

The University of Sheffield ERA-AGE Co-ordination Team



**Professor
Alan Walker**



**Kate
Chadwick**

ERA-AGE contact address:

**Project Secretary
Department of Sociological Studies
The University of Sheffield
Elmfield Building
Sheffield
S10 2TU, UK**

Tel: +44 (0) 114 222 6458/6418

Fax: +44 (0) 114 222 6492

Email: era-age@sheffield.ac.uk

www.shef.ac.uk/era-age

ERA AGE

**European
Research
Area in
Ageing**

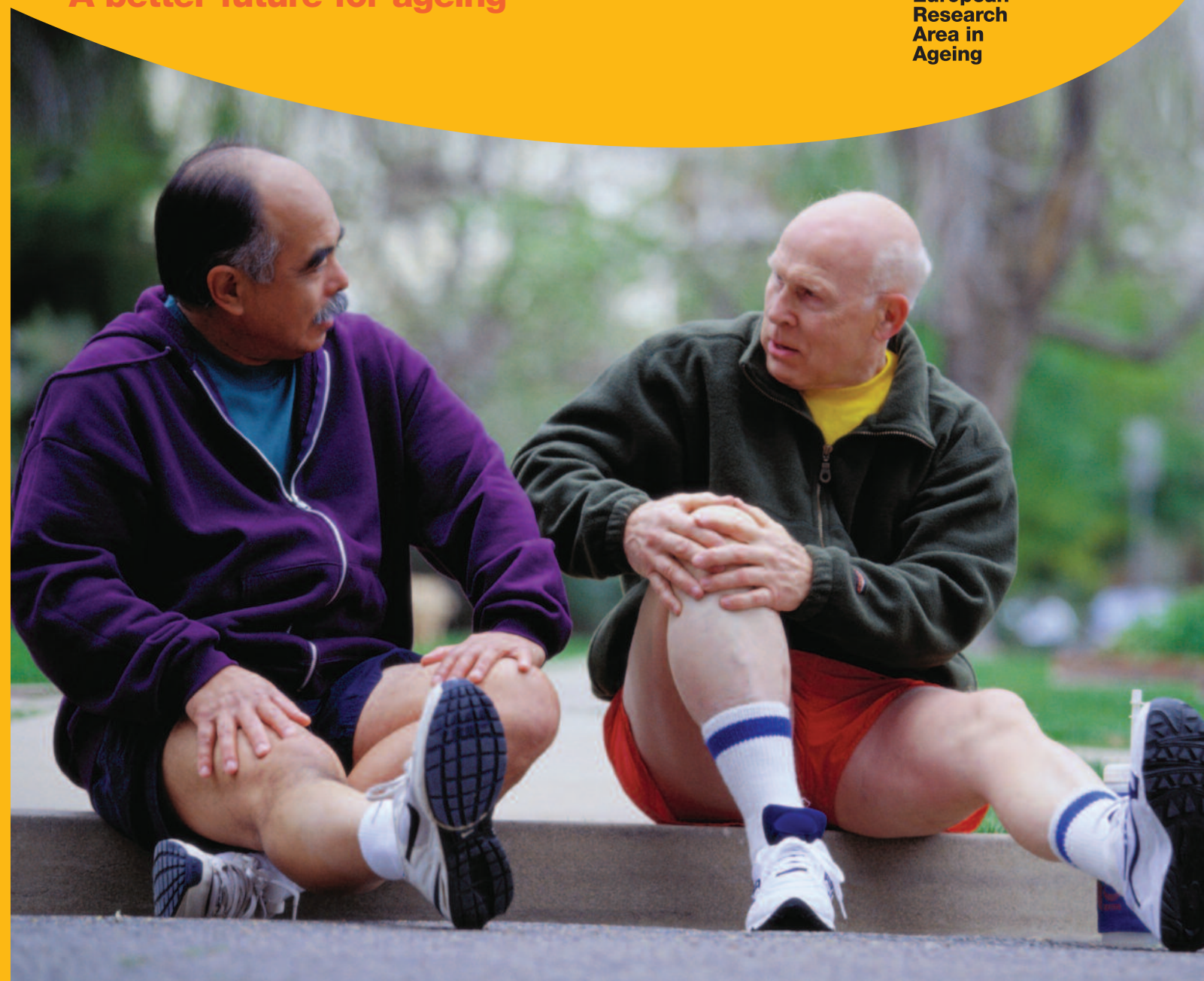
NEWS

Issue 11 Winter 2008

A better future for ageing

ERA AGE

**European
Research
Area in
Ageing**



Project Progress

Welcome to the eleventh ERA-AGE Newsletter. ERA-AGE is the European Research Area in Ageing. This is a European ERA-NET or coordination activity that brings together research councils and ministries in twelve countries with dedicated research programmes or initiatives in the field of ageing. As was reported in the last newsletter, ERA-AGE has launched Europe's first research programme on ageing funded jointly by Member States. The Future Leaders of Ageing

