valentín Gámiz

Photo by Valentin Gámiz



taken to nourish, protect, and sustain the mental health of researchers, and what policy-level support is in place. Similarly, ReMO's WG1 tries to address the systemic level of the mental health problem. For example, they aim to create a comprehensive overview of each country's mental health and related factors based on the collaborative process of managing our national policy briefs and capacity building by bringing different stakeholders together at local and international levels. We all need to voice our opinion through surveys and participate in the outcome of this mission. If you are interested in helping with the dissemination effort of Surveys, please contact Stefan (surveys@mariecuriealumni.eu). If you are interested in contributing to the ReMO policy briefs, please write to brian.cahill@tib.eu.

Be the change you want to see

We often see fellow researchers end up in research labs with suboptimal conditions. We want to help them and change the status quo but are unsure where to start and how to address the situation. To address the situation, you need not travel this path to change alone and end up burned out. You can find like-minded people in your surroundings and work towards a common goal. The ReMO ambassador program aims to train people who envision themselves as wellbeing ambassadors to advocate and make some change with the required support. It also trains communities for more mental health awareness. The program is open to early career researchers and senior researchers, research managers, administration people, and university personnel involved in mental health and psychological therapy because they are all stakeholders at different levels and can do something about the situation. The program includes understanding mental health at general and individual levels and how we can address it at doctoral school, university, and policy-making levels.

Researchers' mental health and wellbeing are the most undermined issues that need attention and a remedy framework. There are multiple stakeholders involved and also multiple possible ways available to reach the goal, but we need to ACT NOW!

Pradeep Eranti 

MCAA Newsletter, Editorial Board

Twitter: @pradeeperanti

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MCAA Annual Conference 2023

Capacity building in open research in peer-led global and distributed community

Open Life Science (OLS) is a training and mentoring program in open science that builds a peer-led global, diverse, and inclusive community. This virtual program consists of training calls on various aspects of open science, one-to-one mentoring, and spaces for communication and practice sharing. OLS alumni are welcome to come back as mentors and are provided training and support. Though OLS was incubated as a life science-focused initiative in 2019, it has rapidly expanded beyond to cover various domains of science and research. OLS has grown a large pool of mentors and experts to support virtually any area and provide participants with hands-on skill training.

Widening inequality in access to scientific and technological resources hinders achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Open science, by making the research process more transparent, reproducible, and inclusive, is being increasingly recognized as an essential contributor to sustainable research practice. Indeed, UNESCO has been supporting the shift to open science by consulting multiple stakeholders and issuing the Recommendation on Open Science (adopted in November 2021), providing a framework with a universal definition, shared standards, values, and principles of open science. Furthermore, in the summer of 2022, UNESCO launched a Global Call for Best Practices in Open Science.

New norms and behaviors often arise in bottom-up or grassroots initiatives, inciting and complementing top-down policy changes in building the culture change. Open Life Science (OLS) is a community-oriented non-profit organization that promotes open, inclusive, and equitable research. OLS, which was incubated via the Mozilla Open Leaders initiative in 2019, and in 2022, is an internationally recognized training and mentoring platform to gather structured training and mentoring for academics, researchers, undergraduates, and other stakeholders working on participatory projects. For that, OLS provides resources, peer networks, and expert consulting to build open projects, establish/lead teams and become multipliers of open research in their networks. The essential requirement for joining this free program is a curiosity for open science and collaborative/ team research.

What does capacity building in open science look like? As of 2022, OLS has almost 500 +

community members across six continents and countries across the Global South and North. On the 27th of February 2023, OLS started its seventh cohort, which will run for 16 weeks. All participants - often teams and research groups - work on an open science project with guidance from dedicated mentors and experts from the community. The program is entirely virtual, and alumni of previous cohorts are welcome to come back as mentors or just stay in touch with the community.

