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Marie Curie Alumni Association

Newsletter

Image by Midjourney, prompt Fabrizio Martina

MCAA Annual Conference 2025

Meet the 2024 Awardees

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Message from the Board

Dear MCAA Members,

It has already been a year since the current Board began its mandate: what a journey it has been so far, and we are now gearing up for the second half! Over the past year, we have continuously refined the MCAA strategy to strengthen its role as a dynamic network of researchers and professionals, advocating for excellence in research and career development opportunities across Europe and beyond. None of this would have been possible without our fantastic Secretariat, also known as the Operational Team, which turns strategy into action. We take the opportunity to simply 'sound [our deepest gratitude to the OpTeam] over the roofs of the world'.

In this newsletter, we are delighted to highlight a few major milestones.

2025 Annual Conference & General Assembly

Our flagship event, the Annual Conference and General Assembly, was held in Kraków, Poland, on 21–22 March 2025. The event gathered hundreds of Members and non-Members, onsite and online, offering a stage for engaging discussions, knowledge-sharing, and networking. Under the theme 'Research and Innovation in a Rapidly Evolving World', the conference featured satellite events, inspiring keynotes and panel discussions, and workshops. Have a look at the agenda.

For instance, the panellists of the high-level plenary session 'Europe's Future: Strengthening Research, Innovation, and Scientific Leadership' discussed key reports shaping Europe's Research & Innovation (R&I) landscape, focusing on strengthening fundamental research, fostering researcher mobility, and aligning R&I with economic resilience to ensure Europe remains a global leader in innovation.

Insights on the MSCA Supervision Guidelines

Exciting news from the Annual Conference: the newly revised MSCA Supervision Guidelines have been officially introduced. The document offers a comprehensive framework to enhance the researcher-supervisor relationship and emphasises best practices in mentorship, career development, and mental health.

At the MCAA, we actively participated in the discussions because we believe in a research environment where everyone can (and must) thrive. These guidelines align with our vision for a more supportive research environment. We encourage both supervisors

Photo by Pineaddle

Board members at the closing of the MCAA Annual Conference and General Assembly 2025 in Krakow.

and researchers to engage with these recommendations, fostering a culture of constructive feedback, open communication, and mutual respect. These guidelines are not just for supervisors but also for supervised researchers, with equal consideration for both, ensuring both perspectives are equally valued. Check them out, share them widely, and be part of the change!

Launching the MCAA Academy Pilot Mentoring Programme

Other exciting news from the MCAA Academy! We are thrilled to announce the launch of a new initiative: the MCAA Academy 'Careers in the Public Sector' pilot mentoring programme. **So, what's it all about?** It's a mentoring programme within the MCAA Academy platform through which you can learn, grow, and connect with professionals working in the public sector, in fields such as policy, education, and healthcare. **How?** Through training and mentorship, it offers a comprehensive and flexible learning experience, enabling mentees to develop the skills they need when they need them. **Want to be part of it?** Whether as a mentor or a mentee, this is your chance to gain insights and share experiences.

A Chinese proverb says, "Teachers can open the door, but you must enter it yourself".

Here is the door: https://www.academy.mariecuriealumni.eu/

Celebrating one year of PEP-CV

Over the past year, the MCAA has actively contributed to research assessment reform through its involvement in the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA), ensuring our Members' voices shape future R&I frameworks.

This month, we celebrate the first anniversary of our Peer Exchange Platform for Narrative-style CVs (PEP-CV). This initiative helps professionals in R&I engage in peer mentoring to better showcase diverse experiences, achievements, and career paths in narrative-style CVs. PEP-CV has now partnered with ORCID, bringing more value to researchers. We invite you all to engage with this initiative and promote its integration into research evaluation worldwide!

Last but not least: the MSCA matchmaking platform... Connecting the dots!

On 27 November 2024, the MSCA National Contact Points (NCPs) met the MSCA Unit in Brussels and online. MCAA representatives participated in discussions exploring potential collaborations between the MCAA and NCPs. Following the event, the matchmaking process began, with MCAA Chapter and Working Group Chairs encouraged to connect with their NCPs through a dedicated portal—and guess what? The portal is still open: https://msca.b2match.io/

We take the opportunity to simply 'sound [our deepest gratitude to all our Members] over the roofs of the world'. Thank you for being part of this journey. Your engagement, ideas, and initiatives drive the success of the MCAA, and we are excited about what we can achieve together in the year ahead.

Stay tuned! The coming months will bring more opportunities for engagement.
We remain dedicated to developing the Association and enhancing the support we provide to our Members.

On behalf of the MCAA Board,

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Image by MidJourney, prompt by Fabrizio Martina

Editorial

A Community in Motion

The 2025 MCAA Annual Conference in Kraków left us energised, inspired, and reminded of the strength that comes from community. This year's gathering wasn't just a series of panels and presentations – it was a celebration of shared purpose. We saw researchers, innovators, and alumni come together across disciplines, borders, and sectors to imagine a better, more inclusive future for science. The positive momentum was palpable, and the warmth of connection undeniable.

If I should mention anything from the MCAA Board's latest work, then let me highlight the MSCA Supervision Guidelines and the launch of the MCAA Academy's 'Careers in the Public Sector' mentoring programme. These initiatives exemplify how strategy becomes practice within our network – how ideas, once debated, are now actively shaping support at every career stage.

I would like to personally congratulate all the MCAA Awardees. Their words reaffirmed that excellence isn't only about publications or patents but also about impact, purpose, and people. The values represented here show how expansive – and inclusive – our definition of excellence has become. Their stories aren't just success stories; they are invitations to dream bigger.

Finally, our in-depth conference coverage ranges from sessions on citizen science, mentoring, and Horizon Europe policy to the vibrant discussions on science communication, research ethics, and brain circulation. These articles do more than recap events – they capture a growing shift in our culture: toward openness, equity, and sustainability. If Kraków reminded us of anything, it's that the MCAA is not just reacting to change – we are actively creating it.

Let's continue showing up for each other, mentoring the next generation, advocating for better systems, and opening the doors of science even wider. The Annual Conference reminded us that we are not alone in our challenges or ambitions. We are part of a living, thriving community, driven by the belief that together, we can shape a brighter future.

See you again next year!

Enjoy the read!

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Meet Award winner

Meet the 2024 Awardees

Image by MidJourney, prompt by Fabrizio Martina

MCAA Awards - Celebrating Excellence in the MCAA Community

Every year, the Marie Curie Alumni Association celebrates its members, Chapters, and Working Groups for their achievements and dedication to the community through the **MCAA Awards**. The Awards are presented across several categories, each spotlighting a unique aspect of excellence:

The **MCAA Career Award** recognises a member with exceptional career achievements, including outstanding work or research experience, or a lasting impact on society or the community.

The **MCAA Best Innovator Award** rewards a member who has presented excellence in innovative approaches related to research, or in the development of new services, products or methodologies.

The **MCAA Social Impact Award** recognises a member whose work has had a significant social impact, resulting in tangible benefits or solutions to societal challenges.

The **MCAA Outstanding Contributor Award** rewards a member who has made significant contributions to the MCAA community through engagement, commitment, and representation activities.

The **MCAA Chapter Awards** (European and non-European) and the **MCAA Working Group Award** recognise the outstanding contributions of Chapters and Working Groups. These awards celebrate efforts that support and strengthen our network through initiatives, collaborations, and activities that have had a positive impact across our global community.

The 2024 Individual Awardees were selected by a distinguished panel of evaluators:

- Bogdan Samojeden, Vice-Dean for Education, AGH University;
- Tarun Agrawal, Research & Innovation Unit Director, Erasmus Mundus Association;
- Ilona Uryga-Bugajska, Vice-Chair, MCAA Poland Chapter;
- Julie Leprêtre, Policy Officer, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture.

We extend our heartfelt congratulations to all the winners and thank them for their inspiring contributions to the MCAA community and beyond!

Meet Award winner

Career Award, Yuzhu Pearl Li: I bridge science and practice into real-world impact

Yuzhu Pearl Li is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering at the National University of Singapore (NUS), where she leads a research group advancing climate-resilient coastal protection solutions. Her work spans coastal and ocean engineering, focusing on extreme waves, turbulence, marine renewable energy, and sustainable shoreline protection under climate change. Pearl is a former Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Postdoctoral Fellow at the Technical University of Denmark and an Alexander von Humboldt Scholar.

How does it feel to win the award?

Winning this award is a tremendous honour and deeply humbling. It represents not only a personal milestone but also a recognition of the collaborative efforts of my mentors, collaborators, and research team over the years. I am especially grateful to my postdoctoral supervisor, the host of my MSCA Fellowship, Professor David R. Fuhrman from the Technical University of Denmark, whose mentorship and unwavering support were instrumental in my obtaining the fellowship and my current position at the National University of Singapore. I also wish to thank my husband, Dominic Wong, whose understanding and encouragement have been crucial in supporting my international mobility and career development.

What journey led you to this award?

My journey spans six countries and multiple disciplines – from dual degrees in Engineering and Arts in China to a Master's in ocean renewable energy in Canada and a PhD in Norway on wave–structure–seabed interaction. A defining moment was receiving the MSCA Fellowship, which led to the development of a turbulence model now central to solving complex coastal problems and set the foundation for my current leadership role at NUS. There, I've built a thriving research team, secured over €7 million in grants, and contributed to national coastal resilience strategies. I also shape climate adaptation policy through leadership roles at the Institution of Engineers Singapore and serve on the EU Mission 'Restore Our

Ocean and Waters by 2030'. As both a researcher and educator, I bridge science and practice—mentoring young engineers, advocating for gender equity, and delivering training that translates research into real-world impact.

How will this award propel you in your future endeavours?

The award is a powerful affirmation of my research direction and leadership. It will bolster my efforts to secure international collaborations, attract top talent, and influence science-informed coastal policies, particularly as we tackle rising sea levels and climate uncertainties. It also motivates me to continue leading with purpose—fostering excellence in research, education, and public service.

What are your future goals?

I aim to deepen the scientific understanding of coastal dynamics and the impact of extreme events under climate change and translate that into scalable coastal adaptation solutions. Equally important is nurturing the next generation of engineers and researchers who are not only technically excellent but also socially and environmentally conscious.

What advice do you have for the MCAA?

Continue fostering interdisciplinary connections and supporting early-career researchers through mentoring and mobility opportunities. The MCAA community is uniquely positioned to bridge research, policy, and societal impact.

Is there anything else you wish to share with the community?

Balancing motherhood and a demanding academic career has shown me the value of empathy and resilience. I hope to inspire others—especially women in STEM—to pursue their ambitions while embracing all facets of life. Personal growth and professional excellence are not mutually exclusive—they can enrich each other.

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Yuzhu Pearl Li in the hydraulic laboratory at the Leichtweiß Institute for Hydraulic Engineering and Water Resources.

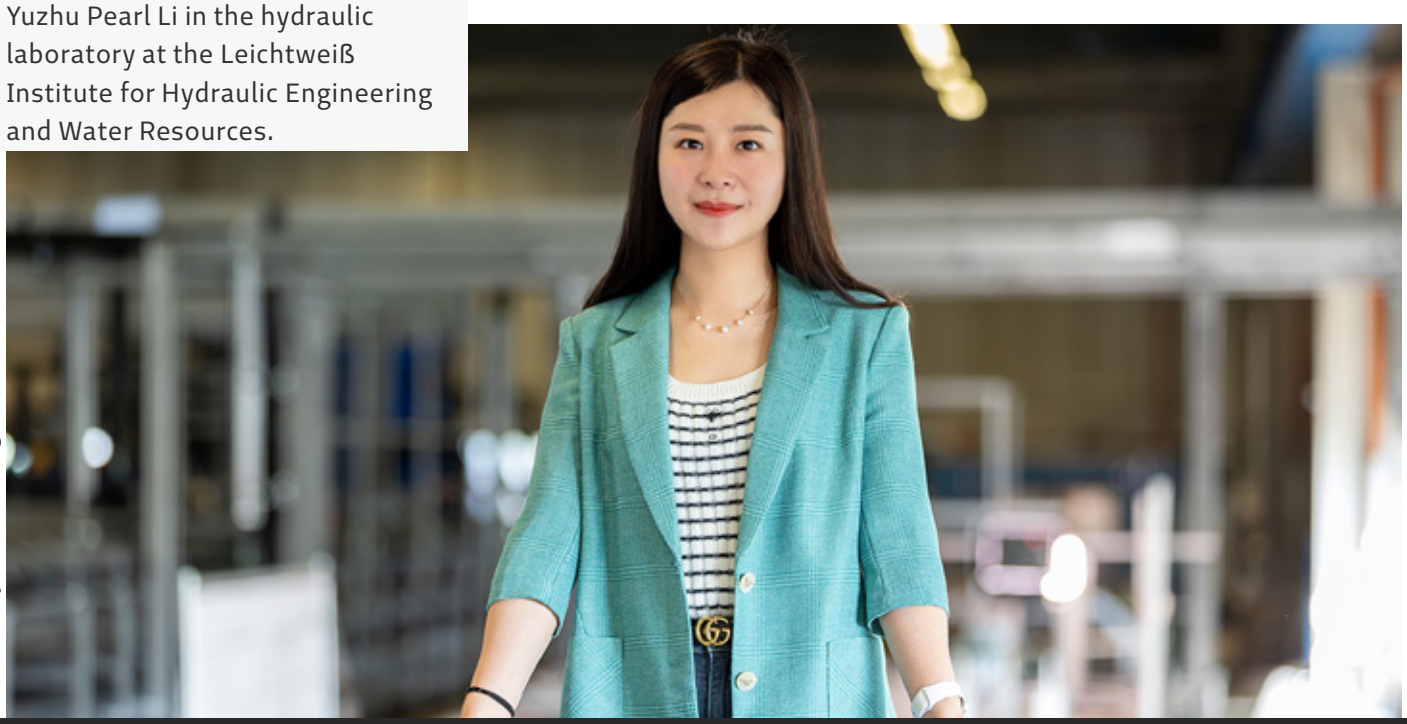

Photo by Kristina Rottig

Meet Award winner

Best Innovator Award, Majid Butt: Be ready to adapt and able to solve practical problems

M. Majid Butt is a senior staff research specialist at Nokia Standards, USA, and an adjunct Research Professor at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland. He has authored nearly 100 articles, contributed to more than 150 filed/granted patents and was declared the outstanding Nokia inventor of the year for the years 2021 and 2022. Majid has won several awards for his research and innovation.

