

Representing young scientists at EGU 2014

Sam Illingworth is the new [young scientists](#) (YS) representative for the EGU Programme Committee, the body that coordinates the General Assembly programme. He is a postdoctoral research assistant at the University of Manchester working on the retrieval of trace and greenhouse gases from airborne measurements.

At the EGU 2013 General Assembly, I attended a YS discussion forum where one of the key issues raised was the importance of having a YS representative for each of the divisions within EGU. Inspired by this call to arms, I promptly went to the Atmospheric Sciences (AS) Division meeting and suggested that we needed a YS representative. The president of the division, Oksana Tarasova, thought this was a marvellous idea and asked me if I was volunteering for the cause. I then gave a rather impromptu speech (I think I may have alluded to a past life in which I trained to be a TV presenter) explaining why I was a suitable candidate, following which I was swiftly voted in as the YS representative for the AS division!

Shortly after EGU 2013, there was another call for volunteers to put themselves forward to become the YS representative for the EGU General Assembly, and so once more I decided to throw my hat into the ring. Fast forward a couple of months and I found myself being invited to Munich to sit in on the Programme Committee meeting, in which many of the decisions regarding EGU 2014 were to be discussed and deliberated.

It is fair to say that it is a reasonably swift trajectory of fortuitousness and candidness that has gotten me this far, and that I am even more fortunate to be taking over from Jennifer Holden, who has done such a wonderful job in developing a definitive and articulate voice for young scientists at EGU. I am also extremely grateful to EGU's Communication Officer Sara Mynott (the YS contact person working year-round at the EGU Executive Office), who has been a constant source of help and inspiration.

But what is it that I actually do as the YS representative for EGU General Assembly? Well, it is my job to make sure that the young scientists (defined as people 35 years or younger, and within 7 years of their highest degree qualification) are well represented, and that they are made to feel like the integral part of the conference, which they already are: did you know that at EGU 2013 over a third of the participants were classified as young scientists?

One of the issues to come out of the EGU 2014 Programme Committee meeting was that the division presidents would love to see more young scientists propose sessions and to act as conveners at EGU 2015. The bottom-up nature of EGU, combined with the high esteem with which our young scientists are held, means that they should not feel inhibited by their relative inexperience, and remember over a third of the Assembly are in the same boat!

I will be the YS representative for the EGU General Assembly until the 2015 meeting, at which point a YS representative from one of the other divisions will take my place for a 2-year term. But before any of that can happen I must issue my own call to arms: many of the EGU divisions are still without a YS representative, and so we need people to volunteer themselves to the presidents of their divisions. By 2015 I would love to see every division with their own young scientist representative, as well as a larger percentage of YS-convened sessions.

Feel free to reach me via email (samuel.illingworth@manchester.ac.uk) or Twitter ([@samillingworth](https://twitter.com/samillingworth)) with any ideas you might have for YS activities or events at the forthcoming General Assembly. You can also contact Sara Mynott at mynott@egu.eu and on Twitter at [@SaraMynott](https://twitter.com/SaraMynott) or [@EuroGeosciences](https://twitter.com/EuroGeosciences).

Sam Illingworth
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Snacking on climate

Early career climate scientists improve their communication skills through a new international and interactive initiative

Good communication skills are rapidly becoming a pre-requisite for any scientist beginning his or her research career. Writing, presenting, interacting and collaborating are crucial for making contacts, developing research proposals, applying for fellowships and communicating one's work. This is particularly true in a publicised field such as climate change research, where inter-disciplinarity reigns, and the ability to convey ideas to wide-ranging audiences is crucial.

But gaining these precious skills is not always straightforward for young scientists. Writing and publishing online can be daunting, so can interacting with researchers outside of one's field.

Born in January 2013 at the University of Bergen, Norway, [ClimateSnack](#) brings together postdoctoral and PhD scientists across climate change disciplines, and helps them improve the way they communicate their work in a friendly, interactive environment. In July, Imperial College London became the second institution to join what has now become a global network of hungry climate snackers. To find out more about this international, multi-disciplinary community of promising climate scientists, I chatted to three members of the London group.

