



Amsterdam Rheumatology Center for AutoImmune Diseases

Introduction

ARCAID unofficially launched one year ago when the recruitment for all positions opened and interested students from all over the world started applying. After the successful kick-off meeting in January in Amsterdam (where the first fellow was already present) the recruitment started full-swing and many people were offered a position. However, the situation soon became rather different when the coronavirus pandemic hit Europe and many countries went into complete lock-down. Many fellows could not travel to Amsterdam and had to start working from home, whether in Amsterdam or even from abroad, and some were able to delay their start until they were able to travel again.

With 20 new international fellows to be hired needing permits, tax-rulings, housing and contracts, it was a challenge for the people from HR and immigration, particularly when this also had to be arranged for people starting remotely from outside The Netherlands. Unfortunately, sometimes things went wrong, but generally, with some flexibility on both sides we were able to arrange solutions, so now almost all fellows are in Amsterdam (and if we are unlucky, can spend their second lockdown here..). Below we give a short summary of the recruitment, and we hear the first impressions and personal experiences of some of the new fellows.

Hopefully, we all stay safe and will be able to do what was the intention of the ARCAID network: research and training of the new generation of leaders in autoimmune rheumatology research and creators of improved bench-to-bedside approaches.

Great interest in the ARCAID Network worldwide!

The recruitment of the ARCAID network started in October 2019. With a targeted social media campaign and strict deadlines, we received 159 applications before the first deadline of November 1st. We prolonged the deadline twice to attract more candidates (we had 240 by the end of January and 350 now), we managed to fill 15 of the positions by the end of February. We now filled another 4 positions and have only 1 left.

In the first Newsletter we met the first fellow, Sona Allaverdiyeva, who started January 1st at the AMC, marking the real start of the ARCAID project. She was followed by another 3 researchers, who introduced themselves in the previous Newsletter (Armando Olivieri, Elham Mirfazeli and Andrew Morrison). Due to the corona crisis and resulting travel and work restrictions, some start dates were postponed.

Adrian Durotin, Aiofe O'Byrne, Ihsan Hammoura, Dimitrios Nikolakis, Daria Balashova, Sofia Frigerio Liddle, Chiara Geyer, Fatemeh Khodadustvaskasi and Melis Asal have all started during May-September, and they will introduce themselves below. We will save the last fellows for the next edition of this newsletter (Giulia Frazzei, Ana Merino, Agner Parras, Utkarsh Mahamune, Roozbeh Sanaei and the last fellow to be recruited).

Impressions on Amsterdam from the ARCAID fellows that have started after May 2020.

Adrian Durotin – ESR4



For me the ARCAID project started at the beginning of the year. I got the acceptance and was excited about my new challenge. I was supposed to start in May but then...CORONA. I quit my job and my apartment in Germany and I was prepared for the move, but with all the uncertainty caused by the virus and the situation in other countries I didn't feel comfortable. Fortunately, the AMC and my supervisor were very accommodating and so I was able to postpone my move and start on September 1st. In Germany I could fortunately withdraw any resignation.

September 1st was getting closer and closer and one gets nervous with joy, but is also afraid of what lies ahead. On 26.08.2020 I finally moved and started my life in Amsterdam.

Everything was very new and the first days I had difficulties to get used to the situation. Little by little I was able to enjoy the advantages of Amsterdam, the city is really beautiful and although you are in a cosmopolitan city, it feels very village-like. On my first day at the AMC I was warmly welcomed by my group and I quickly felt integrated into the team, although many of them still work in the home office. The Dutch bureaucracy cost me some nerves but even there everything went smoothly after a while. Now I can throw myself into my new job and

concentrate on the genetic expression of HLA-complexes in autoimmune diseases. I will get a general overview and focus more specifically on splice variants and expression in different cell types.

