



Max Planck PhDnet

The 2018 PhDnet Survey: Drawing conclusions

SEPTEMBER 27, 2019

MentalHealth

Power Abuse

Surveys

by **Laura Einhorn**

The Max Planck Society (MPS) is one of the non-university research organizations in Germany that produces high-quality research in a plethora of interesting fields such as Maritime Biology, Quantum Physics, Linguistics and Political Sciences. The 85 Max Planck institutes (MPIs) across Germany and beyond provide doctoral researchers (DRs) with the opportunity to work on unique projects in a highly international research environment. However, while we are all certainly aware that this is a great privilege, many of us also face difficult working conditions, a stressful work atmosphere, and a high degree of pressure and anxiety (<https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-018-05634-8>). Taking on and pursuing a PhD takes a high level of intrinsic motivation and commitment, an equally high level of resilience, and the ability to cope with a variety of problems: from being able to live off one's funding scheme, planning a limited number of holidays accordingly to managing the challenges of a hierarchical structure of supervision, and finding the right balance between work and leisure. No matter which discipline, DRs can only flourish and contribute to the high-quality research the MPS thrives on when they don't have to jeopardize their passion and motivation for research, their mental and physical well-being or their friendship and family life for the sake of producing sufficient amounts of scientific output and meeting the demands of supervisors, colleagues, and of the academic field as a whole.

Changes are most efficacious if they are based on comprehensive insights into the most severe problems and into their origins. A first crucial step towards avoiding the negative repercussions of compromising and towards improving the working conditions for DRs is thus an assessment of DRs' situation across MPIs. Identifying similarities and differences between institutes facilitates an understanding of problems endemic to single institutes and of problems which may be endemic to the MPS or to the academic profession as a whole. For this reason, PhDnet conducts an annual survey among DRs working at the MPS. The PhDnet aims to improve and

adapt the survey each year. Starting this year, the core questionnaire will be synchronized among the Max Planck, Leibniz and Helmholtz Associations to include an even larger number of DRs in subsequent years. This will create greater leverage in negotiations with the Max Planck, Leibniz and Helmholtz headquarters, and it will help adopt solutions that other research institutions have already implemented.

Last year, the survey focused on DRs' working conditions, their supervision situation, good scientific practice (GSP), family planning and DRs' satisfaction with different aspects of their PhD (<https://doi.org/10.17617/2.3052826>). More than 50% of all DRs working at the MPS completed the survey.

A clear improvement compared to previous years is the increased share of contract versus stipend holders in most MPIs. The MPS also reacted to the low number of holidays in some institutes which made it especially daring for DRs from abroad to plan their trips back home. The increase of holidays from 20 to 30 days across institutes is gratefully acknowledged and may have taken much more time in absence of DRs' unambiguous demands articulated in the PhDnet surveys. However, the salary differences across sections, contributing to an untenable gender pay gap, and the differences in working conditions between German and non-German DRs, between different regions of Germany, research groups and clusters, or between cohorts are still worrisome. While these differences may in some cases be justifiable, they need to be communicated with utmost transparency. At times, the logic of the academic field creates an unhealthy and almost certainly unproductive sense of competition among young researchers, and this competitiveness should in no way be complemented by grudge or resentment based on unjustified or ill explained differences in working conditions.

Another major challenge that DRs face is the successful creation and maintenance of an open, fruitful and respectful relationship with their supervisor(s). We have very few tools at our disposal to change or improve an unsatisfactory situation, and the traditionally very hierarchical and largely dependent nature of supervisory relationships in Germany exacerbates candid communication of potential problems with one's supervisor(s). While DRs working at one of the MPIs are generally satisfied with their PhD, dissatisfaction and thoughts about quitting clearly correlate with and may thus partially be a consequence of difficulties with supervision. These difficulties may be personal; they may be a result of different research paradigms, demands and expectations; they may simply result from a lack of communication but they may as well result from disinterest, disregard or even from full-on power abuses and exploitative work arrangements. PhDnet therefore demands mandatory

leadership training for supervisors and an implementation of practicable feedback mechanisms. Thesis advisory committees (TACs) can help disperse responsibilities and workload for supervisors and thus drastically improve the supervision situation. Many DRs agree that their TAC contributes to the scientific quality of their projects. TACs may also aid in alleviating harmful dependencies resulting from person-centered supervisory relations.

According to the survey, violations of good scientific practice (GSP) fortunately seem to be rare in the MPS. However, knowledge about what the rules of GSP entail are less well known in some institutes. The ombudsperson system, designed to monitor compliance with GSP regulations, is often criticized and denounced by DRs. Ombudspersons in some institutes are not considered neutral and trustworthy, and this finding is alarming: the MPS' reputation as one of the leading research institutions in Germany needs to be based on rigorous, unbiased and well-founded research, and violations of GSP need to be reported and subjected to critical scrutiny, independent of the violator's field of research, their position, or their academic prestige.

Further, the survey provides intriguing insights into the unnerving challenges DRs face when it comes to long-term planning. The changing structure of the academic field brings in its wake a scarcity of permanent positions and constant job insecurity for non-tenured researchers. It demands frequent residential mobility and flexibility, and favors some types of research and publications over others. While many DRs want to stay in academia after finishing their PhD, few expect to be able to do so. In addition, DRs tend to suspend family planning and parenthood. While the MPS attempts to support DRs with children in different ways, the variety of offers is often perceived as confusing and intransparent. Hence, information needs to be disseminated proactively and in a clear way.

Needless to say, many of these aspects are not unique to the MPS, which is why we are thrilled about the chance to compare findings across Helmholtz institutes, Leibniz institutes and MPIs in the years to come. Most of these aspects are neither unique to non-university research nor to research conducted in Germany. While we acknowledge this fact, there is no reason to resign or to stop voicing concerns. As we state in the survey report, "the MPS maintains a powerful position as a potential role model in the academic system due to its good domestic and international reputation. As a result, we believe that the MPS has the tools as well as the institutional and symbolic power to address these issues and to push for changes on a larger scale".

The survey group is thankful to all DRs who participated in the survey and who shared their experiences and opinions. We hope future surveys will provide many more insights, foster communication and cooperation with the MPS General Administration, and receive a great deal of academic and public attention eventually leading to an improvement of DRs' situation overall.

© 2003–2020, Max-Planck-Gesellschaft