Issue 48 - June 2026

MCAA
MARIE CURIE ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

Marie Curie Alumni Association

Newsletter

Image by GPT Image 2, prompt by Fabrizio Martina

Meet the MCAA Awardees 2025

Reflections from the MCAA Annual Conference 2026

ISSN 2663-9483

Table of contents

Editorial 3

Message from the Board 3

Updates from the MCAA 4

Meet the MCAA Awardees 2025 8

MCAA Best Innovator Award: Dimitrios Christaras 9

MCAA Career Award: Joana Magalhães 10

MCAA Outstanding Contributor Award: Ashish Avasthi 12

European Chapter Award: MCAA France Chapter via Giulia Rizzo and Alberto Gregori 13

Non-European Chapter Award: MCAA Japan Chapter via Eugenio Otal 14

Working Group Award: MCAA Research Management Working Group via Eitan Segev 15

The MCAA Annual Conference 2026

What researchers need to thrive: Reflections from the MCAA Annual Conference 2026 16

Articles by the MCAA community

Swiss Chapter alumni drawn together by chocolate and networking 23

Advertorial

Galicia, an attractive R&D ecosystem for MSCA fellows 25

Editorial information 27

Accessibility statement 28

Acknowledgment

Funded by the European Union

Disclaimer
Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency (REA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.
The MCAA is committed to publishing accurate and up-to-date information and takes the greatest care to do so. However, the MCAA cannot accept liability for any direct, indirect, special, consequential or other losses or damages of any kind arising out of the use of this information.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Editorial

Dear MCAA community,

As summer approaches, I would like to wish you a pleasant and relaxing season, full of inspiration, new opportunities, and well-deserved moments of rest.

In April, we witnessed the MCAA's flagship event, the Annual Conference, which brought together researchers, alumni, and stakeholders from across the world to celebrate 30 years of the MSCA. We provide a brief overview on the following pages, as well as interviews with exceptional MCAA individuals and groups.

The conference was followed by the MCAA General Assembly in May, during which members elected a new Board for the 2026–2028 term. We warmly congratulate the newly elected Board members and thank the outgoing Board for their dedication. We will introduce the new Board and its vision for the future of the Association in the next issue.

Enjoy the read!

Eliška Koňaříková
MCAA Newsletter, Editor-in-Chief
newsletter.editor@mariecuriealumni.eu

Message *from the* Board

Dear readers,

As we reflect on the wonderful moments shared during the MCAA Annual Conference and General Meeting in Brussels this April, we would like to thank all members, speakers, organisers, volunteers, and partners who contributed to making this event such a vibrant celebration of our community. The inspiring discussions, new collaborations, and exchange of experiences once again demonstrated the strength and diversity of the MCAA across borders and disciplines.

At the end of May, the MCAA General Assembly and Board Elections marked another important milestone for our Association and the beginning of a new chapter for our community. We were delighted to see strong participation from both members and candidates, reflecting the vitality, diversity, and commitment of the MCAA network worldwide. The newly elected leadership will help renew and guide the future direction of the Association, continuing to strengthen our shared vision for an inclusive, impactful, and sustainable community.

This year has already brought many important achievements and positive outcomes for our members worldwide. In this issue, we are pleased to share some of these stories, highlights, and initiatives that showcase the impact, dedication, and creativity of our community.

Thank you for your continued engagement and commitment to supporting research careers, scientific collaboration, and community building across the globe.

Together, we continue building a stronger MCAA community.

Virginia Helena Albarracin
MCAA Board Member

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Updates from the MCAA

The MCAA welcomes a new Board

As part of the MCAA General Assembly, MCAA members elected a **new Board** for the 2026–2028 term. The Board will officially begin its two-year mandate on **30 August 2026**. Consisting of **five Executive Committee (ExCom) members** and **six ordinary Board members**, the MCAA Board is responsible for representing the Association and setting its strategic direction.

We congratulate the new ExCom members **Ornela Bardhi** (Chair), **Ashish Avasthi** and **Ana Paula Mendonça** (Vice-Chairs), **Pablo Emiliano Tomatis** (Treasurer), and **Maria Magdalena Razalan** (Secretary), and ordinary Board members **Sabina Cvecek**, **Fan Mo**, **Eugenio Otal**, **Roxana Radu**, **Sandra Rebok**, and **Magdalini Theodoridou**.

We extend a special thank you to the outgoing MCAA Board for its commitment and leadership during the mandate. Read more

MCAA General Assembly 2026

The **MCAA General Assembly** was held online on **30 May 2026**. It included a presentation of the Association's activities and accounts for 2025, the approval of key documents, namely the 2025 General Assembly minutes and financial statement, **the appointment of new Honorary Members**, and the **results of the MCAA Board elections**.

We thank all attendees for joining and contributing to the future of the Association! The full voting results are available to logged-in MCAA members here.

Appointment of new Honorary Members

As part of the General Assembly, MCAA members approved **Anne L'Huillier** and **Manuel Heitor** as **Honorary Members** of the Association.

Anne L'Huillier's appointment is in honour of her lifelong partnership with the MSCA as a mentor across 14 collaborative projects and for her embodiment of the legacy of Marie Skłodowska-Curie as a **2023 Nobel Laureate** in Physics.

