Max Planck Scientists Keep It Simple



Stefanie Höhl (MPI for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences), Christian Vollmer (MPI for Chemistry) and Theobald Lohmüller (MPI for Metals Research) are three of a total of six winners of the Klaus Tschira Prize for Understandable Science.

Stardust need not be as dry as dust, but can actually be quite exciting, as Christian Vollmer of the MPI for Chemistry vividly demonstrated. He is one of a total of six winners of the Klaus Tschira Prize for Understandable Science presented this fall. The award is given to doctoral students who write a report that enables the general public to appreciate the subject of their doctorate. The theme of the award is: "Keep It Simple! – so that others can understand what you have discovered." No fewer than three scientists working at Max Planck Institutes took on the challenge with particular success: geologist Christian Vollmer, psychologist Stefanie Höhl and chemist Theobald Lohmüller. Stephanie Höhl investigated the reactions of small children to their parents' facial expressions at the MPI for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences, while Theobald Lohmüller, under the aegis of Joachim Spatz at the MPI for Metals Research, looked into just what moths' eyes have to do with nanotechnology. The award is presented by the Klaus Tschira Foundation, whose patron is Max Planck President Peter Gruss. The founder, Klaus Tschira, wants to encourage greater appreciation of aspects of the natural sciences, and is himself a Senator of the Max Planck Society. The prize-winning papers were reprinted in a special insert in the German-language magazine *bild der wissenschaft*. The winners each received 5,000 euros in prize money.

Six Max Planck Researchers Receive EU Starting Grants

The European Research Council (ERC) announced in September the scientists and projects that would benefit from the second round of ERC Starting Grants: a total of 240 scientists from 19 countries (including Israel) will share some 325 million euros in sponsorship funds. Each of them will receive up to 2 million euros over a five-year period. The ERC received a total of 2,500 applications. Among the winners are 27 scientists from Germany, including 6 Max Planck researchers: linguist Michael Alexander Cysouw from the MPI for Evolutionary Anthropology, Nicholas Enfield from the MPI for Psycholinguistics, Stefan Diez from the MPI for Molecular Cell Biology and Genetics, Gunter Meister of the MPI for Biochemistry, Marc Strous of the MPI for Marine Microbiology and Sylvie Roke of the MPI for Metals Research. According to ERC President Fotis Kafatos, the ERC Starting Grant is intended to make it easier for the best emerging scientists to start out in their careers. Looking ahead to the future, President Kafatos announced that the program would be split into two, with one part for scientists with two to six years of post-doc experience, and one for those with six to ten years' experience.

Photos: Klaus Tschira Stiftung – Bernhard Kreutzer

Advising the Advisers

EU Working Group networks with University Liaison Officers

The EU Working Group of the Max Planck Society and the Federal Working Group of EU Liaison Officers at German Universities (BAK) came together for the first time in late November for a joint conference in Brussels. In addition to several presentations detailing EU programs, the main item on the agenda involved networking with representatives of the EU Commission.

"Our meeting was very fruitful and we intend to continue to work together," said Rüdiger Hesse, head of the Brussels office of the Max Planck Society. "The BAK has structures that we can learn from, not least because it has existed for longer than our MPS Working Group." For example, the BAK has an extensive website. "The meeting also served to develop contacts between our regional offices and the EU Commission," Hesse continued. The MPS Working Group and the BAK intend to organize further shared events in the future. The conference in Brussels was jointly directed by Rüdiger Hesse and BAK spokesman Andreas Hebbelmann.

Hesse was delighted about the interest the event attracted: "We invited 15 members of the EU Commission to attend our meeting, and almost all of them came." The main focus on the first day was on the COST program (European Cooperation in Science and Technology), which mainly promotes scientific exchanges and strategic conferences. Application for the relevant funds is a straightforward procedure. COST director Martin Grabert and several of his colleagues described the individual elements of the program. "To make an initial application, all that is needed is a rough sketch. In fact, the program is also attractive for junior scientists," explained Rüdiger Hesse. More than a hundred MPS scientists have already received support via COST, which is now financing exchange programs with New Zealand, Australia and Canada.

