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## PhD changes at Max Planck

Overseas students to start benefiting from changes to employment contracts | **By Jane Burgermeister**



Overseas PhD students applying this year to work at Germany's Max Planck Society (MPG) are set to be the first to benefit from changes to a controversial employment rule that had prevented foreign students from getting full employment contracts.

The MPG is an independent basic research organization that funds 80 different institutes with more than 12,000 staff members and 9000 PhD students, postdocs, visiting researchers, and student assistants.

Last year, PhD student Andrea Raccanelli, now at the University of Bonn, [conducted a survey](#) showing that 99% of German PhD students at the MPG had regular contracts with health, unemployment, and pension benefits, while 84% of the non-German PhD students had scholarships without such benefits.

Raccanelli, who organized a network of PhD students at the MPG, took the case to Germany's Court of Labour, accusing MPG of discrimination. The case was passed on to the European Court of Justice, which is expected to rule in 18 months.

Meanwhile, in October last year, MPG distributed a letter to the heads of its centers stating that the rules would change. Nicola von Hammerstein, from the general management of the MPG, told *The Scientist* on Monday (March 7) that the change took effect at the beginning of this year.

Von Hammerstein said she expected at least some non-German students who applied for a PhD early this year to be awarded regular employment contracts in autumn. However, she said it was impossible to predict at this stage how many would eventually benefit.

"Institutes now have the freedom to decide whether to offer foreign students a regular contract or a scholarship, unlike before," von Hammerstein told *The Scientist*. "Some institutes might offer only scholarships, others only regular contracts."

"I expect a mixed system could evolve, though it is too early to

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tell," von Hammerstein said. "For example, PhD students could start with a scholarship in their first year and then move onto a regular contract in their second year."

Von Hammerstein rejected the idea that the MPG had been discriminating against non-German PhD students. "In the world of science, nationality should never count, as it should not count anywhere," she said. "What is important today is more cooperation between scientific disciplines and between researchers around the world."

Von Hammerstein conceded, however, that regular employment contracts were much more expensive for institutions, many of which were operating under tight budgetary constraints. She also said that not all students wanted regular contracts. "Many students do not want to pay into the German pension and unemployment insurance system if they are in Germany for only a relatively short time."

The change comes as the MPG steps up efforts to create more opportunities for young international researchers in Germany by [expanding its network](#) of International Max Planck Research Schools (IMPRS).

There are now 37 such schools, following the addition of eight new schools earlier this year. Altogether, there are about 1200 students currently doing their PhDs in the IMPRS, with 60% coming from outside Germany.

"This international model of the IMPRS has been extremely successful," von Hammerstein said. "Young researchers can work in interdisciplinary teams and benefit from much more intensive supervision from scientists at the MPG and universities. The PhDs so far have been very good in terms of quality."

Now is a difficult time for young scientists in Germany who are struggling to establish their careers in an environment of low government funding and changing employment legislation.

Peter Burkert, from the Thesis Network, a German network of PhD students and postdocs, told *The Scientist* that the future for PhD students looked grim as research organizations strive to save money and because of recent changes in employment laws setting a 12-year limit to temporary contracts for scientists.

Links for this article

J. Burgermeister, "Discrimination claims at MPG," *The Scientist*, March 3, 2004.

<http://www.biomedcentral.com/news/20040303/03/>

"Max Planck Research Schools bring new scientific generation to Germany," Max Planck Society press release, February 23, 2005.

<http://www.mpg.de/bilderBerichteDokumente/dokumentation/pressemitteilungen/2005/pressemitteilung20050222>



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