



**GLOBAL
YOUNG
ACADEMY**

A Digital Archive of GYA History



White Paper

by the History of the GYA working group

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Summary

This paper marks the third phase of the 2019-20 activities undertaken by the [History of the GYA working group](#) on the archiving of material related to the GYA's founding years. After first compiling documents relevant to the founding of the GYA, the second phase saw the building of a digital archive in OneDrive, which was then migrated to SharePoint in 2020 to enable more collaborative and interactive working and annotating. There is great scope for future projects and the working group invites new and old members to get involved.

Introduction

The History of the GYA working group is a long-established group within the GYA. The group's twin purposes are to provide helpful insights to the academy on its history, and to generate new knowledge in the history, sociology and ethnography of science using the GYA as a case study.

The need for scientific academies to pay attention to their own histories is clear - understanding where an academy comes from is essential to understanding where it goes next. Long-established scientific academies such as the UK Royal Society or the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina have dedicated libraries and archives to understanding their foundation and early formative years. Many have also begun the process of digitalising their records and creating digital archives.

There is therefore a particular need for the GYA to curate and preserve its own historical material as a young and boundary-breaking organisation. What explains the GYA's success in its so far short life, and how can this guide the academy's future?

The purpose of this paper is to summarise the contents of the archive material collected so far by the working group, and as submitted by various members and alumni over the years. Building a digital archive of the GYA history, in particular its founding years, has been an objective of the working group for some time.

The paper does not seek to provide a comprehensive history of the GYA by itself, but instead to contribute to the writing of this history through the presentation and interpretation of archived material. A chronological guide to the founding period can be found in the GYA's ['First Five Years' report](#), published in 2015.

Other sources of GYA history gathered by the working group include the upcoming collection of oral histories from those involved with its founding. The paper therefore serves as a starting point for understanding our history – this conversation has only just begun.

The contents of the archive

The archive contains a range of documents, photos, videos and emails. This is a hybrid form of archiving. Some documents have already been published externally, some published to internal GYA audiences, and some originate from administrative material that have never been published. Duplicates were mostly, but not entirely, removed in the archiving process. Some alumni contributed relevant documents that were already in the public domain, and often also already present in the archive as part of the GYA Office material. This is possible with any archive – the same document can often be obtained from different sources, in a range of formats.

The contents of our archive were collected from three sources. These were:

- Documents contributed by GYA Alumni
- Documents scanned from original hard copies at the GYA Office
- Documents held digitally by the GYA Office

Alumni were contacted and asked to provide material, initially for use only by the working group, but could be published more widely in the future. We are grateful for the support of so many former members and for the wide range of interesting material that they have contributed.

The working group will in future have a responsibility not only to add to the archive and continuously develop its scope, but also to preserve the digital material already present. This will likely pose challenges, as will be discussed later in this paper.



Founding members of the GYA, including Thokozani Majozi (writing) at the World Economic Forum's Annual Meeting of the New Champions in 2009 in Dalian, China. Photo contributed by Yoke-Fun Chan, member 2010-2013.



The GYA Founding Members, and some members of the GYA Advisory Board, at the very first Annual General Meeting in 2010.

Defining the parameters of the GYA

Some of the most contentious aspects of the GYA's early years concern the membership selection procedure. With the number of members fixed at 200, GYA membership was, and remains, prestigious. An internal discussion paper on the membership selection procedure was circulated by the then-Managing Director, Heidi Wedel, in 2012 to then-members Gregory Weiss, Bernard Slippers and James Tickner – a copy of the minutes is contained in the archive. A theme emerged for the need to maintain the integrity of the process. Weiss, a founding co-chair, emphasised that 'we also need to insure [sic] that we're not perpetuating a crony and "old boys" network'.

If the GYA were to live up to its stated ideals, transparency was essential. The draft paper also stated the need to maintain 'a good balance between quality and diversity'. It was agreed and minuted that 'adjustments' would be made for diversity at the appropriate time in the process.

The discussions also addressed the issue of national representation by members. This problem arose through the gap between the GYA's roles as both a catalyst for national young academies and as an organisation in its own right with a global membership of individual early- to mid-career scholars. Wedel noted that most new members applied directly, rather than being nominated by a national academy¹.

