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The Swiss Young Immunologists Society (SYIS): empowering the next generation of immunologists

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Introduction

The Swiss Young Immunologists Society (SYIS) was established in September 2020 under the umbrella of the young European Federation of Immunology Societies (yEFIS)^{1, 2}. The overarching aim of this effort was to strengthen networking opportunities as well as increase the visibility of young immunologists during challenging times surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past 2.5 years, the SYIS has successfully evolved into a formal and established society, continuously engaging and recruiting new members. Through a partnership with the Swiss Society for Allergology and Immunology (SSAI), the SYIS represents a bridge between young and established generations of

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immunologists in Switzerland. Overall, the SYIS has become a well-recognized institution at the national level and has filled a big gap in promoting scientific exchange, networking and visibility of young immunologists in Switzerland and Europe.

The SYIS structure

The SYIS operates entirely based on a dedicated team of volunteers. While a few volunteers got started behind the scenes in 2020, the formal recognition of the SYIS as a registered society in Switzerland occurred in 2022. As a result of this process, the organizational structure of the SYIS was defined (Figure 1). The framework consists of “board members” who coordinate overarching aims and activities of the society, below which are smaller teams made up of “active members” carrying out specific tasks structure. This approach allows efficient implementation of tasks and individual ownership, while providing resilience to team turnover.

The SYIS board comprises a president, a vice-president, a treasurer as well as working group (WG) coordinators. Currently, the SYIS features three WGs focusing on events, communication, and finance, which are further divided into departments with dedicated tasks. The president and vice-president jointly coordinate activities at an organization-wide level and represent the SYIS at events and meetings involving stakeholders. The WG coordinators steer their respective groups with a high level of independence, and report back to the board on a monthly basis. All SYIS board members are officially nominated and subsequently voted for by SYIS members during the general assembly on a yearly basis.

