

Ilaria Galasso

Short Term Scientific Mission within the COST Action IS1303, hosted by HeLEX, (University of Oxford, United Kingdom), 14/01/2017 - 02/02/2017

REPORT

My Short Term Scientific Mission at HeLEX was very productive for my project and very enriching for me and my education, even surpassing my highest initial expectations.

The HeLEX centre proved to be a uniquely stimulating framework for my researches, and the HeLEX team was exceptionally hospitable, collaborative and helpful towards me. By staying based at HeLEX, I had the unique opportunity to discuss my research and my activities with the team, getting continuous relevant and constructive feedbacks and suggestions, as well as to learn and to keep myself updated about the works of the members of the team. More specifically, I had the opportunity to regularly participate in the weekly meetings during which HeLEX people share the progress of their works; moreover, I was also offered the chance to give an informal seminar to the team by presenting and discussing my PhD research project together with the data collected during my visit. In addition to this, I had many opportunities for very constructive exchanges and feedbacks, both in semi-formal individual meetings with members of the team and, of course, informally through every day conversations in the office.

By observing and experiencing the HeLEX research environment, and through all the exchanges with the members of the team, I had the opportunity to rethink and to improve parts of my research project in the light of the references and the suggestions collected, and to consider new directions for analysing the societal and ethical concerns related to precision medicine.

In addition to having these very positive exchanges at HeLEX, during my STSM I performed my fieldwork very successfully. I managed to interview, in different departments, a total of fifteen people (much more than I expected in the first place, thanks to the suggestions collected during my visit), all of them very relevant and very prominent experts in their fields, holding key positions in the projects under my study. The interviews were especially aimed at better understanding the potential opportunities and challenges of precision medicine at a societal level in relation to public health issues and in particular to health disparities, with the final goal to build, through this analysis an ethical framework addressing the integration of an appropriate societal commitment in the precision medicine agenda.

The interviews were used to collect and compare impressions and opinions of key experts in precision medicine projects and, as a counterpart, of prominent public health practitioners. In particular, I interviewed: experts holding different roles in the 100K Genomes Project in order to gain the point of view of insiders in precision medicine projects; researchers from the UCL Institute for Epidemiology and Health Care for the perspective of public health practitioners committed in the social determinants of health; researchers from the PHG Foundation who are interested and involved both in public health issues and in precision and genomic medicine; and several researchers in the Nuffield Departments for Population Health in Oxford, especially from the Population Health Ethics Centre (Ethox) and the Clinical Trial Epidemiology Unit, who differently (in relation to their specific roles and expertise, and to the definitions they subscribe) consider themselves as related to public health, or to precision medicine, or on the border line.

The value and the relevance of the data collected during my STSM through the answers of my interviewees, are extraordinarily high, exceeding my best initial expectations. The points of views collected are extremely diverse and extremely significant. I trust, after a careful work of interpretation, to be able to build up on them an epistemic clarification of the significance and the reach of precision medicine, and an analysis of the socio-political conditions and consequences of the affirmation of this approach, to be addressed from an ethical perspective.

To conclude, I am especially satisfied with the data collected in the fieldwork during the STSM, and I trust I can build up an original and valuable research on them, in line with the objectives of the COST Action.

Moreover, my experience at HeLEX, hosted so kindly by the team, was definitely and uniquely productive and enriching both from an academic and from a personal point of view.