

Editorial

Welcome

Welcome to the first issue of MCFA News. Our primary goal is to keep you informed about activities concerning the Marie Curie Fellowship Association and all aspects related to Marie Curie fellowships. We also aim to be a forum for the discussion of issues of importance in science and relevant to the community of young, mobile, European researchers to which most Marie Curie fellows belong. To date, the career structure of young scientists, the impact of scientific research on technological progress and the interaction between scientists and society are among such issues. The MCFA News has been designed to provide a channel of communication between the members of the Association and to become the voice of the MCFA in the European scientific community. In future issues the MCFA News will have a letters section, for you to make your views known on activities of the MCFA as well as on the MCFA News. So please write to us or send us your contributions for other sections of the Newsletter, such as Research focus, Careers in science and Discussion forum.

Maziar Nekovee, Editor

On behalf of the editorial committee

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Laure Ledoux, Chair of the MCFA

It is now 6 months since the present board was elected at the General Assembly in Brussels. What have we achieved since then?

The first actions were to establish a new structure and to improve the means of communication for the MCFA. Committees were created to enable members to participate more effectively in key areas of activity of the Association. The web site was re-designed to include additional information, on-line registration and membership update facilities, as well as a searchable members database. Links within national groups, and between national groups and the board, have been further developed through a national co-ordinators' mailing list; a national groups workshop to discuss and co-ordinate activities is planned to take place in June. Communication between members has been improved through a public international mailing list, chosen as the preferred means of communication on Europe-wide issues, along with a members-only discussion forum. Finally, this is the first issue of the 'MCFA News' which will keep members and the rest of the scientific community up-to-date with MCFA developments. With such links established at both vertical and horizontal levels, the Association is now prepared to move forward towards concrete actions. One of the main objectives of the Association is to create a

clear and visible identity for Marie Curie fellowships by representing them to the academic and industrial world. The MCFA was invited to the European Union conference to launch the Fifth Framework programme in Essen, Germany in February: our stand attracted strong interest from both research institutions and private enterprises. In June, the MCFA will hold an information workshop at the annual conference of the European Association of Research Managers and Administrators (EARMA): as many fellows seek posts in research there is a mutual interest in creating links between EARMA and the MCFA. Finally the committee for relations with industries has been active in contacting industries and recruitment agencies to promote Marie Curie fellows. Raising the prestige of Marie Curie fellowships combines with two other important objectives of the MCFA: to advance science in Europe and to be a strong voice for fellows at European level. In recent months we have acted to ensure that the Association is represented at forthcoming events and participates in key public and scientific debates. As a result, representatives of the Association have been invited to such major events as:

- the June session of the Salzburg Seminar, an international event described as "a centre for intellectual exchange that commands the attention of leaders around the world", which will discuss the theme of scientific development and the democratic process.

Chairperson's report

The MCFA: where do we stand now ?

by Laure Ledoux, Chair of the MCFA

clear and visible identity for Marie Curie fellowships by representing them to the academic and industrial world. The MCFA was invited to the European Union conference to launch the Fifth Framework programme in Essen, Germany in February: our stand attracted strong interest from both research institutions and private enterprises. In June, the MCFA will hold an information workshop at the annual conference of the European Association of Research Managers and Administrators (EARMA): as many fellows seek posts in research there is a mutual interest in creating links between EARMA and the MCFA. Finally the committee for relations with industries has been active in contacting industries and recruitment agencies to promote Marie Curie fellows. Raising the prestige of Marie Curie fellowships combines with two other important objectives of the MCFA: to advance science in Europe and to be a strong voice for fellows at European level. In recent months we have acted to ensure that the Association is represented at forthcoming events and participates in key public and scientific debates. As a result, representatives of the Association have been invited to such major events as:

- the June session of the Salzburg Seminar, an international event described as "a centre for intellectual exchange that commands the attention of leaders around the world", which will discuss the theme of scientific development and the democratic process.

- the World Conference on Science, jointly organised by UNESCO and the International Council for Science in Budapest in June 1999, to discuss relationships between science and society in the 21st century; and its satellite event: the International Forum for Young Scientists.

- the forthcoming European Union conference on "Women and Science: Networking the networks", in Brussels in July 1999.

