

# PhDnet Steering Group Annual Report 2021

## Summary

### Communication:

- Internal:
  - Launched the weekly PhDnet newsletter
  - Increased the use of MAX teamrooms to share internal information
  - Organized biannual section meetings with the external representatives
  - Held our PhDnet General Meeting virtually
  - Coordinated workshop offers for PhDnet members to professionalize the network
- General Administration (GA)
  - Met with the president of the MPS, Prof. Martin Stratmann and the General Secretary Rüdiger Willems, to discuss our plans for the year
  - Joined weekly meetings with Ilka Schießler-Gäbler, our contact person at the HR department, which helped us tackle projects more efficiently
  - Attended many other meetings with contacts at the GA that enabled us to build our ideas and push projects
- External communication
  - Used social media channels for promoting working group achievements
  - Used social media platforms to promote science and publications of our doctoral researchers (DRs)
- Science communication
  - The Offspring working group produced many new podcast episodes over the year reaching 10.000+ listens
  - The Offspring magazine was finished and will be distributed to the institutes in January
- Open science
  - Open Science working group released recommendations for Open Science strategies in the Max Planck Society and discussed it with Vice president Prof. Ulman Lindenberger
  - The Open Science group also organized the Open Science Ambassador meeting together with the MPDL this September

### Employment rights and statutes

- Contracts
  - Support implementation of the increase to 65% base salary
  - Helped the MPS initiative to monitor the local contract situation of DRs to ensure the abolishment of short term contracts

- Supervision
  - Started TAC task force
  - Created TAC guidelines
- Pandemic impact
  - Designed and ran a small survey among the external representatives to monitor the pandemic's impact, and shared the results and insights with the GA to push for solutions

### Support and inclusion

- Onboarding
  - Joined the onboarding taskforce led by the GA, and collaborated with them on designing and finalizing the first two work packages to be introduced
  - Raised issues related to contracts being handed out too late and pushed for change
- Career development
  - Collaborated with the Career evolution Web series which helped connect DRs to different career paths
  - Helped with the games week organization to help improve transition to industry
  - The Career Development and Conference working group ran an independent survey to be introduced to the GA to further improve career development
  - As part of the Planck Academy sounding board, provided information about the needs of DRs, and feedback about platform usability to the GA
- Equal Opportunities
  - Took part in the Presidential Commission on Equal Opportunities
  - The Equal Opportunities working group initiated the 'Safer Spaces' project for peer-to-peer support structure
- Mental Health
  - Collected local best practice examples from the external representatives and shared with DRs and the GA
  - Collaborated with the BGM on topics such as EMAP
  - Worked as mediator between the Mental Health Collective and the GA

### 2020 PhDnet survey results

- Released the annual survey report and summarized it in an executive summary to share the findings
- Started the new 2021 PhDnet survey together with N<sup>2</sup> and pushed for participation

## N<sup>2</sup> achievements

- Sarah Young represented N<sup>2</sup> as an expert at the 'Ausschuss für Bildung, Forschung und Technikfolgenabschätzung' from the Bundestag on the topic of 'Gleichstellung in der Wissenschaft und Forschung' (Equal opportunities in science and research)
- N<sup>2</sup> picked up on the discussion under #ichbinHanna, by publishing a letter to the ministry of education & science and was invited for a private conversation with the minister as a result
- N<sup>2</sup> published "Wahlprüfsteine" for the ongoing election campaign
- N<sup>2</sup> reached out to the parties negotiating the 'traffic light coalition', reminding them of the changes DRs would like to see implemented
- N<sup>2</sup> organized and ran its second harmonized survey
- N<sup>2</sup> conducted its biannual event, which was held online this year under the overarching topic of 'Perspective on Open and Sustainable Research'
- N<sup>2</sup> wrote several requested articles addressing the topic of Mental Health that will be published in the next months
- N<sup>2</sup> has decided to restructure its activities for the next four years

## Full Report

A year full of exciting challenges of new endeavors is coming to an end for us, as the 2021 PhDnet Steering Group. Still the corona-virus is playing an active part in our work and the majority of communication as well as our General Meeting took place virtually, making some aspects easier, others harder. Nevertheless, with the support of everyone involved in our network, we managed to keep our efforts and achievements at a high standard and grow in different directions. Therefore, we are proud to present the achievements of the PhDnet in 2021 and summarize the year in our annual report. Our agenda for 2021 encompassed three major key points: Communication, Employment Rights & Statutes, as well as Support & Inclusion.

