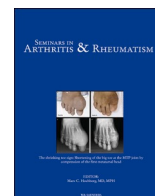




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## Navigating the path of progress: The OMERACT 2023 emerging leaders program

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** The Outcome Measures in Rheumatology Clinical Trials (OMERACT) Emerging Leaders Program (ELP) aims to cultivate a cohort of skilled leaders within the OMERACT community empowering them with expertise and knowledge to help shape and steer the organization into the future. This publication highlights the significance of the ELP in driving leadership excellence, its impact on OMERACT's evolution, and the outcomes and learnings from the OMERACT 2023 ELP.

**Methods:** Insights from the 2018 ELP report informed 2023 program improvements. Engagement was measured by attendance and WhatsApp interactions. Positive program aspects, areas for improvement and ideas for enhancing future ELPs were captured via anonymous survey and participant focus groups.

**Results:** Engagement with the ELP was high with 9 participants, 96 % attendance at all workshops, 154 WhatsApp interactions. All program components were highly rated, with the highest being the 'Psychological Safety' and

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'Methodology/Process/Politics' workshops. Future enhancements included creating further networking, connection and support activities, practical leadership and methodological skill development opportunities, and a new stream focussing on organisational advancement.

*Conclusions:* The 2023 OMERACT ELP was well received and successfully addressed areas previously identified as requiring improvement. New educational enhancements were valued, and the importance of fostering psychological safety at all levels was highlighted. The ELP fortifies OMERACT by nurturing a diverse array of skilled leaders who embody OMERACT's core values. Continuing to refine and evolve the ELP over time will help OMERACT sustain its global influence in patient-centered outcome research.

## Introduction

OMERACT is a global, volunteer-driven, not for profit organisation committed to improving outcomes for patients with autoimmune and musculoskeletal diseases through advancing the design and quality of clinical studies [1]. To help achieve this mission, OMERACT supports the development of Core Outcome Sets (COS) for use in clinical trials and longitudinal studies using rigorous methodology and global Working Groups (WGs) [2]. The OMERACT methodology used to develop COSs has been well described [3] and relies heavily on the leadership, skills, knowledge, collaboration and volunteered time of its membership. With a sustained increase in participants since inception, continually evolving OMERACT methodology and processes and an increasingly diverse and time-poor membership, ensuring the sustainability of OMERACT remains an ongoing challenge. Fostering supportive entry pathways for new members, a positive organisational culture that embodies OMERACT's core values [1], member engagement, and the inter-generational translation of corporate knowledge, therefore remain key OMERACT priorities.

Early initiatives to engage and support members to date have included a wide variety of toolkits [4] and resources [5] as well as tailored education, mentorship, and support programs for newcomers [6], fellows, and patient research partners (PRPs). In 2018, recognising the importance of offering more advanced professional development opportunities that aligned with the organization's framework, the OMERACT Emerging Leaders Program (ELP) was successfully piloted [7]. Focussing on peer support, organisational intelligence, mentorship, leadership, and facilitation skills, this program focussed on early career researchers (returning fellows) and provided an opportunity for participants to strengthen connections with the OMERACT community as well as further develop the skills, knowledge and networks required to take on future leadership roles.

A formal review of the 2018 ELP highlighted the importance of mentorship and support, personal and professional development, and meaningful connection and contribution to those involved in the program [7]. In addition to improving ELP communications, broadening eligibility to participate in the program, and dedicating more time for mentee-mentor interactions, further suggested enhancements included having more sessions on organisational intelligence, advanced methodological knowledge and advanced leadership, mentorship and facilitation skills. With these insights, the ELP program was subsequently revised and despite the significant delay caused by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the revised version of the OMERACT ELP was launched in March 2023. Here, we report on the changes made to the ELP to address previously identified areas for improvement, as well as the experiences and suggestions for further development from the 2023 ELP program participants.

