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Marie Curie Alumni Association

Newsletter

Achieving Work-Life Balance in Research: Challenges and Strategies



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Image by Midjourney, prompt by Fabrizio Martina

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Message from the Board

The Fragile Balance of Work and Personal Life: Biases and the Role of Institutions

Dear MCAA Members,

In this edition of the MCAA Newsletter, we delve into a subject that resonates deeply with our organisation – the intricate balance between family and career. In a nod to current trends, we turned to ChatGPT for its take on this complex issue. At first glance, the response from ChatGPT appeared to be comprehensive and enlightening. It began by acknowledging the widespread nature of this challenge, emphasising that successfully achieving such a balance requires thoughtful planning, effective time management, and clear communication. Furthermore, ChatGPT offered a list of tips that seemed to provide a pathway to improve this balance:

- **Prioritise and Set Goals:** Clearly define your priorities both in your career and your family life; set short-term and long-term goals to help guide your decisions.
- **Effective Time Management:** Develop strong time management skills to make the most of your work hours; use tools like calendars, planners, or apps to schedule tasks and appointments.
- **Establish Boundaries:** Set clear boundaries between work and home life; when you are with your family, focus on them, and when at work, try to minimise distractions.
- **Flexibility and Adaptability:** Be flexible and adaptable to changes in both your work and family life; learn to adjust your schedule and expectations when necessary.
- **Communication is Key:** Communicate openly with your family about your work commitments and schedule; discuss important family events and commitments with your employer or colleagues.
- **Quality Over Quantity:** Focus on the quality of the time you spend with your family rather than the quantity; be present and engaged during family time to make it meaningful.
- **Delegate and Outsource:** Delegate tasks at home and at work when possible; consider outsourcing certain tasks to create more time for family and personal activities.
- **Self-Care:** Prioritise self-care to maintain your physical and mental well-being; take breaks and vacations to recharge and avoid burnout.
- **Define Success on Your Terms:** Define what success means to you in both your career and family life; recognize that this definition may change over time.
- **Seek Support:** Build a support system at work and at home; don't hesitate to ask for help when needed.
- **Learn to Say No.**

Of course, we were also advised to remember that achieving balance is a dynamic process. What may work for one person might not

Photo by Rebecca Arnold



work for another. It is about finding a rhythm that caters to one's own unique situation and adapting as circumstances change. We really appreciate those types of coaching lessons. They represent the quintessence of basic and common sense. However, with all due respect, we will have to pass. Thank you.

In the concluding part of his inaugural speech on January 20, 1961, John F. Kennedy famously said, "ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country". The answer provided by ChatGPT aligns with the latter part of this maxim, focusing exclusively on actions that individual researchers can take to address a situation. This perspective intimates that solutions are exclusively found at the individual level, or more concerningly, implies that the root of the issue lies with the individual. ChatGPT's reply, while comprehensive, conspicuously lacks mention of the institutional dimension and its responsibilities. It infers that resolutions depend solely on individuals, thereby placing the entire onus on individual researchers. This omission is significant, as it narrows the focus solely to individual efforts, disregarding the vital roles and obligations of institutions in addressing these challenges.

According to Johri (2023), ChatGPT's training dataset "consisted of text collected from multiple sources on the internet, including Wikipedia articles, books, and other public webpages." Despite concerns regarding its representativeness, it can be reasonably inferred that this dataset offers a snapshot of the broader discourse on various topics. Therefore, the limitations in ChatGPT's responses might reflect the gaps in how humans generally discuss these issues. This is particularly evident in the discourse surrounding the balance between family and career, where the conversation itself seems to exhibit an imbalance.

Indeed, those points are reasonable and sound, focusing on self-improvement and personal initiative. However, this perspective is not all-encompassing. The role of institutions in enhancing our conditions is equally crucial. This brings us to question the practicality and feasibility of such advice. Are those recommendations effective and attainable in real-world scenarios? And, in light of the prior points, what implications arise when we consider this issue from a researcher's perspective? The answer then may vary. We might assert "no" to universal applicability, "not sure" to their overall effectiveness, and "yes" to the uniqueness of our situation in the research community.

A career as a researcher could include, but not being limited to, teaching, investigation, management, administrative tasks, communication, dissemination, publishing, and mentoring. Balancing a career as a researcher and family seems closer to fiction than reality. Once your (paid) job is done, you go home to start the second phase of your day, what oftentimes may even feel like a second (unpaid) job. Even though family brings often joy and happiness, it simultaneously presents a multitude of challenges: sleepless nights (sometimes for years, not just for a few months), visits to doctors and the hospital almost every week (sickness, routine check-ups, vaccination,), managing challenging

kids, and so on and so forth. One could say that this is the (Global North?) ordinary life of a parent working standard hours. However, from a researcher's perspective this scenario appears grimmer. Typically, researchers start families later in life compared to the average individual in their society, often due to factors like unstable job conditions and living abroad, away from their family. Those simple facts imply that, by the time they have children, researchers are generally older – up to a decade older than the societal average – and consequently may have (much) less energy. Additionally, the family benefits available vary significantly depending on the country, especially in Europe where disparities can be substantial. Moreover, residing in a foreign country often means lacking immediate family support. And even in cases where family support is accessible, it may be limited, as parents are typically older and may not be able to provide the level of assistance required. In the most challenging scenarios, researchers may find themselves in a position where they have to care for their ageing parents while simultaneously managing their own family responsibilities. This, however, is just the tip of the iceberg. Researchers without a stable position, who are in the constant cycle of applying for fellowships and positions, often face the necessity of working additional hours, typically at night, or while their children are asleep. This extra effort is crucial not only to complete their work but also to remain competitive and navigate the exhaustive paperwork required for job, project, or position applications every 18-24 months.

If by any chance they managed to have a permanent contract then they are less stressed. They may still require a partner who either works less or not at all, to balance the family duties part of their life, or they may need to hire help, or enroll their children in extra activities to carve out additional hours for work. These adjustments are often necessary for managing the lab, finalising



grant proposals, or publishing research findings. Given the modest salary scales in academia, such measures can put a strain on family finances and lead to career changes. This phenomenon, commonly known as “the Great Resignation,” is now becoming visible in academia as well (Gerwin, 2022). A particularly worrying indicator of this trend is the noticeable decrease in PhD and postdoc applications.

As we have noted, the responses provided by ChatGPT, as well as the training data it is based upon, exhibit noticeable signs of bias. This is also true for the perspectives we have presented so far. Our discussion has largely rested on a traditional, perhaps outdated, view of family, typically involving two parents and children. But consider single parents who are researchers. This situation intensifies the challenges we have outlined and introduces numerous additional complications. And what about researchers who have a partner but no children? Surely, this too constitutes a family, with its own private life that requires care and attention. Furthermore, researchers without a partner also deserve a fulfilling personal life, free from being overwhelmed

by their professional commitments. The absence of children frequently results in colleagues and employers assuming that such individuals are always available for late evenings and weekend work, or they better be. This attitude, whether inadvertent or often conscious, ends up undervaluing their personal time and treating them as second-class human beings who do not have a right to personal flourishing. The complexity of this issue escalated further when incorporating personal, cultural, and social factors, such as gender and disability. These elements not only add to the complexity but also create unique intersections of challenges that vary widely among individuals, making the pursuit of a balanced life even more daunting.

The very distinction between personal and work life is contentious. Ideally, work, and private life should be integrated facets of an individual's life, harmoniously coexisting rather than competing or being mutually exclusive.

So, what do we truly need in this situation? Let's put aside ChatGPT's answers and urge society, institutions, and employers to heed the first part of Kennedy's maxim: considering what they can (and should) do for researchers. We need kindergartens. Employer-sponsored kindergartens everywhere, in order to support and maintain the fragile balance between work and family responsibilities. Promoting career breaks and offering flexible deadlines can also be transformative. A paid career break would provide better organisation and time to navigate towards a stable job, all while managing family and personal responsibilities. Flexible deadlines could also be a key part of the solution. Allowing researchers to apply for fellowships or projects at intervals that suit their unique circumstances, could greatly enhance their prospects. And last but not least, increasing salaries! It is a big deal because, let's face it, money matters a lot, even in research. Dedicating yourself to science is great and all

– like the whole “giving your body to science when you are gone” thing – but we also deserve to live well now. Fighting for better pay and better conditions for researchers isn't just good for us personally; it will actually do wonders for research overall.

Promoting a harmonious balance between work and private life is a fundamental aspect of MCAA's mission, a commitment clearly reflected in this special issue of the MCAA Newsletter. This topic has been at the heart of numerous initiatives, either directly managed by or actively supported by the MCAA. In our continued efforts to support this balance, we have recently introduced the [MCAA Whistleblowing Channel](#). This new avenue is designed to empower our members, providing a secure platform for raising concerns and suggestions, including those related to work-life balance challenges within the research community. We recognise the importance of member-driven innovation and encourage our members to actively participate by proposing new initiatives by writing to suggestions.box@mariecuriealumni.eu as well as join the [MCAA Genders, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Working Group](#).

On another matter, since the publication of our last Newsletter, the MCAA has observed with concern the intensifying conflict in Israel/Palestine. We have issued a [statement](#) condemning the violence and expressing solidarity with our members in both regions, as well as their academic peers and families.

On a brighter note, the past months have been marked by numerous enriching activities. A prime highlight was the annual European [conference](#) dedicated to Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA), which took place on 14th and 15th November 2023 in Toledo, Spain. Organised by the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, this conference centred on “MSCA Diverse Research Careers to tackle Global Challenges.” It was encouraging to see a

strong representation from our MCAA Board and members, many of whom contributed as speakers and moderators. The conference concluded with an engaging workshop in a World Café format, focusing on MSCA project management, expertly led by our MCAA Working Group on Research Management.

In conjunction with the MSCA conference, the MCAA Board convened for a pivotal two-day meeting in Toledo. This meeting, which was also attended by our expanding Operational Team, provided an invaluable opportunity for face-to-face discussions on vital topics such as internal governance, alumni engagement, and the progress of the MCAA-New-Horizon project. This EC project supports MCAA's governance and financial planning. The Board also dedicated time to strategize on enhancing career development, networking, and influence, finalising the Strategy Plan for submission to the European Commission. We are also pleased to report that Year 1 of the MCAA-New-Horizon project and most of its reporting requirements have been successfully completed.

