

Odyssey of a disabled scientist: From Greece to Germany for a PhD – Interview with Alexandra Tzilivaki and Dr. Oliver Mai-Kolerus

By Kim Mason, Equal Opportunity and Diversity Coordinator at NeuroCure

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Kim: Welcome, everyone. I'm joined today by Alexandra Tzilivaki, a Greek student who received a scholarship to do her PhD in the lab of NeuroCure PI Dietmar Schmitz through the Einstein Center for Neurosciences, and by Dr. Oliver Mai-Kolerus, who is the Administrative Coordinator of the Einstein Center for Neurosciences Berlin. Today we will be talking about Alexandra's journey, as a disabled person, from Greece to Berlin to do her PhD, and what this process was like from the perspective of the scientist and from the administrative side.



From left: K. Mason, A. Tzilivaki and O. Mai-Kolerus

Alexandra, as an early career scientist, you are already very accomplished and have received many awards, including, among others: the Onassis Award as one of the young scientists selected to attend the Lindau Nobel Laureate meeting in Physiology and Medicine, a scholarship from the Vardinoyiannis Foundation, a Google Europe Scholarship for Students with Disabilities, and in 2018 the Manassaki Award as the best postgraduate student in the Department of Biology at the University of Crete. You have also been named as one of the Next Generation Women Leaders in Europe by McKinsey & Company. More recently in Berlin, you were awarded the Brenda Milner Award from the SFB 1315 in 2023 in recognition of your achievements as a brilliant young scientist. We are very honored to have you with us today. Can you tell us about your current position in Berlin and your research focus?

Alexandra: Thank you very much for the very kind introduction - I'm honored. I'm working in the team of Professor Dietmar Schmitz here at Charité. My scientific ambition is to understand what GABAergic inhibitory interneurons (a major neuronal cell class) are doing in the mammalian brain in order to enable us to learn and remember! In particular, I am constructing and utilizing detailed biophysical computational models of single neurons and neuronal networks. My specialization is in computational neuroscience at different levels of abstraction, namely at the single-cell level, where I'm interested in the way that dendrites translate incoming inputs, at the micro circuit level, and at the large-scale network level, where I want to understand why we need such a diversity of interneuron cell types and what is the role in memory-related oscillations.

Kim: So you're saying diversity is also very important at the neuronal level. That's interesting.

Alexandra: Necessary and pivotal. I think this is the magic of the brain, that it is the most diverse organ, the most plastic organ, and the most flexible organ in our bodies. And I think that to study it, we have to be diverse and flexible as well.

Kim: Alexandra, can you tell us something about your personal and training background?

Alexandra: I'm from Greece, from the island of Crete. I was born and raised up in Chania, a beautiful small town. At the age of six months, I was diagnosed with a severe motor neuron disease called Spinal Muscular Atrophy type 2, and since then, I use a wheelchair and can move only a little bit my hands and head. Thus, it was intriguing for my young brain to understand what the word "cells", the word "neurons", the words "proteins", "functions", "muscles" mean. That motivated me, from as long as I even remember myself, to become a scientist. I always wanted to help. To understand what is going on there. After finishing school in Chania, I moved a few hundred kilometers away. That was the first challenge as a disabled young adult in Greece. To be a university student with a wheelchair far away from home! I obtained my bachelor's degree in molecular biology and biotechnology from the University of Crete, based in Heraklion. Later, I also obtained my master's degree in molecular biology and biomedicine. So my theoretical background is in molecular experimental biology. However, from the age of 21, I realized that I want to become a researcher, a brain scientist. And I knew – although I couldn't understand to what extent at that time, I was naive (and that helped me later) - but I knew that I would have to overcome some obstacles during my career related to my disability. So I thought, OK, I need a good CV. So I entered the lab of Yiota Poirazi, where I started modeling neurons and memory processing with computers at the age of 21, until I moved here in Berlin.

Kim: What motivated you to apply for a fellowship through the Einstein Center for Neurosciences Berlin? Why Berlin?

Alexandra: Well, when I was in the middle of my master's degree, I made the decision that I will live abroad. This decision was based on two factors. The first factor is, of course, the best quality of life and social benefits for people with severe disabilities like me. We know that life as a scientist is challenging, right? So imagine that when you use a wheelchair. I wanted to make sure that I will be able and "free" to do my research. And for that, I was willing from an early age to go abroad alone. That was the first factor. The second factor is career related. In order to achieve your academic dreams you need a competitive CV. To do so you need to prove mobility to do good science. You need mobility because it is necessary that we show in our CV that we are independent and able to work with different groups and different people. But apart from that, I truly believe that mobility in science, especially in the first years, is critical because it enables us to "sit down together" with people from different cultures, with different perspectives, to study the brain. I mean, it helps scientists to think with a broader perspective! So Berlin was the ideal place that combined both. And then on ResearchGate I found out about the Einstein Center for Neurosciences. I applied and a few months later I came to Berlin for an interview.