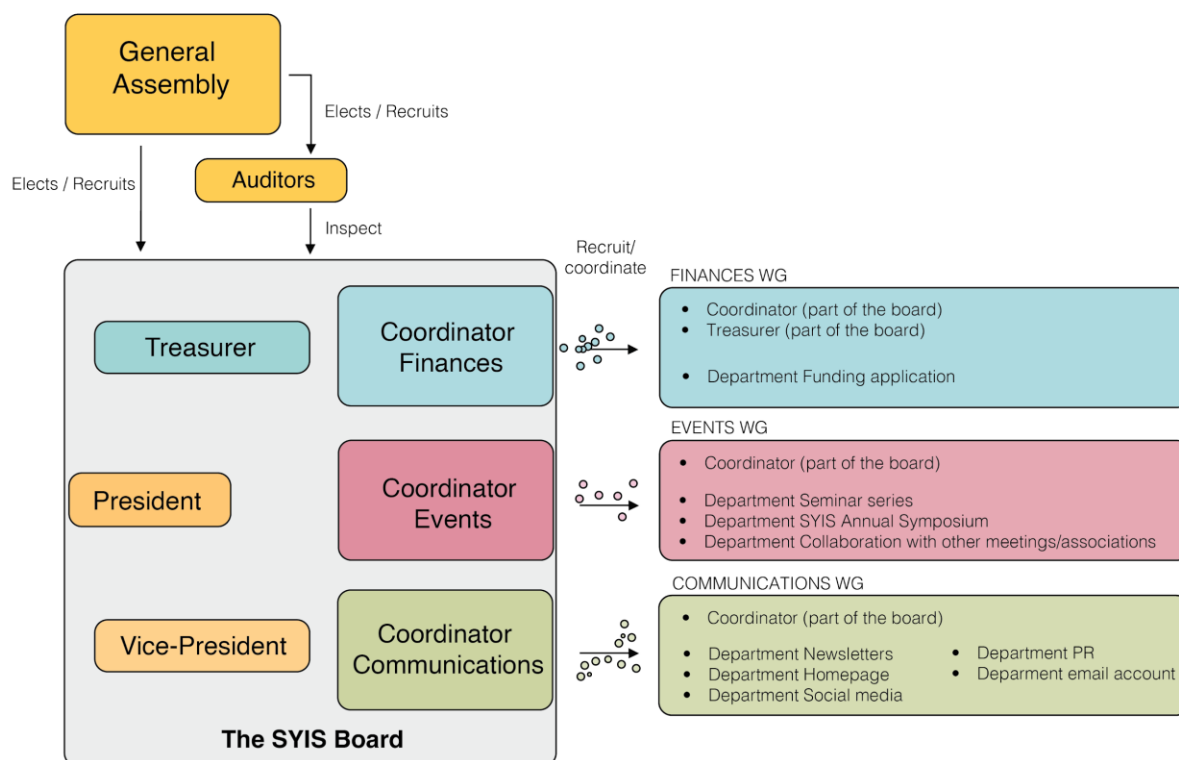


Figure 1. The SYIS organizational structure

Over the past year, the SYIS has established a strong partnership with the SSAI, which relies on a shared membership for young immunologists. To strengthen the bond between the societies and directly discuss the needs of the SYIS community, one SYIS board member participates in SSAI board meetings and vice versa.

All scientists working in an immunology-related field with a connection to Switzerland can become SYIS members within the first ten years after completing their last degree (BSc, MSc, MD, PhD). Currently, the SYIS has over 230 members, the majority of whom hold a PhD degree, followed by 30% of members with an MSc and 20% MDs. Around one third of SYIS members are based in Zurich, followed by Lausanne, Basel, and Geneva.

SYIS activities

The activities carried out by the SYIS revolve around achieving its main goal to build a dynamic network of young immunologists and enhance their visibility at national and European levels. A detailed timeline of SYIS activities and achievements is shown in Figure 2.