Our Chair Fernanda Bajanca has participated in several events: [Bridging European Science IV](#) (20 October, Brussels), the [8th Conference](#) of the European Women Rectors Association (2-3 November, Istanbul), and the [Mediterranean Researchers' Night Gala](#) (2 November, Istanbul). Meanwhile, Board member Giulia Malaguarnera attended [KRECon 2023](#) in Prague (9-10 November) and the [Global Summit](#) on Diamond Open Access in Toluca, Mexico (23-27 October).

We are excited to announce the official kick-off of the [CoARA Boost](#) project in October 2023, wherein the MCAA is co-leading Work Package 4 "Support to CoARA Working Groups". CoARA Boost is an ambitious three-year EU-funded project with a substantial budget, a significant portion of which is allocated for cascaded funding. The MCAA is actively involved in two of CoARA's ten

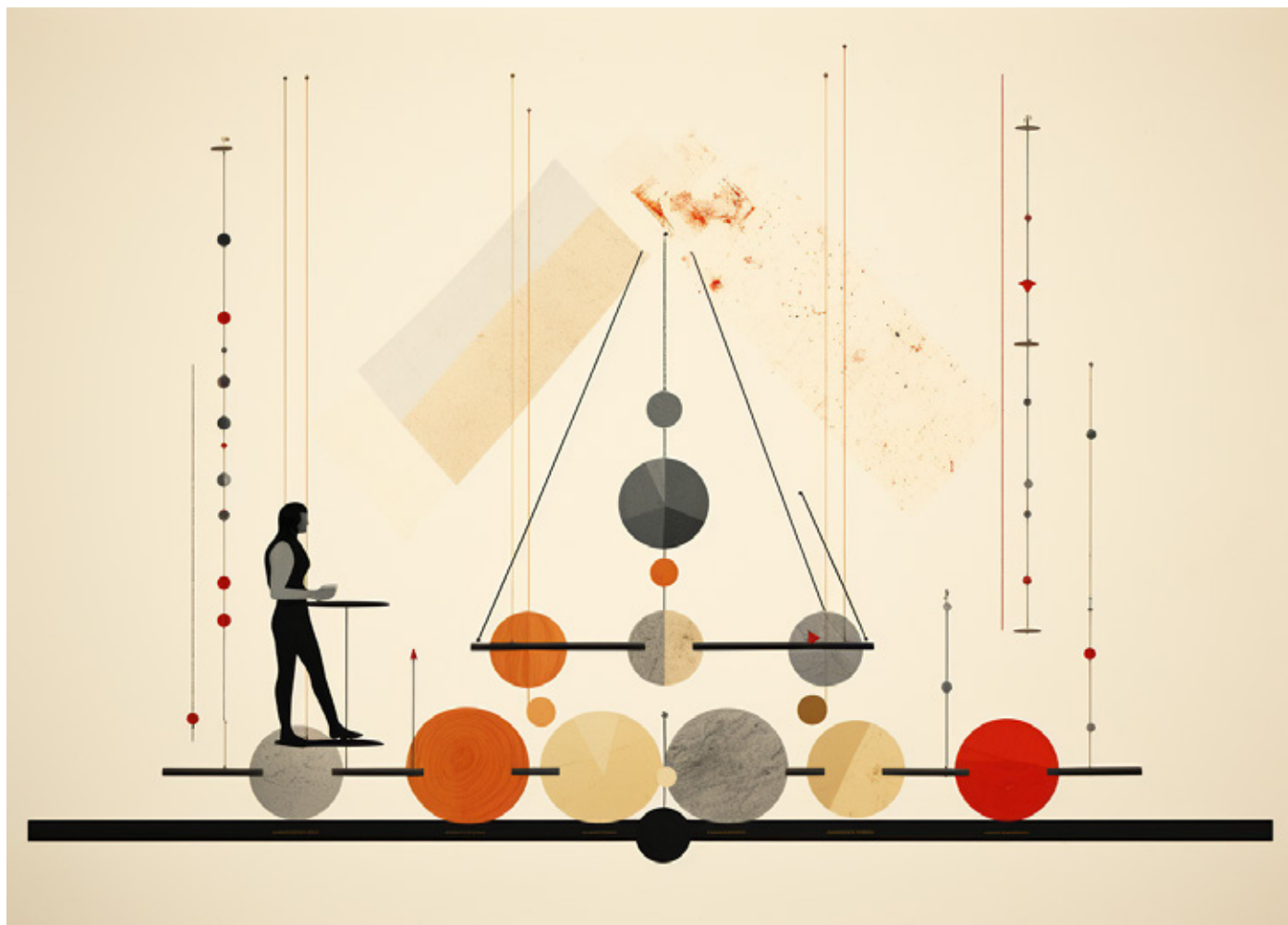
approved [Working Groups](#): "Early-and-mid-Career Researchers" and "Multilingualism and language biases in research assessment", the latter co-chaired by our Board member Gian Maria Greco, who also leads its Task Force 4. Speaking of MCAA's involvement in external organisations, our Vice-Chair Alexandra Dubini is now the vice-chair of the Working Group (WG) on research careers at the [Initiative for Science in Europe \(ISE\)](#), and our Board member Gian Maria Greco is a member of the ISE WG on Horizon Europe and leads the ISE task force on "Interdisciplinarity in Horizon Europe." Several members of the MCAA Policy WG also contribute to ISE WGs.

Our commitment to enhancing the capacity of MCAA members is unwavering, with several key initiatives underway. These include: (1) the recently launched [MCAA Academy](#), a mentor-mentee platform for career advancement; (2) the [MCAA learning programme](#), where there are still several Coursera licences available; and (3) the [MCAA Training programme](#), which is developing a full set of courses, preferably delivered by MCAA members, focusing on a wide range of soft skills.

Additionally, the Board has approved the creation of a General Interest Group (GIG) on Sustainability, spearheaded by our Vice-Chair Alexandra Dubini. This group is dedicated to promoting sustainable practices within the MCAA community and beyond. Members interested in contributing to this initiative are invited to reach out to sustainability@mariecuriealumni.eu or join online: <https://www.mariecuriealumni.eu/groups/sustainability-interest-group>

As we conclude this letter, we must spotlight the upcoming [MCAA 2024 Annual Conference](#), set to take place in Milan from 14th to 16th March 2024. The conference will be dedicated to celebrating "10 years of MCAA: Past, present and future." The preparations are progressing impressively, a testament to

Image by Midjourney, prompt by Fabrizio Martina





the dedication of our Conference Organising Committee volunteers and the support from our operational team. This event promises to be a landmark occasion for our community.

We are also excited to announce that the call for the MCAA Awards 2023 is now open. This is an excellent chance for members to either step forward and showcase their achievements by submitting their candidacy or to recognise and nominate a deserving peer within the MCAA community.

Furthermore, we have opened the Call for Posters and Lightning Talks. We encourage our members to seize this unique opportunity to present and share their research. This platform is not just about displaying your work; it's about engaging with peers, sparking collaborations, and gaining new insights. Whether you're an established researcher or at the beginning of your academic journey,

this is your stage to shine and contribute to the rich tapestry of knowledge that defines our MCAA community.

Looking forward to the dynamic exchange of ideas and the vibrant network of collaboration that Milan 2024 promises, we invite you all to participate actively in these endeavours. Let's make this conference a memorable and impactful event.

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Editorial

Charting the course to a sustainable work culture in research

The discussion surrounding work-life balance in research environments often highlights academia's inherent challenges: intense competition, performance pressures, and precarious long-term job security, which are prevalent concerns in many regions. Yet, the concept of '**work-life balance**' itself implies a misleading conflict between professional success and personal fulfillment. Achieving

academic milestones frequently seems to necessitate personal compromise, as if sacrifices are unwritten requirements for triumph. This mindset leads to neglecting everything from relationships to financial well-being in pursuit of the next academic achievement(s)...be it that elusive big publication, funding, or tenure. Despite the portrayal of research and academia as objective pursuits separate from personal life, the reality is that the personal lives of researchers are deeply intertwined with their scientific work.

The Conference/Volunteering Activities Commitment Dilemma

In research, commitment to conferences, volunteering activities, and university service are often seen as essential for our career development, offering opportunities for networking, skill enhancement, and community contribution. The dilemma is that while these activities can be enriching, they demand time and energy that might otherwise be spent on personal pursuits. For researchers, particularly those juggling



family responsibilities, this can lead to a taxing schedule. The unspoken expectation that one must participate in these activities to be considered dedicated or successful, often leaves underrepresented communities at a further disadvantage.

Addressing this dilemma requires a multifaceted approach. Institutions and departments can play a crucial role by promoting a culture where quality of service is valued over quantity. The provision of support for time management and childcare, coupled with the acknowledgment of these commitments in workload calculations is also crucial. Researchers themselves can benefit from setting personal boundaries, being selective about which activities align best with their goals, and learning to say no when necessary (1). This shift in perspective is essential to allow for a more sustainable and fulfilling approach to professional development.

Remote Working after the Post-Pandemic:

The post-pandemic era has created a new dynamic, with remote working becoming more prominent, opening new opportunities and challenges (2). Researchers can save time on commuting, enjoy a more comfortable work environment, and have the opportunity to integrate work with personal life more seamlessly. However, remote working also blurs the traditional boundaries between work and home. The convenience of working from home often results in extended work hours, as the distinction between '**office time**' and '**personal time**' becomes less clear. This situation can lead to a sense of being '**always on**' and negatively affect mental health and overall well-being.

To address these challenges, academic institutions need to establish clear guidelines and support systems for remote work. It is

important to set expectations for availability, ensure access to necessary resources, and promote a culture that respects personal boundaries. Institutions can also provide training to help researchers develop strategies for effective work-life separation in a home environment. Furthermore, creating virtual spaces for interaction, collaboration, and socialization can help mitigate feelings of isolation and maintain a sense of belonging within the community.

Family Life: Is There ever a Right Time to Start a Family?

The question of when to start a family can be likened to an endless rollercoaster ride for many researchers, oscillating between 'anytime' and 'never'. One of the most significant challenges in researchers' careers is achieving a sense of stability. The ongoing quest often puts additional pressure on life decisions, such as starting a family. For many, the ideal time seems perpetually out of reach, as their career paths are riddled with uncertainties and demanding commitments.

Instead of attempting to find correct and universally inclusive answers to the question of when to start a family, a shift in perspective might be beneficial. Why not rephrase the query? Consider asking: **Should it be a struggle to define the right time to start a family?** The answer might lean towards '**Maybe yes**', but only for worthwhile reasons that resonate deeply with our personal needs and unique perspectives on life and well-being. To facilitate a safe journey for researchers in this aspect of life, it becomes imperative to issue a call to action for institutions, funding bodies, associations, and any other influential entities capable of enacting policy changes and advancing the research culture. The goal should be that customized and inclusive support is readily available for any researcher desiring to start a family, irrespective of their

career stage or individual characteristics.