Kim: What was your selection symposium experience like? Were there any barriers to participation that could not be overcome or were there particular stumbling blocks along the way?

Alexandra: I remember it with positive feelings. I didn't know what would be next. I couldn't imagine. But the symposium, the people from the Einstein Center for Neurosciences, from NeuroCure as well, all were very helpful, so it was a very nice experience and totally barrier-free!

Kim: That's great! I think a key for that experience was also good communication - you being able to tell us what you needed and people here being open and willing to respond to that. How did you feel when you were notified that you were selected for a fellowship?

Alexandra: Oh, well, I cannot describe how happy and excited I was! That particular feeling that life is changing, a new chapter begins, far away from Greece. Of course I love my country, but for me now Germany and Greece are equal to my heart. I couldn't anticipate what would come later. But that was a very, very nice moment. I was very motivated.

Kim: When you describe it, I can really feel what that must have been like for you at the time. After the initial euphoria, there were many practical concerns and steps that needed to be taken. Now I'd like to ask you both about the practical process of coming from Greece to Berlin. Alexandra and Oliver, you experienced this journey from different perspectives. Alexandra, what were your expectations or imaginings about what this process would be like? How long did you think it would take?

Alexandra: I was naive. I thought it's going to work with a "magic click". Besides, I was 24 years old, so for me it was simple and easy, like: "OK, I'm going to Germany. It's easy. It's not that difficult for a disabled person from abroad like from Greece." I do remember the preparations for my transition to Berlin. I had informed my landlord in Heraklion that I'm leaving. I had a party with friends. I informed my supervisor there, my lab colleagues, everyone. My mom and dad were already emotional. And then I remember, that day when someone called me from the Einstein Center that there were some "small" obstacles over there and it was not possible for me to move in October 2017 together with the other fellows to start my PhD. It was a shock. It was barely manageable. The challenges started that day.

Kim: Oliver, maybe can you tell us how long you have been at the Einstein Center for Neurosciences and something about your current position?

Oliver: I started working at the Einstein Center for Neurosciences as the Strategic Coordinator in 2017, after Alexandra's successful application to our center. First a few words about the Einstein Center, because I doubt that anyone outside of Berlin knows us that well. We are a very interdisciplinary and inter-institutional neuroscientific research center. Our PIs work in fields ranging from philosophy and linguistics to neurology and molecular biology. Currently, we have 125 principal investigators in our network and 104 PhD students, so it's one of the largest neuroscientific networks in Berlin. And we're not only a network, we are also a graduate study center and a scholarship program for PhD students with a strong focus on Open Innovation in Science, for which we even received an award in 2020. In my position, I am responsible for most of the administrative processes and especially the focus on finances and annual planning. I'm also responsible for the selection process of future fellows and their onboarding, I coordinate the laboratory rotations and all the strategy to improve the conditions for our PhD students.

Kim: So as a person involved in both the selection of the candidates and their onboarding, you are also active in helping the new students to actually get here. They're coming from different countries, and they may be faced with visa issues or all kinds of different situations. What was your expectation from the administrative side about what it would be like assisting Alexandra in coming from Greece to Berlin?

Oliver: So when I learned about your case, Alexandra, it was like, oh, sounds like a challenge. And I did expect a lot of bureaucracy. What I did not expect was that nobody else had ever tried to get a disabled person from Greece to Germany before. So there was no blueprint for it. We had to learn everything from scratch because there was close to zero help from all the officials. The representative for employees with disabilities of the Charité would only help for situations at work, but not to get somebody here to Germany, or to help a person get settled. We also learned that it's really expensive to get all the assistance Alexandra would need, and the normal scholarship we pay would never cover that. So we had to look for financial help and, well, nobody could help us with this. So there was, as I said, no blueprint. A lot of people were really interested in how this would work and they tried to make suggestions, try this, try that. But in the end, we had to figure it all out by ourselves. Many things didn't

