We can proudly say that the YIAG was the trailblazer of the many young arbitration groups that are today empowering the younger generation of arbitration specialists.

Nigel recalls a lunch with Johnny Veeder on Chancery Lane just after the passage of the Arbitration Act 1996. The Act had revolutionised arbitration in England and Wales and it felt like international arbitration was on the cusp of a new era. Ever the innovator, Johnny proposed the idea of a group of young and diverse practitioners to offer a new and fresh voice on the challenges facing international arbitration which would offer a counterpoint to the legacy of a group of “founding fathers” who had dominated the field up to that point.

The selection of the first (unelected) chairs demonstrated an early commitment to breaking male domination. The initial quartet was made up of a certain Dutch practitioner, Jackie van Hof, who would provide an international civil law perspective, a young barrister named Toby Landau (who had been instrumental in the drafting of the Arbitration Act), Freshfields associate Nigel and a young barrister specialising in arbitration, Claire Ambrose. The first meeting some 21 years ago in 1997 was a modest affair of about twenty contemporaries in a subterranean conference room at Freshfields offices in Fleet Street. Nigel had convinced Freshfields to provide four bottles of cheap wine and some crisps. The upper age limit was provisionally set at thirty. Realising that this would remove many of the original members from office rather promptly (three were 29) it was subsequently extended to 33 and then 35. As we now know “40 is the new 30” as successive generations have wished to avoid confronting mortality by joining the “no longer young” groups. Meetings took place in more glamorous locations as time went on and the group internationalised. As with all good ideas, other institutions took up the gauntlet and launched sister groups.

The 2018 IBA Young Practitioners’ Symposium in Buenos Aires.
As time has passed, the organisational structure has developed to include regional representatives to ensure a balanced geographical approach. The YIAG has become a key part of the arbitration community and a testing ground for new ideas as well as providing training for the next generation. It also creates an opportunity for networking which allows younger arbitration professionals to build strong international relationships.

The core role of the co-chairs has not changed over time; they liaise with the regional representatives and the Events Team to plan a conference (often prior to a main LCIA conference to enable the young practitioners to attend the principal event) and select and organise topics for discussion in the Tylney Hall format. This is an open forum from the floor during which participants discuss topics suggested by them in advance. It allows members to exchange views on the most recent and interesting issues in the field. The co-chairs moderate the discussions in order to keep them lively, ensuring a wide range of topics are covered. The Chatham House Rule allows participants to share unusual, fun and sometimes controversial views as well as valuable war stories that might otherwise be untellable.

Since the Tylney Hall format encourages debate rather than “talking heads”, it empowers all participants equally and enables everyone’s voice to be heard. That visibility has in turn enabled a new generation of arbitrators to emerge. Without the YIAG, Nigel notes it would have been unlikely he would have received his first LCIA appointment at 33 concerning the supply of $200,000 of cement to Portugal where he recalls regretfully informing inexperienced local counsel that they need not address him as “Your Honour”. Such initial appointments also benefit arbitration as young arbitrators tend to be more available than their older peers and are dedicated to providing prompt and pragmatic procedural and substantive solutions to the parties’ dispute.

The YIAG also organises specific workshops to help attendees develop skills such as expert cross-examination sessions in different jurisdictions. It also co-organises events with the LCIA in order to provide a greater range of views on specific aspects of arbitration practice.

For instance, following the recent modification of the LCIA’s guidance notes to arbitrators, a series of “role play” events was launched to showcase the way the guidance notes could work in real life. The YIAG also organises the Gillis Wetter Prize essay competition on a biennial basis. All YIAG members may submit an essay on a specific topic of international arbitration in order to have a chance to win £5,000.

Senior practitioners are encouraged to urge their younger colleagues to join the YIAG. Membership is open to students, practitioners and younger members of the arbitration community. Subscription is free of charge.

Whilst the YIAG would never overtly claim to be the “original and the best”, it is an astonishing credit to the many co-chair alumni and Johnny Veeder’s vision to think that in its 21 year history, it has now extended to over 9,500 members from more than 140 countries. The YIAG and its peer groups are the incubators of a whole new generation of talent which will ensure the constant renewal of a highly skilled pool of talent in this most fascinating of practice areas.

The current YIAG co-chairs are Anya George, Andrey Panov, Flore Poloni and Nathan Searle.

To find out more about YIAG, contact yiag@lcia.org