

MCFA in transition

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For me, it was amazing to see how easy one could come into contact with other fellows and how helpful the work of many members was in making the association useful and meaningful.

Probably from even the very start of the association, it suffered from problems related to the nature of its members. The responsibility of the day to day running of the association was placed into the hands of mostly PhD students or post-docs, who were in the middle of their struggle to establish themselves professionally. Despite some extraordinary efforts, many responsables could not commit themselves for more than a limited period of time, or were sometimes even forced to stop working for the MCFA due to professional changes. Many responsables had only little or no experiences with teamwork, leadership and organisation. Moreover, the number of members willing to spend time with the MCFA decreased after some time. Some members misunderstood their MCFA responsibilities and used their positions to make contacts for their personal use rather than to represent the MCFA.

An apparent turning point came in early 2001 when the grant awarded by the European Commission stopped. It was known that these funds were only limited to three years. The exact timing of the end of the funding period came, however, as a surprise and forced the MCFA board to swiftly act in order to avoid a financial collapse of the association. It was only due to the outstanding efforts of some board members, and I want to mention Dagmar M. Meyer, Isabel E. de Salamanca and Ana M. Cerdeño, and of our secretariat employee Jennifer McClarey that a sudden death of the MCFA could be avoided.

The lack of funding and the decreasing active participation of MCFA members in daily MCFA work made it necessary to change the business model of the MCFA. The current MCFA board, which was elected on 10 March 2002, aims at concentrating on what seems to us most important in securing benefit for the MCFA. We have drastically reduced costs. The MCFA does not have a paid employee anymore; we do now all administrative work ourselves; we have moved to a cheaper Internet provider and - of course - we have stopped funding meetings. We have developed our Internet presence and have introduced mariecurie.org e-mail addresses for all members. The database was extended and made more accessible for members. It is now possible to search the members database with various search criteria like scientific field, fellowship institute, current location and much more. We continue to offer a rich collection of career relevant information on our website.

Despite the lack of funding, we have been represented at many international conferences and meetings such as the Joint conference of

EARMA and Euroscience (JCEE 2002) in Hungary or the conference on "Flexible Europe - Mobility as a tool for enhancing research capacity" in Talinn, as well as at several workshops organised by the European Commission. MCFA members have been publishing articles in Science Next Wave and we have been contributing to discussions on the European Research area and the to-be-formed European Research Council. We have organised a conference on water policy with more than 100 participants and we finally published the Annals II volume with scientific articles from more than 20 MCFA members working in different areas of research.

This list of achievements clearly indicates the directions and also chances for the MCFA. We have managed to voice the concerns of young mobile researchers in times where there is a lack of clearly defined representatives for this group of scientists. We have been contributing to the awareness of Marie Curie Fellowships through a scientific publication and through organising a scientific conference. Moreover, we have been developing possibilities for MCFA members to get in contact with each other. The MCFA discussion forum provides a powerful communication interface, which many similar organisations simply lack.

The change of our business model also illustrates the relationship between the MCFA and the European Commission, as well as the Marie Curie Fellowship scheme. During the past year and a half, we have demonstrated that we can work independently from the European Commission. Contrary to a common misconception, the MCFA is currently not dependent on the European Commission in any way. While the aims of the European Commission represented by the Marie Curie Fellowship Unit and the MCFA might overlap, they do not necessarily coincide. The MCFA provides an organisational structure and voice for scientists who at some point in time were awarded a Marie Curie Fellowship. Indeed, it is our view that awardees stay Marie Curie Fellows throughout their career. The issues taken up by the MCFA will certainly always be related to the work conditions of young mobile scientists in Europe, but as an organisation we represent far more than just the interests of current fellows.

The decision to introduce membership fees was very hard and I don't want to conceal the fact that the fees discussion was always controversial even within the board. The current running costs force us to look for other money sources. Not only that we have costs for the Internet presence and inevitable postage costs, we also would like to be able to fund members to visit meetings, let it be our own meetings or meetings that the MCFA board deems as important forum to represent MCFA interests. There are other costs for instance for administrative work, which could be done by employed personnel on a part time basis to take some burden from MCFA board members. Our efforts during the first years of

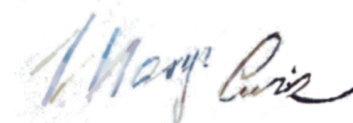
existence of the MCFA to attract sponsors were not successful with few exceptions were certain conferences were sponsored. Thus, we currently see no other way to secure the financial basis of the association than to ask for membership fees. The MCFA statutes do not permit non-paying members as soon as fees are introduced. Moreover, at the last General Assembly it was decided that all members are supposed to pay membership fees, with some reductions for specially defined groups of members. The MCFA board is aware of the fact that many members are not (yet) ready to spend 40 Euros for being member of the MCFA. We have therefore designed a new status, the MCFA affiliate, to allow former members who have decided not to pay fees to stay in touch with the association. The MCFA affiliates have access to their data in the MCFA database, but will not be able to access other MCFA membership benefits like access to data of other members or the Discussion forum etc. The details are described in the MCFA members area.

We very much hope that many members will decide to continue being member of the MCFA. Even more, we hope that many more members will be ready to actively contribute to MCFA activities, for instance through assuming responsibility as board member or as national representative of the MCFA or through taking part in a MCFA working group. The MCFA has the potential of being a unique scientists organisation representing many of Europe's most excellent scientists. We invite you who is reading these lines to consider your own possibilities to contribute to building up our association.

Dr. Winfried Meining

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"Be less curious about people and more curious about ideas"



signature of Marie Curie at the subway station Cluny-La Sorbonne, Paris