work, and step by step we found the things that did work. But it was much more time consuming than expected. Just an hour ago I looked at an old email about the timeline. It was like: Alexandra, do this in two weeks and do that in four weeks, and then six months later you can come to Germany. So at the beginning, after we learned that it was not possible to get Alexandra here in 2017 like all the other students, we were thinking, okay, she will join the center one year later. In the end it took four and a half years! Definitely nobody expected this. I mean there was also COVID in between, but even though that was also a bit of a struggle at the beginning, it was actually not a gamechanger. Alexandra's situation was really about figuring out what worked, and what did not. And a lot of people were involved. At one point or another, everyone in the office worked for Alexandra! For some time, we hired student assistants just for her. And we had the people at the Charité who were involved at some point, the health insurance, the social institutions, companies which provide nursing, people who own flats for rent, clerks at ministries. I don't know how many people were contacted. So yeah, it was a really, really long process. I did not expect that.

Kim: Alexandra, do you remember the first steps that you had to take from a practical standpoint to get here? And along the way, what proved to be some of the most important steps?

Alexandra: From the time period between October 2017 until February 2018, it was a bit chaotic. We had no idea what was going on. And I remember that time was extremely difficult for me psychologically. I was ready to quit, to give up. Then I came to Berlin and my mentor, and current advisor, Professor Dietmar Schmitz literally took me under his wings and told me this: "Alexandra, there are no problems, there are only challenges!"

It was due to Dietmar's tremendous support, that I didn't give up, and because I like science so much - and I'm too stubborn to give up, to be honest. That helped as well! So I would like to highlight the catalytic role and the help of Dietmar Schmitz to overcome all these huge obstacles! At that time we didn't know why it was so difficult. And like Oliver said, the first obstacle was the lack of information. We did not know, any of us, where to search, where to ask for help and advice. I couldn't believe it. I knew that I'm sometimes a bit crazy and innovative and I want to do things that are "challenging", like packing a wheelchair and moving to another country and doing excellent science, which is not an everyday task! But for some reason, I was sure - I was naïve - that someone had done this before and that there must be a way. But this was not the case. So in the first year, I would say, we had to understand what was going on. What are the regulations and the laws? What should we apply for? In 2018, I was still in Greece, but then officially I started to work for Charité, for Dietmar, although I was still hosted in Greece at my previous lab. So my first challenge was that I still had to find a way to get to Germany to continue my life there. The second challenge was that I had to remain psychologically "okay" because my mental health was not good at that time. Thirdly, I had to remain productive and keep my academic excellence, keep my CV and career going, because the PhD is a very important time period for every scientist. The option to step back and put my energy into my transition to Berlin was actually not an option - I also had to work and remain excellent. So it was very, very challenging. And on the other side, imagine a young person in one country that wants to go to another country, who apparently works by distance for another country. I didn't know where I belonged all those years, and I didn't know what the future would bring. It took us a lot of time to understand the process and then just go trial and error, trying to convince the authorities to give me the financial aid for nursing assistance. This situation affected my personal life and my psychology a lot. What helped was my motivation, my passion for science, and the fact that I was surrounded by people that supported me: e.g., former and current colleagues and mentors, all the personnel of the Einstein Center for Neurosciences, as Oliver said. Everyone helped in every way they could. And I'm really grateful for that.

The problems were bureaucratic, primarily at the European level I would say. I remember that I was trying to send emails everywhere I could at that time, to ask for help and get informed about what the process is for a European disabled employee. I remember I had opened the website of the European

Union, and I was just trying to find contacts in the diversity and equal rights sections, and no one knew what to tell me - if someone even replied. It is absolutely unbelievable that there is no law that takes into account or protects disabled professionals and scientists to enable them to move within Europe for work. Germany's social benefits for disabled people are unique, and Germany is a role model country as it provides its citizens a very generous amount of money every month to build their own team of personal assistants that work to support the life of people in need. But in order to be able to apply for these social benefits, you must fulfil some prerequisites that for a foreigner are almost impossible. Specifically, you need to have a suitable place to live, and you need to pay your health insurance in Germany for two years before any application for social benefits. So tell me, how is it possible for a person that arrives from abroad to start a new job if the employer has to have already magically paid health insurance for two years? So that was the first contradiction, and that was the point that we understood that it's going to take at least two years.

Kim: Oliver, what were the first or the most important steps that you, from an administrative perspective, needed to take? And how did you deal with this problem that Alexandra just described?

