

# s(t)imulation

Newsletter of The theory division  
Max-Planck-Institute of colloids and interfaces

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S(t)imulation of yawns in the  
department is strictly forbidden!

## Editorial ... about Money

At the beginning of this year it was announced that changes in the contracts of the PhD students will take place and that their salaries will be increased. This information was confirmed by an email from Markus Antonietti from March 12. The change itself consists of switching the contracts of German students from  $\frac{1}{2}$  BAT IIa to  $\frac{3}{4}$  BAT IIa position. There were two aspects concerning foreign students: (1) Students with BAT contracts would be switched to stipends; and (2) the standard stipend of 950 €/month would be increased to 1170 €/month. There was a certain lack of clarity concerning some issues of the new regulations, e.g.

changes in the health insurance status in some cases, certain inequality of the net amount paid to BAT-students and to stipendium fellows, social security issues, breaking contracts, etc. That is why the students asked for a meeting to discuss these changes. The meeting took place on April 04. During the discussion and in a following email (from April 05) Markus Antonietti tried to elucidate the issue. However, there were still certain aspects that



remained unclear. In this issue of S(t)imulation we include a letter from Tiziano who shares his point of view concerning the questions raised at the meeting and by the mail of Markus Antonietti. His column is followed by a letter from Reinhard Lipowsky who explains what were the steps taken and the reasons for introducing the changes in the students' salaries.

### THE USUAL SUSPECTS



Responsible and co-responsible  
editorial staff are RD JS & JP  
This time more responsible referee: RL

Rumiana Dimova

## A Letter from a Student

I have a  $\frac{1}{2}$  BAT IIa contract which terminates at the end of next year. This contract was signed by Prof. Lipowsky and me. Prof. Antonietti, as a current General Director of the institute, sent an email to all the students informing us about the changes concerning the status of our contracts (salaries). In my case, these changes would imply my contract to be changed to a stipend. I would like to express the thoughts triggered by the meeting with Prof. Antonietti on April 04 about the recent changes of the status of the students' contracts.

One of the points emphasized in an email preceding the meeting was that students should be happy and thankful about the large increase in their income. This made me do the following calculation. The net amount of money I get (having a BAT-contract) for one year amounts to  $12 \times 999$  Euro + Weihnachtsgeld (this makes about 12 470 Euro). In this case the health insurance is paid by the institute. How much does a student with a new stipend (corresponding to the  $\frac{3}{4}$  BAT IIa increase) is getting:  $12 \times (1173 - 112)$  Euro. Here we have subtracted the money for the health insurance. This gives 12 720. This means that if my contract is changed to a stipend I will get 250 Euro more per year, i.e., 2 % more (this, of course, ignores the lost privilege of unemployment and retirement money). But I am lucky because I am younger than 30. It is not known how much more the people older than 30 will have to pay for their health insurance. Indeed, it turns out that most likely they will receive around 3-4% **less** money compared to the time when they had the BAT contract. At the end the "increase" of the salary in some cases will turn out to be a "decrease"! And these people, as mentioned before were told that they should be thankful and happy.

Concerning the social security and the taxes, the e-mail from Prof. Antonietti states: "The german university and science system... is practically exclusively paid by

taxpayers money. I think it is fair that the system nevertheless differentiates between taxpayers or permanent residents and foreigners being here on a temporal base." The problem with this statement is that foreigners employed in Germany are also taxpayers and in this way support the system. Therefore they have the right to profit from this system and such a differentiation doesn't make sense between permanent residents and foreigners having a  $\frac{1}{2}$  BATIIa contract. While having a  $\frac{1}{2}$  BATIIa contract for the last 6 months I was paying taxes. The same would be the case if I was employed in a company – I would pay taxes and I would be a part of the social system. Only in the case that I receive a stipend (which is tax free) I cannot support the system and therefore I cannot profit from it.

Concluding remarks: First, I raise these questions not because I want more money, nor I am unhappy about the increase. I simply wanted to get a sensible explanation about what the changes will consist of and why are they made, also what are the regulations in the institute, or if you want, what are the rules of the game, if any. Second, if the aim of this change was to attract more students, I don't think that the way this issue was tackled will have a very positive outcome. I know of some cases where the BAT-contracts were broken even without any notification. What kind of impression can this give to a student? Third, the explanation about the issues concerning the student contracts was something that we had to ask for. Instead, the long period during which there was a lack of information made us insist on some clarity of what is underway. This is not what a student coming to work in the MPI-KG expects to do – discussions and meetings concerning his contract. Instead he relies to find some security and responsibility in the way his situation is treated.

Tiziano Zito

## A Letter to the Students



Dear Students of the Theory Division,

Rumiana Dimova has asked me to tell you my opinion on the salary issue, which has recently led to many discussions. I must admit that I am somewhat tired of these discussions but since I am responsible both for the theory division and for the IMPRS, I feel obliged to make such a statement.

