This call for applications launched by the Montpellier Advanced Knowledge Institute on Transitions (MAK’IT) aims to set up in Montpellier, over a period of 6 months (October 2020 - March 2021), a group of internationally renowned researchers from various backgrounds and disciplinary fields, covering both life and engineering sciences as well as social sciences and humanities, to apprehend together, through innovative and creative approaches, the societal controversy:

**Fake news or weak science?**

Implications for sustainable development transitions in the agri-food, environmental and health areas

Each member of the cohort thus formed will approach this controversy from the perspective of his/ her own discipline, while comparing its results with those of the other members of the group and enriching them in an interdisciplinary manner.

The aim will be to analyse together how this controversy impacts agri-food, environmental and health transitions towards sustainable development and to identify priority lines of action in terms of research programming, teaching, foresight exercises, capacity-building of scientific communities and their participation in public debate, international collaborations, etc., in order to accelerate these transitions.

MAK’IT offers fellows a privileged working environment to develop their ideas in a decompartmentalized way, within a scientific community recognized worldwide in the three fields of action of the Institute: agriculture & food, environment, health. MAK’IT’s fellows are strongly encouraged and actively supported in their efforts to create new connections and develop new collaborations with Montpellier’s scientific community.
Fake news or weak science?

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides an unprecedented and comprehensive roadmap to transition toward a low-carbon, resource-efficient, socially-inclusive and economically-equitable world. Science is at the core of this agenda and its implementation. As interlinked environmental, social and economic risks and challenges are growing, the need for a global society of science-literate citizens is becoming increasingly apparent.

This objective is however undermined by the proliferation of ‘fake news’ on sustainable development and the seeds of confusion it sows. This phenomenon is nothing new but with social media and networks notably, this kind of news disseminate much faster and at a much larger scale than before, sometimes in unexpected formats and with varying levels of sophistication, to such an extent that for some analysts we have entered a ‘post-truth’ era where our ‘knowledge societies’ are becoming ‘belief societies’.

The very concept of ‘fake news’ is contested and lacks an agreed definition. From approximations, insinuations, half-truths, clever selection of facts taken out of context to misinformation, disinformation, ‘junk news’ or hoaxes, the degree of ‘fakery’ and the intentionality of their author(s) differ. This phenomenon questions also other related concepts: certainty -of facts- vs. uncertainty -of scientific data-, impartiality vs. neutrality -of the media notably-, ignorance vs. hope - when people share stories that fit what they want to believe, like a new miracle medical treatment -. A common feature though is that fake news spreading frequently adorns itself with scientific justifications.

The agri-food, environmental and health sectors and their interactions, that are the subject of this call, are primary targets of these fake science news. Surveys have shown that citizens are most sensitive to risks that are invisible, perceived as out of control or anxiety-provoking. ‘Clean coal’, anti-vaccination speeches, pro- and anti- GMOs, etc.: the content and quality of received information regarding socio-technical controversies play a critical role on how people get engaged on transitions, at any level.

The proposed topic also questions the legitimacy and robustness of scientific data and the role of scientists themselves in this growing fake news phenomenon. On the one hand, while scientists are increasingly mobilized for their expertise in science-policy interfaces, cases of collusion between scientific interests and industrial, journalistic, political ones sometimes produces what some call ‘fake sustainability’. ‘Citizen science’ is increasingly seen as a reliable alternative source of information. On the other hand, scientists are more and more encouraged to directly take part, alongside journalists, policy makers, legislators and others to the fight against fake science news by playing the role of whistleblowers as well as by being more engaged in communication, vulgarization and pedagogy. The relationship between scientists, media and other constituencies, and the public tends to be redesigned in the light of these challenges in a more intersectoral and interdisciplinary way. All these evolutions raise many questions, including ethical ones.

The proposed cohort experimentation intends to test this kind of intersectoral and interdisciplinary approach, with a thematic focus on the agri-food, environmental and health areas. All types of research projects with the propensity to contribute to the proposed controversy in both STEM and SSH disciplines (e.g. researchers working on historical, sociological, psychological and legal aspects of ‘fake news’ and their relation to science, on topics targeted by fake news, on technological/telecommunications means to fight against them) are welcome.

1 The Global Sustainable Development Report 2019: The Future is Now – Science for Achieving Sustainable Development points out four recent trends in particular that are not moving in the right direction: climate change, biodiversity loss, rising inequalities and increasing amount of waste from human activity.
WHO CAN APPLY?

