Issue 44 - September 2025

Marie Curie Alumni Association

Newsletter

Image by MidJourney, prompt Fabrizio Martina

Interviews with Editors

News from the MCAA

ISSN 2663-9483

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Message from the Board

Dear MCAA Members,

We hope you've all enjoyed a refreshing summer break and are returning inspired and energised for the academic year ahead. September is always a time of new beginnings, setting fresh goals, and a moment to reconnect. As we move into this new season, we are excited to share some of the activities and achievements of the MCAA.

MCAA advocacy and global cooperation

This summer, the MCAA joined forces with 16 organisations in advocating for a different approach to the proposed MSCA directionality, **standing up for research that remains open, independent, and inclusive**. We are also proud to announce our involvement as a partner in the MSCA Global Cooperation: Policy Enhancement and Strategic Promotion (MSCA-GLOPOL), a newly EU-funded project. On 26 June, the kick-off meeting took place in Brussels and online, marking the start of an exciting collaboration with PRACSIS, the project coordinator, aimed **at enhancing global cooperation and visibility for MSCA programmes across 26 target regions**, with strong involvement from the MCAA Chapters across the targeted regions.

Recent engagements and representations

Over the past months, the Board and Secretariat have held productive meetings to review progress, discuss strategic priorities, and explore new ways to support members. On 27–29 June, **the Secretariat, with the MCAA Chair, Gian Maria Greco, convened in Brussels** to review ongoing activities and engage with the European Commission's Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) Unit. These exchanges reinforce our collaborative spirit and ensure that the Association's strategic goals translate into concrete outcomes for members.

In the same month, the MCAA Executive Director, Mostafa Moonir Shawrav, and Career Development Manager, Pooja Khurana, participated in **citizen science events in Brussels**: on 18 June, the Citizen Science Fair, bringing science closer to citizens with interactive exhibitions, live demos, and open dialogue, on 19 June, a cluster event on advancing public engagement and citizen science in the European Research Area, and on 20 June the third European Citizen Science project meeting. On 24 June, Mostafa Moonir Shawrav and the MCAA Policy Officer, Tereza Szybisty, represented the MCAA, partner of the CoARA Boost project, at **the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) Steering Board and the CoARA Boost project consortium meeting** in Brussels to discuss strategic priorities and next steps in advancing reform in research assessment. On 3 July, Gian Maria Greco joined the COST Cross-Cutting Activity meeting on **career**

Image by MidJourney, prompt by Fabrizio Martina

development for young researchers in Brussels. This initiative was launched last year and aims to improve career conditions to attract and retain research talent in Europe.

A fundamental moment this autumn is the MSCA Presidency Conference 2025, which will take place on 18–19 September in Lyngby, Denmark, at the Technical University of Denmark (DTU), as part of the Danish Presidency of the Council of the EU. The conference will host stakeholders from across Europe to discuss how to attract, support, and retain research talent. For the MCAA, it will be a strategic platform to enhance the partnership with the MSCA programme and to promote members' interests. The Board will participate in panels, highlighting how the Association fosters excellence, innovation, and collaboration. Interacting with policymakers helps ensure that the perspectives of global researchers shape MSCA policies. This event also provides a chance for European researchers to see their experiences reflected in high-level discussions, learn from peers, and connect with decision-makers, shaping research funding and careers. This engagement strengthens the MCAA's role as a bridge between the MSCA programme and alumni, keeping the programme flexible, inclusive, and responsive.

Key milestones of our mentoring platforms

The MCAA Academy forums **are now active**, offering a dedicated space within the Academy platform for all members, mentors, mentees, and anyone curious, to exchange experiences, spark conversations, and build meaningful connections. The forums are open to the entire MCAA Academy community. Another important news is that the Peer Exchange Platform for Narrative-style CVs (PEP-CV) **has reached 1,000 members worldwide**. The platform continues to foster a supportive mentoring culture, recognise diverse contributions beyond publications, and contribute to global research assessment reform alongside CoARA, the Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), and Open Science more generally.

Chapters and Working Groups (WG) activities

On 22 July, the MCAA Africa Chapter, in collaboration with the MCAA Communication WG organised a webinar on the **power of mentorship in academia** as part of the Around the World Webinar Series, to focus on mentorship and its potential to shape the future of academia. On 4–6 August, the **third Annual Meeting of the China Chapter** was organised in a hybrid format, where

the MCAA Vice-Chair, Corinne Portioli, gave a welcoming speech on the MCAA and her MSCA journey, in the session "Co-creating the Future with Alumni", to promote knowledge exchange and strengthen the global network.

Regarding the upcoming events, on 11–12 September, the **MCAA Research Management WG** will hold its **second annual meeting**, an opportunity to share best practices in research management and collaboration across Europe. On 19 September, the **MCAA Denmark Chapter** will host a **satellite event to the MSCA Presidency Conference** on career planning post-fellowship, offering practical guidance for researchers navigating the post-fellowship phase. On 26–27 September, nine Chapters and two WGs will organise the **MCAA Central European Meeting** at the University of Warsaw, as an opportunity for researchers and science policy advocates to bring dialogue, collaboration, and policy engagement on brain drain and gain, science diplomacy and policy, research funding and the widening participation agenda, to Central and Eastern Europe.

Finally, on 3–4 October, another regional event will take place in Mexico: "**The MCAA Latin America (Latam) Meeting 2025: Science for a Better World: Bridging Research and Society**." The event, led by the MCAA Mexico Chapter and co-organised by four other MCAA Chapters and EURAXESS Latin America and the Caribbean, will bring members together to reflect on the MCAA's core values from a Latin American perspective and to share opportunities on topics such as the MSCA fellowships and collaborations with Europe.

Welcoming new members to MCAA projects

We welcome new MCAA team members to the MSCA-GLOPOL project: Communication Officer, N'zallah Zamani Haro, and Project Officer, Armela Dino. We are also pleased to introduce four new members of the MCAA Secretariat: Project Officer (Proposal Writer), Silvana Munzi, Policy Officer, Nicolas Defaye, Partnership & Sponsorship Officer, Harshita Murarka, and Admin Assistant (Community), Salome Toliashvili.

Looking ahead, a **formal MCAA Board meeting will be held in September**, as an opportunity for the Board and Secretariat to provide updates on the status of various activities to our members, and to engage MCAA Chapter and WGs Chairs in key discussions on collaborative events and joint forces.

With the start of this fresh period, we want to thank each of you for being part of our global community. The past year and a half has been an incredible experience for the current Board, and it is truly inspiring to be actively shaping the future of our Association at this very moment. We look forward to sharing news, ideas, and opportunities in the months ahead, continuing to support, connect, and advocate for our members worldwide. We wish you a pleasant reading with the articles prepared for you by the MCAA Newsletter Editorial Board.

On behalf of the MCAA Board,

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Corinne Portioli
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Editorial

One of the strongest values of the MCAA is the opportunity for everyone to speak on any topic, without boundaries or barriers. This newsletter reflects that spirit – welcoming stories that range from deeply personal journeys to global research initiatives. Every voice matters, and when shared through this platform, those voices weave a collective story of resilience, curiosity, and innovation.

This issue also celebrates the many events that keep our community active and visible. From citizen science to regional Chapter meetings, from mentoring workshops to deep research topics. The MCAA creates spaces where ideas come alive, where members connect across borders, and where our shared vision for open and inclusive research grows stronger.

I am especially proud to highlight the start of the MSCA-GLOPOL project. By building connections across 26 regions, MSCA-GLOPOL ensures that the perspectives of researchers are not confined to Europe but reach and resonate worldwide. It is a reminder that global cooperation is not just a goal but a practice – one that our members actively help to shape.

Finally, this issue includes something special: interviews with our editors, who volunteer their time to shape and curate these stories.

Their reflections reveal the passion behind the pages you are reading. May this issue be another stage where your voices find resonance and your stories spark new possibilities.

Enjoy the read!

Eliška Koňaříková
Editor-in-Chief, MCAA Newsletter
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Image by MidJourney, prompt by Fabrizio Martina

Meet our Editors

interview

Interviews with Editors

Image by MidJourney, prompt by Fabrizio Martina

Behind every published story in the MCAA Newsletter, there's a dedicated editorial team working quietly in the background; reviewing, shaping, and curating the content that brings your texts to life. In the following interviews, we speak with several team members who do it all voluntarily, alongside their professional careers, driven by passion and a deep belief in the importance of storytelling in science.

Eliška Koňaříková
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Meet our Editors

interview

Sandra María Fernández Moya: Towards engaging writing

Can you walk us through your typical day?

I'm a molecular biologist and neuroscientist, a mother of two little girls, and a university lecturer. Recently, I started as a Serra Húnter Lecturer at the University of Barcelona. My days usually begin early, and I dedicate the first part of the morning to writing a paper on our most recent research, which focuses on the role of the RNA-binding protein STAU2 in neurogenesis. At the same time, I'm already drafting the next step of the project, aiming to apply for a grant to continue this line of research. I'm also preparing the new course I'll teach in September – neuroanatomy for medical students.

As a volunteer, what initially drew you to get involved with the MCAA Newsletter, and what keeps you motivated to stay?

I've always loved writing. Since my teenage years, I was constantly putting my thoughts into words, mostly fantasy and science fiction. But once I became a scientist, I had little time to wander through imaginary worlds; my focus shifted to real-world science. Joining the MCAA Newsletter gave me the opportunity and motivation to return to writing, but on a different level. I've enjoyed it so much that, despite the challenges of balancing work and family, I don't want to stop.

What are your hopes or goals for the future of the MCAA Newsletter?

My hope is that it reaches a broader audience and encourages more members of the community to get involved. I believe it's important to make the Newsletter not only informative but also engaging, something that people genuinely enjoy reading. The more readers connect with the content, the more likely they are to contribute with ideas, interviews, and stories. I believe we are moving in the right direction to achieve this.

How has volunteering as an editor influenced your own career, interests, or view of the scientific community?

I joined the Editorial Board as a new-in-the-field editor in the summer of 2023. Since then, two maternity leaves have kept me a

bit less active, but at the same time, I was at a pivotal moment in my scientific career. Receiving a Marie Curie Individual Fellowship helped me secure my current position, after several intermediate steps. Being part of the Newsletter gave me a broader perspective on science – reading and writing about EU science policies, MCAA activities, meetings and career paths made me realise that the scientific world is much larger than the narrow view I had. My interests have started expanding towards science policy and how we, as scientists, can make an impact in that realm. I'm also learning a lot about other research fields, which is both enriching and inspiring.

What's one behind-the-scenes moment or memory from working on the MCAA Newsletter?

This year, I participated in the MCAA Annual Conference online because my second daughter was only six months old, and I didn't want to be away from her. I joined virtually so I could still attend the amazing sessions. I remember feeling overwhelmed – I couldn't choose just one talk to cover! There were so many interesting topics. In the end, I picked two talks to write about for the Newsletter. I wanted to represent the speakers accurately, so I listened to each talk at least ten times. It took a lot of time, balancing writing, working, and parenting, but I really enjoyed it. It was stressful but also very fulfilling, and I hope I managed to capture all the key points. I truly hope I can attend the conference in person next year!

If you could swap lives with any scientist, living, dead or fictional, for one day, who would it be and why?

That's such a difficult question! I just finished reading "Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman!" and I thought what an amazing experience it would be to spend a day in Richard Feynman's mind. His sense of humour, spontaneity, and passionate curiosity about everything, from science to samba and painting, make him a fascinating figure. He seemed to live life to the fullest. I also admire how, when discussing science, he didn't feel intimidated by anyone, whether it was Einstein, Oppenheimer, or even the King of Sweden, because he focused solely on science itself. That kind of clarity and confidence is inspiring.

Meet our Editors

interview

Pradeep Eranti: Volunteering is a game-changer

Can you walk us through your typical day?

I am Pradeep Eranti, a bioinformatician, and I was introduced to genetic epidemiology during my training as an Early Stage Researcher (ESR) in the MLFPM ITN. The MLFPM network enabled ESRs to develop and apply machine learning and statistical methodologies to health data and discover new insights underlying disease mechanisms and explore them in the broader context of precision medicine.

Currently, I am in the final stages of my thesis at the Université Paris Cité, and my typical day involves a lot of writing, editing, and (impatiently) waiting for journal reviews. When I am not immersed in the fascinating world of -omics, I spend time on science communication, advocating for open science and reproducibility, and contributing to community-building initiatives.

And when I need a break from all of this? I daydream about vacations... though with the ongoing editing and research tasks, holiday feels like a mirage!

As a volunteer, what initially drew you to get involved with the MCAA Newsletter, and what keeps you motivated to stay?

I joined the MCAA Newsletter team because I saw it as a fantastic platform for science communication that bridges the gap between various stakeholders, especially in a time when open science and knowledge-sharing are more important than ever.

Being part of the Editorial Board provides me with a unique opportunity, even early in my career, to be involved in the full editorial life cycle, including how to write clear and concise language to communicate scientific content with an audience from diverse backgrounds.

What keeps me coming back, to give back to the community, is the chance to amplify voices from diverse scientific communities, including those affected during the COVID-19 pandemic and from the conflict-affected regions. I believe that effective communication is essential to making science accessible and impactful, and the MCAA Editorial Board shares this belief.

Image by MidJourney, prompt by Fabrizio Martina

What are your hopes or goals for the future of the Newsletter?

Besides continuing to support the production of high-quality content, I hope the MCAA Newsletter continues to serve as an inclusive and diverse platform for all MCAA members, particularly from underrepresented regions and/or topics, to share their stories, breakthroughs, and challenges.

My passion lies in open science and science communication, and I would love to see the Newsletter become a beacon of transparent, collaborative, and globally connected ideas... which can transform science and society.

How has volunteering as an editor influenced your own career, interests, or view of the scientific community?

Volunteering with the MCAA Newsletter has been a game-changer for me. It is not just about editing articles but creating a space for Curie-ous minds to exchange ideas and stories with each other across borders.

As a researcher, I have always focused on human health and disease, recently through the lens of genomics. However, this role has broadened my understanding of how interconnected and interdisciplinary science is.

It has also deepened my commitment to open science. Editing content for a global readership that is accessible and transparent makes me think more critically about how I communicate my research, especially when it comes to making complex genomic data digestible for a wider audience.

I have been with the Editorial Board for over 18 issues, and each one has taught me something new, not just about science but about storytelling.

What's one behind-the-scenes moment or memory from working on the MCAA Newsletter?

