

# Flying the flag for Early Career microscopists

Colum O'Leary

**The RMS Early Career Committee is a newly formed RMS subgroup dedicated to supporting students, postdocs and early career professionals in microscopy. Planned activities include pre-congress workshops, industrial tours, networking events and more. The committee, which held its inaugural meeting in December, is chaired by Colum O'Leary – a DPhil candidate in Materials at Oxford University. Here, Colum shares some of his thoughts on the challenges facing Early Career microscopists, and how the new committee is shaping up to tackle them.**

When I was at the International Microscopy Congress (IMC) in Sydney last year, I spoke to the President-elect (Cameron Varano) and Treasurer (Ethan Lawrence) of the MSA Student Council. Their dedication and enthusiasm inspired me to set up a similar group in the UK.

Once I approached the RMS with the idea for a student council, I discovered that there was already a team of early career researchers that were organising an Early Career workshop at mmc2019 (Rebecca Thompson, Rebecca Saleeb, William Jackson, Irene Del Molino Del Barrio and Katherine Yates). It was then that we decided to combine forces and form the *RMS Early Career Committee* for students, postdocs and early career professionals.

There are many challenges faced by Early Career scientists - some which have always existed, and others which relate to more recent developments and trends. One of the biggest issues is communication. Put simply, it can be very easy to become isolated from the rest of the community when you spend most of your time in your own lab or office, and this makes it more difficult to talk to peers or senior colleagues at conferences. I personally was afraid to speak to senior researchers at conferences when I first started my PhD, and

these opportunities are so important for anyone at the beginning of their career. That's why one of our top priorities is ensuring early career RMS members are able to take these networking opportunities and make the most of their membership.

Of course, there are plenty more resources nowadays to overcome communication barriers, such as social media and video conference calls among other things. However, technological advances raise new challenges for today's early career microscopists – not least the ever-growing expectation of researchers to have a wider array of hard and soft skills to complement their research expertise, such as competent computer programmers, being engaging speakers and having active professional social media profiles! It's a recurring theme in discussions, and a subject tackled at our Early Career Pre-Congress Symposium at mmc2019. That particular event was a great success, and the combination of scientific talks, career experiences and soft-skills sessions was very well received by attendees. There was a lot of positive feedback and I am hopeful that the symposium will continue to be part of the mmc conference series in years to come.

The response from our early career peers to the



The Early Career Committee convenes for its inaugural meeting.

## Colum's top tips for early career microscopists seeking to boost their development:

- Attend conferences. Not only will you learn about other projects in your field, but conferences are the perfect networking opportunity to start collaborations, apply for careers and talk to peers in other research groups and industries. Be aware of any travel bursaries that are available for attending conferences, either from the RMS, your own institution or other organisations.
- Develop your transferable skills portfolio whenever opportunities arise. Attend presentation skills courses. Create your own professional social media profile (Twitter, LinkedIn, ResearchGate). Ask your peers or senior colleagues whether there are any opportunities for you to develop these skills.
- Learn a programming language. There has been a paradigm shift in microscopy research over the last decade, where microscope automation, advanced image processing and machine learning have greatly improved research efficiency. There are plenty of free courses and guides online, and your institute might have additional resources.

formation of the committee has been great. We didn't have to wait long before students, apprentices, postdoctoral fellows and young professors all expressed interest in joining, which is very promising

for the future. Meanwhile most senior colleagues I have discussed RMS Early Career with wished that there was such a committee in the early stages of their career!

Sustaining committee members will of course be a challenge. Most PhD degrees, apprenticeships and postdoctoral positions in the UK last no longer than four years, and many researchers will move abroad to pursue their career. Going forward, we will certainly be helped if we're able to establish a few long-term, core members.

My overriding message is that the RMS can be a very valuable resource to your career, if you want it to be. It has been very receptive towards the Early Career sub group, and has provided us with all the resources we need to give early career microscopists a greater presence in the RMS.

Find out more at [www.rms.org.uk/early-career](http://www.rms.org.uk/early-career)

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