## Methods

### Participants

An emerging leader was defined as any member of the OMERACT community who had previously completed the OMERACT Fellows Program. All 2023 OMERACT conference registrants were screened for

inclusion by the conference secretariat and those eligible were invited to participate in the ELP via personal e-mail 14 weeks prior to the meeting. The invitation included detailed information about the ELP, including the program schedule, session information and expectations of program participants.

### Components of the emerging leader program

The 2023 ELP is summarized in Table 1 and comprised both pre-conference and conference activities.

*Pre-conference:* All participants opting in to the ELP were sent an email welcoming them to program and outlining the online resources that were available to help them prepare for the conference and individual ELP sessions. Four weeks prior to the conference, a virtual meeting was held to welcome and connect ELP members, answer participant questions and discuss individually identified tailored learning objectives. ELP participants were each allocated three mentees (OMERACT Fellows) for the conference and both mentors and mentees were provided with mentor/mentee guides and encouraged to meet virtually prior to the conference. A "gift swap" activity was encouraged as an ice breaker activity with mentors and mentees encouraged to bring a token gift (value less than \$10 US) that represented their home country. A final email was sent 1 week prior to the ELP providing updated conference materials, access to the OMERACT 2023 conference App, and a link to eLearning modules designed to help consolidate OMERACT knowledge and skills.

*Conference:* The ELP consisted of a three-hour in person introductory workshop, five tailored one-hour pre-dinner sessions, and the mentorship program (Table 1). Two skilled facilitators and experienced OMERACTers (BR and PT) designed and delivered the program. Over the course of the five days, four hours were spent on leadership/facilitation skills, three hours on mentorship and delivering feedback, and one hour was spent on organisational intelligence. The workshop sessions were complemented by multiple opt-in skill development opportunities for participants such as chairing plenary sessions, facilitating conference WG sessions, delivering structured feedback to mentees at poster sessions and leading debriefing sessions. To help build a sense of connection and psychological safety [8] within the participant group, all sessions began with a facilitated roundtable "check-in" process which participants were encouraged to lead over the course of the week. An ELP team communication platform (WhatsApp (Version 2.2043.21)) was used to facilitate the sharing of program updates, experiences, photos, and to celebrate ELP participant successes.

*Outcomes:* Engagement with the ELP was measured by attendance and WhatsApp interactions. Following the ELP, all participants were invited to complete an online survey to evaluate the overall importance, workload and structure of the ELP and the quality of individual sessions using a 5-point Likert scale (Poor (1), Below Average (2), Average (3), Good (4), Exceptional (5)). The most positive aspects of the program, areas for improvement and ideas for enhancing future ELPs were also captured via survey and participant focus groups (led by BR and PT). All participants were also asked if they planned to continue to be involved with OMERACT looking forward.

