



Young immunologists of Europe, unite!

As young scientists we are confronted with many important decisions and challenges even at the earliest stages of our careers: who can help me establish and implement the best experimental procedure for my research idea or help me fully formulate the experimental question that can be reproducibly answered using my method? How do I prepare for the next step of my career while occupied with current projects, and how can I navigate the process of establishing my own independent research? How can I have a successful scientific career and what advice is there for maintaining a work-life balance? Who can be my advocate for future job perspectives that suit my needs and interests? These challenges stand in stark contrast with the lack of experience, which comes with a junior status. Important career decisions can be difficult, especially when lacking mentorship and support.

Since the best support often comes from people who are in a similar position, in 2016 and 2017 we set up junior associations within the German (DGfI) and Italian (SIICA) Societies of immunology, respectively, with the aim of promoting and supporting the interests of young immunologists. In this article, we describe our individual national junior association activities in more detail, and present our vision for a European association of young immunologists.

SIICA Junior faculty

The SIICA Junior Faculty (JF) was established in 2017, selecting the faculty from those young members of the Society who applied for the role. The JF consists of young scientists who are mainly under 40 and they represent the young immunologists who constitute approximately 40% of

the SIICA membership. Importantly there is equal gender representation and a variety of subject expertise ranging from basic to clinical immunology.

One of the main tasks of the JF is to work with the SIICA Executive Committee to support young immunologists, notably working to involve young immunologists in the initiatives planned by SIICA. In particular, the JF helps the Executive Committee organize scientific events, with a special focus on those events dedicated to PhD students and/or young postdocs. The top scientific initiatives for young immunologists, defined in this particular instance as international recent graduate and early PhD students, are the “School of Immunology” [1] (usually held in conjunction with the SIICA National Congress) and the “International PhD retreat”. These meetings represent a special opportunity for both Italian and non-Italian students to actively engage with outstanding international immunologists, such as Prof. Alberto Mantovani, Prof. Stefan H. E. Kaufmann and Prof. Adrian Hayday to name but a few of those who have attended past events, in a very informal way. Moreover, the young scientists attending the PhD retreat have the possibility to present their own scientific data, as well as many opportunities to socialize and discuss their work, thereby creating a precious professional network. Participation of international students is particularly encouraged thanks to the availability of travel grants provided by SIICA. Thus, young immunologists from outside Italy, who are interested in attending one of these SIICA events, are very welcome. In this regard, the date for the next “SIICA School of Immunology” has recently been announced, and it will be held on 7–9 September 2020 in L’Aquila, Italy (<http://www.siica.org/siica/node/284>); the next PhD retreat will take place in 2021.

Another key SIICA activity is public engagement aimed at publicising scientific achievements that have a high impact on public health. In this context, one of the most important events is the “Univax Day”, focused on vaccines, which takes place simultaneously in most Italian Universities [2]. During this meeting, students from high schools and their teachers are warmly invited to discuss the benefits and potential risks of vaccination with experts. The experts provide compelling scientific evidence to back or refute the audience’s claims and also answer questions from the audience. The JF helps moderate the discussion and collects multimedia products of the event to be published on social networks. Our past events (February 2018–2020), have been very successful in terms of the number of universities and high schools involved and, most importantly, in terms of the debates that were unleashed.

In order to reach the largest number of people possible among SIICA members and the public, the JF also spreads information about all SIICA events on the web. As social networks represent an established way of communication among people of all ages, but notably amongst the young, we decided to manage a SIICA Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/siica.immunologia>), as well as create a SIICA account on Twitter (@SiicaI). We commonly use Facebook and Twitter to inform SIICA members about both SIICA and other European Societies’ events. Additionally, we decided to create a SIICA YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC5jjFh6tOARju4IKlvUHKQ/featured>) to broadcast SIICA events and have posted several interviews with scientific experts.

To keep our society “young” and to embrace new ideas, we aim to have a regular turnover of the young immunologists forming the JF. Most of the current JF are