Each of the 18 issues I contributed to holds a special place, but one that really stands out is the Special Issue that we put

together on Open Science. What began as a straightforward pitch grew into something far more impactful through unique bottom-up stories. Within days of our call for submissions, we started receiving contributions from various stakeholders, such as researchers and policymakers across continents – some from well-established institutions and others working in smaller or less-resourced environments, with each sharing personal insights into the challenges and breakthroughs they had experienced during their open science journeys. What struck me was not just the content, but the trust these contributors have placed in us. Some sent their drafts late at night, expressing joy that they finally had a platform to talk about these efforts and hoped it would resonate with the MCAA community.

That kind of honesty reminded me why we do this. It is not just about producing a polished document, but about creating space for genuine voices, personal stories, and like-minded connections. And even though the editorial team was running on too much coffee and not enough sleep at times, it felt like we were part of something meaningful, and that made the chaos feel purposeful.

If you could swap lives with any scientist, living, dead or fictional, for one day, who would it be and why?

If I could swap lives with any scientist – what an interesting question! – I would pick Krishnaswamy Vijayraghavan, former Principal Scientific Adviser to the Government of India during the COVID-19 pandemic. His research in genomics and leadership during India's efforts to sequence the COVID-19 genome really inspire me. I would love to experience first-hand what it is like to navigate large-scale science initiatives and influence national science policy, especially during such a critical time when decisions impact millions of lives. Furthermore, as the editor of the Open Science Special Issue, I also admire how he has navigated the complex intersection of open-access and research integrity.

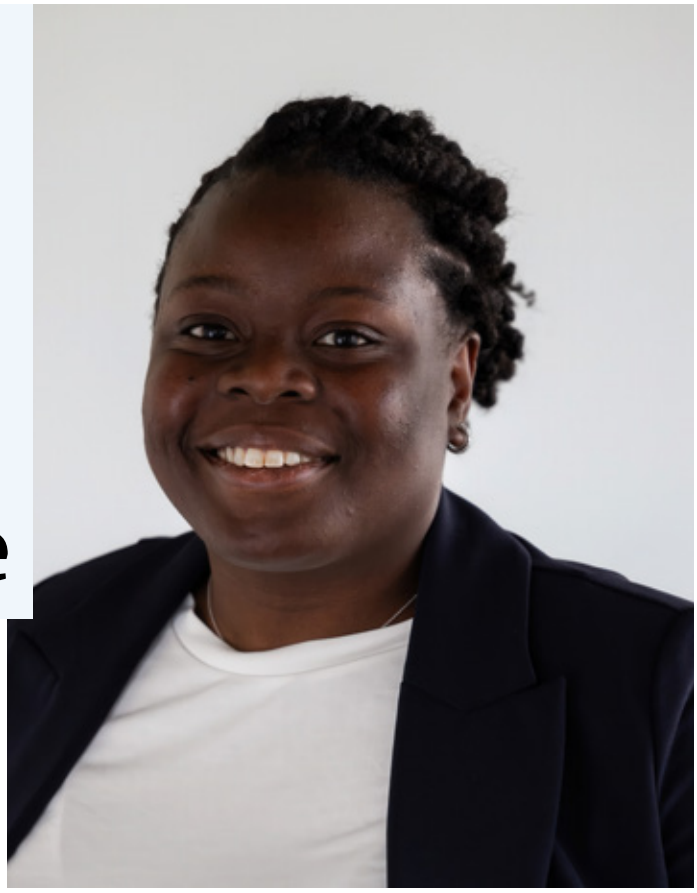
On the fictional side, I would probably swap places with Sherlock Holmes, not just for his problem-solving genius but for the sheer thrill of solving mysteries. Further, it would be amazing to have his observational powers while editing our future issues!

Image by MidJourney, prompt by Fabrizio Martina

Meet our Editors

interview

Christina Makoundou: I aim for the MCAA to be more accessible



Can you walk us through your typical day?

I am a chemist by training, researcher in materials science at the University of Antwerp, Belgium, and a three-time Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions awardee. I specialise in the conceptualisation, development, and characterisation of sustainable materials. My current research bridges chemistry, engineering, and environmental studies to develop and propose alternative materials and processes, with a focus on waste valorisation and circularity within and across sectors. I actively engage in science communication and societal outreach, and contribute to educational activities, aiming to advance research at the interface of science and society.

When I am not in the lab, I like to experiment with new things to travel – not only physically, but also culinary, exploring the richness of the world. You can also find me in places linked with sport or cultural youth events, and music. I always have earbuds close by.

As a volunteer, what initially drew you to get involved with the MCAA Newsletter, and what keeps you motivated to stay?

In general, I am quite active in the MCAA. At the time, in 2020, I actually joined the MCAA Newsletter as part of the Gender Equity Diversity and Inclusion (GEDI) Working Group. Initially, my role was to help proofread the articles to address language and visual misuses or bias regarding the GEDI topics. The goal was to ensure inclusivity in writing and avoid misunderstandings caused by offensive words or images, to make the MCAA Newsletter enjoyable for all the readers. I decided to stay because I have been enjoying the coverage of diverse subjects during these five years, which has also allowed me to learn and grow in this process.

What are your hopes or goals for the future of the Newsletter?

I like to be part of the evolution of topics, layout and possibilities for the Newsletter. I do not have a particular goal, yet I aim for the MCAA to be more accessible by the members and beyond and that more voices are represented in some conventional and special issues of the Newsletter. It is also the venue for communication about the Association's activities and horizon. It's great that it continues to maintain its quality and creativity.

How has volunteering as an editor influenced your own career, interests, or view of the scientific community?

I have been involved in the Editorial Board for five years now, and I have discovered so much during this time, the editorial process, the review, and the proofreading. This is also something that is part of the job of a scientist, and this experience in the MCAA Newsletter is very valuable for it. Also, the Newsletter offers different ways of communicating on interesting and valuable topics with a slightly different form than what we may encounter in a more academic edition. This has been a mind-opener regarding transversal yet vital questions in the academic world such as open science or career development and assessment.

What's one behind-the-scenes moment or memory from working on the MCAA Newsletter?

I believe, every year, the production of the MCAA Newsletter and IRRADIUM magazine is memorable! All these years the teamwork has definitely been expressed through the publication of the magazine and its availability during the MCAA Annual Conference. Each year it is the palpable deliverable of the weeks of work behind the scenes.

If you could swap lives with any scientist, living, dead or fictional, for one day, who would it be and why?

I am an eternal trier: I discover and investigate the unknown. I like to explore new things, and this is also evident in my daily life, my non-scientist one. Think of someone who never fully sticks to a recipe, always adding a personal touch, because successful novelty and innovation often emerge from the unexpected. Imagine any truly disruptive, bold-type scientist – that would probably be a life swap I would happily embrace!

Image by MidJourney, prompt by Fabrizio Martina

Meet our Editors

interview

Srishti Goyal: Helping to communicate complex thoughts

Can you walk us through your typical day?

I'm currently doing a very short postdoc at the Universitat de Barcelona, where I study resource requirements for a good life. Most of my day is spent working with large datasets, building environmental-economic models, and hoping my code behaves, while trying to stay hydrated in the Spanish summer. In the evenings, I catch up on Indian news to stay connected to home and, as one inevitably does, spiral into existential worry about the state of affairs there.

As a volunteer, what initially drew you to get involved with the MCAA Newsletter, and what keeps you motivated to stay?

I joined because during my PhD, there were days when thesis work felt impossible, but I still wanted something meaningful to do to keep myself sane. I stayed because I enjoyed learning about areas outside my field and helping communicate complex thoughts to a multidisciplinary readership.

What are your hopes or goals for the future of the Newsletter?

I hope the Newsletter becomes the go-to read for professional development, where researchers share both their achievements and failures so others can learn. Ideally, it would be like Nature, but focused on research careers and professional growth.

How has volunteering as an editor influenced your own career, interests, or view of the scientific community?

I've been part of the Newsletter team for a year now, and volunteering as an editor has definitely improved my ability to write clearly, which can sometimes be harder than

Image by MidJourney, prompt by Fabrizio Martina

working through research. It has broadened my understanding of science, showing me fascinating areas far beyond my own work. Just as importantly, working with such a collaborative and supportive team has made the experience even more rewarding. It is a great environment to grow while contributing to something meaningful.

What's one behind-the-scenes moment or memory from working on the MCAA Newsletter?

One moment that stands out is spending hours fixing UK English spellings and formatting inconsistencies. It reminded me how much care goes into the final polish, even if no one notices when it is done right. At times like that, while others might have dreamed of publishing breakthroughs, I dreamt of catching stray American spellings.

If you could swap lives with any scientist, living, dead or fictional, for one day, who would it be and why?

I would love to spend a day as Herman Edward Daly to experience what it was like to calmly challenge the world's obsession with economic growth while pioneering ecological economics. I imagine he must have had moments when convincing mainstream economists about limits to growth felt harder than balancing one of their general equilibrium models on a good day.

Meet our Editors

interview

Polat Goktas: The MCAA Newsletter shall be a bridge that connects ideas, people, and impact

Can you walk us through your typical day?

I am Polat Goktas, Managing Editor of the MCAA Newsletter. My days usually begin with coffee; which, let's be honest, is the unsung hero behind most scientific breakthroughs. From there, I dive into a mix of research on artificial intelligence and digital health, mentoring students, and, of course, tackling editorial tasks. My role often shifts between being an academic, a storyteller, and a professional deadline firefighter. Somewhere between meetings, reviewing drafts, and answering emails, I try to remember that eating lunch before 4 p.m. is generally recommended for a balanced lifestyle.

As a volunteer, what initially drew you to get involved with the MCAA Newsletter, and what keeps you motivated to stay?

At first, I was simply curious. How tough can editing be? I thought. Spoiler alert; tougher than expected, but also infinitely more rewarding. What keeps me motivated is the sense of impact. The Newsletter is not just a collection of articles; it's a place where fellows' voices come alive, where career journeys inspire others, and where we can make research feel human. Plus, working with such a committed team makes the process enjoyable.

What are your hopes or goals for the future of the Newsletter?

I'd love to see the Newsletter become a place where science meets storytelling. Beyond

Image by MidJourney, prompt by Fabrizio Martina

highlighting achievements, I want it to be a hub for creativity, where we can experiment with themes, bring in diverse perspectives, and even dare to sneak in unconventional formats (imagine a research meme section or a comic strip about grant applications). More seriously, my goal is for every fellow to feel represented and for readers to look forward to each issue as something engaging, accessible, and slightly unexpected.

How has volunteering as an editor influenced your own career, interests, or view of the scientific community?

After several years on the editorial team, I can say it has been transformative. It taught me that science is not just about data and results, it is about the people behind them and the stories they carry. I have learnt to communicate more clearly, to appreciate the diversity of research fields, and to value collaboration beyond disciplinary borders. It has also reinforced my view that scientists, despite their brilliance, sometimes need gentle (and repeated) nudges about deadlines. In my career, this role has added a layer of leadership and creativity I didn't expect, but now wouldn't want to lose.

What's one behind-the-scenes moment or memory from working on the MCAA Newsletter?

The June 2025 Special Issue is one I'll never forget. I was co-editor for the theme Sustainable Career Transition Pathway: Bridging Academia, Public Sector, and Industry, a topic close to my heart. Behind the scenes, it was a whirlwind: coordinating authors across time zones, polishing drafts at odd hours, and making sure the theme held together like a story rather than a collection of papers. At one point, my inbox felt like a second home. But when the issue finally came out, the feedback from readers made me happy. It reminded me that the Newsletter is not just a publication; it is a community effort where passion and persistence turn into something meaningful.

If you could swap lives with any scientist, living, dead, or fictional, for one day, who would it be and why?

The chance to time travel, fix deadlines before they even happen, and grab coffee with Leonardo da Vinci sounds irresistible.

Meet our Editors

interview

Maria Romano: Volunteering at MCAA taught me that growth comes from sharing knowledge and supporting others

Can you walk us through your typical day?

My name is Maria, a biotechnologist by training, fascinated by the hidden world of human microorganisms and infectious diseases. I am currently based in Italy, where I work as a researcher at the Institute of Biostructures and Bioimaging of the National Research Council (IBB-CNR) in Naples, a vibrant city bursting with history, music, and colours. The main goal of my research is to better understand the molecular mechanism of infection, using structural biology and molecular biology as tools to identify protein targets, study them, and develop molecules for therapeutic intervention.

As a Board member of the MCAA, a mother and a researcher, I can say that there is no typical day for me, but I love the variety and the challenge it brings. My workdays are shaped by deadlines and planning, but a big part of my time is spent conducting research and supporting young researchers and students, whether through mentoring, training and science communication activities within and beyond the MCAA. Outside of work, I enjoy music, baking experiments with my son, and family time to recharge and get inspired.

What inspired you to get involved with the MCAA Board, and what keeps you motivated?

I became an MCAA member as soon as I started my fellowship back in 2021, joining the Board of the Italy Chapter. That experience was truly inspiring, thanks to the great collaboration with Riccardo Biondi, who at the time was the Italy Chapter Chair. During those years, I realised the value of the mutual learning that volunteering offers, and

I felt ready to take a bigger step in shaping the MCAA's impact.

As a Board member and one of the contact points for communication, I oversee communication-related initiatives, working closely with our active members in the Communication Working Group and the Editorial Board, helping to shape our key communication outlets. On a more strategic level, I act as a direct contact point with our Secretariat's Communication Team, contributing to the development of our communication strategy. Working with an international, multidisciplinary team is a truly enriching experience that broadens my perspective and keeps me motivated to contribute more to our Association.

Are there any new directions that you are particularly excited about within the MCAA?

The MCAA has become a powerful platform for connection, advocacy, and visibility. It is my desire to reflect that energy and potential in our communications at every level. This can be boosted through collaborative efforts: the MSCA Fellow of the Month is one key example of collaboration between the MSCA, REA, and the MCAA. This initiative not only highlights the inspiring stories of MSCA fellows across Europe and beyond but also strengthens our community, making it more visible, connected, and vibrant.

We are continuously working to enhance our impact, thanks to the dedication of our volunteers, the Communication Team and Board members. Exciting news is on the horizon, and I am thrilled to be part of this collaborative work at this very moment. Our Association will have a new look with a brand-new website! With its features, it will provide an enhanced experience to engage with our content and members and for us to showcase our communication outlets more efficiently. It's wonderful to see our community growing, and it feels incredibly rewarding to contribute to shaping its future.

How has being part of the MCAA Board shaped your journey?