In parallel the first call for abstracts has been issued for the 'Annals of the MCFA'- the interdisciplinary annual journal of the Association which will include selected highlights of outstanding research results obtained by Marie Curie fellows during their fellowships. Finally, the MCFA is actively seeking to further exploit its interdisciplinary potential, by gathering fellows from different disciplines for the organisation of thematic forums around a scientific topic. A first event is proposed for late 1999 on "Innovative Research and Technology in the Biosciences for Environmental Sustainability and Industrial Innovation". Such events will be

Contents

MCFA local groups	p.2-3
Interview	p.3
Careers in science	p.4
Discussion forum	p.6
Research focus	p.7
MCFA local groups	p.7
What is the MCFA ?	p.8

increased in the future, with the aim of publishing the proceedings from these thematic symposia in special issues of the "Annals of the MCFA".



First Annual General Meeting of the MCFA, held in Brussels

We have been able to undertake all these activities thanks to the generous start-up grant awarded by the European Commission in 1998. However, as foreseen in our business plan, this grant is to be progressively decreased over the next two years, and to

avoid unacceptably high membership fees, we must secure alternative sources of funding. To that end, and to ensure that the Association projects a pro-

fessional image, we have hired a consultancy to contact potential sponsors on behalf of the MCFA. The company chosen, AVE & partners, is a small Brussels-based consultancy with a proven track record in securing funds for cultural, sports and scientific

projects. The Association will have to agree on the sponsor's suitability each time an offer is received. AVE & partners seem to be confident that the MCFA will be attractive to sponsors, and we expect some initial results by September 1999.

However promising these first steps might be, we still have a long way to go. The Association can only achieve its full potential if it represents a significant proportion of Marie Curie fellows. The membership at the time of writing this article is 1250 with 100 applications waiting to be processed. This is a good starting figure, but it is low with respect to the number of potential members. In the third and fourth framework programmes around 7,000 fellows, including 3,200 in the TMR programme, received European mobility research grants. Many fellows are not aware of the Association because their current address is not available through the Commission's database. Reaching them to increase our membership base, and

therefore our strength, is now our main priority. Every member can participate in this effort, by making the MCFA known to other fellows in his or her institution, university or company. Thanks to co-ordinated actions at all levels, we can work together to achieve the MCFA objectives and become the largest body of scientists in Europe.

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MCFA local groups

The MCFA National Groups - Backbone or Backstage ?

by Winfried Meining

What role do the MCFA national groups fulfil ?

Of course there are various answers to this question. They establish a social network of fellows, provide country-specific information, establish manifold contacts with scientific organisations, academic institutions, enterprises, research councils, media etc. ... Fellows organised in local groups have, through local meetings, the opportunity to actually meet in person rather than via various mailing lists or at less frequent international meetings; this allows for intense contact and an exchange of ideas and information. Depending on the respective viewpoint one might emphasize one or the other aspect, but I am convinced that local groups have

an important task to fulfil: carrying out the ideas of the Association at a local level.

During the past six months we have come closer to making these ambitious aims a reality as can be seen from the following highlights of this period.

The co-ordinator teams of several groups have been completely rebuilt, (France, Germany, UK, Belgium, Italy) or in some cases, newly formed (Finland, The Netherlands). The MCFA is now, with the exception of Luxembourg, represented in all EU member states. The central national groups webpage www.mariecurie.org/src/loc_grp.htm lists all existing MCFA groups with contact details of their co-ordinator teams. All these groups

provide web pages, that are hosted by local institutions or - as a new service for national groups - by the central web provider in Brussels. Various national groups have held meetings, where typical MCFA-related issues were discussed (see also www.mariecurie.org/src/meet/nat.htm). Several measures have been taken to improve the contact between national groups and to ease their development.

All national group co-ordinators and webmasters can now be contacted via a single e-mail address: coord@mariecurie.org. This mailing list is frequently used for announcements of national group activities or national group-related Board decisions. It is at present the only mailing list of the MCFA, where access is restricted to the public, thus allowing for the sometimes necessary, internal discussion on sensitive issues.

The budget for MCFA meetings has been redesigned, allowing a more flexible usage of the existing funds. Large national meetings can now be supported with up to 1000 EURO, whereas local

meetings are supported to a maximum of 100 EURO. The idea behind the specification of two types of local meetings (keeping in mind the existing restrictions of the budget) was, that the national groups concentrate on fewer meetings with more generous refunding of expenses rather than on holding many meetings at the lower reimbursement level. A survey among the national co-ordinators demonstrated one of the major drawbacks to the work of national groups: the difficulty in motivating Marie Curie fellows to spend time with the Association. The main tasks of the Association at both international and national level will be to streamline the efforts of active members and to create and develop a firm foundation for the future development of the Association. Only in this way can we effectively market the Association to both Marie Curie fellows and the general public. The national group co-ordinators will meet for a national groups' workshop during the weekend 18-20 June in London. The meeting aims to improve collaboration

between national groups and to develop common strategies. The production of Fellow Guides will be a major topic. Any requests regarding the workshop should be directed to the group co-ordinators (See www.mariecurie.org/src/loc_grp.htm for e-mail addresses), the collective national groups' e-mail address coord@mariecurie.org, or to the MCFA Board member responsible for local groups, Winfried Meining.