Research in Europe (FLARE) Post-doctoral Programme held its first summer school in June and, in this newsletter, we include a full report on proceedings by one of its organisers, Kenneth Abrahamsson. There is also an editorial by ERA-AGE Director, Alan Walker, on why it is essential for Europe to fund ageing research. You will find further details of ERA-AGE activities, including the FLARE Programme and summer school, on the website – www.era-age.group.shef.ac.uk.



**SIXTH FRAMEWORK
PROGRAMME**

European Commission
6th Framework Programme
ERA-NET/1/CA-SSA
No.510177

Why Europe Must Fund Ageing Research

There is no doubt that, over the past decade, population ageing has climbed steadily to the top of the policy agenda. Few in national or European policy making circles retain any lingering doubts that, along with climate change, security and the recent credit crunch, ageing is important enough to be labelled a 'grand challenge'. It is paradoxical, therefore, that in research terms ageing is far from occupying a status commensurate with its policy priority. Within the Member States the priority given to ageing research is patchy, with only a minority mounting dedicated programmes in this field and, even when the priority has been recognised, as in the case of Germany's first federal programme of ageing research launched in 2006, there is no guarantee that this will be sustained. At the EU level the last Framework Programme to have a dedicated ageing theme was the 5th one. It is difficult not to interpret the absence of a core theme on ageing in FP6 and FP7 as a comment on its low priority. There are no reliable figures, that I am aware of, concerning spending on ageing research by Member States and it is impossible to discern precisely what is spent on this topic within the Framework Programmes.

This inadequate situation in Europe contrasts directly with the USA which has had a National Institute on Aging since 1974. Its mission is to conduct a broad scientific effort to understand the nature of ageing and to extend healthy and active years of life. The NIA not only funds substantial research programmes but is also dedicated to the training and development of a cutting-edge scientific community and the creation and maintenance of the necessary research resources to support these efforts.

The budget allocated directly by Congress is over \$1 billion (2008). In Europe there is no comparable activity in terms of either mission or budget. ERA-AGE is the only coordination body but its resources are meagre in comparison with the US NIA. The fact that we were able to mount Europe's first joint funded research programme on ageing – the FLARE Post-doctoral Programme – is a tribute to the prioritisation of ageing research in the eight member states that fund it (Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Romania, Sweden and the UK). There are no resources for sustaining this programme or for creating a European infrastructure to coordinate ageing research.

Why is funding ageing research so critical? As recognised by the US, more than 30 years ago, if the added years of life resulting from the demographic bonus are to benefit both society and the individuals concerned, there must be a sound evidence-base on which to build policies and practices. In addition there is huge economic potential in the generation and development of new products (and markets) linked to the older population. A major commitment to ageing research is necessary also to attract and retain a new generation of scientists dedicated to this field. At present more generously funded research areas such as cancer attract large numbers of young scientists but, in fact, age is the major risk factor for cancer (and coronary heart disease and stroke) and it is vital to enlarge our understanding quickly of the precise role it plays.

As well as recognising the significance of ageing for both individuals and society through substantial funding it is crucial for Europe to act in a concerted way. First of all coordinated action in this field is essential to prevent, as far as possible, duplication of effort and to maximise added value from funding. Secondly Europe needs to maximise its research resources in this field by cooperation and the cross-national sharing of expertise, data and instruments. Some Member States are relatively new to ageing research or are too small to develop expertise in every aspect of it. Thirdly, in some specialist areas, including newly developing ones such as environmental gerontology and gerontechnology, collaboration across borders is the key to critical mass.

This case for ageing research and for European coordination will form part of a major conference on the future of ageing research to be held in Brussels in February 2009 (details on the ERA-AGE website).

Alan Walker
Director, ERA-AGE

FLARE Summer School 2008 – A Learning Experience



BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

The idea of a summer school was launched parallel to the discussion of the FLARE initiative. The purpose was to strengthen the network and community feeling among the FLARE post-docs, to promote multidisciplinary interests and to focus on career planning and development.