Being part of the MCAA Board really brought into my life the power of collaboration across disciplines and countries. Working remotely with an international team on diverse tasks

Image by MidJourney, prompt by Fabrizio Martina

Image by MidJourney, prompt by Fabrizio Martina

has fueled my curiosity and eagerness to learn new things. From the start, I brought my own perspective as a scientist and alumna, but the personal and professional connections with members, Board colleagues, and Secretariat have made this experience really rewarding. I'm passionate about mentoring and communication, so being involved with the MCAA Academy and the Communication Team means a lot to me; it's challenging but in a good way. Marie Curie once said: "One never notices what has been done; one can only see what remains to be done." That really resonates with me because it reminds me that challenges are part of the journey, and there's always more to achieve. This experience has given me fresh energy and motivation, broadened my interests, and reinforced my commitment to fostering an inclusive and supportive environment where researchers can thrive and make meaningful contributions to society.

If you could swap lives with any scientist, living, dead, or fictional, for one day, who would it be and why?

If I could swap lives with any scientist, I would choose Sir Alexander Fleming. I imagine walking into St. Mary's Hospital laboratory, surrounded by agar plates filled with bacteria and scattered notes, feeling the curiosity and focus that guided him every day. I would choose the moment he noticed a patch of mould surrounded by a clear halo where the bacteria had disappeared. That single observation led to the discovery of penicillin, which changed the course of medicine. I love how he described it: "One sometimes finds what one is not looking for. When I woke up just after dawn on September 28, 1928, I certainly didn't plan to revolutionise all medicine by discovering the world's first antibiotic, or bacteria killer. But I suppose that was exactly what I did".

Spending a day as Fleming would be like stepping into the mind of someone who saw possibility where others saw only chance. His words reflect humility, passion, and determination, and I would love to experience the curiosity and persistence that turn observation into discovery.

News from the MCAA

From Pakistan to Finland: A cross-cultural research journey

Hina Ishtiaq in her warm clothing during the winter season at Oulu International Airport

The shift from Pakistan to Finland offers insights into how contrasting cultures shape research, communication, and daily routines – from silence and punctuality to traditions and cuisine. This article shares personal insights how international moves can redefine professional practices and broaden perspectives.

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Since 2015, Hina has served as an educator and mentor at Sardar Bahadur Khan Women's University, Quetta, Pakistan. Her research interests span molecular genetics, neurogenetics, genome-wide association studies, genetic disorders, rare monogenic conditions, and genetic testing and analysis. She has contributed to high-impact publications and remains an active participant in national and international scientific forums.

Moving across continents for research is not just a geographic shift but an emotional, intellectual, and cultural transformation. When I left Pakistan, a land of vibrant marketplaces and warm sunshine, for Finland, I knew I was stepping into a different world. What I did not realise at the time was how this transition would reshape me both as a scholar and a person.

Arrival in Finland

I arrived in Oulu at the peak of winter. Everything was quiet. The snow blanketed the streets, the sky wore a melancholic shade of grey, and the chill found its way into places I did not know existed. Coming from the bustling cities of Pakistan, where the soundscape is alive with life, I was struck by the stillness of Finnish life. It felt like stepping into a museum of calm.

Culture shock

The silence was my first culture shock. In Pakistan, conversation is spontaneous and expressive, and even strangers might

casually strike up a chitchat. In Finland, social interaction felt wrapped in layers of personal space and quiet contemplation. I initially mistook the lack of small talk for coldness. But over time, I discovered something beautiful beneath it, a deep respect for individual boundaries and a thoughtful approach to communication. Here, when someone speaks, it's meaningful. I learnt to listen more, to appreciate pauses, and to find warmth in subtleties.

Academic transformation

As a researcher, this shift had a surprising effect on my work. The tranquil atmosphere of Finnish academia allows for uninterrupted concentration. Libraries here feel like sacred spaces where silence is not just appreciated, it's expected. My productivity improved. I found myself more reflective and deliberate in my approach to problem-solving. The Finnish system not only encourages independence but also provides support when needed.

Respect for time

Another aspect of cultural adjustment was the understanding of time. In Pakistan, time flows with flexibility. Schedules bend easily for hospitality, spontaneity, or unexpected turns. In Finland, punctuality is a virtue. Meetings start precisely on time. Deadlines are not suggestions but commitments. This rigidity felt stressful. But with time, I came to realise that respect for time fosters trust and reliability. It is a silent pact of professionalism, and I have absorbed this discipline into my practice.

Culinary transition

Food was another realm of transformation. I missed the rich spices, the aromas of biryani and karahi, the comforting warmth of tea, yet food became a bridge, a way to share my identity while opening up to theirs. Finnish cuisine, with its simplicity and reliance on seasonal ingredients, felt unfamiliar. I began introducing my colleagues to Pakistani flavours while embracing local delicacies such as rye bread, mustikkapiirakka (blueberry pie), and salmon soup.

Understanding of the world

But the most profound growth happened internally. As I navigated this new cultural landscape, I developed greater empathy. I learnt how to live in a culture very different from my own and slowly adjust to new habits, while still staying true to who I am. This experience made me a better team member, more inclusive, and more aware of diverse perspectives. It also made me a more perceptive researcher. Cultural differences are not barriers but lenses that enrich our understanding of the world.

Embracing nature

Oulu itself has grown on me. The nature here is pristine. I have learnt to love the forests, the lakes, and the magical glow of the northern lights. Seasons in Finland bring dramatic changes, but with each change, there is something to celebrate. Even the long winter nights taught me patience, introspection, and the importance of inner light.

A transformative journey

Moving from Pakistan to Finland was never just about research. It was about personal, cultural, and academic growth. It challenged my assumptions, expanded my worldview, and gave me a deeper appreciation for diversity. I learnt that culture shock is not something to fear but to embrace because every uncomfortable moment is a doorway to discovery.

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News from the MCAA

Workshop on MSCA and EM funding opportunities

MSCA funding session's panellists

A full-day workshop on Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) and Erasmus Mundus (EM) opportunities was held in Milan on 27 May 2025. The event gathered around 70 participants and provided practical guidance on securing European research and scholarship funding, while fostering collaboration between the MCAA and the Erasmus Mundus Association (EMA).

Charanraj Mohan received his Master's degree in Electronics, Signal Processing, and Communication in 2015, and his PhD in Physical Sciences and Technologies in 2021, both from the University of Seville. He has been awarded several fellowships and grants, including the IEEMA project, Erasmus Mundus–HERITAGE scholarship, Lloyd's Register Foundation doctoral studentship, the MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowship, and a grant from the EACEA. He received the distinction of Premio Extraordinario de Fin de Máster (the Spanish recognition of Honours) for his master's degree. He has served as a volunteer for the National Service Scheme, HelpAge India, EMA, and the MCAA. His research interests include circuit design using complementary metal–oxide–semiconductor (CMOS) technologies, bio-inspired device applications, and unconventional computing.

The workshop formed part of a series of activities **funded by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA)** under the Erasmus+ Students and Alumni Alliance (ESAA) Work Package (WP) 3.2.1 programme, aimed at promoting EU opportunities for higher education and research. Co-organised by **EMA** and the **MCAA India Chapter**, the event also sought to strengthen collaboration between the two alumni networks.

Advancing careers with MSCA and EM

The workshop was held at Rogers Hall, Politecnico di Milano. It was designed as a two-part event: the morning focused on MSCA funding, while the afternoon centred on EM scholarships. Speakers and panellists included a Project Adviser from the European Research Executive Agency (REA), as well as

academicians, researchers, EM coordinators, intellectual property experts, MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowship (PF) grantees, EM scholars, and volunteers from both the MCAA and EMA. The workshop attracted about 70 participants from Milan and surrounding areas, who benefited from first-hand advice on application strategies, proposal preparation, and career development.

MSCA funding session

The morning session, moderated by **Sivagurunathan Ulaganathan** from Nord University and the MCAA India Chapter, started with the keynote presentation of **Chiara Bellani** from REA, who highlighted various MSCA funding schemes and opportunities. This was followed by the presentation of **Sivagurunathan Ulaganathan** from Nord University, a two-time MSCA grantee. He provided a detailed blueprint on how to prepare a successful MSCA fellowship proposal, including what to include and common mistakes to avoid.

A panel discussion on the path after MSCA funding followed, which was made interesting and motivational by the multidisciplinary panellists: the previously mentioned **Chiara Bellani** and **Sivagurunathan Ulaganathan**, **Valentina Goglio** from the University of Turin, **Nidia Maldonado Carmona** from Università degli Studi di Firenze, **Esmeralda Colombo** from the RFF-CMCC European Institute on Economics and the Environment, and **Luca Stendardo** from the Institute of Condensed Matter Chemistry and Technologies for Energy (CNR-ICMATE). The diverse perspectives of the experts, from the industry, academia, research, and IP, enriched the debate on opportunities and challenges after MSCA funding.

Erasmus Mundus scholarship session

The afternoon session, moderated by **Charanraj Mohan** from the Politecnico di Milano and EMA HERITAGE (Erasmus Mundus Partnership India Europe), started with the keynote presentation by **Gianluca Valenti** from the Politecnico di Milano, who introduced the Hydrogen Systems and Enabling Technologies (HySET) programme. This was followed by the presentation by **Maria Jose Domingues Vazquez** from Universidad de Santiago de Compostela and **Luke Akinremi**, who introduced the European Master in Lexicography (EMLex) EM programme. Their presentations offered insights into the consortium, master programme structures, enrolment, career prospects, and international mobility.

EM funding session's panellists

A participant raising query during a session

Ena Peeva from the ISLANDS EM programme provided insights and guidance on applying for and securing the EM scholarship. **Charanraj Mohan** concluded the afternoon session with an overview of the EMA activities.

The session ended with a panel discussion titled "Erasmus Mundus – a vibrant & multi-cultural experience" with the previously mentioned **Gianluca Valenti**, **Maria Jose Domingues Vazquez**, **Luke Akinremi**, and **Ena Peeva**, together with **Yaneris Velasquez** from the Master in Membrane Engineering for Sustainable Development (MESD) EM programme, **Jordan Hammond** from Humanitas University and European Public Health Master (Europubhealth+) EM programme, and the moderator **Charanraj Mohan**. Several interesting and thoughtful topics on the cultural experience during an Erasmus stay, immigration and student visa renewal delays, job prospects, and validation of degree and diploma certificates after EM studies were discussed in detail.

Key takeaways

The workshop enhanced awareness of EU funding opportunities, especially the MSCA PF and Erasmus Mundus Master programmes. Attendees gained valuable insights into application requirements, proposal document and CV preparation, and interview performance for securing funding.

The session dedicated to preparing a proposal for the MSCA PF pulled many attendees' attention. The presentation of the HySET and EMLex EM programmes also gathered wide attention. The panel discussions allowed participants to raise questions on many topics, including career options after a master's, PhD, and postdoctoral research, degree and diploma accreditation in the home country, immigration challenges of students, and internship opportunities. Overall, the workshop delivered significant benefits to the participants and strengthened collaboration between EMA and the MCAA.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the EACEA for the grant under ESAA WP3.2.1. Heartfelt thanks to the operational units of EMA and the MCAA India Chapter. Special thanks to the volunteers of the EMOTION EM programme: Fayola Fedoria, Md Muhibur, Seemal Habib, and Virginia Clarence for assisting and volunteering in all activities during the one-day workshop.

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News from the MCAA

From thatched classrooms to sustainable chemistry labs: Turning methane into clean chemicals

Manila Ozhukil Valappil is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Postdoctoral Researcher at ICN2, Spain, developing electrochemical approaches to convert methane into fuels and chemicals. Her research spans sustainable electrochemical energy conversion and storage, as well as 2D materials. She holds a PhD in Chemistry from CSIR-Central Electrochemical Research Institute, India, and is a recipient of the Newton Bhabha Fellowship (British Council). She has carried out postdoctoral research in Canada and has authored over 20 peer-reviewed publications. Manila is a member of the Royal Society of Chemistry, an IUPAC affiliate, an RSC MentorLoop mentor, and actively contributes as a journal reviewer and science communicator.

From a village school in India to shaping sustainable chemistry in Europe, this Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow's journey shows how resilience, curiosity, and a passion for sustainability can open doors and redefine who belongs in science.

I never imagined that science would take me this far, not just across borders but through transformative ideas that reshaped how I see myself, both in science and in the world. My classrooms were thatched huts in a rural Indian village. We saw lab coats, glassware, and coloured solutions only in textbooks. Fast forward to today, I am doing research in a European laboratory as a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) Postdoctoral Fellow,

based at ICN2 Barcelona, investigating how to valorise methane, a potent greenhouse gas, into clean fuels and chemicals. This journey is not just about tricking molecules, but also about my way of finding meaning in science.

Turning methane into opportunity

Methane is often treated as a harmful greenhouse gas, either burned off or overlooked when produced as a by-product of biogenic processes, despite being roughly 28 times more potent in driving global warming than carbon dioxide. While we worry about fossil fuel emissions, the carbon footprint of commodity chemicals such as paints, plastics, and pharmaceuticals often goes unexamined.

My MSCA project is therefore about considering methane not as a problem, but as a resource that can be repurposed to produce these useful chemicals otherwise made through energy-intensive, high-carbon footprint processes. Leveraging electrochemistry and renewable energy, I am developing mild, energy-efficient pathways to convert this hard-to-break molecule into methanol, to decarbonise its industrial production. It's not just a scientific question to solve, but an opportunity to build more sustainable chemistries for the future.

Roots and research journey

Rewinding a little to where it all started, I come from a caste-oppressed background and an under-resourced public education system. Access to science was limited and rarely personalised. My parents worked hard, feeding cattle and doing manual labour. They didn't know that careers in scientific research even existed or were within reach. Regardless, they trusted the value of education and did everything they could to provide it. As I didn't have the luxury of having anyone to guide me, I simply followed what was most affordable, doing what everyone else around me was doing, unaware of other possibilities within reach. It was during my master's that I realised I enjoyed doing electrochemistry, a turning point that clarified my research direction. From there, things started to shift. I secured a PhD position at CSIR-Electrochemical Research Institute, India.

Since then, my research journey has taken me across continents, from a PhD in India to the UK for an exchange, and then five postdoctoral years in Canada working on sustainable chemistries, before landing in Spain for the MSCA fellowship. Each move brought new mentors, collaborators, lab cultures, and perspectives, all connected by

Left: The village school, AUPS Malamakkavu, State of Kerala, India, where my journey started. Roofs have changed, but the roots remain. Right: Quiet village landscape, just a short walk from home, with farmers working in paddy fields.