With the expansion of the IHP to a total of 31 participating European countries, the Association looks forward to doubling the number of MCFA national groups and in particular, to integrating Eastern European fellows. All Marie Curie Fellows in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Iceland, Israel, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovak Republic, Slovenia and Switzerland are cor-

dially invited to form national groups and to take part in the Association's activities. The national groups are, as is the Association as a whole, going through a process of development; this takes time. The role of national groups will be subject to change over the next few years, but I firmly believe that strengthening the work of national groups means strengthening the backbone of the Association.

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MCFA local groups

Austrian National Group Proposes a Family Mobility Allowance

by Bernd Loescher, Nora Brambilla, Cord Hockemeyer, Sabine Hill, Co-ordinators of the Austrian Group of the MCFA

At its last meeting the Austrian national group discussed the problem of extra mobility costs for fellows with dependent family members (the discussion paper is downloadable from www.dbai.tuwien.ac.at/mcfa-austria/). Travelling and household moving expenses at the beginning and end of the fellowship, as well as communication and travelling expenses during the fellowship, to maintain the contact with the original environment, rise with the family size.

Mobility causes especially high running costs when children form part of the household: in an unknown environment, the private network solidarity (grandparents, friends...) must be replaced by commercial services. Have you ever tried to find a place in a public kindergarten in a major European city without having asked for it years before? Fellows with school-age children must either accept education in a language other than their mother tongue (with a

potential impact on the total number of years spent at school), or find a special school which offers teaching in the children's mother tongue. This school might be distant from their living place and/or private, thus an additional expense. If the fellow's partner interrupts his or her own professional activity in the country of origin, the household will have to support substantial loss of income (also in the long term because of its impact on his or her career); if not, the geographical separation of the family results in other costs to maintain family cohesion.

These factors may induce financial difficulties for fellows with families. At present there is no mechanism in the system of Marie Curie fellowships that takes the family situation of a fellow into consideration. Sometimes, potential candidates with families might even give up on the idea of submitting a pro-

posal for a fellowship because of the domestic situation.

Of course, member states may cover certain extra expenses through their tax and social security systems, as they do for their nationals. But this concerns only the normal costs that all families encounter. The extra expenses for families arising especially from mobility are not covered by the member states, and this should not be their responsibility. The mobility costs for fellows are supposed to be covered by the mobility allowance and the flat-rate travel reimbursement. The Austrian group proposes to include in these allowances a family factor, and invites all national groups to discuss this topic, in order to develop a common Association position, which could, along with other points, be used as an input (and feedback) for the improvement of the scheme.

Interview

German National Contact Point

Maziar Nekovee interviewed Barbara Lieder from the German National Contact Point

What is the scope of your Contact Point ?

We work on behalf of the Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF). Apart from the Marie Curie fellowships we

are also responsible for the Human Potential and the International Cooperation (INCO) programmes and we are the General Information Point for FP5. As far as the Marie Curie fellowships are concerned we cover

not only the fellowships in the Human Potential Programme but also those in the thematic programmes. In comparison with other countries we are one of the bigger contact points with 3 full-time and 3 part-time scientific officers, 2 administrative officers and 2 secretaries. This allows us to offer a wider range of services.

Roughly, how many Marie Curie fellows are hosted in Germany and do you know from which countries the majority of them come ?

Germany produces the largest number of fellows, followed by Italy and Spain. In FP4 (only TMR) 557 German fellows went abroad (17% of all fellows). Like all fellows, the German ones go mainly to the UK (40%) and France (30%). On the other hand only 330 or 10% of fellows came to Germany, most of them originating from France (25%), Spain and Italy (20% each). This is about 100 fellows per year.

The success rate of German fellows, (25%) as well as of fellows coming to Germany (24%), is

slightly above the average (22%).

What are the services and information that the national contact point provides to fellows, before or on arrival in Germany, to help them settle down ?

As the National Contact Point we advise not only German applicants but we help those Marie Curie fellows coming to Germany. For this purpose we have published a Guide, "Living in Germany", with information on housing, administrative stuff and last but not least social security and taxes. This guide is distributed to every new fellow coming to Germany.