How does it feel to win the award?

Of course, it is a great feeling to win this award in a large community of very talented scientists and engineers who have won prestigious Marie Curie doctoral and postdoctoral fellowships in their careers. Any recognition is great, but this award is close to my heart as the value of a reward is measured by the weight of the community awarding it, and I cannot ask for a better recognition than the one linked with the prestigious Marie Curie programme.

What journey led you to this award?

I spent quite a few years in academia (nearly eight years after my PhD) and then moved to industry at Nokia. Blue sky research and publications are the bread and butter for academics, and this is what I was doing in the first phase of my career, including the period as a Marie Curie postdoc fellow. But, I always felt that I could do better in industrial research as I had the ability to apply my skills to solve problems of a practical nature. I took a chance to switch to the industry. Now, about six years after I moved to industry, with a portfolio of more than 150 filed patents, nearly 100 articles, as well as other industry-relevant initiatives and accolades, I can proudly say that I was right, and my innovative patents are helping telecom industry to move forward in 6G wireless communications.

How will this award propel you in your future endeavours?

I believe recognitions, good or small, are quite important for a researcher, but this is not what you work for. I would take this award as a validation of my innovative work in my career, and this motivates me further to invest all my energies in creating innovative solutions for the technologies of the future.

Photo by IEEE WCNC

Majid Butt at the IEEE WCNC 2024 Conference, where he was organising a panel discussion with his colleagues.

What are your future goals?

This is an exciting time for the telecommunications industry, with industrial efforts just starting in 2025 for 6G. 6G will be the first generation of communication with so-called native AI solutions, where AI solutions will not replace individual functionalities of the system, but the system will be built with AI-based solutions in mind. My ultimate goal is to play a key role in technology advancement and build AI-based telecom solutions that will transform our lives.

What advice do you have for the MCAA?

The MCAA is doing great in supporting the career growth of Marie Curie fellows through several initiatives. One suggestion I have is to do more activities that make researchers more industry-ready, as academia will never be able to consume that many PhDs. Postdocs tend to become research managers right after their PhDs, which is great for an academic career, but this is not what the industry wants. The industry wants more hands-on, experienced researchers who can produce innovative solutions, not research managers. The MCAA can help to organise more activities where industry speakers can organise training on industry-ready skills, which include patent filings as well as other industrial tools. We need to remove the myth that Marie Curie researchers are just fit for academic research.

Is there anything else you wish to share with the community?

I am too often asked this question by young PhD researchers: “How hard is it to switch from academia to industry?” My response is that it is not as tough as academic researchers think as long as your role is linked to research, and I don’t mean just writing publications, research is a much broader term. All the traits that you learn in a PhD are valuable; you just need to be ready to adapt and be able to use them to solve a practical problem.

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Meet Award winner

Social Impact Award, Arnaul Pujol: My research requires a team, long-term commitment and perseverance

Arnau Pujol, PhD in Physics, began his research career in cosmology. With a Marie-Sklodowska Curie Individual Fellowship, he transitioned to the field of malaria, where he conducts research on malaria surveillance and genomics.

How does it feel to win the award?

It is an honour to receive this award from the MCAA and to see my work recognised by the community. However, I must emphasise that I do not see this award as an individual accomplishment. These achievements would not have been possible without the invaluable support and expertise of our dedicated team at ISGlobal in Spain and at the Manhiça Health Research Centre in Mozambique. Our success is a direct result of their commitment, together with the collaboration of Mozambique's National Malaria Control Programme (NMCP), and all the tireless work of the field workers, nurses and study participants who battle this disease on the front lines every day.

What journey led you to this award?

I have always combined a fascination with science with an interest in and motivation for social justice. This brought me to conduct a PhD in physics and, at the same time, volunteer in NGOs and participate in cooperation projects. My first experience in Mozambique came through volunteering at Engineering Without Borders from Catalonia, where I started to learn about the reality of the country.

After several years of research in physics (cosmology), I felt the need to transition into a field with a more direct social impact, allowing me to merge my two main passions into my research career. The MSCA Individual Fellowship at ISGlobal provided me with the opportunity for this transition.

At ISGlobal, with a very supportive collaboration with a team from the Manhiça Health Research Centre, I have been able to learn from their expertise and contribute to

research on malaria surveillance. I also had the privilege of engaging in projects with close ties to Mozambique's NMCP, which allowed me to integrate their vision, priorities and expertise into my work. My achievements are not the result of individual effort but rather the product of extensive, long-term contributions and expertise from the team in Manhiça and national institutions like the NMCP.

How will this award propel you in your future endeavours?

The award motivates me to continue my work in this field with enthusiasm. There are still many challenges to address in the fight against malaria, requiring long-term commitment and perseverance. However, I think it is a cause that really justifies this effort, and it is definitely a field that deserves higher priority in terms of funding and support.

What are your future goals?

I aim to expand my research through new projects. Malaria is a disease associated with many inequities in resources, gender, education, and more. I aim to strengthen the connection between my work and the reduction of social inequities. Also, I hope to contribute to improving the dynamics of the scientific community, which often operates within the constraints of a capitalist, patriarchal, white supremacist and colonial system that perpetuates imbalanced opportunities and influences. This is an urgent priority in the field, and something I still have a lot to learn and address.

What advice do you have for the MCAA?

I encourage the MCAA to continue building a community of scientists and former scientists from different fields, prioritising the promotion of synergies that can provide a positive impact on society. In these turbulent times, it is important to remember that the scientific community cannot be neutral, and we must emphasise that science should serve the benefit of everyone and not only a selected few.

Is there anything else you wish to share with the community?

Science can really benefit from multidisciplinary approaches, which is something I really enjoyed in my career. If anyone in the community is not working directly on malaria but identifies potential interesting synergies between our fields, I would welcome the opportunity for a conversation and the chance to explore new ideas.

Manhiça Health Research Centre in Manhiça (Mozambique).

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Meet Award winner

Outstanding Contributor Award, Eugenio Otal: The award is a clear sign that you're doing things right

Eugenio H. Otal is a father of two and husband to a wonderful woman, serving as the Chair of the MCAA Japan Chapter. He is an Assistant Professor at Shinshu University, Japan, specialising in materials chemistry and water quality sensor development. He holds a 2nd Dan in Aikido and a 1st Dan in Kendo.

How does it feel to win the award?

It feels good. In my humble opinion, an award isn't the ultimate goal; it's more like a compass pointing you north. When you receive one, it's a clear sign that the work you've put in—through persistent struggles—is aligning with something meaningful, that you're on the right track. But it's not about feeding the ego; it's a tool for calibrating your efforts, a reminder to sharpen your focus and refine your approach. It's a call to improve your methods with care and precision, and to strengthen your discipline so that you can keep moving forward – not only for yourself, but for the greater purpose behind it all: the adventure.

Of the three elements of the journey—goal, path, and companions—I am only mildly curious about the ultimate goal; I prefer to focus on the path and my MCAA colleagues.

What journey led you to this award?

All my love goes to the MCAA—this Association is a truly remarkable community. My journey began with my first meeting in 2024 in Milan, where I encountered an exceptional group of individuals. Unlike other academic conferences, where egos often clash over whose equation is more elegant or whose experiment more groundbreaking, this gathering was different. We were united by a shared commitment to improving the MCAA. How could anyone not get inspired in such an environment?

How will this award propel you in your future endeavours?

The award has affirmed that the actions I've taken are effective, and it has brought greater clarity to my path. Rather than being limited to a single direction, I now see a spectrum of meaningful possibilities. I've developed a deeper understanding of where to focus my energy, which tools to use to generate

results, and how to make things work with intention and precision. While some options are clearly promising and others can be set aside, the unknown journey of life still holds infinite potential. These yet-untested paths should be embraced with a renewed spirit—what Shunryu Suzuki called the beginner's mind: "In the beginner's mind, there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind, there are few."

What are your future goals?

Continue the initiatives already underway, refine them, and embark on new adventures. The AsiaConnect initiative was stressful, exhausting, and relentlessly demanding—yet when we saw that our talks had reached thousands of viewers, the fatigue was replaced by a profound sense of joy. Now, we must uphold this momentum, year after year, bringing in more researchers and working toward a grand in-person gathering.

What will the new adventures be? No one knows—life is uncertain, but with courage and collaboration, we can embrace the unknown. What matters most is that, no matter how bold or unconventional an idea may seem, there is a supportive community behind it. The MCAA is there to advise, correct, and encourage us – and, just as importantly, to inspire us to raise the bar together.

What advice do you have for the MCAA?

If I may offer one piece of advice, it is this: stay close to those who remind you why you began. I always had the desire to pursue meaningful endeavours, and true guidance came from the experienced voices—the old wolves—who illuminated the path ahead. Being part of this Association is truly a gift. With nearly 23,000 members and continuously growing, you will always find support and encouragement to illuminate your path. It is like a warm embrace that stretches across the globe, a constant reassurance that you are never alone.

Eugenio H. Otal receiving the MCAA Outstanding Contributor Award 2024 from Gian Maria Greco, Chair of the Marie Curie Alumni Association, in recognition of his significant contributions to the MCAA community.

Apart from this humble piece of wisdom, I have no grand lessons to impart—only profound gratitude. My thanks could span 23,000 lines. I deeply appreciate my Chapter members, the generous Chairs of the Asian Chapters, the Argentina Chapter, the dedicated members of the Research Funding Working Group, and the MCAA Board—especially Gian Maria, whose inspiring passion drives us forward, and Hakim, whose wisdom and advice have consistently guided me. I can't help but smile warmly when I recall remarkable souls like Kira, Pooja, Ruben, Gledson, and Ashish. I am deeply fortunate to have crossed paths with you, and I sincerely apologise if I've omitted names equally cherished and forever etched in my heart. And to Fernanda, who first ignited that precious spark—our farewell in Milan remains a cherished memory I will carry with me always.

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Meet Award winner

European Chapter Award, Denmark Chapter: Chapters are key to member engagement

Julia Chiossi has a passion for bringing people together and facilitating interpersonal communication and interactions. With a background as a speech therapist and researcher, she completed her MSCA ITN in 2023 and now works in clinical research management in the industry. Originally from Brazil, she currently lives in Copenhagen, where she supports the MCAA as the Chair of the Denmark Chapter.

How does it feel to win the award?

It was unexpected and, at the same time, reassuring. Our group in the Denmark Chapter Board has dedicated time and energy to revitalising the Chapter, and this recognition brings extra motivation. It shows that we are on the right path, and personally, I feel re-energised.

What journey led you to this award?

Our Chapter faced some challenges before the last elections, having gone over a year without a Chair. During that time, activities stopped, members became disengaged, and collaborations faded. Over the past year and a half, we have worked to turn things around. We have grown our membership by approximately 30%, reaching 282 members, and relaunched networking events to bring our members back together. Additionally, we established new partnerships with local universities, which led to three thematic workshops, even in the face of limited resources.

How will this award propel you in your future endeavours?

The award brings not only motivation, but it also provides visibility for the Denmark Chapter. It is an opportunity to highlight the actions we have taken and to inspire engagement in future activities. My hope is that it will attract more members, strengthen collaborations, and open doors for future initiatives.

What are your future goals?

My main goal this year for the Denmark Chapter is to strengthen our relationships with local stakeholders. The aim is to increase awareness of the MCAA initiatives and ensure our members gain even more value from being part of the association and the Chapter.

What advice do you have for the MCAA?

Chapters are key to increasing member engagement, as they understand local needs and are a way to translate the MCAA's strategy into something meaningful to the members. My advice would be to further empower the Chapters by strengthening their agency, providing more support for engaging with regional stakeholders, and increasing opportunities to gather feedback.

Is there anything else you wish to share with the community?

I have to emphasise that no actions are done alone. I must acknowledge my colleagues in the Denmark Chapter Board, namely Ana M. Martin Gonzalez, George Anasontzis, Hüsnü Aslan and Thomas Paster for all their work. Thank you for all the collaboration.

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Attendees of the How do I get my ideas funded? workshop organised by the Chapter. The event was held at the Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences, University of Copenhagen.

Meet Award winner

Non-European Chapter Award, Andean-Caribbean Chapter: Latin America is a role model of collaboration among regional partners

Sergio Manrique is the Chair of the MCAA Andean-Caribbean Chapter and a Former MSCA PhD Fellow in the RUNIN Project at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain) and the University of Stavanger (Norway). Industrial Engineer, Specialist in Managerial and Organisational Control Systems, and MSc in Management Organisation and Business Economics. He has over 10 years of work experience in both private and academic sectors in Europe and Latin America as a Researcher, Consultant and Project Manager. He currently works as a Delivery Lead in the IT consulting sector.

How does it feel to win the award?

It feels very rewarding and motivating. It represents and recognises the collective effort and collaboration among many colleagues and partners, including members of our MCAA Andean-Caribbean Chapter, Euraxess Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), the Colombia MSCA National Contact Point (NCP) and other MCAA Working Groups and Iberoamerican/Latam Chapters, in strengthening MCAA representation in our region, and moreover, in promoting and facilitating the scientific cooperation of researchers and academic institutions between Latam and Europe. Overall, the award mainly represents a source of further commitment to keep working on these goals with greater energy and devotion.