### Communication

Improving our internal communication is one of the key points for us to enable an active interaction with all doctoral researchers (DRs) inside the Max Planck Society (MPS). One of our main steps this year was the launch of our **weekly PhDnet newsletter**, which is sent to our external representatives and summarizes all relevant information that we receive for our DRs. Additionally, we used our **MAX team rooms** to exchange ideas with the DRs and share documents and information. **Biannual PhDnet section meetings** were organized by our section representative to discuss specific topics and issues with the external representatives in their respective section. As a highlight of the year, the PhDnet came together in its **General Meeting** in October<sup>1</sup>, taking place via zoom and gathertown, offering an interactive and engaging environment. The opportunity of organizing **workshops** tailored to the specific needs of our steering and working groups was provided and taken throughout the year to further professionalize our network.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.phdnet.mpg.de/186897/20th\\_PhDnet\\_GM\\_2021.pdf](https://www.phdnet.mpg.de/186897/20th_PhDnet_GM_2021.pdf)

Additionally to our internal communications, we continued our fruitful interactions with the MPS headquarters and a constructive communication and collaboration were maintained. The **meeting with the president of the MPS**, Prof. Martin Stratmann and the **General Secretary** Rüdiger Willems, took place in April and provided a valuable foundation for our plans. Other **meetings with the General Administration (GA)**, as for example with Kerstin Dübner-Gee, the head of the HR department, or also our weekly meetings with Ilka Schießler-Gäbler, our contact person at the HR department, enabled us to address certain issues or tackling projects more efficiently. We would like to thank all the members of the GA but specifically Prof. Martin Stratmann, Rüdiger Willems, Kerstin Dübner-Gee and Ilka Schießler-Gäbler for their constant trust and support.

Moving to external communication, we focused on showcasing the achievements of the PhDnet and its members. One of the major means is our **social media channels**, which we used for promoting the achievements of our working groups. Additionally, we started offering our social media platforms to DRs to promote their science and publications.

Apart from communicating within and about the PhDnet, communication of science and within the scientific community are important topics for us.

**Science communication** is one of the focus points of our **Offspring working group**. They constantly produced new **podcast episodes** inspiring and educating our DRs throughout the year, reaching 10.000+ listens across all platforms. As a highlight, they managed to get the Science Communication star Dr. Neil deGrasse Tyson for one of their episodes<sup>2</sup>. And with the end of the year, the **Offspring magazine** will reach all the institutes with interesting articles and information by and for DRs.

Another hot topic addressing communication inside science is tackled by our **Open Science working group**. This year, they released their **recommendations for Open Science strategies in the Max Planck Society**<sup>3</sup> which they also discussed in a meeting together with Vice president Prof. Ulman Lindenberger. To promote Open Science further they organized the **Open Science Ambassador meeting** together with the MPDL this September.

It is important for us to mention, that all of the described communication happened mostly virtually, starting with the complete virtual handover from the 2020 steering group, our general meeting, the PhDnet winter party and ending now in our handover to the 2022 steering group.

### Employment rights and statutes

Considering the employment situation of our DRs, this year started with a valuable improvement: the **increase to 65% base salary** for all support contracts. Throughout the first months we were in contact with our external representatives and the GA to support the implementation of these changes. Additionally, we supported the MPS initiative to monitor the local contract situation for our DRs and ensure the **abolishment of short term contracts**.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kv0Eb8DvzPc>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.phdnet.mpg.de/phdnet/who/workgroups/open-science-group/Discussing\\_OS\\_in\\_the\\_MPS](https://www.phdnet.mpg.de/phdnet/who/workgroups/open-science-group/Discussing_OS_in_the_MPS)

As regularly shown by the PhDnet surveys, not only a stable contract situation is needed for our DRs to ensure a healthy and successful PhD, but also **supervision** remains one of the key aspects. The steering group addressed this by furthering the efforts by last year's steering group on the topic of **Thesis Advisory Committees (TAC)**. We created a **task force** with which we **developed guidelines** for implementing TAC across the various Max Planck Institutes. Through these guidelines, we aimed to increase the **focus on the working conditions and environment** of the DRs, specifying the **role of the TAC members** and providing **different TAC formats** adjusted to the yearly aims. We hope that the project will continue in the next year with a common discussion and joint revision with the GA.

However, one of the main challenges all of us had to face was the ongoing **impact of the pandemic** that was slowly showing its long term effects. Therefore, we designed and ran a small **survey** among our external representative to evaluate where the major challenges lie. We **identified four main areas** where support from the GA would be beneficial: General procedures for contract extensions, steps to monitor and address the impact of the pandemic on PhD projects and career paths, coaching for supervisors on online supervision of DRs, as well as increased assistance with residence permit applications and travel procedures during the pandemic. The results and insights were shared with the GA to face the new situation together.

### Support & Inclusion

Additionally to improving the working conditions, we always aim for a fair and welcoming scientific working environment.

