In November 2017, the first ENABLE conference for young researchers finally took place in Barcelona, Spain. However, it was a long way to the successful event, and it is far from over yet. We started organising ENABLE almost two years ago: a group of 35 volunteering PhD students and Postdocs from four European research institutes with support from institute coordinators and an innovative science communication agency.

As many young scientists nowadays, we felt isolated in our own research areas, and wanted to build up networks going beyond our own fields of science. This is why we created ENABLE, to involve young scientists in opening the academic world from within, and to promote crosstalk between disciplines, collaboration with industry, and communication with society at large.

This idea of bringing young researchers together, at a symposium organised by other young researchers in the same situation, culminated in the first biomedicine PhD and Postdoc symposium at the European level last November. The conference in Barcelona turned out to be a huge success, with 272 young researchers participating from more than 25 countries within and outside of the EU. Companies were thrilled by our approach as well, as highlighted by our 10 sponsors, which allowed more than 60 attendees to participate via a travel grant. ENABLE 2017 was a huge success, but we are only getting started.

We would like to use this newsletter as an opportunity to look back at what we have accomplished so far, and glimpse at what we hope to achieve in the future, most importantly the 2018 ENABLE conference in Copenhagen, Denmark.
272 attendees

- 64% women
- 3% PIs
- 17% postdocs
- 80% PhD students

EEUU, Portugal, Spain, Greenland, UK, Norway, France, Netherlands, Belgium, Ukraine, Italy, Austria, Serbia, Hungary, Morocco, Tunisia, Cyprus, South Africa, Egypt, India, Bangladesh

10 sponsors
23 companies at the career day
12 job openings
70 travel grants
131 children & teenagers
Apart from bringing young scientists together, we further aimed at **communicating biomedical research to the general public**. According to an online survey we carried out before the conference event, it turned out that many people are fascinated by scientific research, but lack the means to understand its chances and limitations. Based on these results, we provided several opportunities for the public to get in contact with scientists, ask questions to gain a better understanding of scientific research, and even get an insight into what it is like to work as a researcher.

We invited primary and secondary school students to IRB Barcelona, to take them on a journey into what it means to be a scientist. Primary school students were introduced to the scientific method by performing fun experiments, and they discovered that everyone can be a scientist as long as they are motivated to find out more about the world surrounding them. For teenagers, ENABLE volunteers organised a session where secondary school students could directly ask PhD students and Postdocs what it’s like to work in academia.

For adults, ENABLE tried to initiate direct discussions between scientists and the public. During the “Ask the scientist” podium talk, cancer was set into the spotlight, as researchers and public figures discussed the challenges and advances of fighting this serious disease in the 21st century. In a cross-disciplinary session a day later, scientists and well-known non-scientific guests were invited to a panel discussion on the importance of leadership, within and outside of the academic world. The sessions were held in Spanish and Catalan, respectively, and enabled the public to directly give questions to scientists they would usually only see on television. Finally, everyone who wanted to dive even deeper into scientific research could do so at the very popular microtalks. At four bars in different neighbourhoods of Barcelona, 16 ENABLE participants presented their research to the general public in an informal setting, accompanied by food and beer.
CAREER DAY

As young scientific researchers, we often believe that a career in academia is our only option, but at the same time we feel pressured by the high degree of competition in this sector. “Publish or perish” is a commonly heard phrase, but what to do if one does not find meaning in this hunt for ever higher impact factor publications? With the ENABLE career day, we sought to provide chances for a career in science outside of the academic landscape.

The main highlight was the science fair, where 28 companies presented themselves, their portfolio, and any job opportunities they had to offer, with more than a dozen advertised job openings. Participants could not only get insight into career paths to consider, but also find out what companies require from prospective applicants, and network with contacts directly within the companies.

In addition to the science fair, we offered several other opportunities to challenge one’s expectations of career options. Participants could get insight into EU funding requirements, and find out about less obvious career paths, like science communication or journal editing.