Manuel Heitor received the recognition for his fierce, transformative political advocacy for the structural rights and financial security of European researchers, most notably as the **primary architect** of the **Choose Europe initiative** to eliminate precarious contracts.

We congratulate the new Honorary Members and thank them for their dedication to the MSCA and for their efforts to improve researchers' working conditions!

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Call to host the MCAA Annual Conference 2027

With the successful conclusion of the 2026 edition of the MCAA Annual Conference, we're already looking ahead to the next one. The **call to host the conference in 2027** is now open!

Applications are open to MCAA members based in European Union Member States, backed by their local Chapter and supported by a host institution. Discover the criteria and send your application to host the Association's flagship event by **10 July 2026**. Read more

Photo: Ekaterina Zaharieva / LinkedIn

Meeting with Commissioner Ekaterina Zaharieva

On **21 May**, our Chair, **Gian Maria Greco**, Executive Director, **Mostafa Moonir Shawrav**, and Policy Officer, **Nicolas Defaye**, met with the European Commissioner for Startups, Research and Innovation, **Ekaterina Zaharieva**. The exchange focused on the 10th Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (FP10), the future of the MSCA, the European Research Area (ERA) Act, and freedom of scientific research. It provided an opportunity to reiterate our consistent message: the importance of maintaining a robust, **excellence-driven, and bottom-up MSCA framework** to ensure Europe's long-term competitiveness. Read more

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Introducing CUSP, a new project on science diplomacy

The MCAA is part of **Consolidating European Science Diplomacy (CUSP)**, a new Horizon Europe project dedicated to building a coherent, inclusive, and forward-looking European science diplomacy ecosystem. The project maps science diplomacy across Europe and beyond, establishes an online European Science Diplomacy Platform, and delivers targeted capacity-building for diplomats, policymakers, and researchers. The project officially launched on **1 June 2026**, and the first in-person consortium meeting took place in **Vienna, Austria, on 9–10 June**. Follow the project on LinkedIn to stay updated. Read more

"3% for science, 100% for Poland" campaign

On **27 May**, the Polish academic and scientific community gathered in front of the Sejm, the lower house of the Polish Parliament, in Warsaw, urging the government to increase research and development (R&D) expenditure to 3% of GDP by 2030. The demonstration, part of the "3% for science, 100% for Poland" campaign, addressed increasing concerns about **chronic underfunding in academia, low salaries, limited career prospects for early-career researchers, and the risk of ongoing brain drain**, including comments published in the Science|Business from members of the MCAA Poland Chapter. Read more

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Bringing society into the heart of science

The next training session for the **Network of Researchers for Citizen Science (NR4CS)**, organised in the framework of the European Citizen Science (ECS) project, will take place online on **3 July at 12:00 CEST**, featuring Joana Magalhães, recent MCAA Career Awardee, as the guest speaker. The session will explore how citizen science can be approached as a participatory model for **science communication**, and how communication strategies can amplify the impact of citizen science initiatives. If you are not an NR4CS member, learn more and join here—it's free and open to everyone interested in participatory research practices. Read more

SECURE2 Annual General Meeting

The Sustainable Careers for Researcher Empowerment 2 (SECURE2) project, of which the MCAA is a partner, held its Annual General Meeting on **18–19 May in Szczecin, Poland**. Together with the European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers (Eurodoc) and the International Consortium of Research Staff Associations (ICoRSA), we organised a hybrid **workshop for researchers**. It aimed to raise awareness about the **SECURE Research Career Framework (RCF)** and discuss how researchers from diverse disciplines and career stages can support its implementation at their institutions. Read more

Stakeholder dialogues by the MCAA

In May and June, the MCAA hosted stakeholder dialogues at its Brussels office, bringing together representatives from leading universities, research institutions, researcher networks and policy organisations. The first dialogue, held on **13 May 2026** during the inaugural **European Doctoral Day**, focused on the impact of the **MSCA Doctoral Networks** and the priorities that should guide their evolution under FP10. The second dialogue, held on **4 June 2026**, broadened the lens to the **future of the MSCA** as a whole under FP10, exchanging views on key orientations proposed by the European Commission while reaffirming the excellence-driven, bottom-up principles that underpin the programme.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Meet the MCAA Awardees 2025

Photo by the MCAA

Every year, **MCAA members** are rewarded for exceptional contributions to their fields and the MCAA community, **MCAA Chapters** for their vital role in localised community building, and **MCAA Working Groups** for driving topic-specific engagement and innovation. From individual breakthroughs to collective milestones, these awards celebrate the brilliance of our members and the strength of our communities. As per tradition, the **MCAA Awards ceremony** took place during the Annual Conference Gala Dinner in Brussels.

Recipients of the individual MCAA Awards and the Chapter and Working Group Awards are presented on the next pages.

Eliška Koňaříková
MCAA Newsletter, Editor-in-Chief
newsletter.editor@mariecuriealumni.eu

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

MCAA Best Innovator Award: Dimitrios Christaras

Share the journey that led you to this Award

My background is in the physical sciences: a first degree in applied mathematics and physics, a master's in particle physics, and a PhD in biomedical optics. I now work at the interface between academic research and product development in ophthalmology.