The steering group was invited to join the **onboarding task force** led by the GA this year. We felt this collaboration was really fruitful, also thanks to the constructive lead of Signe Tuborgh and we look forward to continue it next year. One of the first steps was to collect questions that early career researchers would need to get answered at all stages of their interaction with the MPS. **'Attract and Recruit'** and the **'Welcome and Onboarding'** working packages being the first two to be introduced. The task force made some **extensive progress** on the 'Attract and Recruit' working package and we look forward to seeing this getting implemented in a **website** soon. In addition, we were very happy that we were able to raise awareness for the issue of **contracts being handed out too late**. We hope, that our survey results for this topic will help to make the overall **onboarding process more welcoming and informative**.

In collaboration with the GA and the PostdocNet, the Career Development & Conference working group of the PhDnet continued efforts to provide career perspectives outside of academia for DRs and Postdocs. The **Career Evolution web series**<sup>4</sup> interviewed alumni as well as industry partners to share their experience with a wide audience (56 sessions July 2020-2021). The series has run successfully in connecting DRs with partners from industry and providing perspectives on **different career paths**.

In addition to the web series, we continued the collaboration with the GA and the PostdocNet in organizing the **Games Week**. This event was tailored to DRs and Postdocs who are in the final

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.phdnet.mpg.de/events-and-activities/career-evolution>

stages of their academic career and plan to transition to industry. It comprised of webinars, one-on-one trainings on CV writing, interview skills trainings and many other offers.

To better understand the skills our DRs have or require for transitioning to industry, the Career Development & Conference working group ran an **independent survey**. We look forward to using these results together with the GA to further improve the career development offers of the MPS to meet the future career needs of the DRs.

Further, as part of the **sounding board** of the Planck Academy<sup>5</sup>, we provided information about the needs of the DRs on the offered courses and workshops. Furthermore, we provided continuous feedback from DRs about platform usability.

In addition to being invited to the sounding board of the Planck Academy, we were very happy to be welcomed to the **Presidential Commission on Equal Opportunities**. The working environment and tone in this commission was **very positive and focused on concrete measures**. We look forward to continuing our work in the commission and want to thank Prof. Asifa Akhtar for her open and constructive lead.

The Equal Opportunities group of the PhDnet initiated the **'Safer Spaces' project** this year. This **peer-to-peer support structure** aims to provide some fast and easily reachable help. In the first part of the project interested people would get trained on 'unconscious bias' and 'active listening' to get the **certificate for a general 'Safer Space' officer**. Further trainings on specific topics would be implemented at a later stage. The 'Safer Spaces' would get introduced by targeting DRs, but we hope to **expand the project in the future** with the help of the Presidential Commission on Equal Opportunities and the Planck Academy to train 'Safer Space' **officers at all levels**. We would like to thank Frauke Logermann for her support on this project in the last year.

As the pandemic continued, **mental health** kept on being an important topic for researchers all over the world. Therefore, we collected best practices for local initiatives happening at the institutes and shared them as inspiration for our external representatives and the GA. Additionally, we worked as a mediator between the Mental Health Collective and the GA to ensure using all available resources to tackle this important topic together.

### 2020 PhDnet survey results

Our **annual survey report**<sup>6</sup> was released in October and summarized in our executive summary<sup>7</sup>. It combines our base topics with newly added insights on diversity and the impact of the pandemic. We are happy to report a further **decrease of the abundance of stipends as well as short term contracts, but there are still differences in funding for different section, genders and nationalities**. One of our main concerns was to see that **relevant information** on the contracts and the contracts themselves **are handed out far too late** to the DRs, often only after moving to a new city/country or the start of their work.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.mpg.de/career/planck-academy>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.phdnet.mpg.de/180599/1\\_PhDnet\\_Survey\\_Report\\_2020.pdf](https://www.phdnet.mpg.de/180599/1_PhDnet_Survey_Report_2020.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.phdnet.mpg.de/who/steering-group/resources/PhDnet-annual-reports/Phdnet\\_Annual\\_Report\\_2020](https://www.phdnet.mpg.de/who/steering-group/resources/PhDnet-annual-reports/Phdnet_Annual_Report_2020)

An opportunity to learn from the pandemic was presented by our results on the **home office regulations**. A majority of the DRs would like to partly continue with this possibility, but the future regulations are uncertain. The pandemic does not seem to impact **supervision**, but similar to last year, has a **major impact on our DRs mental health**.

Career paths and development were once more a focus point for us. From our survey, we see that the **satisfaction with the availability of permanent positions in the academic system is very low**, and that more female DRs, DRs in a partnership and DRs with children or with a plan to have children, want to leave science. In addition, 45% of DRs **do not feel prepared for a job outside of science**. The only measures remarkably reducing this percentage are **mentoring and career development offices** that have been installed at some institutes.