The summer school was organised and funded jointly by ERA-AGE, the Swedish Research Council for Working Life and Social Research and the Swedish Foundation for Health Care Science and Allergy Research (Vårdal Foundation) and the Vårdal Institute. The domestic planning group consisted of Kerstin Carsjö, Research Secretary, FAS, Kenneth Abrahamsson, Programme Director, FAS, and Professor Ingalll Rahm Hallberg, Vardal Institute. It was held between Sunday June 22nd and Friday June 27th, 2008 and the venue was Örenäs castle in the southern most part of Sweden. Örenäs is less than ten miles from the city of Landskrona and a half hour drive from Lund, the nearest university city.

The number of course participants was 29. In addition to the FLARE post-docs, a few post-docs from the ERA-AGE partners who did not participate in FLARE also joined in the course as well as a few post-docs from the Vårdal Institute. All participants, however, were active in the area of ageing research and had interest and/or experience in multi/cross-disciplinary research. Leading European experts were invited, covering academic fields such as demography, biogerontology, social gerontology, geriatrics, epidemiology/public health and psychology. Attention was also paid to career planning and European research funding strategies.

FLARE Summer School 2008 – A Learning Experience

GETTING TOGETHER AND STARTING UP

On Sunday evening all participants arrived, although not without problems and barriers such as lost luggage, a lost computer, delayed flights and cancelled train connections from Copenhagen Airport, Kastrup. The last person to arrive, having experienced several delays, was Professor Alan Walker, the coordinator of ERA-AGE and other major initiatives concerning ageing research in Europe during the last decades.

Örenäs castle greeted the FLARE participants on early Monday morning with splendid weather – a blue sky and a blue waterfront provided a nice and creative context for blue-sky research. The organisation team – Kenneth Abrahamsson, Kerstin Carsjö and Ingalill Rahm Hallberg gave words of welcome followed by Alan Walker, who presented an overview of the ERA-AGE mission and the FLARE initiative to support future leaders of ageing research. He also shared ideas on the development of ageing research in the UK, the programme labelled The New Dynamics of Ageing, which is a joint investment by five British research councils (www.newdynamics.group.shef.ac.uk).

All participants had written abstracts, produced a poster and also gave a short introduction of their research projects after lunch on the first day. The time allotted for individual presentations was, however, a bit short, just a few minutes. The presentations covered memory research, ethical issues concerning life quality in ageing societies, basic medical research on the pool of T-cells and how they develop over the life span, a comparative study of fertility and demography in France, Greece and UK and a study on palliative care from a staff perspective. Other fields reflected in the research plans were the role of formal and informal care and the division between the family obligations and the public sector, as well as a growing private market for ageing care. All in all, it provided a good illustration of the multi-disciplinary approach of the FLARE mission.

Five heterogeneous teams were created to work with three thematic challenges during the week: a research proposal for the 8th Framework Programme; research career development in ageing research, and, finally, models of network building and collaborative platforms during the FLARE-mission. The Summer School aimed at a multi-disciplinary bridge building mission, creating an arena for a dialogue between post-docs with basic and applied approaches, covering the whole life span from bio-medical, psychological, sociological, health care science, economic and ethical perspectives.

THEMATIC LECTURES, GROUP WORK AND CONTINUOUS DISCUSSIONS

Tommy Bengtsson, Professor of Economic History, Centre for Economic Demography, Lund University held the first lecture. He discussed three major demographic challenges. The first challenge was population growth – a development that was described as a major threat to humanity during the 20th century, but that did not have the foreseen implications. The second threat – or challenge – was the development towards ageing societies and the lower fertility rates and increasing longevity. Thirdly, Tommy Bengtsson raised the issue of population decline in certain countries and the role of international migration.

The second working day also included a comparative outlook over research funding strategies with special focus on the Marie Curie Mobility Programme. Attention was also paid to career planning and career development in research, experiences from the European Science Foundation's network on research careers as well as discussions on work life balance policies for scholars.

The third day of the Summer School started with a lecture and discussion together with Kaare Christensen, Professor in Epidemiology at University of Southern Denmark, Odense. His lecture focussed on three issues; why do we age so differently, which are the determinants of longevity and which are the possibilities of interventions due to the plasticity of human beings. How can you do research on how differences are being developed? Which are the natural experiments with human beings? What do we know about the causes of death – how can we analyse differences between different age-cohorts with regard to life course and death. Is it possible to make semi-experiments or get close to natural experiments, e.g. during disasters and war?