My focus is on building novel optical systems that measure properties of the eye not accessible by conventional means. My PhD at the University of Murcia under Pablo Artal focused on light scattering in vision and imaging. One outcome of that work was a new optical method with applications in eye diagnostics, which was later granted a European patent.

In parallel, I co-founded Diestia Systems, an Athens-based company developing optical instruments for vision research and clinical diagnostics, and I now lead R&D at Lightfield Medical, where we have developed a fully automated anterior-segment imaging platform, a novel diagnostic instrument currently in late-stage testing. It is a technology that could shift how ophthalmic imaging is performed.

I have been an MCAA member since 2014 and am currently the **Chair of the Greece Chapter**. The Award recognises a body of work that has always been collaborative, so the credit belongs as much to the colleagues, mentors, and clinical partners I have worked with as it does to me. It feels less like a personal milestone and more of a useful checkpoint, that the direction is one others find worth supporting.

Photo by the MCAA

What are your future goals?

My ultimate objective is to see ideas reach patients and to do so in a form that does not depend on income or geography. The path from a working prototype in the lab to a device a clinician actually uses is long and unforgiving: regulatory, clinical, manufacturing, and commercial hurdles each filter out most of what looks promising on the bench.

None of this is made easier by the current state of academia, which is underfunded and unstable, with many scientists genuinely struggling. My advice is to hang on, and to do so collectively: **network, collaborate, promote each other's work, and have some fun while doing it**. The MCAA is one of the few places where all of that happens at once.

MCAA Career Award: Joana Magalhães

Photo by the MCAA

Share the journey that led you to the Award.

I started my career as an MSCA fellow, in the Doctoral Network Alea Jacta Est, sharing a strong commitment and embodying from the very beginning the principles and values of the MSCA, of multidisciplinary thinking, international collaboration, openness and excellence that shaped every single step of my professional life and beyond.

My scientific and academic path of more than 20 years spans a wide range of fields, from health and material sciences—reflecting a **bench-to-bedside** trajectory with innovative basic and translational contributions to musculoskeletal diseases, such as the discovery of natural-based materials or biomarkers with patient involvement—**to social sciences and media and communication studies**. I've done pioneering work on media production from an evidence-based, intersectional approach, creating diverse and real-life inspired female characters to inspire girls into STEM fields through the STEAM-for-health TV series and to recognise women's contributions in science, by collaborating extensively with the third sector and reaching and involving wider audiences, including underserved communities.

In the last years, my scientific and senior management roles expanded towards multi-stakeholder mediation and knowledge

brokering, contributing to the recognition, professionalisation and growth of the European citizen science and science communication communities, supporting evidence-informed policies and social innovation, either as a team member or scientific coordinator of the NEWSERA, IMPETUS and COALESCE projects, the latest currently building the European Competence Centre for Science Communication.

I'm truly honoured to receive this Award, although strongly convinced that it is not an individual recognition but rather the fruit of a collective effort from all those I have had the privilege and joy to learn from, work with and be inspired by, and with whom I gladly share it.

What are your future goals?

This Award reinforces my commitment to the MCAA community and wider scientific community and my motivation to continue advocating and working for our shared values and principles, contributing to an ecosystem where science is fundamental to a more democratic society. I also hope that the recognition of a diverse trajectory like mine, which embraces many aspects of contemporary and Open Science, can further encourage both researchers and research funders to advance towards the adoption and implementation of research assessment principles aligned with **DORA** and **CoARA**.

I would like to take the opportunity to invite my colleagues to take on Manuel Heitor's pledge during the MCAA Annual Conference, to use our voices and influence each of our member states governments, national research agencies, and the like, to defend a pact for research and innovation by prioritising public expenditure on research and development, end job precarity, and reach a common ground for a long term vision, where **Choose Europe for Science** becomes a reality for all.

Photo by the MCAA

MCAA Outstanding Contributor Award: Ashish Avasthi

Share the journey that led you to the Award.

My journey to the MCAA Outstanding Contributor Award has been shaped by nearly a decade of volunteering, learning, and growing with the MCAA community. I feel that within the Association, I have found not only a professional network, but also a space to serve, experiment, connect people, and help researchers feel heard.

Over the years, I have contributed through communications, editorial work, conference organisation, policy engagement, science communication, and community-building. From supporting MCAA publications and Annual Conference activities to **chairing the Communication Working Group**, serving as **Vice-Chair of the Spain-Portugal Chapter**, coordinating webinars, launching new initiatives, organising events, and representing the MCAA in European and international spaces, my motivation has always been the same: **to make the Association more visible, inclusive, useful, and connected**.

Photo by the MCAA

Receiving this recognition is deeply humbling. Voluntary work is often made of many small, consistent efforts, be it ideas, meetings, drafts, events, and collaborations that may not always be visible. This award makes me feel grateful, encouraged, and even more responsible for continuing to contribute to a community that has given me so much.

What are your future goals?

This award motivates me to continue strengthening the MCAA as a space where researchers can connect, grow, and contribute across borders, disciplines, and career stages. I want to keep supporting initiatives around communication, policy, inclusion, science diplomacy, and community engagement, while encouraging more members to take active ownership of the Association.