In this years survey we shifted our focus from power abuse to **discrimination, microaggression and conflicts in general**. Worryingly, one out of four DRs has faced discrimination, with non-EU citizens experiencing it twice as often as Germans. Among the reasons for discrimination, nationality and gender are named the most. Still a quarter of our DRs are experiencing conflicts, but many are not reporting them mainly stating that they don't think the conflict would be resolved or that they are afraid of repercussions. Additionally, we identified a lack of diversity among our DRs, especially when it comes to ethnicity.

## N<sup>2</sup> achievements

As part of the N<sup>2</sup> network, we engaged in many political activities and had a busy year running our event and harmonized survey.

In the beginning of the year, Sarah Young represented N<sup>2</sup> as an **expert at the 'Ausschuss für Bildung, Forschung und Technikfolgenabschätzung'** from the Bundestag on the topic of 'Gleichstellung in der Wissenschaft und Forschung' (Equal opportunities in science and research)<sup>8</sup>. The political activities were continued when N<sup>2</sup> picked up on the discussion under **#ichbinHanna**, by publishing a **letter to the ministry of education**<sup>9</sup>, that included some concrete ideas on how the German scientific system could be reformed. As a response to this letter, **N<sup>2</sup> was invited by the minister of education & science** to a private conversation together with five other parties, where the different views were exchanged in a very open and constructive manner. After having published the **'Wahlprüfsteine'**<sup>10</sup> for this years election, N<sup>2</sup> reached out to the parties negotiating the 'traffic light coalition', reminding them of the changes the doctoral researchers would like to see implemented in the upcoming years<sup>11</sup>.

In addition to this N<sup>2</sup> organized and ran it's **second harmonized survey**, which is expected to broaden our knowledge about the work and life of DRs in non-university research institutions all over Germany. Since we will be able to compare the results of this year's survey to the data we collected in 2019, the **impact of the corona crisis will also be visible**. N<sup>2</sup> conducted it's **biannual event**, which was held online this year under the overarching topic of 'Perspective on

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2021/kw20-pa-bildung-gleichstellung-837088>

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.phdnet.mpg.de/n2/publications-and-press/N2\\_Stellungnahme\\_IchbinHanna](https://www.phdnet.mpg.de/n2/publications-and-press/N2_Stellungnahme_IchbinHanna)

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.phdnet.mpg.de/176448/wahlpr\\_fsteinebericht\\_promovierende\\_btw2021.pdf](https://www.phdnet.mpg.de/176448/wahlpr_fsteinebericht_promovierende_btw2021.pdf),  
[https://www.phdnet.mpg.de/176464/wahlpr\\_fsteinebericht\\_promovierende\\_btw2021\\_nachtrag\\_spd.pdf](https://www.phdnet.mpg.de/176464/wahlpr_fsteinebericht_promovierende_btw2021_nachtrag_spd.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.phdnet.mpg.de/186479/N2\\_Forderungen\\_Koalitionsverhandlungen.pdf](https://www.phdnet.mpg.de/186479/N2_Forderungen_Koalitionsverhandlungen.pdf)

Open and Sustainable Research'. Lastly, N<sup>2</sup> wrote **several requested articles** addressing the topic of **Mental Health** that will be published in the next months.

With the end of the year, N<sup>2</sup> has decided to restructure it's activities for the next four years, to be able to dedicate more time for the event and survey individually, while still being able to **sharpen the profile of N<sup>2</sup>** and connecting the different parts.

In conclusion, **we look back to a very fruitful and successful year and want to thank all member of the PhDnet and collaborating partners for their work and contribution.**

We look forward to what 2022 will bring with our new 2022 Steering Group:

Spokesperson: Hang Liu, MPI for Heart and Lung Research (2021 Survey coordinator)

Deputy Spokesperson: Alina Fahrenwaldt, MPI Collective Goods (2021 Survey group member)

General Secretary: Anna-Dorothea Heller, MPI of Colloids and Interfaces (2021 Secretary group member)

BM section rep: Maria-Bianca Leonte, MPI of of Neurobiology

CPT section rep: Jonas Sinjan, MPI for Solar System Research

HS section rep: Danielle Pullan, MPI for the Study of Society

**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,

the 2021 PhDnet Steering Group

Lea Heckmann (Spokesperson), Sarah Young (Deputy Spokesperson), Florian Bednarski (General Secretary), Marga Albu (BM Section Representative), Johannes Bischoff (CPT Section Representative), and Aroma Dabas (HS Section Representative)