One example was from the Second World War in Holland where one part of the country was deprived of food. Issues of selection effect and survival rates also need to be analysed. Another illuminating example was the annual death risk of people living in former West and East Germany before and after re-unification. This example, however, stimulated interesting questions. Why not go back in history to look at the 20th century as a whole? Maybe some of the differences already were in place from the 1920's or the 1930's?

CONTINUED DISCUSSIONS ON HOW AND WHY WE AGE?

Professor Mats Thorslund, Ageing Research Centre, Stockholm gave an overview of life expectancy in Sweden and other countries. Furthermore, he discussed the changes with regard to the relative proportion of gainfully employed persons and older citizens in need of costly social and medical support. Another part of Professor Thorslund's lecture was various methods to assess ADL functions (activities of daily living), such as mobility issues; can you walk 100 metres, can you walk up stairs, rise from a chair, stand without support or are you bedridden? Similar tests were also made in the SWEOLD study, by defining various physical activities. Mats Thorslund also presented a conceptual model to study the support – in family or by the public sector – with regard to age and functional ability. A main part of the lecture reflected on value and quality of various methods to study and assess life quality and living conditions of very old citizens.

After the lunch break the FLARE Summer School continued its scientific journey into the brain and cognitive science or neuropsychology with the guidance of Professor Kristine E. Walhovd, Centre for the Study of Human Cognition, University of Oslo. Her field covered cognitive development and cognitive change in a life-span perspective looking at individuals from seven years of age to 95. Two central concepts were cognition and plasticity.

Walhovd gave strong empirical evidence on the falling cognitive capacity over the lifespan as tested by the Californian Verbal Learning Test. Age related differences could also be related to the difference between recall and recognition, which was illustrated by strong empirical evidence. Inhibition and automated response is also a response increasing over time. One theory mentioned was speed of processing theory – older people become somewhat slower. On the other hand, the frontal lobe theories say that speed is not the whole explanation. There is a lot of complex and competing evidence in this sense.

The final day of the FLARE Summer School included an expert lecture from Professor Janet Lord, Professor of Immune Cell Biology, at University of Birmingham, UK on '*Immune senescence: an exemplar of physiological decline with age*'. Janet Lord gave an inspiring introduction to theories and results from bio-medical studies on ageing and the interaction between genetic determinants, environment, nutrition, life style and social gradients of public health. She also discussed more fundamental scientific questions such as how the ageing process is reflected over the life-course, and why do people age differently?

SUMMING UP THE FLARE SUMMER SCHOOL

All in all, the Summer School was supposed to integrate various activities. Firstly, all participants should present their own research both in the form of a poster and an abstract. Secondly, the group discussions on options and barriers to multi/inter-disciplinary research were a high priority. Finally, there were the lectures and discussions with leading experts in the field. Looking back at the process, it seemed that the time for individual presentations and the integration of abstract and poster was not optimal in the programme. It might have been better to present abstracts and posters at the same time and to give more time and space for comments and discussions. The thematic group discussions, however, seemed to have been interesting and useful. The expert lectures were also very appreciated (of course with some variation depending on interest and presentation style), especially when the expert combined strong empirical evidence on specific parts of the ageing process with an interactive talk with the participants of the FLARE Summer School. The evaluation illustrated the variety in background, interests and preferences. Some of the participants, maybe those who felt a more senior post doc-identity, thought that the programme was too elementary, but the majority found it adequate to their needs and interests. The length of the programme was also discussed. Some participants would have appreciated a shorter and more focussed programme, say three days. Everybody liked the venue and some participants expressed their gratitude to the site visits to caring homes for older citizens, while others were more ambivalent about the value of these site visits. Almost all summer school participants would have liked more time for feedback and informal discussions of their own field of interest. Thus, the balance between individual focus and the multi-disciplinary learning process was not an easy one.



FLARE Summer School 2008 – A Learning Experience

HOW TO CREATE A FLARE COMMUNITY? IDEAS FROM THE GROUP PRESENTATIONS

The group presentations covered a number of interesting multi-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary fields. All groups were given the same point of departure, to identify research problems on ageing in Europe, focus on theoretical aspects in a multi-disciplinary context, propose a research design to analyse the problems, illuminate barriers to multidisciplinary research (MDR) and ways to overcome them, present a preliminary research plan (3-4 pages) and to describe a time budget. The project ideas suggested included new vulnerable groups and the interplay between formal and informal care, diabetes mellitus in older people, dementia prevention, quality of life in old age.

The second task was to analyse and discuss how conditions for individual research careers can be improved. Issues covered in the challenge were the role of research training and supervision and support, the work life balance issues, the post-doc identity, the role of international contacts, the impact of bibliometric stress, the need to connect to a team and the balance between scientific excellence and social relevance.

