

A Prize That Benefits Young Scientific Researchers

Max Planck Society doubles the award money to provide scholarships to 15 Spanish scientists



In the Teatro Campoamor: Doctoral students Matthias Weißenbacher and Ali Shahmoradi, President Peter Gruss, Institute Director Ignacio Cirac, and research group leaders Soojin Ryu and Damian Refojo (from left) accept the Prince of Asturias Award for International Cooperation.

Gruss to champion basic research during his visit. “La Max Planck dedicará el premio a enlazar con Investigadores españoles” was the headline of the local newspaper LA NUEVA ESPAÑA on the following day, emphasizing the Max Planck Society’s dedication to fostering young researchers. The Max Planck Society has doubled the prize money from its own resources to provide 15 young Spanish doctoral students and postdocs with the opportunity to spend a research residency at a Max Planck Institute.

The roundtable discussion that took place in the evening in Gijón with the CEO of ThyssenKrupp Elevator, Ramón Sotomayor, also focused on the next generation of scientists, in the light of the alarmingly high youth unemployment in Spain. The discussions were held in the buildings of the University of Oviedo, which was founded in Spain 1608 and is thus the third oldest university in Spain. Currently with 30,000 students, it is the scientific and cultural center of Asturias. Under the headline “En defensa del talento,” the Spanish regional newspaper EL COMER-CIO quoted Peter Gruss’s statement that Spain should keep its talents in the country.

In any case, the media coverage surrounding the award ceremony was huge. The local newspapers printed extensive supplements in which they reported in detail on the individual winners of this year, including U.S. star photographer Annie Leibovitz, Oscar-

At a festive gala in Oviedo, Spain, the Max Planck Society received the Prince of Asturias Award for International Cooperation and sent a clear signal in support of science in the light of austerity measures in Spain.

Do you know Oviedo? The capital of Asturias is not one of the “hot spots” for travellers in Spain, although it has a few UNESCO World Cultural Heritage monuments. But once a year, in October, international attention is focused on Oviedo – when the Prince of Asturias Awards are presented by the Spanish Crown Prince. Outside the entrance of the venerable Hotel de La Reconquista – the building dates from the 18th century – a “red” carpet is rolled out for the winners. In this case, the red carpet is

actually blue, the color of the Prince of Asturias Foundation. The Director of the Foundation welcomes each prize-winner in person, to the sounds of traditional bagpipe music. The reception is followed by a press conference.

The Max Planck President is at the center of a flurry of photographers’ flashlights – and with him the four young researchers Ali Shahmoradi, Soojin Ryu, Damian Refojo and Matthias Weißenbacher, who accompanied the President on his journey as representatives for the approximately 400 junior scientists within the Max Planck Society.

At the press conference, the President called for more political commitment to research. In numerous letters, Spanish colleagues had asked Peter

winning Austrian filmmaker Michael Haneke and Nobel Prize winners Peter Higgs and François Englert.

The Max Planck Society was also presented with its “Images of Science” exhibition. The pictures were prominently displayed alongside the path through the city’s park – everyone making their way to the Teatro Campoamor, the venue of the award ceremony, walked past it. Thousands of people lined the streets to watch the motorcade of the Queen of Spain, the Crown Prince and the Crown Princess, as well as the winners, making their way to the theater.

The actual award ceremony, attended by 2,000 guests, made it to the front page of *El País*. And by that time, at the latest, it became clear why the Prince of Asturias Award is also called the “Spanish Nobel Prize.” The ceremony is as impressive as that presided over by the Swedish Royal Family during the Nobel Prize ceremony.

Fascinated by research: In connection with the presentation of the Prince of Asturias Award, the Max Planck “Images of Science” exhibition was displayed in the inner city of Oviedo. The most striking images by Max Planck scientists were presented in large copper frames.

Photos: FPA



Ali Shahmoradi at an audience with Crown Prince Felipe of Spain (left) and his wife.

Culture Fair

Young Max Planck researchers at the “Cultural Week” in Oviedo, the capital of Asturias

Before the presentation of the Prince of Asturias Awards, there is a Cultural Week, where the prize winners – artists, scientists, charities and athletes – take some time out to attend readings or exhibitions.

“During those five days, I was most amazed by how genuinely warm and friendly the people of Oviedo and the prize-winners were,” says Ali Shahmoradi, Ph.D. student from Göttingen. With three fellow junior scientists, he was directly involved in the proceedings. “At a panel discussion with the Spanish Max Planck Director Ignacio Cirac, we presented the Max Planck Society and answered questions about our institutes and the application procedures.”

The program wasn’t only about recreation, of course. Together with three junior scientists from Spain, Austria and South Korea, Ali was directly involved in the official events of “Award Week” – a week of cultural activities preceding the presentation of the Prince of Asturias award – for example, during a panel debate with students in the crowded auditorium of Oviedo University.

Since everyone stayed at the same hotel, not only did Ali meet the Crown Prince at the reception, but he also spotted him when “he cheerfully paced through the halls.” It was practically impossible not to come into contact with him or the other laureates. Other celebrities were also relaxed. “On a hike in the mountains of Asturias, we talked to Michael Haneke about the film industry, and Peter Higgs even had a few minutes’ time for a chat at the conveyor belt of the airport baggage claim.” The highlight, however, was no doubt the awards ceremony. “Every time I am asked what I liked best, I think, Ali says. “But to walk into the Teatro while traditional Asturian music was playing in the background was surely one of the highlights.”

Maybe it was also the morning after the gala, when the Max Planck researchers had gotten comfortable in the hotel lobby. Early bird and star photographer Annie Leibovitz asked them, quite surprised: “Wow, did you guys work through the night?” “That’s just how it is in the Max Planck Society,” Ali replied.