My advice to fellow MCAA members is pretty simple: **do not wait to be invited to make a difference**. Start with what you care about, offer your skills, learn new ones, collaborate generously, and stay consistent. Small contributions, when sustained, can create real impact.

European Chapter Award: MCAA France Chapter via Giulia Rizzo and Alberto Gregori

Photo by the MCAA

Share the journey that led your Chapter to the Award.

Our paths to this Award are different, yet deeply intertwined through the MSCA experience. **Giulia Rizzo**, an Italian researcher specialising in medical implantable devices, joined an MSCA-funded doctoral project in Paris and the MCAA in 2017, becoming **Chair of the France Chapter** in 2023. **Alberto Gregori**'s journey began with two FP7-ITN MSCA projects as a PhD researcher and postdoc, working on functional materials for thin film technologies, before moving to the interface of academic and industrial research, while also joining the **Chapter leadership**.

Together, we have worked to make the **France Chapter a dynamic and inclusive community** for MSCA researchers based in France. Our shared commitment has been to strengthen synergies between researchers, local institutions, and key stakeholders, while supporting career development across all stages. Receiving this Award is incredibly meaningful; it validates not only our personal journeys but the **collective energy of every member** who has contributed to the Chapter. It feels like a recognition of what we can achieve when researchers come together with a common purpose.

What are your future goals?

Our goal is to keep building the France Chapter as a **strong, welcoming, and impactful community for MSCA researchers at all career stages**. We want to deepen ties between academia and industry, expand our network of local partners, and create more opportunities for visibility and collaboration.

Photo by the MCAA

Non-European Chapter Award: MCAA Japan Chapter via Eugenio Otal

Share the journey that led your Chapter to the Award.

I am Eugenio H. Otal, Associate Professor at Shinshu University in Japan, Chair and founding member of the MCAA Japan Chapter. My journey with the MCAA has been shaped by one of the Association's core foundations: **to offer our members lifelong professional development, networking, and advocacy opportunities**, extending MSCA support to benefit former fellows throughout their entire careers.

In this spirit, and as part of a small Chapter, I have focused on strengthening the bonds among Japan Chapter members and **expanding regional collaboration across Asia**, while promoting science diplomacy and career development. Through Chapter meetings and regional activities, I have tried to move progressively closer to the core mission of the MCAA.

I feel this Award as a message that the direction is the correct one, a push to continue with even greater strength. The real award, the one I keep in my heart, is the support and trust of the colleagues who stood behind these efforts.

What are your future goals?

I would like to start by quoting Jordan Peterson: "We are built to walk uphill. And when you reach the pinnacle of the hill, you want to stop and appreciate the vision, but the next thing you want is a higher hill in the distance."

After the successful virtual meetings in the Asia region, our next higher hill is to move toward in-person meetings. Our speakers delivered strong pitch presentations. Now, we should invite companies, open pathways to entrepreneurship, and help transform our members' knowledge into real value. We published the book of abstracts. Now, we should go further: publish scientific results and build an editorial house that draws on the experience of our members as editors, reviewers, and researchers.

I know that I will fail in some attempts, and that failure will hurt. But I will learn from it. **The MCAA community is there to help me, and I am here to help the MCAA community**.

Working Group Award: MCAA Research Management Working Group via Eitan Segev

Photo by the MCAA

Share the journey that led your Working Group to the Award.

I am a project manager working to strengthen the role, visibility, and professional recognition of the research management community, with a particular focus on MSCA Doctoral Networks (DNs). Over the years, my work with the MCAA has focused on creating spaces where members involved in MSCA projects can connect, collaborate, and support one another across borders, sectors, and career stages.

A major part of this journey was forming the Working Group together with Hakim Ferria and Jonas Krebs. **What began as a shared wish** to give more structure and visibility to the needs **of professionals supporting DNs developed into a broader community effort**, built on trust, collaboration, and a belief that project managers are important stakeholders for the MSCA Unit and strategic contributors to European research and innovation.

This Award feels deeply meaningful because it recognises not only individual work, but also the collective energy of many colleagues who give their time, ideas, and care to the MCAA community. I feel grateful, humbled, and encouraged to continue contributing.

What are your future goals?

This Award motivates me to keep working for stronger recognition of research and project managers and for more inclusive, supportive professional communities within the MCAA. My goal is to help create practical opportunities for exchange, mentoring, advocacy, and visibility.

My advice to peers is simple: **do not underestimate the value of your contribution**. Much of the work that keeps research moving is invisible, but it is essential. Speak about it, document it, share your experience, and find allies. **The MCAA is a powerful place to build that collective voice**.

MCAA Annual Conference 2026

What researchers need to thrive: Reflections from the MCAA Annual Conference 2026

Photo by the MCAA

Excellence is often discussed in terms of discoveries, publications, patents, and prizes. Yet throughout the MCAA Annual Conference 2026, a different question repeatedly surfaced: what conditions allow researchers to thrive and produce excellent research in the first place?

That question felt particularly timely as the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) programme marked its 30th anniversary. Over the past three decades, the programme has evolved into one of the European Union's most significant investments in research talent, supporting more than 150,000 researchers through training, career development, international collaboration, and mobility, and helping shape generations of scientific careers.