To get direct feedback on everyone’s own career choices, 13 company representatives and ENABLE keynote speakers answered questions on their individual career paths, including obstacles and surprising opportunities, during intimate career chat sessions. And finally, participants could train their soft skills in one of eight intensive workshops, covering topics from scientific writing to what it takes to start a biotech based company.

SCIENTIFIC SYMPOSIUM

An important part of developing our own careers is to stay up-to-date with cutting-edge science from all over the world, especially when it comes to emerging techniques and questions outside our own area of research. With the ENABLE scientific symposium, we wanted to give everyone the chance to learn from leading experts and to discuss their own results with young researchers from different fields.

We recruited eight highly renowned researchers as keynote speakers, who presented their state-of-the-art research in four interconnected sessions: going from the foundations of synthetic and cellular research, to a holistic omics perspective, and from studying modelling systems in vitro/in vivo to developing patient-centered approaches. Apart from the talks, we fostered interaction with our speakers eye-to-eye, either during career chats, the daily lunch session, coffee breaks, or the networking-focused event Tapas with Speakers.

We also wanted to enable participants to present scientific results and receive critical feedback from peers. This is why we reserved 16 short talks exclusively for speakers from the audience, which they gave in the four sessions together with the keynote experts. In addition, 100 different research projects were discussed during the two poster sessions. The best short talks, microtalks and poster presentations were awarded with prizes in the end, and it was inspiring to see the enthusiasm with which everyone took part in networking and talking about science. The poster presentation was especially popular, with discussions going on long after the session was officially over, so we aim to extend it for the 2018 ENABLE conference in Copenhagen, Denmark.
During the event, we interviewed two of our most inspiring speakers about academia, industry, and ENABLE.

### 1. What convinced you to accept our invitation and become a speaker of the ENABLE conference?

I have always enjoyed giving talks at meetings that have been organised by students and postdocs. I always feel that the pulse of what’s exciting in science for me comes from the interactions with my own students and my own postdocs. For me it’s a natural part of life. So being invited by European postdocs and students was the idea of an enjoyable conference, really getting a sense of what are students and postdocs thinking about these days.

### 2. What do you think sets ENABLE apart from other scientific conferences?

I think a unique aspect of it is that so often conferences are dominated by professors, and so often postdocs and students are a little bit more reluctant to ask the questions that they would like to ask, and yet they are very good questions. And so I think [the ENABLE conference] allows young investigators to develop the skills that they’re going to need when they present their work in front of a group of professors and at major scientific meetings.

### 3. ENABLE offers students the possibility to interact with professors directly, in almost informal settings in small groups. Do you feel that this exchange, not only about science, is important for you as well?

Absolutely. Your priority can’t be 24/7 science. One, you’d burn yourself out, but second, you might not ever publish anything that anybody’s interested in if you’re working 24/7 at the bench. And then to find out where people got inspired, why are they scientists, why are they graduate students in this program, why are they here at this ENABLE meeting? What do they hope to get out of it? People might have enrolled in this program to come out with an idea what career they’re going to go.

### 4. Do you think career development is an area scientists should be more open to?

Not everybody is going to end up running a research lab and in going out there and using their skills to do research and to run their own laboratory. A lot of them will. But it’s not going to be everybody’s profession. And I think what’s very important is that people don’t consider it a failure if they don’t go into these areas, that they’ve somehow let their advisor down and they’ve somehow let themselves down.

### 5. Do you think a group leader should support their students if they want to leave academia?

By all means, we can’t be disappointed with the directions that our students and postdocs go into. What we can do is to try to prepare them so that whatever choice they make, they’re going in with their eyes open, that they’re really comfortable with their choices. That is something that is our responsibility as mentor.

### 6. Do you think scientists have a responsibility to reach out to the public?

It’s always okay to stand for yourself, but it’s not okay not to be out there and participating and helping others understand what we do. If you’re out there giving a talk, you have to be able to convey that it’s accessible, no matter who your audience is. Kids are naturally inquisitive about science, for instance. It’s only along the road in their education that somehow biologists have made it boring for students. We have a responsibility to make sure that that excitement is not dampened.

