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## PhDnet Steering Group Annual Report 2020

With our first virtual General Meeting behind us, an exciting, productive, but in many ways unusual year is coming to an end for the 2020 PhDnet Steering Group. With the corona virus pandemic interrupting our everyday lives in an unprecedented way, the work of the PhDnet had to be adjusted as well. We are nevertheless satisfied with our team effort and the achievements that we, on behalf of PhDnet, are proud to report in our annual report. Our agenda for 2020 encompassed three major key points: Communication, Career Development, and Working Conditions.

### Communication

Our aim to improve communication with the General Administration (GA) got off to a good start. At our handover meeting in Munich we got to know many members of the GA across various departments and were able to outline projects and collaborations.

However, starting in March it quickly became clear that communication of information about the handling of the Covid-19 situation by the Max Planck Society (MPS) and its institutes had to become a number one priority. As GA frequently updates **MAX** with useful information—COVID regulations, OHB, workshops & seminars. We started to promote the use of [MAX](#) as a platform amongst the Doctoral Researchers (DRs) by creating a **PhDnet team room** and section subrooms, and by hosting a webinar on how to access and use MAX efficiently. In addition, we started our own PhDnet **Virtual Meeting Series** in April. For the first time in PhDnet history, we initiated Q&A sessions for DRs to talk with members of the MPS and GA about the situation of DRs in the times of an ongoing pandemic and beyond. We chatted with the CPT section head, members of the central and a local works council, the head of the Health, Safety & Environment unit, and the speaker of the scientific staff representatives of the Human Sciences Section. Importantly, the SG's annual **meeting with the president of the MPS** at the end of April took place virtually as well. Despite the unusual setting the meeting was constructive and fruitful, and we highly appreciated to have the time to discuss all important points of our agenda with the president. At the end of April, we also met the Communication Department of the GA to discuss the relaunch of Max Planck Journal. In May, in a follow-up **meeting with the head of the Human Resources department**, Kerstin Dübner-Gee, we were able to discuss in more detail aspects of the working conditions and career aspects of DRs in the MPS.

To promote our activities and provide information we increased our **social media presence** across all channels with regular posts on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#). The PhDnet webgroup drew up a task force to restructure the PhDnet [website](#) and made its content more accessible and streamlined.

Additionally, we uploaded an **FAQ section** on the MAX [PhDnet team room](#) with information on: General Structure of MPG & PhDnet, Contracts, Visa Regulations & Support for Internationals, Parenting, Conflicts, and TAC (Thesis Advisory Committee). All MPS DRs are invited to the PhDnet team room, login to [MAX](#) and [check it out](#).

Moreover, all newly elected external PhD representatives now receive a **welcome e-mail** from the Steering Group, to directly establish a strong connection with the DRs across the MPIs. To inform people about the structure and aims of PhDnet, we uploaded an **introductory presentation**. Lastly, we've designed a **poster** to increase the physical visibility of PhDnet in the institutes. Both are available for download on the PhDnet [website](#).

Apart from the Steering Group, the PhDnet workgroups contributed some exciting projects to improve our communication and outreach. First of all, the **Offspring** Working Group launched a **podcast** for and by DRs. The podcast hosts and DRs themselves, Srinath Ramkumar, Nikolai Hörmann and Allison Lewis, regularly interview members of PhDnet, alumni with interesting career paths, or experts on Open Science (OS) and Open Access (OA). With over 2000 listens, the [podcast](#) has gotten off to a very successful start!

Communicating **MPS wide OS and OA strategies** has been another keypoint of the SG and the OS working group. The working group finalized their survey on the opinion and knowledge about OS practices amongst DRs and are about to publish the report in a peer-reviewed journal. In addition, the group is writing up a discussion paper with recommendations to join forces with MPS bodies to increase OS practices in the institutes and the whole MPS. Moreover, a video series on OS topics is planned for 2021.

## Career Development

At the start of the year the PhDnet joined forces with the GA and the PostdocNet in their efforts to develop career perspectives outside of academia for DRs and Postdocs. In the [Career Evolution web series](#), which has been held regularly since July, the hosts interview alumni from various fields of industry who share their experience with a wide audience (around 100 participants in each session). This series is a successful **new platform** to connect DRs with partners from industry and provides important **perspectives for their future**.

In addition to this collaborative work, the MPS introduced the [Planck Academy](#) at the beginning this year. By hosting **workshops** for DRs and Postdocs, but also for **Directors and Group leaders** this initiative is an important step towards shaping a better supervision culture in the MPS. We are enthusiastic that the PhDnet Steering group has been invited to **join the sounding board** of the Planck Academy to provide feedback on the needs of DRs and take part in decisions on the future development of this platform.

## PhDnet Survey

An important measure to gauge the **satisfaction and current working conditions** of DRs in the MPS is the annual PhDnet survey. The [2019 survey report](#) was finalized in June this year and has received a lot of attention. While overall satisfaction has been increasing across the years, a high percentage of DRs suffer from **depressive symptoms** and anxiety due to aspects such as high workload and pressure from their supervisors. Around 19% of DRs receive work **contracts with a duration of 2 years** or less, and women, non-German DRs and those working in the HS section get **paid less** for their PhD works. All of this puts DRs in a financially and mentally vulnerable position. On the other hand, supervision agreements and TACs are slowly becoming the standard for all DRs.

Thanks to the work of our incredibly skilled and professional survey working group, we hosted several **survey presentations** directed to DRs but also heads of administration, IMPRS/PhD coordinators and managing directors. These presentations were extremely well received and the feedback has been positive throughout. We are glad to have brought our important findings to the attention of a much bigger audience than has previously been the case.