Photo by Manila Ozhukil Valappil

Speaking to a non-specialist audience at an interdisciplinary conference on sustainable transportation in Granada, Spain, on how electrochemical methane conversion fits into the broader picture of sustainability

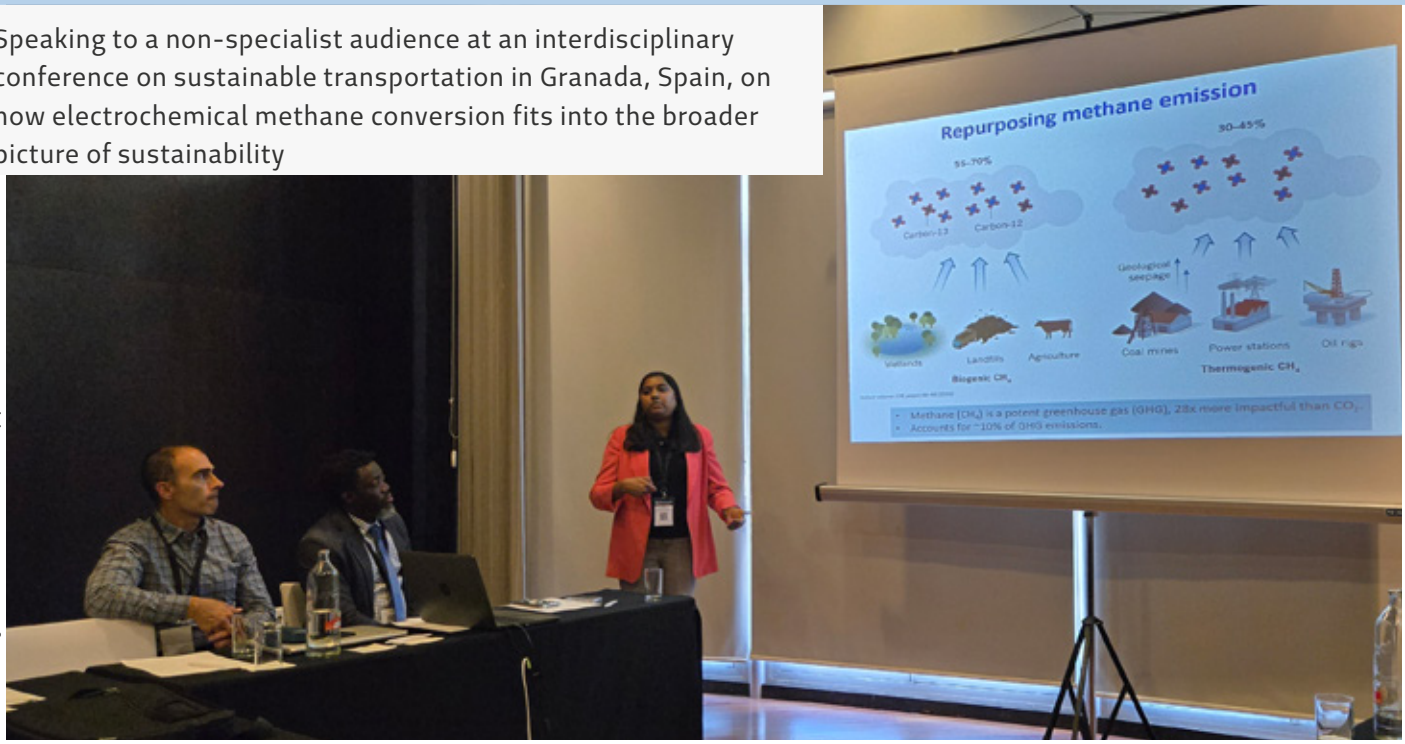

Photo by Manila Ozhukil Valappil

one goal: to build a better world. Along the way, I realised that what is often lauded as merit in science is often shaped by unseen advantages, whether it be access to quality schools, mentors, computers and the internet, language skills, or academic networks. These gaps don't just disappear, meaning that people like me discover and enter research much later. That delay makes it difficult to build confidence and forces many of us to learn foundational aspects later, often while already navigating a demanding environment. For some, entering science is a natural progression. For others like me, it begins with finding a way in and picking up fast to stay on track. These realisations didn't let me down, though. They defined my purpose. The values I grew up with shaped my deeper perspective on why inclusion, teaching, and training others are important, whether offering constructive feedback on a thesis, providing assistance in the lab, or simply listening when someone is struggling with personal challenges.

Beyond the lab

I have found joy in more than just experiments. Mentoring students, reviewing scientific papers, and guiding junior researchers feels as meaningful as research itself. I give talks at interdisciplinary conferences and return to colleges and schools in my hometown, especially places that remind me of where it started. Today, other women in my family are also pursuing science, once unimaginable. Many people in my village have now heard about the MSCA grant for the first time. It has sparked curiosity and a sense of pride in their little world that once seemed distant and unreachable. This MSCA fellowship has therefore been more than just a research grant. It has served as a foundation for growth, reflection, and action. Through my research, I aim to help develop cleaner technologies for a sustainable future. Through my space, I also hope to defy narrow ideas of who belongs in science. That, I believe, might be the most meaningful outcome of all.

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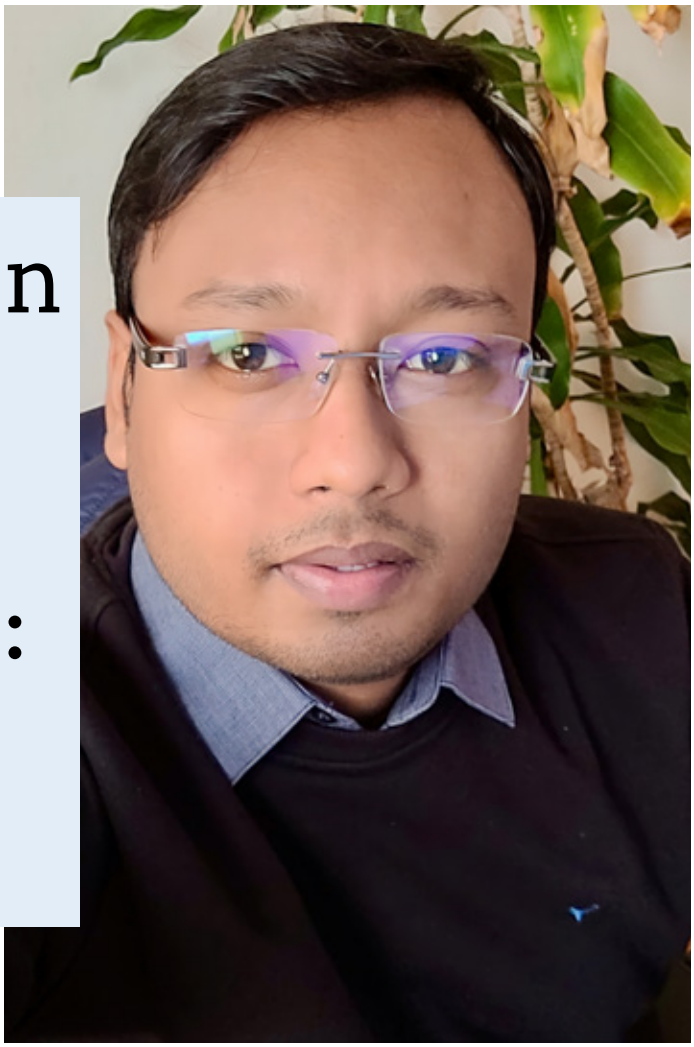
News from the MCAA

Next-Generation tools for water quality testing and monitoring: When science meets society



Billions of people worldwide still lack access to safe drinking water, with contamination often going undetected until it's too late. Emerging optical and chemical sensing technologies now enable rapid, on-site detection of pollutants, cutting testing times from days to minutes. These next-generation tools bridge science and society, offering practical solutions for global water security.

Swayam Prakash is a physical/analytical chemist developing innovative optical sensors and spectroscopy-based methods for rapid and on-site water quality testing, supporting sustainability goals through applied research and international collaboration. He is currently working as an MSCA Postdoc Fellow at BAM Germany.

Research journey

Clean water is not a luxury; it's a human right. As per the WHO report, over two billion people globally lack access to safely managed drinking water. The causes are many, like industrial effluents, agricultural runoff, untreated human waste, and ageing infrastructure. These problems are often invisible until it is too late or until outbreaks of serious diseases or irreversible health impacts emerge. That is where science can step in, not just with discoveries and innovation, but with practical ground-level solutions.

As an MSCA postdoctoral researcher, I explore optical and chemical sensing technologies for testing and monitoring water quality. I am particularly interested in water contaminants

that are difficult to detect through conventional methods. Traditional bacterial detection using E. coli takes 18–24 hours with a dedicated, established lab and expert to analyse the results.

One of my key solutions to this problem is developing a 3D-printed fluorometric device that connects to a smartphone and enables rapid, on-site water quality testing for pollutants such as faecal contaminants. This tool could be used as a primary screening, especially in low-resource settings. The detection of this analytical method's sensitivity is based on fluorescence properties of biomarkers, i.e. urobilin, and with this optical sensor, nano to sub-nanomolar concentrations can be easily detected within minutes.

More than just science

Fieldwork, cross-disciplinary collaboration, and conversations with local stakeholders have changed how I see my scientific role. More than just producing data, I see it as part of a broader mission: supporting sustainable development technologies and contributing to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 on clean water and sanitation. These experiences have reshaped my understanding of what it means to be a scientist in today's world. It's not only about lab experiments or publications. It's also

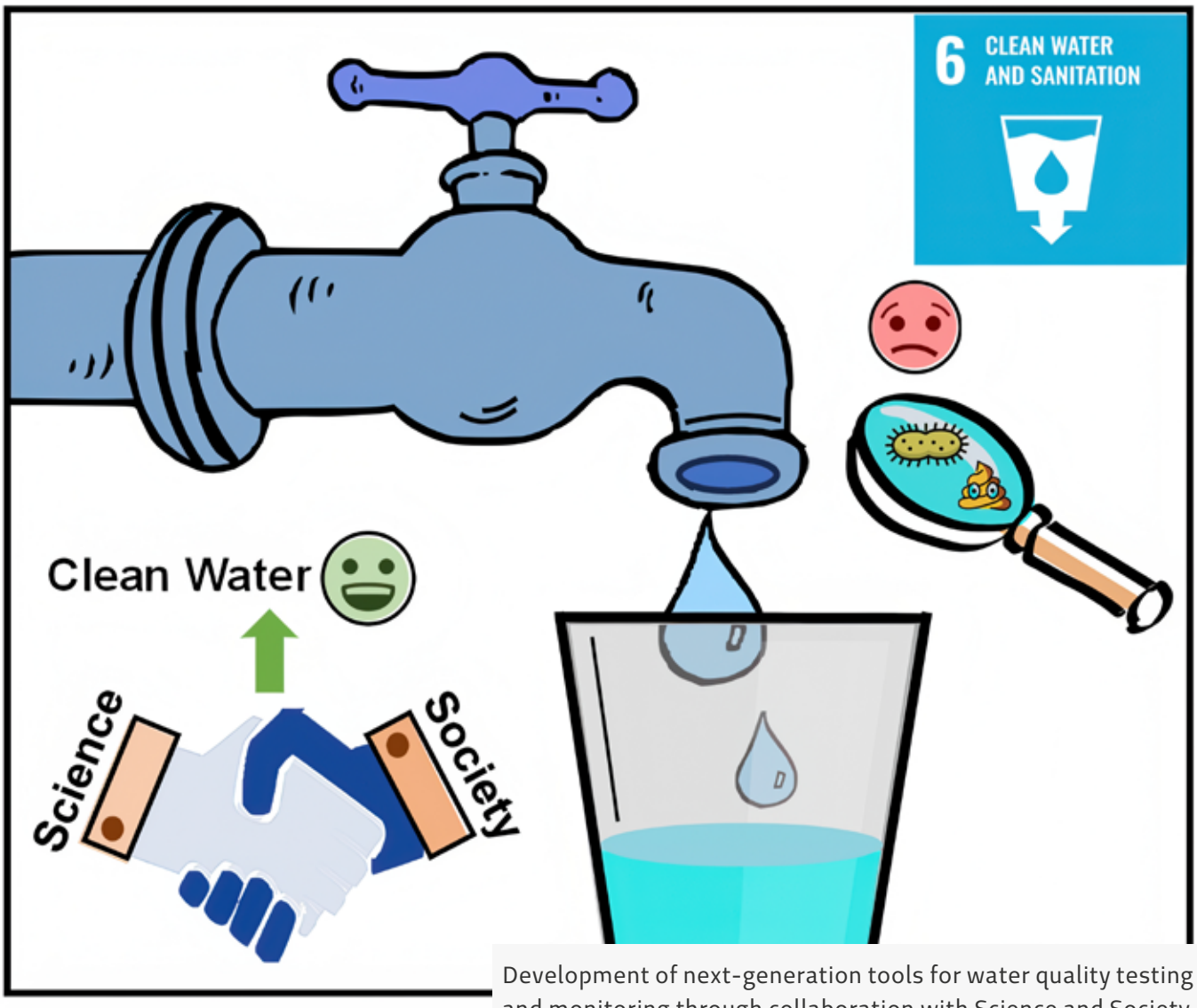


Image by Swayam Prakash.

Development of next-generation tools for water quality testing and monitoring through collaboration with Science and Society.

about translating research into tools, co-creating knowledge with communities, and making science accessible, understandable, and useful. That's the spirit of MSCA mobility that crosses borders not just physically but intellectually and socially.

Working across disciplines from physical chemistry, analytical chemistry, environmental chemistry and sensor engineering to public health and sustainability has been one of the most enriching aspects of my MSCA journey. It has helped me to design solutions that are not just technically robust, but also socially relevant. Of course, these research experiences have not just shaped my research, but they have also shaped my career path. I have grown more committed to interdisciplinary research and open science. In the end, as scientists, we have knowledge, vision and the responsibility to solve real-time problems.

Career development advice

As Marie Curie fellows, we are equipped with the tools to explore, lead, and innovate. Still, the question of "**What's next?**" often lingers. Here are a few lessons and reflections from my journey that may resonate with fellow researchers.

1. Your skills are broader than you think. From data analysis and experimental design to scientific writing, project management, and collaboration, research equips us with versatile transferable skills. Recognise them, whether you pursue academia, industry, policy, or entrepreneurship; these capabilities provide a strong foundation.

2. Stay curious but stay open. Don't limit yourself to one path. Many opportunities arise outside your original plan. I began in fundamental physical chemistry but found passion in translational water research, developing real-world sensors, working with industry, and contributing to the SDGs.

3. Communication matters. Learn to tell your story. Write, speak, and present in ways that resonate beyond academic circles. My involvement in science communication through the MCAA Newsletter, international essay competitions, participation in international conferences and public writing, among others, opened doors and built networks I never expected.

4. Think about impact, not just output. A career is not just a list of publications or grants. What problem are you solving? Who benefits from your work? What legacy do you want to leave?