The Future on the Big Screen

Doctoral students and professors “slam” and debate at the 2nd Visions in Science conference

This interdisciplinary science event, organized by members of PhDnet, showed that the next generation of scientists produce ideas far beyond the topics of their own doctoral theses. This year, the presentations were more engaging than ever.

Explaining my research – in an exciting way in five minutes. That may seem a difficult challenge, but not to the eleven “science slammers” at the 2013 Visions in Science conference in Dresden. Armed with a watering can,

chalk and rap lyrics, they battled for triumph. The audience – more than 70 doctoral students – generously rewarded not only the props but also the technical glitches with thunderous applause, especially in the case of winner Dong-Seon Chang. He gave a very impressive presentation of his thesis topic: willingness to cooperate. But it was the lack of cooperativeness on the part of his computer that forced him to reboot three times – and that made the crowd go wild.

His equally talented fellow competitors also benefited from the great atmosphere at the “slam”; for example, Shradha Das, who secured second place with her rap song about molecules involved in tissue formation. Physics student Filippo Guarnieri, who came in third place, chose to insert a written disclaimer in his presentation: “No cats or god particles were harmed during the making of this science slam.”

Quite apart from the care taken not to harm cats or god particles, the central discussion topic at Visions in Science was whether such laid-back scientific presentations actually work. The organizers Dong-Seon Chang (MPI for Biological Cybernetics, Tübingen), Ilka Vosteen (MPI for Chemical Ecology, Jena) and Sabine Keiber (MPI of Quantum Optics, Garching), as well as team leader Norman Gerstner (MPI of Molecular Cell Biology and Genetics, Dresden), are now convinced that the Science Slam complements the main program nicely.

The program involved renowned scientists offering prospects in their respective fields. This year, Dirk Helbing, Thomas Hamacher and Anja Feldmann talked about the



Winner and co-organizer of the Science Slam Dong-Seon Chang.

Left page: Together in the lecture hall: Participants of the PdDnet meeting at the Max Planck Institute of Molecular Cell Biology and Genetics.

role of networks in economics, energy supply and digital communication. Environmental scientists Felix Ekardt and Victor Smetacek, as well as neuroscientist Rainer Goebel, testified to the ever-increasing interest in sustainable solutions in environmental and medical science.

“Besides the talks, I particularly enjoyed the panel discussions, in which interdisciplinary cooperation in science and industry was debated,” said Ph.D. student Daniela Popescu. Another highlight was the talk by Max Planck Director Reinhard Jahn and his account of the work of the Presidential Committee on “next-generation scientists.”

Since the first conference in 2012, Visions in Science has gained impetus, notably thanks to funding by the MPG and the steadily growing support from sponsors including BASF, McKinsey, Lanxess and TÜV Süd. “If next year’s conference can maintain the same degree of professionalism, it will establish itself as a recurring event,” said Daniel Kalthoff, former PdDnet spokesperson. To ensure that this is indeed the case, the organizational team for the third conference is already in place. Recordings from the second conference – Science Slam, talks and panel debates – are available online at maxNet.tv and YouTube.

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Change through Education

Ahmed El Hady, a postdoc from Egypt, speaks about the period of transition in his homeland and says that the Arab Spring must not give way to a new winter.



In discussion: Ahmed El Hady at a conference about Middle East politics.

"If I had the opportunity to carry out research at home in experimental neurosciences, I would do so immediately," says Ahmed El Hady. "But this is still a daydream." Germany has been the scientist's home for the past six years: initially as one of the doctoral students at the MPI for Dynamics and Self-Organization who moved directly on to doctoral studies from a bachelor's degree, without completing a master's degree.

In the meantime, this phase of his life has come to a close and Ahmed is now furthering his knowledge as a postdoc at the same institute. "It was a friend and Max Planck alumnus in Egypt who suggested that the MPI in Göttingen could be the right place for me – and my subsequent application for an IMPRS grant was successful,"

says Ahmed. Something he found particularly appealing was the scientific freedom offered by the institute to carry out experiments for the purposes of proving theoretical principles of neuroscientific research. Ahmed is also grateful for the facilities and the comparatively low teaching commitment. For many researchers around the world, such privileges are still a distant reality, including in Ahmed's native Egypt.

Like many young people, Ahmed had a primary concern in Egypt: "Since 2001, I thought a lot as a student about the problems with the strict security system. But political activities at the university were, of course, strictly prohibited in the Mubarak regime." Nevertheless, in 2004, Ahmed and some other students founded a "Pugwash" for young Egyptian students.

Inspiration for the idea came from the fishing village of the same name in Nova Scotia, Canada, where scientists and intellectuals met and drafted a declaration against nuclear energy in 1957; the resulting international "Pugwash" groups won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1995. "Our main concern is the Middle East – in particular its security policy and how it affects Egypt. I also raised issues that were rather unconventional to date, such as equality between men and women, but also the security risks arising from modern warfare technologies," says Ahmed. Although his political work underwent setbacks, it may well have been the small seed that would bear fruit much later, long after Ahmed left Egypt for Germany.

From January 2011, Ahmed followed the events surrounding the Egyptian revolution from Germany. For him, it was a time of "elation, inspiration, and yes: for the first time in my life, I was proud of my country." From colleagues at the institute to his family in Cairo – once the discussion had started, nothing could stop it. "In this difficult and emotional time, I received tremendous support here in Germany, primarily from the institute. I even managed to be at Tahrir Square a few times during my visits to Cairo."

From Göttingen, Ahmed is also following the ongoing transformation of the political landscape. To "meet the objectives of the revolutionary movement with freedom, transparency and equality," the education system also has to change. "We need an education system that helps future generations to be more critical and more informed. I hope that this will be the case some day, and I would love to play my part in this."