An Open Life Science cohort journey starts with participants applying to the program. They are then matched with mentors based on their interests, expertise, and time zone compatibility. Mentors and mentees meet regularly every two weeks. In these meetings, mentors provide guidance and support to help mentees achieve their goals. In addition, throughout the program, mentees are engaged in training opportunities, such as interactive video calls and skill-up workshops, and encouraged to interact with the entire cohort, engaging in group discussions and providing

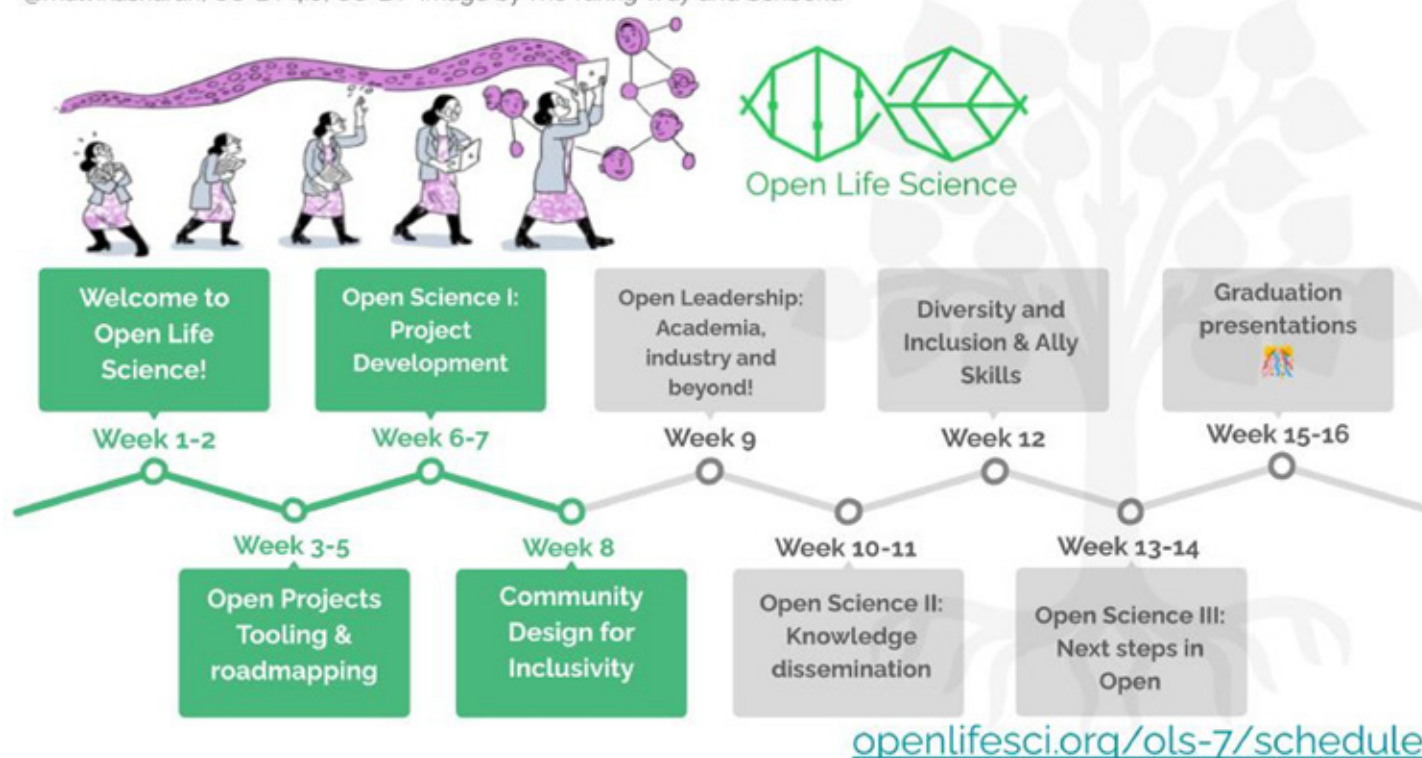
each other feedback. The topics of the training program are presented in Figure 1.

During three years of all-remote communication, OLS developed sustainable practices to design the community experience to help as many different kinds of people participate in it, embracing the principles of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. The practices OLS developed for this aim include: ensuring inclusive remote participation, sharing narratives of the OLS grant applications with a wide audience, and sharing the recordings of the training calls and other educational resources. Training calls, in particular, are experts' talks on collaborative open research practices. They form almost 100 hours of open educational resources on the [OLS Youtube channel](#), becoming a valuable training resource for an audience that goes well beyond the OLS mentees.

OLS, as a community of practice, engages with policy to facilitate cultural change. As an example of collective action, OLS as a global

Figure 1

@malvikasharan, CC-BY 4.0, CC-BY image by The Turing Way and Scriberia



Sustainable practices by OLS and deliverable actions



Figure 2

community responded to the UNESCO call for best practices to highlight the importance of grassroots initiatives in strengthening society-science-policy relationships; read the full response and community consultation process in [Zenodo](https://zenodo.org/record/6841873).