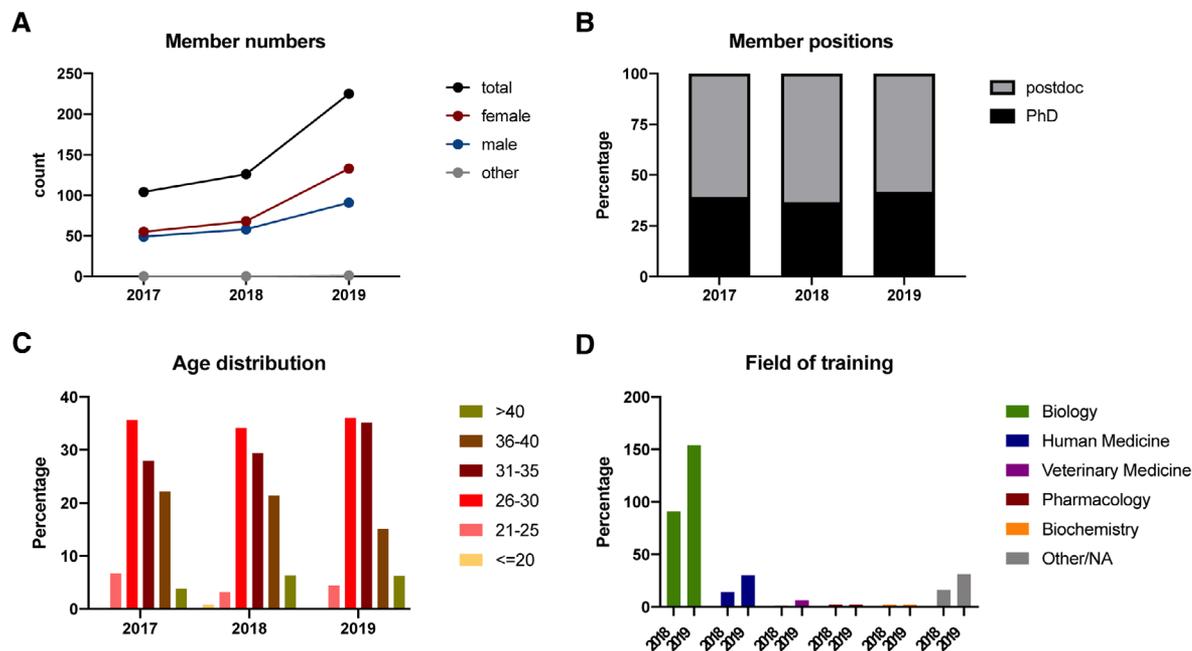


Figure 1. DGfI 'Young Immunologists' member demographics.

going to finish their terms of service in the autumn of this year. It has been a fantastic professional and life experience and we have really had a great time in the Board improving our skills in terms of scientific communication and the spirit of collaboration. For this reason, we hope that our initiative will be continued by new enthusiastic, passionate and collaborative young immunologists, who are driven by this wonderful mission. Therefore, we encourage all the SIICA young members to apply to become members of the new Board (a link on the SIICA website – www.siica.org – will be available soon) and we hope the new JF members will experience the same satisfaction that we had during this wonderful journey.

DGfI 'Young Immunologists'

The DGfI 'Young Immunologists' (YI) were founded in 2016 at the DGfI conference in Hamburg, and thanks to detailed feedback from 139 young scientists obtained by surveying a subset of the DGfI, we set up our aims, membership rules and organizational structure accordingly. Our objectives are to i) foster a network among young immunologists, ii) strengthen early career development, iii) enable the exchange of methods and ideas among young scientists, iv) be engaged in lobbying both within the

DGfI and beyond and v) support young scientists in general. Since our association aims to promote young scientist careers specifically, YI membership ends either 12 years after obtaining the doctorate degree, upon leaving DGfI or at the age of 40, but members with 'non-linear CVs' can also extend their membership depending on circumstances.

By now we have 225 members (representing approximately one sixth of DGfI members), with female members exceeding the number of male members for the first time in 2019 (Fig. 1A). About 60% of us are postdocs while 40% are doctoral students, and we are mostly around 25 to 35 years of age (Fig. 1B–C). Most of our members have a background in biology, but the number of medical scientists is rising (Fig. 1D). A maximum of seven young immunologists form the advisory board, and they name among themselves a speaker and a co-speaker. Each board member serves a term of two years, and the board members are selected by all YI members through online voting. The first elected YI advisory board started their work in 2017, and this is being continued by a new board elected in 2019. Over the past three years we have launched our own section within the DGfI website (<https://dgfi.org/young-immunologists/>) as well as a Twitter account (@YI.dgfi), promoted YI activities, contributed a YI workshop at a meeting of the signal trans-

duction society, started regional meetings, and refined our bylaws (Fig. 2).