Two issues that concern a lot of fellows in many countries are taxation and the fact that there is a significant difference in the way the contracts are implemented. What guidance do you provide to fellows and their host institutions in these two areas ?

We have developed a model contract, for the employment of fellows, in co-operation with the ministry and the European Commission. This model contract is widely used by almost all host institutions whether public or private. Because of this, there is a quite stable and homogenous legal situation for all fellows. Differences in net income normally result from the choice of health insurance or taxation of the mobility allowance. In order to enable the fellows as well as ourselves to check the salary we have made some model calculations for various cases (unmarried, married etc.).

Still, there are certain problems which need to be handled on an individual basis. In cases where there are problems with the staff administration, mostly in connection with the contract, taxation etc. we inform the fellows about the legal situation and we offer to talk to the administrators on their behalf, as the language barrier here is often crucial. After the settling-in phase, the problems of Marie

Curie fellows in Germany are more generally with the fellowship itself (and this is probably the same in all countries), like early termination, pregnancy, etc. In this case we explain the steps which have to be taken with the host institute as well as with the Commission.

The German national contact point provides a lot of assistance and information to those who are interested in applying for fellowships, or in the process of application. Could you describe the services you provide to these prospective fellows ?

As far as German fellows are concerned, we offer help mainly at the application stage. We have published a Guide for applicants with practical hints for the application (www.dlr.de/PT/marie-curie/). We offer to read their applications before they are handed in to the Commission in order to avoid formal mistakes and to ensure that special European requirements are fulfilled. This service is also offered to fellows coming to Germany. In addition, we offer help with finding a host institute with two data bases: one is the "Stipendienboerse" a list of potential host institutes in German-speaking countries (Austria, Germany, Luxembourg) (www.dlr.de/PT/stipendienboerse/). The other one is PHIL (Potential Host Institutes List www.dlr.de/PHIL/), which is a Europe-wide database of all contact points with the focus on institutes in industry and the less-favoured regions. Last but not least, we try to help German fellows with their general problems. In the case of questions about contracts, taxes etc. we normally refer to the respective MCFA-section.

Do you still keep track of fellows once they have left Germany for the host country ?

To enable us to keep in touch with the fellows we ask them for contact details. We also publish a list of fellows, from and in Germany, on the Internet. But it is difficult to keep in contact

with former fellows. Unfortunately, we very rarely hear about a "success story" (and we are still waiting for the first Nobel Prize winner!).

How do you see the collaboration between the national contact point and the MCFA ?

Collaboration with the MCFA is very important as it enables us to get structured feedback about the fellowships. With information about the general problems we can try to improve the situation in general either through the Programme Committee in Brussels which we attend as National Experts or by further support at a national level. In addition I find it very interesting to get in contact with the fellows themselves, to hear their ideas and problems (I eagerly follow the discussions in the MCFA E-mail lists). After several ad-hoc contacts with the MCFA, in the future I would like to establish regular co-operation with the Association with a focus on the German section.

What are the job prospects for fellows returning to Germany ?

As far as we can judge, job opportunities for returning

MCFA fellows are quite good in Germany. Here, there is an increasing lack of Post-docs and PhD students which is maybe also felt in other countries. Due to this, excellent scientists such as MC fellows have good prospects.

In your experience, are Marie Curie fellowships becoming more widely recognised in Germany ?

Although, it is widely known that there are interesting funding opportunities from the European Commission, Marie Curie fellowships have not yet established a name in the scientific community like the highly prestigious Humboldt-Foundation fellowships which have existed for decades.

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Careers in science

Marie Curie fellows in Procter & Gamble ?

by Olaf Böttger

This essay gives a brief presentation of how a Marie Curie fellowship can be useful for a position in a global company like Procter & Gamble. I am writing about Procter & Gamble because this is the company which I know best and for which I am involved in recruitment. Nevertheless, the observations made here are probably more general and can be applied to other global companies, too.

When you start thinking about applying for a job, it is important to bear in mind that it is not the Marie Curie fellowship itself which will help you to get a position. Rather you should consider those personal qualities which enabled you to get the Marie Curie fellowship in the first place. In other words, Procter & Gamble do not employ someone because he or she has a fellowship but

because of his or her initiative and follow-through to 'earn' the fellowship.

In recruiting (and in internal promotion), Procter & Gamble use so-called 'What counts' factors. In what follows, I shall describe how Marie Curie fellows might use their fellowship experience successfully to demonstrate excellence in these areas.