“ClimateSnack is essentially designed to help early career researchers develop their writing skills and their communication skills in general,” says Dr Will Ball, a postdoctoral researcher in the department of Physics and the founder of the ClimateSnack group at Imperial College London.

“At each institute that we have set up a ClimateSnack group, we physically bring together people in different areas of climate research. They will write thousand-word blogs about their work, keeping it very simple. In fact you want to keep it at the level that any other climate scientist in a different area of climate research would be able to understand. So as a solar physicist, I should be able to communicate my work to somebody working on, say, atmospheric dust.”

These blog pieces are the climate ‘snacks’ that eventually get published online. “Then we have a centralised hub that all the institutes publish through, which is the website,” Will continues. “Through that, people will be able to interact, get to know each other and give feedback on the actual writing. So they get better at writing, and also learn about the science that’s going on around them. That’s the concept.”

Sian Williams, a PhD student in atmospheric physics looking at dust plumes and land-atmosphere interactions, runs the day-to-day climate snacking affairs in London: “We have a meeting once a month where people from different departments across Imperial College come together.”

“Every time, we have a few snacks. I try to encourage people to write them and then send them out to anyone who is coming to the meeting in advance, so that people get a chance to read what has been written and give feedback.”

Writing a snack can be a daunting but rewarding experience. Each author reads out his or her piece and the floor is then open to discussion. “People who have come together from different institutions say what they like about the articles [and] how they think they can be improved. Normally when you write something, be it for a journal or a website, you never really get that direct feedback, so I think it’s a really great opportunity,” Sian continues.

Dr Rachel White, a postdoctoral researcher in regional climate modelling, [has recently published her very first snack](#), writing about the difficulties of simulating global rainfall patterns: “I actually found that it was easier to write than I thought it would be.”

But putting pen to paper is just the first step. “Trying to check that you have really written what you wanted to write, and that people are going to understand what you meant, is the really interesting process,” Rachel adds. “That’s where the ClimateSnack meetings come in. Different people will have got different things from your article. You have to be quite careful so that everybody understands what you meant. That is a really interesting concept to learn and try and get you head around.”

Will is now an experienced snacker. “Publishing online was nerve-racking, but I developed a better sense of confidence in what I’m doing and in my writing.”



Happy snackers: Rachel White, Will Ball and Sian Williams. (Credit: M. Ferrat)

These meetings are not just useful for improving one’s writing, but also for placing early career researchers in a safe, productive environment where they can hone their discussion and personal engagement skills.

“It’s not just writing. At these meetings you have to communicate, debate, argue, discuss, and you get better at that. And it’s in a safe environment. That’s where you build the confidence and then start moving out,” Will explains.

“Important, imaginative work comes out of collaborating with people who aren’t in your field,” Rachel adds. “Being able to discuss your research and describe it clearly to someone who is in a different field is incredibly important, at conferences, over the internet, everywhere.”

For Will, these communication skills are valuable even within one’s own field. “How many abstracts, how many summary papers have you read that are difficult to understand, even in your own field? [ClimateSnack] makes you more aware of the phrases and the words you use. I’ve noticed that in the way I write. I’m just a little bit more aware of what might confuse somebody.”

ClimateSnack has grown at an incredible pace since January. “We are setting up at many other institutes in the UK, and have interest from several others in Europe and in the United States,” Will tells me. “So it’s going to expand very quickly in the next coming months.”

The success and uniqueness of ClimateSnack lies, I think, in its open and constructive environment, and in the opportunities it creates for early career researchers to forge international collaborations with other climate scientists.

Concluding our interview, Sian adds: “There are opportunities for climate snackers to go on residential courses across Europe, which is really exciting because it’s not only building skills but again building collaborations with different people. And I think the main exciting thing is more people from different universities getting involved.”

ClimateSnack is supported by the Grantham Institute for Climate Change, Uni Climate, ResClim and the Bjerknes Centre for Climate Research. You can have a bite of the latest tasty snacks on the [ClimateSnack.com](#) website. If you are interested in joining the community or setting up a group at your institute, you can also get in touch with the ClimateSnack organisers. Happy snacking!

Marion Ferrat

*Climate scientist and science communication student
at Imperial College London & EGU blogger*