The MSCA fellowship is not just a title but a launchpad. Use it to build a career that is not only successful on paper, but also fulfilling in purpose. Whether you are finishing your fellowship or years into your career, keep learning, adapting, and most importantly, connecting science with society.

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News from the MCAA

Marie Curie changes Lives. Mine included

Research journey

As a legal scholar from Ukraine, my MSCA4Ukraine fellowship was about more than just academic support: It offered me and my 4-year-old son protection, continuity and the opportunity to establish something long-lasting. I have led an interdisciplinary project at the SAGE Laboratory at the University of Strasbourg, focusing on the execution of European Court of Human Rights judgements at a local level, by local and regional authorities. The intersection of human rights and local self-government is not just an academic topic – it concerns real people, the quality of our everyday life and real challenges to make it better.

I started my fellowship in mid-2023, so I can answer the question: "What does it mean when a research grant becomes a matter of life or death?"

MSCA4Ukraine saved me and kept me connected

Although now I live and work in France, I still feel connected to Ukraine and my university in Odessa. Our university buildings were damaged by missile fragments twice. Without the MSCA4Ukraine grant, I would not be able to continue my research, publish papers, teach students or support my colleagues. During

Natalia Mishyna is a legal scholar and governance expert based in France, currently a researcher at the SAGE Laboratory, University of Strasbourg, and a former MSCA4Ukraine Fellow (2023–2025). With over 25 years of experience in comparative constitutional law, human rights – particularly social rights – and municipal governance, she works at the intersection of law, policy, and sustainable development. Natalia advises the Council of Europe on local democracy and social policy reforms and has extensive experience in EU-funded projects. Her current research explores the changing role of local authorities in advancing social rights, implementing the SDGs, and acting as emerging subjects in international law.

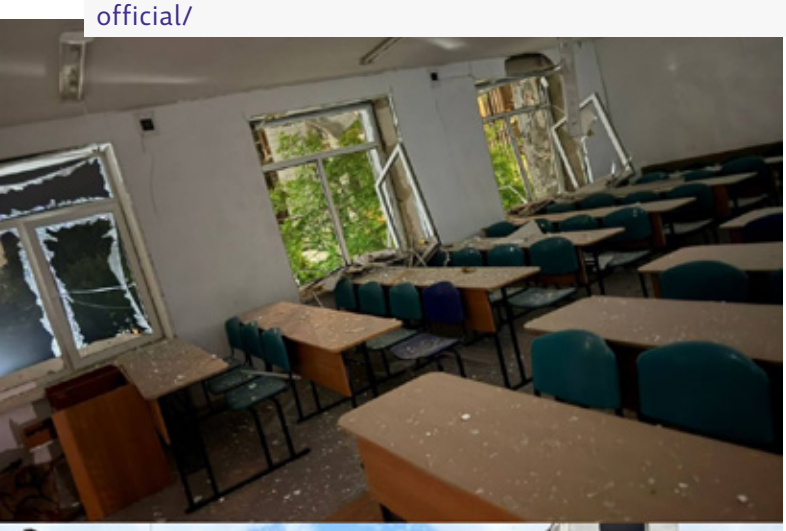
the blackouts in Ukraine, I was able to deliver online classes to displaced students and assist Ukrainian colleagues in maintaining their study programmes. Thanks to the stability that the fellowship provided, I was able to publish several peer-reviewed articles in open-access journals, participate in Council of Europe activities and develop training materials on human rights and local democracy.

This fellowship is not just about academic results; it's also about people. It enabled me to be part of the European academic and legal community while continuing to contribute to Ukraine. It has given my mobility a purpose and enabled me to grow professionally and personally – yes, one of the most distinctive features of the MSCA programme is its combination of research and professional development. From the very start, the MSCA4Ukraine team has provided valuable advice and resources. I carefully considered the recommendations about what fellows can and should do beyond research, and I can honestly say that they are all well thought out and helpful.

For example, initially, I wasn't sure whether to spend time and money on French language courses. I thought: "This war will end soon, and I will finish my project and go home." However, I decided to follow the advice and attend French classes twice a week. Later, when I was invited to the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, I was happy about my decision, as the meetings were in French and I understood practically everything. That was the first time I really saw how important learning French was.

I would like to thank everyone involved in the MSCA4Ukraine programme, the European Commission and all EU citizens. Thanks to you, I have been able to stay safe, develop my knowledge and skills, and continue helping others as both a researcher and a legal expert.

Odessa, Ukraine, spring 2025. Image from the official Instagram account of the National University Odessa Academy of Law, https://www.instagram.com/nuoua_official/



What I would like to say to future fellows:

- Don't ignore the professional development element – it's extremely useful and everything included has a purpose.
- Open Science and public communication, including on professional social media, are important because they make your work useful to more people.
- Use this time to build bridges between countries, universities, colleagues, and ideas. This is a special opportunity for you. Thanks to the MSCA programme, you have many resources to make society a better place!

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News from the MCAA

Shaping public health through co-creation

Public health research impact goes beyond data: it warrants engaging diverse stakeholders. My doctoral work explores how co-creation can empower communities to shape research that affects them. Across Europe, I have seen participatory approaches bridge theory and practice, producing more inclusive solutions. This piece shares reflections on public health co-creation, along with practical guidance for putting it into practice.

Co-creation refers to a collaborative process in which all relevant stakeholders – such as community members, service users, professionals and researchers – actively define the problem, design solutions, implement interventions and evaluate outcomes together, with mutual learning and innovation at its core (Messiha et al., 2023).

Traditional research often positions the researcher as an expert, with limited engagement from the individuals or communities most affected by the work. This top-down approach risks producing insights with limited real-world application. Co-creation challenges this model by engaging stakeholders more actively throughout the research process.

This participatory approach not only improves the relevance of findings but also enhances the quality and ethical rigour of research. By engaging stakeholders in the design, implementation and evaluation phases, co-creation can be argued to facilitate more responsive and equitable public health interventions.

A personal journey

Research, when conducted with genuine intent, transcends academic exercise – it becomes a vehicle for insight, relevance and change. Through my academic journey and doctoral

Katrina Messiha is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions PhD Fellow in the European Commission's Health CASCADE project. Her doctoral research is focused on developing core theory-based principles that can address health inequalities and complex, wicked public health challenges through interdisciplinary research and policy development. Katrina has recently served as a visiting academic and policy researcher at EuroHealthNet as well as a visiting researcher at the University of Cambridge.

research at Amsterdam UMC, I have come to view co-creation as an important approach to public health research. Co-creation seeks to bridge theory and practice, promoting inclusive and participatory research that centres on the lived experiences of those it seeks to serve (Messiha et al., 2024; Messiha et al., 2025a,b; Delfmann et al., 2025).

From social sciences to public health

My academic foundation in Population and Geography (BSc, University of Southampton, 2018) and Social Policy and Social Research (MSc, UCL, 2020) sparked a research interest in addressing social inequalities through evidence-informed policy. These experiences shaped a commitment to understanding how health research can better engage with communities - especially those often marginalised in conventional research paradigms.

Tips for initiating co-creation in public health

Drawing on both academic study and practical experience, I suggest the following entry points for researchers and practitioners interested in applying co-creation:

Katrina Messiha in Action at a European Conference about Co-creation in Brussels.

- Engage stakeholders from the research-design stage: not just as subjects, but as co-designers.
- Invest time in relationship-building. Transparency and shared expectations are crucial.
- Use reflexive and critical frameworks to understand and address imbalances in power dynamics among stakeholders.
- Ground your co-creation process in theoretical frameworks such as critical realism and empowerment theory to guide analysis, inform methods and ethical considerations.
- Co-creation is iterative; adapt your approach based on stakeholder input and contextual shifts.

Doctoral research: Advancing co-creation

My doctoral work endeavours to contribute to the systematic application of co-creation within public health research. Key goals include:

- Exploring theoretical and methodological underpinnings of co-creation in public health.
- Applying critical realism to understand the structural and causal mechanisms influencing health inequalities.
- Investigating how the critical social theory of empowerment can support youth participation in research.
- Conducting multisource analyses of stakeholder roles in youth-engaged public health interventions, including the development of a comprehensive co-creation roles framework and systematic review.
- Establishing the theory-based principles for co-creation in public health via consensus exercises.

This work is part of the Health CASCADE project, which aims to build capacity for co-creation by developing a robust framework, evidence base and training materials for researchers across Europe.

Practical insights from secondments

Through academic secondments, I have examined co-creation across varied settings:

- EuroHealthNet (Brussels): Co-developed a policy précis on citizen participation, focusing on inclusive engagement in health policy. University of Cambridge (England): Supported the development of a co-designed digital platform addressing dementia care in underserved communities (Messiha et al., 2025b).
- Stichting Alexander (Amsterdam): Explored empowerment within youth participatory research, analysing how co-creation can elicit youth's agency and voice.
- Glasgow Caledonian University (Scotland): Shadowed Obesity Action Scotland's national co-creation campaign, including its role in enhancing public health outcomes.

Each experience reinforced the importance of adaptability, contextual awareness and critical reflection when operationalising co-creation.

Looking ahead

As public health challenges grow in complexity, co-creation can offer a responsive approach to research: one that values diverse forms of knowledge and shared ownership of outcomes. By exploring a more systematic and well-considered theoretical, ethical and methodological foundation for co-creation, I aim to support researchers and practitioners in embedding related principles more widely. My ongoing work as part of Health CASCADE is a small part of a broader movement seeking to make public health research not only more effective but also more equitable.

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News from the MCAA

Patriarchy, culture, and law: The persistence of gender-based violence

As part of my Marie Curie Postdoctoral Fellowship, my research focused on the challenges faced by Kurdish women in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), and more broadly the Middle East, particularly forced marriages, female genital mutilation (FGM), and honour killings, so called patriarchal trifecta. This article builds on those findings to explore how these practices persist not only in the KRI but also globally, shedding light on the ongoing struggle for gender equality.

Gender-based violence is a widespread issue, manifesting in harmful forms. In the KRI, these practices severely limit women's autonomy and perpetuate a cycle of violence. While particularly prevalent in the KRI, these practices are not confined to that region; they persist across South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and parts of the Middle East. Recent legal changes in Iraq, lowering the legal marriage age for both girls and boys, further entrench child marriage and reduce protections for women and girls. These shifts reflect broader systemic issues, where women continue to experience violence within both family and societal structures.

Shilan Fuad Hussain is a researcher and analyst dedicated to advancing gender equality and advocating for women's rights. She serves as an Associate Editor for Brill and Routledge and as a Senior Consultant on gender-related societal issues. She is also an academic expert for the Institute of Domestic Violence, Religion & Migration (UK) and The Integrity Centre.
Shilan works on various topics, including cultural representation, gender-based violence, women's human rights and empowerment, state policies for gender equality, female genital mutilation, sexuality, arranged/forced marriages, the social impacts of masculinity, and multi-identity in the diaspora. Her current work sits at the intersection of sociology and cultural analysis and its symbiotic relevance to modern society.

Research conducted between 2022 and 2024 highlights regional differences in the prevalence of these practices. Urban centres report fewer cases of forced marriage and FGM, while rural areas, shaped by religious conservatism and limited education, remain hotspots for gender-based violence. These disparities underscore the need for policies tailored to local contexts. The fight for gender equality in the KRI is deeply connected to broader movements for national and human liberation, as captured in the Kurdish slogan "Jin, Jiyan, Azadî" (Woman, Life, Freedom). Understanding how tradition, religion, and social and political structures intersect is crucial for developing solutions to gender-based violence. Tackling these issues is key to achieving lasting progress for women – not just in the KRI, but globally.

Gender-based violence in Iraq: the patriarchal trifecta

In the KRI, gender-based violence is entrenched within a patriarchal trifecta: forced marriage, (FGM), and so-called honour killings. These interconnected practices constrain women's autonomy, reinforce patriarchal dominance, and sustain generational cycles of harm. While particularly acute in the KRI, this trifecta reflects a broader global architecture of gendered oppression.

Poster Presentation at the MCAA Annual Conference in Kraków, 2025

Each element – whether forced marriage, FGM, or honour killing – feeds into and fortifies the others. Women coerced into marriage are often denied education and financial independence, rendering them more susceptible to abuse. FGM frequently precedes early marriage, compounding disempowerment. Honour killings then emerge as the brutal culmination of these compounded vulnerabilities. This is not merely a sequence but a structure – one designed to maintain control over women's bodies and choices.

A global affliction

Although especially prevalent in the KRI, these practices echo across the globe. In Pakistan, hundreds of women are slain each year in the name of honour. In Somalia, despite legal prohibitions, more than 90% of women aged 15 to 49 have undergone FGM. In Iraq and other Middle Eastern contexts, patriarchal legal systems and social taboos obstruct women from reporting abuse or escaping coercive marriages. Thus, the KRI's challenges must be situated within a global continuum of gender inequality – a system in which women's bodies become battlegrounds for cultural, religious, and political control.

Legal regressions and systemic setbacks

Recent legislative amendments in Iraq have further endangered women and girls. By permitting girls as young as nine to be married and reducing the legal marriage age for boys, these reforms dismantle hard-won protections against child marriage. They also erode women's rights to divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Legal advocacy groups in the KRI have decried these measures as direct violations of international treaties, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These amendments also shift family law into the domain of religious authorities, bypassing democratic mechanisms and public scrutiny

– signalling not only a retreat in gender rights but also in democratic governance itself.

Geographies of patriarchy: regional disparities

My field research conducted between 2022 and 2025 reveals marked disparities in the prevalence of forced marriage, FGM, and honour killings across the KRI. Urban centres such as Hewlêr (Erbil) and Silêmanî (Sulaymaniyah) report lower incidences compared to rural regions, where traditional religious views and educational limitations perpetuate violence. Religious conservatism exerts a strong influence in these areas, and families adhering to stricter interpretations are more likely to condone such practices. The intersecting variables of education and economic status are critical: women without access to either are most at risk.

Tradition as justification – and the struggle against it

Cultural narratives often cloak these harmful practices in the language of tradition. Some defenders claim that forced marriage and FGM are intrinsic to Kurdish heritage. Yet such assertions confuse patriarchy with Kurdish identity. The Kurdish people have long endured cultural erasure; to conflate oppression with authenticity is to weaponise culture against the very women who sustain it. This framing risks portraying women's liberation as a betrayal rather than a continuation of Kurdish resistance. Practices like FGM are driven by anxieties over female autonomy. The fear is not simply of the body, but of a woman who owns it – of a life lived outside the bounds of male control.

