The Max Planck Society enhances the training and career conditions of its young scientists and researchers

In 2015, more than 8,500 PhD students and postdocs were working as researchers in the Max Planck Society. They form the backbone of the research work with their ideas, commitment and enthusiasm. The superb scientific working environment at the Max Planck Institutes and the sophisticated technical infrastructure attract many junior scientists. However, in order to continue winning the most talented young researchers in the face of international competition with top facilities, it is essential to continually improve career structures. Consequently, a package of measures was put in place in 2015 to make the Max Planck Society even more attractive for talented young researchers.

Obtaining a doctorate is the first step in a scientific career. Since July 2015, junior scientists have been receiving funding contracts* from the Max Planck Society to enable them to concentrate fully on their research in this phase. Previously, the majority of students mainly had scholarships. The Max Planck funding contract combines the scientific freedom of a scholarship with the social security of a contract of employment. This ensures that PhD students can commit their independent, undivided attention to their scientific work.

Compensation corresponds to 50 percent of (level 1 or 2) plus the federal civil service pay scale (TVöD Bund); an annual special payment is also made. A recruitment bonus may be granted in individual cases, so that remuneration amounts to a maximum of 100 percent of pay grade E 13 TVöD. In addition, research residencies within the scope of the doctoral thesis – in Germany and abroad – are subsidized. Support contracts are concluded for a period of three years, with the option of a further one-year extension.

The Max Planck Society has also revised its Guidelines on Doctoral Training in order to give young researchers the best possible support. For example, the guidelines stipulate that doctoral researchers and Institutes must define the rights and obligations incumbent on both sides in a support agreement. Doctoral students hold regular meetings with their principal supervisor, i.e. their doctoral mentor, to discuss the schedule for completing their dissertation.

All doctoral students are also assigned a further independent scientist to provide support. In addition, they are monitored by a Thesis Advisory Committee. In the event of ambiguities or differences of opinion, doctoral researchers have the opportunity to refer to an independent doctorate officer at the Institute or participating university who will intervene to resolve the conflict.

The guidelines also stipulate that no Max Planck scientist should generally supervise more than eight doctoral students at the same time. In its regular evaluations, the Scientific Advisory Board checks the compliance with the guidelines and investigates the quality of of training provided for doctoral students. Students also receive support if they wish to further their professional education as well as their soft skills. In doing so, the Max Planck Society wants to assist students in defining their career goals. After all, experience has shown that the majority of students leave the field of academic research after obtaining their doctorates.

After completing a doctorate in Germany, a vast variety of temporary opportunities is available to the fresh graduates, in what is often referred to as the “postdoc phase”. Graduates find employment; among other things, as project assistants, scientific staff, or lecturers; or as researchers working towards obtaining their professorship. It depends on the circumstances whether it is possible to become successful in such a position or to find a scientifically au-
tonomous position as a junior professor or research group leader. The motivation of postdoctoral students is just as equally diverse as the jobs on offer; while some wish to complete only one project and otherwise want time to spend time on their career development, others wish to broaden their scientific spectrum with a view to an academic career.

The Max Planck Society concludes employment contracts with postdocs corresponding to the Collective Wage Agreement for the Civil Service (TVöD Bund). Scholarships are only awarded to scientists as part of institute-specific guest programs, who carry out research work at Max Planck Institutes on a temporary, project-related basis. In addition, the Max Planck Society has increased its support to postdocs in planning their careers within and outside science. An initial central seminar programme was successfully launched in 2015. In addition, a total of 10 further education seminars were offered for postdocs: from career planning as a scientist and project planning in research up to management training. The Max Planck Society also developed the event format ‘Career Steps for Postdocs in Academia and Industry’ in 2015. This day gives postdocs the opportunity to find out more about different career options open to them in science and industry. Nearly 200 junior scientists participated in the kick-off event, which was organized in collaboration with the Technical University of Munich in May 2015.

The new funding structure for junior scientists was drawn up by a working group chaired by Vice President of the Biology and Medicine Section, Bill S. Hansson. A Presidential Committee headed by Reinhard Jahn, Director at the Max Planck Institute for Biophysical Chemistry, developed the Guidelines for the Supervision of Doctoral Students and improving the conditions for postdocs with the participation of external experts. For the Max Planck Society, however, this does not represent the end of the process for improving the support of junior scientists. For example, a programme to help with the career planning of postdocs is currently in development.

The new funding structure will cost an additional 50 million euros per year after the conversion phase – and certainly represent a major task for the Max Planck Society. A further consequence of the new guidelines is that the number of doctoral students will decline by around fifteen percent – a clear indication of individually better support structures and an even higher quality of support. Overall, the Max Planck Society is establishing new standards in the German science system with these measures, both financially as well as structurally. The Max Planck Society is creating a viable basis for the competitive support of junior scientists.

* With the exception of one Max Planck Institute which, based on special structural conditions, has applied for an opt-out model and therefore exclusively only offers scholarships for doctoral students.