## Working Conditions

As the PhDnet survey has shown impressively this year, **supervision** remains one of the key aspects for a healthy and successful PhD. The steering group tackled this issue by performing a **separate survey** amongst DRs on the topic of **Thesis advisory committees (TAC)**. It was shown that regular meetings with the supervisor and a functioning TAC provide a **healthy and productive environment**. With the help of the TAC survey, the steering group identified different kinds of TACs and provided some important documents and ideas on how to **form and work with a TAC**.

Another key aspect of this year's steering group has been the topic of **onboarding**. This includes the recruitment of new DRs, support for new PhD candidates as well as settling in at the MPIs and within the MPS. Together with the GA and the PostdocNet a **task force** was established which to improve the onboarding process, with a focus on the ability to provide important **information as early and as transparently** as possible. We look forward to this fruitful collaboration in the coming years.

Furthermore, the 2019 survey highlighted again the issue of **short contracts** for DRs. The importance of this topic was acknowledged by all stakeholders and is now discussed in **the presidential circle**.

**Increasing the base salary** of the support contracts has been on the Steering Group agenda for many years. We are pleased through constant collaboration with not only members of the Max Planck GA but also governing bodies, the salary is increased from 50% to **65% starting 2021**. The Steering Group appreciates the firm stance from the GA in making this mandatory for all current and future contracts.

The **Equal Opportunities (EO) group** of the PhDnet once more focused on the topic of mental health. The [Mental Health Collective](#) (with members of PhDnet and Postdocnet) was founded during the pandemic and has since established a **TeaTime** and revived the **Mental Health awareness week**.

Lastly we are grateful for the invitation to join the **Max Planck Presidential Commission on Equal Opportunities**. Following a fruitful first meeting, we are excited for what is to come with the Max Planck Society and eager to offer our input and assistance wherever necessary.

## Collaboration with N<sup>2</sup>

In addition, the PhDnet survey results are being compared to those of our [N<sup>2</sup> partner networks](#), who distributed the same questionnaire to the DRs of their organizations. In the framework of N<sup>2</sup>, we are aiming to publish the results of our **harmonized survey** to increase their significance even more. In **2021**, N<sup>2</sup> will offer two **presentations of the harmonized survey results** on **February 4th** from 16:00-17:00 (English) and **February 9th** from 14:00-15:00 (German). Although the presentation is open to the public, we specifically aim for members of the Max Planck Society to attend. In addition to the survey report, board members of N<sup>2</sup> are preparing several publications to appear in 2021 on topics such as the general situation of non-university DRs, mental health, and conflict reporting. The success of N<sup>2</sup> lies not only on the strong collaboration between DRs, but also with the general administrations of the member organizations. Furthermore, continuing on the success of the 2019 N<sup>2</sup> conference and adapting to the current situation, N<sup>2</sup> is in the process of organizing a **3-day hybrid conference in 2021** (virtual and physical) to inform and bring together non-university DRs.

## Additional Activities

For the first time, the PhDnet steering group received professional **training** in negotiation and communication skills, as well as media and press training. Both virtual workshops helped the steering group tremendously in focusing our work and broadening our skills. This is why in 2021 we hope not only the steering group but also active working group coordinators and members participate in trainings pertinent to the success of their projects.

An important task of this year's steering group and secretary group had been the reform of the PhDnet **Statutes**, with a focus on the **election procedures**. The PhDnet voted on these changes in November at the 2020 [general meeting](#). We want to thank the organizers, invited guests and participants of our first **virtual general meeting**. We hope the three days were informative and engaging. You can find the **minutes** of the [2020 meeting](#) and [past meetings](#) on the PhDnet Website.

The restrictions due to the current pandemic, have left many people feeling isolated and without the ability to visit family and friends. To foster a stronger bond between Max Planck DRs we hosted a **virtual winter social** on December 18th. The program included a Pub Quiz, Escape Room, dance hall and craft beer tasting. We used GatherTown to allow the DRs to interact within their regional hub, sections, or with people who have similar hobbies. We hope this brought people together during these trying times.

The success of PhDnet lies in the individuals coordinating and participating in the **Working Groups**: [Career Development & Conference Group](#), [Secretary Group](#), [Webgroup](#), [General Meeting Group](#), [Equal Opportunity Group](#), [Offspring Group](#), [Survey Group](#), and [Open Science Group](#). Involvement in a working group is open to all Max Planck Doctoral Researchers, we hope to see some new faces in 2021.

## 2021

We look forward to what next year will bring with the **2021 Steering Group**:

Spokesperson: Lea Heckman, MPI for Physics (2019 Survey co-coordinator for analysis)

Deputy Spokesperson: Sarah Young, MPI of Colloids and Interfaces (2020 PhDnet Steering Group CPT section representative)

General Secretary: Florian Teichmann, MPI for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences

CPTS Representative: Johannes Bischoff, Fritz Haber Institute of the MPS

HSS Representative: Aroma Dabas, MPI for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences

BMS Representative: Marga Albu, MPI for Heart and Lung Research

Their term begins January 2021, and we are sure they will continue representing the voices of all Max Planck Doctoral Researchers, collaborating with the General Administration and work towards improving the overall situation for Max Planck Doctoral Researchers. You can **contact them** with the Steering Group email: [steering.group@phdnet.mpg.de](mailto:steering.group@phdnet.mpg.de)

We want to thank those that elected us to this position. It has been a unique year and we are grateful for the opportunity to lead, represent, and serve the Doctoral Researchers of the Max Planck Society.

Sincerely,

2020 PhDnet Steering Group

Lindsey Bultema (Spokesperson), Cornelia van Scherpenberg (Deputy Spokesperson), Julia van Beesel (General Secretary), Nikki van Teijlingen Bakker (BM Section Representative), Sarah Young (CPT Section Representative), and Simon Hofmann (HS Section Representative)