Aiofe O'Byrne – ESR5

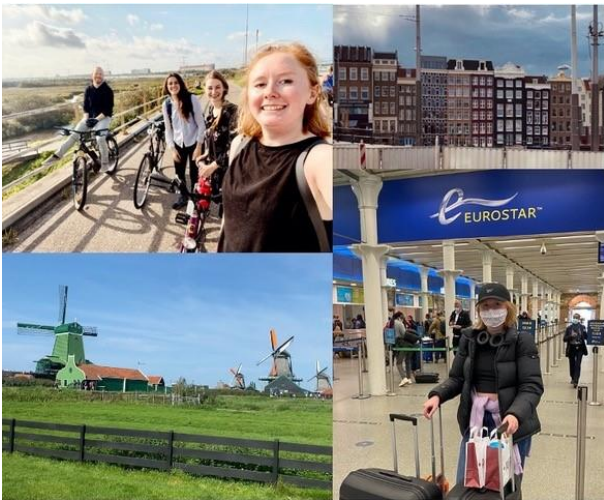
As we have all heard on numerous occasions we now live in unprecedented times. I originally was due to start the exciting adventure of my ARCAID PhD project (ESR5) with Dr. Lisa van Baarsen in June. However due to the COVID pandemic this had to be delayed.

Although I was unable to start my PhD during this time, I was able to support important COVID research during my extended period at my previous institute, King's College London working on COVID serology in-house ELISAs. Here I contributed to two different studies exploring the antibody response in a large TwinsUK cohort and a 3-month longitudinal study investigating SARS-CoV2 antibody titres post infection. I am proud to be part of this work which was extremely rewarding and was great to contribute to whilst I could not be here in Amsterdam.

Therefore, on the 1st of September after one week in Amsterdam exploring the city, building lots of IKEA furniture and discovering I will never buy a desk with drawers again, I was able to start my ARCAID project. During my first week I attended the ARDD, a virtual conference with over 2000 participants and talks from more than 65 scientists which gave me great insight into the field of ageing and senescence which was new for me!

Amongst other things, riding my bike on the right side of the road has been a new challenge from me coming from London. However, after cycling to Zaanse Schans and back with some of the other ARCAID fellows this weekend it certainly feels like I am heading in the right direction. In the coming weeks I look forward

to getting stuck into the lab and meeting more of the ARCAID network and colleagues at the AMC in person!



Ihsan Hammoura - ESR9

I have arrived to Amsterdam on the 1st of September and I have been enjoying my stay since then. It truly feels like home. I had the opportunity to meet some friends, go sightseeing and discover this wonderful city. I have felt very welcomed on the first day of work. My supervisor Dr. Marleen Van De Sande made sure to guide me through every step and introduced me to all. Nowadays, I am mostly working from home due to the Covid restrictions. I am looking forward to my work here and hopefully it would be a successful journey.



Dimitrios Nikolakis - ESR10

I am very happy to begin my PhD studies in the framework of the ARCAID project, in the

beginning of September. Due to the nice weather a couple weeks ago, I have found the opportunity for a brief sightseeing in Amsterdam. For instance, I visited some well-known places, like the Van Gogh museum. Unfortunately, the COVID cases increased again and the several restrictions cannot allow me to explore Amsterdam properly. I hope things will get better soon and I am looking forward to meet the other fellows.