¹ The current GYA application process uses self-application only and does not include any elements of nominations from other (young) academies.

Weiss advised against the ‘dangerous semantics’ of claiming that members represented or were ambassadors for a particular country.

The question of participation was also relevant to discussions. Weiss commented that ‘our haste to broaden participation has given us too many members that don’t participate fully.’

Overcoming adversity

The founding years of the academy were not without significant challenges. Funding in both the short- and long-term was a constant source of uncertainty. Funding in the early years was secured from the Volkswagen Foundation, together with support from the InterAcademy Panel (now the InterAcademy Partnership, IAP). This was crucial to the new-born GYA, alongside the support of the German Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften (BBAW).

Archive documents also reveal the readiness of the new organisation to reform the status quo and break through barriers. A member of the Advisory Board and key supporter of the early academy, Bruce Alberts (USA), wrote in a submission to the 2010-15 external assessment of the GYA that ‘International science has for too long been the province of overcommitted old men (like me) [...] I also welcome their [the GYA] impatience with formalities and ingrained bureaucracies.’

An agenda for change

From the first beginnings of what would become the GYA, an outspoken boldness and far-reaching vision was characteristic of the founding period. In 2008, at the World Economic Forum’s Annual Meeting of the New Champions in Tianjin, China, a group of young scientists selected by the InterAcademy Panel (IAP) released a joint statement titled ‘[Passion for Science, Passion for a Better World](#)’. The Tianjin statement was unmistakably an agenda for change. As well as calling for better policies regarding family-work balance for young scientists and an end to discriminatory practices, the statement set out grand overarching ambitions: ‘We envisage a world without borders where scientists can move freely to advance their research’, ‘We particularly recognise the need to develop and deliver a robust science culture at all levels of society’.



Attendees brainstorm a ‘Global Young Academy’ at the 2009 meeting of the World Economic Forum in Dalian, China. Photo from the GYA Office.

Making use of new technology

A thread running through the archive is the ongoing use of technology to bring members together. The GYA has developed alongside major changes in how academics communicate and collaborate internationally. In the founding years of the academy, not all its members had access to video conferencing software like Skype, and not all of those that did were familiar with it. For the membership selection process in 2011, copies of applicants' details were distributed by post on CDs.²

Also in 2011, founding member Bernard Slippers wrote to newly appointed Managing Director Heidi Wedel 'perhaps we should try Skype if convenient for you at some point Heidi. The program is free and easy to download, and all that is needed is a computer with a camera and a microphone (most laptops will have it).' In 2020, the technological capabilities of the GYA were put to the test with the unprecedented challenge of the COVID-19 crisis. Holding an Annual General Meeting (AGM) remotely via the internet became a necessity, whereas technology such as Skype had previously been seen as an accessory.

New technology also presents some major difficulties for the archival process, such as constantly changing mediums, the risk of digital redundancy and loss of material. We must be particularly alert to the challenges presented by 'born digital' material (Procter, 2006). This refers to digital material that has no physical origin to refer to in case of loss, as opposed to 'digital surrogates', copies of physical items. There is and will continue to be a preservation challenge against the threat of redundancy and also intentional or planned digital obsolescence.

As an academy committed to scientific independence, the GYA must also assess the extent to which digitalisation means democratisation, or in fact corporatisation (Hamilton and Spongberg, 2017). The leading developers in hosting digital archives are Google and Microsoft, the latter providing the SharePoint functionality currently used by the GYA to store its own archive. Alongside its quasi-archival project Google Books, which has scanned and digitalised tens of millions of published books, Google has also pressed ahead with Google Arts & Culture, providing a digital platform for artwork, artefacts and archival material. Scientific and academic partners in this project include the UK's Royal Society, the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences, India's Academy of Fine Arts and Literature, and Spain's Royal Academy of Medicine, as well as many museums and art galleries. The leading role played by large multinational corporations in these digitalisation projects will likely be a topic of ongoing controversy.

