

In Good Hands

Developing the best possible advisory service for foreign employees and guests



Katrin Sillem, Integration Issues Officer

As the new Officer for Integration Issues at MPS Administrative Headquarters, Katrin Sillem has been working with the institutes since mid-February on expanding the advisory service for foreign employees and guests.

MAX PLANCK RESEARCH: *What sparked your interest in the issue of integration and “interculturalism”?*

Katrin Sillem: For one thing, I pursued cultural studies at the university. For another, before I came to the MPS, I worked for a long time in an international environment, where I learned a lot about the co-existence of different cultures.

Early this year you sent a questionnaire on the subject of “Advising and integrating foreign employees” to all institutes. How do you rate the survey results in general?

Katrin Sillem: To start with, I am very satisfied with the response rate, as almost 100 percent of the questionnaires were returned. This is an indication of how seriously the issue is taken at the institutes. The survey revealed that roughly one-third of the institutes employ full-time visitor advisors. In around two-thirds of the institutes, this function is performed on a decentralized basis, which means that, in many cases, institute employees look after our foreign employees and guests. This

group in particular expressed a strong desire for greater professionalization of the role. Our aim would be to have full-time visitor advisor positions at these institutes, too. A small number of Max Planck institutes already have “International Offices.”

Which issues or tasks did the institutes consider to be particularly urgent? What specific measures have you developed based on this information?

Katrin Sillem: In addition to increasing the number of visitor advisor positions, there was also a specific request for more intercultural training. We will be expanding the range of training courses in this area accordingly. As an additional urgent requirement, many institutes also suggested that we have a manual in which foreign scientists and guests can find all types of useful information on such topics as residence permits, childcare facilities, the media, etc. – an A to Z of life in Germany, as it were. We are currently in the process of preparing such a manual. It should be available in hard copy and electronic form by fall.

Financing integration activities is quite a tricky issue as, to date, no resources have been budgeted for the necessary expenditure. We are making every effort to find a long-term solution that will allow us to continue to expand our activities. If nothing else, it is important for the institutes to have a main contact person who is familiar with the legal issues surrounding, for example, visas, or who is available to act in an advisory capacity if there are problems with

local authorities. This service existed before I took up my position and it will, of course, continue to be available in the future. Another idea would be to organize regional Welcome Days, which several institutes could coordinate together.

How would you describe the general goals of your work?

Katrin Sillem: I would like to increase awareness of the fact that intercultural competence should be considered a crucial, rather than a supplementary basic qualification in the MPS. The MPS took its first visible step in achieving this objective by signing the Diversity Charter in March.

In addition, we are constantly increasing our efforts to attract outstanding foreign scientists. When deciding in favor of or against a research facility, it is no longer just the scientific environment, but also the support provided for the individual researcher and his or her family that is a major consideration. The competition from universities and non-university research facilities cannot be underestimated. It thus seems to me to be extremely important that we provide a level of support that not only involves the handling of all administrative issues, but also includes activities that foster integration. This will help us attract foreign scientists and guests and ensure that they feel at home with us. They can then pursue their research work with fewer worries and, in a best case scenario, promote the MPS in their home country as an employer that cares.

MPS Signs Diversity Charter

An environment that cultivates acceptance and mutual trust, where employees are shown appreciation – regardless of gender, race, nationality, ethnic origin, religion or world view, physical ability, age, sexual orientation and identity – in short, one that embraces and harnesses diversity: this is what the MPS has committed to by signing the Diversity Charter. Launched in 2006 by a number of German companies, the Charter has Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel as its patron. Minister of State Maria Böhmer, Federal Government Commissioner for Migration, Refugees and Integration, presented MPS Secretary General Barbara Bludau with the certificate of signature at a ceremony in Munich’s Haus der Bayerischen

Personal Contacts That Matter

How do other people do it? Research School coordinators learn from one another

Sometimes it's not so much the intellectual issues that pose problems for scientists. For many of them, especially when spending time abroad, the first priority is to find a suitable home for the family or a good kindergarten. Visiting scientists at German universities and Max Planck Institutes receive help in matters like these from the International Centers (IBZs) and Guest Houses. Representatives of these organizations met in Munich in December to exchange ideas.

This was their fourth meeting since 2002, and it prompted considerable interest. Some 28 IBZs and Guest Houses were represented, even though there has so far been little networking between them. So when the participants met for a Bavarian sausage breakfast, they were not short of things to talk about. Items on the agenda ranged from integrating different cultures to financing and administrative matters, through to "meet-and-greet lounges" and operating instructions for washing machines in Chinese.

The IBZs and Guest Houses can trace their history back to the 1960s when the first Guest Houses – already a common feature in the Anglo-Saxon countries – were established in Germany. The next stage saw the establishment of the IBZs, with the buildings initially financed by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. Over time, a variety of different forms of financing have developed, and the system of organization is by no means standardized. The bandwidth ranges from autonomous associations to university endowments. At a local level, the IBZs have strong links with one another. The Munich association, for example, combines the universities and the Max Planck Society.

The IBZs and Guest Houses are united by an underlying sense of purpose that one representative from Berlin described as the "philosophy of academic coexistence." The goal is for scientists from abroad to feel at home in Germany. On the one hand, this means finding suitable accommodation without undue difficulty. On the other hand,

many visitors feel the need for personal contacts in a foreign land. Therefore, the Centers offer scientific lectures, discussion groups, concert evenings and other leisure encounters. One is even affiliated with a kindergarten and a school.

Due to the different ways in which they are organized, however, the Centers often find themselves dealing with problems on their own. Audit offices, for instance, dispute whether operating a guest house should even be one of the tasks of a scientific institution. Some participants were concerned that as funds become scarcer in the coming years these problems will intensify. And yet, in an age of increasing globalization, paralleled by a growing skepticism toward foreigners, the IBZs and Guest Houses are now more important than ever. In order to present a more united front in the future, the representatives attending the meeting agreed to reinforce their "brand" by forming an alliance.