The final mission was to discuss ways and methods of future FLARE cooperation. How could a network be organised, do we need an internal FLARE website, role of informal meetings and joint seminars leading to research applications were some of the questions raised. A joint website might cover issues like:

- Background information about each person in the network (CV-like), grants page, study links (contact details of study managers and data request sheets), conference information, potential collaborators/partnerships, jobs (current/upcoming), dissemination of key findings/press releases.
- Should future contacts build on shared methodological approach or subject of interest? Should there be regular meetings each academic semester? Which are the options of a more organised form of collaborations in subject related or multi-disciplinary teams? Should future collaboration focus more on joint research training, to write applications, to increase academic publishing or how to strengthen the professional identity (to take the step from being a post-doc to a senior scholar).



PREPARING THE NEXT GENERATION OF SCHOLARS – THE ROLE OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT

The FLARE post-doc initiative is a challenging experiment and a constructive method to foster future international collaboration within the European Research Area. International collaboration, not only in Europe, but also in a global context is a field of development in most nations. The European Commission and the European Science Foundation support a lot of activities in this field. The European Research Council is one of the major instruments. Within the EU-programme PEOPLE, the Marie Curie Programme is another bridge building activity with the aim of supporting young scholars. In a Swedish context, the Vårdal Institute under the leadership of Professor Ingali Rahm Hallberg, has developed a generic model for career development on the post-doc level, being applied among young scholars in the caring sciences. The Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research, is now negotiating with the European Commission on a new initiative of international post-docs labelled Marie Curie Cofund. It is our hope that this initiative can start from 2009. It would be open to all fields of research under FAS areas of responsibility, namely working life, public health, social security and welfare.

The strength of the FLARE initiative, however, is the aim to create a multi-disciplinary research community on ageing research. It is too early, however, to anticipate what kind of interaction that will be developed within the FLARE family. It is our hope but also commitment, that the summer school – with all its advantages and shortcomings – might have stimulated future contacts, new inspirations and possible collaboration among the next generation of leaders of ageing researchers in Europe.

Kenneth Abrahamsson
Programme Director, FAS

Partner and National Coordinator (NC) Contact Details

Kenneth Abrahamsson
Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research
Kenneth.Abrahamsson@fas.forskning.se

Irit Allon (NC)
Israeli Ministry of Health
allonirit@yahoo.com

Claudine Attias-Donfut
Caisse Nationale D'Assurance Vieillesse
claudine.attias-donfut@cnav.fr

Wolfgang Ballensiefen (NC)
Projekträger des BMBF im DLR
Wolfgang.Ballensiefen@DLR.de

Signe Bang (NC)
The Research Council of Norway
sba@rcn.no

Frank Bingen (NC)
Fonds National de la Recherche
frank.bingen@fnr.lu

Kerstin Carsjo (NC)
Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research
Kerstin.carsjo@fas.forskning.se

Mihail Coculescu (NC)
Ministry of Health
m.coculescu@uni-davila.ro

Aurelia Curaj (NC)
Executive Agency for Higher Education and Research Funding (UEFISCSU)
aurelia.curaj@uefiscsu.ro

Claudia Gandin (NC)
Istituto Superiore di Sanita,
gandin@iss.it

Beatrix Grubeck-Loebenstein
Austrian Academy of Sciences
Beatrix.grubeck@oeaw.ac.at

Anna-Liisa Kauppila (NC)
Academy of Finland
anna-liisa.kauppila@aka.fi

Benny Leshem
Israeli Ministry of Health
benny.leshem@moh.health.gov.il

Anne-Sophie Parent
AGE, Europeans Older People's Platform
Annesopie-parent@age-platform.org

Ute Rehwald (NC)
Projekträger des BMBF im DLR
Ute.Rehwald@dlr.de

Alan Rozenkier
Caisse Nationale D'Assurance Vieillesse
alain.rozenkier@cnav.fr

Emanuele Scafato
Istituto Superiore di Sanita
scafato@iss.it

Michel Tuchman (NC)
Caisse Nationale D'Assurance Vieillesse
michel.tuchman@cnav.fr

Cornelia Vollath
Projekträger des BMBF im DLR
Cornelia.Vollath@dlr.de

Alan Walker
The University of Sheffield
k.chadwick@sheffield.ac.uk

Forthcoming Events

Final Forum / conference
The final ERA-AGE Forum will take place in February 2009. Details of this important event will be made available via the ERA-AGE website in the near future.



The ERA-AGE Consortium