Complicity, resistance, and the quiet revolution

While systemic, this violence is not unchallenged. Many women resist – quietly but powerfully. They teach their daughters, they refuse unwanted marriages, they whisper their truths to trusted aid workers. These acts, though small and often hidden, chip away at the monolith. Yet some women also enforce these norms, not out of conviction but survival. In a world where disobedience invites social exile or violence, complicity can be a form of endurance. Men, too, often express conditional opposition: they denounce honour killings in the abstract, yet falter when the imagined victim is a sister or daughter. Honour, in this calculus, is inseparable from male ego and familial pride.

Toward liberation: law, culture, and the horizon of freedom

Despite efforts by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to enact reforms, gender-based violence remains pervasive. Legislative changes, though necessary, are insufficient in isolation. True transformation demands cultural and structural upheaval. International NGOs and legal advocates have laid important groundwork, but enduring change must rise from within the KRI – from communities willing to confront and undo the forces that bind them.

Women must be empowered through education, economic autonomy, and legal protection. Their struggle is not a marginal one; it is central to any vision of national and human liberation. For without the right to live – Jiyan – and to be free – Azadî – women remain prisoners in their own homeland. Only by dismantling the architecture of patriarchy can a future be imagined in which every woman commands the full dignity of her life and body.

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News from the MCAA

At marine stations, researchers study diverse marine organisms, uncovering adaptations that could unlock new insights into human health.

Photo by Centro de Ciências do Mar (CCMAR)

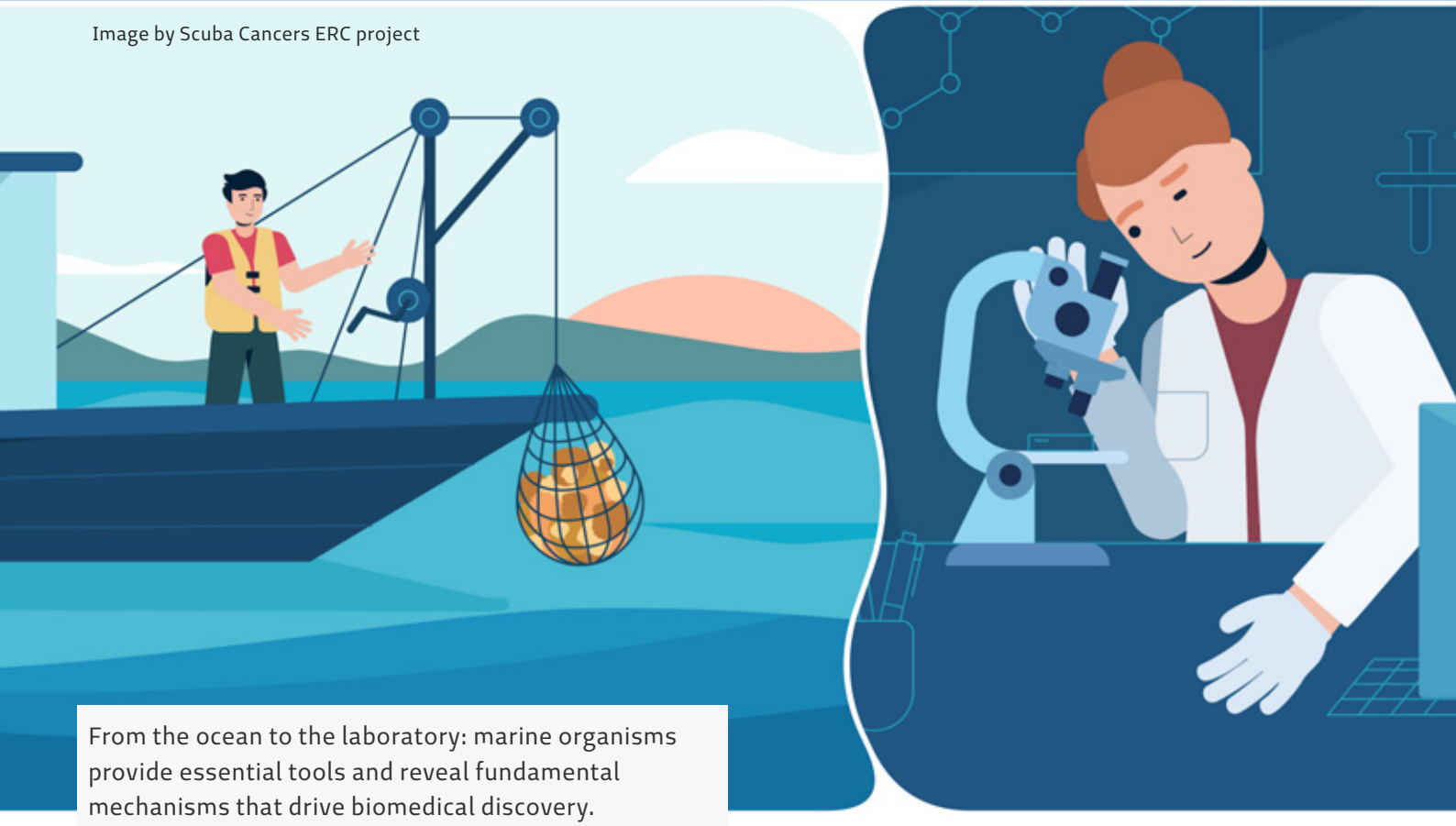
How marine life is shaping the future of medicine

The ocean has long been humanity's hidden laboratory. From starfish that revealed the secrets of immunity to jellyfish that gave us glowing proteins, marine life has powered over a dozen Nobel Prizes and countless medical breakthroughs. This article dives into how sea creatures, sponges, snails, squids, and more are shaping the future of medicine in extraordinary ways.

When most people think about the ocean, they imagine sandy beaches, ships sailing, or penguins taking a dip in the Southern Ocean. Far fewer realise that marine organisms have been at the heart of some of the greatest medical breakthroughs of the past century. From Nobel Prize-winning discoveries to cutting-edge molecular tools, the ocean has quietly been shaping the future of medicine. Over thirteen Nobel Prizes in Physiology

Alicia L. Bruzos is a molecular biologist specialising in evolutionary biology and cancer genomics. She obtained her PhD in Molecular Medicine at the University of Santiago de Compostela (Spain), where she investigated the evolution of bivalve transmissible cancers. Then, she pursued two postdoctoral positions: one in the United Kingdom on precision medicine, and another in France funded by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, focusing on marine bivalves. In September 2025, she joined the Max Planck Institute for Marine Microbiology in Bremen (Germany) as a junior group leader with a Minerva Fast Track Fellowship. Her research combines evolutionary biology, genomics, and marine sciences to uncover the mechanisms driving cancer emergence and propagation. She is also dedicated to science communication, particularly on the biomedical potential of marine life.

Image by Scuba Cancers ERC project



From the ocean to the laboratory: marine organisms provide essential tools and reveal fundamental mechanisms that drive biomedical discovery.

or Chemistry have stemmed from research on aquatic organisms. In 1882, studies on starfish larvae led to the discovery of phagocytosis, the process by which specific cells engulf bacteria or other particles for defence. This finding laid the groundwork for modern immunology.

From anaphylaxis to GFP

In the early 20th century, research on cnidarians led to another Nobel Prize-winning discovery. During an expedition, scientists studied the painful stings caused by the Portuguese man o' war. They found that repeated exposure to small doses of venom made animals more sensitive instead of immune, a reaction they called anaphylaxis. This finding laid the foundations of modern allergy research. Half a century later, a Nobel Prize was awarded for the discovery of green fluorescent protein (GFP), originally extracted from a jellyfish. GFP revolutionised biomedical science by allowing researchers to visualise processes that were previously invisible, such as the spread of cancer cells or the development of Alzheimer's disease.

Key to biomedicine lays in ocean

Another example comes from squid: their giant axons enabled scientists to understand how electrical impulses are transmitted in neurons, fundamentally shaping neuroscience. Sea urchin eggs, meanwhile, provided key insights into the cell cycle, helping to unravel how cells divide, a discovery that continues to guide cancer research today. Beyond Nobel Prize discoveries, many other studies on marine organisms have revolutionised our understanding of biomedicine. The gulf toadfish, for instance, has been a model for studying urea excretion, clarifying how animals regulate toxic nitrogen waste. Similarly, the European green crab provided insights into sodium transport systems, which are analogous to those found in the human kidney. Studies on the American eel revealed how kidneys adapt to dramatic changes

in salinity as the fish migrates between freshwater and seawater, offering parallels to human kidney function under stress.

Cool survival strategies

In the icy waters of the Antarctic, polar icefish produce antifreeze proteins that prevent their blood from freezing. These molecules have inspired advances in cryopreservation, a technique to store cells and embryos at extremely low temperatures without damage. In surgery, adhesives inspired by proteins secreted by mussels to attach to rocks are now being used as medical glues.

Marine microbes have also been a goldmine for biomedical science. A luminous bacterium was central to the discovery of quorum sensing, the process by which bacteria communicate and coordinate behaviour depending on their population density. This opened new avenues for developing strategies to disrupt harmful bacterial communication. An archaeon thriving in deep-sea hydrothermal vents yielded the highly accurate Vent DNA polymerase, used for DNA amplification in genomic research, including the Human Genome Project.

Immunity, treatment and painkillers

Even lesser-known species have provided remarkable clues. The oyster toadfish has been used to study the inner ear and balance mechanisms, contributing to our knowledge of human equilibrium and vertigo. The star ascidian has offered unique insights into how blood cells interact with sperm, shedding light on immune recognition processes relevant to both reproduction and transplant biology.

The ocean is also a rich reservoir of bioactive compounds. More than a thousand substances isolated from marine organisms have demonstrated antiviral or anticancer activity. One striking case involves a tunicate found in shallow waters off the Balearic Islands. Researchers identified a molecule with strong anti-tumour activity, now synthesised in laboratories and approved as a treatment for certain blood cancers. Another milestone came from a Caribbean sponge, which provided the chemical basis for AZT, one of the first effective treatments against HIV. Pain management has also benefited from marine life: a small Caribbean cone snail produces venom that paralyses its prey, and a synthetic derivative of one of its venom components has proven to be a painkiller more effective than morphine, but with fewer side effects.

Focus on the sea

Why turn to the ocean when humans live on land? The sea is the cradle of life on our planet, hosting organisms with unique adaptations. Studying these adaptations helps us uncover novel biological mechanisms and therapeutic strategies. Despite its proven impact, marine biology remains an underappreciated ally in medical innovation. The sea is vast, and we have only scratched the surface of its potential. As research progresses, unexpected animals may hold the keys to solving some of our most pressing health challenges. So, the next time you look at the ocean, remember: it is not only a source of beauty but also a reservoir of knowledge for the future of medicine.

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News from the MCAA

Photo by Ivano De Pinto Fotografo

Who is the policy officer responsible for the MSCA Doctoral Networks?

Part of Horizon Europe, the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) are the European Union's flagship funding programmes for doctoral education and postdoctoral training of researchers. In this interview, the policy officer overseeing the MSCA Doctoral Networks shares his insights and experiences in science policy.

Horizon Europe is the EU's research and innovation programme for 2021-2027. This programme facilitates collaboration and strengthens the impact of research and innovation in developing and implementing EU policies while tackling global challenges.

All the MSCA programmes are part of Horizon Europe dedicated to support, provide jobs and train around 65,000 talented researchers from all over the world, at all stages of their career, with new knowledge and skills in all disciplines. Through its funds, the MSCA are setting high standards for researchers' careers and continue to achieve a long-lasting impact on European research and innovation systems, boosting cooperation beyond academia and increasing their global attractiveness and visibility.

Which are the MSCA programmes?

There are five types of MSCA programmes, targeting different objectives:

- Doctoral Networks (DN), supporting programmes to train doctoral candidates in academic and non-academic organisations.
- Postdoctoral Fellowships (PF), supporting career perspectives and excellence of postdoctoral researchers.
- Staff Exchanges (SE), encouraging collaborations between organisations through staff exchanges.
- COFUND, co-funding of regional, national and international programmes.
- MSCA and Citizens, bringing research and researchers closer to the public at large.

Who are the policy officers responsible for the MSCA programmes?

A policy officer is responsible to apply the knowledge in research and data analysis, together with awareness of the EU goals, to better inform policy development. This typically involves understanding the potential impact of policy changes, translating them into tangible actions and effectively communicating these implications to the affected communities.

The policy officer I spoke with is Sohail Luka, from the European Commission Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, responsible for the MSCA Doctoral Networks.

According to the interviewee, an MSCA DN policy officer is in charge of designing the MSCA DN action. It means developing the actions for researchers, managing the connections with the stakeholders, and designing the programme in line with the allocated budget from the EU.

How to become an MSCA policy officer?

There isn't a defined career path to pursue in order to become a policy officer for MSCA. Sohail Luka's career is a prime example of intersectoral mobility. In fact he described himself as a professional nomad, owing to his diverse and interdisciplinary background.

He began in academia as a PhD fellow and teaching assistant in the USA specialised in molecular genetics, before spending nine years as a Procter & Gamble manager in the field of communication and public relations. During the academic years, he learnt scientific and teaching skills. In his industrial role, he gained expertise in communication with stakeholders, negotiation, and a goal-oriented approach, necessary in the corporate environment. Both experiences were crucial for his subsequent career steps. Afterwards, he returned to Academia as a visiting Professor in Italy and then as Principal Investigator (PI) and Head of Department in Egypt. At that point, he decided to apply his experience and knowledge toward a broader public goal, leading him to join the EU institution in 2005.

There are various types of work contracts for becoming a policy officer, including fixed-term or permanent positions secured through a public competition. In his case, he falls in the second category.

What are the positive sides and drawbacks?

For Sohail Luka, who remains perpetually optimistic, there are no downsides to this job – only positive aspects. For him, the main benefits of this role include the significant job impact on researchers and on the broader population, the autonomy in managing the work, and the opportunity to collaborate with a highly skilled and supportive team.

How to become a policy officer?

While noting that his remarks apply to most career decisions, for those aspiring to become a science officer, Sohail Luka advises to reflect sufficiently on the reasons for pursuing such a career option. He emphasises the importance of being curious and highly motivated to continuously learn and grow in the field. Additionally, he encourages active engagement in international and multicultural events, recognising their essential role in promoting global collaboration. Finally, he shared the one question that ultimately helped him decide for every career move he made: "Am I moving forward or backward, i.e., will I become a better person and a stronger professional?"

In conclusion, science policy is a dynamic and crucial field that bridges the gap between scientific research and public impact. It involves crafting and implementing policies that support innovation, address societal challenges, and foster international collaboration. Professionals in this area must navigate complex and evolving landscapes, balancing the needs of researchers, policymakers, and the broader community. Therefore, candidates with a diverse background, including multisectoral experience in both academia and industry, are often well-suited to become the next generation of policy officers.