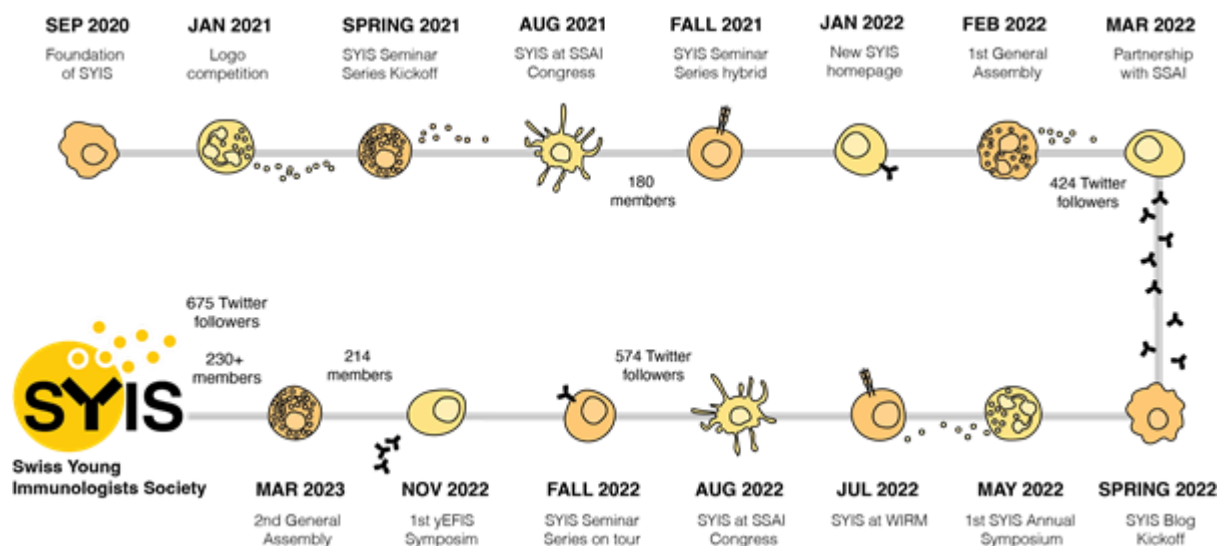


Figure 2. Timeline of SYIS activities and achievements

From the outset, the SYIS heavily prioritised the development of a robust social media presence on platforms such as Twitter (@syis_ecr) and LinkedIn (linkedin.com/company/syis) to engage with the extended community by sharing relevant news and conducting polls. Additional platforms for the announcement of news related to the society include the SYIS homepage (www.syis-ecr.org) and a quarterly newsletter. All our members are welcome to share their achievements (i.e., recent publications, awards), job offers and news with us to be featured on social media and in the newsletter. As a benefit of the partnership with yEFIS, the SYIS reach and impact include the wide European network of young immunologists.

In spring 2021, the SYIS launched its first seminar series which was fully virtual and featured science and out-of-the-box talks. This format proved to be immensely popular and boosted the SYIS reach and visibility. With the ease of pandemic restrictions, the main aim was to provide more opportunities for in-person networking. To this end, the fall 2021 edition of the SYIS seminar series took place in a hybrid format, featuring the possibility to participate either in person at the University of Zurich (UZH), or via Zoom. A UZH Graduate Campus grant sponsored the in-person networking event following the seminars. To engage more young immunologists from other places in Switzerland, the “SYIS-on-tour seminar series” was launched in fall 2022. While continuing on a hybrid format, the physical location of the seminars rotated across Swiss universities and institutes. This approach proved to be successful, with SYIS members hosting seminars at the University of Lausanne (UNIL) and the University of Geneva in addition to the UZH.

In May 2022, the first SYIS Annual Symposium took place at ETH Zurich, bringing the SYIS community together in person for the first time. The event was a resounding success, with 80 registered participants who enjoyed a range of insightful talks, inspiring inputs from workshops, and

ample opportunities for exchange and networking during breaks and poster sessions. The program included keynote lectures from Prof. Federica Sallusto, current EFIS president, and Dr. Daniela Latorre, SYIS co-founder and then-president, as well as four talks from young Group Leaders in Switzerland. In addition, a session on Scientific Writing was hosted by the European Journal of immunology, and 3 parallel workshops on Grant Writing, Public speaking, and Transition from Academia to Industry were featured. To add a competitive edge to the symposium, the best three posters were recognised and awarded prizes. To conclude the event, a lively networking session was organised, completed with pizza and drinks, which provided a relaxed and enjoyable environment for all attendees and organisers to connect and discuss the insights gained during the day. Overall, the feedback from participants indicated an extremely high level of satisfaction with the event. The success of the meeting is owed to the hard work and dedication of many SYIS active members, alongside the generous financial support of the SSAI, the Fund for the Promotion of Young Researchers grant from the University of Bern and industry partners.

Over the past years, SYIS members continued to benefit from networking opportunities as well as increased visibility through the society's ongoing collaborations with various national and international meetings in the fields of immunology. Congresses with an ongoing collaboration with the SYIS include the SSAI Annual Congress and the World Immune Regulation Meeting (WIRM). Here, SYIS members were featured in SYIS sessions and qualified for talk and poster prizes to highlight their achievements. The SYIS also actively participated in the organization of the first yEFIS symposium in Berlin in November 2022, representing a unique opportunity for SYIS members to share their work and network with peers from all over Europe ³. The SYIS Twitter account provided live social media coverage of these events, which amplified the visibility of the participants.

SYIS key success factors

This section highlights and explores key factors which enabled the successful establishment of the SYIS despite the many challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, limited resources, lack of established infrastructure, and no opportunities for in-person meetings. This may serve as a useful guide for other initiatives seeking to formalize and boost their impact.

The SYIS experienced rapid growth and engagement from the SYIS community early-on. This can be attributed to five key factors. Firstly, active contributions to SYIS activities from its extended community were solicited from the get-go, which ensured that members felt invested and involved. Secondly, the society was kick-started via the hosting of virtual events reaching a broad audience with little to no budget. Thirdly, a strong social media presence, amplified by the yEFIS network, helped raise awareness of the newly established society. Next, the founding members actively sought out opportunities to acquire and manage funds provided by external grants, which greatly increased the flexibility and resources to support the society's initiatives. And finally, the formal partnership with

the well-established national senior society SSAI aided in establishing the SYIS as a reputable organisation within the broader Swiss immunology community. Outlined below are specific examples of how some of these fundamental concepts were applied in the context of launching the SYIS.