The theme for the first evening of the event was "Personal networking with the European Commission." Guest of honor was Herbert von Bose, Director of the industrial technologies department at the Research Directorate of the EU Commission. Mr. von Bose agreed with the representatives of the MPS and the German universities that basic research should also be given greater priority in the industrial research sponsored by the EU. Rüdiger Hesse summed up the common ground they shared: "In this respect, we at the Max Planck Society are more in agreement with the universities than other non-university institutions involved in the research program."

The participants from the two working groups also agreed to organize further meetings in the future. They already have their eye on a somewhat larger-scale event involving the national contact point for the Federal Ministry of Research, the Brussels office of the scientific organizations coordinating body KoWi, and the Leibniz Association. "We are all motivated by the fact that the framework programs have become so complex over time that we, as advisers, are ourselves in need of advice," Hesse explained. The overall amount of funding made available by the EU for research activities is enormous: the 7th Framework Program that runs from 2007 to 2013 is valued at around 53 billion euros, and an additional 10 to 20 billion euros is available under various other special programs.

Photo: Michael Ehry

Group Heads Issue Networking Invitation

LeadNet is an initiative launched by the heads of groups, teams and projects with the aim of establishing and maintaining future contacts beyond the limits of individual institutes. They are inviting all junior scientists with leadership responsibilities to an initial meeting at Schloss Waldthausen in Mainz (Photo). The conference, to be held on Thursday and Friday, May 6 and 7, 2010, is intended to facilitate the exchange of ideas on scientific and organizational matters. Following an introduction to the organizational structure of the Max Planck Society, the agenda will include such topics as: finding scientific mentors, guiding doctoral students, applying for national grants, and writing press releases.

The meeting will also include a session devoted to "Computational Biology" and a special round of discussions for heads of Independent Junior Research Groups. Those interested in taking part can register for the conference online. Further details are available at www.leadnet-mpg.de. The closing date for registration is February 28, 2010.

PhDnet Meeting in Jena

The smallest possible network in which a doctoral student might find himself/herself generally comprises the student, his/her Ph.D. supervisor and the contacts he/she makes in the course of his/her scientific work. To extend horizons beyond the bounds of this small group, there is PhDnet: the joint body of doctoral students at the various Max Planck Institutes.

Small enough to focus on specific interests, yet large enough to provide interaction between the numerous MPIs and their thousands of employees. For guests attending the event in Jena at the end of October 2009, the annual general meeting was positive proof that the network has a real and a virtual side. A total of 85 representatives from 49 MPIs met in the city that is home to the MPIs for Biogeochemistry, Economics and Chemical Ecology.

The meeting elected the new members of the steering committee, who will officially take up their posts at the start of 2010: Daniel Kalthoff (MPI for Neurological Research) will replace Leonard Burtscher as spokesperson; Section representatives Sandra Schöttner, Susannah Burrows and Axinja Hachfeld will be succeeded by Stefan Klatt (MPI for Molecular Genetics), Veronika Bierbaum (MPI for Colloids and Interfaces) and Alexander Jehlin (MPI for Intellectual Property).

From left to right: Susannah Burrows, Veronika Bierbaum, Stephan Klatt, Daniel Kalthoff, Alexander Jehlin, Leonard Burtscher

Photo: Max Planck PhDnet

Cooperating in Innovative Fields

Scientists at all stages of their careers are working together on some 50 joint projects

מכון ויצמן למדע
WEIZMANN INSTITUTE OF SCIENCE

The Weizmann Institute of Science is one of the few institutions in the world that shares a mandate similar to that of the Max Planck Society: it promotes state-of-the-art basic research at several institutes and offers scientists optimum working conditions. It also cultivates an international network and aspires to outstanding results by appointing the most qualified researchers available. If an ideal candidate is not available, the appointment is left unfilled.

Scientists from Max Planck Institutes and the Weizmann Institute are currently working together on some 50 joint research projects. The subjects are drawn from every area of the natural sciences (the Weizmann Institute is not engaged in the social sciences). Many of these projects are financed from the EU research budget that supports joint ventures with an international component, such as the interdisciplinary "AnEUploidys" network in system biology and genetic research, in which the MPI for Molecular Genetics is involved. The EU set aside more than 8 million euros for this project for a five-year period ending in 2010.