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News from the MCAA

Writing a competitive MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowship proposal: Insights from NCP and Alumni

With over 800 registrants and 420 live attendees, the MCAA Ireland Chapter's recent webinar on 2 July 2025 offered crucial insights into the highly competitive Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) Postdoctoral Fellowship (PF) call. Featuring Ireland's National Contact Points (NCPs) and successful alumni, the session tackled everything from eligibility and proposal writing to real-world tips for success. A must-read recap for researchers preparing their applications this year!

Highlights from the MCAA Ireland Chapter event

Every year, early-career researchers across Europe and beyond eagerly await the MSCA PF call. Recognised for its prestige and for opening doors to international mobility, advanced training, and new research collaborations, the MSCA PF is also highly competitive. With this year's call officially open, the MCAA Ireland Chapter identified a strong demand for reliable guidance and organised a dedicated webinar on 2 July 2025. The session drew remarkable interest, with over 800 registrations and 420 live attendees. The event brought together NCPs and recent fellowship alumni to address both the official requirements and the practical realities of applying for the MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowship.

The main presentation was delivered by Blanca Suarez-Bilbao, Ireland's MSCA NCP. Suarez-Bilbao is no stranger to the MSCA community. Having completed her doctoral training within an MSCA network at the University of Bamberg in Germany, she now draws on over 20 years' experience in project and account management spanning both academic and industry settings in Ireland and Spain. Her opening talk provided a comprehensive overview of the MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowship scheme, demystifying eligibility criteria, mobility rules, and the key components of a competitive proposal. She also offered advice on navigating the timeline and assembling the necessary supporting documents.

Houda Briwa is an MSCA ITN alumna and PhD researcher at Technological University Dublin. Her work focuses on explainable AI and human reliability in safety-critical systems, with applications in control-room alarm management. She serves as Chair of the MCAA Ireland Chapter, leading collaboration, outreach, and member engagement to build an inclusive, active community. She is committed to clear science communication and, as Chair, to creating a supportive space where researchers can connect, grow, and collaborate.

Image by Houda Briwa

Supporting Suarez-Bilbao throughout the session was Jane Carrigan, Interim Head of the Irish MSCA Office and current National Delegate. Carrigan has worked in Irish higher education for over two decades, initially as an academic and later as a programme director and research administrator. Her expertise was evident as she supplemented the main presentation with timely clarifications and took a lead role in answering participants' questions during the interactive segments. Carrigan emphasised the importance of tailoring applications to the scheme's expectations and highlighted resources available to applicants at the national level.

The session also benefited greatly from the participation of two recent MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowship alumni, who brought practical, real-world insights to the discussion. Pietro Pampili, now a researcher at Tyndall National Institute in Cork and Vice-Chair of the Ireland Chapter, shared his experience as a Global Fellowship awardee. His MSCA journey took him from Ireland to Japan, working at Nagoya University on advanced materials research. Pampili's presentation offered practical advice on approaching each section of the MSCA proposal: introduction, excellence, impact, implementation, and CV. He encouraged applicants to use narrative techniques such as the ABT framework ("And... But... Therefore...") to craft a compelling story and advised that visuals and literature reviews should clarify and showcase expertise. Pampili stressed the importance of linking the project's main impact to the applicant's career goals, maintaining coherence between the Impact and CV sections. He also addressed practical aspects of a successful fellowship, such as salary transfers, project management, legal agreements, and monitoring expenditures. Finally, he recommended aligning project ambitions with feasibility, understanding EU policy priorities, and clearly articulating both career and scientific impacts within the proposal.

Polat Goktas, Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Engineering and Natural Sciences, Sabanci University, brought a perspective from the European Fellowship track. Goktas's background includes several international honours, including a Fulbright Fellowship at Harvard Medical School and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship for his work in AI applications in healthcare. He advised

applicants to set clear, SMART objectives and to link their research plan, training, and career goals. Goktas stressed the value of outlining both immediate outcomes and long-term impacts, including communication and knowledge transfer. He also recommended a well-structured Gantt chart covering all project activities, and encouraged realistic planning for communication, dissemination, and exploitation to maximise the project's overall benefit.

Audience engagement was high throughout the event. The chat was busy with questions covering topics such as eligibility nuances, how to choose a host, and common pitfalls to avoid. Many queries were answered live, while the remaining questions were collected for detailed follow-up. The event concluded with a moderated Q&A session, where speakers revisited and addressed some of the most frequently asked topics.

By bringing together NCPs and successful alumni, the MCAA Ireland Chapter provided a valuable resource for prospective applicants and reaffirmed its commitment to supporting the community through every stage of the research career journey.

Please find the full event recording and the presentation materials.

For updates and further discussions, join the MCAA Ireland Chapter and email: ireland.chapter@mariecuriealumni.eu

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Image by Midjourney, prompt by Fabrizio Martina

News from the MCAA

When researchers return to the classroom: a cross-shared experiences journey and perspectives

Public outreach, science communication, and, most importantly, direct encounters with pupils remain an important task in the spirit of sharing knowledge as a scientist/researcher. In 2025, several occasions provided opportunities for mentoring, learning, and growing together, while addressing thought-provoking questions and exploring current and future challenges in synergy.

Connecting research with schools is more than outreach, it is a two-way dialogue shaping shared futures. Over the past year, we participated in several activities and collaborated with schools in France and Italy through science-education programmes, including the Schools Challenge by the Learning Planet Institute (supported by the MCAA French Chapter and MEDNIGHT).

Christina Makoundou is a chemist by training, a researcher in materials science and three-time Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action awardee. She specialises in the conceptualisation, development, and characterisation of sustainable materials. Her research bridges chemistry, engineering, and environmental studies to develop and propose alternative materials and processes, considering waste valorisation and circularity within and across sectors. Christina actively engages in science communication and societal outreach, and also contributes to educational activities, aiming to advance research at the interface of science and society. Her core research aim is to propose improved solutions to current challenges by combining traditional knowledge with modern approaches.

Giulia Rizzo is a researcher, specialising in energy solutions for medical implantable devices. She is currently a biomedical engineer at GE HealthCare, working on ultrasound probes for echography. Previously, Giulia was a postdoctoral researcher at INSERM and an MSCA PhD fellow in the European project WIBEC, where she developed her thesis on rechargeable batteries for medical implantable devices. Her expertise bridges physics, electronics and biomedical engineering. Since 2023, Giulia has been actively involved in the MCAA association as Chair of the France Chapter.


Photo by Giulia Rizzo

How the story started

Connecting research with the wider public - especially with schools - has always been a priority.

"For me, the passion for sharing knowledge began long before an academic career, encouraged through roles such as sports coaching and leading summer camps, where teaching and engaging with young people brought great joy.

The academic year 2024-2025 opened opportunities to explore new ways of engaging with sciences with classrooms, moving beyond simply presenting research to fostering genuine interaction with students," says Christina Makoundou.

MEDNIGHT and The Schools Challenge

Goal of the MEDNIGHT project is to bring research and researchers closer to the general public, with a particular focus on families, pupils, and students. MEDNIGHT aims to foster a shared Mediterranean identity by highlighting common challenges in the region and reinforcing the role of science in addressing them.

In this spirit, MEDNIGHT seeks to showcase the attractiveness and importance of researchers' work and careers to the general public and to schools, through a series of initiatives under the umbrella theme of Mediterranean Science, with special emphasis on female researchers in the Mediterranean.

Giulia Rizzo explains: "As Chair of the MCAA France Chapter and Project Assistant at MEDNIGHT, I collaborated with the Learning Planet Institute on The School Challenge in Paris. In this competition, MEDNIGHT contributed by providing researchers such as Christina and me, who delivered targeted lectures. Drawing on her experience, Christina spoke about sustainability and the use of recycled materials in cities at the Learning Planet Institute. For my part, I led a workshop on inclusion and gender gaps in STEM research with schools at JP Morgan's."

The Schools Challenge is a mentoring programme that empowers secondary school students in Seine-Saint-Denis to explore sustainable development, science, and technology through hands-on project work. The initiative helps students tackle real urban challenges with the support of mentors over the course of six months and 12 creative workshops.

"I had the honour of being named matron of this year's edition. Students were invited to design inclusive playground installations that promote equity, creativity, and well-being within their school environments. I was deeply impressed by the pupils' teamwork, talents and abilities. Their commitment over the six-month programme, through multiple sessions and rehearsals, culminated in powerful, meaningful prototypes and presentations. It was truly inspiring to witness!" describes Christina.

A second meeting focused on inclusion and gender gaps. Speakers proposed a challenge inspired by real-life situations related to

gender inequalities in STEM, including gender bias in AI. Each group developed potential solutions to address the issue and prepared a presentation. In the final stage, they pitched their ideas to the other students and to the event organisers from JP Morgan, explaining the problem and presenting their proposed solution.

"It was fascinating to see how the younger generations approach long-standing issues in our modern society, bringing forward innovative and creative ideas. I enjoyed the way they encourage and support one another when working as a team," continues Giulia.

Learnings from these experiences

These experiences showed how young learners eagerly embrace complex topics like sustainable urban materials when approached with curiosity and simplicity. Importantly, the interaction was mutual. Pupils are challenged with fresh perspectives and creative solutions, reminding us that science is about listening and co-creating knowledge.

To truly embed such engagement, institutions must support researchers with time, recognition, and resources. Encouraging these collaborations benefits society and enriches science itself. After all, shaping knowledge is also sharing it, and our shared future begins with conversations in classrooms.

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Photo by Clara Lamoure

News from the MCAA

MSCA-GLOPOL launches to open new doors for researchers worldwide

The Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) have long been a gateway for researchers to gain new skills, expand their networks, and collaborate across borders. Now, a new project under Horizon Europe MSCA Global Cooperation: Policy Enhancement and Strategic Promotion (MSCA-GLOPOL) has officially launched to make those opportunities more visible, accessible, and impactful for researchers worldwide.

MSCA-GLOPOL is a three-year initiative designed to strengthen international research collaboration, promote inclusive participation in the MSCA calls, and align efforts with key science diplomacy and innovation policies across 26 global regions. Led by PRACSIS in collaboration with the Marie Curie Alumni Association (MCAA), the project adopts a structured and inclusive approach – bringing together stakeholder engagement, targeted promotion, capacity-building, and policy alignment to strengthen global research talent and institutions' access to MSCA opportunities.

N'zallah Z. Haro is a communications specialist and Marie Curie alumna with a background in health. She serves as a Communications Officer for the GLOPOL project under the MCAA, supporting efforts to strengthen global research collaboration. With extensive experience leading communications across Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Europe, and Asia, she brings a global perspective to her work. Her research and advocacy interests focus on chronic illnesses, particularly sickle cell disease, where she aims to bridge research, policy, and innovation to improve patient outcomes and amplify patient voices in shaping health solutions.

The project kicked off with a hybrid launch meeting in Brussels on 26 June 2025, where consortium members, European Commission representatives, and regional stakeholders aligned on priorities and next steps. Soon after, the MSCA-GLOPOL team also met with MCAA Chapter Chairs online to explore how the Chapters can actively support regional outreach, training, and community engagement.

MSCA-GLOPOL Launch meeting, 26 June 2025, participants from the left: Isabelle Demolin (Communication Adviser, PRACSIS), Mostafa Moonir Shawrav (MCAA Executive Director), Alexandros Iakovidis (Senior Project Manager, PRACSIS), Cristina Gomez (Project Coordinator, PRACSIS), N´zallah Zamani Haro (MSCA-GLOPOL Communication Officer, MCAA), Armela Dino (MSCA GLOPOL Project Officer, MCAA), Kira Keini (MCAA Communication Manager), Jenny Lind Elmaco (Policy Adviser, PRACSIS), Nishant Shandilya (RLO Representative), Desislava Kolarova (Policy Officer, Research Executive Agency (REA), European Commission), Thierry Devars (Policy Officer, MSCA Unit, European Commission), Tereza Szybisty (MCAA Policy Officer), Bernhard Von Mach (CEO, PRACSIS), Elida Jacobsen (PRACSIS).

Why it matters to MSCA fellows and alumni

For current MSCA fellows, alumni, and prospective applicants, MSCA-GLOPOL isn't just another EU project. It directly touches on how researchers connect with funding opportunities, access training, and participate in global research networks. More specifically, the benefits are:

- **For applicants**: Access to more targeted information, guidance, and support in their regions to lower barriers to applying for the MSCA.
- **For fellows and alumni**: Possibilities to share experiences, engage in events, and connect with peers across continents.
- **For institutions and policy actors**: Stronger dialogue with the MSCA to ensure that research priorities are aligned with local and regional needs.

"Through MSCA-GLOPOL, we are actively working to break down barriers to global research cooperation. This initiative is all about ensuring that researchers, no matter where they are, have the visibility and support they need to access MSCA opportunities and contribute to a stronger, more interconnected global research community," explains Mostafa Moonir Shawrav, Executive Director at the MCAA.

Where the project works

MSCA-GLOPOL is here for researchers at all stages and has a truly global reach. It focuses on countries with EU Science and Technology Agreements, including **Algeria**, **Argentina**, **Australia**, **Brazil**, **Canada**, **Chile**, **China**, **Egypt**, **India**, **Japan**, **Jordan**, **Korea**, **Mexico**, **Morocco**,

New Zealand, **South Africa**, **Switzerland**, **Tunisia**, **Ukraine**, and the **United States**; and on regional dialogues with the **African Union**, **Association of Southeast Asian Nations**, **Latin America and the Caribbean**, **Mediterranean partner countries**, **the Eastern Partnership**, and **the Western Balkans**.

This geographic spread reflects the EU's commitment to deepening science diplomacy and international collaboration.

What's happening in practice

MSCA-GLOPOL is built on practical, concrete actions designed to benefit researchers directly, including:

- **Events**: The project will participate in regional flagship events, organise thematic workshops, and host global online training sessions. These are opportunities to learn more about the MSCA, sharpen proposals, and connect with peers and institutions.
- **Tailored resources**: From multilingual guides and toolkits to inspiring success stories and alumni case studies, new materials will be created to showcase MSCA opportunities and provide first-point-of-contact information in regions where awareness about the programme is still low.
- **Policy insights with real impact**: Based on the needs and experiences of the research community, the project will track participation in MSCA calls across the 26 regions, publish country updates, and feed evidence-based recommendations into EU policy dialogues.
- **Involvement of the MCAA community**: The MCAA Chapters and members will play an active role in the project, helping to anchor promotion efforts locally, share best practices, and connect the project with researchers.