Initiative: Let us start with the application for a Marie Curie fellowship. It is not widely known in business how challenging the application process for European Community grants is. So use this information in your application and outline the different steps necessary to get a fellowship: e.g. networking, finding a partner abroad, getting all the papers and signatures together, and getting informed about deadlines and competition rules, etc. It might also be helpful to remember the obstacles you faced and which strategies you used to overcome them. Initiative is a form of doing things differently - of making a difference.

Thinking and Problem-Solving: This is a simple one for a PhD student or a postdoc. But it pays to think more about the process and strategies of your thinking than what you actually did in your project. The chances are that you will never need most of the detailed knowledge gained during your fellowship. But you will need your academic skills: e.g. how to gain an overview of a new area quickly and thoroughly, how to use academic networks, where to find out about conferences and workshops, and how to present what you have learnt to others, including those not familiar with your academic subject.

Ability to Work with Others and Communication: Most of the work in industry is collaborative work. While this seems very different from what you did in your PhD or postdoc project, think again carefully about all the collaborative elements of your fellowship. Did you work and

write papers with your supervisor? Did you teach students? Did you contribute to a departmental work group? Did you attend conferences and present papers? All these count. However, do not forget to include all the experiences beyond your project. Did you organise meetings for the MCFA? Did you work for a political party or charity? Did you interview people or conduct fieldwork as part of your project? It does not really matter what you did. What matters for Procter & Gamble is that you respected and worked efficiently with people from diverse backgrounds enabling them all to contribute at their best. What we need are people who can build and maintain productive relationships across borders, cultures, and geographies.

Creativity and Innovation: Creativity and innovation are usually built-in elements of an academic project, especially a PhD thesis. What was new and different about your project? Do not just consider what you did but also how you did it. Was there a new process, a new approach, a new way of thinking about an issue? Procter & Gamble look for people who can think in new ways: we call this break-through thinking beyond that box which frequently limits our solutions. Be creative and innovative about your application: find new ways of presenting yourself, especially those aspects of your personality which you take for granted but which others appreciate.

Priority Setting: Procter & Gamble look for people who are excellent in project management. This involves setting goals, taking a long-term view, and getting resources in place to achieve key objectives. Of course, your fellowship is just this: a project which you have managed. You have a goal, a deadline, limited resources – and it is up to you (with the help of your supervisor) to manage your resources in a way that achieves the goal most efficiently. Moving to another country for your fellowship is

another example of priority setting. Did you experience difficulties? What did you do to tackle them? Did you blame others? Or did you sort them according to urgency or importance so as to solve them one by one?

Leadership: This is a difficult topic for most people as many seem to think of the Bill Clintons of this world when imagining leadership. However, leadership is not as much being the leader as the process of leading. In other words, this is a process of forming a vision, setting directions to achieve this vision, and capturing the commitment of others. I am sure everyone can think of examples many of which do not necessarily occur in a typical 'leadership situation'. Often it is more challenging (and rewarding) to lead when there is no set leader, e.g. taking initiative spontaneously in a discussion group. Typically, leadership is not found within a Marie Curie fellowship but requires extra efforts.

I have described the seven factors Procter & Gamble look for when you apply for a job with that company. But we also – and above all – look for interesting people. Thus, take the best facets of your personality from a professional point of view and make them the leading elements of your application. Ask yourself why Procter & Gamble should be interested in you as a person and how you could help us to make life better for our consumers.

And don't be afraid to make a bold case for yourself. One movement of a butterfly can cause a storm on the other side of the world. Why can't this effect, known from chaos theory, apply to you as well? An idea generated in your daily work can cause a storm of progress throughout the world if you're given the room and support to translate your own vision into concrete actions. And if you have talent, Procter & Gamble will help you all the way. Can you create a storm?

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studied management and computer science in Braunschweig, Germany. He then went to Lancaster University, UK for an MA in Organisational Analysis and Behaviour. He spent his Marie Curie Fellowship at Keele University in the UK where he completed a PhD on "From information technology to organising information: an interdisciplinary approach". Olaf has been one of the founding co-ordinators of the MCFA UK Group and is still an aged member of the information management committee of the MCFA. After seven years in academia, he wanted to taste "real life". So he joined Procter & Gamble in Germany and works in IT Marketing Systems.