What journey led you to this award?

It has been quite a journey. After a couple of years of trying and coordinating, we were finally able to found the MCAA Andean-Caribbean Chapter by the end of 2022. Right after that, and apart from the remit of gathering and attracting more former and current MSCA fellows to our Chapter and the Association, we embarked on the mission of organising the 3rd MCAA Latam Conference. The conference took place in

October 2023 in Cartagena, Colombia, and served as a role model of collaboration among regional partners from different areas seeking to contribute to the discussions on Science Diplomacy and Scientific Cooperation between Latam and Europe. This has been our biggest achievement.

Besides and after such a milestone, we have also been actively collaborating with Euraxess LAC, the Colombia MSCA NCP and other MCAA Chapters and Working Groups in co-organising and taking part in various activities and events aimed at strengthening our MCAA community and promoting MSCA opportunities.

How will this award propel you in your future endeavours?

As mentioned before, this award means more fuel and motivation to keep working towards our goals. We are aware there is still a lot of work to do, both in terms of enlarging and consolidating the MCAA community in Latam, and in contributing to further topics related to MSCA promotion and scientific cooperation between Latam and Europe. The award should serve as a source of motivation for more fellows to join our efforts and recognise the great opportunity that it is to be part of and contribute to the MCAA and our Chapter.

What are your future goals?

One primary goal I would state is ensuring the sustainability of our Chapter in the mid and long term, by attracting and engaging more members to consolidate a larger and stronger group willing to contribute and collaborate towards our goals. Then, such goals might evolve in the future, but as of now, I would summarise them in three main points:

- Representing the MCAA in the Andean-Caribbean region by keeping the community of former and current MSCA fellows linked to our region engaged and aware of what the MCAA does and how they can contribute and be supported by it. This also implies being a good point of contact for former MSCA fellows returning to the region and for new MSCA fellows moving abroad in coordination with Euraxess LAC and the Colombia MSCA NCP.
- Taking part in and contributing to the promotion of MSCA and Horizon Europe research and funding opportunities for researchers and institutions in our region by providing testimonials and guidance and participating in activities aimed at this goal.
- Taking part in and contributing to discussions on science diplomacy and scientific cooperation within and among Latam and Europe, with a special focus on

Photo by Universidad Tecnológica de Bolívar

Group photo of the Closing Ceremony of the MCAA Latam Conference 2023.

contributing to the challenges our region faces that such knowledge exchanges and collaborations can help to tackle.

What advice do you have for the MCAA?

I think I have stated this before publicly and will state it again: the MCAA must keep doing well (excellent, actually), as it has done over these more than 10 years of existence. I would personally not modify the MCAA's strategy and goals, as these represent the correct path to follow, and we must keep sticking to that essence. The MCAA has been going through some transformations to make it stronger and more sustainable, and that is something to recognise. What is left is to keep working towards enlarging and consolidating our community (there are still many MSCA fellows to reach and attract) and towards becoming a key player in relevant discussions related to research and innovation in Europe and beyond. Finally, we need to keep seeking more and more collaboration and synergies among Chapters and Working Groups.

Is there anything else you wish to share with the community?

I would like to express my most sincere gratitude to the MCAA Secretariat and Board for making all this possible and for their great efforts in making the MCAA such a fascinating and prosperous community; their support and help have been crucial to the success of the MCAA Andean-Caribbean Chapter.

In addition, and as I mentioned before, this award actually represents the collective effort and collaboration of many colleagues and partners; therefore, I would also like to show my appreciation to Viktoria Bodnarova from Euraxess LAC, to Catherine Fonseca from the Colombia MSCA NCP, and to all the former and current Chairs and Vice-Chairs of all those Chapters (Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Chile, Spain-Portugal, India, etc.) and Working Groups (Research Funding, Communication) that have collaborated with the MCAA Andean-Caribbean Chapter and enabled our course of action for receiving this recognition.

Last but not least, I would like to thank all the members of our Chapter for their contributions and efforts, and motivate and invite all former and current MSCA fellows linked to the Andean-Caribbean region and Latam to reach out to us and join our community.

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Photo by Universidad Tecnológica de Bolívar

Andean-Caribbean Chapter members who attended the MCAA Latam Conference 2023.

Meet Award winner

Working Group Award, Research Funding WG: The award emphasises the value of collaboration, creativity, and dedication

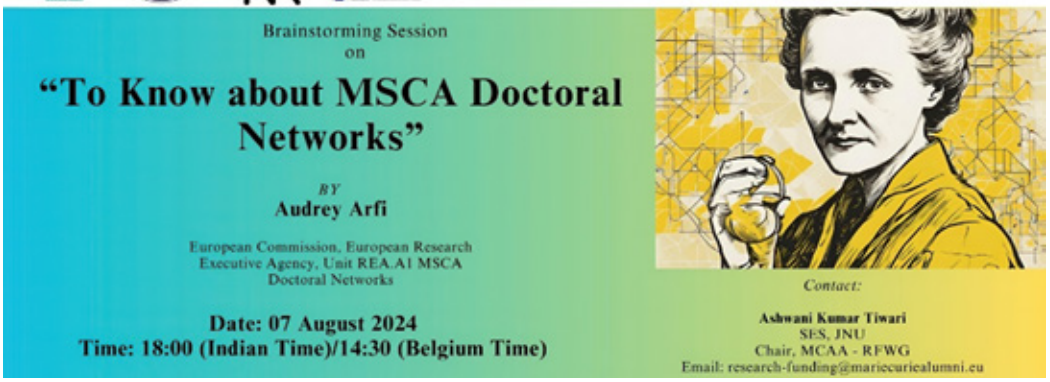
Ashwani Kumar Tiwari is working as an Assistant Professor at the School of Environmental Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, India. He is the Chair of the MCAA Research Funding Working Group. His teaching and research areas are hydrogeochemistry, contamination of water resources by geogenic and anthropogenic activities, groundwater-seawater interaction, mining, water resource management and GIS. Tiwari was a postdoctoral researcher at Politecnico di Torino (Turin, Italy). He was awarded Erasmus Mundus and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions fellowships.

How does it feel to win the award?

At the MCAA Annual Conference and General Assembly 2025 in Kraków, Poland, as Chair of the Research Funding Working Group (RFWG), I received the Working Group Award, which was both exciting and rewarding. This recognition emphasises the value of collaboration, creativity, and dedication. It encourages me to continue pursuing excellence. It is a team achievement rather than an individual one. This award is dedicated to all RFWG members and all of my MCAA and non-MCAA collaborators. As Chair of the RFWG, I would like to thank the members of the Working Group and my MCAA and non-MCAA collaborators for their full support and the award selection committee for encouragement.

What journey led you to this award?

In my opinion, every outcome is the culmination of the hard work of numerous individuals, including family members, friends, mentors and collaborators. The continuous encouragement and feedback from the active members of the RFWG, the previous Chair of the Working Group, the MCAA Executive Director and the MCAA Board helped me to contribute to the MCAA community.



A joint brainstorming session organised by the MCAA-RFWG. The event was attended by 104 researchers from India, Nepal, Europe, and Latin America, as well as various institutions.

Furthermore, I thank the MCAA Management team, the Chairs of other Chapters and Working Groups with whom the RFWG collaborated at several events, my colleagues, speakers, and other institutions/ organisations for their full support to the RFWG to successfully organise several events on European research funding opportunities.

How will this award propel you in your future endeavours?

Research is a unique segment in science or any stream, and the best utilisation and collaboration of our ideas with others could improve and enhance our way of thinking towards a statement of the problem. Receiving this esteemed honour will undoubtedly boost my motivation, credibility, and future growth and success prospects. Also, it increases my responsibilities to contribute more to the MCAA community in future.

What are your future goals?

My plan as the Chair of the RFWG is to raise awareness among and encourage non-European (e.g., African, Latin American and Asian) researchers to learn more about European funding opportunities, including the MSCA, and to apply for the same to enhance their careers.

What advice do you have for the MCAA?

Since I took charge as the Chair of the RFWG, I have had several meetings with some brilliant minds in the MCAA community, and I have learnt a lot about new ideas in science and society and improved my skills. As an MCAA member, enhancing your skills and contributing to science and society are always win-win situations. Hence, my simple advice is this: be happy and available to contribute and collaborate with the MCAA community in whatever capacity you can.

Is there anything else you wish to share with the community?

I would again like to thank the MCAA community, which felicitated RFWG and with that me with this prestigious award. Whatever we do should be helpful to society. Our small contribution will help build a flourishing future for the MCAA community. I thank everyone who has supported and encouraged me to contribute to the MCAA community. The credit goes to all of them.

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MCAA Annual Conference 2025

Citizen Science Engagement: Who Benefits and Why It Matters

Image by Midjourney, prompt Fabrizio Martina

The 2025 MCAA Annual Conference kicked off with a vibrant satellite event on Citizen Science, uniting researchers passionate about making science more inclusive and impactful. The session covered everything from policy shifts to grassroots projects, highlighting the global reach of Citizen Science and practical ways for researchers to get involved.

Opening the Doors of Science: Citizen Engagement in Focus

The 2025 MCAA Annual Conference kicked off with an energising satellite event on Citizen Science (CS) that brought together curious, committed researchers from across disciplines and career stages. Co-organised by Pooja Khurana (MCAA), Mireia Ros (Science for Change), and Cléa Montanari (Université Paris Cité / Learning Planet Institute), the session opened up a timely conversation on the meaning and importance of citizen engagement in research. At its core, the event posed a powerful question: What happens when we open the doors of science to everyone and who benefits?

We started by unpacking the many names CS goes by: participatory research, community science, public engagement, civic science, and the wide variety of ways it's practised (Shirk et al, 2012). Despite the differences, a common thread runs through them all: meaningful public involvement in the research process. Whether it's co-designing research questions, gathering data or helping interpret results, **CS offers a more inclusive, democratic way to create knowledge with people, not just about them**.

Real-World Impact: Citizen Science Across Europe

This ethos is gaining traction at every level - global, EU, and national. From the UNESCO

Photo by Viktoriya Zoriy

Satellite event speakers from left: Cléa Montanari, Bogna Gawrońska-Nowak, Mireia Ros and Pooja Khurana

Recommendation on Open Science (2021) to Horizon Europe, citizen participation is becoming central to how we rethink research for the public good. The European Citizen Science (ECS) project is helping to lead the way. With 27 national ambassadors, it is developing policy recommendations, practical tools and training resources that are actively strengthening the CS ecosystem across Europe.

One of those ambassadors, Bogna Gawrońska-Nowak from the Kraków University of Economics and the Institute of Urban and Regional Development in Warsaw, shared real-world insights from participatory experiments in Łódź and Kraków. Her research showed that public trust in CS outcomes isn't one-size-fits-all but varies by region, education level and age (Bedessem et al, 2021). Her takeaway: "**To truly connect, we need to meet communities where they are, not where we assume they'll be**."

We explored the impact CS is making in other EU countries. In Belgium, the ISALA project worked with over 3,000 women to collect vaginal microbiome samples and lifestyle data, breaking taboos, generating critical health insights and centering women's lived experiences in research. It showed the transformative potential of CS, not just for scientific outcomes but also for equity, awareness, and collective community empowerment.

Building a Stronger, More Inclusive Research Culture

These examples prompted deeper reflection: **How do we define value in research? Who gets to decide what counts?** These questions align closely with the values behind initiatives like CoARA (the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment), which encourages institutions to move beyond metrics like publication counts and embrace broader, more inclusive measures of impact.

Participants explored this sentiment through a workshop examining Citizen Science's value across five layers: themselves as researchers, the affected communities, those in power, the environment and wider society. CS, many said,

made them feel more connected to people, to purpose, to something bigger than their work. Concerns were raised around data credibility, volunteer compensation and power dynamics. But debate led to constructive dialogue and reaffirmed the importance of interdisciplinary exchange.

To close the day, we turned the spotlight on how researchers can get more actively involved in CS. The ECS Academy offers free, open-access training and networking opportunities via the eu-citizen.science platform. For those eager to deepen their expertise and connect with like-minded peers, the **Network of Researchers for Citizen Science (NR4CS)** is open to new members. You can register here or join the mailing list directly by emailing nr4cs-subscribe@eu-citizen.science.

The **2024 NR4CS Training Series** presentations are available as open resources on Zenodo and the MCAA YouTube Channel. Looking ahead, the 2025 Training Series promises even more opportunities to learn and collaborate. In partnership with UPCité/LPI, the MCAA also launched a new initiative to support early career researchers who incorporate CS in their research proposals: "**Public Participation in Research – A Workshop Series for 2025 MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowship Applicants.**" Registration is now open, and further information can be found here.

What truly stood out was the shared momentum in the room. Unlike past events where CS felt new to many, this session brought together both fresh faces and experienced voices, sparking deeper, more dynamic conversations. That mix reminded us

Photo by Viktoriya Zoriy

Pooja Khurana introducing the ECS Consortium to the audience.

that CS isn't just a method; it's a mindset. **CS is science rooted in dialogue, open to critique and shaped by lived experience**.

This session didn't just inform; it **energised**. It wasn't only about presenting projects; it was about building community, grappling with big questions, engaging with our participants and reimagining what a more participatory, inclusive science can be.

Final Call to Action:

If you wish to stay involved, learn more, or collaborate with a vibrant Citizen Science community, then:

- Join the NR4CS Network.
- Explore 2024 NR4CS Training Series presentations on Zenodo and the MCAA YouTube Channel.
- Register for the 2025 Workshop Series for MSCA applicants and learn more.

Because in the end, science isn't something confined to labs or locked in journals. It's something we live, question and create—together.

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MCAA Annual Conference 2025

Mentoring Festival: Celebrating the Spirit of Mentorship

The MCAA Mentoring Festival 2025 redefined mentorship as a catalyst for transforming research culture. It emphasised that real change begins with valuing people, making mentorship the core of inclusive, thriving research environments.