Ableism in Research

Individuals with disabilities are significantly underrepresented at all levels of academia, from undergraduate studies to advanced research positions. The root of such disparity lies in the ableist attitudes prevalent in

research toward disability, which create barriers to reasonable accommodations (3). The situation becomes even more challenging for those with invisible forms of disability, such as chronic illnesses or neurodivergent conditions.

The pandemic has further highlighted numerous issues faced by individuals

Harmonizing Research and Self-Care [The image is created by DALL-E]. This composition captures the challenging yet achievable balance between professional and personal life in research. The left side portrays the intense, time-constrained environment of academia. In stark contrast, the right side offers a tranquil escape, showcasing moments of self-care.



suffering long-term consequences from infections and illnesses. It underscores an urgent need for change. Academic institutions and governing bodies are called upon to develop and implement policies offering robust support and flexibility. Policies need to focus on eliminating barriers and promoting equal access, participation, and advancement for individuals with disabilities within institutions. Proactive measures are essential to ensure a more inclusive and equitable environment for all.

Institutional Policies to Foster Work-Life Balance:

Robust structures are necessary to support the diverse needs of the research community. Institutions should consider implementing flexible work arrangements to accommodate varying life stages and responsibilities, such as parenting, caring for elderly relatives, and chronic illness. Options might include part-time work, job-sharing, flexible scheduling, and the provision of leave for family and health-related matters. Fostering a culture where taking leave is not only permitted but encouraged, without fear or career repercussions, is essential.

Supporting mental health and well-being is another crucial area. It involves ensuring access to resources such as counseling and maintaining reasonable workloads. Transparency in communicating about available support policies is key, so all members of the academic community are informed about their rights and the support they can access. Regular policy reviews are essential to meet the evolving needs of researchers and to address any implementation gaps. By adopting comprehensive policies, institutions can demonstrate that achieving a work-life balance is not just feasible but a fundamental priority.

Work within the MCAA to Foster Equity, Diversity and Inclusion:

Diversity is essential to form dynamic and successful teams. However, researchers from diverse spheres still encounter obstacles that hinder access to leadership positions and compel them to work excessively, putting their work-life balance at higher risk. Significant efforts are required to better embrace and celebrate differences among research staff members. Researchers, especially decision-makers, should be aware of unconscious biases and actively work to overcome them efficiently. Organizations dedicated to research need to update their procedures, adopt an ethos of acceptance, and promote inclusivity.

The MCAA and the Genders, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (GEDI) Working Group (WG) have been proactively addressing the challenges faced by researchers from different ethnic, gender, socio-cultural/religious backgrounds, and family perspective/status. GEDI WG's efforts focus particularly on research careers and especially leadership positions, where diverse participation gets more challenging. Through workshops, talks, articles, videos, consultation and public statements, they have been raising awareness of the difficulties encountered along the research/academia pathways. The GEDI WG is actively proposing and discussing potential policy solutions on topics such as starting or having a family, LGBTIQ+ inclusion, disabilities (ResearchAbility), researchers at risk, fairness in AI, responsible brain circulation, etc.


A current activity of the GEDI WG focuses on ensuring that all MSCA fellows work and thrive in a safe environment, where balancing career & family or making plans for a family is a realistic option. This initiative gathers past and present good practices and achievements, plans, and evidence. In collaboration with the Policy and Survey WGs, ReMO, and the MSCA

Unit, it aims to develop and utilize these insights to create evidence-based guidelines for all MSCA participating countries.

Conclusion:

The dialogue around work-life balance in research and academia is longstanding, yet a substantial journey remains. The challenges to work-life balance are dynamic and continually evolving. With a deeper understanding of these issues comes the potential to craft effective and impactful solutions. This special issue gives voice to the experiences and struggles within the MCAA community regarding work-life balance, while also highlighting initiatives at various levels to foster a more sustainable work environment. It features the diverse, lived experiences and inspiring stories of researchers from different career stages, countries, and contexts. Remarkable stories highlight the strength and indomitable spirit of our research community, urging the fight for a work culture where members not only

survive but thrive. The issue illuminates efforts at personal, institutional, and policy levels to build a more equitable work atmosphere in research. The hope is that these narratives and insights offer readers a new perspective and ignite meaningful conversations. Remember, research is a marathon, not a sprint; every bit of support or insight eases the journey, making each step forward just a bit lighter.

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News from the MCAA

Mentoring: The intangible tool to a better quality of life for scientists!

Scientists often get overwhelmed and forget that mentoring can promote well-being and assist them in taking more conscious career decisions.

We all know the expression “standing on the shoulders of giants”, but do we really apply it in our personal life? If we are not afraid of adding references to our articles, why do we hesitate to do the same with our life and career choices? Mentoring is a good framework for asking professional and personal questions, to gain a new perspective, and to explore possibilities guided by a more senior professional.

Universities offer a rich curriculum of courses to their students to let them become highly skilled professionals. However, there are additional factors contributing to graduates’

**Bionote:**

Greta Faccio, PhD, has studied life sciences in Varese, Italy and lived in different European countries to study and work. She holds a PhD in genetics from the University of Helsinki (Finland) where she studied enzymes to tune the texture of food. In 2012, she joined the Swiss Federal Laboratories for Materials Testing and Research and investigated the use of proteins for materials science, diagnostics, and MedTech. She is now active in the intellectual property field and as a consultant and mentor.

Bionote:

By the age of 18, Maria moved from her Home country, Cyprus, to the UK, where she obtained her B.Sc. in Biomedical Sciences and her M.Sc. in Immunology and Inflammatory diseases from the University of Manchester and the University of Glasgow, respectively. She was also employed by Q2 Solutions-Clinical Laboratory Services Provider, in Edinburgh. She is currently pursuing her PhD in Biomedical Sciences at the University of Cyprus to develop personally. Maria is very interested in science communication and outreach and is a board member of Greek Women in STEM.





Image by Adobe Firefly, prompt by Fabrizio Martina

career development and overall well-being. For example, some students relocate to a foreign country alone, to join a very different culture, especially on the private side (Figure 1). Balancing an ambitious and time-demanding job with personal growth can take a lot of mental and emotional energy, at every career stage.

Stemming from our personal experience and public initiatives, we would like to draw attention to what mentoring can offer to universities to facilitate education in an academic setting and to students, especially from STEM disciplines.

I (Greta) remember having issues with SDS PAGE during my doctoral work. All my colleagues were proactive and offered advice. That problem was clear for everyone to see. Invisible issues such as discussions on authorship or an unfriendly colleague, however, received much less attention. I did not want to be a difficult coworker in my first paid position. Gladly, a senior colleague offered some key advice while having a coffee. I (Maria), on the other hand, remember being a master student having colleagues who were


more than happy to assist in designing my first experiments in the lab and then training me in using a data analysis program. I was pleasantly surprised when they offered to give me feedback on my performance and my presentation when I mentioned during a coffee chat that I had upcoming interviews for PhDs! That was the first time I came across the concept of mentoring in my career journey. Their honest advice and moral support certainly improved my self-confidence.

Studies have highlighted the concerns about STEM graduates suffering from high levels of anxiety and depression globally, especially after the COVID-19 outbreak. Laboratory work, a competitive workplace, and bullying are just a few of the reasons STEM graduates lose their inner balance. In 2018, the Department of Chemistry at the University of Minnesota launched an initiative to make graduate students both happier and more productive, to reduce stressors; that has resulted in empowering the students and in social gatherings to prevent feelings of loneliness. Similar initiatives specifically focused on women have been undertaken at the University of Washington, where they pair


graduate students and postdocs with faculty mentors. Mentoring is, however, important for everyone at every stage of their career. For this reason, the Yale Postdoctoral Association at Yale University, USA, offers a Mentorship program that not only brings postdocs from the university to get to know each other, but also offers training for them to become mentors themselves.

Scientific research demands specialisation, and this often results in the formation of a social professional bubble made of colleagues and think-a-likes. When facing a problem that is not technical, it might be hard to identify who could help. It might be hard to stop, look around and identify who the giants are in our lives. Getting creative on how to establish a relationship with them is the next step. Quick options can include dropping a question via email or a formal chat via the LinkedIn platform. This can be a very good beginning for a mentoring relationship. If

the situation allows a chat with physical presence is recommended to strengthen the relationship. Many academic Institutions have started to offer it as an organised service and companies have started to see mentoring as an intangible tool that can not only help to preserve and share company culture, but also help employees navigate complex internal situations and thus influence their performance.

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Photo by Maria Koumouri, 2023

Figure 1. Reconciling work and personal life can be difficult for someone working as a scientist in academia.

News from the MCAA

Reach & Engage: to leverage the full potential of MCAA impact in the United Kingdom

Discover the main goals for the upcoming year of the Chapter, which wants to increase its dynamics and community spirit.

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

During the past year, I oversaw the Scotland region, organising bi-weekly social meetings. In addition to an experience as the founder of a debating association and a great discussion with another board member, it helped me conceive a vision for the Chapter's future and motivated me to apply.

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

Our Chapter faces two issues: (1) eligible people don't know the MCAA exists; (2) low engagement within the Chapter. We are keen to propose the best events and workshops. However, there is no point if most are unaware of them and the others do not participate. We have the members, the resources, and the will. Now, we need to bring these pieces together to build a community. This is fundamental if we expect to leverage the real potential impact of the MCAA actions.



Bionote:

Quentin Loisel has been recently elected the new Chair of the United Kingdom Chapter after a year as Scotland's regional leader. He is a current MSCA PhD fellow at Glasgow Caledonian University and part of the [Health CASCADE project](#), aiming to make co-creation trustworthy. His work bridges technology and the fundamental human dimension within the values of the co-creation process. With the growing influence of technology in our lives, he aims to enable collaboration of the diverse actors of society, bridge the gap between humans and technology, and make the best of future technology.



An illustration of the United Kingdom map with bright nodes on key locations. Tiny figures of diverse individuals are positioned only within the boundaries of the UK. These figures symbolize population centers, and luminous lines connect them, illustrating an interconnected network.

What are your plans for developing the United Kingdom Chapter?

Firstly, we must develop communication between members. They are willing to connect socially or for networking. Moreover, considering the mobility requirement, we all faced arriving in a new country without knowing anyone. We want to create local contact points where people can easily reach each other.