Held in Brussels at the Université Libre de Bruxelles and online under the theme **Research careers beyond borders: 30 years of the MSCA**, this year's MCAA Annual Conference provided an opportunity not only to celebrate that legacy but also to reflect on its future. Across plenary sessions, panel discussions, poster presentations, lightning talks, and countless conversations in between, one idea surfaced repeatedly: **excellence does not emerge in isolation**.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

It depends on the environments in which researchers work, the opportunities available to them, the communities that support them, and the systems that shape their careers.

In her keynote address, European Commissioner for Startups, Research and Innovation, Ekaterina Zaharieva, highlighted the success of the MSCA over the past three decades and emphasised the importance of ensuring that Europe remains a beacon of research excellence and talent.

Her remarks set the tone for many of the discussions that followed. Across the conference, participants repeatedly returned to a broader question: what do researchers actually need to thrive? The answer extended far beyond research grants or international mobility, encompassing everything from career sustainability and research culture to scientific freedom, inclusion, and societal engagement.

Mobility and sustainability

Mobility remains one of the defining features of the MSCA experience. For many researchers, moving across countries, disciplines, and sectors opens doors that would otherwise remain closed. It enables new collaborations, exposes researchers to different perspectives, and creates networks that often last throughout entire careers.

Discussions on MSCA-funded networks highlighted how the programme has evolved into a global talent ecosystem, bringing together researchers from across the world while raising important questions about equitable recruitment, recognition of qualifications, and institutional support. The benefits of internationalisation were widely acknowledged, but participants also recognised the practical challenges that accompany increasingly global research communities.

Sessions such as **Doctoral Training, Skills and Research Careers** and **Sustainable Research Careers: Frameworks for the Future** highlighted how expectations of researchers have evolved. Doctoral candidates are increasingly expected to develop transferable skills alongside disciplinary expertise, preparing them for opportunities not only within academia but also across policy, industry, entrepreneurship, and civil society. As

Photo by the MCAA

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Photo by the MCAA

career paths become more diverse, institutions must adapt to support researchers navigating them. Several speakers also noted that early-career researchers are not merely beneficiaries of change but often drivers of change themselves, helping shape more inclusive, flexible, and responsive research environments.

The conference also explored **what happens after mobility**. Discussions on reintegration into emerging and under-resourced research environments highlighted the challenges faced by many returning researchers, including limited infrastructure, scarce funding opportunities, delayed career stabilisation, and difficulties translating international experience into long-term professional opportunities. For many participants, these conversations underscored that mobility should not be viewed as an end in itself. Rather, its value depends on whether researchers are able to build sustainable careers during and after their international experiences.

Similar concerns emerged during discussions on the European Research Area (ERA) Act and the broader goal of delivering the **fifth freedom** across Europe, aimed at strengthening the circulation of knowledge, talent, and innovation. Participants reflected on the need for greater coherence between national systems, stronger social protections for researchers, and less fragmented research careers across Europe.

Practical experiences of scientific mobility reinforced these points. Researchers shared stories of navigating visas, housing markets, healthcare systems, language barriers, and social integration challenges. While international mobility remains one of the most rewarding aspects of a research career, these conversations illustrated that institutional support and peer communities often determine whether mobility becomes an opportunity or a burden.

Together, these discussions underscored that mobility is most valuable when accompanied by the **conditions needed for long-term career development**.

Research cultures that support excellence

If mobility was one recurring theme of the conference, research culture was another.

Across discussions on mental health, supervision, ethics, integrity, inclusion, scientific freedom, and

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

research assessment, participants repeatedly highlighted that **the quality of research cannot be separated from the quality of the environments** in which it is produced.

The session **Mental Health in Academia: Risks and Strategies to Take into Account** addressed the growing pressures faced by researchers, including precarity, isolation, burnout, and uncertainty about future career prospects. Instead of framing wellbeing as an individual responsibility, speakers emphasised the importance of institutional support, peer networks, and cultures of care. The discussion reflected a growing consensus that sustainable excellence requires healthy researchers and healthy workplaces.

Research integrity emerged as a similarly systemic issue. Conversations on ethics and supervision challenged the idea that integrity can be achieved through compliance mechanisms alone. Instead, participants explored how supervision practices, power dynamics, institutional incentives, and organisational cultures shape researchers' daily experiences. **Good supervision** was repeatedly described not simply as a management responsibility but as a cornerstone of ethical research environments, researcher development, and scientific quality.

Questions of inclusion and belonging also featured prominently. Discussions on care responsibilities, confidence, and inclusive career pathways highlighted the structural barriers that continue to affect many researchers, including those balancing research careers with family and caregiving responsibilities. Rather than focusing solely on individual resilience, speakers called for institutions to address systemic challenges and create environments where diverse researchers can thrive. One particularly memorable idea was that of casual acceptance, a culture in which inclusion is treated not as an exception, but as an ordinary and unquestioned reality.

The session **Freedom of Scientific Research: Protecting Autonomy, Integrity and Safety in a Changing World** explored the relationship between scientific freedom and research culture. Several participants argued that protecting scientific freedom requires more than legal safeguards. It also depends on secure careers, supportive institutions, and environments where researchers can pursue challenging questions without fear of professional consequences. Political pressures, precarious employment conditions, institutional constraints, and evaluation systems can all influence the research questions people choose to pursue.