Mentorship has long been seen as a tool for professional development, but at the **Mentoring Festival** during the **MCAA Annual Conference 2025** in **Kraków**, it took centre stage as something deeper: **a vehicle for reimagining research culture**. Organised by the MCAA Community Manager Pooja Khurana and MCAA Board representatives Irene Castellano Pellicena and Maria Romano, the festival brought together diverse voices to reflect on the role mentorship plays in shaping inclusive, supportive and value-driven research environments.

The MCAA has long made mentoring a core value. Launched just last year, the **Peer Exchange Platform for Narrative CVs** (PEP-CV) has grown to over 800 members and is open to researchers worldwide. Aligned with the DORA (Declaration on Research Assessment) and CoARA (Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment) principles, a key milestone was its collaboration with ORCiD, allowing members to display mentorship experience on their profiles—a small but powerful step toward **making mentoring more visible and valued**. Meanwhile, the MCAA Academy offers structured, purpose-driven mentoring through its General Mentoring Programme. At the festival, we launched the first pilot, **Careers in the Public Sector**, supporting alumni exploring paths beyond academia.

Voices that Inspired

A message that echoed throughout the day was the need to **manage expectations and build trust**, especially in cross-sector mentoring relationships. Xavier Ronald Eekhout Chicharro from EURAXESS Spain's REBECA mentoring programme reminded us that even after a formal programme ends, mentoring relationships often continue informally, sometimes becoming lifelong connections. He reflected on how mentoring supports **science in society** by providing pathways for researchers to develop multipotent careers across sectors.

But mentoring can also be radically transformative when it breaks down traditional hierarchies. Stefano Lucca, an MSCA fellow and peer support facilitator, highlighted how peer mentoring fosters openness, co-creation, and mental wellbeing. By shifting away from top-down dynamics, peer models allow both parties to feel heard and respected—especially vital in a field where imposter syndrome and burnout remain common.

Another powerful dimension emerged through discussions around **Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI)**. Mentoring, when done right, has the potential to challenge the structural inequalities that persist in academia. As Jenny Lind Elmaco, Chair of MCAA's GEDI (Gender, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) Working Group, put it, we need to design spaces where everyone feels safe to speak, belong and succeed, not despite their identity, but because of it.

Mentorship: Recognition, Culture & What We Value

Mentorship, like research, is relational. But who gets to decide what counts as success? And how do we make sure those offering guidance and support, often invisibly, feel valued? **Who defines it, and who gets to be seen and valued within those definitions?**

As Sean Sapcariu, PEP-CV supporter and Project Manager at FNR (Luxembourg National Research Fund), reflected, mentors have the power to shift what and who is valued in research. **When mentorship moves beyond credentials and into care, it transforms culture**. Yet, mentorship is not without its challenges. As shared candidly by Irene, negative experiences with mentors can leave a mark. But learning from bad mentorship can still guide us to become better mentors for others. Because in the end, **mentorship isn't about perfection or hierarchy—it's about showing up, being human and choosing to grow together**.

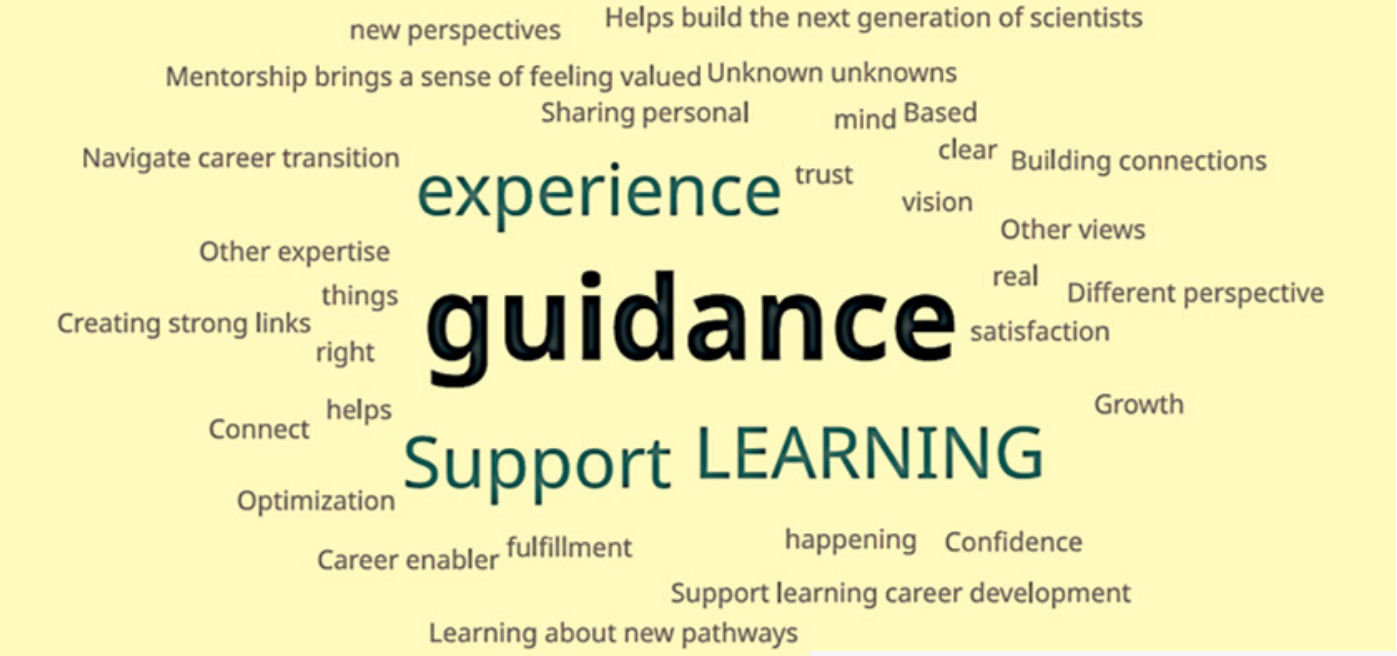
When we prioritise people over prestige and lived experiences over linear paths, we lay the foundation for a more inclusive and empathetic research culture. But **how do we recognise and reward those who make time to mentor others?** Too often, this labour goes unseen. Karen Stroobants, Vice Chair of CoARA, stressed that reforming researcher assessment shouldn't mean adding more metrics but **valuing what people are already doing**. As echoed by our audience, whether through narrative CVs, ORCID visibility or digital badges, small shifts in recognising mentorship can begin to shift the culture.

A Shared Responsibility to Reform

The festival closed with a lively speed-networking session, where participants reflected on challenges like discussing career breaks, navigating uncertainty, and maintaining balance. One takeaway stood out: **We make time for what we value**. If we want research cultures that are kind, inclusive, and equitable, mentorship must be more than an

Photo by Kira Keini

Sean Sapcariu, Irene Castellano Pellicena, Karen Stroobants, Pooja Khurana and Maria Romano. On the screen, one can see the MCAA Mentoring Initiatives: PEP-CV and MCAA Academy.



Slido response to: Why is Mentoring Essential?

optional extra—it must be woven into how we work, evaluate, and connect. Mentorship is more than a programme - it is a **commitment to people**. It's about recognising potential, building trust and co-creating a system where **growth, inclusion and kindness** are at the core.

The Mentoring Festival showed that true change begins with valuing people, not just results. Let's build a research culture where mentorship isn't optional—it's the core, and everyone has a place.

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MCAA Annual Conference 2025

Shaping Europe's Future

With Framework Programme 10 (FP10) on the horizon, Europe's research landscape faces critical challenges. Experts at the MCAA Annual Conference discussed funding stability, researcher mobility, and the role of the ERC and the MSCA. How can scientists secure long-term support and drive impactful innovation? Discover key insights shaping the next era of European research.

Image by Midjourney, prompt by Fabrizio Martina

The Future of European Research

Europe's research and innovation (R&I) landscape is at a turning point. With major economic, political, and technological shifts underway, the upcoming FP10 will be crucial in determining the future of research across the continent.

At the recent Marie Curie Alumni Association (MCAA) Annual Conference, experts gathered to discuss how to strengthen Europe's research ecosystem, focusing on key challenges such as researcher mobility, funding stability, and scientific excellence. The session was opened by Mostafa Moonir Shawrav, the Executive Director of the MCAA, who raised an important question: "Will there be changes in the Horizon Europe framework?"

The European Research Council and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions roles in FP10

A major topic of discussion was the role of the European Research Council (ERC) and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) in FP10. Paweł Rowiński, president of the All European Academies (ALLEA), introduced the debate surrounding the leaked European Commission's communication on the Competitive Compass for the EU, and concerns about potential risks to the ERC's autonomy with this new policy tool guiding Europe's economic strategy in all research areas, including humanities, a field some forget to be an important part of research. Maria Leptin, President of the ERC, emphasised the importance of fundamental research in all areas, stating that the ERC was founded specifically to support curiosity-driven research. She highlighted the need for

higher funding security to enable long-term scientific progress.

Manuel Heitor (Center for Innovation, Technology and Policy Research), who authored a report on the interim evaluation of Horizon Europe (Full report: Align, Act, Accelerate: Research, Technology and Innovation to boost European Competitiveness), stressed that the ERC and the MCAA make Europe a reliable and attractive place for researchers to choose Europe, but investment is necessary. He pointed out that young researchers must voice their needs and advocate for better job opportunities in science. He also called for greater political attention and support for the MSCA, urging its expansion in FP10.

The European Parliament has strongly defended the ERC's independence, but research funding remains vulnerable to budget cuts. Moniek Tromp (Initiative for Science Europe) cited the strikes in the Netherlands, where more than a €2 billion reduction in research and education recently occurred, as an example of how science funding is under pressure across Europe.

Global Collaboration vs. Research Independence

The session also addressed the impact of US research funding cuts. Paweł was asked whether Europe should use this as an opportunity to attract American researchers. Instead of a competitive approach, he advocated for continued collaboration with US institutions while reinforcing Europe's research security and infrastructure to maintain independence.

Science Communication and Policy

A key challenge highlighted during the Q&A session was how to ensure long-term political support for research funding. Panellists noted that funding policies cannot be entirely shielded from political decisions, as taxpayers ultimately influence how money is allocated. To secure strong R&I policies, scientists must better communicate the economic and societal benefits of research to the general public – the voters who elect policymakers.

Moniek stressed the need to translate the importance of research to politicians, ensuring they understand its impact on

Image by MidJourney, prompt by Fabrizio Martina

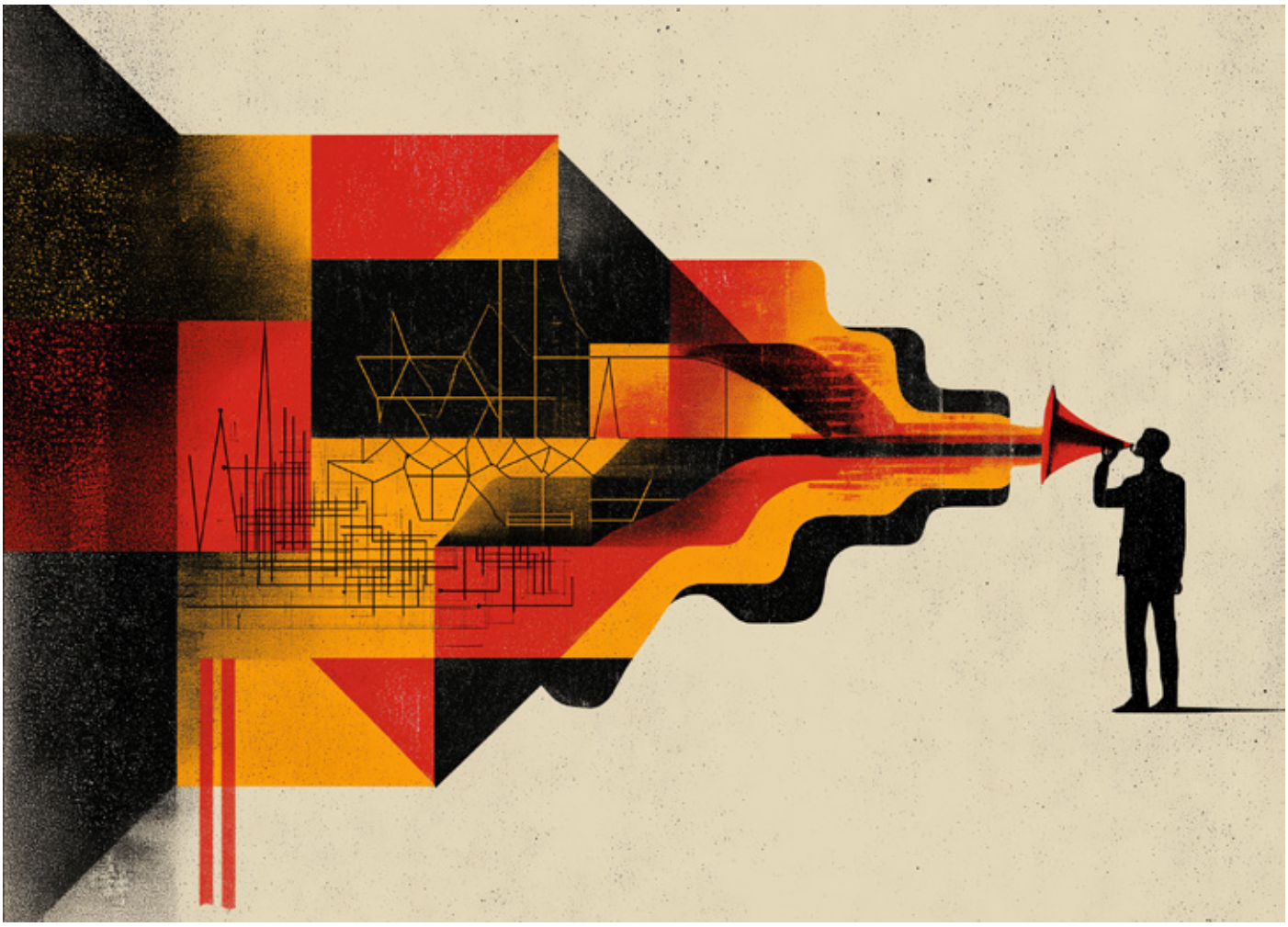

Image by Midjourney, prompt by Fabrizio Martina

society and the economy. The discussion also highlighted that science is expensive, but its long-term benefits far outweigh short-term costs.