Daria Balashova - ESR12



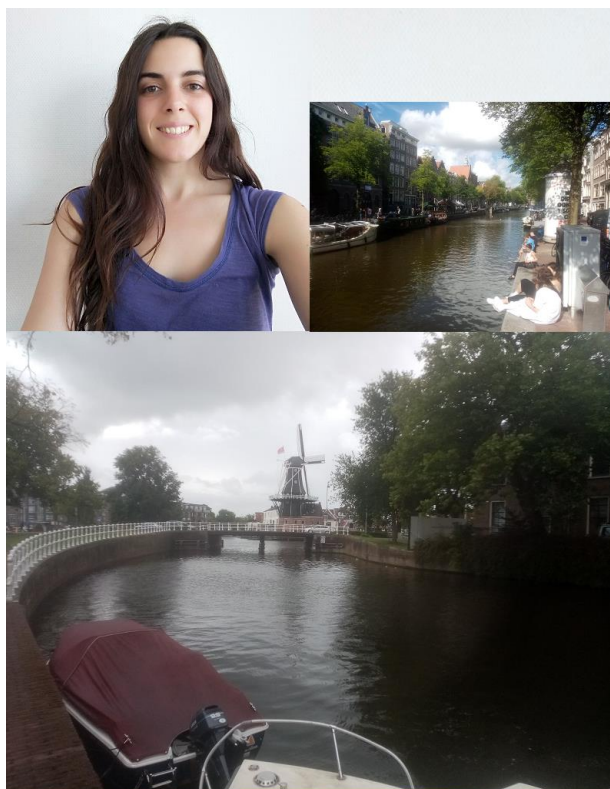
My program started as planned in May, only because of the virus, not in Amsterdam, but remotely. I really want to move to a new country and a new city, especially as beautiful as Amsterdam. And, of course, it would be much easier to start communicating with colleagues live. At the same time, I appreciate the opportunity to be close to my family during this epidemiologically troubling time.

I like the theme of my work. I believe that the collaboration of medical and bioinformatic groups will help to better understand the nature of autoimmune diseases. I like my science group. Since May, I have got to know my colleagues not only from the academic side, but also as very creative, athletic and interesting people. They play and write music, ride bicycles and grow plants, so I guess when I move to Amsterdam, I will be glad to get to know them better and share hobbies.

Sofia Frigerio Liddle - ESR13

Moving to another country and start a PhD have never been easy, and it is even more difficult and stranger in these weird times.

My start date in the ESR project number 13 was supposed to be the 1st of June, but because Coronavirus pandemic it was put off for the 1st of September. In the meantime, I have read articles and reviews that are related to my topic, so that I can have a better understanding of my project and be able to start thinking in the first experiments. I have also started writing a review, which I think it is a great way to gain more insight into my PhD's topic.



I arrived in Amsterdam in a warm and sunny day of August. During my first walks around the neighborhood, I got impressed with the beauty of the city, with the canals and the floating houses. I also really liked the fact that is a very green city, with many parks and nature where is possible to have a relaxing time. One of the first things that I did when I arrived was to pursue a bike, so that I could go around the city without taking the metro. I also visited some places which are near to Amsterdam,

such as Haarlem, an incredibly beautiful and picturesque small city, and Zandvoort, a small town near the beach, where, in spite of the wind, it was possible to enjoy a little bit of sun.

A few days after my arrival, I visited the lab, whose name is Tytgat Institute for Liver and Intestinal Research, next to AMC. Everyone there was super nice and willing to help, so I felt happy of having such a warming welcome. After that, we went to visit AMC, which is an impressive and lively building full of doctors, patients and scientists.

My activity will start on the 1st of September, and, even though many activities will be at home, I will start doing some experiments in the lab soon. I am very excited about starting to work in the project, attend meetings and meet the other ARCAID fellows as well!

Chiara Geyer - ESR16

"What a horrible time to move to another country" I thought when I boarded ICE128 with direction Amsterdam on the 26th of June. I could not have been more mistaken because my welcome in Amsterdam could not have been warmer. Already on my first day arriving here the other Amsterdam based ARCAID students decided to welcome me with a corona safe gathering in the park and I felt so happy to be part of this network.

Before I came here I had heard so many rumors about the horrible Dutch weather but Amsterdam showed its best side in the last few weeks giving me the possibility to explore the beautiful city center in the glow of the summer sun, enjoying the evenings at Gaasperplas strand and even to go on a 34 km bike tour to Zandvoort aan Zee and visit the beach.

