

# By Young Scientists, for Young Scientists

Interact symposium takes place for the sixth time



Providing fresh insights into the brain's visual cortex: David Fitzpatrick, Director at the Max Planck Florida Institute, was the keynote speaker at Interact 2013.

One final push the evening before Interact 2013: In a lab at the genetic engineering center of LMU, the University of Munich, bags are being stuffed with promotional gifts as if on a production line. Almost the entire organization team has turned up to pack pens, pads, Post-It notes, energy drinks and candies. Goody bags for the participants, presentations, poster sessions: Is this really a normal conference?

Yes, it is! Some 24 hours later, the pre-event in the Anatomy Department of LMU started on a musical note with the Trio Scientifico before the first presentations begin. Ruth Gil Prieto of Harvard Medical School Boston, and Jan Korbel of EMBL Heidelberg, then delivered two presentations on the subject of "Science & Society," whetting the appetite still further for a beer to wash the evening down. In an entertaining account of her own personal career, Ruth Gil Prieto encouraged the participants not to shy away from change, while Jan Korbel homed in on the subject of personalized genome research. His story of a patient with metastasizing liver cancer was like science fiction in real life: the 65-year-old patient's genome was sequenced, the

treatment adjusted accordingly – and his life expectancy has already doubled.

Interact is just what the name says: At its heart lies interaction between young researchers. Some 300 doctoral students, postdocs and master's students gathered in mid-March in the Audimax at the Technische Universität München to hear exciting presentations and view the posters put up by colleagues. Jean Beggs, professor of genetics at the University of Edinburgh, gave a detailed overview of her field of specialization, RNA splicing. Around 50 percent of genetic diseases are caused by defects in the processing of ribonucleic acid, leading to the formation of defective proteins. The second keynote speaker, Brian Sutton of King's College London, enthralled the audience with his presentation on allergies and antibodies, as well as a host of curiosities from the world of crystallography.

David Fitzpatrick, Director at the Max Planck Florida Institute and the third of the keynote speakers, was very impressed by the wide range of topics covered at the conference and the enthusiasm of those taking part. "A stu-

dent-run meeting that runs incredibly well," he remarked in praise of the organization team. The team was comprised of doctoral students from the Max Planck Institutes of Biochemistry, Neurobiology and Psychiatry, the two Munich universities and the Helmholtz Center Munich. The number of positive responses from those taking part confirmed the success of the conference. "The secret of Interact lies in the high density of researchers working in the life sciences in Munich, and in their keenness to explore their immediate environment," suspects Interact organizer Anja Kretzschmar. One thing she is sure of: "The event is bound to lead to more than one joint venture in the future."

Of course the event ended in celebrations – with the relieved members of the organization team being among the first on the dance floor. There were even a few organizers who signed up for 2014. And Brian Sutton enjoyed himself so much that he would like to come back next year.

 [www.munich-interact.org](http://www.munich-interact.org)



An opportunity to learn from the luminaries in their field: Munich doctoral students are paying rapt attention.

# “Exist” Offers a Path to Independence

How former MPS doctoral students use their scientific expertise to set up new businesses

Federal funding makes it possible to set up in business outside of the world of science after completing a doctorate. But it's not just a question of money.

Remaining in the world of science after completing his doctorate just wasn't an option for Dennis Fink – but he still wanted to be creative. Together with his partner Wolfgang Hankeln, another former doctoral student at the MPI for Marine Microbiology, he came up with an idea that was as simple as it was successful: they advise researchers on how to describe scientific contexts in a way that can easily be understood. But without support, it wouldn't have been so easy to establish their agency, “mediomix”. “The year of “Exist” funding helped us, above all, to develop our customer base and our network,” says Dennis Fink.

Each year, around 1,000 students complete their doctorates at the Max Planck Society. Given that not all of them intend to make a career in science, programs like “Exist” are important to help them set up in business. This funding program by the Federal Ministry of Economics is aimed explicitly at former students who have graduated within the past five years. In contrast to the support provided by Max Planck Innovation, the program also lends itself to business concepts that require comparatively little start-up capital and – as in the case of mediomix – are not based on MPS research results. “We focus on helping researchers use graphics technology to communicate their subjects and their findings,” Dennis Fink explains.

Both their training and their scientific networks were important – even essential – in enabling them to offer professional advice on these matters: In order to apply for “Exist” support, every team of would-be entrepreneurs needs a mentor and a non-university research institution or partner university with a new business start-up network. Such networks provide the opportunity for regular contact with other new entrepreneurs, as well as the supporting technical and physical infrastructure.