First, I have to explain one thing, which you have heard before, namely that Max-Planck-Institutes have two different types of internal funds and different rules related to these funds. On the one hand, we have a certain number of BAT IIa/2 positions for German students; on the other hand, we have a certain number of stipends for foreign students. The rules related to these internal funds are decided by the BLK (= Bund-Länder-Kommission), which is the governmental funding agency for the whole Max Planck Society.

In addition to the BLK rules, which provide overall boundary conditions for our procedures, we used to follow an internal MPI rule, which said that we would pay all PhD students roughly the same monthly net salary.

Until recently, we had no problems with these rules. For the theory division, I used the procedure that the foreign PhD students would get a stipend of about DM 1800 = EUR 900 which was equivalent to the monthly net salary of 1/2 BAT IIa position. If one compared these two salaries in detail, one would find that the German students received some additional benefits related to their German citizenship.

I used this procedure since 1993, and I must tell you that nobody complained until recently when we started to change our rules in two ways.

First, I supported a proposal by Angelo Valleriani to give 1/2 BAT IIa contracts to the foreign students of IMPRS as well. As mentioned, these positions have certain additional benefits compared to stipends. Our argument was that we wanted to attract particularly good students to the school and that we could thus treat them somewhat better than the other foreign students.

However, when I supported this proposal, I did not realize that it had two severe problems. First, it violates our BLK rules as Frau Schlender found out at the beginning of this year. Secondly, it implies a waste of money, as I will explain next.

Those of you who are or have been on a BAT contract know that there is a deduction of about 20 percent for retirement plans, unemployment insurance, and health insurance. In addition, the employer, i.e., the MPI pays another 20 percent. If you add the tax, you will find out that a student who is paid according to a BAT contract is about twice as expensive for the institute compared to a student who receives a stipend even though the monthly net salary is the same.

It is also clear that most of this additional money is wasted unless the foreign student had the possibility to stay in Germany on a permanent basis. Our experience certainly tells us, however, that the majority of our foreign students will not stay.

In other words, the proposed scheme gave some benefits to some (not all!) of our foreign students but, at the same time, wasted a lot of money of the MPI.

As I said, I did not do this kind of calculation when I originally supported the 'salary with BAT benefits' proposal for the IMPRS students. However, I was forced to do so when we wanted to implement another new rule, which was to increase salaries for PhD students beyond the 1/2 BAT IIa level.

From my point of view, the main reason for doing this was to stay competitive in the recruitment of students. Indeed, I have had several German candidates for PhD positions who I wanted to hire last year but who told me during their job interviews that they had already some offers for full BAT IIa positions at German universities. This is possible after the DFG (= German science foundation) has changed its rules about two years ago.

Thus, I thought that we should also have the possibility to offer a higher salary to applicants for PhD positions if we could not attract them otherwise. You should note that this was consistent with my attitude towards the somewhat better payment for the IMPRS students. On the other hand, I also felt that it would be inappropriate if graduate students had the same salary as research associates.

Not surprisingly, this issue became a controversial topic during our monthly board meeting, which involves my two colleagues, Markus Antonietti and Helmuth Möhwald, the head of our local administration, Frau Schlender, and myself. Our discussions went back and forth for a while and we could not reach any decision for several months. At the beginning of December 2001, we became tired of this situation and felt that we should do something about it. As a result, we agreed upon two things: (i) We would stick to our old rule and pay all students roughly the same monthly net salary, and (ii) We would increase this base line to something of the order of a 3/4 BAT IIa position (you will now know that there is another complication which is that there are two types of BAT, BAT West and BAT East, but this is a side issue which I will ignore here).

Collective decisions about controversial issues are often difficult to understand afterwards. However, all members of our board had rather positive feelings about our decision and thought that this would be a real Christmas present to all of our students. My colleague Markus Antonietti was particularly enthusiastic about it and immediately told the good news to his students.

Unfortunately, it turned out that we had overlooked certain details. The most important ones were our overall budget and certain constraints on the maximal salary, which we can pay as a stipend.

We then had a second round of discussions during January and February in order to find out how to implement our previous decision about the salary increase. In this second round, we discussed the 'salary with BAT benefits' for foreign students. The first issue was 'waste of money' and I did the previously described calculation. In addition, Frau Schlender talked to the GV (= central administration) and learned that this procedure violates our BLK rules.

In this second round of discussions, I also tried to get a better approximation to our old internal rule to have the same net base line for German and foreign students. Thus, one of my proposals was to reduce the salary for German students again in order to get a better match with the maximal stipends but this proposal did not get a majority vote in our board.

In other words, our new rules represent a compromise, which reflects the various constraints of our budget and the various priorities of the different board members.

I understand that public discussions about salaries can easily lead to some emotions. On the other hand, I definitely think that your situation is not intolerable. You have all received an increase of your salary which certainly compensates the loss of BAT benefits from which some of you suffer.

You should also note that, in the academic world, the canonical time to discuss his/her own salary is during the interview or negotiation period, i.e., before one has accepted a new job. From this point of view, the whole procedure is rather unusual.

However, if you still think that you have special reasons to feel dissatisfied with our new rules, you should let me know and I will take the time to discuss them with you in private.

Greetings, Reinhard Lipowsky