Since the day I moved to Amsterdam a bit more than one month has passed and time flies. Even though I expected my start to be completely different before the pandemic, I was very happy when my supervisor offered me to be included in the Covid-19 research project.

Starting my PhD with the work on a such an up to date project and getting an insight into the whole process from planning complex experiments to laboratory tasks and data analysis helps me to develop important skills for the next four years that I can use to make my project ESR16 more successful as well.

It is true, the current situation demands numerous restrictions and regulations but the Experimental Immunology Department found a great way to solve the problem of transmitting corona virus infection by introducing plastic shields that can be worn during the training sessions in the lab. Due to this special regulation I had the possibility to start much earlier with the laboratory work than expected and I got great support from everyone in my group during my start at AMC.



From the weekly meeting with my supervisor answering all questions, detailed experimental planning sessions, lab work and cookie breaks with my colleagues to spontaneous after-work meetings feeding the ducks in Vondelpark suddenly there is no time left for bad thoughts any longer.

Fatemeh Khodadustvaskasi – ESR18

I remember when I got accepted for this position, I was daydreaming about it and eagerly was waiting for the start of my work. However, these colourful dreams turned to nightmare within a couple of months exactly when I wanted to be prepared for coming. Everything from flight to embassy appointment and also my work starting date, ... were suspended. You all know what I'm talking about ... Corona...and perhaps many of the ARCAID fellows have felt the same.... In this time, the friendly and supportive manner of ARCAID project staff and my supervisor, their guidance and advice helped me pass through this step and after about 3 months of delay, I moved to the Netherlands.

The nature, fresh air, canals, bikes,... I have to confess that the pictures on the websites don't give justice to the gorgeous nature of Amsterdam. You can see canals everywhere and each one just as scenic as the previous. Every street, especially in the city centre with these canals looks the same and sometimes I find it difficult to find my way without Google Maps. One thing I noticed and it was for me very interesting was that some buildings lean forward and also almost all buildings near these canals have a hook on the top front side of the roof.

I knew that cycling is very popular in Amsterdam; bicycle lanes exist in many streets, here you can see different models of bicycles. When you are biking not only you have to concentrate on cycling, but you also have to look out for signs and road markings. The triangles, squares... It took a while for me to get used to this system. One of the first things my husband and I have done was buying bike. Owning a bike can always come in handy, especially here in Amsterdam.

Still there is a lot to explore in this amazing city. Yet, we have not seen many places. Although there are safety measures and not much restriction for traveling around the city, we prefer to stay at home and avoid going to crowded places.



Melis Asal - ESR19

When I first heard about Covid-19 I did not think much about it. I definitely did not think that the virus would change our lives in just a few weeks! I am from Turkey, and the virus entered Turkey officially on 10th of March. The rest happened very quickly, all of the borders closed and all of the transportation stopped. I was supposed to start my PhD on 1st of July. As the date approached, I started worrying as the EU kept their borders closed to non-EU countries. Luckily, both PIs of mine were very helpful and cheering along the way. I started my PhD online. I was right away included in the lab meetings and other online events of Skin Lab, and felt very welcomed from the very first moment. Working online has been a challenge, but not a bad experience after all. I had enough time to dig into literature before starting in the lab, and had plenty of time to plan experiments. I finally arrived in Amsterdam on 18th of

August, and had to stay in quarantine for 10 long days. After that, I was ready to start my PhD in real life! My first day in the lab felt like a reunion, as I already knew everyone, but just not in person. Now, I enjoy the beauty of Amsterdam and feel very lucky to be a part of this team.



First ARCAID live meeting?

As it is, we are tentatively planning the first ARCAID live meeting for the fellows and PI's to get to know each other on the 23rd of October. However, of course we need to await how the situation regarding coronavirus contaminations develop and whether we are allowed to physically meet.

For more information on the network and topics/input for the next newsletter please contact the project manager (Laurian Jongejan);

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