Oliver: A major recognition on our side was that, for this to work, Alexandra would need an actual employment contract – which the Einstein Center could not provide because we only gave scholarships, and were not allowed at that time to make employment contracts with PhD students. But it took a few months for us to recognize what we needed and that we couldn't give it. So we were really happy that the Cluster of Excellence NeuroCure stepped in and gave Alexandra a position, an employment contract, because without this, it wouldn't have been possible at all. Then we started the next processes, because she couldn't come to Berlin with just a contract - we didn't have nursing for her, we didn't have a flat. So she needed to stay in Greece for a while. So we made an official “Entsendung” – a kind of secondment - so that she could be a Charité employee working in her old department with Panayiota Poirazi, in the lab she was already familiar with, so that she could be productive, she could be working, even though it's not in Berlin. But she had a German employment contract and she paid into the German care insurance fund (Pflegekasse), social insurance fund (Sozialkasse), and medical insurance plan (Krankenkasse), so that the time she needed to get into the German social welfare system was counting already. The next big challenge was, I think more Berlin specific than just system specific: She needed a flat, and getting a flat in Berlin is tough. Getting a flat for a disabled person who needs more space than just a one-bedroom apartment, which is at the same time affordable and accessible by wheelchair, close to impossible. I think we looked for two years. Several people from our office visited flats, and finally, we found one on the outskirts of Berlin, even with a direct connection to the Charité via tram. That at least circumvented another problem in Berlin: getting around in a wheelchair with public transportation. So these were the two major things we had to achieve. Then of course we had to organize all the “minor” things, e.g. the different examinations. Three or four times she had to be examined by the health insurance or by the Sozialamt. All with different foci. And none of these services just believed the applications, they all had to see for themselves. I mean, Alexandra has an innate genetic illness. So every physician who reads her documentation would know what her physical situation would be like. But still, everyone had to see everything for themselves. We had to organize the travels, organize the stays, at some point we had to organize a flat. It was not useless, but it felt unnecessary. And then even after we got her flat, and she got the final examination to establish her care level (Pfleigestufe/Pflegegrad), for which a lot of people had to be coordinated, we had to do it twice because the first assessment was incorrect, and of course we had to appeal the decision. So a lot of work nobody expected.

Kim: It sounds like there was no road - like you were both staring into a jungle and just trying to make a path through it, hoping to find a way to meet each other. What an extraordinary experience. I'd like to ask you both what things you think helped. It was obviously a difficult process, but what things made it go forward anyway?

Alexandra: From my perspective, I think that in the end, the passion for science won - I did everything because I wanted to come and do nice science here. And I was lucky that, as I said before, I was supported by genuinely nice people like Dietmar Schmitz, who didn't allow me to give up. The fear that it might not work was an everyday routine that didn't allow me to enjoy life. Many times I thought that it just would not work, but then they made me feel that I should continue.

I will be honest, it was very hard. I remember in 2018 some people from the Medizinischer Dienst (MDK) wanted to meet with me, to check if I am eligible to apply for financial help. It is called "persönliches Budget" (personal budget) here in Germany, and supports people with disabilities to hire and offer contracts for personal assistants. And on that day, I was accompanied by a friend of mine. She came with me to Berlin. People in the Einstein Center and Dietmar Schmitz tried their best to make my accommodation as convenient as it could be for me, and I'm grateful for that. But I remember, we were trying to find the flat to rent, another milestone here in Berlin! And then I just wanted to go to the lab, to come here at the Charité and discuss with colleagues, and I remember my friend telling me, "No science today, let's go find a flat!" And then, a year later I recall the day I saw my current flat! I am grateful to Oliver, to people from the Einstein Center, and to fellow colleagues that were voluntarily going, because I had to put some furniture in that absolutely empty apartment that I have never seen before because the people from the authorities wanted to examine me in the place I live. And I remember the day that I arrived, and the first night.

Kim: Oliver, from your perspective, what things made a positive difference, what helped you continue moving forward?

Oliver: We continued forward, basically, because failure was not on the table. We didn't want to fail. There was so much work involved, we just didn't want this to be for nothing. What worked well, I think, was Alexandra's first clerk at the Sozialamt Pankow - I forgot her name - because this woman knew whom to approach and she helped a lot to get all the things done. Unfortunately, after we got Alexandra a flat, her case files moved to a different Sozialamt in Lichtenberg. The people working there were not so accommodating. Also, there was a complete lack of trust in the work of the other social offices, so they checked her case again. What also worked kind of well, at least for a time, were the care companies that could be paid through the personal budget. Not because they were perfect - there were also setbacks - but because they knew the processes.