Secondly, we must improve information about the MCAA missions, resources, events, and activities. Our need assessment shows that our members prefer emails as a communication channel, and we plan to create a short bi-monthly newsletter to communicate events, tools and stories from the Chapter and other groups. Anyone can [sign up](#).

Our team can only dedicate our spare time to the association. So, we need to be bright and bold! Our strategy is to only focus on what requests the least cost (e.g., financial, time, people, etc.) for the most significant impact. Moreover, our innovation should be easily transferred to the next board in two years.

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

The expected benefits of our strategy will be to create a community spirit, support networking, improve communication within the Chapter, better inform of MCAA's benefits, and Chapters and Working Groups' events. Finally, we expect an increase in our members and their participation.

Conscious that it will already take most of our time, we are thinking of only reproducing the events that have been successful in the last years. However, we actively support any ideas from members and encourage them to take the lead on organising any relevant events.

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

The United Kingdom is an attractive destination for researchers, and the Chapter has many members. The Chapter is the ground level of the MCAA in the four nations of the country. Our role is to create a community dynamic, supporting meaningful participation and ensuring the link with higher levels of the association. MSCA researchers face particular challenges that the Chapter needs to consider


and support, acknowledging the essential human dimension.

How will you cooperate with other Chapters and Working Groups?

Our current goals do not require close collaboration with other Chapters and Working Groups. However, we are glad to consider any cooperation as long as they are relevant regarding the impact and necessary resources. Some Chapters and Working Groups have already contacted us with proposals to which we are happy to contribute. I am still personally discovering all the possibilities, and it will surely increase in the future.

What would you say to members considering joining the United Kingdom Chapter?

MCAA is an excellent opportunity to participate in a supportive association for MSCA researchers. You are more than welcome to join this adventure as a regular member. However, an association's impact is proportional to the engagement of its members. If you have an idea for an activity or an event you would like to organise, be sure to reach out for support from us!

Quentin Loisel 

Chair of the United Kingdom Chapter

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News from the MCAA



STAIRCASE Survey: Improving working conditions in Academia

Your voice is crucial for improving the working conditions of academics! Discover how you can shape the future of academic working conditions by participating in the STAIRCASE Survey, a vital action of the Researcher Mental Health Observatory (ReMO).

Bionote:

Mathias Schroijs is a member of the Postgraduate Office of the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB). As project leader, he is responsible for developing transferable skills training programs and career development services for researchers. Mathias has a research background in healthcare (KU Leuven) and, at the same time, focused on setting up support services for the training and professional development of researchers at the local (PhD Society at KU Leuven) and institutional level (project manager MSCA-Cofund IF@ULB), as well as the representation of early-career researchers at European level.

In the backdrop of an emerging mental health crisis in academia, particularly affecting junior researchers, the STAIRCASE Survey stands as a vital instrument within the [Researcher Mental Health Observatory \(ReMO\)](#). ReMO is an EU-funded COST Action Network, representing researchers from around 49 [\(mostly\) European countries](#), and is committed to improving working conditions and mental well-being in academia (see [ReMO manifesto](#)). The first crucial step driving such a change is an evidence-based understanding of the current situation across countries and institutional contexts.

As of January 2022, a dynamic group of over 30 active researchers, including mental health professionals, psychologists, data scientists, and organisational experts, came together to tackle this highly ambitious challenge. Ranging from early-career researchers to professors, our group spans across academic disciplines, hierarchies, and national boundaries, united by a common goal: evidencing recommendations towards concrete policy changes aimed at meaningfully and sustainably improving and nourishing researcher's mental health.

Survey Development and Launch

Coordinated by TIB – Leibniz Information Centre for Science and Technology, a dedicated special interest group of volunteer European researchers has meticulously collated key measures of researcher mental health and a range of indicators of working conditions (relating to, amongst others,

precarity and various work demands and resources).

We obtained the necessary ethical approval and developed a data protection plan combined with a robust technical infrastructure that will enable (vetted) researchers to access the complete data securely, including all the demographic variables. In addition, we have conducted a first pilot study in Montenegro, providing valuable insights into effective survey outreach strategies.

Since 2022, the special interest group has been joined by approximately 60 team members, working on a comprehensive outreach strategy. Employing both “bottom-up” and “top-down” approaches, they engage with stakeholders, develop social media strategies and seek institutional support to maximise the survey's reach.

Image by Amil Orahovac



Figure 1: Sustainable working conditions in academia survey

We officially launched the survey on September 15, 2023 (see [STAIRCASE Launch event](#)). This final survey investigates how organisational differences might influence individual mental health, encompassing both positive indicators, such as work engagement and job satisfaction, as well as negative indicators, such as work addiction, depression, and burnout. The survey also explores contextual factors within departments, institutions, and countries that may impact mental health indicators.

Target population and Key Outcomes

The STAIRCASE survey, crafted by researchers for researchers, targets researchers from doctoral to leadership levels in university and non-university research institutions, excluding non-scientific staff, industry researchers, and people who have left academia. While the primary focus is on the 49 countries represented in ReMO, efforts extend globally.

With the survey, we collect data from individual researchers on mental health outcomes (depression, anxiety, burnout, work engagement), work context (e.g., organisational, climate, harassment, job demands & resources), demographic characteristics, and employment situation, and (insofar as respondents opt-in to volunteering such information) social media handles & ORCID IDs.

What can MCAA members do?

We invite MCAA members to participate, ensuring a comprehensive representation of their institutions and countries. The

involvement of MCAA will enhance our capacity to craft tailored recommendations suited to its members' unique situations and the MSCA at large. Together, we can make a lasting impact on the working conditions and well-being of researchers.

When and How to Participate?

The STAIRCASE survey will remain open for data collection until March 15, 2024. [Click here](#) to participate in the survey, which should take approximately 15 minutes to complete.


To learn more about the survey, please visit the dedicated [STAIRCASE survey website](#), where you will find [introductory videos](#), information on [Ethics](#), [data](#), and [GDPR compliance](#), and an [FAQ](#).

Closing - We Count on You!

Your contribution is instrumental to the success of this endeavor. Be a part of the change and help us create healthy academic working conditions!

We would be extremely grateful if you could (a) fill out the survey and (b) help us distribute the invitation within your networks!

Acknowledgements: Mathias thanks Brian Cahill, Inge van der Weijden, and Stefan Mol for their support.

Mathias Schroijen 
Université libre de Bruxelles

Special Issue

Achieving Work-Life Balance in Research: Challenges and Strategies

A Global Dialogue on Cultivating Work-Life Harmony in Academia

Discover how academics worldwide balance work and personal life, as scholars share their unique experiences and strategies shaped by diverse cultural backgrounds. Explore a global view on finding harmony in academia.

Introduction

The quest for work-life balance in academia is a topic of global relevance, shaped by diverse cultural influences. We reached out to a cohort of invited scholars and researchers to understand how cultural nuances shape their work-life balance across different regions. Their voices provide a comprehensive picture of the challenges and strategies in different academic environments.

Work Culture

Virginia Helena Albarracin from Argentina, with her journey in Biological Sciences and Biochemistry leading to roles as an Independent Researcher at CONICET and Director at CIME-UNT-CONICET, reflects on positive academic changes in her country, emphasizing new regulations and laws for gender equality and sustainability in research. In Canada, Kenza Dufourmantelle, the Senior Director at the Canadian Conservation Institute, brings a blend of chemistry and art history to her role, observing a



progressive work culture. Pooja Khurana, a European-based stem cell scientist and developmental biologist, now engaged in blending scientific research with social impact, finds her current workplace to be diverse, inclusive, and liberal with her past experiences. From the UK, Riccardo Maddalena and Magdalini Theodoridou bring their extensive international experience in civil engineering and conservation science, respectively. Maddalena, a Lecturer at Cardiff University, and Theodoridou, a Newcastle University Academic Track Fellow, highlight the flexible working policies at their

institutions, contributing to a supportive work environment.

Work-Life Balance Practices

In terms of practices, Albarracin has implemented "flexible working hours, remote work options" at CIME, creating a collaborative and understanding environment. Dufourmantele's organization in Canada adopts a flexible schedule for a better work-life blend. "Employees choose to work longer hours each day, resulting in a 3-day weekend," she explains. Khurana emphasizes the importance of recognizing challenges faced by researchers, especially regarding mental

health. She values "acknowledgement and acceptance" of such issues within her work culture. In the UK, Maddalena appreciates Cardiff University's embrace of "blended working," allowing a mix of on-campus and remote work, while Theodoridou notes Newcastle University (NU)'s supportive policies for parents with Employer with heart charter, stating, "NU offers up to two weeks of paid leave for colleagues who suffer an early miscarriage."

Desired Changes

Albarracin calls for enhanced family support and infrastructure in universities, advocating



Figure 1: Harmonizing minds, balancing lives: Uniting the world of academia

Image by DALL-E, prompt by Polat Goktas

for “more childcare facilities” to aid parents in balancing their professional and personal responsibilities. Dufourmantelle emphasizes the necessity of establishing “guidelines on the healthy ratio of meeting vs. non-meeting time” for a balanced work schedule, minimizing meeting fatigue and enhancing productivity. Khurana highlights the need to tackle job precarity and raise awareness about menstrual health issues, vital for improving employee well-being and productivity. These suggestions reflect an understanding of the broader societal factors that impact work-life balance. Maddalena advocates for “mandatory well-being training for all employees” and expanded mental health resources to improve the overall wellbeing of the university community. Theodoridou underscores the necessity of additional support for parents, especially in high-risk pregnancies, and suggests extending leave policies and offering full financial support beyond standard provisions. Additionally, she recommends provisions of childcare support for all parents participating in conferences and external activities, ensuring they can balance professional development with family responsibilities.

Personal Strategies

Albarracin maintains her work-life balance by hiring a nanny for her son and participating in gym, yoga, and cultural events. She values flexibility and personal life consideration in her leadership. Dufourmantelle integrates

running into her daily routine, for energy and clarity, noting, “No matter how busy I am, I take this time for myself early in the morning.” This dedication to self-care is a testament to the importance of setting aside time for personal wellbeing. Khurana ensures personal care practices are a regular part of her work schedule, challenging work over personal life norms. Maddalena, navigating an independent researcher, uses a disciplined approach for balance, stating, “I have been using digital tools...to help plan my week and improve my work-life balance.” He prioritizes personal activities post-5pm, exemplifies a disciplined approach to balancing professional and personal commitments.

Conclusion

The collective experiences of our hosted researchers and scholars underline the importance of both institutional policies and personal strategies in achieving work-life harmony. Their stories from Argentina, Canada, Europe, and the UK provide a rich tapestry of approaches, reflecting the distinct cultural frameworks that influence scholarly pursuits in academia.

