Providing support and a voice for Europe's young researchers

A body set up primarily to promote a fellowship scheme for postdoctoral scientists is seeking to play an active role on the political stage.

London

The first open annual general meeting of the Marie Curie Fellowship Association (MCFA) takes place in Brussels next week. The association is hoping to use this meeting not only to raise awareness of the problems facing young European scientists, but also to establish itself as one of the main partners for academia and industry in dialogue on such issues.

The MCFA is open to scientists who have received mobility research training grants from the European Community. Such grants began in 1958 with no distinct identity, being allocated under many different research, training and development programmes. But in 1996, Edith Cresson, then European commissioner for research, announced that research fellowships of the European Union would be called Marie Curie fellowships.

At the same time, she announced the creation of the MCFA. Since 1958, 7,000 fellowships have been awarded and another 8,000 are expected within the fifth Framework research programme (FP5). Around 1,900 people have chosen to join the MCFA, and it already has national groups in every European country.

Practical difficulties in reaching early recipients mean the MCFA can look at recruiting alumni from around 3,200 individuals funded in FP4. But it hopes that a higher proportion of FP5 fellows will join.

Independence

For an organization that only received its first funding in May 1998, nearly 2,000 members is no mean feat. But the MCFA is ambitious, well organized and well funded. In 1998 it received 450,000 euros (US\$483,000) from the commission, and expects 70 per cent of this in 1999. A condition of commission support is that it must find substantial sponsorship funds in its second year. The MCFA hopes to become independent in the next two to three years.

"We see the Marie Curie Fellowship Association playing a key role in the tracking of fellows throughout their career," said Barry McSweeney, head of the Marie Curie Fellowships Programmes in the European Commission. The association also gives the commission valuable input for its monitoring of programme implementation and for planning future programmes.

Bright future: young researchers hope to follow the pioneering footsteps of Marie Curie (right).

Laure Ledoux, president of the MCFA, says that, although the commission is funding the association, it is "independent to create its own aims". One of the main reasons MCFA fellows join, she adds, is the potential it offers for them to link up with researchers in other fields.

"As a young scientist, it is difficult to assert oneself in an ocean of experts in the various research fields," says Ana Lisa Vetere Arellano, a fellow working for a British engineering consultancy firm. "The fact that I am part of the MCFA has helped me acquire a bird's-eye view of ongoing research of my peers throughout Europe."

Fellows also say they hope to meet more experienced researchers and those likely to play key roles in the future. "As far as we know, we are becoming the biggest young researchers' association in Europe. Now, that might be very interesting for anybody's future," says Ana Cerdano, a fellow based at the Sanger Centre near Cambridge in the United Kingdom.

The MCFA can also provide practical assistance to fellows, from help with the tax system of a new country, to what to do on arriving at a university with a family. Members share information about jobs at their university on a joint mailing list, and the association holds a recruitment database.

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Although the commission was primarily seeking, in creating MCFA, to promote Marie Curie fellowships, members are keen for it to have scientific objectives. "The intellectual capital is being trained by the commission and we felt that this international network could capitalize on this," says Ledoux.

The MCFA intends to achieve this by organizing science-based workshops, joint activities with other organizations, such as the European Science Foundation, and by producing *The Annals of the MCFA*, an interdisciplinary journal publishing highlights of the "outstanding research performed by Marie Curie fellows during their fellowships".

The MCFA is actively developing its links with industry. In February, Unilever will sponsor an MCFA meeting on innovation in the biosciences, and thinks it will be a good opportunity to build links with young academics, to find interesting new work, and to work with a progressive organization.

Ambitious

The MCFA looks set to continue growing. Today, when Marie Curie fellowships are awarded, individuals are automatically invited to join the association.

Members are ambitious for the organization over the next five years, wanting it to be a stronger voice in the link between academia and industry, and, says Vetere Arellano, a "strong collaborator" with the commission, taking part in FP6 as a "consultant in issues of training and mobility for researchers".

Ledoux is keen for the association to carry political weight with both the European Commission and research funding organizations. The MCFA, she says, provides a voice not only for Marie Curie fellows but also for young scientists in general.

This is not an idea with which everyone is comfortable. Some observers say the association cannot speak for all young scientists, but only for the elite who win Marie Curie fellowships. They also question whether becoming a voice for young scientists is appropriate for an organization funded by the European Commission for a different reason.

But the impetus that is building up behind the MCFA could be difficult to stop. And the question remains: if the MCFA does not become the voice for young European scientists, who will?

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