**Table 1**  
Format of the OMERACT 2023 Emerging Leaders Program.

Session / stream	Description	Structure	Knowledge/skills
<b>Pre-OMERACT</b>	Warm welcome and ELP program information EL Mentorship Program	All EL participants emailed information about the goals of the program as well as supporting educational materials 8 weeks prior to OMERACT 2023 All EL participants completed online educational materials and questionnaire outlining their own goals for the program 1hr virtual meeting 4 weeks prior to conference ELs matched with three Fellows, provided mentor and mentee guides and encouraged to hold a virtual meeting with their mentees prior to the conference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understand the context and objectives of the EL program</li> <li>Identify needs of the current ELPs to tailor the conference program</li> <li>Demonstrate a “Check in” process</li> <li>Practical mentoring skills</li> </ul>
<b>Day 1: Mentoring / feedback and leadership / facilitation</b>	Welcome, Introductions and SMART goal setting.  Psychological safety	45mins face-to-face facilitated workshop.  1 hr facilitated workshop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learn how to run a “check in” icebreaker and create a safe space for your team</li> <li>Learn how to set SMART goals</li> <li>Understand the concept of psychological safety</li> <li>Recognising psychologically unsafe environments and team behaviours</li> <li>Recognising the flight, fight, freeze and fawn responses in ourselves and others</li> <li>Practical tips for establishing psychological safety</li> </ul>
	Advanced Facilitation	1hr facilitated shared experience workshop.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strategies for addressing common challenges that can arise in facilitation</li> <li>Improved self awareness, focus on process not outcome as a facilitator</li> </ul>
	Skilled debriefing and feedback	1hr facilitated shared experience workshop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Delivering feedback effectively</li> <li>Skilled debriefing</li> </ul>
<b>Day 2: Facilitation/ Leadership</b>	Engaging for success with OMERACT PRPs	1 hr facilitated shared experience session between ELs and PRPs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Practical tips to optimize the working relationship between PRPs and ELs</li> <li>Practical skill application in fostering psychological safety</li> </ul>
<b>Day 3: Methodology/process/politics</b>	Ask the experts Q and A Workshop	1hr facilitated Q and A Panel session with senior OMERACT members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improve understanding of OMERACT politics, funding, processes and methodology</li> </ul>
<b>Day 4: Facilitation/leadership</b>	Challenges in setting up and running working groups	1 hr face to face Leadership Action Set	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Asking open questions to encourage reflection</li> <li>Skilful self-reflective practice</li> <li>Power of sharing vulnerability</li> </ul>
<b>Day 5: Mentoring / feedback and leadership / facilitation</b>	SMART Goal review and feedback	1 hr, face-to-face, facilitated by 2 moderators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>SMART goal setting</li> <li>Delivering feedback</li> </ul>
<b>Other opportunities</b>	EL appointed daily as Chair for morning plenary session ELs appointed facilitators of WG sessions	Voluntary opportunity, chair face to face or hybrid plenary sessions Voluntary opportunity, facilitate face to face or hybrid sessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Practical opportunity to practice creating psychological safety, facilitation</li> <li>Practical opportunity to practice creating psychological safety, facilitation</li> </ul>

EL, emerging leader; OMERACT, Outcome Measures in Rheumatology; PRP, patient research partner; SMART, Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound.

## Ethics

Ethics approval was not required. Consent to publish was received by all ELP participants.

## Results

### Participants

Ten conference registrants (two who had participated in the 2018 ELP and eight who had previously participated in the Fellows Program) were identified as being eligible and invited to participate in the 2023 ELP. Nine (90 %, two prior ELP and seven prior fellows) participants opted to take part in the program (one joined after the first workshop). The majority of ELP participants (5/9) were women, three were from the United Kingdom, four from Canada, one from Germany and one from Denmark. Four ELP participants were rheumatologists, three were researchers, one was a podiatrist, and one was a physiatrist. The EL facilitators were both rheumatologists (one from Australia and one from Canada). There was a 96 % attendance at all workshops, with 154 WhatsApp interactions and 47 photos/videos posted during the five-day conference period.

### Were the identified areas for improvement from the previous ELP addressed?

Advanced notice of program participation and clarification of ELP expectations were provided via pre-conference emails and virtual meetings (Table 1). Additional responsibility and opportunities for skill development were offered to ELP participants with four taking up the opportunity to chair daily opening plenary sessions and 18 WG breakout sessions being facilitated. Improving the amount of dedicated time to spend with mentees was achieved with preconference matching and communication, a gift swap “ice-breaker” orientation activity, inclusion of the fellows lightning talk and poster presentation feedback sessions. ELP participant feedback regarding these changes is shown in Table 2 and were rated as exceptional or good by all participants.

### Program evaluation

Results for the post-conference survey were obtained from all nine participants and are summarized in Table 2. Eight respondents felt that it was “extremely important” to have an ELP, and all felt that the workload was ‘just right’. All components of the program were generally felt to be exceptional or good, with the highest ranked sessions being the

“Psychological Safety”, “Methodology/Process/Politics: Ask the Experts Q&A” and “Facilitation” workshops.