Photo by the MCAA

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

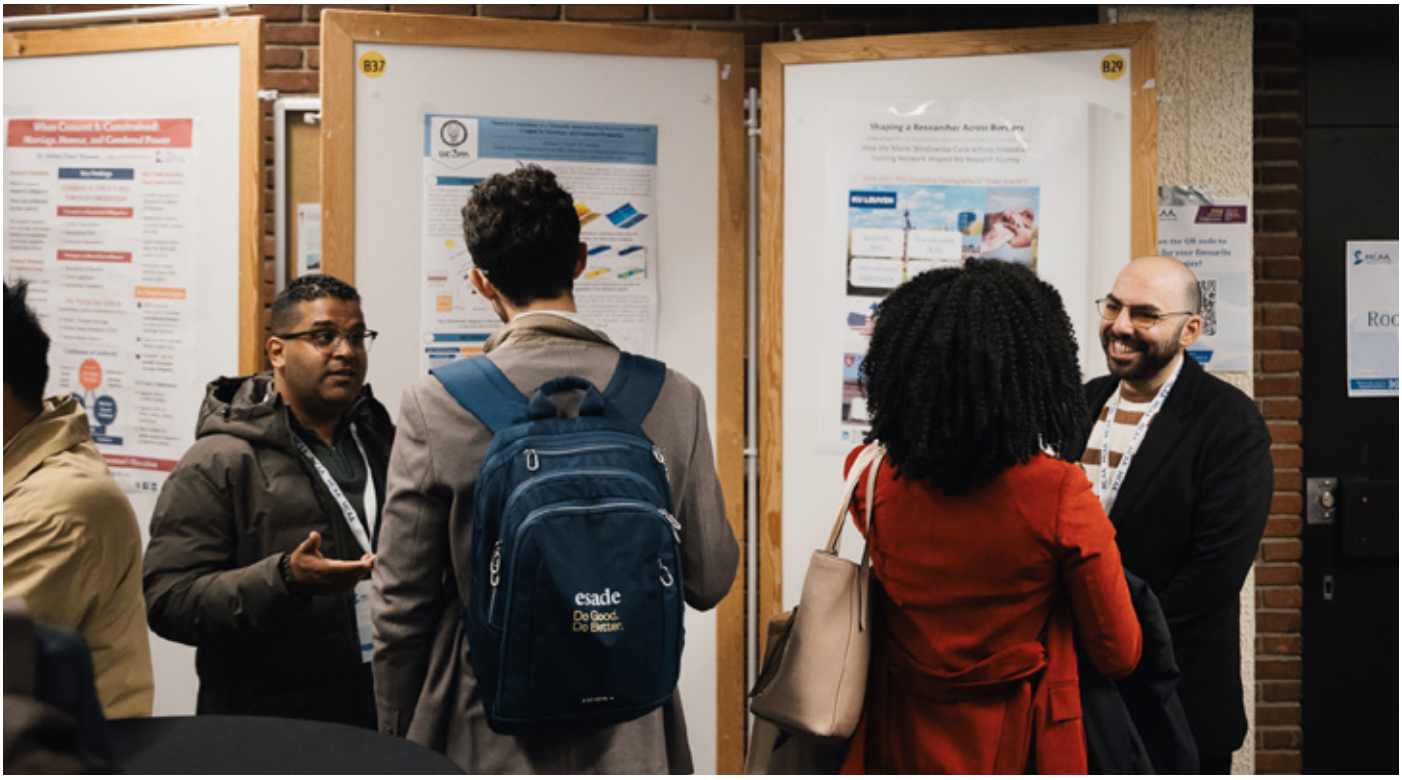

Photo by the MCAA

This naturally connected to discussions on **research assessment reform**. Across multiple sessions, participants questioned whether current evaluation systems adequately recognise the full range of contributions made by researchers. Open Science activities, public engagement, supervision, mentorship, interdisciplinary collaboration, and societal impact often remain secondary to publication-based metrics. An especially thought-provoking point raised during the conference was that research assessment is not only about measuring excellence; it can also shape the boundaries of intellectual risk-taking, interdisciplinary collaboration, and long-term inquiry. If Europe wishes to foster innovation, many argued, it must ensure that researchers are rewarded for the full spectrum of activities that contribute to knowledge creation and societal progress.

The message running through these discussions was remarkably consistent: **excellence is not produced solely by talented individuals**. It is cultivated through healthy institutions, supportive leadership, fair assessment systems, and research cultures built on trust.

Yet creating supportive research environments is only part of the picture. Many discussions also focused on how researchers engage with the societies their work ultimately seeks to serve.

Connecting research with society

A third major theme running throughout the conference was the increasingly interconnected relationship between research and society.

The sessions **Human-centred Open Science: Reimagining Open Science for Societal Engagement** and **Advancing Citizen Science in Europe** challenged participants to think beyond access and transparency. While significant progress has been made in developing policies, infrastructures, and platforms, many speakers argued that the next challenge lies in participation. Open Science is not only about making research outputs available; it is about ensuring that research remains connected to societal needs and that citizens have meaningful opportunities to engage with the research process.

