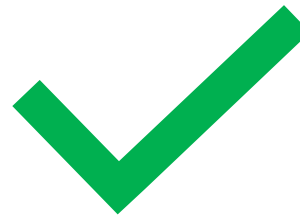


# From failure to success – my MSCA experience

Ciaran Gilchrist

Postdoctoral Researcher  
Umeå University, Sweden  
(Soon to be UiO, Norway)

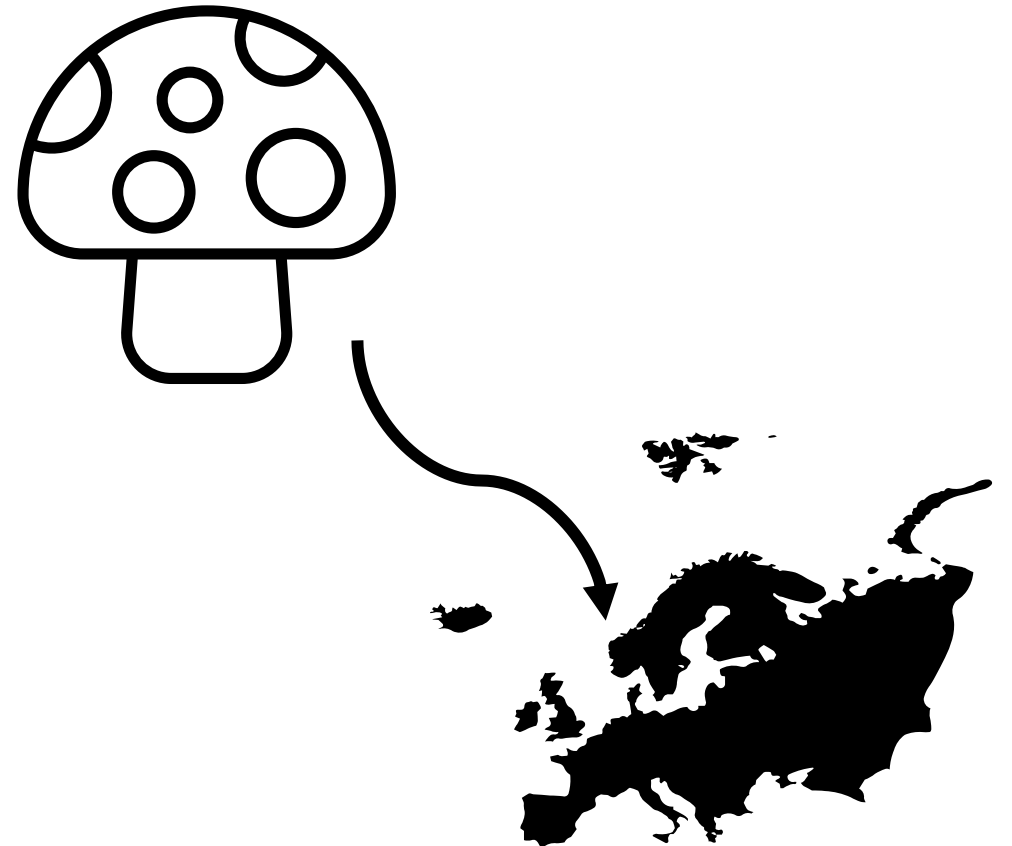


# Who am I?

- Scottish/Irish national but based in Sweden for almost 10 years
- PhD from Stockholm University in October 2022
  - First MSCA application autumn 2023 ~1yr post-defence, unsuccessful
- Postdoc at Umeå University since December 2023
  - Second MSCA application autumn 2024 ~2yr post-defence, successful
- Will begin my MSCA postdoc at UiO in autumn 2025

# Studying hybrid speciation and introgression using a natural fungal model system

- Inger Skrede main supervisor – Oslo Mycology Group (OMG)
- Life Sciences project – how a forest decomposer evolves and hybridises in forests across Europe, and in the lab
- Fieldwork, lab work, bioinformatics
- Contribute molecular biology skills, evolutionary background, analysis skills
- Gain experience in field work (never done!) and improve my genomic analyses skills



# My applications

## Marie Curie 2023 *Unsuccessful*

### Project FunHy

- Overall score – 77.00%
  - Excellence – 3.50
  - Impact - 5.00
  - Implementation – 3.00
- My first time writing a grant application
- 1 year post-defence

## Marie Curie 2024 *Successful*

### Project FINESSE

- Overall score – 97.80%
  - Excellence – 4.90
  - Impact - 4.80
  - Implementation – 5.00
- No change in publications
- Similar time spent as in the previous year
- Only my second application
- 2 years post-defence