*Most positive aspects of the ELP*

Open-ended questions and responses are summarized in Table 3. The most positive aspects of the ELP included the ELP leaders and the psychologically safe space they created, the small group size fostering participation and more in-depth peer connection, the interactive peer learning format and the tailored program design for each participant using individual SMART goals. All participants reported an intention to remain involved with OMERACT in the future.

*What could be done differently?*

Allowing the introduction of a new group member (after the first workshop) and observers in some sessions was felt to temporarily reduce the sense of psychological safety for some participants. Likewise, unclear requirements of ELs who agreed to facilitate one of the special interest group workshops led to some confusion and anxiety that could have been avoided with clearer communication. Whilst it was acknowledged that the OMERACT conference schedule was much improved, having more ELP time pre and during the meeting to connect with peers and OMERACTers in leadership positions, and having an earlier timeslot for ELP sessions in the conference program were also suggested. Finally, a more personalized EL-to-Fellow mentorship matching process and clearer program requirements was suggested to better align skills, needs and expectations of both mentors and mentees.

*Ideas to further enhance the ELP*

Table 3 summarizes suggested ELP enhancements. Central themes and associated recommendations included network, connection and support activities, further practical opportunities to develop leadership and facilitation skills, and new pathways within the ELP to facilitate the development of both advanced methodological knowledge and organizational advancement.

A revised diagram incorporating this feedback into future ELP design can be seen in Fig. 1.

The new model recognizes the central importance of mentorship and certain core skills (e.g. respectful communication, interdisciplinary teamwork, working with PRPs) in fostering a culture that embodies OMERACT’s core values, no matter the career progression pathway. It also acknowledges the diversity of leadership positions available and the need for more tailored support and education pathways for each of these roles. (Fig. 1)

**Table 2**  
Emerging Leader Program evaluation (5 point Likert Scale, 1 (poor) –5 (exceptional)).

ELP Component	Mean (SD)
Pre-conference Meet and Greet Sessions <sup>a</sup>	4.50 (0.5)
Emerging Leaders/Fellows’ Mentor Program	4.13 (0.8)
Emerging Leaders/Fellows’ Gift Exchange	3.88 (0.6)
Setting SMART goals Workshop	4.44 (0.5)
Psychological Safety Workshop	4.88 (0.3)
Advanced Facilitation Workshop	4.56 (0.5)
Engaging for success with OMERACT PRPs	4.44 (0.5)
Methodology/Process/Politics Workshop: Ask the Experts	4.78 (0.4)
Challenges in setting up and running working groups	4.56 (0.5)
Amount of time for the Emerging Leaders daily meetings	4.22 (1.0)
Emerging Leaders’ program facilitators <sup>b</sup>	4.75 (0.4)
Time for interactions between Emerging Leaders*	(1.0)

<sup>a</sup> n = 8 due to one Emerging Leader entering the program during the conference, after this item had occurred.

<sup>b</sup> n = 8, one non-responder  
PRP, patient research partner.