Key Takeaways for Policymakers

Speakers were asked: "If you could give one key recommendation to politicians on how to strengthen European research, what would it be?"

- Recognise the long-term impact of science on society and the economy.
- Ensure stable funding for fundamental research in FP10 and beyond.
- Reduce bureaucratic obstacles to research and innovation.
- Maintain open science and research security while fostering global collaboration.

Mostafa closed the session by emphasising the need to unify advocacy efforts so that researchers can effectively communicate science's value to decision-makers and the public. The discussion underscored the urgent need for strategic investment in researcher mobility, talent retention, and fundamental research. As FP10 takes shape, the choices made today will define Europe's role in global innovation for decades to come.

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MCAA Annual Conference 2025

Unlocking Horizon Europe Funding

Image by MidJourney, prompt Fabrizio Martina

Horizon Europe is the EU's flagship research programme, with a €93.5 billion research budget, offering vast opportunities. But for many, especially for newcomers, it remains complex. At the recent MCAA Annual Conference, experts came together to break it down: its structure, funding mechanisms, and evaluation processes, providing valuable insights on the MSCA, ERC, and COST Actions, learning key strategies to navigate applications and maximise your chances of success.

Understanding Horizon Europe

Horizon Europe is the EU's primary funding programme for research and innovation and runs from 2021 to 2027. As we are approaching its midpoint, a new strategic plan (2025–2027) has been published to guide its future direction. The plan focuses on three main priorities: the green transition, digital transformation, and fostering a more democratic Europe. During the session, a panel of experts discussed the complexities of Horizon Europe, including how it is structured, the challenges researchers face, and how to navigate it all more effectively.

MCAA Board member Irene Castellano Pellicena opened the session by introducing the speakers and outlining the three main pillars of Horizon Europe:

Pillar 1: Excellent Science – Includes programmes such as the MSCA and the ERC, which fund high-risk, high-gain research with a bottom-up approach.

Pillar 2: Global Challenges & European Industrial Competitiveness – A top-down approach with funding allocated to specific topics set by the European Commission. This pillar covers seven key mission areas:

- Health
- Culture, Creativity and Inclusive Society
- Civil Security for Society
- Digital, Industry and Space
- Climate, Energy and Mobility
- Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment
- Non-Nuclear Direct Actions of the Joint Research Centre.

Image by MidJourney, prompt Fabrizio Martina

Pillar 3: Innovative Europe – Aims to help startups grow and support groundbreaking innovation.

In addition to these pillars, Horizon Europe includes horizontal actions such as the COST Actions, which aim to widen participation and strengthen the European Research Area by fostering collaborative networks.

MSCA: More Than Just Funding

David Wizel (Head of Sector, Research Executive Agency) gave an overview of the MSCA, a programme that supports researchers at all stages of their careers across all disciplines while promoting cross-sectoral and international mobility.

The MSCA offers five types of funding:

Doctoral Networks – Collaborative PhD training projects submitted by consortia.

- **Postdoctoral Fellowships** – Supporting individual researchers aiming to boost their careers.
- **Staff Exchanges** – Facilitating knowledge transfer between sectors and countries.
- **COFUND** – Co-financing training and career development programmes.
- **MSCA and Citizens** – Aiming to bring science closer to the public.

David explained how eligibility and funding are calculated (they are based on researcher months) and broke down the **evaluation process**, which includes expert reviews and panel discussions to ensure fairness and transparency.

His advice? Start early, read all the guidance documents carefully and follow the evaluation criteria. He stressed the importance of leaning on your internal networks for peer review, consulting national contact points, and ensuring all required documents are completed.

Horizon Europe's evaluation process follows strict guidelines to ensure transparency and fairness:

- Admissibility & Eligibility Check – Proposals must meet basic criteria.
- Expert Review – At least three independent experts evaluate each proposal individually before reaching a consensus.

- Panel Review – Ensures alignment with programme objectives.
- Final Commission Review – The European Commission finalises results and notifies applicants.

COST Actions: Networking opportunities

Radenka Krsmanovic Whiffen (Science Officer, COST Association) explained how the COST Actions work differently from typical funding. COST is an intergovernmental funding organisation supporting networking activities rather than direct research funding. Researchers from all career stages can participate, and unlike other Horizon Europe projects, COST Actions allow participants to join at any stage during the action's lifetime. It supports interdisciplinary collaboration through activities such as short-term mobility grants, workshops, training schools, conferences, guest lectures and expert exchanges.

COST has about 260–290 active Actions running at any given time, with a success rate of roughly 39%. Participating in COST has been shown to increase follow-up funding opportunities, making it an accelerator for researchers' careers.

From MSCA to ERC: A Researcher's Journey

Maria Rodriquez Aburto (Lecturer and Principal Investigator at University College Cork) shared her personal experience as an MSCA Postdoctoral Fellow. After initial funding rejections, she refined her ideas and successfully secured an MSCA fellowship, which helped her develop preliminary data for an ERC proposal.

Her key takeaways for applicants:

- Treat the application process as a learning experience.
- Do not rush. Strong proposals take time.
- ERC proposals require groundbreaking ideas with well-defined knowledge gaps.
- Seek feedback from colleagues and internal reviewers.
- Use available resources and support networks.
- She also reassured attendees: that even without publishing her main findings, she used preliminary data to strengthen her proposal – and it worked.

Q&A Highlights

David clarified that at the time of application, specific PhD candidates do not need to be named for MSCA Doctoral Networks, but support letters and letters of commitment strengthen proposals.

Final Thoughts

Irene wrapped up the session by thanking the panellist and reminding everyone that persistence and strategic planning are key when applying for Horizon Europe funding. The discussion underscored the wealth of opportunities available but also the need for researchers to navigate the complexities of the programme effectively. As Horizon Europe progresses towards 2027, maximising its potential will depend on continued engagement, knowledge-sharing, and advocacy for strong research funding policies.

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MCAA Annual Conference 2025

Science in the Age of Misinformation: Bridging the Trust Gap

Image by MidJourney, prompt Fabrizio Martina

Science communication is no longer just about sharing knowledge—it is about fighting misinformation, building trust, and engaging with people where they are. The recent MCAA Annual Conference tackled these challenges head-on, bringing together experts from journalism, policy, and research to discuss how we can strengthen public confidence in science.

Organized by Ashish Avasthi from the MCAA communication working group and moderated by Claudia Alarcon, Science Diplomat at the Interamerican Institute for Global Change Research, we were able to listen to three important speakers: Subhra Priyadarshini, Chief Editor at Nature Global Portfolio, Lisa Ginsborg, Research Fellow at the European Digital Media Observatory and Agata Gurzawska, Research Manager at Trilateral Research, Coordinator of the EU-funded VERITY project on trust in science.

The Speed of Misinformation

Subhra Priyadarshini was stating the truth of what we all saw during the COVID-19 pandemic: “Imagine a small Indian village in 2021, where a woman refuses the COVID-19 vaccine, fearing it will alter her DNA.

Photo by Pineaddle

Lisa Ginsborg (Research Fellow at the European Digital Media Observatory), Agata Gurzawska (Research Manager at Trilateral Research, coordinator of the EU-funded VERITY project on trust in science) and Claudia Alarcon Lopez (Science Diplomat STeP, Interamerican Institute for Global Change Research, and presenter) during the talk, together with Subhra Priyadarshini (Chief editor at Nature Global Portfolio) who attended remotely. Photo taken by event organisers.

Meanwhile, halfway across the world, a social media influencer with no scientific background convinces millions that masks are useless. This is the power of misinformation—it spreads six times faster than the truth. Why? **Because it appeals to emotions more than facts**". But this is not the only reason: lately, institutional distrust is making people question even well-established science. COVID-19 was an inflexion point. "Only some countries were well prepared, with clear social media campaigns, and trustworthy community leaders, being able to increase vaccination rates", said Subhra, "**So the lesson is, clarity can build trust and save lives.**"

Science Must Meet People Where They Are

The solution is not just about making facts available—it is about making them accessible and relatable. Subhra Priyadarshini shared key strategies: **Simplify, but do not oversimplify**— break down complex topics. **Tell stories, not just statistics**—data alone will not change minds, but personal stories might. **Engage in real dialogue**—trust is built through two-way communication, not one-way messaging. **Go where the audience is**—whether it is TikTok, community forums, or schools, scientists need to meet people in their spaces.

The Battle Against Misinformation

Lisa Ginsborg, from the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), stressed the complexity of disinformation. It is not just about fake news—it is a whole ecosystem of misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda, often fuelled by political and economic interests. EDMO is actively tracking

trends in misinformation, especially in areas like climate change and health, to build resilience through media literacy and fact-checking networks.

But is regulation the answer? Not necessarily. Lisa warned that while some regulations aim to curb misinformation, they can also be used to suppress free speech. Instead, Europe is focusing on two points: to allow the free flow of information and public debate by experts and transparency—ensuring that social media platforms take responsibility for how misinformation spreads while empowering researchers with better data access.

The Trust Crisis in Science

Agata Gurzawska from the VERITY project pointed out another challenge: Trust in science remains high, yet people often reject science-based recommendations (COVID-19, climate change). Why? Agata pointed to four possibilities:

- **Science is inherently uncertain**. It evolves with new discoveries, making it vulnerable to misinterpretation.
- **The research landscape is shifting**. Private-public partnerships, social media platforms, and citizen science all influence trust in ways we have not fully understood.
- **Science, politics, and the economy are deeply connected**. The commercialisation of research can create higher levels of distrust in society.
- **Trust is now decentralised**. It is no longer just about institutions – social influencers, community leaders, and individuals all play a role in shaping public perception.

"We need to redefine how we think about trust in science," Lisa explained. "It is an ecosystem, and every stakeholder (as Stewards of Trust)---from policymakers to educators, from journalists to everyday citizens—has a role to play."

A Call to Action

Science communication is not just a skill—it is a necessity. Universities should integrate science communication training into PhD programmes. Scientists should collaborate with fact-checkers and journalists. Institutions should create spaces for dialogue, not just information dumps. We should continue supporting open science initiatives as important tools against misinformation.

As Subhra put it, "Behind every science communication effort, there are people who love stories. Science needs to be told in a way that sticks – not just in the news cycle, but in people's minds and hearts."

So, the question remains: How do we shift public mindsets? How do we ensure that truth wins over misinformation? And how do we—scientists, journalists, policymakers, and communicators—continue to earn and sustain public trust?

One thing is clear: Science belongs to everyone. But in a world full of noise, the truth needs a louder voice.

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MCAA Annual Conference 2025

ERA Actions Under Review: Achievements, Challenges, and the Path Forward

The European Research Area (ERA) is a pivotal initiative within the European Union aimed at enhancing collaboration, coordination, and integration across national research systems. One of the most significant efforts under ERA has been the series of ERA Actions, designed to address specific aspects of the research landscape, including the mobility of researchers, career progression, gender equality, and the alignment of national research agendas with European priorities.

At the recent MCAA Annual Conference, an important panel discussion featuring key stakeholders in the European research ecosystem provided valuable insights into the progress, challenges, and future directions of ERA Actions. This report summarizes the perspectives shared by the speakers during the panel, focusing on their views on what ERA Actions have achieved, what is still missing, and what needs to be done going forward.

Image by MidJourney, prompt Fabrizio Martina

The Achievements of ERA Actions

ERA Actions have made notable strides in addressing various barriers faced by researchers and research institutions in Europe.

Pil Maria Saugmann, the President of Eurodoc, the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers, discussed the importance of stakeholder engagement in the ERA process, particularly through organizations like the MCAA, Eurodoc, ISE, and AERT, which represent researchers at

Photo by Pineaddle

Panellists of the ERA talk (from left to right): Renaud Jolivet (Full Professor, Maastricht University), Pil Maria Saugmann (President of Eurodoc, the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers), Alexander Hasgall (SNSF Swiss National Science Foundation), Sara Pilia (Project Officer - SECURE MCAA) and Gian Maria Greco, (Chair, Marie Curie Alumni Association). Emmanuelle Guardian attended remotely.

the European level. According to Pil Maria, **the best way to engage in ERA is through national and university-level involvement**, where individuals can contribute to decision-making and gradually gain knowledge and experience. She emphasized the value of the new ERA website launched by the European Commission, which is more user-friendly and accessible than previous versions. Pil Maria also expressed optimism about the improvements made in the ERA Actions agenda, even though these Actions are still in their early stages. She remarked: "I see this as a significant improvement. But I believe this is just the first round. We'll continue refining it moving forward."

Renaud Jolivet, Full Professor at Maastricht University and representative for individual researchers and innovators, emphasized a major breakthrough in governance representation: "The most significant achievement over the last three years is that we, as individual researchers and innovators, now have a seat at the table," he stated. "Previously, we were consulted only at the end of the process, when policies were already decided. Now we are part of the actual negotiation of policy actions at the European level." He added that while coordination among researcher organizations had its challenges, progress has been made to create unified positions.