This theme resurfaced in discussions on science communication. In an increasingly multilingual,

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

digital, and Artificial Intelligence (AI)-supported environment, **effective communication requires much more than simply translating scientific findings**. Researchers must navigate different audiences, communication formats, and expectations while maintaining trust and credibility. Despite rapid technological change, participants repeatedly emphasised that empathy, authenticity, and human connection remain essential.

AI featured prominently throughout the conference, particularly in discussions on **Responsible AI in Global Research Careers: From Principles to Practice**. Discussions moved beyond technological capabilities and focused instead on practical questions surrounding transparency, authorship, accountability, and responsible use. As AI becomes increasingly integrated into research workflows, researchers and institutions alike are being challenged to establish practices that encourage innovation while safeguarding research integrity.

Beyond research itself, several sessions explored the expanding roles researchers play in addressing societal challenges. Discussions on commercialisation highlighted Europe's long-standing challenge of helping research-based innovations move from laboratory discoveries to scalable enterprises. The session **Empowering Researcher Networks as Strategic Actors in Science Diplomacy** examined how researcher networks can contribute to international dialogue and evidence-informed policymaking during periods of geopolitical uncertainty. **Sustainability** also emerged as a recurring theme, with participants discussing how the 2025 MSCA Green Charter can help embed environmentally responsible practices into research careers, laboratories, and institutions.

Discussions on the **future of Horizon Europe brought** together many of the themes that had emerged during the conference. Participants highlighted the importance of protecting research autonomy, preserving bottom-up excellence, and ensuring that researchers remain at the centre of future European research and innovation policies. The message was clear: **investment matters, but so do the conditions** that allow researchers to translate that investment into meaningful impact.

Beyond the formal sessions, poster presentations, lightning talks, Chapter meetings, and Working

Photo by the MCAA

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Group discussions highlighted the diversity of the MSCA community and the value of the connections formed through it. The breadth of topics showcased during the poster session and lightning talks reflected this, spanning disciplines, sectors, and career stages. These exchanges served as a reminder that research careers are shaped not only by institutions and policies but also by the professional networks and communities that support researchers throughout their journeys.

The conference concluded with reflections on the importance of supporting attractive, sustainable, and inclusive research careers while preserving excellence at the heart of the MSCA. The closing ceremony also marked a special moment as Gian Maria Greco, in his final conference as MCAA Chair, reflected on the Association's growth and thanked the community whose collective efforts have shaped its success. Together, the final remarks reinforced a message that resonated throughout the conference: **research excellence flourishes when researchers are supported by strong communities, enabling environments, and a sense of belonging**. As the MSCA enters its fourth decade, that message feels more relevant than ever.

The author would like to thank the session moderators and contributors who provided summaries and reflections from across the conference programme. Their insights were invaluable in capturing the breadth of discussions and themes explored during the MCAA Annual Conference 2026.

Srishti Goyal
MCAA Newsletter, Editorial Board Member
srishti.goyal1808@gmail.com

Photo by the MCAA

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Articles by the MCAA community

Swiss Chapter alumni drawn together by chocolate and networking

The Marie Curie Alumni Association Switzerland Chapter hosted a delicious meet-up event energised by Swiss chocolate. Read about the beautiful day spent in Lake Zurich, focused on networking and learning about the history of local chocolate making.

Colin Courtney-Mustaphi is a researcher and consultant on topics of environmental change and long-term societal impacts on our environment. He is based out of Basel, Switzerland, and Ottawa, Canada, and has extensive fieldwork experience in the Arctic, Rocky Mountains and eastern Africa. Colin uses methods from geology, disturbance ecology, archaeology and qualitative research methods to understand past and recent modifications to ecosystems in order to help support today's dialogues and decisions on environmental management into the future.

Research and development in the Swiss Chocolate industry

On 28 March 2026, the MCAA Switzerland Chapter held an event that included entry to the Lindt Home of Chocolate museum, a lunchtime group meeting, and a boat ride on Lake Zurich. The day trip was a chance for several international members living in Switzerland to socialise, immerse themselves in the Swiss culture, plan the upcoming priorities of the Chapter, and exchange with members employed across many industries. Recent MCAA Switzerland Chapter events have included picnic socials in Basel and professional training for self-branding in academia.

Entry to the museum offered a chance to learn about the history of scientific developments across the Swiss landscape that supported the intensification of the international chocolate industry in the country. The historical exhibit highlighted the internationality of the Swiss economy and the industrial and scientific progress necessary to create and maintain a competitive edge in the food industry. Later exhibits showcased the technological advancements of robotics, computers, and product handling that support factory processes to create and package

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

chocolate batches, which still to this day have a human element for the delicate placing of nuts. The exhibit showed that a diverse set of skilled workers is needed from chemistry, robotics, computer programming, business processes, materials sciences, and more.

The atmosphere was conducive to socialising and discussing research and career topics—typical among Marie Curie alumni. The group shared stories of places, mobility, and career highlights from various Marie Curie Actions, with a range of participation throughout the past decade. Lunch at a Swiss kitchen nearby provided time to discuss the results of a recent member questionnaire on upcoming Chapter priorities.

The afternoon concluded with a boat trip back to Zurich for a closing discussion.

