

On Course for Careers

“Sign Up!” program for outstanding female postdocs moves on to the fourth round



Working together for a career in science – the participants in the fourth round of “Sign Up!”

Women are underrepresented in science, particularly in management positions. The MPG intends to change this. One of the measures it has put in place is a training program designed explicitly for female postdocs. Over 70 female researchers have already taken part – and both evaluation and feedback from participants show that the course is a winner.

The English expression “to say it in a nutshell” aptly describes the program taking place in this seminar room in Berlin’s Kreuzberg neighborhood: a science slam in which participants have just three minutes to present their work; so little time that complex research topics must almost literally fit into a nutshell. What’s more, when 19 female postdocs from the MPIs meet for a career training session, the language spoken is English. To start with, the mint-green upholstered chairs were arranged in a circle, then in rows so that each speaker faces a seated audience. One might think: 1 against 18, but in fact they are all supportive of one another.

Each presentation is followed by applause. And constructive feedback.

Self-presentation training is just part of a package designed to provide the participants with some important knowledge, fundamental strategies and practical tips that will help them launch their careers in science. Becoming a postdoc is in itself an ambitious achievement, but for a professorship, the hurdles are far higher.

And some of these hurdles are still gender-specific, and thus lend themselves to discussion among an all-female group of scientists, as “Sign Up!” project head Katharina Schiederig made clear in her presentation as part of the first course module in June. “The desire to start a family and the role of a mother are significant in themselves. But more general aspects, such as the Academic Fixed-Term Contract Act, are just as important,” says Schiederig.

As a qualified diversity trainer with a doctorate in political science, she works for the think-tank EAF Berlin, a not-for-profit organization that pro-

motes equal opportunity through training in politics, business and science. “Sign Up!” was developed jointly with the MPG and has been running since 2009. It is aimed explicitly at women working as postdocs. Particularly the years after a doctorate, during which one normally conducts research in a department with an institute Director, sets up initial projects of one’s own, or supervises doctoral students, are a kind of crossroads to the future.

“It’s life’s rush hour, when there are so many decisions to be made: Do I go into industry or stick with research, do I start a family – and how do I bring it all together? All of these questions must be answered,” Schiederig continues. This is where “Sign Up!” comes in, to enable young women to make a balanced choice from among the broadest possible range of options. “The most important part of the course is that each participant develops her own plan for what she wants to achieve – using the tools acquired in the seminar.”

This self-analysis, which begins in the first module and continues at subsequent meetings through follow-up discussions in small teams, is something that Elisabeth Wenger also finds very important. “It helps enormously to look closely at how career paths in science unfold and which success factors are really relevant. To then discuss one’s own status quo and one’s own goals was certainly not easy, but very valuable,” says the postdoc from the MPI for Human Development in Berlin.

After all, the process also makes clear where there is room for improvement. For example, when it comes to updating one’s CV, not just with a list of publications, but with details of teaching experience, external funding, cooperative projects and time spent supervising students. Isabella Guido, a postdoc at the MPI for Dynamics and Self-Organization in Göttingen, puts it thus: “We are scientists, we spend our days in the lab because research fascinates us. And it’s easy to believe that that will simply turn into a career. But the exact opposite is true. ‘Sign Up!’ opens your eyes and is a real-

ly wonderful opportunity. And the course also brings us into contact with other women who share the same goals.”

One of the selection criteria is that participants actually intend to continue working in research. Another is that they excel in their own field, which is why they must be nominated by a Max Planck Director, as Martha Roßmayer explains. She is the officer in charge of “Sign Up!” at Administrative Headquarters.

Since the program launched in 2009, there have been three courses; the fourth began in June and runs until January. “‘Sign Up!’ has received highly positive evaluations, which is why it continues, even though the MPG otherwise tends to avoid gender-specific formats for advancement. But in this case, the need is evident and the demand is great,” says Roßmayer. Consideration is currently being given to the possibility of allocating more money and offering career courses annually in the future. Independently of this program, Administrative Headquarters also maintains a list of advanced train-

ing courses that are also open to men – bookable via the respective institute.