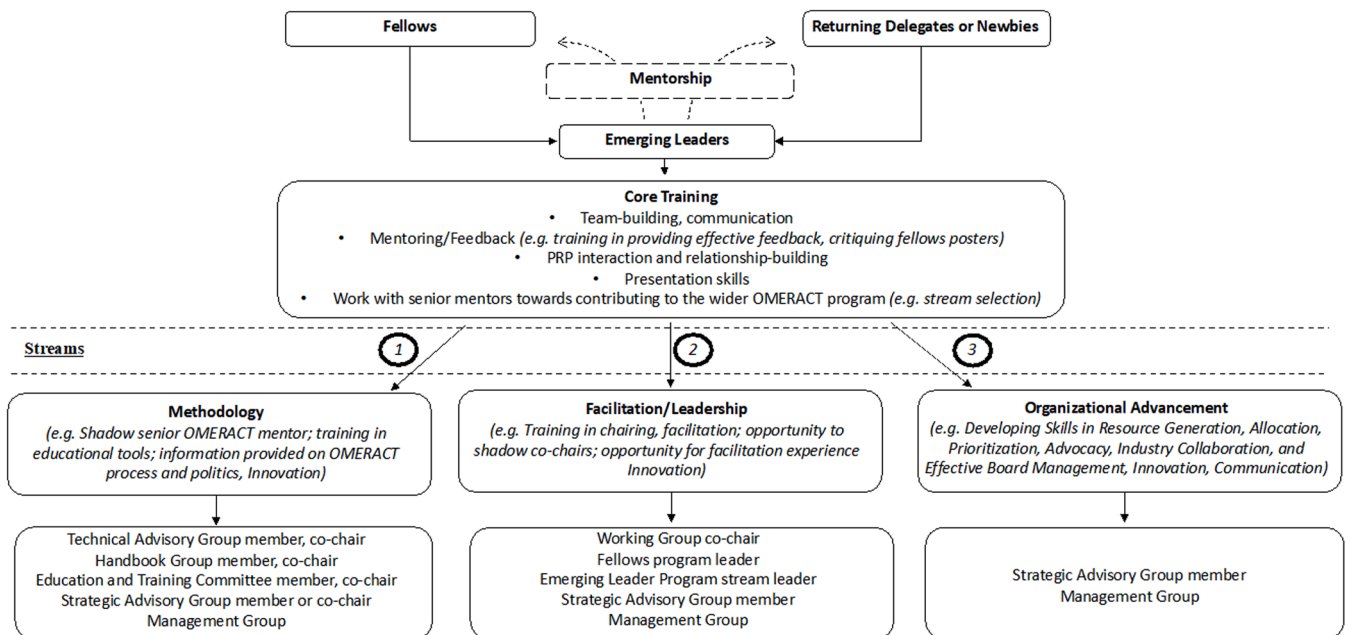
**Table 3**  
Suggested enhancements to the ELP program by program participants.

Stream / Theme	Suggestion for ELP Enhancement
<b>Networking /</b>	Regular ELP meetings in between conferences (virtual, ACR, EULAR)
<b>Connection /</b>	Opportunity to shadow and be mentored by OMERACT leaders
<b>and Support</b>	Hold an ELP workshop day prior to OMERACT conference Workshop on funding challenges and opportunities Introduce a EL PRP buddy program Enhance mentor mentee matching process and mentor training opportunities
<b>Leadership/</b>	Foster mechanism for advertisement of experiential learning opportunities within OMERACT community
<b>facilitation</b>	Opportunity to shadow and be mentored by OMERACT leaders One on one leadership coaching to progress goals Rotation of chair of virtual ELP sessions Opportunity to have input into / run future Fellows/ Newcomer/PRP programs Regular virtual leadership action sets to workshop challenges
<b>Methodology</b>	Further small group methodological training with experts Opportunity to be involved in planning plenary sessions at OMERACT 2025 meeting Virtual Q and A Sessions with experts Create opportunities to shadow technical advisory group members
<b>Organisational</b>	Workshop on basic organizational financial management skills
<b>advancement</b>	Create opportunities to develop networks with pharmaceutical companies Create opportunities to be involved in OMERACT branding, social media strategies Shadow management committee member

**Discussion**

Our report describes the second OMERACT ELP, building upon the 2018 experience. The implemented changes addressing the areas for improvement were well-received by the 2023 participants. Pre-conference communications and virtual meetings helped to clarify program expectations, promoted an early sense of connection and along with the ELP SMART Goals Workshop, and ensured the 2023 ELP was tailored to the diverse wants and needs of the participants. There was also an increase in the flexible opportunities made available to ELPs to take on leadership roles during the conference and gain real world experience and confidence in applying skills learnt during the sessions. All the ELs rated the workload ‘just right’, addressing the previously identified concern regarding balancing the EL’s workload with both program and conference activities. Importantly, all ELs are planning to return to the next OMERACT conference in 2025.

