

Young physicists excited to network through the International Association of Physics Students

The student-run organization seeks to increase outreach in Asia, Latin America, and the US.

The International Association of Physics Students will change your life,” is something Ruhi Chitre kept hearing at a conference for women in physics in 2019. Eager to see what the fuss was about, later that year Chitre traveled from her base in the UK to Germany for the annual International Conference of Physics Students (ICPS), the flagship event of the association, known as IAPS. For her, the prediction proved true.

The ICPS showcased possible career avenues for physics students. Through discussions there, Chitre became hooked on the idea of working in science policy. Being around other physics students who were also trying to find their career paths was inspiring, she says. She realized that IAPS offered opportunities for making friends and sharing advice about career options. She served as its secretary in 2020–21 and president in 2021–22. In April, she began working as a consultant in artificial intelligence at UNESCO.

During her time as IAPS president,

Chitre and other executive committee members created a server on the instant messaging platform Discord for members to make friends. “We made a structured place where people could ask about different things,” she says. The topics include sharing information about events, posting funny memes, and even asking if someone has a couch to crash on.

The inaugural conference was held in Hungary in 1986 by physics students there who wanted to collaborate with their peers from around the world. It led to the formation of IAPS a year later. The organization is run by students. It gets advice and financial support from the International Union of Pure and Applied Physics and from the European Physical Society, which also provides space at its headquarters in Mulhouse, France.

IAPS comprises more than 90 000 students from 45 countries, and the number of members—and countries—continues to grow. The membership got a bump during the height of the COVID-19 pan-

demic, spurred by a combination of widespread isolation and easy access with the click of a button. Students can join IAPS during their undergraduate or graduate studies, and they can stay for a year after they earn their highest degree. IAPS is organized into territorial and local committees, but if there is no committee in a student’s region, they can join IAPS as an individual member.

Eleven executive committee members work together to connect students around the world. Committee member Dimitris Gkavakos, a physics bachelor’s student in Greece, is the public relations manager. He describes the organization as a “knowledge-transfer pipeline” that helps physics students succeed in the field.

About 400 students attend the ICPS conference each year. In 2022 Mexico was the first non-European country to host the event, but it was held remotely that and the previous year in Denmark because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Philippines hosted the conference in person in 2023.

The IAPS executive committee wants



CONTESTANTS GREET STEPHEN HAWKING at the opening ceremony of the 2014 Physics League Across Numerous Countries for Kick-ass Students in the Netherlands.



STUDENTS FROM AROUND THE WORLD meet in Cologne, Germany, for the 2019 annual conference of the International Association of Physics Students.

to know how they can help individual members, says current president Cyrus Walther, who this year earned his master's degree in experimental particle physics in Germany. The organization contributes financially toward events, fosters professional networking, connects committees to other associations, and offers other support when it can, he says. Through IAPS, he adds, members can develop their leadership skills and form international networks.

Creating community

The executive committee aims to increase IAPS membership in Asia, Latin America, and the US. It's been difficult to make inroads in the US, in particular, Walther says, because students there are well served for career building and networking by the Society of Physics Students (SPS, which is affiliated with the American Institute of Physics, the publisher of *Physics Today*). SPS is the US committee of IAPS. A couple of SPS student council members attend the ICPS every year. Still, despite having automatic membership, many SPS members are unfamiliar with IAPS, says Brad Conrad, who was SPS's director until August 2023. For the foreseeable future, he adds, SPS cannot afford the several hundred thousand dollars that it would cost to host large IAPS events in the US.

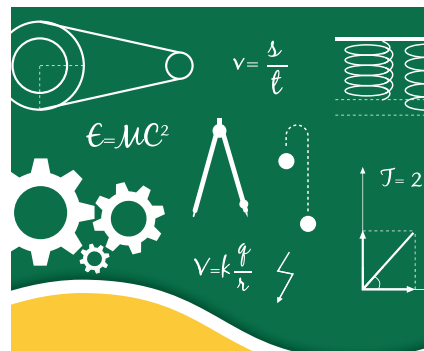
Thara Caba became involved with IAPS in 2021. At the time, she lived in her native Dominican Republic, and astronomy, her field of choice, is not taught in colleges there. Through IAPS, she formed a local committee to bring astronomy

outreach to her town. With a grant from the organization, she hosted a month-long astronomy event for women and girls. Participants attended astronomy lectures and learned about potential career options. Caba says that the event inspired one high school student to create an astronomy club at her school. That sense of community is what makes IAPS special, says Caba. In 2021–22 she served as IAPS public relations manager, and in 2022–23 she was secretary. She is pursuing her master's degree in astrophysics and space science in Serbia.

In Singapore, Soe Gon Yee Thant stumbled onto IAPS in 2020 when she took part in the Physics League Across Numerous Countries for Kick-ass Students (PLANCKS), another popular IAPS event. The three-day exam-based physics competition takes place in a different country every year. In 2021 she organized a preliminary competition to select whom to send to PLANCKS from Singapore. Next, she and others formed a territorial IAPS committee. Working on the competition gave her a sense of purpose and helped her build a community, she says. She served on the IAPS executive committee in 2022–23 as the membership and advocacy manager. She graduated with a bachelor's degree in physics and is currently a researcher working on complex systems, machine learning, and neural networks. She remains involved with IAPS through an external-relations working group.

This August IAPS will be hosting the 38th ICPS in Tbilisi, Georgia.

Hannah H. Means **PT**



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