Alexander Hasgal, expert in the field of European research and innovation policy (SNSF Swiss National Science Foundation), highlighted that researchers often underestimate the importance of engaging with ERA at the institutional level. He stressed that many researchers are already involved in their universities, and by engaging with the ERA Actions, they could become some of the best-informed individuals in their institutions, even influencing university leadership. Alexander also pointed out that the ERA Actions are not just about policies; they are about fostering a dynamic European research area where barriers are overcome. He noted that the **culture of cooperation** and the willingness to **overcome barriers** are fundamental to ensuring the success of ERA.

Emmanuelle Gardan, director of the Coimbra Group and co-sponsor of the ERA Action 4, focused on the **tools** that have been developed as part of the ERA Actions, particularly the **ERA Talent Platform**, which offers researchers the opportunity to navigate mobility, assess their competencies, and find career development opportunities. She acknowledged that for many researchers, ERA's **policy frameworks** might seem disconnected from their daily work. However, she pointed out that platforms like the ERA Talent provide concrete, user-friendly resources that can directly improve the working conditions and career progression of individual researchers: "The ERA Talent platform was designed specifically for researchers. It helps you with mobility, assessing your competencies, and finding career opportunities." She also stressed that while policy frameworks may seem disconnected from researchers' daily realities, tools like the Talent Platform offer tangible benefits, making it easier for researchers to advance their careers.

Existing Barriers Faced by Researchers

However, despite these initiatives, researchers still face significant **barriers to mobility**, such as visa restrictions, language barriers, and cultural differences that can hinder the ease with which they transition between countries. Pil Maria noted, "Mobility is key to the development of European research, but we must ensure that the hurdles to cross-border mobility are addressed more effectively. Without overcoming these barriers, the full potential of ERA will remain unrealized." Pil Maria also mentioned that academic governance is one of the weakest links in the research ecosystem, particularly at the postdoctoral level. She pointed out that many researchers struggle to engage in decision-making processes, leaving them without a platform to voice their concerns and contribute to shaping policies that affect them. Pil emphasized the need for universities to provide better training for researchers in governance, as this group will eventually become the academic leaders of tomorrow. She said: "We need to focus on developing future academic leadership. This training

Image by Midjourney, prompt Fabrizio Martina

should empower the next generation of researchers to take on leadership roles and drive democratic processes within academia."

Renaud noted that **postdoctoral researchers** often face significant challenges in terms of career progression, with many working under **temporary contracts** and **limited job security**. "Many of the challenges we face cannot be solved with more funding alone. What we need is a culture of cooperation within Europe, one that encourages overcoming barriers to collaboration," he remarked.

Emmanuelle added that while **policymakers** are focused on large frameworks and strategies, many researchers are more concerned with the day-to-day challenges they face, such as career advancement and mobility. She pointed out that there is often a gap between **policy frameworks** and the **reality** of working conditions for researchers, which needs to be addressed to make ERA more relevant to individual researchers' lives.

The Future of the ERA Actions

Looking toward the future, the speakers emphasized the importance of continuing to evolve the ERA framework to meet the needs of both **researchers** and **policymakers**. Pil Maria stressed that academic governance should be a focus for universities, which need to train and empower the next generation of academic leaders. By strengthening the ability of researchers to engage in governance, the European research system will become more democratic and responsive to the needs of the research community. Renaud pointed out the **fragmentation of the European research landscape**, suggesting that it leaves ample room for policymakers to disregard the research community's concerns. "The science policy landscape in Europe is unnecessarily fragmented, with many organizations often competing against each other. This fragmentation makes it easier for policymakers to dismiss us. We need to find a way to speak with a louder, more unified voice."

Alexander emphasized that ERA should continue to **encourage cooperation** among European researchers and institutions. He noted that Europe is facing numerous global challenges, including AI, climate change, and societal development, and addressing these will require strong, **collaborative research efforts**. He argued that while **funding** is crucial, it is equally important to create a culture of collaboration and information exchange to ensure that researchers can work together across borders. Emmanuelle added that ERA's focus should shift towards making tools and frameworks more accessible and useful for **individual researchers**. She acknowledged that ERA has introduced important tools like the **ERA Talent Platform** but called for further efforts to ensure these tools are more user-friendly and relevant to researchers at different career stages.

Takeaways

The discussion revealed that while the ERA Actions have made important progress, significant challenges remain. Researchers continue to face barriers in mobility, career progression, and academic governance. Future efforts should focus on ensuring that early-career researchers have a platform to engage in decision-making processes, reducing fragmentation between national research systems, and making the ERA tools more accessible and impactful for individual researchers. By addressing these issues, ERA can continue to evolve and strengthen the European research landscape.

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MCAA Annual Conference 2025

Empowering Women in Science Diplomacy

Photo by Theodota Lagouri

At the MCAA Annual Conference 2025, experts discussed the importance of gender equity in driving global innovation in a parallel session about empowering women in science diplomacy. The session addressed challenges such as the persistence of unconscious biases and the role of initiatives like CERN, offering strategies for fostering inclusivity, integrity, and ethical governance in global scientific collaboration.

Introduction

At the MCAA Annual Conference, the parallel session Empowering Women in Science Diplomacy for Global Innovation led by Theodota Lagouri, Researcher at CERN and Yale University, and Chair of the MCAA Policy Working Group, explored the critical intersection of science, diplomacy, and gender equity. Featuring distinguished speakers Elke Dall (Centre for Social Innovation), Maria Rentetzi (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg), and Cristina Biino (Scientific Attaché, Italian Embassy in Geneva and Researcher at CERN), the session highlighted the evolving landscape of science diplomacy and underscored the need to elevate women's voices in this historically male-dominated field.

Elke Dall, an expert in science diplomacy frameworks, has been involved in initiatives like Horizon 2020's S4D4C project, which aimed at strengthening science diplomacy in Europe. Maria Rentetzi, a scholar in gender and nuclear diplomacy, discussed how historical biases continue to shape diplomatic institutions. Cristina Biino, a CERN physicist and Italy's scientific attaché in Geneva, shared her insights from CERN and other international organisations, shedding light on international scientific diplomacy.

The session examined not only the challenges women face but also practical solutions for creating more inclusive, ethical, and effective global research collaborations.

Photo by Theodota Lagouri

Panel at the MCAA Conference Parallel Session 'Empowering Women in Science and Diplomacy for Global Innovation', held on March 21, 2025. On the podium (left to right): Elke Dall (ZSI), Cristina Biino (Scientific attaché), Theodota Lagouri (MCAA) and Maria Rentetzi (FAU) on screen, joined virtually.

Science Diplomacy: A Bridge Between Science, Policy, and Society

Science diplomacy is key to addressing global challenges like climate change and emerging technologies. It involves the intersection of scientific expertise, policy-making, and institutional frameworks. Achieving gender balance in this field remains a challenge.

The session also highlighted a report recommending A European Framework for Science Diplomacy, where scientific competition and collaboration coexist. In the Western Balkans, for example, women are stepping into leadership roles despite limited resources and political challenges. Tracking women's contributions and ensuring equitable representation remains an ongoing effort. The session reinforced the need to continue working toward gender balance in science diplomacy.

Historical Barriers: Women's Role in Nuclear Diplomacy

Historical biases have had a profound impact on women's participation in science diplomacy, particularly in nuclear diplomacy. The IAEA, the International Atomic Energy Agency, initially male-dominated, still faces gender disparities in nuclear policy-making and diplomatic negotiations. Addressing these systemic barriers requires more than increasing the number of women in the field; structural changes are needed. This includes funding, mentorship programmes, and policy frameworks ensuring women's access to leadership positions in science diplomacy.

International Collaborations: CERN and SESAME as Models for Science Diplomacy

International collaborations like CERN (Conseil Européen pour la Recherche

Nucléaire), the European Council for Nuclear Research and SESAME, the Synchrotron-Light for Experimental Science and Applications in the Middle East, serve as examples of how science diplomacy can bridge geopolitical divides. CERN, established to foster post-war European collaboration, now serves as a hub for global scientific exchange. Initiatives like OQI, the Open Quantum Institute within CERN, demonstrate how open science facilitates equitable access to transformative technologies like quantum computing.

SESAME brings together countries with historically strained relations, such as Israel, Jordan, Egypt, and Palestine and highlights how scientific collaboration can serve as a platform for peace-building and trust-building. Also, GESDA, the Geneva Science and Diplomacy Anticipator, plays a crucial role in anticipating scientific challenges and their diplomatic implications, particularly in emerging fields like artificial intelligence and biotechnology.

In these collaborations, the inclusion of women is essential to ensure diverse perspectives in shaping the future of global science diplomacy.

Breaking Barriers: Strategies for Inclusion and Leadership

The panel discussion highlighted practical strategies for increasing women's representation in science diplomacy:

- **Data-Driven Policies**: Collecting gender-disaggregated data to identify gaps and track progress.
- **Mentorship & Leadership Training**: Creating mentorship programmes for early-career women in science diplomacy and pathways to leadership.
- **Institutional Support**: Establishing funding mechanisms and policy frameworks that prioritise gender equity.
- **Interdisciplinary Education**: Encouraging universities to integrate science diplomacy into STEM and social sciences curricula to equip future leaders with the necessary skills.

Achieving gender balance in science diplomacy is not only about fairness but also about creating more effective, inclusive, and ethical global research collaborations.

Towards a More Inclusive Future

The session concluded with a call to action. While progress has been made, sustained efforts are needed to dismantle systemic barriers and ensure that women play a central role in science diplomacy. Gender-sensitive policies, mentorship networks, and international cooperation are crucial for building a more inclusive and ethically robust scientific landscape.

Science diplomacy is a powerful tool for addressing global challenges, but its full potential can only be realised when women are actively involved in shaping its future. Moving forward, fostering equity, integrity, and ethical governance in science diplomacy is vital to ensuring that innovation serves all of humanity.

For updates and further discussions, join the MCAA Policy Working Group and email policy@mariecuriealumni.eu.

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MCAA Annual Conference 2025

Impact on Researcher Wellbeing and Mental Health: Reflections from the MCAA

Doing research is intellectually rewarding, but it often comes with intense pressure and personal challenges. The "publish or perish" culture and institutional demands can take a serious toll on mental health. As highlighted by the presenters, beyond academic stress, the effects of an unsupportive environment are equally significant and must be acknowledged when addressing researcher wellbeing.

Why is everyone so stressed in research?

Mental health is still a taboo topic, although research shows that more than two in five students experience mental health issues during their PhD, with international students and women being at higher risk (Keloharju et al, 2024; Van Der Heijde et al, 2019). Certainly, personal traits, such as perfectionism and impostor syndrome, contribute to the deterioration of mental health, but this is not the whole picture (Berry et al, 2021). Many of us have seen bright young scholars start their PhDs with excitement, only to end up emotionally and mentally drained, struggling with feelings of inadequacy and burnout. At later stages, post-doctoral careers can bring a new set of challenges, often accompanied by a strong sense of instability and frustration, which can impact mental well-being and influence career decisions. A key common factor underlying many of these experiences is the research environment. Researchers' mental health is heavily shaped by this context, including the quality of supervision, lack of institutional support, job insecurity, mobility demands, and home-life circumstances (Kismihók et al., 2021). Poll results from the session attendees reflect these findings, with most identifying their biggest well-being challenges in academia as, in order: job insecurity, work-life balance struggles, and lack of support.

Academia said, "If you can't measure it, it doesn't exist", and ReMO replied, "Well, not anymore."

At the 12th Marie Curie Alumni Association (MCAA) Annual Conference, the session on mental health and wellbeing in academia drew significant interest. The discussion focused on the Researcher Mental Health Observatory (ReMO) COST action, which began with just 10 core researchers and grew to include more than 300 members. By the time the project concluded in September 2024, thousands of researchers had been involved, marking a major step forward in how mental health is understood and supported in the research community.

ReMO managed to involve researchers from around the world and engage with partners from universities, EU policymakers, Eurodoc

and institutes. The initiative focused on gathering evidence around researchers' wellbeing and its objectives were documented in the Researcher Mental Health and Wellbeing Manifesto (Kismihók et al, 2021). All ReMo's outputs are freely accessible on Zenodo, including books, webinars on YouTube, training resources from the ReMO Ambassador program, podcasts sharing personal stories, and policy briefs.