The second module taking place in the seminar room in Berlin also includes leadership training, since the women will have management duties to perform in the next stage in their careers, as Research Group Leaders. Also important are the discussions with female Directors and science managers who describe their ascent to the top. These will be repeated in the third and last module, but by then the emphasis will be on insight into the appointment procedure and how best to prepare for it.

One item that is not on the official program agenda is networking. This simply develops – coordinated, of course, by an alumnae network of all previous participants – as the course proceeds, which could already be sensed during the science slam in the seminar room in Berlin. The second module begins with each participant recounting what she was thinking about on her way to the course. Several commented, as they sat in a circle, that “it’s great to see everyone again.”

Always on the Ball ...



Early in September, chemists, physicists, pharmacists and engineers from 22 countries spent three days at the MPI for Dynamics of Complex Technical Systems in Magdeburg discussing trends in the development of industrial crystallization processes. Afterwards, true to the tradition of the conference – now in its 20th year – the international exchange continued on the soccer field. Nearly 40 of the 100 or so conference participants joined in, and thanks to the multitude of nationalities, almost every continent was represented. This small-scale World Cup was played out between four teams in two semi-finals and one final. The winner was eventually decided by a penalty shoot-out. Our photo shows Erik Temmel from the MPI in Magdeburg in action: he’s parrying a header from Hideyuki Nagao, a conference participant from Tokyo.

Setting the Course for 2017

PhDnet representatives hold their annual meeting in Berlin



Max Planck Vice President Angela D. Friederici answered questions on equal opportunity. PhDnet Spokesperson Martin Grund was delighted with the lively exchange.

A year ago, as Martin Grund well remembers, PhDnet adopted an amendment to its bylaws that provided for a doctoral student representative to be elected at every Max Planck Institute. Now, after “months of hard work,” says the departing PhDnet spokesperson, the network can harvest the fruits of its labors: “The 2016 General Meeting was

attended by elected representatives from 66 institutes, which is 80 percent of the total. So the amendment is well implemented.” This worked because support is strong among doctoral students, because an online tool was employed for the elections, and because “the administrations of the institutes were very supportive of us.”

The General Meeting, for which the doctoral student representatives from the individual MPIs and other PhDnet supporters converged on Berlin in early November, was once again attended by several invited guests, among them Vice President Angela D. Friederici. She provided the junior scientists with a look at the work of her Presidential Committee on Equal Opportunity. “The debate that followed was both open and lively. Three PhDnet representatives were even invited to the Committee’s next meeting,” says Grund. They will be there to put forward the points developed by the PhDnet working group that was specifically set up to look into this issue.

Also at the General Meeting, which was held at the MPI for Infection Biology in Berlin, the new PhDnet Steering Group was elected. Starting in 2017, Jana Lasser, MPI for Dynamics and Self-Organization, will represent the doctoral students of the CPT Section; Lisa Scheuermann, MPI for Infection Biology, will represent those of the BM Section; and Teresa Hollerbach, MPI for the History of Science, those of the HS Section. In addition to the Chair-/Spokesperson Leonard Borchert, MPI for Meteorology, the leadership team also includes Secretary General Rafael Laso Pérez, MPI for Marine Microbiology, and Treasurer Gabriel Guerrero, MPI for Biology of Ageing.

Ripples in Space Reach Harnack House

News of the discovery of gravitational waves in September 2015 spread around the world, with the US LIGO detector in the spotlight. In mid-October, Rainer Weiss, one of the senior scientists working on this project, delivered the Harnack Lecture before an audience of 160 in Berlin.

For the physicist, it was a homecoming. Born in Berlin in 1932, his family was forced to flee a few years later, first to Prague, then to the US. Weiss studied physics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where he obtained his doctorate in 1962 and has been a professor since 1965. Over the years since, his work has spanned various fields.

Since the 1980s, Weiss has been studying gravitational waves. He enhanced the laser interferometer – at that time, this was a new technique, and a group from the MPI for Physics and Astrophysics became the first in the world to use it in their research.

This pioneering work created the basis for the large detectors, including LIGO. In his Harnack Lecture – which prominent scientists have been invited to deliver each year since the MPG conference venue was reopened – Weiss presented a retrospective on gravitational wave research and reported on this particular facility, which encompasses two observatories in Hanford and Livingston. Gravitational waves were first detected there on September 14, 2015.