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From the Lab to the Stage

Olga Sin explains her research in three minutes and wins at FameLab Germany

Eight finalists presented their entries in front of an audience of 1,300 guests. The 30-year-old postdoc attributed her success to the Max Planck "Sign Up!" career-building program.

"What comes to mind when you think about worms? Some of you might think of bird food, some might think of gummy worm candy," says Olga Sin, researcher at the MPI for Molecular Biomedicine in Münster, at the start of her three-minute speech at the German FameLab finale in Bielefeld. She went on to demonstrate that worms – and especially the model organism *C. elegans* – are so much more. Specifically, that they might hold the key to treatments for such human illnesses as Alzheimer's or Parkinson's.

The reason behind this suggestion is that the cause – protein aggregation in the brain, which reduces mobility and memory abilities – also occurs in *C. elegans*. What's more, as this worm shares 80 percent of its proteins with humans, scientific studies could produce highly significant results. Pharmaceutical companies, for instance, are already using these worms to test substances that could slow or prevent these protein clots, Sin says. She made the intriguing point that, while *C. elegans* has no brain, it could nonetheless help shed light on the mechanisms and effects of Alzheimer's and Parkinson's.

Conveying the importance of research in such a concise manner is precisely the objective of FameLab, an international science communication competition. Sin had long harbored a desire to compete. The final push for her, says, was the MPG "Sign Up!" program aimed at outstanding female junior scientists. "The self-presentation training was really helpful here," she emphasizes – as was, of course, the associated task of presenting in front of other female participants in a self-organized "Science Slam."

Having won in her regional contest and then in the German national final, Olga Sin even qualified for the European final in England. Another important aspect for her was the success enjoyed by a fellow female Max Planck junior scientist in the German national final: the jury and the audience awarded Kerstin Göpfrich, postdoc at the MPI for Intelligent Systems, second place.

To watch videos of all presentations, visit:
https://www.britishcouncil.de/en/famelab

Olga Sin first won the regional contest before going on to secure first place in the German national final.

Photo: Bielefeld Marketing/Sarah Jonek

"We want to bring the best minds together"

A conversation with Vice President Ferdi Schüth about the Max Planck Schools

Every year, around 4,500 doctoral students conduct research in the Max Planck Society. They either dedicate themselves to a traditional individual doctorate or enroll in one of the 63 International Max Planck Research Schools (IMPRS), which provide a structured framework. The Society's development concept is to be expanded, with the Max Planck Schools becoming larger units. Vice President Ferdi Schüth is driving the plans forward.

Mr. Schüth, how do the new Graduate Schools differ from the IMPRS model?
Ferdi Schüth: The most significant difference is that the new schools are geographically dispersed, national alliances in which we want to bring together the best minds in Germany. The cooperating alliances, made up of various Max Planck Institutes, universities and other non-university organizations, should grow and become more visible. In addition, we plan to create a central applicant portal. The only criterion that matters is scientific excellence.

Who will organize the schools, and where?
That depends on the school in question. We want to experiment, and that's why we've designated an initial exploration phase. First of all, there are scientists and researchers that support such schools – but they are spread across Germany. Therefore, a school will need a coordination office. A centrally located Max Planck Institute could accommodate this office, but it could also be situated somewhere else, because this is an open system. This aspect is also expressed in the name: "Max Planck Schools – a joint initiative between German universities and the German research organizations."

Where are the students located?
I imagine that, depending on the school, students could initially progress through blocks of theme modules. In many sciences, the decision to obtain a doctorate is made right after completion of a Bachelor's degree. To give young people a sense of community and provide a common foundation to address their differing educational backgrounds, a three-month period studying together at a central location would be expedient. That location could be the Harnack House, or it could be a specific university where several scientists and researchers who are active in the school are located. It could also be the building for the Max Planck Institute for Physics in Munich, which our colleagues will vacate in a few years. Ultimately, we simply have to make sure that there are enough teaching and accommodation facilities available.

Ferdi Schüth, Vice President and Director at the Max-Planck-Institut für Kohlenforschung.