What is next? If the values of an inclusive and collaborative environment speak to you, if you are curious about open science and research (beyond open access), then

- Follow us on [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#)
- Read exciting [stories](#) from our program
- Explore OLS cohorts on the [map](#)
- Join, benefit from, and contribute to the OLS [community](#)
- Consider applying for the OLS-8 cohort, and applications will open in June 2023
- If you are interested in running a taster workshop in your community or organization to introduce them to open-sharing culture or just want to chat, contact us at team@openlifesci.org

Mayya Sundukova

Open Life Science
mayya.sundukova@gmail.com
 LinkedIn: @mayya-sundukova

Lisanna Paladin

European Molecular Biology Laboratory
lisanna.paladin@gmail.com
 Twitter: @pradeeperanti

Pradeep Eranti

MCAA Newsletter, Editorial Board
 Université Paris Cité
 Twitter: @pradeeperanti

All authors are part of the Marie Curie Alumni Association and OLS community - in various roles. Mayya Sundukova is a Resident Fellow in OLS, Pradeep Eranti was onboarded as a mentee and stayed as a friend of the community, and Lisanna Paladin was onboarded as a mentee and is now a mentor in the initiative.

Partner

Germany's hotspot for international research excellence

Baden-Württemberg has excellent universities, ample funding, and unparalleled opportunities for international researchers.

The state of Baden-Württemberg is home to some of Germany's oldest universities, and many of the best. Of the nation's 11 top-rated Universities of Excellence, 4 are in Baden-Württemberg, in the southwest of the country.

This vein of knowledge brings riches. The four universities, Heidelberg, Karlsruhe, Konstanz and Tübingen, have attracted around €15 million each in additional annual funding until 2025 for top research from federal and state governments under Germany's Excellence Strategy.

The state contributes as well: investing 5.8% of its GDP in science. These efforts have seen a new generation of rising research stars from around the world heading to Baden-Württemberg.

Among them is Ilinca Suciu, a biochemist, who moved from Bucharest to Konstanz University, where she joined a toxicology group that develops alternatives to animal testing for substances potentially dangerous to humans.

These alternatives include new cell models based on induced pluripotent stem cells.

"My PhD studies look at the stress-response pathways in neuronal cells and how omics technologies can be used to predict and understand human neurotoxicity," says Suciu. "I am working on my own research, but I also have the opportunity to collaborate and contribute within the department, as well as with groups at the university, such as chemistry and informatics. As part of the EU-ToxRisk consortium, we also cooperate with international research groups and industry partners."

Suciu's PhD studies take place at the [Konstanz Research School Chemical Biology](#), one of 12 International Graduate Schools in Baden-Württemberg. These offer doctorate and PhD programmes in English, and most provide scholarships for accepted students — a great advantage for international candidates.

A collaborative system

Naeim Ghavidelnia is a doctoral researcher and part of the [Living, Adaptive and Energy-autonomous Materials Systems \(livMatS\)](#) at the University of Freiburg. There are 57 Clusters of Excellence in Germany, which receive around €385 million a year between them. This funding supports research, provides training for young researchers, and brings in highly qualified international researchers. Twelve of these clusters are in Baden-Württemberg, along with 39 of the country's 225 funded Research Training Groups.

Ghavidelnia, who is originally from Iran, uses examples from nature to develop self-sealing, programmable materials for technologies

of daily life. By increasing longevity, these materials could work for longer, thereby reducing waste and pollution.

"The research areas within livMatS are in a very close collaboration with each other," he points out. "Also, livMatS is very well connected to other research groups within Baden-Württemberg and all over the world." Interdisciplinary work brings new ideas to the group and provides opportunities to collaborate, he adds.

Model of a unit cell, the smallest element of the programmable materials. A large number of interconnected unit cells on small scales make the large-scale metamaterial.

These opportunities extend along the academic spectrum. "Students working towards their MSc in the department of biology get the chance to try out potential master research projects under the supervision of a PhD student," Suciú says. "They learn about conducting research and presenting their work, and we get to experience supervision."

Both scientists appreciated how Baden-Württemberg invests to help international researchers find a warm welcome, by offering support with formalities such as setting up bank accounts and finding accommodation.