## First round timing

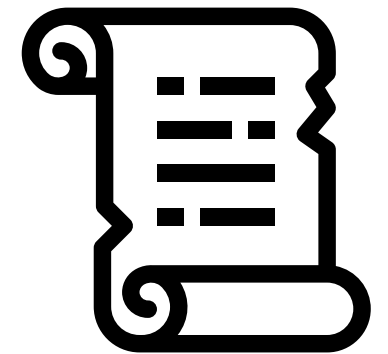
- Spring 2023 – 2<sup>nd</sup> place in postdoc application to UiO. Let's write a grant!
- Spring 2023 – Attended masterclass, begun writing
- Summer 2023 – missed deadline for external review but got review internally
- Autumn 2023 – chaotic timing with holidays and other postdoc applications, but managed to submit the completed application
- February 2024 – rejection, but positive comments. Another round?

## Second round timing

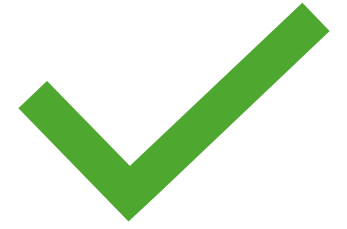
- May 2024 – attend MSCA masterclass, making changes and writing as I go
- Late June 2024 – Full draft complete: sent to external reviewer and took a well-deserved summer holiday 😊
- July 2024 – got feedback from external reviewer but continued with holidays
- Early August 2024 – began rewrite based on extensive feedback
- September 2024 – submit completed application with a week to spare

# Feedback – round 1

What the reviewers thought of our first MSCA application

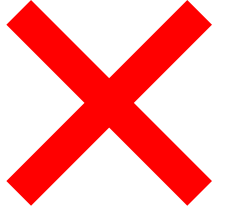


# Reviewer positives round 1



- “The proposed research is ambitious and clearly moves the field beyond the well-described state of the art”
- Both the supervisor (Inger) and I are well suited for the project
- Impact – only positive comments and maximum score

# Criterion 1 – Excellence Weaknesses



- *“The acquisition of sample collections from different regions and countries via third parties reduces the likelihood that the objectives will be realised”* **We had not made clear that we were carrying out the fieldwork ourselves**
- *“The methodologies to be used are not clearly explained.”* **We needed to clearly and specifically explain our methods and terminology**
- *“The knowledge that the researcher will transfer to the host is not convincingly substantiated with specific measures to foster it”* **We had not made clear what I would bring and how I would transfer it to the host**
- *“The training activities are limited to scientific training within the host group. Although a "Postdoctoral Career Success Programme" at the host university is mentioned, it is not clear how the researcher will take advantage of it, particularly regarding transferable skills”* **We were not clear as to the extra training I would get when, and how I would improve my non-scientific skills**



## Criterion 3 – implementation weaknesses



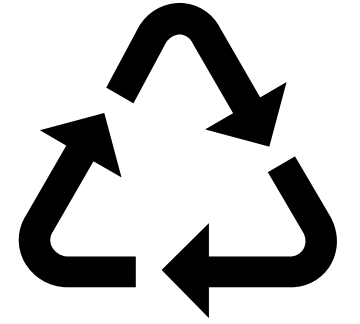
- *“The workplan has insufficiently described deliverables and milestones, and the effort assigned to each WP is not adequately justified”* **We had not made clear our working packages and maybe needed a bit of a rethink on them**
- *“While an explicit contingency plan is provided, the identification, probability and the severity of certain risks are underestimated”* **We needed to justify our risks and maybe err more on overestimating than underestimating the risks**

# What I changed for round 2

Based on feedback from first application and external reviewer

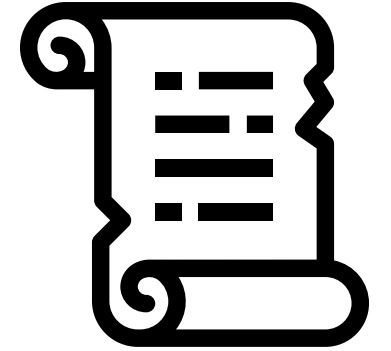


# Things that stayed the same



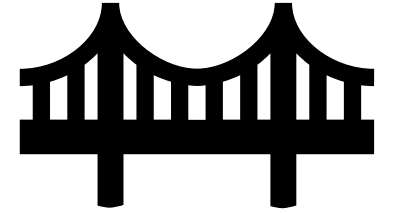
- Publications – no new publications in these 12 months
- Was working while writing both times
  - No huge break to focus on writing
- Experience broadly similar
  - 1 year extra and employed as a postdoc for part of this
- No massive change in skillset
- Didn't spend loads of extra time for the successful application
  - But better forward planning around timing of meetings, feedback and writing