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Image by MidJourney, prompt by Fabrizio Martina

Special Issue

Achieving Work-Life Balance in Research: Challenges and Strategies



Bionote:

Maria was born in Cyprus. By the age of 18, she moved to the UK where she obtained her B.Sc. in Biomedical Sciences and her M.Sc. in Immunology and Inflammatory diseases from the University of Manchester and University of Glasgow, respectively. Apart from her research experience in Academia, she was employed by Q2 Solutions-Clinical Laboratory Services Provider, in Edinburgh. Maria has always been eager to develop professionally. She is currently pursuing her PhD in Biomedical Sciences at the University of Cyprus. Maria is very interested in science communication and outreach and is a board member of the non-profit organization Greek Women in STEM.

“How accepting vulnerability helped redefine my work-life balance”

Realizing that ‘being vulnerable does not lessen one’s professionalism or value as a scientist’ has been key in shifting my mindset and achieving a balanced academic and personal life.

I have always been a meticulous and high-performing student. This did not stem from my desire to receive awards and recognition, but from a genuine interest and passion for the topic of study. Although I could successfully keep my work concerns at a safe distance from my personal life and vice versa (supposing that this was the best way to maintain a healthy work-life balance), this changed tremendously during my PhD.

Attaining a healthy work-life balance was challenging, not only because of long working hours and pressure to perform well, but also due to an inability to exclude personal life from day-to-day PhD work routine. At some point, accumulated feelings of stress started taking their toll on my mental and physical health. My motivation to work or socialize

with friends dropped dramatically, which was an alarming sign for me. Inspired by a friend's example, I asked for help and started therapy. In one of our sessions, my therapist said, "You are human, you got tired of pushing through all this time, and it is okay." After several health check-ups and confirming that my physical symptoms were due to anxiety, I decided to take matters into my own hands. In the midst of a busy working period, I decided to ask for a break of one week. I shared my concerns about the situation with my supervisor and I, luckily enough, received a compassionate response. The only thing I did during that week was to spend some quality time with loved ones, including myself. This break eventually created the space I needed to relax, reflect, and re-define my mindset about my work-life balance.

The brief break from the high-pressure environment helped me rediscover my motivation. I realized that being vulnerable and open about my feelings was not an

indication of weakness but of strength. The fact is, there are no 'bad' or 'good' emotions. Instead of categorizing my emotions, I listened to them carefully. For me, stress meant that I needed to take a break to relax. Fear meant that I needed to learn to trust myself and my judgment in tackling issues. Anger meant that if I did not enjoy being in a certain situation and that if the situation did not change, I could change my attitude towards it. I realized that my PhD and my life could not be separated and that I had to find a balance; where experiences of one fueled the other, and together, they could foster my growth.

I no longer feel guilty about responding to emails only during working hours. I feel relieved that I do not need to overwork for weeks to deserve a couple of days off. Taking breaks is not a reward but a prerequisite for an individual of any profession to stay healthy and creative. I am at peace with the fact that some days my productivity is low due to

Photo by Niki Michalopoulou by Greek Women in STEM



Bend so you don't break




personal struggles, and I do not apologize for it in the fear of being considered less professional.

I am fortunate enough to have a supportive network of family and friends who believe in me and understand my needs without doubting my abilities and potential. But what about the role of our workplace, 'Academia', in such a challenging situation? Throughout my career, I have heard many stories like mine from fellow scientists. Surprisingly, many share their experience with shame and behind closed doors. In contrast, others proudly boast about their long hours of work and lack of social life, without realizing that they reinforce an old-fashioned and toxic work culture while reflecting their traumatic experiences to others. It should not be normalized to accept unhealthy working habits at the expense of our well-being and base our self-worth on working hours and the progress of research projects.

Academic institutions should assign a personal counselor to PhD students and supervisors with whom they will feel safe to speak out and share their worries. People in senior positions should encourage their team to participate in extracurricular activities (and get out of their bubble) to fulfill their personal needs. Importantly though, each of us should comprehend why it is vital to have this balance in the first place and what are the perceptions (and prejudices) behind our actions when losing this balance.

As young scientists, it is our responsibility to speak up and change the things that do not serve our generation's needs anymore. Taking that first step by sharing our story with pride may be a good start!

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Special Issue

Achieving Work-Life Balance in Research: Challenges and Strategies

Wired but Weary: Artificial Intelligence to Rescue Work-Life Balance in a Digitised Academia?

Digital technology has revolutionised academia, but at what cost to our work-life balance? As the boundaries blur, artificial intelligence emerges as a potential savior. Could virtual personal assistants be the key to reclaiming equilibrium in our professional and personal lives?

Bill Gates (1) claims we will soon all have a virtual personal assistant (VPA). An agent empowered by various artificial intelligence technologies that could take charge of simple daily tasks and support you with the more creative ones. Its potential impacts are vast: communication, information, planning, learning, health, etc. The promise is to earn flexibility while saving time and resources. You can imagine your VPA as the project manager of your life, ensuring you focus on what matters and achieve your goals. Sounds tempting in the demanding world of academia, right?

But what about work-life balance?
How can it help?

Imagine your VPA organising a balanced schedule. For example, it would consider your private commitments and automatically arrange your professional appointments

Bionote:

Quentin Loisel is a current MSCA PhD fellow at Glasgow Caledonian University and the MCAA UK Chapter Chair. He is part of the [Health CASCADE project](#), aiming to make co-creation trustworthy. The goal of the project is to develop technologies that will enable evidence-based co-creation. His work bridges technology and the fundamental human dimension within the values of the co-creation process. His work focuses on how artificial intelligence can improve collective intelligence. With the growing influence of technology in our society, Quentin aims to enable collaboration between society's actors to make the best of future technology.

accordingly. It would prioritise your activities and prepare backup solutions for the ones you cannot attend. It could remind you of activities in a timely manner to ensure you meet all your deadlines. In our increasingly busy lives, this also promises to reduce the noise and only get curated information. It could send you relevant information for your projects, ensuring you don't get non-urgent notifications outside working hours and making a curated summary of past activity when you return.

In summary, it could differentiate your life from the professional activity and improve your time management, prioritisation, and flexibility to support balance. Your VPA will work for you to make your life smoother.

An increasingly blurred border

However, considering that it could be one day technically possible, these technologies bring new crucial challenges concerning work-life balance. Firstly, there is a cognitive cost since new technology requests continuous learning and adaptation. Secondly, it must access most of your personal and professional information to work optimally. This leads to significant ethical and privacy concerns. Thirdly, there

is the risk of an over-reliance on technology. Indeed, you might not always be aware of or in control of all actions taken by your VPA. It will make mistakes, and you will be the first impacted. Moreover, if the system shuts down, it will be hard to get back on track. This leads to the fourth point: you may face significant damage in a cyberattack with such a global management system (e.g., a leak of personal and professional data). Finally, since the VPA might centralise the interaction, it might reduce interactions with others and increase isolation.

Beyond these challenges, there are two essential questions: what is a work-life balance, and how to operationalise it?



Image by DALL-E 2 prompt by Quentin Loisel

A modern office setting with a diverse group of professionals discussing strategies. A whiteboard displays the words "Work-life Balance," and there's a holographic projection of a virtual personal assistant showing calendar reminders and tasks.



A modern office setting with a diverse group of professionals discussing strategies. A whiteboard displays the words "Work-life Balance," and there's a holographic projection of a virtual personal assistant showing calendar reminders and tasks.

It is fundamental because we must train or feature the VPA to be "aware" of work-life balance and how to enable it. If not appropriately specified, the default paradigm might be the dominant one: more productivity. Indeed, digital technologies have been implemented with the same justifications until now: "Do more with less", "You will save time", or "It brings more flexibility". However, we saw that this rationale could interfere with a balanced work-life and result in the need to control or change digital tools usage to restore equilibrium.

AI with everyone

This technology holds transformative potential for enhancing productivity and reshaping the work dynamics in academia. Nonetheless, it must also consider setting boundaries and self-care to achieve work-life balance. This technology won't naturally consider it and even brings new challenges for the same. Learning from past technology

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implementations, it is worth working on this question before to avoid having to fix the issues afterwards.

Defining work-life balance at an individual and institutional level is essential. These characteristics need to be stated as clearly as possible to be operationalised. A VPA might be able to identify how to operate independently, but the more specific the rules, the more efficient the actions will be. Thanks to great versatility, these technologies could optimally combine individual needs with the institutional culture to encourage a better work-life balance.

But remember, the impact can be immense, positive or negative. The one who will define the rules and implement the technology will have the power to enforce a vision. Ethical considerations are enormous: everyone who will be impacted should take part in the creation, implementation, and monitoring.


Conclusion

If technical and other crucial challenges are solved, the personal VPA might manage aspects of our private and professional lives, impacting both more than any technology ever did before. All stakeholders should participate in creating precise work-life balance characteristics and integrate them during the creation of the technology. A close human-AI collaboration should monitor implementation and usage. This technology could significantly improve work-life balance but it won't happen without you!

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Special Issue

Achieving Work-Life Balance in Research: Challenges and Strategies

Should I worry about failed experiments or bigger ideas during my postdoc?



Photo by Faria Khan

Work-Life Balance in Academia

Researchers often become deeply immersed in their work, prioritizing research goals above all else. However, this narrow focus can hinder career development and overall well-being. Cultivating essential skills beyond research expertise is crucial for professional growth and success. Additionally, taking regular breaks and establishing a healthy work-life balance are essential for maintaining productivity, creativity, and overall health

"Life will get better – you just have to get past the PhD". I have heard this phrase constantly as I struggled to achieve work-life balance during my time as a Marie Curie fellow. When I got my first job as a postdoc after my PhD, I easily fell into the routine of working extra hours in the lab, a habit I acquired during my PhD time. After all, science is exciting, and I want to work on multiple projects and test those challenging hypotheses. Now, being a postdoc at Harvard has increased the urge


to work on multiple projects and pursue additional career development programs, but at what cost? As a newly appointed postdoc, I want to know more about recent developments in my field, network with other like-minded professionals, and achieve results for the projects in less time. Does life get better after getting a PhD?

A major problem facing the postdoc in today's world is intensive training and the expectation

to do more in less time while being consistently underpaid; a phenomenon faced by early-career researchers around the world. Conventionally, a postdoc is an intermediate position required prior to acquiring a faculty position, but is it necessary? And how much time should be spent on training and gaining additional research experience after the PhD? Women and individuals from underrepresented backgrounds have more difficulty maintaining that balance and moving into more independent leadership positions, so they tend to choose this conventional postdoc route.