Kim: So what I'm hearing from both of you is that it's extremely important to have a strong motivation, whatever that motivation is, to have people who support you, and ideally to know the processes. Unfortunately that last point was missing in your situation. If you had to do it all over again, Alexandra, is there anything that you would do differently?

Alexandra: I have thought about that many times. One major thing that I would have done differently - all these four years of waiting - would be to take life easier, because I didn't allow myself to enjoy life for four years. As I said before, it impacted me a lot mentally, psychologically, and personally, because I didn't know where I belonged. It was like I had a suitcase full of clothes ready to go, and two of the wheels of my wheelchair were in Berlin, and the other two wheels were in Crete, in Greece. So I couldn't start doing things or making effort on other aspects. I was living in a kind of box, like next year I'm going, next month I'm going. But no, life is not like that. And this is the major lesson learned on my side, to be adaptable, to be flexible, and if something is not good, to make it good in any way you can. And I have to tell you something that not a lot of people know, even the ones that know my story: it affected my health as well, the whole situation, because at that time, for the first time, there was a new kind of therapy for my disability. No, I'm not going to walk, but at least it helps to remain young and beautiful! But I didn't have access to that therapy all these four years, because I was insured in Germany, but in order to have this therapy, I had to be in Berlin, to live there. So I decided to sacrifice my health for the PhD. Now I receive the therapy.

Kim: I'm glad that you're getting the therapy now. There's an expression that sometimes the end justifies the means. I don't think we can say that here, but at least it wasn't all for nothing - maybe we can say that. Oliver, from your perspective, is there anything that you would do differently if you had to do it again?

Oliver: Of course! I mean, we gained a lot of knowledge. The first thing would be to get Alexandra on an employment contract as early as possible. We lost more than half a year before we could get her on a contract. The next thing would be to get a flat earlier, more urgently. In Berlin, the apartment situation has become pretty bad. The optimal situation would be having a flat here and subletting it for two years. Because it's a financial burden – Alexandra had to pay for two flats, one in Berlin and one in Heraklion, which is really expensive.

Kim: Listening to you both talk, there really were so many things that you didn't expect and that presented a burden requiring creative solutions. Looking back, what was important and what was maybe not so important?

Alexandra: I would say the most important thing is the “soft skills”: emotional intelligence, adaptability and flexibility. And another thing is that for me, I was extremely stressed about my career, and yes, I am still. Because I was afraid of this four-year “gap”. Apparently, there was no gap - I tried to be productive and publish and I did it. But still, my PhD was in Berlin, so I had to come to Berlin, which was a little different. I believe that in the end, if someone is flexible it is much more important. Life is not a box. That's the take home message. You cannot put your life in a box. It doesn't work like that. It is necessary to have an ambitious and challenging long-term plan. At least, from a personal perspective this is how I get motivated – but take it step by step and day by day. Otherwise, we will be disappointed for no reason.

Kim: Oliver, from your side, looking back, what turned out to be actually very important and what maybe not so important?

Oliver: I think the most important for the whole process would be two people. This would be Dietmar Schmitz here in Berlin, because without his eagerness to help her, to get Alexandra to Berlin, it wouldn't be possible. Because, for example, she wouldn't have got a work contract. And getting a workplace in a lab would have been much harder. So, he was the person who actually made the starting of the process possible. And on the other side, the second person was Panayiota Poirazi, the lab head in Heraklion. Without her, Alexandra wouldn't have had a place to work for two years. And so this whole concept of the “Entsendung” would not have been possible. You cannot just pay somebody a salary without them actually working for you. And so the possibility of this other workplace increased the chances that Alexandra could actually do experiments, which was also very important for the whole thing to work..

Kim: Alexandra, do you know anyone else with a similar situation?

Alexandra: Very unfortunately, no.

Kim: So you're the avant-garde. That's why your story is so helpful. Hopefully, even though everyone's situation is unique, perhaps there are some lessons from this situation that might be of use to someone else in the future. Alexandra, what advice would you give to another disabled scientist who might want to do their PhD in Berlin or in another city or country?