Nationality: researchers of all nationalities, who have not resided in France for more than 12 months in the three years preceding the call for applications.

Tax residence: candidates must have a tax residence abroad.

Level of education: candidates must hold a doctorate or equivalent and fall into one of the following two categories:
- ‘Senior’ candidates: a minimum of 10 years’ experience in research after the (doctorate obtained before 1 October 2010).
- ‘Junior’ candidates: a minimum of 2 years’ experience in research after the doctorate (doctorate obtained between 1 October 2010 and 1 October 2018).

Professional status: candidates must have an employment contract in a foreign university or research institution (other than a French research institution abroad), or be attached to it through an emeritus, covering the period of their residency. A letter of attachment, signed by the head of the home institution, will be required in the event of selection at the end of the evaluation process.

Disciplines / research field: all disciplines, in life and engineering sciences or SSH, related to MAK’IT’s three main action areas (agriculture & food, environment, health) and research project likely to feed the selected controversy.

Scientific partnership: applicants must have identified one or more possible partnerships with Montpellier’s research structures that could lead to scientific cooperation during their stay.

Languages: Fluency in English is required, understanding of French is preferable.

Open-mindedness: the proposed programme requires candidates to be creative, open to interdisciplinary dialogue and risk-taking, and motivated by the discovery of an original methodological approach through the understanding of controversies and by exchanges with other actors from the socio-economic world.

HOSTING CONDITIONS

A hosting agreement is signed between the University of Montpellier, on which MAK’IT depends administratively, the hosting research structure and the fellow to formalize the following modalities.

RESEARCH RESOURCES

Fellows invited by MAK’IT are detached from their usual obligations in their home institution and have the necessary availability to freely devote themselves to their research project and participate in the Institute’s activities.

During their stay in Montpellier, they each have an office equipped with a computer, internet access and printing facilities in an open space at MAK’IT’s premises, located at the Institut de botanique, in the historic heart of Montpellier. The fellows also have access to several meeting rooms and a 250-seat amphitheatre. MAK’IT facilitates access and extended lending rights in the main libraries of the University of Montpellier, as well as the possibility, with financial contribution, of having lunch at the administrative restaurant on which the Institute depends.

The integration of the invited fellows into Montpellier’s scientific community is facilitated by their connection to one of the research structures of the site in line with their respective research themes, and the appointment of a scientific correspondent for each of them. The research structures concerned provide each fellow with a workspace that he/she can use as he/she wishes during his/her stay in Montpellier.

To facilitate their interdisciplinary group work, fellows are accompanied by a Research Officer recruited specifically to work on the selected controversy. He/she is responsible for compiling a literature review and enriching a virtual library related to the controversy, as well as setting up a scientific network of contacts in Montpellier and international experts on the subject who can share their knowledge and interact with the Institute’s fellows. He/she will be in charge of accompanying the group’s interdisciplinary scientific approach and will be involved, in agreement with the group, in the collective valorisation of its work.

An induction period is planned for the fellows at the beginning of their stay, including visits to Montpellier campuses and research centres, as well as a one-week group seminar to explain the interdisciplinary and collaborative approach expected within the cohorts.
**HOUSING**

MAK’IT works with a seasonal apartment rental agency in Montpellier to offer guest fellows a range of quality apartments, selected by itself, that are fully equipped and nearby or easily accessible from the Institute. MAK’IT takes full and direct responsibility for the accommodation costs of its residents. Requests for family accommodation must be indicated in the application form in order to be considered.

**FLAT-RATE MONTHLY ALLOWANCE**

Fellows invited to MAK’IT remain attached to their home institution during their stay: they do not have an employment contract with the Institute and it is their responsibility to ask their institution of origin to maintain all or part of their salary. MAK’IT pays guest fellows a monthly allowance of a non-negotiable lump sum as follows:

- **‘Senior’ fellows:** € 3,000
- **‘Junior’ fellows:** € 2,000

This amount is calculated to enable fellows to largely cover the costs related to their stay in Montpellier and to finance their scientific activity (travels to meetings, registration fees for scientific events, purchases of books or software, etc.).

**TRAVEL AND VISA**

MAK’IT covers its fellows’ return trip between Montpellier and their usual place of residence, in economy class. Any immigration costs (visa) are also covered.