As an early career researcher, I also strive to arrive at the perfect answer: "how much is enough before I can achieve that leadership position." After discussion with scientists, colleagues, seniors and leaders of the research groups and industry, I have come to the conclusion that this question does not have a definitive answer, but really depends on what an individual's career path/plan is. However, I have come across many suggestions for maintaining that work-life balance and the time to achieve that more independent position which are summarized below:

- The post-doc is not a validation of the work you have done in your PhD- the degree and experience itself has given you enough knowledge to be an independent thinker and a researcher. Postdoc is just another experience that you should opt to increase your network and to understand the expectations in the mid-career stages of your life.
- While 75% of your work should be allocated to your postdoc projects- the next 25% of your time should be really focused on your future career plans e.g., writing the grants, understanding the "market" or "policy" that requires your research, networking, training on new techniques and possibly even drafting independent publications and mentoring the younger scientists in your lab.
- While your PI/mentor has identified projects that will be beneficial to both of you, for the postdoc, it is high time to think about future projects/ideas that you can design for yourself. This should also include independent ideas you haven't worked on before. If you're transitioning into an industry through transit, start thinking about the industries that will best suit your future projects. If academia is your goal, start by getting information about those grants.
- Breathe: you don't have to do everything in your time as a postdoc. Remember that the postdoc is just an independent research experience, and the future would give you more opportunities to work on different ideas/projects. Your goal should be to have at least 1-2 postdoc publications from the work you do after your PhD.
- Do something that excites you outside your lab. Maybe learning about a new plant species, a business idea, mentorship experience, or writing? Would this give you a chance to relax and perhaps also add innovation/diversity to science? Maybe that side network of learning how startups work will give you the inspiration to start your spinoff in the future. Or could a conversation with a journalist give you motivation to tackle challenging problems in society through your research?
- Don't overwork – remember that quality is not quantity. Don't sweat, relax and enjoy. Postdoc should be an exciting experience, and stress hormones can ruin it for you. Learn how to get the adrenaline rush you felt during the PhD time and allow yourself to work on that stability to achieve a work-life balance.

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Special Issue

Achieving Work-Life Balance in Research: Challenges and Strategies

Navigating Mobility Challenges: Lessons from an MSCA4Ukraine Fellow

One Ukrainian researcher's story: Academic mobility in the face of adversity. Discover his journey from the midst of war to the pursuit of knowledge. Learn how the academic world came together to offer hope and challenges of personal life and emotional well-being.

The Dystopian Beginning

On the fateful day of 24th February 2022, an unprovoked armed invasion by the Russian Federation into Ukraine shook the world. According to the United Nations, this conflict forced over 5.5 million Ukrainians to flee their homes as refugees (UNHCR, 2023). Among these refugees were numerous Ukrainian scholars and researchers. The impact of the Russian invasion extended beyond human tragedy, affecting the academic and research landscape. Some universities were damaged or destroyed (Dim, 2022), also



Bionote:

Artem Nazarko is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Doctoral Fellow at the Faculty of Law, University of Bergen. He is working in international criminal and humanitarian law, focusing on the prosecution of international and domestic war crimes under universal jurisdiction and the right to a fair trial. Artem holds masters degrees in international law from the National University Odessa Law Academy and in economics from Admiral Makarov National University of Shipbuilding.

the funding was redirected to support the military (Smagina, 2023). This situation left many Ukrainian researchers with a pressing question: how to continue their academic pursuits in the face of such adversity (Halavka, 2022)? This story concerns resilience, adaptation, and seeking knowledge amid crisis.

The Plight of Ukrainian Scholars

I am Artem Nazarko, a Ukrainian lawyer and a doctoral candidate in Law. Before the war in 2021, I had already embarked on my doctoral journey. However, after 24 February 2022, my family and I were compelled to leave our homeland, casting a shadow of uncertainty over my academic endeavors. The question that loomed significantly was how to resume my research.

International Response: A Beacon of Hope

The response from European universities and research centres to the Ukrainian crisis was both swift and heartening. They offered a lifeline to displaced Ukrainian scholars, providing opportunities for work and financial support. One of the most significant initiatives was '[Science for Ukraine](#)', where various organisations could assist Ukrainian researchers. In 2022, I worked as a visiting researcher at Palacký University Olomouc (Czech Republic), the University of Vienna (Austria), and London South Bank University (United Kingdom). My journey was far from linear as I explored multiple institutions to pursue my research.

The European Commission's MSCA4Ukraine Initiative

To support fleeing researchers, the European Commission launched the MSCA4Ukraine initiative in October 2022 (SAR Europe, 2022). It marked the first specialised scholarship

program of the European Union for researchers from vulnerable groups, currently supporting 125 scholars and doctoral candidates through scholarships in European universities. Fortunately, I secured a two-year MSCA4Ukraine grant and embarked on my journey to the University of Bergen in Norway. I have been diligently working on my project, 'Issues of Domestic Prosecution of War Crimes in Ukraine' (Nazarko, 2023). In a recent webinar, I shared my relatively fresh experience as an MSCA4Ukraine fellow (European University Association, 2023).

The Challenge of Balancing Work and Life


One of the most significant challenges displaced scholars face is work-life balance, especially frequent relocations. This aspect of academic mobility can profoundly impact personal life and emotional well-being.

First, there is the strain of separation. The necessity of mobility often means that scholars must leave their families and support systems behind. This separation can be emotionally challenging, especially during turmoil and uncertainty. Scholars like myself must cope with the emotional toll of being away from loved ones. Second, there is a challenge of the work-life balance. Maintaining work-life balance becomes a complex juggling act for displaced scholars. Research demands and the need to adapt to new environments, languages, and cultures can make finding time for personal life and self-care challenging. Third, there is a psychological resilience. Long-distance commuting and frequent relocations can test one's psychological resilience. Scholars must rapidly adapt to different academic and cultural contexts, which can be emotionally taxing. Coping with change and uncertainty requires a robust mental and emotional toolkit.

Forging Ahead

My journey has been a rollercoaster of challenges, discoveries, and adaptation. The support from European academic communities and the opportunities provided by initiatives like MSCA4Ukraine have been a lifeline for displaced Ukrainian scholars. The lessons learned from navigating mobility challenges can inspire and guide researchers facing adversity in an increasingly interconnected world.

As Ukrainian scholars, we remain dedicated to advancing our research, building bridges between cultures, and contributing to the global academic community, even in the most challenging circumstances.

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Special Issue

Achieving Work-Life Balance in Research: Challenges and Strategies

Opening to self-care: Learning from mental health professionals

It is not new news that many academics are exhausted from all kinds of research and teaching duties. Long waiting times for funding results, meeting students' needs, and even working in the lab could be emotionally demanding. Like academics, mental health professionals deal with high workload and often take care of others' emotional needs. So, what can we learn from them?

Mental health professionals have shown me that one type of quality self-care practice is more effective and accessible (though not easier) than what most academics might think: mindfulness. At a conference in June this year, I had the opportunity to meet academics from various disciplines, including AI, business, psychology and others. When I mentioned mindfulness as a health-promoting activity, many expressed skepticism and said the research methods in mindfulness are questionable. Interestingly, although the word mindfulness raises questions, there are many success stories on the front lines of mental health professionals.

A few months after the conference, I attended a prestigious two-day suicide intervention training. Most of the thirteen practitioners reported practicing mindfulness for self-care. At least two of them said they



Photo by Sarah Ng

Bionote:

Sarah Ng is the founder and director of Epicloud Health and Diversity, U.K., which specialises in mindfulness training and research with a focus on the use of language and imagery in mindfulness. She studies the mind-body connection and its role in emotion regulation over 15 years. Her latest research focuses on how individuals regulate their anxiety through cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression and how power and stigma influence the improvement of mental health in academia. She is on the committee of the British Psychological Society's (BPS) South West Branch and an ambassador of COST's 'Action Researcher Mental Health Observatory.



Image by Kathy Lee

Mindful self-care entails not judging yourself

survived personal trauma by learning to be mindful, that is, by being more aware of the thoughts, feelings, and sensations that arise in the moment, by observing them and not judging them.

I wonder why there is such a difference between academics and mental health professionals when it comes to mindfulness as a form of self-care. Indeed, skepticism among academics towards mindfulness has been reflected in recent research (Lemon & McDonough, 2018; Stofleth & Manusov, 2019). Perhaps that skepticism stems from the mind-body divide seen among academics. According to Sir Ken Robinson in his acclaimed TED talk "Do Schools Kill Creativity?" In 2006, academics viewed their bodies as a form of

transportation for their heads. As a (runaway) academic, I can hardly disagree with that.

Being skeptical is part of the scientific training, and to be honest, mindfulness is overhyped in the "McMindfulness" industry (Choi et al., 2021; Hayes & Plumb, 2007). However, it is important to be open to the growing scientific evidence that mindfulness can help with the mental health crisis in academia. Elizabeth Blackburn, one of the 2009 Nobel Laureates in Physiology and Medicine, identified links between mindfulness and telomere length, a biomarker for human aging and longevity.

Other neuroscience research and meta-analyses of psychometric studies have

shown that nurturing mindfulness can mediate changes in brain structures that reduce anxiety and depression (Tang, 2015). Mindfulness research needs more work, but as long as the scientific data is not clear, there is no harm in putting the method into practice, under the guidance and care of experienced people. In the meantime, scientific research into mindfulness, like other types of research, such as weighing the benefits and risks of caffeine, is likely to continue to evolve despite controversies. As Elizabeth Blackburn noted, academics have yet to embrace research into health interventions rooted in religious and spiritual practices, such as mindfulness. Science and religion may seem contradictory, but they are not mutually exclusive.

We talk about the benefits of being open to breakthroughs in science and technology. Let's do the same in our self-

care. Mindfulness is about being aware and describing what it is. Take breaks from evaluating, criticizing and judging, and find ways to tune into your thoughts, feelings, and sensations. To deal with chronic stress, refresh yourself regularly at a deep level and connect with the core of yourself in a compassionate way.

You are much more than impact factors, rankings, and numbers of publications. Much of you is immeasurable: love, care, empathy, intuition, and more. It would be good to notice that.

Sarah Ng

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Special Issue

Achieving Work-Life Balance in Research: Challenges and Strategies

Never Enough?