Alexandra: Well, I think that being a disabled scientist is a challenge by definition, even if you study in your hometown. I think that for students or researchers from Germany, it is challenging, but it is doable because they don't have to overcome these obstacles like health insurances, waiting two years to be eligible to apply for social care and things like that. I'm very sorry to say it, but it is still a utopia for a foreigner. But this is not only happening in Germany. Germany compared to other countries is far

better. I love Germany, just to make it clear. It's at the European or the worldwide level that the issue must be solved. It's impossible to move abroad if you are in need and to start a new life from scratch and to receive social benefits and to flourish in your career - and all of that without delays. There is currently no umbrella that covers this topic, in Germany or anywhere else. There is nothing. So the problem is not on the scientists. The problem is not on the disabled people. The problem is political, I would say. It's not the universities only that should find a solution to this. It's the governments of European countries and Europe per se. I was lucky. I have a great advisor, Dietmar Schmitz, and his leadership on this issue helped. But he's a scientist, and I'm also a scientist. It's not our responsibility to deal with this. It's a big contradiction that makes me angry sometimes. How can you welcome diversity and equity in science? And how can you make claims that people have rights to work and be productive? But what do you do for this? Nothing.

Kim: It's a very interesting point, especially about science, because as you said earlier, being a scientist involves mobility, needs mobility. It needs exchange with different people from different labs with different perspectives. And yet mobility is really the key problem. It's not the difficulty of being a scientist; it's the difficulty of being able to move from one place to another. That's a structural barrier. Are there, to your knowledge, mechanisms from funding organizations that recognize the extra time that it takes you to do things because of these barriers? Do you get extensions, for example, on grants or contracts?

Alexandra: No. There is nothing. I mean, there is only the special note sometimes in applications. You can write down that you have a severe disability, and the funders say they will take this into account. I want to tell you a story about this. When I was much younger in Greece, and I was applying for predoctoral scholarships, I was trying to hide the fact that I have a disability from my applications in order to see if they would select me, purely based on my excellence. And why do I say that? Because initially I was feeling guilty to say that I have a disability because I don't want this to define me as a scientist. I want people to remember me as the person that tries to understand interneurons, not as a disabled Greek student from Charité. But that's a long-term process, and it's going to take years, I think, but hopefully one day it's going to be true.

Kim: Well, it sounds like you're well on your way to getting there. Do you see it differently now? Do you see advantages in mentioning that you have a disability?

Alexandra: Yes, because it's not something that I should be ashamed of, because everyone is different. And even if you see a male scientist - male, white, not disabled - you never know the obstacles and challenges that everyone experiences, right? So the thing is not to be less strict with disabled scientists; the thing is to make sure that they have the same opportunities. And trust me, right now there is nothing, even for conferences. I remember for every travel grant that I have been applying for, in the past and now, to go to a prestigious conference - which by the way, is also very good for the CV of junior scientists - I had to explain that I need to be accompanied by my personal assistant. Practically, it means that I need a higher budget. I am happy to see that childcare grants are coming up lately, or parental leave grants and things like that. For disabled scientists there is still nothing.

Kim: So it sounds like there is a clear need for policies and measures to be developed. An important step for reducing barriers is to understand more specifically what those barriers are. So, again, getting this information from you today is very helpful. Hopefully this feedback can be provided to funding organizations so that they can take such situations into account in how they design their programs.

Oliver, from your perspective, are there any things that universities, for example, could or should change in order to make it easier to hire other disabled scientists in the future? Of course, it's difficult

to generalize, but bearing in mind that each person's situation is unique, are there any things you can think of that universities or institutions could do better?

Oliver: Yes, of course. I'm not so sure about the universities, but what we definitely need to have is this kind of two years funding for a scientist to get this person into the German welfare system. No one can actually expect from a group leader to meet this need of a scientist. For them it's like: Okay, I want to work with this person. But until I have him or her in my lab, I already need to finance them for two or three years while they are working abroad. Actually, I think close to no one is doing this – what Dietmar did was quite exceptional. So you need a possibility to fund this gap to at least give a disabled person from another country a chance to get to Germany. It wouldn't help for a postdoc, for example, because the postdoc only lasts two years - at least for one postdoc position - but for scientists with a more long-term perspective to stay somewhere, this would be extremely helpful. Actually, this would be a gamechanger. The rest of the issues we can work through, but this two-year gap of funding we need to get from somewhere.

Kim: That would be a really interesting funding program or scholarship to have - thank you for that suggestion. As a final thought, I'd like to ask you each for some spontaneous responses. Oliver, can you name five words that for you best describe this whole process?

Oliver: Hard, time-consuming, frustrating, but a happy ending. And with that I'll close.

Kim: Alexandra, what are five things that you think are needed to get through such an odyssey?

Alexandra: Being crazy, very motivated to do science, ambitious, persistent, stubborn, and lucky to have good mentors.

Kim: Fantastic. Thank you both so much for this conversation. I'd like to add an adjective of my own: inspiring. Thank you very much and all the very best for your future.