There is also a regular exchange of scientists working on smaller, bilaterally financed research projects. One such example, in the field of structural molecular biology, is a study of the proteins involved in Alzheimer's disease. Cooperation has traditionally been strong in the field of neurobiology. Nobel laureate Professor Bernd Sakmann, together with colleagues at the Weizmann Institute, is researching the network of nerve cells in the brain and how these cells are stimulated. The MPI for Nuclear Physics in Heidelberg, whose scientists took part in the very first joint projects with Israel, continues to be involved with the Weizmann Institute in the study of atomic and molecular physics. Prior to his appointment as President of the Weizmann Institute, Professor Daniel Zajfman was a Director at the MPI for Nuclear Physics. It was at that time that he initiated the Cryogenic Storage Ring (CSR), which operates at extremely low energy and temperature levels. The device is intended to help physicists understand chemical-physical processes in space by replicating them in the laboratory.

The Max Planck Society and the Weizmann Institute also have a shared interest in providing support for junior scientists. The International Max Planck Research School at the MPI for Biophysical Chemistry in Göttingen and the Feinberg School (a Weizmann Institute facility for junior scientists) are jointly engaged in training doctoral students.

Over time, the topics of mutual interest have become increasingly interdisciplinary. For example, the "Cell Environments" research project brings together biologists, chemists, materials researchers and nano-scientists, all of whom are focused on the origins of cell growth and behavior, and how these are influenced by their environment. The project involves several institutes on both sides and is seen as a source of great future potential in this field.

Professor Daniel Zajfman,
president of the Weizmann Institute of Science.

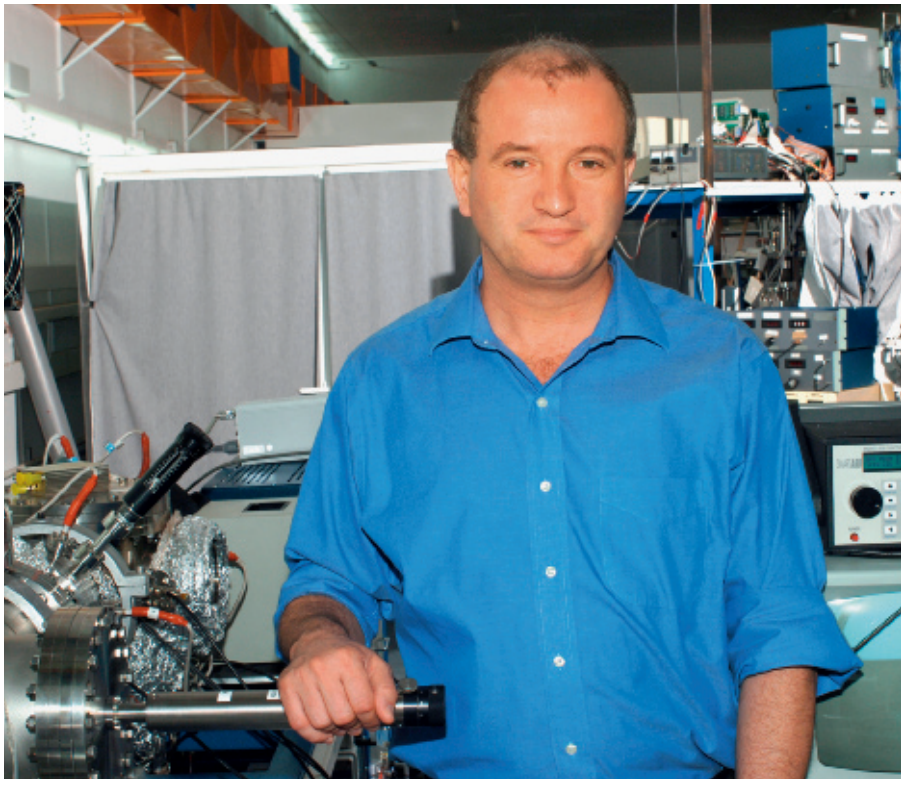

Photo: Weizmann Institute of Science