



Discrimination claims at MPG

PhD candidates say Max Planck Society denies foreign students the same status as Germans | [By Jane Burgermeister](#)

A former PhD student at the Max Planck Institute for Radio Astronomy in Bonn has alleged that the [Max Planck Society](#) (MPG) routinely discriminates against foreign PhD students by offering them scholarships instead of regular 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.

Andrea Raccanelli, who now works at the University of Bonn, said his statistics indicate that 99% of the German PhD students at the MPG have a regular contract, whereas 84% of the non-German PhD students have scholarships.

PhD students who are on a scholarship do not have access to retirement plans, health insurance, or unemployment insurance, so they have a lot of disadvantages, Raccanelli told *The Scientist*.

He also noted that PhD students on scholarships cost half as much for the MPG to employ as students on regular contracts, because of Germany's high non-wage costs.

Raccanelli, who said that he was refused information on the contracts offered to PhD students by most of the Max Planck institutes, made his discovery after circulating a questionnaire during a meeting of MPG PhD students at Heidelberg.

He said his statistics cover 1038 students from 30 Max Planck institutes, comprising 717 German nationals and 321 non-German nationals.

Raccanelli said he had been informed by MPG president Peter Gruss that the MPG has a total of 3000 PhD students and that a third of these are non-German nationals.

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"I have reason to believe that the statistics I collected are representative of the whole 3000 PhD students," Raccanelli said.

"I have no objection to different contracts being offered as long as the differences are based on merit or experience or something like that. But to have different contracts based on nationality is horrible," he added.

Rüdiger Willems from the MPG told *The Scientist* that the differences in the contracts between German and non-German nationals reflect differences in the workload expected of the two groups.

He said German PhD students on regular contracts are under legal obligation to perform a certain amount of work. Non-German PhD students on scholarships, by contrast, are not under any such obligation, but are given the opportunity to do a doctorate within the framework of a research stay.

Willems said that the MPG's contracts were issued in accordance with rules laid down by the [Bund-Länder-Kommission](#), the government body that funds the MPG. He said that these rules are anchored in a number of different documents on employment law—some of which date back to 1974.

Noting that German universities offer both German and non-German PhD students regular contracts, Raccanelli said that the MPG had institutionalised unequal treatment of German and non-German PhD students in its internal employment rules.

He noted the Max Planck Institute for Colloids and Interfaces in Golm recently terminated the regular contracts of all non-German PhD students and transferred them onto scholarships.

One Algerian student only found out when she got a notice from the health insurer telling her that she was no longer insured, Raccanelli said.

Tiziano Zito, a PhD student at the Golm institute, who has since moved to Berlin University, condemned the termination of the regular contracts at Golm as unfair and illegal.

Raccanelli, who has taken the Max Planck Institute for Radio Astronomy to court because the institute claimed the rights to an invention he made, even though he was not technically an employee but a scholar at the time, also tabled a question on discrimination at the MPG to the European Parliament on January 8 with the help of Antonio di Pietro, a member of the ELDR parliamentary faction.

Editor's note: See a [letter](#) on this story.

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