Methodological questions

In the process of building this digital archive, a number of methodological questions have arisen, which will be addressed in this section. At the outset of the project, material from all three sources was compiled together in a dedicated OneDrive, that is part of the Microsoft Office365 suite. OneDrive is designed for document storage and has limited capacity for interactive or collaborative working with the material contained in it.

² Emails / V_Thadhani / FW: Selection Committee YS 2011

In line with the GYA Office's policy, the archive was then transferred from OneDrive to SharePoint, which is connected to a dedicated History of the GYA Working Group team in Microsoft Teams.

The migration of the archive was not straightforward, however. OneDrive and SharePoint are not compatible, so the entire archive was instead downloaded as a back-up to a single computer and then uploaded to SharePoint. This presented its own set of challenges, as many of the path names for documents within were longer than the character limit allowed by SharePoint. The previous archiving policy of using detailed folder and filenames to sort material was adjusted based on necessity.

This is a good example of the challenges ahead for digital archiving. If transferring between two similar parts of the Microsoft Office365 suite were to become unexpectedly problematic, future transfers that will be necessary could introduce complications. We should not assume that our digital material will last indefinitely in its current format in an online cloud.

One approach to this problem would be a 'Darwinian' attitude, summed up by the idea that "that which matters will last". Historians have raised questions posed by this approach, though, with archives as subjects of inquiry in their own right. The contentious questions of what is considered confidential, what is preserved and by whom, and what is accessed and by whom, can be framed around clashes between free and open intellectual collaboration and 'corporate control of the digital world' (Hamilton and Spongberg, 2017). In addition, materials that can be archived may not reflect the full circumstances occurring during that period, for myriad reasons, which has the potential to propagate a source of bias towards future assessments.

Another set of challenges for historians posed by the rise of digital archives is their narrowness relative to physical archives. Ephemera and marginalia are important parts of archives, allowing for unexpected discoveries and a richer picture of the historical era under investigation. It is not yet clear whether our digital archive has the same capacity as its analogue predecessors, which opens the question of whether a wider preservation beyond the narrow scope of a Word document or an email is needed (Procter, 2006).

A particular challenge of the "living" archive is the issue of data protection. In an era of increasing recognition of the concepts of the value and ownership of an individual's data, the GYA will need to gain the continuous consent of its members and partners to store material relating to them in the digital archive. Many public archives operate on the basis of a "thirty-year rule", whereby no material is made public until thirty years after its original production.

The final question arising is the so-called "right to be forgotten". This refers to the right of the individual to have their personal data deleted, rather than allow for its indefinite storage. This poses some obvious problems for archivists and historians relying on perpetual access to this data.

Looking to the future

As already stated, archiving is a self-conscious process and can be used to set forth ambitions for the future. The story of the founding years of the GYA will have greater significance to future members and historians as the influence and stature of the academy continues to grow. Looking ahead, we would like to pose some questions on the future of the History of the GYA working group and our archiving and history-writing more widely.

Firstly, what further role could the History of the GYA working group play in increasing the visibility of our history to members and partners? How can the working group secure continuity and also provide a space for innovative new ideas? Collaborative working via SharePoint and Teams may offer a technological solution.

Secondly, how can we use the archive to assist in developing the GYA's future direction? If knowing where we have come from is vital to informing where we go next, what conclusions can we draw from a fuller knowledge of our origins? Finally, how can the GYA better preserve its digital assets, and ensure ongoing reliable access, particularly in the 'born digital' era?

The next phase of our work will see the working group collect a series of oral histories from founding members. We hope this will add depth to the collection, broaden its scope, and provide new interpretations to the archival material as well as the personal perspectives of those most closely involved with our founding.

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About the GYA

The vision of the GYA is *science for all; science for the future*, and its mission is to give a voice to young scientists and researchers around the world. The GYA, founded in 2010, is an independent science academy of 200 outstanding early- to mid-career researchers from six continents who are selected from across disciplines based on their academic excellence and commitment to engage with society. GYA members serve five-year terms, and the GYA presently counts members and alumni from 100 countries. The GYA administrative Office is publicly funded and hosted at the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina. The wide array of GYA activities is supported by a range of international public and private funders.