Prior to its first direct elections (1979) and the Single European Act (1986), the European Parliament (EP) had formally very few competences and limited powers. However, what the Treaties provided for the EP and what its members (MEPs) made out of their institution differed remarkably. This is the subject of my PhD research: the institutional evolution of the EP prior to its first direct elections, with a particular focus on the EP’s activism regarding social and labour policy. Through the UACES Scholarship which I was granted, I was able to conduct 14 interviews with former MEPs and members of EP staff. These interviews offered extensive and detailed information on the behaviour of the early MEPs and the institutional development of the EP prior to its first direct elections. The parliamentarians’ behaviour and their underlying ideas led to the establishment of routines within the EP as well as between the EP and other Community institutions. Thus, both the MEPs’ activism and their ideas can be considered a – if not the – driving force behind Parliament’s increasingly powerful role. To some extent, archival source documents such as parliamentary resolutions, reports, questions and the respective drafts allow an understanding of such behaviour and evolving routines. Consequently, at the beginning of my PhD research, I consulted ca. 3,700 EP documents from the period 1952-1979. However, these documents do not reveal much about the underlying ideas and interests that drove the early MEPs. Hence, the success of my research project relies heavily on personal accounts, which to collect the UACES Scholarship allowed me. The combination of personal recollections and the previously consulted archival material enables me to profoundly understand and analyse the EP’s early development.

As initially planned, the UACES scholarship allowed me to conduct interviews in different countries with MEPs and members of EP staff. However, some aspects of the various trips did not go quite as intended. First and foremost, the elevated age of the interviewees led to some unforeseen difficulties, notably that some of those whom I initially intended to interview preferred to speak on the phone instead of during an encounter: their state of health did not allow them to schedule a reliable meeting, since they had to visit doctors and hospitals in a frequency that could not be foreseen. Consequently, the itinerary of the interview trips changed a bit: not all trips that were initially planned did indeed take place. In addition, given the elevated age and state of health of some MEPs, three of those whom I had hoped to meet for an interview – and with whom I had partly already set a date and place for the interview – passed away before I had a chance to speak to them about their experiences in the EP. In two out of the three cases, I received the information early enough to be able to re-schedule my trips. In one case, however, I only learned of an interviewee’s departure when I turned up at his home, and he did not open the door.

However, more surviving MEPs from the period 1952-1979 could be contacted, some of whom agreed to an interview, allowing me to go to Belgium and Italy (both of which were not initially on my itinerary) and meet former MEPs there. Since in the end some of the funding kindly provided by UACES was left over, I could have long international (and hence – prior to the abolition of roaming charges – rather cost-intensive) phone calls with five MEPs who preferred interviews over the phone to actual encounters, would not have been able to schedule a meeting for an interview with me for reasons of health, or the trip to whom would have been overly expensive and complicated, since they reside in small villages that are difficult to reach without a car. Thanks to the in total 14 conducted interviews, I am able to include personal accounts from all nine member states of the European Communities prior to 1979 as well as all EP party groups in my PhD research. As I had hoped for, the interviewees shared with me information about informal practices and strategies that helped me significantly to better understand and analyse the EP’s institutional evolution prior to 1979.