And what comes after that?
The doctoral students could progress through two or three stations in participating research groups and become better acquainted with their work. That would be equivalent to the research internship in a Master's program. After that, there could perhaps be another block module before the future doctoral students decide, based on their experiences with their various advisors, on a location for their doctorate. I must point out that this is only one possible model, and legal scholars might arrange things quite differently. We will have to adjust to various discipline cultures and the expectations of potential students.

If I were a prospective doctoral student, why would I opt for one of the new schools?
Ultimately, it depends on how deep your interest is in a particular area of research, and how ready you are to come into contact with people from other locations in external modular blocks. The IMPRS are much more specialized than we intend the new schools to be. And we make no bones about it: the new schools will be much more selective than the IMPRS. After all, the perceived quality of Harvard, Imperial, Berkeley and Oxford is also based in part on the rigor of the selection process.

How will the partners share the costs?
In the Max Planck Society, we have budgeted funding for the pilot phase that will help finance coordinators, travel costs and distance learning institutions, and perhaps also one or two dedicated teaching staff and bachelor's degree scholarships. Moreover, we believe that initiatives at the new Graduate Schools can be linked to an IMPRS and make use of their local funds. In any case, funding is provided for doctoral students in the Max Planck Institutes' budgets. Funding for fellows at universities has been requested from the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research. Each fellow and their faculty should re-

Photo: Amac Garbe /MPG

ceive funding to enable collaborations to take place on an equal footing. The other non-university institutions will have to account for the funding from their own budgets, as the Max Planck Society has done.

Has there been any response from the IMPRS, which might be worried about their future appeal?
In the initial phase, it was not clear to the IMPRS whether they were being left to wither away or whether there would be no new ones. That is by no means the plan. There are essentially three options for the IMPRS. First: they cease to exist because they become part of a new Graduate School and form the basis of a new local structure that must be retained for doctoral students. Second: they continue to operate under their current name but belong to a new School that comprises all the IMPRS, with a common application portal and a common teaching program. And third: the IMPRS and the new Schools coexist, which will typically be the case if there is only a slight thematic overlap between the two.

What do you think of the idea of the President of Hamburg University, who suggested Albert Einstein as a neutral figure to name the schools after?
We simply can't spend ten years trying to establish something new. Everyone – however grudgingly – has to admit that the most internationally recognized name in the German scientific community, the one that stands for high quality in basic research, is Max Planck. It would be negligent not to use such a well-known brand name.

And what is the schedule?
The selection meeting has already taken place, and a decision has been made. At the beginning of September, it will be announced which Schools will be supported in the pilot phase.