Dennis Fink (left) and Wolfgang Hankeln of “mediomix” illustrate the ocean’s fundamental processes with a self-made globe model. Their installation made a great impression at the Science Summer in Lübeck in 2012, where it won first place in the “Wissenschaft interaktiv” competition.

Applications can be submitted at any time by universities and research institutions on behalf of a team. A detailed paper is required setting out the new business idea, along with CVs and references. These are then evaluated by a committee of experts using a 13-point system that covers a variety of aspects, including innovation and market potential.

Teams that score between seven and eight points the first time around have the opportunity to boost their score in a bonus round. “After about three months’ wait, we were given the green light and were able to get started,” says Dennis Fink.

Support is then provided for one year. A maximum of 22,000 euros is available to pay for materials and training. In addition, up to three team members each receive a monthly grant of around 2,500 euros. It sounds quite good, but the twelve months are soon over and it's time to stand on your own two feet. This is where networks can help in finding further financing after the start-up phase, for example from high-tech new business development funds.

“The grant made it easier for us to make the transition from the world of science to our new role as independent entrepreneurs,” says former Göttingen-based doctoral student Simon Bungers, who, together with colleague Florian Hauer, set up the free digital laboratory notebook “labfolder” service with Exist support. Naturally enough, networking is the top priority for their project, given that close interaction with doctoral students and scientists at the MPS has been vital in the development of “labfolder.” In February this year, while still in the initial funding period, the team released the first usable version of their digital laboratory notebook at labfolder.net.

## FUNDING FACTS

- The Exist Foundation receives between 260 and 300 applications each year. Applications can be submitted at any time – there is no set deadline.
- In 2012, 130 teams of would-be entrepreneurs were awarded grants to help them on their way to independence. According to the Foundation, the success rate is around 50 percent, even when viewed over several years.

# Building Networks for Equality

Establishing an environment that promotes equal opportunities: This was the objective presented by Ludwig Kronthaler at the annual conference on this subject



A women-only group picture: The equal opportunity officers of all Max Planck Institutes meet once a year.

For the majority of the approximately 90 participants, the 17th conference of equal opportunities commissioners was, in fact, a first: between November 2012 and March 2013, 65 Max Planck institutes elected new commissioners and deputy commissioners; in the rest of the institutes, elections had been held earlier, are still to be held, or women were appointed to the positions. An average of almost 60 percent of the female employees participated in the elections: in line with the federal legal provisions, men were not called on to participate in the decision-making. Whether this is to remain the case was the subject of very heated debate at the conference, which was held at the MPI of Molecular Physiology in Dortmund. As Central Equal Opportunities Commissioner and organizer, Ulla Weber focused on the

opportunities afforded by the conference for the equal opportunities officers to get to know each other and share their experiences. This was also promoted by workshops on various aspects of the equal opportunities officers' work, which were led by some of the officers themselves.

The fact that the importance of equal opportunities has been increasing for some time was demonstrated by Ute Zimmermann, Director of the Executive Department "Equal Opportunities, Family and Diversity" at TU Dortmund. She showed how her university has succeeded in promoting the DFG's Research-Oriented Standards on Gender Equality with the help of innovative approaches to the extent that the issue of equal opportunities has now become firmly estab-

lished within the university's structures. In contrast, Ludwig Kronthaler stressed the MPS's maxim that equal opportunities can't be achieved through control and regulations, but through the commitment and dedication of scientists of both genders.

However, the MPS is not yet satisfied with all that has been achieved in this area up to now. Hence, the equal opportunities officers of the organization's sections are now invited to attend the meetings of the committee for the promotion of female scientists (MPG-Ausschuss "Förderung der Wissenschaftlerinnen"), and some institutes even advertise positions for scientific members. For the equal opportunities commissioners, the next step – as a separate group in the MPS network maxNet – is network building. As Ulla Weber sees it, next to conveying expertise, this is the most important measure for fostering the recognition and development of equal opportunities. An external trainer presented ideas about the role that the equal opportunities commissioners can assume in their institutes in this regard. However, in Ulla Weber's view, whether the commissioners can and wish to see themselves in more of a consultative, supportive or monitoring role greatly depends on the specific culture and willingness of the individual institutes to engage in equal opportunities issues. A pragmatic approach must be adopted – a process that Weber describes as "changing reality while also taking reality into account." Moreover, each of the equal opportunities commissioners must be allowed to decide for themselves which priorities they will set in their activities and which objectives they want to pursue.