

Power abuse and conflict resolution

PhDnet position paper by the PhDnet Steering Group, August 2018

Preamble

As PhDnet we speak for the over 5000 doctoral researchers (DRs) currently associated with the Max Planck Society (MPS). Our primary goal is to advocate for the physical and mental health of DRs as well as the advancement of their careers. Furthermore we see ourselves as integral part of the MPS and want to help maintain its scientific excellence while striving to be an employer that acts in the best interest of all its employees.

What recent media reports have shown is only the tip of the iceberg. We as the representation of DRs see the prevalence of power abuse and the difficulties to solve interpersonal conflicts as a structural problem of the academic system. The problem is caused by

- i) steep hierarchies and multi-dependencies of young researchers on the one hand,
- ii) high pressure to publish as well as
- ii) lacking training in leadership and personnel development of scientific leaders on the other hand.

The lack of robust and trustworthy mechanisms to report and resolve conflicts makes it hard to help and protect victims of power abuse and harassment and even harder for perpetrators to receive honest feedback and learn from it. The existence of this problem has to be recognized by the academic system as a whole and we need to work on a solution together. In this paper we propose a differentiated and multi-faceted solution to a complex problem that targets four main areas: the **prevention** of conflicts and power abuse, the **protection** of victims and early career researchers in less powerful positions, the **arbitration** of conflicts by a committee independent of the MPS and the implementation of **consequences** for offenders.

A binding **code of conduct** that defines the culture that the MPS wants to establish concerning power abuse and harassment needs to be enacted before arbitration measures can be fully implemented. The prevention of power abuse and supervision conflicts has to be **considered a matter of good scientific practice** by the academic system.

Below we formulate concrete steps and measures for implementation within the MPS since we are the elected representation of the DRs associated with the MPS. Nevertheless we understand this position paper as a basis for discussion for the whole academic system.

Prevention

A main reason for the occurrence of power abuse is the dependence of an early career researcher's livelihood and career on one single person: the supervisor. We propose

- Consistent implementation of **Thesis Advisory Committees** (TACs) - TACs have to become the norm (currently 54% of DRs have a TAC, see PhDnet survey 2017). Furthermore, binding guidelines on how TACs are established have to be implemented regarding
 - i) independence of members,
 - ii) number and function of members
 - iii) number of meetings,
 - iv) mandatory meetings without the supervisor present and
 - v) documentation.
- A **clear definition** of the **role of the supervisor** has to be established: the supervisor is not only there to lead and evaluate research, but also to help with career development and to ensure good mental and physical health of the DRs.
- The supervisor alone must not be the only one to decide over a **contract extension**. This decision has to reside with the TAC for scientific reasons and the head of the personnel department for administrative reasons.
- DRs should be employed by institutions rather than single PIs. Institutions as a whole have to be responsible to ensure their funding and supervision.
- Every scientific leader in the MPS who is responsible for the training of early career researchers must undergo **mandatory and regular leadership trainings** that include training on communication, conflict resolution and supervision as well as the recognition of behaviour that violates the code of conduct and occupational safety regulations.
- Every early career researcher has to be part of an onboarding workshop that **informs** about the code of conduct and occupational safety regulations as well as existing mechanisms to report and resolve conflicts.

Protection

Once a conflict has become apparent, the livelihood and scientific career of the early career researcher has to be protected. We propose that

- The MPS helps **finding a new supervisor**, if necessary at a university or other institute if the situation makes relocation necessary,
- a written statement is issued, granting the affected DR **access to research data**, results and facilities needed to complete the PhD project for the rest of the duration of the project - within reason,
- **employment and funding** until the end of the PhD project is ensured and
- a confirmed supervision conflict is **recognized as reason for a contract extension** within the regular 3+1 years and possibly beyond 4 years project duration.

Arbitration

Power abuse, harassment and interpersonal conflicts can occur in a wide range of severities. Many actions fall into a grey area that is not covered by the criminal code of Germany. To find judgement in case of a conflict, several steps are necessary:

- To divide this grey area into clearer regions of tolerable and intolerable actions, a **code of conduct** as basis for the arbitration of conflicts must be adopted.
- For conflict arbitration, a **committee independent of the MPS** and **trusted** by all its members has to be established. We propose a committee which is headed by a professional mediator and includes members who are early career researchers, scientific leaders and scientific staff members (not employed by the MPS).
- Once a conflict is reported, it is **investigated and judged by the committee**.
- Control over the arbitration process, flow of information and communication has to always lie with the victim.
- **Existence** of the independent committee has to be **communicated** broadly and continuously to all employees of the MPS.
- Conflicts recognized by the arbitration committee have to also be recognized by the affected institute. Measures taken as well as steps in the arbitration process have to be **communicated regularly and transparently** to everybody affected.

Consequences

Even if effort is put into the prevention of conflicts, power abuse and harassment, we have to recognize that they can always occur as long as humans interact. If the behaviour that violates the code of conduct occurs repeatedly or is severe, consequences for the offender have to be considered. We suggest a binding and transparent list of consequences that are implemented depending on the severity of the offense, including

- **mandatory trainings** and coaching for offenders,
- mandatory **co-supervision** with an independent colleague and
- reduction of number of supervised early career researchers up to
- **complete prohibition to supervise** early career researchers and issue working contracts for them for an extended period of time.