One of the most valuable enhancements to the 2023 ELP for participants was the introduction of the psychological safety workshop. Defined as the shared belief that the environment is safe for interpersonal risk taking [8], psychological safety has been shown to be a fundamental component in the success of high performing teams and productive scientific work [9,10]. ELP 2023 participants had the chance to learn about the theory underpinning psychological safety, share experiences about psychologically safe and unsafe environments, and importantly, use their lived experience of the psychological safe learning setting created during the ELP sessions to use as a model for future behaviours. It was clear from the feedback that ELs also valued the opportunity to share challenging personal and leadership experiences, discuss controversial topics with peers and OMERACT leaders and workshop practical solutions. This was only able to be achieved at a deeper level once psychological safety had been established within the ELP group. Participants reflected on the importance of the ELP Facilitators in this process, the importance of having psychological safety as a skill in the OMERACT leadership toolkit for leaders at all levels and the



Nb: These are potential career tracks within OMERACT. ELs may have the option to take part in  $\geq 1$  stream over time.

**Fig. 1.** OMERACT Emerging Leaders Program showing potential career tracks and associated skill development pathways. Emerging leaders have the option to take part in  $\geq 1$  stream over time.

benefits of this skillset in other position of leadership held outside of OMERACT.

Consistent with the spirit of OMERACT, the 2023 participants have helped to further refine and enhance the OMERACT ELP. ELs felt further improvements could be made with the mentoring program. Mentoring is a well-described means to enhance workforce performance and engagement, promote learning opportunities and encourage multidisciplinary collaboration [11]. Mentorship in combination with a feeling of psychological safety enhances the mentee’s perception of organizational innovativeness [12]. Pre-conference Fellow/ELP mentor-mentee matching using mentor strengths and identifying mentee areas for development was suggested as one possible way to increase the chances of success of this relationship. Including more time for mentor training in the curriculum was also suggested.

Given the constraints of the conference timetable, ELs also identified the need for more time to be allocated to the ELP workshops pre and post conference in a virtual setting. Creating more opportunities for ELs to engage with fellow ELs and network with OMERACT colleagues by holding a preconference ELP day, and hosting events at ACR and EULAR were also suggested.

Moving forward, several program enhancements which align with the new OMERACT framework were also identified. Creating further opportunities for more experienced ELs to take a lead in delivering Fellow, PRP, Newcomer and ELP sessions, including a mentorship program for ELs that aligns with their skill development pathway and including a new support and education pathway to develop the skills, knowledge and networks required for high-level organizational event planning and management activities were suggested. These have been incorporated into the proposed new ELP outlined in Fig. 1.

**Limitations**

This report is limited by the small number of participants from two continents but is reflective of the participation in OMERACT ELP 2023. Understanding how other OMERACT members (e.g. Fellows, Newcomers, PRPs and members of the Management Group, Technical

Advisory Committee, Strategic Advisory Committee) perceive the ELP was not evaluated, and would provide additional valuable input into future program development.

**Conclusions**

The ELP was again shown to be a valuable addition to OMERACT and the changes incorporated into the 2023 OMERACT ELP were positively received. The inclusion of the psychological safety workshop and ensuring a psychological safe environment to learn in were identified as key components to the success of the ELP and to sustaining future leadership training at all levels within OMERACT. Based on the 2023 ELP experience, further program enhancements have been proposed including a new pathway to incorporate key leadership skills required to achieve organisational sustainability and advancement.

**Authorship contributions**

All authors collected data and contributed to the final manuscript. All authors contributed to critical analysis of the manuscript and approved the final version.

**Data availability**

Data are available on request to the authors.

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Nil

**Declaration of competing interest**

None of the authors has any competing interests to declare.

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