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**Elaine Fuchs**

Professor Elaine Fuchs is an Investigator at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute and a Rebecca C. Lancefield Professor of Mammalian Cell Biology and Development at the Rockefeller University, in New York, USA. She is famous for her work on the biology and molecular mechanisms of mammalian skin and skin diseases, and has led the modernisation of dermatology.
1. Why did you accept the invitation to be a keynote speaker at ENABLE?

It is impressive the initiative by students and postdocs to organise themselves to create this kind of conference for your own benefits, quite an honour. Even though I didn’t know anything about Enable, I immediately accepted because I wanted to support this sort of concept and initiative.

2. How do you think participants could benefit from ENABLE? Could we challenge our participants to explain research to diverse scientific public and break isolation inside academia?

Every cross disciplinary interaction is critical for someone’s development at any stage of its career because you do get exchanges of ideas. This is very challenging, especially in the short talks. You have a very limited amount of time to introduce your topic to people who are not experts. That is a very good practice for everyone. The outcome, in my opinion, is for young people to build professional networks, because you never know in your future career what you will have to work on. Mixing people up from different fields is absolutely beneficial for everyone involved.

3. What is your opinion about interaction between science, academia and industry?

It seems that it is more common now for academics to branch out into private industry, to develop something in the lab and try to spin it out into the commercial sector. Usually this is a way to increase growth, and the impact of the research, to create jobs and attract money. It is nice because it involves people from different research levels – from full professors to graduate students, everyone seems be able to participate in those start-up companies, and that’s also great experience.

4. Have you had chance be invited to some similar events to ENABLE and what do you think can be improved?

I would be especially interested in alternative paths for PhD students and career development, because it is often hard to find that information if you just work in academic environment. It is hard to be in contact with somebody who is expert in patent law for example. It is worth the effort you put in career day and activities. For your initiative it is very important to get feedback from attendees and to get the general feel about the workshops, career chats and other activities.

5. What do you think scientist can actively do to encourage a direct discussion between scientists and the general public?

It’s not obvious to many scientists how to talk to general public. The worst thing that could happen when you talk to general public is that they become afraid that the technology and research you are talking about are going to hurt them somehow. It’s tricky. You have to do it in the correct way. It’s complicated and it’s important to make the right impression and so people become informed and not afraid.
COVERAGE HIGHLIGHTS

PRESS

“The success of the first ENABLE event and the response of the young participants to the programmed activities serve to strengthen my belief that education must go beyond traditional approaches. Therefore institutions must ensure that the training of future generations of scientists encompasses a wider skill set in a rapidly changing world.”

IUBMB Newsletter

“The participants [presenting micro-talks] were well prepared in explaining their research to a broad public and had found clever ways to make analogies of their scientific findings.”

CPR News

BLOGS

“Personally, I gained new motivation through talking to my peers which struggle with the same problems but also share the same passion for science and uncovering new things. The conference overall was a great success, and I can recommend any young researcher who is in a phase of orientation in this ever-changing field to attend.”

Edinburgh Neuroscience and Me

“A lively, stimulating atmosphere was present throughout this 3-day Symposium: this is what happens when young scientists meet and share their passion for science with their enthusiasm.”

The Armenise-Harvard Laboratory of Cancer Biology & Genetics

SOCIAL MEDIA

Thanks to @EnableNetworkEU team for this great conference! You did a really good job!

@EnableNetworkEU

The #ENABLE2017 is ending with success, well done guys for organising such a great first European PhD and Postdoc symposium!

@EnableNetworkEU

Microtalks were a pleasure. Glad that I was captured in a deep discussion over an epidemiological work about role of ibuprofen in fighting cancers. #ENABLE2017 #enable2017 #symposium

@EnableNetworkEU

First European network for PhDs and postdocs: way to go Europe! Innovation and growth start from bringing the most brilliant minds together!

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