"When I arrived in Freiburg, I found a very nice and friendly environment," says Ghavidelnia. "I have joined a variety of courses at the graduate school, including the German language. These have been a good way to meet other international students. It's a beautiful place to live, too."

To learn more about opportunities in Baden-Württemberg for international researchers, please visit <https://www.bw-career.de/en/>

Hannah Stellmacher

Manager Talent and University Services

Baden-Württemberg International

Agency for International Economic and

Scientific Cooperation

Agency for International Economic

and Scientific Cooperation

Hannah.Stellmacher@bw-i.de

Naeim Ghavidelnia designs programmable materials that, due to their geometry, automatically adapt to changing conditions and mechanically close cracks.

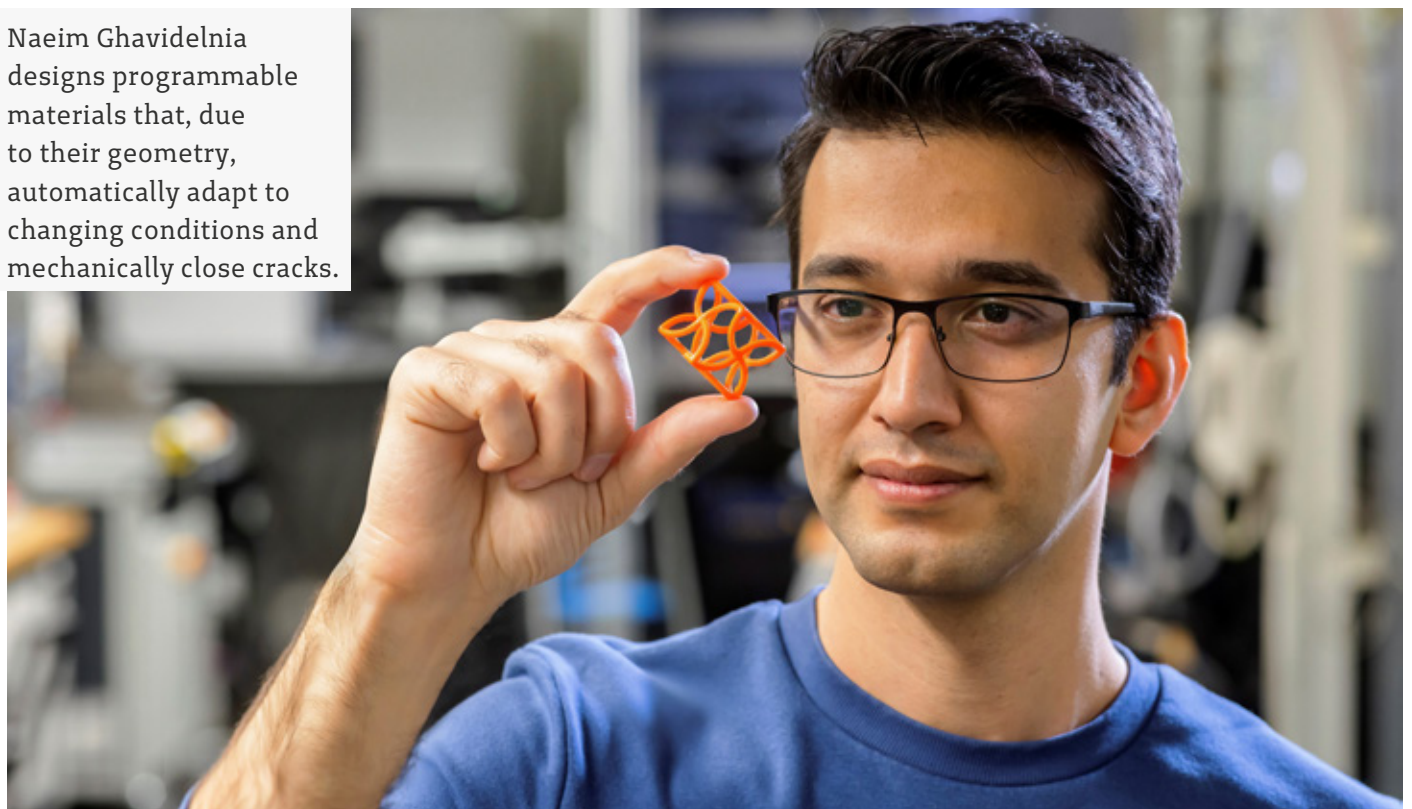


Photo by Jürgen Gocke

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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