In the future we aim to set a more specific focus on early career development and also address special issues like maternity/paternity leave and provide advice/discuss what to do if you find yourself in difficult work situations. A central part of our work has been to contribute young scientist 'building blocks' to our annual DGfI conferences. At the conference in Erlangen, a year after our foundation, we organized several activities which addressed our core objectives (Fig. 2). A dedicated YI scientific session took place just after the official opening of the conference in order to increase young scientists' visibility in the immunology community. Six young scientists had the chance to present their research data in short talks in the large auditorium, which would typically be reserved for renowned invited speakers in plenary sessions. To promote networking opportunities, we organized a social evening for young immunologists on the night before the 'official social evening' of the entire congress. Furthermore, we set up our own lunch session during the symposium – on the topic of time management – and offered child care for parents who depended on being able to bring their children to the conference, in order to offer general support and address some of the critical issues facing young scientists in a very practical way. These YI activities

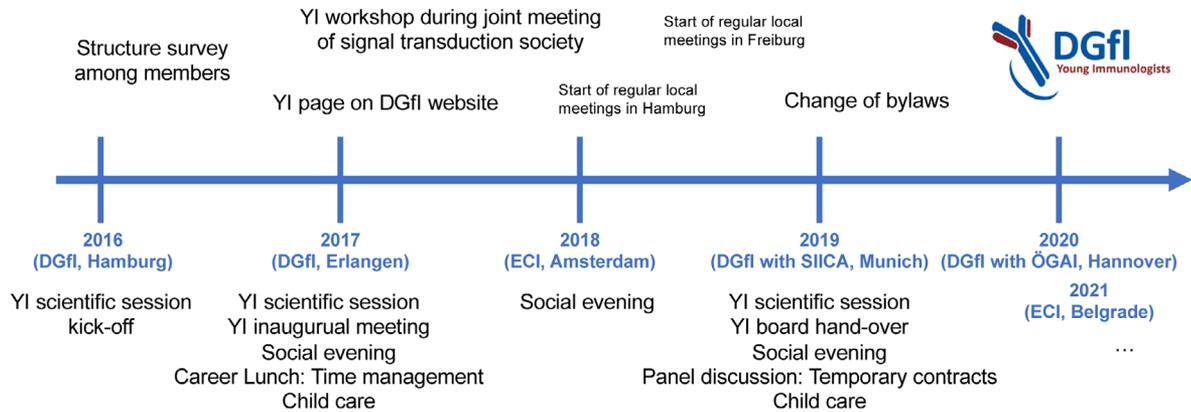


Figure 2. Timeline of key activities of the DGfI 'Young Immunologists' since the group's foundation in 2016.

(scientific session, social evening, lunch session, child care) have, by now, become an integral part of DGfI conferences.

Towards a European young immunologist initiative

Connecting young immunologist societies within Europe, such as those of the German and Italian Societies and beyond, would further increase the visibility of young scientists and enable us to address, at a European level, the issues that are most relevant for junior scientists such as building a successful career. As national examples of young immunology societies, three things are particularly important to us.

First, we are currently in the process of setting up a network of existing junior associations of national societies of immunology in Europe. To this end, we are actively

reaching out to Societies and working with EIFS. You can also contact us directly, if you are active in such a junior association and interested in working with us. Regarding European initiatives, we already organized a social evening at the European Congress of Immunology (ECI) in Amsterdam in 2018, and are planning on extending our activities at the ECI conference in Belgrade in 2021.

Second, we believe that we should team up with other junior societies whenever possible! At the joint DGfI and SIICA conference in Munich in 2019, young immunologists from Germany and Italy selected abstracts for the joint early career researcher scientific session together. To address the common challenges faced by early career scientists, we organized panel discussions on funding opportunities (SIICA), as well as on temporary contracts and job perspectives (DGfI), for young researchers in Italy and Germany. Finally,

we fostered our international network while having a great time at a social evening that was exclusively for young immunologists and held in one of the most famous Munich breweries, and our junior association members represented the lion's share of our national teams in a football match Germany (DGfI) vs. Italy (SIICA) (Fig. 3).

Third, if no junior association exists within your national immunology society yet, we encourage you to set one up! By doing so, you can create an important infrastructure for your own, as well as for future generations of young immunologists in Europe. It is worth mentioning that our own young associations have not encountered any resistance, but rather only encouragement and support from the senior colleagues of our respective national immunology societies, despite the fact that the formal involvement and representation of young scientists in Societies



Figure 3. Football match Germany (DGfI) vs. Italy (SIICA) at joint DGfI-SIICA conference in Munich 2019. Young immunologists represented the majority of players.

brings additional work and new challenges for all; however, our senior colleagues are fully aware that young scientists represent the future, and that their early involvement is beneficial for everyone. On a final note, although we are looking at this from a European perspective, we're also interested in hearing from any young immunologist associations within National Immunological Societies beyond Europe as we're sure we can all learn from each other.

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