

SIGNIFICANT INCREASE IN APPLICATIONS TO MAX PLANCK SCHOOLS

The Max Planck Schools, a joint initiative of German universities and non-university research institutions, continue to increase their profile. This is reflected by the most recent figures: compared to the first call in 2018, all three schools saw a significant increase in applications, with the Max Planck School for Cognition still receiving the largest number. The Max Planck School Matter to Life was able to almost quadruple its number of applications compared to 2018.

For the three pilot schools – the Max Planck School of Cognition, the Max Planck School Matter to Life, and the Max Planck School of Photonics – nearly 1,100 applica-

tions were received in the third round of applications; three times as many as in the first round of applications in 2018. This is evidence that the schools are becoming increasingly well known, both nationally and internationally, and have succeeded in attracting the brightest minds from all over the world with their interdisciplinary programs. “The pool of applications this year is again very diverse, interdisciplinary, and international. Our School received over 500 applications from students in the U.S., Russia and Australia from a wide range of disciplines – from psychology to neuroscience to data science,” said Arno Villringer, Director at the Max Planck Institute for

Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences in Leipzig and one of the spokespersons for the Max Planck School of Cognition. “We have significantly more suitable applications than available places,” he added.

With their multi-stage procedures which are specific to each school, the three pilot schools are in the process of selecting their new PhD students, who will then start their doctoral studies in October 2021. The initiative now involves 27 universities and more than 30 institutes of non-university research institutions. The German Federal Ministry of Education and Research is funding the five-year pilot phase with EUR 45 million. www.maxplanckschools.de/en

80 TRIPLE RECOGNITION FOR THE MAX PLANCK SOCIETY

The European Research Council (ERC) has awarded Advanced Grants to 209 researchers in the current application round. Of the 40 lucrative grants awarded to Germany, three went to researchers from the Max Planck Society. Endowments of up to EUR 2.5 million each will put them and their teams in a position to be able to pursue their project ideas, all of which have been rated as excellent.

The European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, Mariya Gabriel, drew particular attention to the increasing number of women among the grant recipients: “It also gives me great pleasure to see more women applying for and receiving these prestigious grants.” Since the start of the Horizon 2020 program, for example, the percentage of female Advanced Grant recipients has increased from around 10 percent in 2014 to over 22 percent in 2020. Female researchers submitted 22 percent of the applications in the current funding round: 23 percent of the grants were awarded to women, including one from the Max Planck Society.

In a Germany-wide comparison, the Max Planck Society, which was awarded 3 grants,



The MPG's 2020 Advanced Grant award winners – the happy recipients of millions of euro in research funding (from left): Marina Bennati of the MPI for Biophysical Chemistry, Didier Stainier of the MPI for Heart and Lung Research, and Johann Anton Zensus of MPI for Radio Astronomy.

PHOTOS: HELGE HORN, MPI FOR LUNG RESEARCH; IRENE BÖTTCHER-GAJEWSKI / MPI FOR BIOPHYSICAL CHEMISTRY

ranks second alongside the Technical University of Munich (also 3 grants) and just behind the Leibniz Association which garnered 4 grants. The research grants were awarded to institutions in 14 European countries. Germany, which has 40 approved grants, is in second place behind the United

Kingdom (51 grants). The ERC received more than 2,600 research proposals in the latest Advanced Grants round, eight percent of which were approved, whereby scientific excellence is the sole selection criterion. ERC funding for the grants totaled EUR 504 million.

EXEMPLARY COMMUNICATION ON ANIMAL TESTING

The general public takes a dim view of animal experiments for research purposes, which makes well founded, transparent communications on the subject all the more important. The “Understanding Animal Experiments” information initiative has awarded the label for “exemplary communications about research involving animal experiments” to the online animal experiments portal on the Max Planck Society’s main website.

The objective of the “Understanding animal experiments” initiative is to show how universities, institutes and organizations can inform the public about the research they carry out involving animal experiments. It is supported by the Alliance of Science Organisations in Germany, of which the Max Planck Society is a member. The label for “exemplary communications on research involving animal experiments”

honors institutes and organizations that demonstrate an exemplary commitment to transparent and open communications and dialog concerning animal experiments and research involving animal experiments.

Conscious of its special responsibility in terms of its own research and its wider social role, the Max Planck Society published the “Animal Experimentation at the Max Planck Society” policy paper in 2016. The paper takes a critical view of the relevant ethical conflicts and legal frameworks and provides readers with an understanding of the importance of animal experimentation in basic research.

This was followed by further processes, such as creating the role of Animal Experiment Officer who, together with the Max



Best-practice communication in animal research

Awarded by
„Tierversuche verstehen“

Planck Institutes concerned, is responsible for the central coordination of the subject, and the development of an e-learning module on animal ethics for advanced training for researchers. Another achievement is the comprehensive online animal experiments portal, which is now entitled to bear the label for

“exemplary communications on research involving animal experiments”.

Among the Max Planck Society Institutes, the MPI of Molecular Cell Biology and Genetics in Dresden serves as an example of best-practice. The Institute’s website provides an excellent example of transparent and open communications on the subject of animal experimentation:

www.mpi-cbg.de/en/research/animals-in-research/

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ECOSYSTEM FOR IDEAS AND CREATIVITY

The construction phase of the new Max-Planck-Zentrum für Physik und Medizin (MPZPM, Max Planck Centre for Physics and Medicine) in Erlangen is now beginning. Three highly respected organizations are behind the centre: the Max Planck Institute for the Science of Light (MPL), the Friedrich Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU) and the University Hospital Erlangen. The researchers of the three partners who come together in the MPZPM use modern mathematical and physical methods – especially from optics – to give new impetus to the biomedical disciplines.

“A fascinating project is emerging here,” said the Bavarian Minister-President Markus Söder when laying the foundation

stone. In the fight against cancer, for example, it is important to combine new methods at the cellular level with artificial intelligence or quantum computers. Therefore, the State of Bavaria is investing almost EUR 60 million in the Institute to “create an ecosystem for ideas and creativity” and to accelerate the process in which new scientific knowledge is generated.

“Great breakthroughs have been made in science by merging research fields and creating entirely new disciplines,” said Martin Stratmann, President of the Max Planck Society, during the event at the construction site. However, given the differentiation of science today, it is no longer so easy to meet at eye level. Erlangen is the ideal place for such encounters because the thematic orien-

tation of the institutions coincides and “the will of the actors to overcome borders is always noticeable.”

The MPZPM research groups are still scattered all over Erlangen. At the beginning of 2024, they will move into the new building on the grounds of the Erlangen University Hospital. The building, with its modern laboratories and offices, will provide space for about 180 employees on five floors and 5,700 square meters of floor space. They will conduct research within walking distance of the doctors in the clinics and will be able to reach their colleagues in the other institutes that are currently being built via glass bridges. The architecture thus also reflects the close ties between the founders of the MPZPM.