Interview: Susanne Beer

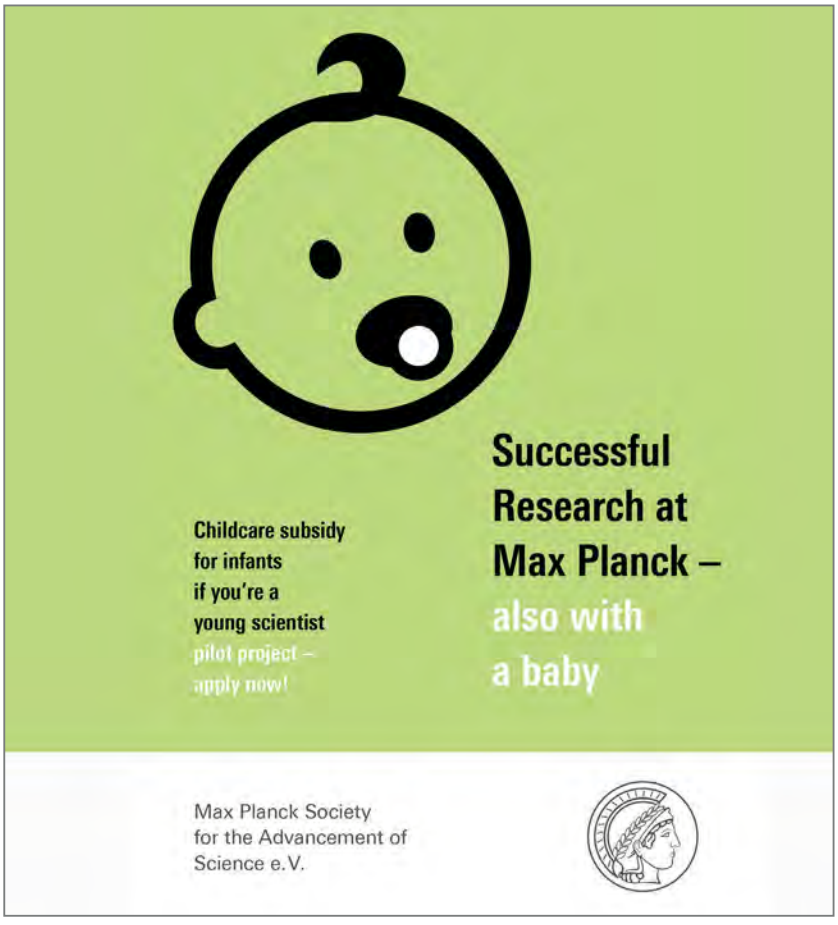
Childcare Subsidies

Applications can now be made to Max Planck Institutes

It looks like a baby version of a smiling emoji – but on a pastel green background: the cheeky face complete with pacifier adorns the cover of a new flyer explaining how scientists and researchers can obtain financial assistance for childcare for infants between the ages of three months and one year. It's not as straightforward as it sounds: for reasons relating to public funding law, the Max Planck Society is not permitted to bear childcare costs; it may only fund the provision of the corresponding infrastructure.

This is where the Max Planck Foundation comes in – to provide a jumpstart and help young researchers quickly reenter the world of science. The target group for childcare for the youngest children are doctoral students with funding contracts, and postdocs with a collective agreement for public employees (TVöD). Childcare costs pose a particular challenge for these income groups.

A precondition for funding is that both parents work or that the recipient is a single parent. If the mother and father both work in the Max Planck Society, only one parent may claim the subsidy. The funding will cover no more than half of monthly childcare costs, up to a maximum of 400 euros per month, for up to ten months. Applications should be submitted to the Institutes' administrations; the data will then be collected centrally to assess need for the coming year. The Max Planck Foundation will initially provide 500,000 euros for the pilot project.



Established in 2006 the Ernst Haage Prize honors young scientists for outstanding achievements in the field of chemical energy conversion and fosters young academics in particular.
The prize is awarded by the Ernst Haage-Foundation and is endowed with € 7,500.

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- Two pages of laudation
- Curriculum vitae in table form
- Complete publication list
- Up to three reprints of works by the nominee

Personal applications cannot be considered.

The prize recognizes outstanding scientific achievements in the field of chemical energy conversion, for example in the following divisions:

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MAX-PLANCK-INSTITUT FÜR CHEMISCHE ENERGIEKONVERSION

Fascinated by Microbiology

Forty-six doctoral students meet in Marburg to shed light on their research passion from two sides

Lively interaction: In mid-May, PhD students from the Max Planck Institute for Terrestrial Microbiology in Marburg and the Bremen-based Max Planck Institute for Marine Microbiology met up at the two-day "It MaTter(s)" conference. In several sessions, young scientists presented their research in Marburg. Two poster sessions, with posters from all groups and departments, rounded out the event.

The Max Planck Society is made up of over 80 Institutes – but only two of these are dedicated to understanding the function of microorganisms and researching how they contribute to important processes in our world. To get to know each other's work, as well as to build networks and gain inspiration for further research, researchers from both of these Max Planck Institutes met up at the two-day "It MaTter(s)" conference held in mid-May. The meeting was held at the Max Planck Institute for Terrestrial Microbiology in Marburg, where the doctoral students from the Max Planck Institute for Marine Microbiology in Bremen had the opportunity to enjoy tours of all departments and laboratories.

Selected doctoral students presented their research in a series of sessions, ranging from marine ecosystems, surface structures and the marine nitrogen cycle to mitosis mechanisms, synthetic CO_2 fixation and plant-pathogen interactions. Two poster sessions, with posters from all groups and departments, rounded out the event.

"Lots of scientific discussions and potential collaborations have come about thanks to this lively interaction," say Max Mundt and Laura Zeugner, members of the ten-person organization team made up of doctoral students from the two Max Planck Institutes. Following the great success of this conference, a repeat event has already been planned for next year in Bremen.

Photo: Greta Giljan