# Things I did differently - content



- The project content and experiments were broadly the same
  - Went from 4 to 3 scientific working packages
  - Same themes and ideas
- More clear explanations
  - No misunderstandings about fieldwork, made clear we would carry it out
  - Clearly worded the exact ways in which we would carry out the work rather than more vague explanations
    - Probably the most time was spent planning and writing the specifics for each project and objective
- More time and extra space in the application for other training activities

# Things I did differently - structure



- Changed the structure of our working packages (WP)
  - Included 3 scientific working packages (4 was too many)
  - Included 3 other packages related to project management, training, and communication and dissemination
- WPs put into table including their tasks, and milestones/deliverables
- Risks – made sure they were clear and not underestimated

**Each WP is split into  
several tasks**

**Milestones and  
deliverables were  
stated clearly here**

**Science WPs**

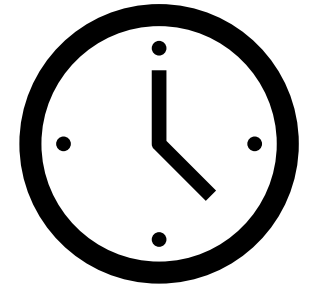
**WP just for project  
management**

**WP for training**

**WP for communication  
and dissemination**

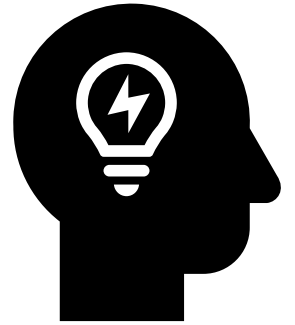
WPs	Tasks	Milestones/Deliverables
<b>WP1</b> Atlantic population field study	<b>T1.a</b> Collect field samples <b>T1.b</b> Culture field samples <b>T1.c</b> Prepare samples for sequencing <b>T1.d</b> Sequencing <b>T1.e</b> Sequencing analyses <b>T1.f</b> Writing and publication	<b>M1.</b> Completion of all field sample collections <b>D1.</b> Report on analysis of samples collected from first year's field season
<b>WP2</b> Hybrid growth and sequencing	<b>T2.a</b> Generate hybrids in lab <b>T2.b</b> Measure growth of populations <b>T2.c</b> Analyse growth data <b>T2.d</b> Prepare samples for sequencing <b>T2.e</b> DNA extraction and sequencing <b>T2.f</b> Sequencing analyses <b>T2.g</b> Writing and publication	<b>M2a.</b> All hybrids have been generated <b>M2b.</b> All hybrids have been sequenced <b>D2a.</b> Report on growth phenotypes of hybrids <b>D2b.</b> Report on hybrid sequence analyses
<b>WP3</b> Hybrid transformation	<b>T3.a</b> Identification of potential target genes <b>T3.b</b> CRISPR-Cas9 transformations <b>T3.c</b> Growth measurements <b>T3.d</b> Writing and publication	<b>M3.</b> Completion of all genetic transformations <b>D3.</b> Summary of transformed strains and growth patterns
<b>WP4</b> Project management	<b>T4.</b> General project management	<b>M4.</b> Completion of deliverable <b>D1</b> <b>D4a.</b> Mobility declaration <b>D4b.</b> Evaluation questionnaire <b>D4c.</b> Data management plan <b>D4d.</b> Research dissemination
<b>WP5</b> Training	<b>T5.a</b> Bioinformatics training <b>T5.b</b> CRISPR-Cas9 training <b>T5.c</b> Postdoc career success programme <b>T5.d</b> Other training	<b>M5.</b> Completion of CRISPR-Cas9 training <b>D5.</b> Career development plan
<b>WP6</b> Communication and dissemination	<b>T6.a</b> Webpage upkeep <b>T6.b</b> Outreach <b>T6.c</b> Conferences	<b>M6.</b> Create webpage on uio.no <b>D6.</b> Update on outcome of planned outreach activities

# Other things I did differently



- Better planning of time writing
  - Getting complete draft before summer for external folk
  - Timing around summer holidays (not needing feedback in July)
- Taking time during working hours to write application
  - May be dependent on your current situation
- Had a decent draft to work off of
  - The first application really helped as a template –nothing is wasted!

# What you can think about when writing



- Make everything clear to read
  - Don't assume the reviewer will magically know what you mean
- Be specific in what your methods and techniques are
  - Specific is better than vague
- Timing and planning are important
  - Remember that Nordic folk like their summer holidays
- Getting external or internal reviews are important
  - Someone outside of you and your supervisor to look at the application
- Writing applications is tiring, so look after yourself!



# Any Questions?

Cheers for listening!

Email: [ciaran.gilchrist@umu.se](mailto:ciaran.gilchrist@umu.se)