Procter & Gamble is one of the leading international manufacturers of consumer goods in the world with more than 300 brands and product variations and approximately 100,000 employers. For more information (also on recruitment) see www.pg.com

MCFA Careers

Useful career information is available at the following Web sites:

MCFA Career mailing list:

www.mailbase.ac.uk/lists/mcfa-career

Database of job openings:

www.mariecurie.org/career/openjobs.html

Discussion forum

Problems and Opportunities of the Spanish Scientific Enterprise

By Jose Niño-Mora, founding Secretary of the Spanish Association for the Advancement of Science and Technology (AACTE)

The current generation of Spanish scientists is not only the most numerous, but also the best prepared in the history of our country. Previous generations had to work in an environment characterised by chronic underfunding, overload of non-research-related activities, obstacles to the free flow of ideas and a lack of public appreciation for science. Nevertheless, a significant number of them were able to overcome those obstacles and achieve international recognition. The case of Santiago Ramón y Cajal, Nobel Prize for Physiology and Medicine in 1906, in recognition of his fundamental work on the structure of the nervous system, stands out as an epitome of the power of the individual genius to overcome the system's shortcomings. Unlike Cajal, other top Spanish scientists had to emigrate to pursue research at the highest level. Our second (and most recent) Nobel Prize winner in science, Severo Ochoa (Physiology and Medicine, 1959), is the foremost example of this *brain drain*.

In contrast, nowadays we are witnessing a relatively abundant crop of Spanish scientists educated at top international research centers and performing world class work. The share of publications by Spanish researchers, out of the total world output, amounted to 2.5% in 1995, up from negligible past levels. A major factor accounting for this growth has been the increasing level of public investment in scientific and technological development in our country since the restoration of democracy, almost 25 years ago.

During the late 1980s the Spanish government launched an ambitious National R & D Plan. It set out to co-ordinate the major fronts of R & D enterprise: graduate and postdoctoral training, national priority areas, technology transfer, etc. The level of public funding for R & D grew substantially during the initial years of the Plan's implementation.

A major component of the Plan was a policy to promote graduate and postdoctoral training in centers of research excellence, through the allocation of competitive research fellowships. Many top Spanish graduates and postgraduates seized this opportunity, and went to learn and work with the international leaders in their fields. Others did the same with funding from their host countries. The European Commission, through the TMR/Marie Curie fellowship programmes, provided further opportunities. One objective of this policy was to eventually reintegrate these scientists into the national R & D system, thus reaping the benefits of the public investment made in their training. The government even launched a scheme of "reincorporation contracts", aimed precisely at reversing a possible brain drain.

Yet events did not unfold as many of us had dared to hope. Public support for R & D did not grow consistently: in 1996 it hit a 5-year rock bottom, sliding down to a mere 0.76 % of GDP, while the European average was 1.83%. The expectation of many scientists to find a position in Spain after a successful stay at a top international centre was often frustrated: academic openings were few and far

between. Furthermore, the public competitive selection process for filling those openings often yielded peculiar results. The five-member committee (in the case of public universities: two from the department offering the position, three drawn at random from a national pool of tenured professors in the relevant knowledge area) decided, in over 90% of cases, in favor of the local candidate. One who had typically pursued his or her doctoral work in that same department, often without any international experience, and with a substantially inferior (or even non-existent) publication record.

This unwritten *closed-doors* policy was also applied to those returning under the "reincorporation contracts". Under this government-sponsored scheme, Spanish postdocs working abroad could apply for a contract attached to an ongoing project. The maximum duration was for three years, during which time they were expected to find more stable employment. The reality proved harshly different as many of the "reincorporated" postdocs reached the end of their contracts without any academic job prospects. In spite of having applied, in some cases, for a dozen or more positions, they saw their academic qualifications summarily dismissed in favour of the *official* candidates.

As for the option of turning to a career in industry, the opportunities for doing so within the scope of R & D activities are still limited. Spanish companies have traditionally attached a low priority to the R & D function and multinational corporations typically keep their R & D centers well beyond our boundaries, focusing here instead on manufacturing or distribution.

It should not come as a surprise to know that many scientists are concerned with this state of affairs. The frustration at their lack of prospects was publicly expressed by one of the hardest hit groups, the "reincorporated" postdocs, with a major demonstration in Madrid in May 1998 (see "Spain's lack of career

prospects laid bare", Nature 14/5/98). More recently, Nature devoted an editorial to the topic of cronyism in Spanish academic selection processes (see "Spanish universities and the obstacles for development", Nature 24/12/98).

This concern about the loss of a golden opportunity to bring the Spanish scientific enterprise up to the level of the more advanced countries was a major driving force in the creation of the Spanish Association for the Advancement of Science and Technology (AACTE). The idea came among the exchanges in a digital forum set up by a major Spanish newspaper (El País), in late 1997. Some of the participants seized that opportunity, and articulated the idea of an association that would provide a permanent forum for exchanging ideas, and a means for coordinating initiatives. Given the geographical dispersion of our members, and the initial zero budget available, the Internet played a key role in the development of AACTE.