Learning to balance an academic career with a growing family is a challenging task, which can leave one exhausted and feeling like they are not doing enough. This article shares a new parent's personal journey to better work-life balance

An old story goes: as many people, as many opinions. That's why, when I asked several colleagues to define work-life balance, they all had a slightly different answer. In fact, many of them said I must be struggling with mine. It was just a small exercise I conducted after an editorial meeting when we decided on the topic of the December 2023 special issue of the MCAA Newsletter, and I was simply trying to understand if the topic resonates with the audience. However, their responses made me wonder if my balance was actually off.

In modern society, many academics, including me, try to focus on a major career push in their 20s-30s. We all know how competitive this world is, so when you find the topic you love, you should work really hard for it, yes? Chronically overworking, attending many international conferences, taking on extracurricular activities in professional societies to push yourself even further, spending too little time with your family or not being fully present. Does it sound familiar? Well, at least it does sound a lot like my life for the last 10+ years. Although some might find this lifestyle tiring, I actually enjoy it a lot. Every late night



Photo by Amsterdam Business School, University of Amsterdam

Bionote:

Oleksandrs (Sasha) Ivashchenko is a senior medical physicist at the nuclear medicine department of the University Medical Center Groningen. After obtaining her MSc in applied physics in Ukraine, she moved to the Netherlands to pursue her PhD at ITN Trace'nTreat, based at TU Delft. Subsequently, Sasha worked at various academic medical centers, increasingly moving towards medical research. She is the current editor-in-chief of the MCAA Newsletter and holds a board seat at several professional and humanitarian NGOs, including [European Federation of Organizations for Medical Physics and Science For Ukraine](#).



Image by MidJourney, prompt by Fabrizio Martina

writing an article, scanning at the hospital or going on a work trip, I am also looking forward to learning something new, to seeing the results of hard work that has finally paid off. But as much as I enjoy it, I'm also happy to have a supportive partner by my side and want to have a life outside of work.

A few years ago, I finally started feeling that I was getting somewhere with my career. My network was growing, a long-awaited permanent position was secured, and collaboration opportunities were coming in. My inner voice was saying: "Yes, Sasha, you are rocking it!". At the same time, I was near my mid-thirties and realizing that this really was the time to start a family. I was at the age where, before I found my "calling" in academia, I thought I would already have a family. But the work, more work, grant applications, paper revisions, and job

insecurities happened, and, after a few years, I just got too caught up in the whirlpool of the modern lifestyle in academia.

We were lucky to welcome our son into this world in May 2023. He is such a sweet and joyful beacon of light and I can't imagine our lives any other way. But when I look back on the last few months of my motherhood experience, I wish I could go back and shake myself.

To start with, 16 weeks of maternity leave sounded like an eternity to me, as I have never taken more than 2 weeks off in my life. Childishly or rather stupidly, I was deeply concerned that several projects would fade away, people would forget to involve me, that the momentum to publish our results would pass. Even on the day of the delivery, I texted colleagues to let them know where

the files were to submit the manuscript before the deadline, and apologised for the inconvenience. Over the past few months, when I could have just stayed in the moment, I often found myself reading notifications on the phone, scrolling through science journals during night feedings, and staying semi-present.


Especially after going back to full-time work in mid-August, I found myself being stuck in the half-present zone all the time. When I am at home, I feel the responsibility to monitor work matters due to the “less” hard-working work style I have now. I know this isn't the case, but I do feel a little guilty every time I cannot stay late for experiments. At work, I constantly feel guilty about not spending enough time with my family. I want to do more for and with them and give them the best version of me they can get, yet 100% sure that I'm failing at it. There is a feeling of being not enough wherever I go. It is a nagging feeling of self-doubt that is now rooted into my daily life. Therefore, when my colleagues said that I might be struggling with the work-life balance, I thought they were onto something.

As academics, we are trained to excel and thrive for excellence. Publish or perish, push for results, and move forward. At last, now I simply want to stay in the moment and enjoy the life I have, at home and at work. Many of us rush to move forward and forget to “enjoy the ride”, something I'm now learning to embrace. Slowly by slowly, I'm starting to understand that the “never enough” guilt I have, is just the next phase in my personal development.

Just like my little boy, I am now gaining new skills: really learning to say no, setting better boundaries, and focusing only on projects that actually matter to me. When I look back on the last year of my life, in reality, it

was probably the most productive year I've ever had. In fact, parenting has pushed me to finally apply all that time management knowledge and task delegation skills I learned in personal development courses during my PhD. Better late than never, right? Instead of jumping 'hands-on' into every project I like, I now teach and invest in people around me. In a way, I'm exploring a new circle of support and collaboration that always surrounded me at work, but that somehow I hadn't seen before. Yes, unfortunately, some of my concerns were true. For example, I get sideways glances from several older male colleagues when I turn down meetings because of breast-pumping time slots in my calendar. However, within a few months, I also gained more confidence by reminding them that we live in the 21st century, the fact that their remarks are inappropriate, about my rights, and the fact that they needed to eat as a baby as well. The last argument, in particular, puts a peculiar look on their faces.

That is why, in the depth of the “not enough” phase many of us will need to go through once in our lifetime as new parents, I just want you to remember that it is a way forward to a more fulfilling and better balanced life. And if you will stumble or struggle on the way, don't forget that there is a big MCAA community ready to support you.

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Special Issue

Achieving Work-Life Balance in
Research: Challenges and StrategiesA tale of a
mother and a
war refugee

Just imagine... A war has broken out and you are forced to flee your country holding your one-year-old boy in your arms to a foreign country, with no clue about what to do next, where to live and how to earn a living? Apparently, trying to survive, both physically and mentally, while running for your life is not just a thing you see in movies anymore. It becomes your life: life of a war refugee.

I will never forget that cold morning of February 2022 when I woke up to the sounds of sirens and missiles. Little did I know that the life I had been living had just come to an end, and my world had turned upside down in an instant. All I could think about was saving my young one and my family. I quickly filled a suitcase with the first things I got my hands on, grabbed my little one, and charged on the road with an uncertain future.

After a few days on the road, there was finally a glimmer of hope, a glimmer of safety, far away from the explosions. A safe haven, where I could take a breath, calm my nerves, and finally start to live again. However, I was in a new land and had a family to feed. Seeing your child crying of hunger doesn't allow you to ponder over the successful career that you had just lost, but rather forces you to take up any menial job you get your hands on in order to satiate your child's hunger.



Photo by Kristen Loken photography

Bionote:

With a PhD in law as MSCA4Ukraine Fellow, Kateryna Latysh is working on a Digital Forensic, OSINT and Artificial Intelligence project at Vilnius University (Lithuania). Since 2014, she has been teaching as an assistant professor at Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University (Kharkiv, Ukraine). Kateryna was involved in several public sector projects, serving as an assistant to a Member of the Canadian (2013) and Ukrainian (2018-2019) Parliament. She has 12 years of legal experience in the pre-trial and trial as a Ukrainian Barrister.

After a while even though my child was fed and safe asleep, I still felt a pit in my stomach. Why? Because, while me and my baby were safe, I had my loved ones that

were left behind and were probably shaking every hour due to constant bombing and aircrafts flying overhead. I felt remorse for sleeping in a comfortable bed while my near and dear ones were forced to stay in a cold, spooky basement. I felt bad every time I ate food because there were those I knew who were cooking whatever they could eat over a fire in between explosions. This guilt pointed to signs of PTSD. It took me a while to channel the trauma I had suffered into power. I said to myself, that I could either sit and cry while listening to the news or I could be strong and be a role model for my boy. Needless to say, I chose the latter and also tried looking for ways to help my country even though I was in a faraway land.

This is when I started brainstorming ideas and doing some research in terms of possible career options. The first obvious choice was to continue the path of a researcher since that was always the goal. I had almost forgotten that a year ago, I was planning to apply for the MSCA fellowship but gave up the idea of raising a family. However, as the saying goes "Fortune favors the brave". I discovered that MSCA4Ukraine had just launched. Memories from the year before came gushing back and teary-eyed, I applied for this beacon of hope.

Time passed and the news came - I got the fellowship. I was elated with the news but was also sad that I couldn't celebrate it with my loved ones as I had imagined. This fellowship supported my mental health and gave me a chance to work for my country and stay in touch with my home university through the secondments.


All I needed next was to make a proper timetable that included time for research and nursing my child. Although easier said than done, working effectively with a toddler is no easy feat. So, how did I manage to do it? Well, my golden rule was to not mix the two things together. It will lead to a burnout. It

is a personal belief that it is better to spend quality time with your child without thinking about work. Meanwhile, to focus on work, it's acceptable to seek outside help. I sought help from a kindergarten, which provided me time from 7 am to 5 pm to concentrate on work while my child was playing, napping, and learning. Another thing that helped me a lot was that there were places in libraries where parents with toddlers could work. It was either a closed 2 person chamber with a gaming space for the child or a big room with a caretaker with whom you could leave your child.

Of course, it helps when there are policies in place to support you. I was lucky to be part of the Lithuanian system, where parents get some special perks. For instance, you get an additional day off every 3 months as mother's/father's day and, if you have more than 2 children, you get a day off every month. Another example is that you can work remotely until your children are 3 years old, which goes up to 14 years old if you are a single parent (for at least 20% of their total working time). Also, if you are a public employee with kids under the age of 3, you can have a 4-day workweek.

But, whether you have such a support system or governmental/institutional policies in place or not, keep in mind that you will always be the first role model your kids will have. So, it is imperative that you don't stop. From seeing me reading in the library, my son has fallen in love with reading. It has become our favorite pastime now.

Now, I don't know if I am doing a perfect job being a researcher and a mother at the same time but I am doing my best to achieve a perfect balance between the two, mainly by keeping the two things separate.

Kateryna Latysh 
Vilnius University

Special Issue

Achieving Work-Life Balance in Research: Challenges and Strategies

Iberus Connect: a community of researchers at Campus Iberus to foster work-life balance.

Iberus Connect, the international network and community of researchers at Campus Iberus, welcomes scholars from around the world to the consortium of excellent universities: Public University of Navarre, University of La Rioja, University of Lleida and University of Zaragoza. This program is dedicated to give support to international researchers in achieving a healthy work-life balance.

What is Iberus Connect?

Iberus Connect, managed and coordinated by Campus Iberus, is an initiative that aims to integrate international researchers into any of the Universities under its Consortium –Public University of Navarre, University of La Rioja, University of Lleida, and University of Zaragoza– through the creation of an international network and community of researchers.