Colin Courtney-Mustaphi
Knowledge Core LLC, Basel
MCAA Switzerland Chapter
colin.courtney-mustaphi@unibas.ch

With contributions from Toni Fröhlich and Maria José Mendieta Jara, MCAA Switzerland Chapter.

The entrance to the Lindt Home of Chocolate museum in Kilchberg, near Zurich, Switzerland.

Participating MCAA Switzerland Chapter members and family at the 9.3-meter-tall Lindt chocolate fountain.

Advertorial

Galicia, an attractive R&D ecosystem for MSCA fellows

In the latest call for the MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowships (2025), Galicia ranked fourth among Spanish regions for selected projects, behind Catalonia, Madrid and Andalusia. Fifteen of the 127 projects submitted from Galicia were selected, giving a success rate of 11.8%, above both the Spanish average (9.4%) and the European average (9.6%).

For the Galician government, strengthening the science and research ecosystem is a priority, and the MSCA-PF programme is a valuable tool for attracting international scientific talent, including Galician researchers trained abroad for whom the Marie Curie programme may provide a bridge back home.

The high standards of the MSCA-PF call help attract top international candidates to lead the future of science, particularly important for a growing R&D ecosystem like Galicia's.

Four leaders of Galician research groups hosting fellows selected in the 2025 call explain why they value bringing these researchers into their teams. David Posada, María Giménez, Carlos Pérez Carmona and Diego Martínez are part of the Oportunius Programme — an initiative of the Galician government to promote research excellence — and lead competitive groups in areas including cancer genomics, materials for energy conversion and storage, ecology and particle physics.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Oportunius offers competitive working conditions and additional financial support to ERC grant holders, as well as expert guidance for ERC and MSCA applicants. A new line of support for MSCA-PF candidates joining Galician institutions has already achieved a 10% success rate in its first year.

Professor David Posada leads the Phylogenomics group at the Centre for Research in Nanomaterials and Biomedicine (CINBIO) at the University of Vigo and the Cancer Genomics group at IIS Galicia Sur. He received two ERC grants (StG 2007 and CoG 2013) and has extensive experience supervising MSCA fellows. His lab at CINBIO will host a new fellow from New Zealand from October.

"I don't see MSCA fellows simply as researchers who strengthen my team, but also as colleagues I can help develop. Supporting young researchers is part of my role as a team leader, just as others supported me", states Dr Posada.

He believes MSCA fellows make a strong contribution to Galicia's R&D ecosystem: "They bring internationalisation — whether from abroad or as Galicians returning home. They provide networking opportunities, new contacts, unique skills and fresh approaches, which enrich us and drive research forward, something essential in a growing ecosystem such as Galicia's."

Professor María Giménez leads the Condensed Matter & Functional Materials group at CiQUS at the University of Santiago de Compostela. She was herself a MSCA Fellow at the University of Nottingham between 2009 and 2011 and returned to Spain in 2018 after 11 years in the United Kingdom. She holds an ERC Starting Grant (2015) and two ERC Proof of Concept grants (2021 and 2025).

Prof Giménez has already hosted two MSCA fellows and will welcome another this autumn. She believes Galicia offers an attractive environment for young researchers.

"When choosing a group for a postdoctoral fellowship, researchers look for the best groups in their field within the country they wish to move to. Galicia has excellent centres and research groups, among the best in their fields, and we support fellows so they can understand our system and potentially develop their careers here."

Carlos Pérez Carmona, Research Professor at the Misión Biológica de Galicia (MBG-CSIC), was himself an MSCA fellow and spent two years in the Czech Republic before working for almost a decade at the University of Tartu in Estonia. His group will host its first MSCA fellow in September, arriving from Estonia.

Prof Pérez Carmona believes the Oportunius Programme has been crucial in attracting leading scientists and fostering outstanding research groups, making Galicia attractive to MSCA fellows worldwide. "The Galician science system is of a higher standard than one would expect in a region of this size."

According to Dr Diego Martínez, head of the Nuclear and High-Energy Physics and Technology group at the University of A Coruña, and ERC grantee in 2014, the key factor for an MSCA fellow is the quality of the host group. "In particle physics, it is essential that the group is integrated into the international research community and based in a CERN member country."

The four group leaders agree that, while not essential, obtaining an MSCA-PF grant is an excellent first step towards leading an ERC-funded project. As Prof Posada puts it: "Anyone capable of designing a strong project and securing an MSCA-PF grant has the skills needed to lead an ERC-funded project. It is almost a natural progression."

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

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

Ashish Avasthi, Pradeep Eranti, Polat Goktas, Kannan Govindaraj, Srishti Goyal, Gian Maria Greco, Eleni Ilkou, Sharanpreet Kaur, Eliška Koňaříková, Maria Magdalena Razalan, Maria Romano.

Managing Board

Eliška Koňaříková, Editor-in-Chief; Polat Goktas, Managing Editor; Ashish Avasthi, Associate Editor; Gian Maria Greco, Associate Editor; Maria Magdalena Razalan, Associate Editor; Maria Romano, Associate Editor.

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

Copyright notice

The whole document as well as each individual article are released under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

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. Last but not least, the PDF file now complies with PDF accessibility requirements and can be used by screen readers.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.