**INSURANCE AND SOCIAL SECURITY COVERAGE**

MAK’IT does not cover insurance and social security costs, which must be borne by the fellows themselves or their employer. The MAK’IT team is at the fellows’ disposal to assist them in dealing with international health insurance companies, in the event that the coverage available through their home institution is not valid in France.

The fellows must provide proof of adequate social security coverage, covering the risks of illness, accidents at work and civil liability, before arriving in Montpellier.

**ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES**

The MAK’IT team is at the fellows’ disposal to help them with the administrative procedures related to their installation in Montpellier and the organization of their scientific events. If necessary, their families also benefit from specific support: schooling of children, assistance with the academic integration of spouses, French as a foreign language courses, etc.

**COMMITMENTS OF THE FELLOW**

A stay at MAK’IT aims to enable invited fellows to carry out their research through an innovative and enriching approach, by freely organising their activities and working hours and benefiting from the necessary services and assistance in their daily practical and administrative procedures. It also implies the acceptance of certain conditions.

**TIME SPENT IN MONTPELLIER**

Each invited fellow is required to be in Montpellier for at least 90% of the duration of his stay (excluding periods of closure of the Institute). This residency requirement, which is essential to establish genuine partnerships with the local scientific community, is compatible with occasional absences, which must be reported in advance. Absences of less than a week are simply notified to the host research structure and the MAK’IT team. A longer absence will be subject to management approval.
CONTRIBUTION TO THE COHORT’S ACTIVITIES ON THE SELECTED CONTROVERSY

The fellow commits to contribute fully to the interdisciplinary activities, meetings and reflections organized by MAK’IT during his/her stay, including a weekly interdisciplinary working seminar with the rest of the cohort on the treatment of the selected controversy. He/she agrees to share the progress of his/her research, to participate actively in the collective production that will come from the cohort’s work and exchanges and to prepare a short activity report at the end of his/her stay.

ORGANISATION OF AN INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC SCIENTIFIC EVENT IN MONTPELLIER

The invited researcher undertakes to organise, during his stay in Montpellier, at least one scientific event of international scope, open to the public, on a theme related to his research project and the controversy dealt with by the cohort, in collaboration with the research unit on which he/she depends and Montpellier’s scientific community more broadly.

COMMUNICATION AND DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS

The fellow retains the intellectual property rights to the results of his/her research carried out as part of this fellowship with MAK’IT.

He/she undertakes to contribute to MAK’IT’s publications and other communication tools concerning the activities of the cohort.

He/she keeps MAK’IT informed of its participation in external symposia, seminars or scientific events as well as of his/her publications, prizes and distinctions obtained...

He/she authorizes MAK’IT to publish his/her portrait and, if relevant, the results of his/her research carried out at MAK’IT for the Institute’s archives. In the event of their wider dissemination, the fellow undertakes to mention the support he has received from MAK’IT and to affix the Institute’s logo to them.

EVALUATION PROCESS

MAK’IT attaches great importance to the quality and impartiality of its selection process. Each application is reviewed by MAK’IT’s Scientific Council composed of independent international experts. The latter establishes a list of shortlisted candidates, as well as a complementary list (with rankings) and forward them to the MAK’IT Management Board (Board of the MUSE initiative) for final decision.

At the end of these two successive phases, candidates are informed of the result of the selection. Successful candidates receive a letter of invitation from MAK’IT Director detailing the proposed conditions of stay.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

- the candidate’s scientific background and international recognition
- the relevance of its field of research to the proposed controversy and the SDGs, and its potential to contribute to an interdisciplinary and intersectoral dynamic
- the demonstrated ability to create links and conduct collaborations within plural scientific communities and with the Montpellier scientific community in particular
- the adequacy of the profile with MAK’IT’s vision and values: excellence, innovation, interdisciplinarity, out-of-the-box thinking, collegiality and openness to the socio-economic world

Evaluators will strive to ensure that the group is as representative and appropriate as possible with regard to gender balance, age, geographical origins, scientific disciplines and areas of expertise of the candidates.

PROVISIONAL CALENDAR

- March - April 2020: evaluation of applications by MAK’IT Scientific Council and pre-selection of around ten candidates
- April 2020: final selection of candidates by MAK’IT Management Board (MUSE Board) and announcement of results
- 1st October 2020 – 30 March 2021: first MAK’IT cohort in Montpellier

HOW TO APPLY?

Online application for: https://questionnaire.umontpellier.fr/index.php/455614?lang=en