The organisation's first activity aimed at generating visibility for the SYIS and fostering active engagement among young immunologists. To this end, Swiss young immunologists were invited via social media to participate in a logo competition. SYIS members subsequently voted for their favourite logo. Perkin Elmer generously sponsored this competition by offering to pay for a one-year SSAI membership for the awardee, Sergio T. Ribeiro from UNIL.

Following up on the logo competition, the SYIS organised its first seminar series in the spring of 2021. Online hosting of the event kept the costs extremely low. The key for the success of the seminar series can be attributed to the identification of a unique format not covered by other seminar series. The out-of-the-box format included scientific talks from two young immunologists, one from academia and one from industry, who not only shared their scientific data but also their personal career progression and tips. The event engaged many young immunologists, resulting in 180 SYIS members recruited by the end of the seminar series.

As a result of the success of the Seminar Series and the subsequent growth of the SYIS, it became evident that the society required a more formal structure and recognition to gain financial independence. To this end, the SYIS board decided to establish the SYIS as an official society. This required the drafting of bylaws defining the objectives, membership categories, structure, and financial aspects of the society, which were finalized with the help of SYIS active members by the end of 2021. In 2022, the SYIS was officially recognized as a society, enabling the opening of a society blank account to manage money from grants and sponsors for the planned activities in 2022.

The formalization of the SYIS combined with the constantly increasing visibility and engagement of Swiss young immunologists drew the attention of the SSAI. They enthusiastically accepted the SYIS proposal for a formal partnership between the two societies. This provides a stable financial basis for SYIS initiatives and activities through the reliable income from a shared membership fee and provides SYIS members with additional benefits, such as eligibility for travel grants and reduced conference fees previously available solely to SSAI members. Notably, this partnership has strengthened the SYIS's political influence on immunology-related discussions at the national level.

Future directions

The SYIS is dedicated to fostering connections amongst its members, increasing their visibility and advocating on their behalf. To achieve these goals and keep up the momentum, we aim to expand engagement with the community by launching a number of additional initiatives in the upcoming year.

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Plans for 2023 include social media campaigns showcasing SYIS members and key opinion leaders' interviews for the International Day of Immunology. To further raise the profile of SYIS members and to promote their work, an annual Best Publication Award for SYIS members is currently under-works.

As a result of the overwhelmingly positive feedback from the first edition, the "SYIS-on-tour seminar series" will be held also in 2023, enrolling the Swiss Institute of Allergy and Asthma Research (SIAF) in Davos as an additional co-host of the series.

Building on the success of the first SYIS annual symposium, the SYIS is currently organizing the second SYIS annual symposium, scheduled to take place in Bern on the 23rd of August 2023 as a pre-event to the annual SSAI congress 2023.

Moreover, the SYIS will continue its collaboration with yEFIS as an active member of the task force and participate in the organization of joint events, such as the SYIS/yEFIS symposium at the [European Mucosal immunology Meeting in Bern](#) this summer, as well as the European Congress of Immunology in Dublin 2024.

Finally, the SYIS will keep investing in the partnership with the SSAI to enhance collaboration and communication between established and young immunologists in Switzerland. To this end, we plan to launch a career-oriented mentorship program in which established SSAI members mentor SYIS members to support them advance their careers.

In conclusion, the SYIS has grown rapidly since its foundation and has achieved many successes, including the establishment of a formal society, securing financial stability and hosting a plethora of independent events. As the inaugural SYIS board, we are immensely proud of the achievements we have made thus far. We are confident that our efforts will help establish a long-lasting society of young immunologists, creating a strong network to support the needs of early career immunologists both nationally and internationally.

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