The objectives of AACTE are:

- to articulate initiatives to government and the media in order to promote standards of scientific excellence
- to promote an increasing level of public and private investment in R & D equivalent to that of the more advanced countries
- to monitor the selection/promotion procedures for academic positions in accordance with the principles of merit and equality of opportunity
- to serve as a forum of ideas for scientists interested in R & D issues in Spain.

The last objective is met by AACTE by maintaining a permanent digital forum, open to the scientific community at large, as well as a Web page (www.aacte.net). The AACTE has also monitored a number of academic selection procedures, collecting objective evidence that casts legitimate doubts about their fairness. Other activities have included publications in the national media, and communications with R & D policy-makers. Our membership is diverse, including not only

postdocs in unstable employment, but increasingly, senior academics and graduate students. Since our first anniversary, the AACTE has continued to grow steadily, and is poised to continue expanding both the scope and the impact of its activities.

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Research focus

The MC Fellows Workshops: Research Training in Progress

by **Christine Heller**

Marie Curie fellowships are awarded to European scientists for the purpose of supporting scientific research and development, through training, while improving further integration between the citizens of different EU member states. This integration is very important for the future, as mutual respect and knowledge of cultural differences is essential for community development: existing differences should be brought out to strengthen the whole.

The European Commission has initiated a scientific monitoring scheme that brings together the MC fellows working in the same region, with the objective to share their research work and experiences. These meetings are organised in the form of interdisciplinary workshops, where fellows can demonstrate their various technical skills in an informal and comfortable environment. Raising public awareness for scientific work is an important issue. Consequently the event focuses on the development of communication

skills and abilities, that awaken curiosity in others, and stimulates the creation of new bridges between disciplines. Hence, an important aspect is the advancement of science through knowledge of, and interest in, its parts. The 1st Workshop of MC fellows was held in Grenoble, France on 22-23 April at the European Synchrotron Radiation Facility (ESRF). The presence of large research centres in Grenoble resulted in the dominance of the Physics discipline in the talks of the 17 fellows who presented their work at the event.

The 2nd Workshop of MC fellows took place in Oxford, U.K. on the 26-28 May. This was a much larger event covering a wider range of disciplines, and included a total of 25 presentations by fellows. With a slight majority of research from the Life panel, the workshop illustrated results from Physics,

Mathematics, Chemistry, Life and Earth Sciences and Economics. Future workshops will be announced to a wider audience. The MCFA will increase its participation and support so as to further enhance its interdisciplinary character, develop communication and improve public awareness of science.

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MCFA local groups

Setting up the Italian National Group

a personal report by **Sabine Kröner**

At the beginning it was a tax issue. On my first pay slip in April 1998 I found my salary was taxed at over 26 percent but no deductions were made for social insurance. This seemed to me not in accordance with the general contract guidelines. But neither the University Administration, which was dealing for the first time with such a fellowship, nor the national contact point could clear up this question. So I tried to get information on the situation of other Marie Curie fellows in Italy. I contacted Angelo Casertano as the contact person mentioned on

the MCFA web pages for the Italian group. However, it turned out that an Italian group did not really exist yet. Bureaucratic problems and lack of time and motivation, from people generally interested in an Italian MCFA group, had so far prevented its foundation.

When I was asked if I would like to set up the Italian group I at first hesitated, due to the expected workload. But my personal experience as the only Marie Curie fellow at the Host University finally convinced me that an Italian group was defi-

nately necessary. As a first step I became a member of the MCFA. Then I gathered information: from the Web pages of the UK group about the history of the MCFA; from the co-ordinator of the Austrian group on how to set up a group plus substantial encouragement; from Angelo Casertano an address list of all Marie Curie fellows and the e-mail addresses of the official people in Brussels, etc.

After directly contacting many fellows with blind e-mails, I found three other interested fellows. Tax issues had also been a major problem for them. Taking advantage of the fact that we worked in the same city, I met with Ralf Hendrik Menk who had already started to solve the taxation problems for the fellows at his Host Institute. The result of the discussion was the start of the Italian group. We set up a mailing list and a homepage, and announced the creation of the

Italian group to the MCFA at the end of June 1998.