The meeting was also an opportunity to exchange practical experiences. On a guided tour of the newly renovated Munich IBZ, the female participants – the IBZs are mostly operated by women – drew inspiration from the interior design features. With utility costs included in the rents charged by most Centers, it is often a challenge to persuade residents to be economical in their use of electricity and water.

Working at the IBZs and Guest Houses also requires extensive interpersonal skills to strengthen communal life. The atmosphere is also aided by the requirement written into the rental agreements for residents to give presentations of their own work. The participants from Munich in particular were concerned that intercultural exchanges at the IBZs might suffer from being too dependent on the work of volunteer program planners – one reason being that many of the female scientists who previously gave generously of their time now have professional commitments of their own.

Wirtschaft in early March. "Diversity is a fundamental factor in successful international competitiveness and future economic growth," stressed the Minister of State in her speech. By signing the Charter, the MPS joins a group of roughly 800 companies and institutions that are committed to the Charter's ethos.

Barbara Bludau (left) and Maria Böhmer at the signing of the Diversity Charter.



Science Guided by Ethics

Max Planck President Peter Gruss comments on the new rules for dealing with scientific risk as adopted by the Max Planck Society's Senate in 2010

Science is of central importance to all areas of modern life, and scientific discoveries form the basis of our entire modern living environment. Therefore, we often – rightly – say that we live in a “scientific society.” Science and research are essential drivers for growth in forward-looking economies. At the same time, they are fundamental to our cultural wellbeing. Yet we also live in a “risk society” – and that applies to science, too.

The scientific community must know how to deal with risk, as scientific findings can be misused when they end up in the wrong hands, for instance with computer hackers and dictators, or even art forgers. Those who wish to develop a defense against bioterrorism attacks must understand the technologies available to the attacker. When conducting materials research and research into nanotechnology in the area of defense and weapons technology, we run the risk of developing offensive weapons. Those who investigate molecular plant genetics must also bear in mind the possibility of using seeds for biological attacks.

However, to claim that the risk of misconduct is limited to the natural sciences would be to miss the mark. Scientists who deal with issues in witness psychology must anticipate the use of their results on terror suspects and prisoners of war. New techniques for tracing booby traps may just find use at airports – and misuse by dictators. Sociological research may violate the rights to privacy and data protection of test persons.

Research results may be used, but of course they may also be misused. We therefore speak of “dual use,” which means that there must be rules for how to handle research topics that may be misused. At the same time, research (especially basic research) hinges on scientific freedom – a freedom that is unequivocally protected in Germany's Basic Law, art. 5, para. 3. Only scientists who are free to exchange ideas and publish their findings can become competitive internationally. In contrast, scientific freedom must be limited in cases where a scientist violates ethical rules or where science is misused to create biolog-

ical weapons, computer viruses or unethical interrogation techniques, or for terrorism or military purposes.

In this context, the Max Planck Society considers it particularly important to formulate unambiguous rules that serve as guidelines for responsible scientific practice with regard to scientific freedom and risk, without running the risk of over-regulating. In March this year, the Senate of the Max Planck Society thus adopted the “Max Planck Society Instructions and Rules on the Responsible Use of Scientific Freedom and Dealing with Scientific Risk.” The rules are meant to help scientists become more sensitive to possible cases of misconduct, even – and especially – in cases where it is not obvious, and to facilitate action by scientists in critical matters of conscience. The instructions amend the existing “Rules of Good Scientific Practice” in the Max Planck Society.

With this, the MPS is taking up an issue that has recently increasingly attracted public and political attention. In 2007, the German federal cabinet introduced a research program for civil security, with initial funding lasting through 2010. The aim of the program is to address, through intelligent security research, the increasing dangers that can originate especially in natural disasters – but it is not entirely uncontroversial in the political landscape. The German program is operated in the context of European security research. The European Union also launched its first research program for civil security from 2007 to 2013.

In this context the Max Planck Society guidelines seek to sensitize scientists at the individual level to any risks when planning and conducting research and collaborating with colleagues, and also to support them as far as possible in case of doubt or questions. The general underlying principle of the guidelines is that: “The research conducted by the Max Planck Society shall serve to gain knowledge and shall be committed to the good of humanity and the protection of the environment. Scientists must therefore avoid or minimize direct and indirect damage to people and the environment, to the greatest possible extent.”



This memorial tablet is a reminder of the discovery of nuclear fission – a scientific achievement of dual use.

This means that scientists must calculate the risk associated with their research in the event of misconduct, and weigh the principle of scientific freedom and transparency against any dangers. To reduce risk, every scientist must take the appropriate security measures. This might mean providing special protection for particularly dangerous materials in the laboratory, choosing cooperation partners from politically sensitive states more carefully or refraining from publishing findings – or in extreme cases, from conducting unjustifiable research.

In the Max Planck Society, the newly established Compliance Office and the Legal Department at Administrative Headquarters in Munich will help with questions about the legal constraints on research. For questions concerning ethical boundaries, any scientist is free to contact the three permanent members of the MPS Ethics Commission. If the Ethics Commission becomes involved, it may request opinions from the Director of the institute and the staff, as well as from the Scientific Advisory Board of the institute in question.

With these new rules and procedures, the Max Planck Society is deliberately drawing on the lessons from the research of its precursor organization, the Kaiser Wilhelm Society, which, primarily during the National Socialist era, ignored ethical boundaries. The legacy of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society is thus a great source of motivation for the Max Planck Society to consider the possible misuse of scientific findings early on, and to tackle it as effectively as possible.