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## **Helping fellow nomads**

**A veritable academic nomad in her own right, Dagmar Meyer now heads up the Marie Curie Fellowship Association (MCFA). She tells us about the rewards and challenges of helping fellow researchers get mobile.**

Dagmar Meyer grew up in a small German village of just 2 000 inhabitants. Describing the place where she spent her teenage years as “not very exciting”, she felt the pull of the outside world early. “I started being mobile when I was 17,” the current chair of MCFA explains. “I heard about the United World Colleges, and applied for a two-year scholarship to Pearson College in Canada. I was lucky and was one of only four students from Germany who were given it that year.”

Her two years in this cosmopolitan setting mapped the course of her subsequent life. “Living and studying in a small community of 200 students from more than 60 different nationalities... has had a profound influence on me.” After completing her International Baccalaureate, she worked during her gap year at an international school in the Philippines, where she had the chance to visit China, Thailand, Malaysia, and Burma, before returning to Germany to start her university education.

### **A study in mobility**

In addition to her native Germany, Meyer's university studies took her to the UK, Spain and France. In fact, her PhD was a demonstration of European mobility in action – with all its various rewards and challenges. After starting her doctorate in mathematics at Heidelberg University (DE), she decided to move to Spain with her then Spanish partner whom she had met on a student union exchange programme.

“He had come to Germany so we could live together, but he couldn't finish his studies in Germany as his previous studies in Spain were not recognised,” she explains. “So I decided to spend at least one year of my PhD in Spain.” Meyer obtained a fellowship from the German Academic Exchange Service to the Autonomous University of Barcelona.

### **Jumping hurdles**

Confronted with the steep bureaucratic hurdle of ‘homologación’ – or ‘harmonising’ of foreign qualifications – the German mathematician was forced to give up her hopes of completing her PhD in Spain.

While she was away, her PhD adviser in Germany had moved to the prestigious Max Planck Institute (MPI) in Bonn, and she followed suit. “Luckily, the MPI offered me a PhD contract, so funding was not a problem,” she notes. Although she had a great time at MPI, once her research was finished she was presented with a practical obstacle: where to submit her thesis.

“The MPI is not entitled to award degrees since it is not an institution of higher education,” she explains. “In the meantime, my adviser had obtained a permanent position in Strasbourg in France and we looked into the option of getting my PhD from Strasbourg, but this was denied since I had never even set foot [there].” At the end of the day, she managed to go full circle and submit her thesis in Heidelberg.

### **There’s something about Marie**

Meyer moved to France to do her post doc at the Université Paris 13. Already on a French Foreign Ministry fellowship, she was thrilled to learn that her application for a Marie Curie fellowship was successful. But contractual issues related to the fellowship left her feeling “completely lost”.

She eventually found her way out of the bureaucratic forest. On the way, she came across MCFA and decided to get involved with helping other fellows. “I searched the internet to see whether there was some kind of alumni organisation that could help me and... found out about the MCFA,” she admits. “In the end, I got a very good contract for my Marie Curie project, through an intermediate organisation. But not everybody is so lucky, and this is where we try to help”.

In addition to providing practical support for current fellows, MCFA helps former fellows develop their careers, and takes action at national and European level to improve both the practical and policy situation of researchers, particularly mobile ones.

The association has already been involved in several EU policy dialogues, including the Commission’s communication ‘More research for Europe – towards 3% of GDP’. The MCFA has also produced a position paper on the plans for a European Research Council.

### **Support system**

Her own experience as an academic nomad and of the administrative difficulties involved strengthened her resolve to smooth the path for others. “Having gone through a period of complete uncertainty... I was determined to help others so they wouldn’t have to reinvent the wheel.”

With that in mind, she joined the MCFA. “I have experienced the joys and the pains of mobility, the immense stimulation of living and working in a multicultural environment, but also the frustrations that the permanent fight against bureaucratic windmills can entail,” she observes. “I also know what it can mean for your personal life to be mobile, when you constantly have to find new friends and build a new social environment in the place where you happen to live for a year or two.”

After doing her post doc in Paris, Meyer returned to Germany to take up a research position at the University of Göttingen where she works today. In her five years at MCFA, she has risen to become the association’s chair.

“Running an organisation of more than 3 000 researchers from all over Europe, from a diverse range of scientific, professional and cultural backgrounds... is not an easy task,” she admits. In addition to juggling the needs of current fellows and alumni, getting members to volunteer for longer-term projects is tough.

### **A question of finance**

One of the biggest challenges MCFA faces is money. “Another serious difficulty we face is the lack of long-term funding,” Meyer explains. Shortly after its creation, the MCFA received a generous start-up grant from the European Commission which dried up after three years.

“Without this support, it was impossible to keep our staffed office in Brussels open [and] we became a completely virtual organisation based on volunteer work,” she points out. But

MCFA is learning the fund-raising game. "We are now gradually gaining more experience in the search for sponsorship for specific activities," she notes.

Despite the challenges and difficulties, the work is worthwhile. "The most rewarding moments are of course those when we see that our efforts have a real effect," observes Meyer. "For instance, when fellows send us e-mails of despair and we can help to resolve the issue, or when concrete recommendations by the MCFA are taken on board by the Commission or other policy makers."

### **Big plans**

Meyer and her team have ambitious plans for MCFA. "We have a good basis on which to build on, but we need to increase our active membership base," she explains. "We need to become more visible both at national and European level, and to develop a more well-defined profile, with clearly identified strategic goals."

The MCFA also plans to develop its national groups, which are the first point of contact for most fellows. And it intends to further its successful experiments in joint projects, such as those it has run with other European associations like Euroscience and Eurodoc, or with Science's NextWave, an on-line career development resource for scientists.

MCFA has also proved itself indispensable in Commission consultation exercises. It has provided valuable input to EC initiatives such as the Researchers' Mobility Portal or the recent communication on Researchers in the European Research Area. The association plans to continue its good work and is taking part in several ongoing Commission initiatives, including a "Researcher Charter" and a "Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers". It has also prepared a survey on the Marie Curie European Reintegration Grants which will be launched very soon.