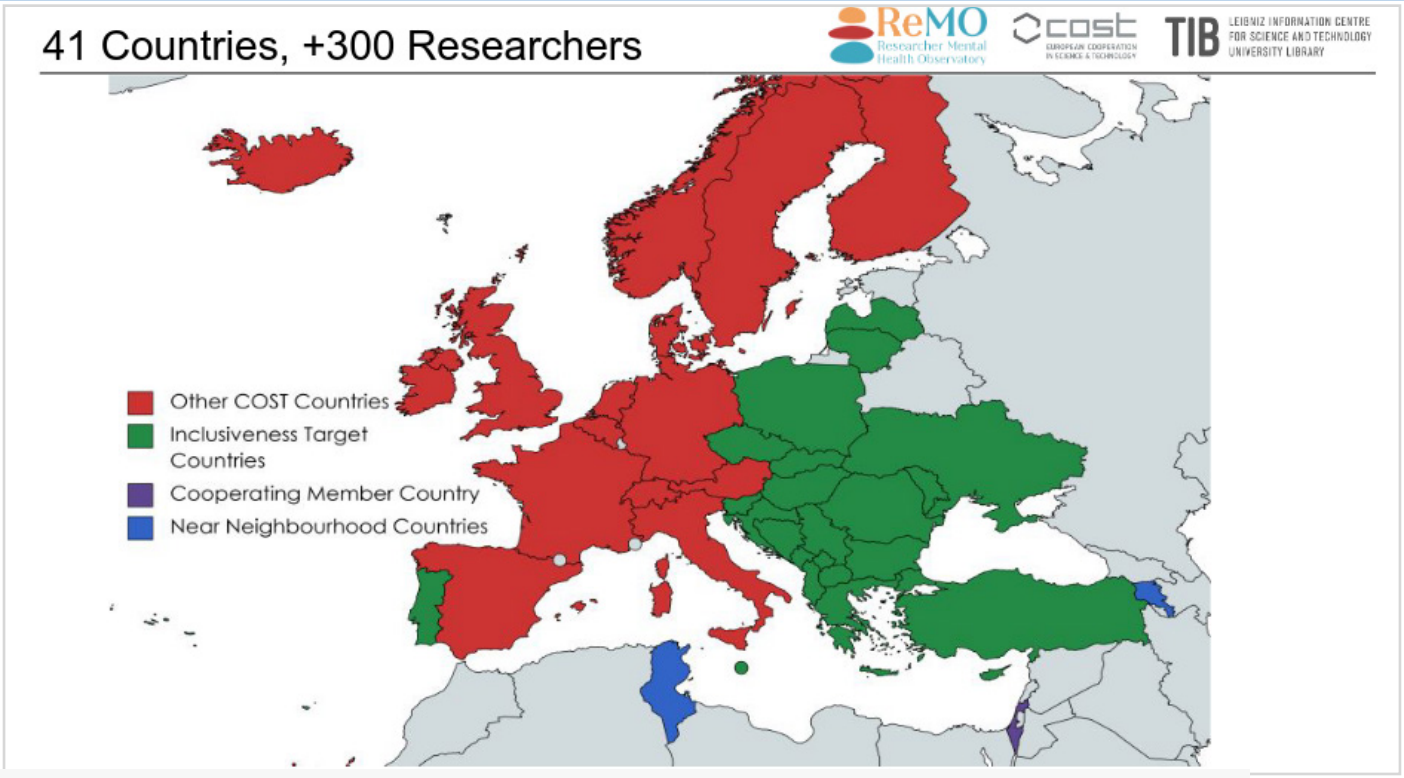
A key highlight of this project was the launch of the STAIRCASE survey, a large-scale data collection effort focused on working conditions. Distributed across all member countries, the survey collected over 4.500 responses, making it one of the largest surveys on academic working conditions in Europe. The findings, which will be publicly available soon, will provide valuable insights into shaping the future of academic working conditions. One of the biggest ReMO achievements was the inclusion of the term "mental health" into the new European Union's European Charter for Researchers.

What comes next?

The MCAA Genders, Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (GEDI) Working Group is launching on 11 April 2025 the Mental Health Task Force, a new initiative within the Marie Curie Alumni Association focused on supporting the wellbeing of its members. The task force aims to develop resources, promote open dialogue, and integrate mental health awareness into MCAA activities and policy positions. Their goals include organizing workshops, compiling a directory of professionals, developing guidelines, amplifying lived experiences, and collaborating with European networks like ReMO to ensure alignment with broader efforts. This task force reflects MCAA's commitment to fostering a supportive, inclusive, and sustainable research culture for all its members.

Insights and lessons learned

While change is underway, it remains in its early stages. It is unacceptable that academia is eating its own children by often propagating bad practices with toxic mentalities like "I suffered, so you should too". It is not helpful for the individuals, it is not assisting research progress, it costs money on the country's development and health care systems, and it is not productive for society as a whole. We need to do better. As the younger generation is more anxious but also more open to



Source: ReMO's Zenodo report: Evidence of change-making and the power of academic communities

discussing mental health (Alison, 2024), institutions may finally be pressured to change practices and prioritize researchers' well-being. Till then, let's advocate for mental health and raise awareness.

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MCAA Annual Conference 2025

Strengthening institutions, safeguarding integrity: Ethics in academia and AI

Image by Midjourney, prompt Fabrizio Martina

How can clearly defined institutional policies and strong ethical governance protect researchers and foster responsible innovation? Discussions from the PAOLA project and the AI ethics session at the MCAA Annual Conference 2025 point the way forward.

During the MCAA Annual Conference 2025 in Kraków, two insightful sessions highlighted how strong institutions are essential for safeguarding integrity and promoting responsible innovation. The PAndora bOx of whistLeblowing in Academia (PAOLA) project's final conference and the session AI Ethics and Integrity: Balancing Innovation with Responsibility in Research underlined the critical need for clear ethical guidelines and transparent governance in academia.

Institutional Clarity in Whistleblowing: Insights from PAOLA

Whistleblowing is a crucial mechanism to uphold accountability, yet it remains highly sensitive and under-supported in academia. A recent survey conducted under the PAOLA project revealed that over 90% of respondents had witnessed unethical conduct, and nearly 80% had faced it themselves. However, many lacked confidence in current systems: 70% questioned their confidentiality, and 87% found them difficult to navigate. These findings highlight a persistent disconnect between institutional policies and researchers' everyday realities.

The satellite event hosted by the PAOLA project explored how institutions can better protect integrity by providing robust, transparent, and supportive whistleblowing channels that researchers can trust. The session featured two panels. The first presented key findings from the PAOLA project, while the second engaged in a forward-looking dialogue on persistent challenges and future directions. Together, they highlighted the need for stronger institutional frameworks to foster a culture of integrity and empower researchers.

A central takeaway from both panels was the importance of institutions addressing three fundamental questions:

Photo by Srishti Goyal

MCAA Satellite Event – Final Conference of the Pandora Box of Whistleblowing in Academia (PAOLA) Project, held on March 20, 2025. On the podium (left to right): Gianluigi Maria Riva (Legal Insights), Francisco Valente Gonçalves (Principal Investigator), Szidonia Rusu (Observatory Presentation), and Susana Sousa Lourenço (Data Insights)

- **What constitutes misconduct?** Institutions need to clearly define the reportable offences—such as data falsification, plagiarism, harassment, ethical breaches, or misuse of funds. Without precise and shared definitions, whistleblowers may hesitate to report the unethical issues that affect them.
- **How can concerns be raised safely?** Effective policies must guarantee confidentiality and set up secure whistleblowing mechanisms for reporting. Best practices include secured digital reporting platforms, anonymous channels, timely responses, and safeguards against retaliation.
- **Who is responsible for managing reports?** It is essential to communicate clearly designated roles, such as ethics officers, ombudspersons, or dedicated committees, to ensure consistency and fairness in the process.

Speakers emphasised that **policy alone is not enough**. Institutions must also actively train staff, raise awareness, and demonstrate visible leadership in ethical governance. A supportive culture is essential, where researchers view whistleblowing as a shared responsibility rather than a personal risk. When researchers trust their institutions, they are more likely to speak up with confidence that they will be heard and protected.

The PAOLA session made a compelling case for institutional clarity, both in written rules and in practice. By embedding ethical conduct into their everyday operations and governance structures, academic institutions can respond to misconduct more effectively, and foster long-term trust among researchers.

As part of its practical contributions, the session also helped raise awareness about the Observatory. This digital platform

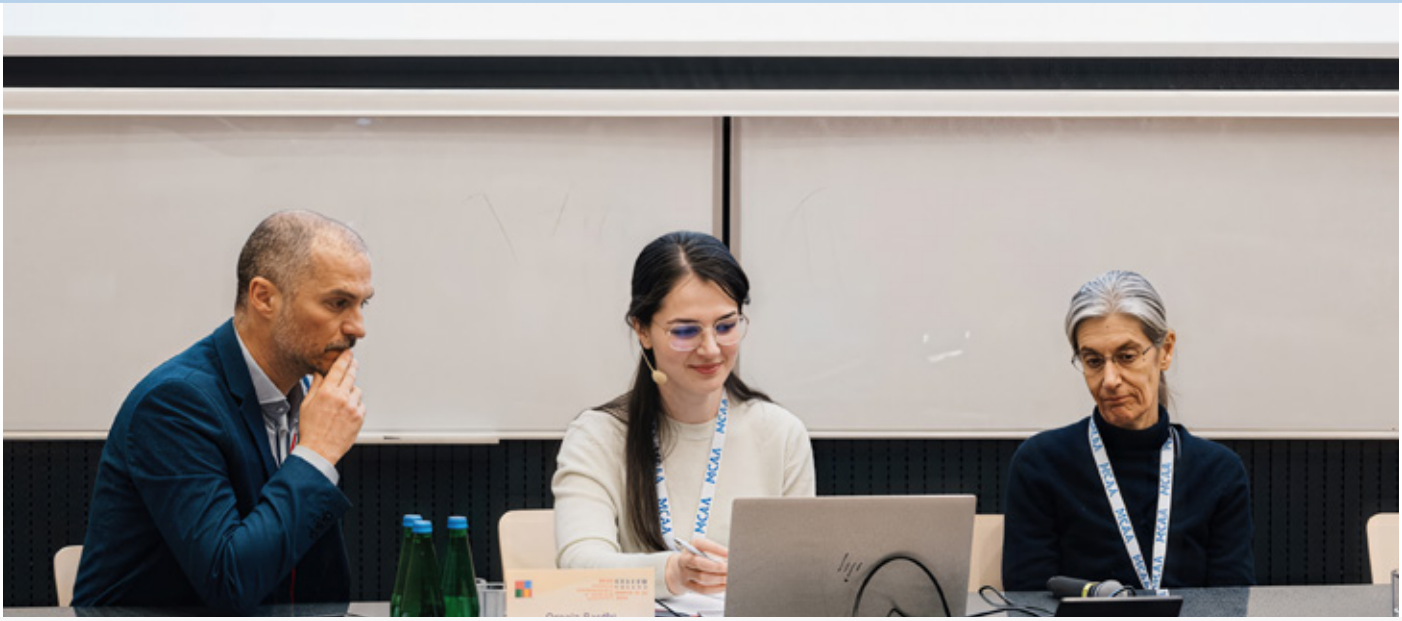

Photo by Andrzej Rusinowski

The MCAA Annual Conference session on AI Ethics & Integrity for Responsible Research & Innovation, held on March 21, 2025. On the podium (left to right): Liviu Știrbăț (Head, AI in Science, European Commission), Ornela Bardhi (MCAA Board member), and Theodota Lagouri (Chair, MCAA Policy Working Group). Mihalis Kritikos (Secretary, European Group of Ethics in Science and New Technologies) and Gàbor Szüdi (Centre for Social Innovation) joined virtually.

provides toolkits, legal resources, case studies, and e-learning materials to support whistleblowers and institutions. It connects users with advocacy networks and pro bono legal aid, helping translate ethical principles into practice.

Institutional Responsibility in AI Ethics

The AI Ethics session built upon these institutional themes, emphasising ethical governance as vital to responsible AI research. Experts from the European Commission and policy advisors highlighted institutional responsibilities related to privacy, bias, transparency, and sustainability in AI research and policy.

Essential ethical considerations discussed were:

- **Privacy and Data Protection**: Given AI's reliance on vast, sensitive datasets, institutions must rigorously enforce privacy protection frameworks to ensure ethical compliance.
- **Bias and Fairness**: Institutions must actively identify and correct biases in AI systems to avoid discrimination in critical areas such as healthcare, employment, and criminal justice.
- **Transparency and Explainability**: Transparency in AI decision-making was a recurring theme. Institutions should advocate for explainable AI systems, enabling users and stakeholders to understand and challenge AI-driven decisions.
- **Environmental Sustainability**: With AI's growing ecological footprint, institutions must lead sustainability efforts, balancing technological innovation with environmental responsibility.

Speakers provided a comparative analysis of international AI governance, contrasting the EU's human-rights-oriented framework with China's state-centric approach. Despite differences, shared global ethical standards were highlighted as potential common ground.

Initiatives such as the EU's **Choose Europe** were also discussed, aimed at attracting global research talent by fostering trust and ethical clarity in AI research. Speakers

underscored the importance of ethics by design – embedding ethical principles throughout the AI development process. Despite regional differences, there is growing momentum for global cooperation. Researchers are strongly encouraged to engage with ethical frameworks to ensure innovation aligns with fairness, sustainability, and the protection of rights. Institutional support was described as crucial in enabling researchers to pursue responsible AI practices without concerns over data misuse or intellectual property violations.

Taken together, the sessions emphasised that ethical integrity must be embedded not only in individual practices but also within the broader frameworks of institutional governance.

Institutional Ethics: The Way Forward

Both sessions underscored the critical role of ethically robust institutions as foundations for trustworthy and innovative research environments. Strong institutional frameworks – which are built on clarity, transparency, and proactive oversight – are essential. They not only protect researchers but also enable responsible and sustainable innovation.

Key takeaways included:

- The need for clear definitions and procedures to guide ethical responses to misconduct and AI innovation.
- The importance of visible leadership in creating trust and accountability within research institutions.
- The value of cross-border cooperation in setting and upholding ethical standards.
- The necessity of integrating ethics into the design stage of policies and technologies.

This emphasis echoes broader academic insights. For instance, Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) argue that effective institutions are fundamental to societal and economic progress. In the context of research, this underscores the need for clearly articulated policies, ethical oversight, and accountability mechanisms to address current challenges and anticipate future ethical complexities in both whistleblowing and AI research.

Ultimately, embedding ethics throughout institutions—from whistleblower protection to AI governance—fosters a culture of integrity and accountability, ensuring research advances responsibly and serves both the scientific community and the public good.

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MCAA Annual Conference 2025

From Brain Drain to Brain Circulation: Building Bridges Through Science Diaspora Networks

Uncover the transformative power of science diaspora networks in converting 'brain drain' into 'brain circulation.' Learn how these networks foster robust international collaborations and effectively influence science policy, bridging the gap between global scientists and their home countries.

A Common Goal: Connection Across Borders

In a lively panel discussion on Expat Communities: Science Policy & International Mobility, representatives of international science diaspora organisations came together to reflect on the evolving role of mobile researchers, the importance of scientific networks, and the challenges of creating policy change from the grassroots up.