Then the summer break interrupted the activities. Towards the end of September we started planning a meeting to launch the Italian group. Since we both felt a discrepancy existed between what was officially announced about the MCFA and our personal experiences as Marie Curie fellows, we went to the first AGM of the MCFA in Brussels in order to bridge this gap. We came home with a more complete understanding of the goals of the MCFA, a lot of contacts, information and impressions. Soon after we sent out invitations to the mailing lists for the first national meeting of the Italian group for early December. The feedback was very discouraging especially when the representative from the national contact point finally cancelled her participation, despite a large effort to attract her. We did not

expect the Italian group to go on. I remember well, just Ralf and me sitting in the seminar room, waiting for further participants of whom just two had confirmed their attendance. We were happy in the end to hold the meeting with 7 fellows, 5 from Trieste and 2 from Florence. The meeting was very informative and constructive. We exchanged experiences and ideas and made plans for future activities. All participants enjoyed the meeting and agreed about its success.

Encouraged by the "numerous" number of participants from the various research centres in Trieste, Ralf and I initiated a regular

"Stammtisch" in Trieste at the end of January 1999. Up to March, this social event took place 5 times and was frequented each time by 4 to 8 fellows. In February Martin Bünner started a similar "Stammtisch" in Florence as well. Since my grant finished in March and I was going to leave Italy afterwards a second national meeting was organised in mid-March in Florence. This time we were happy to welcome Daphne van de Sande from the national contact point in Rome and a fruitful collaboration was initiated. 15 participants from several cities attended the meeting on a very bright and sunny spring

day. Gathering 25 % of the fellows registered on the Italian mailing list was a surprising success for us, as outgoing co-ordinators.

At the meeting Martin Bünner and Oscar Vives were elected as new co-ordinators. Further tasks were divided among the participants so that all would take an active part in the future organisation of the Italian group. Thus, the Italian group is now established and I hope it will develop with the contribution of the fellows in Italy.

P.S.: Due to the work of the Italian national group, a possible solution to the taxation problems in Italy was found for the fellows within

the Fourth Framework Program. Currently the Italian government is preparing a law to facilitate the integration of new Marie Curie fellows. Thus, it is likely that for the first fellows coming to Italy, within the Fifth Framework Programme, the tax issue will not be a problem any more...

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What is the MCFA ?

The Marie Curie Fellowship Association (MCFA) is the representative body of all former and current holders of a Marie Curie fellowship. It was initiated in November 1996 by the European Commission, in recognition of the enormous potential of Marie Curie fellows as scientific leaders of the future, and in acknowledgement of the need for an interdisciplinary network of young scientists on a pan-European basis.

The MCFA is a non-profit organisation governed by an elected administrative board; it has national groups in all member states of the EU.

MCFA members are from various fields of science spanning the biological, physical, and social sciences and represent both university and industry work sectors. At present the MCFA has over 1,300 members from all EU countries.

Aims and objectives

The major aims and objectives of the Association, as defined in its articles, are to:

- help advance science in Europe;
- create a clear and visible identity for Marie Curie fellowships;
- improve contact and the flow of information between members of the Association;
- establish a structured interface between fellows and the world of research and industry;
- develop and foster the international dimension of Marie Curie fellowships;

- increase the appreciation and understanding of science by the general public.

The range of services and facilities offered by the MCFA includes:

- the organisation of scientific and thematic meetings at both national and international levels;
- an electronic network devoted to careers;
- an interface between MCFA members and potential employers in academia and industry;
- assistance and advice to current fellows on issues related to their fellowships and integration in the host country.

In addition, the MCFA provides the European Commission with feedback on the implementation of the fellowship programmes and aims to be a strong voice for young European scientists within the scientific community.

Marie Curie fellowships

Marie Curie fellowships are individual research and training grants awarded to scientists, from EU countries, by the European Commission through a peer-review selection procedure. The major proportion of awards are post-doctoral fellowships; these allow young scientists to receive training and to carry out ambitious research in some of Europe's best research institutions outside their home countries.

The programme also provides a number of grants for post-graduate researchers and experienced scientists.

During the Human Capital and Mobility programme (HCM, 1992-1994) and the subsequent Training and Mobility of Researchers Programme (TMR, 1994-1998) over 7,000 individual Marie Curie Research Fellowships, (including 3,200 in the TMR programme) were awarded, out of more than 20,000 evaluated research proposals. The Improving Human Potential Programme (IHP 1999-2002) will fund more than 8,000 new Marie Curie fellowships within the Fifth Framework Programme.

Further information

Further information on the MCFA can be found by consulting the Association's web site: (www.mariecurie.org) or by contacting our European office:

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Membership

If you are a current or former holder of a Marie Curie fellowship (as defined above), you are eligible to become a member of the MCFA. Our web site includes a membership application form where registration details can be completed and submitted electronically.

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