Campus Iberus, the Campus of International Excellence (CEI) of the Ebro Valley, strategically aggregates research capacities from the public universities of the Autonomous Communities of Aragon and La Rioja, of the Foral Community of Navarra, as well as that of the province of Lleida in Catalonia. The campus focuses on interdisciplinary collaboration fostering

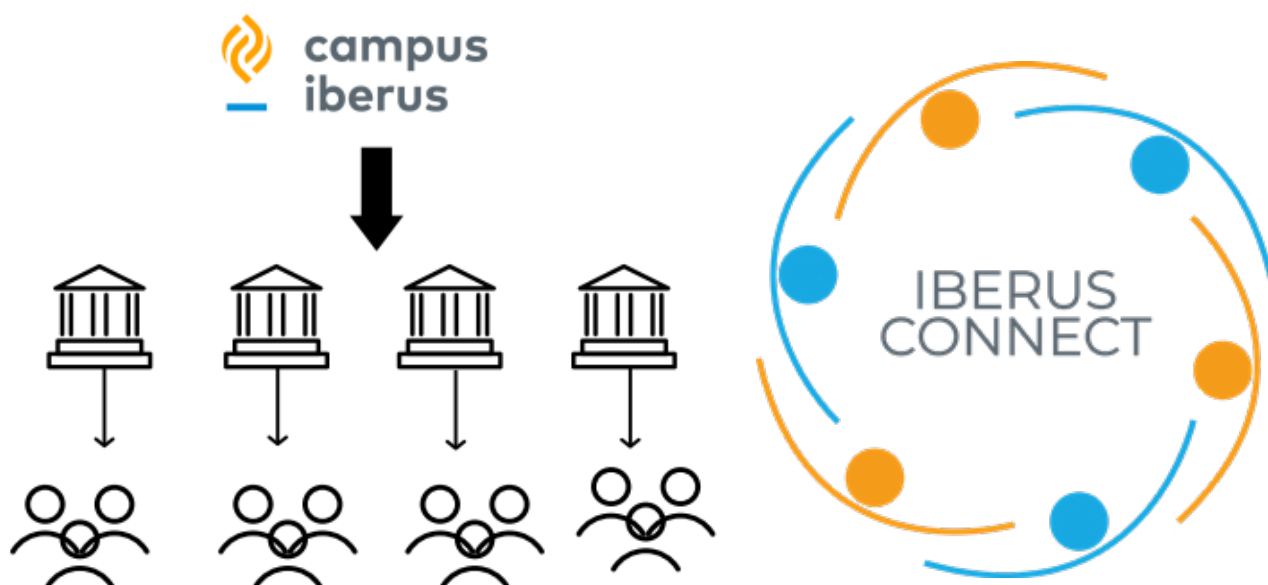
Bionote:

With a PhD in Fluid Mechanics as FPU Fellow at LIFTEC (University of Zaragoza), Joaquín specializes in thermal management and chemical technologies. Joaquín was awarded a 2-years postdoctoral Marie Skłodowska-Curie IAPP fellowship in Italy (Green Kitchen project). After some years at Bosch Group in Spain, he is currently coordinating the MSCA Programme (Iberus Experience) for 11 postdoctoral researchers at Campus Iberus. Joaquín also has some teaching experience as associate professor in engineering, holding the position for the Spain-Portugal Chapter of the MCAA.

clusters in Agrofood and Nutrition, Technologies for Health, Energy and Sustainability, Social and Territorial Development, and Circular Bioeconomy. This brings together research, industry, public administration and other key actors in order to face shared research challenges with an approach based on scientific leadership and excellence.

Mentoring program for international researchers

Campus Iberus has launched a mentoring program to facilitate the academic and social integration of international researchers. The program attempts to help newcomers



Iberus Connect mentoring programme at the 4 universities of Campus Iberus

(mainly PhDs) to adapt to the hosting University and to reach a work-life balance by pairing incoming researchers with more experienced ones willing to act as local coaches at their university.

Mentors, experienced researchers, communicate with the mentee before arrival to guide them through administrative processes, urban mobility, and accommodation, promoting work-life balance. Additionally, they are also encouraged to share tips and experiences to help newcomers to settle in the city and integrate as a citizen. They are expected to communicate assertively and give constructive feedback, establishing a trusting relationship with the mentee and identifying their needs and interests.

University Ambassadors

University Ambassadors organize socio-cultural activities (welcome to the city, icebreakers, local culture, leisure

activities...), supporting mentors and mentees throughout the academic year (at least 3 events). An ambassador needs to know the city and the university well enough to give necessary information and share their experience on the administrative and academic processes. They have to keep in touch with the paired international researchers, with special focus on supporting the mentors.

Moreover, they are responsible for the content creation that can later be used in Campus Iberus social media: Iberus Connect social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, Telegram...) are managed by Campus Iberus.

Mentors and Ambassadors Rights, Duties and Benefits


To ensure effective support, mentors and ambassadors undergo training in coaching, and intercultural awareness –to enhance their transversal competencies

as a mentor–, negotiation, coaching, and leadership, among others. Both mentors and ambassadors play a crucial role in transmitting institutional values, aiding the integration and development of international researchers at each university. They maintain direct contact with Campus Iberus, reporting any issue or difficulty that may arise to the Iberus Connect team.

Mentors and ambassadors are recognized with 15 hours of transversal training, in addition to being considered a merit in Erasmus+ grant scales for international mobility in Europe. Moreover, the experience as mentor or ambassador undoubtedly contributes to their personal development, improvement in language skills, cultural exchange language skills, cultural exchange and international networking.

MSCA Iberus Experience researchers

Researchers from the [Iberus Talent](#) and [Iberus Experience](#) MSCA-COFUND programs are clear examples of participants deeply involved in the Iberus Connect, both acting as mentors or as mentees. For instance, in the Iberus Experience programme, 11 researchers from 9 nationalities (Argentina, Brazil, India, Italy, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines, Spain and Vietnam) have joined our universities in 2022-2023. These programs attract and retain excellent researchers to an attractive and stimulating environment, and Iberus Connect supports incoming researchers in finding a work-life balance in their new institutions and cities.

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Image by MidJourney, prompt by Fabrizio Matina

Special Issue

Achieving Work-Life Balance in Research: Challenges and Strategies

MSCA Promotes Equal Opportunities for Researchers

Equity, equality, inclusivity, and diversity are European values central to the policies of the European Commission. The Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) place high importance on promoting these values and contribute to the creating a system where all participating researchers have equal opportunities for career progression.

The MSCA

The Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) have been the European Union (EU)'s reference program for doctoral education and postdoctoral training since 1996. Between 2014 and 2020, within the framework of Horizon 2020 (H2020), the MSCA supported 65,000 researchers involving doctoral candidates and more experienced researchers in Europe and beyond. End-of-fellowship and follow-up questionnaires indicate that over 90% of all former fellows believe that the MSCA fellowship had a very positive impact on their professional development under H2020 (European Commission (EC), 2023a).

The MSCA has significantly supported the growing number of women in research and innovation, contributing to achieving full and equal access to women in science. Under H2020, women comprised 44% of fellows within MSCA (IF, ITN, COFUND actions), a notable increase from 37% in Framework Programme 7 (FP7). Additionally, the mobility and training of experienced



Bionote:

Senem Sanal-Erginel is a policy officer at the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) within the Directorate-General for Education and Culture in the European Commission in Brussels, Belgium. As a part of her professional duties, she is responsible for coordinating relations with the Marie Curie Alumni Association (MCAA), and supervising in MSCA. Prior to her current position at the MSCA unit, she worked on school policy and engagement. Senem has an academic background, holding a PhD in Educational Sciences. She is a mother of two children, aged 14 and 10, and describes herself as passionate about being a mother, academic, and engaging with research policy at the European Union level. She strongly values inclusion and equal opportunities for all.



Photo by Istock/Andrii Yalanskyi

Visualizing equity: Diverse paths, one goal in MSCA's commitment to equal opportunities for researchers

female researchers within MSCA are higher compared to other programs, with women representing 42% of MSCA fellows versus 39% in similar programs.

MSCA under Horizon Europe

Under Horizon Europe, the current framework program for research and innovation covering the period between 2021 and 2027, MSCA introduced new measures to promote a gender-equal culture within research and innovation organizations. From 2022, organizations established in EU Member States and associated countries must have a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) to apply to calls for proposals (EC, 2021a). Besides mandatory requirements, GEPs contain recommended actions on work-life balance, gender balance in leadership and decision-making, gender equality in recruitment and career progression, integrating gender dimension into research and teaching content, and addressing gender-based violence, including sexual harassment.

More gender friendly and inclusive MSCA

Promoting fellows' research careers is a primary goal of the MSCA. Analysis of the end-of-fellowship and follow-up questionnaires indicates that the MSCA has indeed contributed to advancing ITN/IF/COFUND researchers' careers, enhancing their employability and professional prospects (EC, 2021b).

The MSCA under Horizon Europe adopted a more gender-friendly and inclusive approach, emphasizing gender mainstreaming at all levels and work-life balance provisions to encourage greater participation by women. Notably, family allowances are now accessible to all fellows with families, regardless of their eligibility at the beginning of their project. Other measures include long-term leave allowances covering maternity, paternity, parental, sick, or special leave, as well as part-time work for family and personal reasons. In addition, as part of its efforts towards accessibility and inclusiveness, MSCA offers financial support for additional costs


incurred by researchers/staff members with disabilities through a special needs allowance (EC, 2023b). The MSCA is committed to addressing the gender pay gap and supporting equal opportunities by ensuring equal pay for all fellows.

As part of the efforts to achieve gender balance, the MSCA incorporates a gender dimension as a critical criterion in its evaluation process, enhancing the quality and societal relevance of research and innovation.

To promote equal opportunities and career advancements, the MSCA Guidelines on Supervision (EC, 2021c) advocates for the effective supervision of researchers during their fellowship. These guidelines place a strong emphasis on promoting a healthy work-life balance and personal well-being in the workplace. Consistent with the European

Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the recruitment of researchers (EC, 2005), the MSCA requires transparent recruitment processes and ensures high-quality employment and working conditions for all researchers.

Finally, and importantly, as part of the European Commission's efforts to support women in research and innovation, the MSCA emphasizes promoting female role models, including outstanding MSCA supervisors, coordinators, and fellows, to inspire girls and women globally through signature events such as 'European Research Nights' (2023) and 'Researchers at Schools' (2022).

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Accessibility Statement

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

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

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

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



Editorial information

About



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

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Instructions for submission

Authors interested in submitting an article should read the Editorial Guidelines and the Editorial Rules available on the [s](#). Articles should be submitted **exclusively** through the form available on the MCAA Newsletter website.

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