I opened the panel by sharing the experience and achievements of the Czexpats in Science initiative. Czexpats in Science builds a network of Czech researchers abroad and connects them with home institutions and policymakers. “We use the power and experience of the community to positively influence science policy in our country,” I explained. One of the flagship events is a Christmas conference that gathers diaspora scientists when they are likely to return home. “We also promote the achievements of our scientists abroad and support their networking. And we share their experience to foster international mobility.”

Poland’s Approach: Turning Brain Drain Into Circulation

Jakub (Kuba) Orłowski, representing the Polonium Foundation, brought in the Polish experience, reflecting on over a decade of building community among Polish researchers abroad. From those early efforts, the organisation now spans multiple continents. They run the Polonium Network, conduct diaspora research, organise the Science: Polish Perspectives conference series, run a mentoring programme, and advocate for policies that keep scientists connected. In the panel, Kuba explained the inclusivity of their events, which, though primarily targeting the Polish diaspora, welcome all interested parties and are conducted in English to ensure broad participation and enhance connection-building among attendees.

Photo by Pineaddle

Expat communities panel - from left: Eliška Koňaříková (Czexpats in Science), Norbert Bencze (DOSZ), Jakub Orłowski (Polonium Foundation), Radoslav Paulen (Žijem vedu), and Pablo Tomatis (MCAA Argentina Chapter).

"We know from our surveys that at most 40% of Polish researchers abroad are thinking of coming back, and that percentage drops off the longer they spend abroad," Kuba said. There are various ways to establish connections with Polish universities and the Polish industry, and in that way, contribute to the economy and society. "Even if they do not return physically, they can still contribute by collaborating with institutions, mentoring younger scientists, or participating in public science initiatives."

Hungary: Building Community Across Cultures

Norbert Bencze, speaking for the 30 years long existence of the Association of Hungarian PhD and DLA Candidates, emphasised the importance of community for international students and early-career researchers. One key programme, the ambassador system, supports international PhD candidates in Hungary, the vast majority of whom come from outside Europe. Norbert noted the initial challenges that universities and communities faced in accommodating international students, particularly those from non-European cultural backgrounds. "It was a big shock," he remarked.

In parallel, they have launched Homecoming Knowledge, a new initiative to connect Hungarian scientists abroad without necessarily asking them to return permanently. "No one ever asked them: What would you like to do? How could you contribute in another way?" Norbert emphasised. "We would like to build bridges between international PhD candidates and the Hungarians."

The Slovak Perspective: Popularisation and Policy

Radoslav (Rado) Paulen represented the Slovak group Žijem vedu—"I live the science". A Marie Curie fellow who returned

to Slovakia, he spoke about their dual focus on popularising science and pushing for better research conditions. As an example of areas for improvement, he cited his return to Slovakia, noting the administrative challenges he faced there, which were absent in Germany and the UK.

"We run a platform for Slovak scientists abroad and for the Slovaks who want to go abroad. We share open positions, what are the needs in respective countries, or what changes are in the legislation," he shared. The group also produces podcasts that translate new scientific research into digestible public content—'scientific canapés,' as Rado put it.

Žijem vedu tries to have its word in whatever initiatives are happening in Slovakia, whatever the stakeholders, or decision-makers do, when they are trying to improve anything. "We try to make sure that they improve something and not make it worse, because that also can happen sometimes," he sums their influence up.

LATAM Voices: Building Science Policy and New Connections

Pablo Tomatis, Chair of the MCAA Argentina Chapter, offered a different regional lens. He highlighted the LATAM Conference, a bottom-up initiative aimed at uniting Latin American alumni of the MCAA. He recounted how a mere idea evolved into a significant event, attracting 45 scientists along with support from embassies, ministries, and Euraxess Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). The event helped map the Latin American scientific diaspora and sparked further editions in Brazil, Colombia, and upcoming Mexico.

Brazilian participant **Julia Chiossi** noted: "You do not have many people with PhDs [in Brazil], let alone international PhDs who came back. So, these people are in a special status— they could really make a difference."

Takeaways: Action From the Grassroots Up

Several panellists agreed that the path forward lies in circulation, not repatriation. As Rado Paulen said: "It is not about bringing people home. It is about creating systems that let them contribute wherever they are."

As the panel wrapped up, a few clear messages stood out:

- Network, network, network.
- Do not lose hope, and join your community.
- All top-down initiatives will be lifeless unless they are paired with grassroots voices.
- Evidence-based information is crucial for shaping policies that support the scientific diaspora.
- All those initiatives are a marathon, not a sprint.

From Hungary to Argentina, Czechia to Poland, the call was clear: support your scientists wherever they are. Enable them to connect, share knowledge, shape policy, and strengthen their communities. Whether through online platforms, webinars, local embassies, Christmas meetups, or mentorship programmes—what matters is building bridges.

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MCAA Annual Conference 2025

The Future of Science: Bridging Careers, Collaboration & Innovation

How can science evolve into a more inclusive, agile, and impact-driven ecosystem? At the MCAA Annual Conference 2025 in Kraków, a dynamic session titled The Future of Science: Bridging Careers, Collaboration & Innovation explored pathways to reimagine scientific careers through entrepreneurship, cross-sector partnerships, and sustainability.

Bridging Boundaries: Careers, Collaboration & Innovation in Science

Held on March 22, 2025, during the MCAA Annual Conference and General Assembly in Kraków, Poland, the session The Future of Science: Bridging Careers, Collaboration & Innovation convened thought leaders from academia and industry to examine the shifting terrain of scientific careers. Organized by the Career Development Working Group (WG), the session emphasized the importance of flexible, collaborative, and mission-driven approaches to scientific work, rooted in global impact and societal relevance.

Opening the session, Sureyya Akyuz, Chair of the Career Development WG, highlighted three guiding themes for rethinking research careers:

- **Career Fluidity**: enabling movement between academia, industry, and policy-making,
- **Collaborative Science**: fostering interdisciplinary and intersectoral engagement,
- **Sustainable Career Development**: aligning scientific goals with frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Sureyya Akyuz highlighted the instrumental role of the MSCA in facilitating open science, mobility, and systemic transformation. Her address encouraged a departure from rigid institutional silos toward ecosystems that nurture diverse talent and translational research.

From Lab to Market: Deep Tech and the AI Imperative

Aytul Ercil (Co-founder and CEO of Vispera), a distinguished academic and entrepreneur, drew from her experiences founding Vispera and scaling AI-powered retail solutions, to demonstrate how research in computer vision can lead to market-ready innovation.

Her talk spotlighted:

- The **translation of academic research into applied AI solutions**, including case studies in visual quality assurance and inventory analytics,
- Strategies for **scaling deep-tech ventures**, with emphasis on funding, visionary teams, and navigating investor dynamics,
- The necessity of **ecosystem-level collaboration** between universities, startups, and industries to accelerate innovation,

Photo by Polat Goktas

The dual imagery—Sisyphus-like struggle and a motivational cartoon—illustrates the challenges and external pressures faced by researchers, while reinforcing the session's core message: "**It ain't easy, but it is possible**."

- The imperative to **support gender** inclusion in tech entrepreneurship,
- And a call for researchers to develop **entrepreneurial competencies**, including IP awareness and data science skills.

Aytul's Ercil's central message was unequivocal: sustainable innovation demands collaborative environments where ideas can be tested, refined, and scaled for real-world benefit.

Industrial Doctorates: A Hybrid Model for Innovation

Sohail Saad Luka (Policy Officer, European Commission, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Unit) presented a compelling case for **MSCA Industrial PhD programmes** as engines of both innovation and career diversity. Through first-hand experiences supervising industrial researchers, he identified how this model enables a unique synergy between academic inquiry and industrial application.

Key takeaways from his talk included:

- The **dual supervision model** enhances both theoretical rigor and applied relevance.
- Industrial doctorates generate **mutual value**: universities gain real-world relevance, industries access cutting-edge talent, and researchers cultivate multi-sectoral fluency.
- Institutional frameworks like **MSCA COFUND** and **EIT Knowledge and Innovation Communities** play a key role in scaffolding these programs.
- Evaluating doctoral outputs based on **competencies, stakeholder engagement, and innovation metrics** rather than publications alone.
- The importance of **cultural change** in academic settings to value non-linear career trajectories.

Sohail Luka concluded by positioning industrial doctorates as strategic tools for Europe's knowledge economy, where

researchers are seen not just as scholars, but as agents of innovation.

HealthTech, AI, and Entrepreneurial Science: A Vision for Transformative Impact

Keti Zeka (Research Director at Research and Product Consulting Ltd) provided an interdisciplinary vision at the crossroads of **HealthTech, AI, and scientific entrepreneurship**. Drawing from her own entrepreneurial ventures, she outlined how AI is redefining healthcare delivery and creating space for impact-driven scientific careers.

Highlights of her presentation:

- AI is emerging as a **catalyst for predictive, personalized, and smart healthcare systems**.
- Entrepreneurial science involves **embedding translational thinking** in research, rather than abandoning academic values.
- Building a **HealthTech startup** requires navigating regulatory landscapes, clinical validation, and multidisciplinary leadership.
- Barriers such as **data privacy, algorithmic bias, and legacy system integration** must be addressed through ethical and human-centered design.
- Mentoring underrepresented groups in STEM is essential to build **inclusive innovation ecosystems**.

Keti Zeka's message was clear: the future of science demands not only new technologies but also co-designed, equitable systems that amplify societal resilience.

Interactive Reflections: Voices from the Room

The session concluded with a participatory dialogue, led by Sureyya Akyuz, inviting reflections from attendees through **live polls and open-floor discussions**. The segment provided real-time insights into the evolving needs and aspirations of early-career researchers.

Key observations included:

- A **strong appetite for intersectoral careers**, with participants eager to blend academia with industry, policy, or entrepreneurial engagements.
- Barriers such as limited mentorship, fragmented funding ecosystems, and lack of institutional incentives were frequently cited.
- A recurring call to strengthen **soft skills**—communication, digital literacy, and project management—alongside technical expertise.
- A widespread agreement that **inclusive support structures** must become the norm, not the exception, in fostering interdisciplinary excellence.

Sureyya Akyuz closed the session by affirming that career development in science is not a one-size-fits-all journey. It is shaped by collaboration, creativity, and courage.

Future-Ready Science Starts with Empowered Researchers

The Future of Science session offered more than a discussion, it provided a strategic framework for redefining what it means to build a career in science today. From AI entrepreneurship to industrial doctorates and HealthTech innovation, the speakers demonstrated that **research excellence and societal relevance are not competing goals, but intertwined missions**.

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MCAA Annual Conference 2025

Quo vadis Science Communication?

Image by MidJourney, prompt Fabrizio Martina

As scientists, we must foster science communication because it helps ensure that scientific discoveries and evidence inform public decisions, policies, and everyday choices while also combating misinformation and making science more inclusive, transparent, and connected to real-world concerns.

Science communication was running like a red line over several sessions at the recent MCAA Annual Conference. This summary distils key statements, recommendations, and visions for advancing science communication in Europe and beyond.

Next-Generation Science Communication

As a red line through multiple speeches and multiple panels came the necessity of impactful science communication. Most of the community members already know how to disseminate their science, break down complex statements, tailor messages to target audiences, and explain the core nature of science – its inherent uncertainty. Also, many MCAA members engage in participatory, community-driven, and citizen science projects, and these collaborations continue to grow every year.

Even though people trust the scientists—more than 80% of respondents worldwide reported at least moderate trust in scientists (Cologna et al., 2025)—they often don't follow scientific recommendations. "Misinformation spreads six times faster than the truth, mostly because of its emotional tone," noted Subhra Priyadarshini, Board Director at the World Federation of Science Journalists and editor at Nature India.

Joana Magalhães and Isabel Mendoza, in their COALESCE policy brief (Magalhães & Mendoza, 2025), stated: "Recently, expert reports from Draghi, Letta and Heitor have highlighted the urgent need to enhance EU competitiveness by prioritising research and innovation, offering bold visions for outlining the trajectory and funding for the next R&I framework programme."

Warnings Around the Globe

Strengthening EU policy in science aligns with growing global threats to scientific freedom. "Cutting of research is very short-sighted," emphasised Maria Leptin, President of the

Photo by Pineaddle

Maria Leptin, President of the ERC, during her welcoming speech

ERC, during her introductory speech. "It shows how fragile we are."

Moniek Tromp, President of the Initiative for Science in Europe, added a hopeful note: "We need to be active and influence the move in the right direction." She further encouraged scientists to continue making an impact—not just on knowledge, but on economics and, ultimately, our collective future.

Paweł Rowiński from the ALLEA federation offered practical advice: "We should remove all bureaucratic obstacles and not work against freedom in science."

How to Make an Impact

As mentioned, many MCAA members are involved in participatory projects or interdisciplinary initiatives such as science-art collaborations. But what truly makes a difference?

"Science must meet people where they are," stressed Subhra Priyadarshini. We must listen to each other, or even better: "Prioritise listening over speaking to build a channel for trust," she adds. Scientists and institutions should create spaces for two-way communication.

To complete this, according to Agata Gurzawska from the VERITY project, "We should seek new platforms." That means leaving our ivory towers and our press release conferences, seeking real people, and talking to them. Or chat. Or play. "We should humanise the science, make stories, infographics, animation, or use gamification," Subhra concluded. She also recommends integrating science communication training into every PhD curriculum.

Furthermore, evidence-based decision-making can attract not only policymakers and politicians, but also their voters. And with trust comes funding, opportunities, and

collaborations. “Without individual actors, we will not achieve anything. We need collaboration, multiple stakeholders, and multidisciplinarity,” shared Agata.

So What?

Based on the shared findings, I ask—how do we make a real impact?

What measures can we take to shift public mindsets?

Can we convince society—and, in turn, politicians and decision-makers—of the true value of science?

How do we change the world?

“Highly excellent science must be protected,” summarised Maria Leptin.

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Image by Midjourney, prompt Fabrizio Martina

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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