

# ESO Fellow Days 2021 in Cyberspace

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We used the unique circumstances of the global pandemic to reboot the ESO Fellow Days as a virtual online meeting. More than twenty Fellows connected to a two-day meeting on 20 and 21 October 2021 via the collaboration platform Microsoft Teams and the virtual reality space Gather. The activities of the event were chosen in advance by public vote. Feedback from the participants testified to their overall satisfaction and exposed the need to have meetings between Chilean and Garching Fellows on a regular basis.

The ESO Fellow Days were originally envisioned as internal ESO symposia held in turn in Santiago and in Garching. They were seen as a means to advertise the high-level science done by the Fellows within the organisation (Emsellem, Klaassen & West, 2011). These meetings also allowed fellows to interact with each other and provided career-building activities aimed at them. However, the last ESO Fellow Days were in 2012 (West & Emsellem, 2012) and the current generation of Fellows were missing out on the exchange with their peers on the other side of the globe. As new forms of remote collaborative opportunities gained traction during the pandemic, the idea of having a virtual meeting, organised by Fellows, was born. The duration and activities of this event were decided by public vote from an initial list of ideas that were brainstormed by the organisers.

Guided by the vote, we organised two half-day (mornings in Chile, afternoons in Germany) programmes that consisted of career-building activities and free-form discussion. After the meeting we gathered feedback from the participants in the form of a survey in which participants could score their satisfaction with the agenda items on a scale from 1 (very dis-

satisfied) to 5 (very satisfied), with free-text fields that allowed them to submit more detailed comments. Overall the meeting was a success, the general satisfaction level being 4.3, and the meeting duration was seen optimal.

Our meeting kicked off with a welcome address by ESO Director General Xavier Barcons. In his speech he emphasised how Fellowship holders establish an important link between the astronomical community and ESO. This is exemplified by the fact that numerous former Fellows now hold leading positions at world-class astronomical research institutions where they are actively involved in the development of new instrumentation for ESO facilities.

The public vote regarding possible career-building activities at the Fellow Days revealed a strong interest in guidance on European Research Council grant applications. With financial support from the Santiago Office for Science we hired a professional research consultant offering grant-writing services for research and innovation projects. The 90-minute seminar — Touching the Stars with ERC — provided an introduction to the ERC application and evaluation process. Many questions during the session reflected interest in the topic, although the post-meeting survey showed that not all participants were equally satisfied with the seminar (score: 3.2). Some survey respondents approved of the introductory nature, but others would have preferred a deeper exposition tailored more specifically to astronomers.

Current Fellows also wanted to connect with former Fellows. This was achieved by organising a 90-minute panel discussion with ESO Fellowship alumni. The panel consisted of five alumni at three different career tracks<sup>2</sup>: corporate, academic, and staff at ESO. Getting first-hand accounts of post-fellowship CVs offered a glimpse of the existing opportunities. The lively discussion with the panellists provided encouragement to the current Fellows in respect of their future careers. This get-together with alumni was regarded by many participants as the highlight of the Fellow Days (satisfaction score: 4.8) and should therefore be repeated in future.

We also wanted to provide space for informal interactions, as this was an important component of the real-world Fellow Days. However, classical video conferencing software does not allow for the desired spontaneity and hence we used Gather<sup>1</sup>, a video chat platform that incorporates spatial dynamics. We set up dedicated meeting spaces in Gather for different areas of scientific interest (stars, galaxies, and planets) and a general hangout space (Figure 1). The latter was the platform for lively exchanges on the differences in the duties of Chilean and Garching Fellows. The opportunity to connect via Gather was generally well received (satisfaction score: 3.8), but some participants would have preferred a more structured approach. However, it was our intention to emulate the “chaotic” social component of a meeting, where serendipitous exchange may lead to new creative insights and future collaborations. Maybe this important component of real-world meetings cannot be translated adequately into the virtual realm.

Still, while we could not meet in person, the expansion of online meetings and remote working during the pandemic enabled the Fellows of the organisation to come closer together. We hope that the tradition of having ESO Fellow Days will be continued by the coming generations of ESO Fellows. Networking is necessary for sharing perspectives and gaining new



Figure 1. ESO Fellows discussing science and duties using the Gather platform at the Fellow Days 2021. Top: General hangout space. Bottom: Topical meeting rooms.

ideas. The ESO Fellow Days could be seen as a cornerstone of the ESO Fellowship in the future, to the benefit of Fellows' careers and ESO in the long term.

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#### References

- Emsellem, E., Klaassen, P. & West, M. 2011, *The Messenger*, 144, 53  
West, M. & Emsellem, E. 2012, *The Messenger*, 147, 44

#### Links

- <sup>1</sup> Gather: <https://www.gather.town/>

#### Notes

<sup>a</sup> The non-academic corporate track was represented by Jason Grunhut, a 2012 Garching Fellow who now leads a Data Science Team at TELUS Digital in Canada, and Carla Gil, a 2006 Chile Fellow, who now is an Associate Director at Genmab in Denmark (see "Fellows at ESO" in *The Messenger* No. 157, p.54 and No. 136, p.78, respectively). The academic track was represented by Kate Maguire, a 2013 Marie Curie Fellow hosted in Garching (*The Messenger* No. 158, p.61) who now is an Assistant Professor at Trinity College Dublin in Ireland, and Andra Stroe, a 2015 Garching Fellow (*The Messenger* No. 166, p.69), who now holds the Clay Fellowship at the Center for Astrophysics | Harvard & Smithsonian in the US. The route towards becoming staff at ESO was represented by Andrea Mehner, a 2011 Chile Fellow (*The Messenger* No. 153, p.43), who is now an ESO Astronomer with duties at Paranal Observatory.

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Aerial view of La Silla Observatory, ESO's original observing site. It is located on the outskirts of the Chilean Atacama Desert, 600 km north of Santiago de Chile and at an altitude of 2400 metres.