How you can engage

The project is designed to be open and participatory. MSCA fellows, alumni, and prospective applicants can engage with MSCA-GLOPOL by joining events such as training sessions, flagship gatherings, and thematic workshops announced through the MCAA and project channels. Alumni and fellows are also encouraged to share their stories through case studies, interviews, and testimonials that can inspire future applicants.

To stay updated, keep an eye on the MSCA-GLOPOL website and watch out for the upcoming **Flashnote newsletter**, which will share news, opportunities, and ways to get involved.

If you'd like to connect with the MSCA-GLOPOL team whether to collaborate on events, contribute to promotion, or share ideas, use the MCAA contact form (Subject: MSCA-GLOPOL).

As the project gains momentum, expect more opportunities to participate, more tailored information in your region, and more ways to connect your research to global networks.

MSCA-GLOPOL is ultimately about making sure that wherever you are in the world, you have a clearer pathway to the MSCA. For applicants this means access. For fellows and alumni, it means visibility. For the global research community, it means stronger, more inclusive collaboration.

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News from the MCAA

Choose Europe: shaping the future of science and research

Choose Europe is the EU's new initiative to attract the world's brightest researchers. With fresh funding, easier mobility, and a strong commitment to scientific freedom, it aims to make Europe the global hub for innovation. By choosing Europe, scientists can shape discoveries that define our future.

Choose Europe is the ambitious new initiative of the European Commission to support science and innovation, announced by President von der Leyen at an eponymous event held at the University of La Sorbonne in Paris in May 2025. As the name suggests, its main goal is to attract the brightest scientists in the world, in the hope that they will choose Europe as the long-term place to conduct research and deliver impact, both in terms of knowledge production and innovation. To achieve this goal, the initiative plans to act on three main levels.

New grant schemes, new challenges

The first level is the release of specific **new grants** aimed at both senior and early-career researchers. For the former, the Commission intends to put forward €500 million to fund **7-year super-grants** under the European Research Council, with calls in 2026 and 2027. For the latter, a pilot scheme is planned as part of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions programme with a budget of €22.5 million for the call opening in October.

While in general the initiative has been very favourably welcomed, we should also acknowledge that there are minority voices

Pietro Pampili is a researcher at the Tyndall National Institute in Cork, Ireland. Originally from Italy, he began his career in the electronics industry, where he worked for over a decade before returning to academia to complete a PhD at Tyndall and University College Cork. He was awarded a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Global Fellowship, through which he spent two years at Nagoya University in Japan conducting research on the epitaxy of III-nitride materials. In addition to his research activities, he currently serves as Vice-Chair of the Ireland Chapter of the Marie Curie Alumni Association.

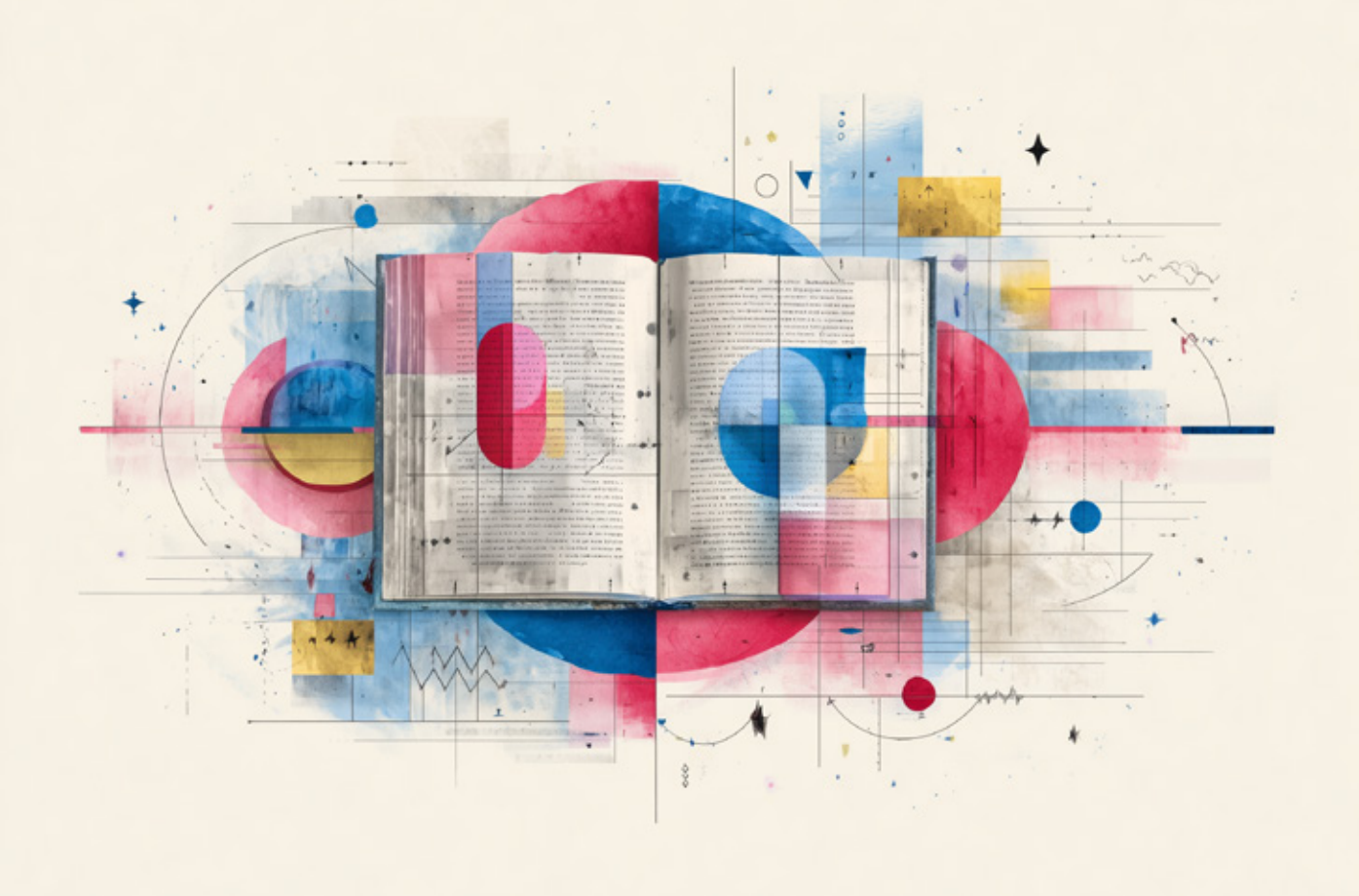

Image by MidJourney, prompt by Fabrizio Martina

within the research community concerned about the **consequences of increased competition** and the expected impact on being able to survive in the already challenging academic environment. I suspect that many readers of this article have had similar conversations with colleagues or perhaps share these doubts themselves. While I understand this reaction on a human level, I think it arises from focusing on a narrower perspective.

If we want to convince taxpayers and governments that research and innovation are indeed crucial for the future of our societies, we need to deliver **real impact** and truly **excellent science**. And for this, attracting international researchers with novel ideas is crucial, not only for them to do excellent research in the EU, but to encourage discussion, bring new ideas to the EU research ecosystem, as well as creating new collaborations that could end up in exciting breakthroughs. As a former MSCA individual fellow of the global track, I know from my personal experience how transformative it can be to engage with leading research groups internationally. I have spoken with friends and colleagues from many disciplines who have had similar experiences. I believe attracting scientific excellence to Europe, and bringing it directly into our research ecosystem, has the extraordinary potential to benefit not only European society at large but also all researchers based in Europe, at all career stages, whether directly funded by Choose Europe or not.

Inclusion as the key element for our future

But one-off funding is not enough to create a sustainable system. Particularly for early-career researchers, there is a clear need for career progression support and the **removal of unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles**. Anyone who has spent some years in academia knows how frustrating it is when

valuable collaborators are denied access to conferences or project meetings, or how much time and energy they must spend keeping up with the paperwork needed to maintain residence permits or secure travel permission. As former or current MSCA fellows, we have already fully embraced the concept of scientific mobility, but the associated challenges for researchers and their families need to be recognised and addressed. As highlighted by the MCAA on many occasions (Castellano-Pellicena et al., 2025; MCAA, 2024), the research environment needs to be more inclusive and equitable. From this perspective, it is really encouraging to hear that the second level on which Choose Europe plans to act is the inclusion of specific tools for streamlined relocation, improved visa procedures, and career support.

The third, and I believe the most important, level of Choose Europe is the strong commitment of the Commission not only to recognise the principle of scientific freedom, but also to enshrine it in European legislation through the forthcoming European Research Area (ERA) Act. As President von der Leyen said in her speech at La Sorbonne, "**Science has no passport, no gender, no ethnicity or political party**." Only a science that is independent from politics and the influence of power groups can truly support evidence-based policymaking. For a long time, we have taken these values for granted, but the current political situation is a clear warning that this is no longer the case. In a world in which science is under attack on many fronts for short-sighted political interests, putting scientific freedom at the core of European legislation is a very significant step that the research community should strongly value.

The MCAA has expressed strong support for Choose Europe, welcoming it as a timely step to reaffirm Europe's commitment to research, innovation, and international collaboration. The recent MCAA Policy Paper (Castellano-Pellicena et al., 2025) highlights the initiative's focus on scientific freedom and openness, which closely aligns with the Association's core values. While MCAA and other organisations broadly support the initiative, some concerns remain that future EU funding could lean too heavily towards scale-up and competitiveness. This might favour top-down priority setting over long-term, bottom-up, curiosity-driven, and basic research – the very foundation of ERC and MSCA programmes' enduring success.

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News from the MCAA

Bridging Minds, Building Futures: MCAA Central European Event 2025

On 26–27 September, 2025, the University of Warsaw will host the first-ever MCAA Central European Event, a landmark gathering of researchers, policymakers, and stakeholders from across the region.

Co-organised by nine MCAA Chapters (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, and the Western Balkans) together with the Policy and Career Development Working Groups, this flagship event will spotlight the power of collaboration in addressing some of Central and Eastern Europe's most pressing challenges: brain drain and talent retention, science diplomacy, and research funding.

The event promises unique opportunities for networking, cross-border partnerships, and dialogue with key decision-makers. Participants will connect directly with National Contact Points, policymakers, and funding bodies, boosting their professional networks and strengthening their impact on regional and EU-level science policy.

By uniting voices from across Central Europe, the event will showcase the role of the MCAA and MSCA in shaping science diplomacy, supporting talent, and driving innovation. It will also highlight the value of MSCA-funded experiences in building a vibrant, inclusive, and competitive research ecosystem.

With strong outreach, engagement with national institutions, and the participation of key stakeholders, the MCAA Central European Event 2025 will raise the visibility of both the MCAA and the MSCA, reinforcing their relevance and leadership in the region.

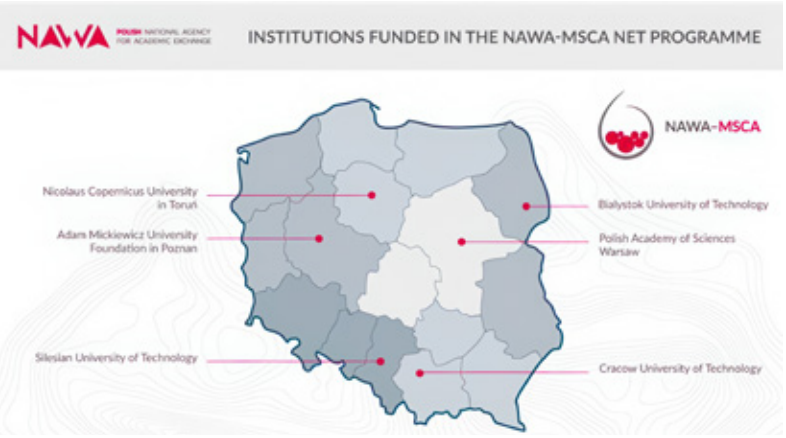
This is more than a conference – it is a flagship moment for the MCAA and MSCA, affirming their commitment to excellence, inclusivity, and the future of research in Central and Eastern Europe.

Michael Nones
Chair, MCAA Poland Chapter

Béla Fiser
Chair, MCAA Hungary Chapter

Partner

The NAWA-MSCA Network has just started operating



Starting from 1 June 2025, the **NAWA-MSCA NET**, launched by the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (NAWA), aims to foster the internationalization of Polish research entities by building long-term, sustainable support structures for Polish MSCA applicants and beneficiaries of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA, Horizon Europe 2025–2027). Funded with approximately PLN 10 million from the European Fund for Social Development 2021–2027, projects will run to 30 June 2028*.

The initiative of MSCA Regional Contact Points (RCPs) involves creating places across six macro regions of Poland: Northern, Western, South-Western, South-Eastern, Eastern, and Central Poland, and training their personnel to help the MSCA proposal writers and beneficiaries.

Their goals include, i.a., carrying out promotional, informational, and consultative activities across the macro regions, collecting data on MSCA projects, and providing document review and feedback, hosting international scientific conferences to disseminate MSCA research, results, and MSCA fellows.

Thanks to the **NAWA-MSCA NET** programme, the MSCA RCPs work in close collaboration with the MSCA National Contact Point (NCP) in NAWA to ensure consistent, accurate, and timely information about the MSCA programme for stakeholders. The cooperation typically involves regular meetings, joint training sessions, coordinated communication campaigns, and sharing the resources, tools, and expertise. By working together, they enhance outreach, harmonize support services, and improve the quality of assistance provided to researchers and institutions.

MSCA RCPs act as local contact points, providing tailored guidance, answering queries, and supporting applicants within their respective regions. They relay local needs, challenges, and feedback to the MSCA NCP, which coordinates overall strategy, ensures alignment with European Commission guidelines, and distributes updates and best practices.

In case of any questions about proposal writing and project management, we recommend contacting your MSCA RCP, and if you are an MSC Alumni, you are very welcome to cooperate with the NAWA-MSCA NET.

* The NAWA-MSCA Network program is financed by the European Union from the European Fund for Social Development 2021-2027 as part of the project "Support for higher education and science institutions in serving foreigners and Poles traveling abroad", no. FERS.01.05.IP.08-0003/24.

Aleksandra Górecka
Polish MSCA NCP (NAWA)

European Funds for Social Development
Republic of Poland
Co-funded by the European Union
NAWA POLISH NATIONAL AGENCY FOR ACADEMIC EXCHANGE

Accessibility Statement

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

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

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

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

Editorial information

About

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

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

Instructions for submission

Authors interested in submitting an article should read the Editorial Guidelines and the Editorial Rules, and then submit an article **exclusively** through the form available on the MCAA Newsletter website.

Editorial Board

Managing Board

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

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Acknowledgment

Funded by the European Union