Report from the Steering Group of the Max-Planck-Society PhDnet

2014

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Introduction

1. PhDnet organization and structures

Currently, there are approximately 5200 PhD candidates in the Max-Planck-Society (MPS), which represents 25% of all employees. Around 40% of them are members of an International Max Planck Research School (IMPRS).

PhDnet is the network of all MPS PhD candidates and those affiliated to MPS, i.e., IMPRS PhD candidates. PhDnet is a forum for discussing and solving common problems and improving doctoral education and conditions. Furthermore, it promotes interdisciplinary exchange between the PhD candidates from different MPIs through workshops, meetings and seminars. Major decisions in the PhDnet are made at the annual general meeting where representatives from MPIs meet. Different tasks of the PhDnet are tackled by working groups and the steering group (SG) which is led by a spokesperson (see figure 1). The financial officer and secretary general are also part of the SG. The SG represents the PhDnet towards the MPS organs and external stakeholders.

The SG consists of (figure 2):

- Andreea Scacioc (spokesperson)
- Ana Carolina Alfinito Vieira (HUM representative)
- Clemens Buss (CPTS representative)
- Prateek Mahalwar (BMS representative)
- Jan Niklas Grieb (financial officer)
- Friederike Wrobel (secretary general)

PhDnet was provided with a budget of 48 500 EUR for 2014. Its usage is split into several budget items in Table 1. The budget for the soft-skill seminars was fully used and we’ve seen request for more.
Table 1: Summary of the financial situation of the PhDnet

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Planned (€)</th>
<th>Left (€)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>26 400</td>
<td>781</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steering Group travel</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
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2. Recurrent issues and long-time PhDnet goals

PhDnet was founded in 2003 and since its beginning has set a few goals:

- Supervision complemented by TACs (thesis advisory committees)
- Ending the discriminatory awarding of stipends and contracts based on nationality
- Status determination of stipend holders, i.e., solving the social security gap between stipend and contract holders

Over the years other goals have developed:

- Ending the culture of PhD candidates working (or writing theses) without being paid
- Helping foreign stipend holders enjoy a statutory health insurance at an attractive and fair price
- Initial duration of contracts and stipends of 3 years – covering the duration of a PhD thesis
- Universal implementation of measures developed for the attractiveness of MPS stipends
- Bringing the advantages of MPS stipends to both IMPRS PhD candidates at universities and to the MPS PhD candidates receiving external stipends (e.g. DAAD)
- Giving everyone the choice between a stipend and a contract
- Setting the minimum contract level to 65% E13 TVöD
- 30 vacation days minimum for all

3. Current situation of the MPS PhD payment guidelines

In the last years, the payment and social security conditions of PhD candidates were improved:

- PhD candidates cannot avail of an MPS stipend unless they have a statutory or statutory-like health insurance (circular 42, 2014).
- The initial duration for MPS stipends and contracts should be 3 years (circular 20, 2014).
- The measures developed for the attractiveness of MPS stipends should be implemented at full scale (February 2014, Presidential letter to directors).
- A fixed-term follow-up contract can be offered in the case of scientists who, in the course of a fixed-term contract, are caring for a child or children (circular 68, 2013).
A private health insurance package was negotiated between MPS and Mawista (Mawista HALLESCHEN) such that stipend holders can enjoy the benefits of a statutory-like health insurance if they get it within six weeks upon entering Germany (March 2013).

A recruitment bonus of up to € 200/month can be awarded to stipend holders (circular 11, 2013).

The recommended list of health insurances was updated. Now, it is mentioned that Europa and Mawista Science private insurances are travel insurances. A statutory health insurance for MPS stipend holders was added (November 2012).

The basic stipend was increased to € 1365 (circular 39, 2012).

Institutes were reminded that stipend holders cannot be used as cheap labor for teaching, technical work or research tasks outside their thesis work. The internal review commission is supposed to check on these regulations (circular 39, 2012 & circular 11, 2013).

The awarding of stipends will be supplemented with a written statement from the supervisor setting out why a stipend is being awarded in the specific case (circular 39, 2012).

Health insurance subsidy of up to € 100 will be awarded to stipend holders who have a statutory or statutory-like health insurance (circular 15, 2012).

Stipend holders receive child allowance of € 400/month for the first child, and € 100/month for every additional child (circular 74, 2011).

Stipend holders, who have at least one child aged 12 or younger at the time their stipend commences, can claim a 12-months extension of their stipend. If the stipend holder chooses not to extend their stipend, or to extend by less than 12 months, the corresponding amount of money is available to reimburse childcare costs (circular 74, 2011).

Relocation costs of those moving to Germany from abroad can be reimbursed up to a total amount of € 2000 (circular 74, 2011).

Recruitment bonus for contract holders can be paid: up to 100% of the E13 TVöD payment (circular 40, 2010).

The initial duration of a stipend or a contract should be three years. The institutes can give two extensions of six months each, while extensions beyond four years should be approved by the general administration at the headquarters (circular 17, 2010).

It is possible to grant part-time stipends of at least 50% if children or close relatives are being cared for (circular 17, 2010).

PhD candidates, both stipend and contract holders, are liable for damage suffered by the MPS only if the damage is caused with intent or as a result of gross negligence, and the MPS is being held liable for it (circular 17, 2010).

4. The goals of the Steering Group 2014

Based on the discussions at the 2013 annual meeting, the SG has set the following goals:

- Follow-up on the discussions started by the SG 2013
  - Initial duration of stipends and contracts
PhD candidates not being paid until submission
- Discriminatory awarding of stipends and contracts based on nationality
- Institutes not awarding the removal allowance and the Sachkostenpauschale (material costs)
- Health issues among PhD candidates (e.g. burn out, back problems etc.)

- Supervision
- Status determination of stipend holders
- Group health insurance
- Equal rights among stipend holders
- Information dissemination
- Open access
- Workplace atmosphere and the culture of science

Payment and status determination for stipend holders

1. Status determination of stipend holders

Doctoral researchers can be classified into two groups: stipend holders and contract holders. This classification does not only concern the method of payment but it concerns a set of rights and duties held by the doctoral researchers.

Contract holders have task-oriented contracts and they may be expected to fulfill a certain number of work hours, to be present at their workplace like other personnel and perform a series of chores. They also contribute to the social welfare system and therefore can rely on social benefits.

Stipend holders receive a flat sum each month; they have no employer and do not contribute to the social welfare system. On the plus side, these researchers are to be given the full liberty to engage in their research and nothing more.

The dichotomy between stipends and contracts is an old issue within PhDnet. One of the PhDnet goals at its founding in 2003, besides putting an end to the culture of discriminatory awarding of stipends and contracts based on nationality, was bridging the social security gap between stipends and contracts. Steps towards improving the stipends situation were taken starting 2009 by implementing the health insurance subsidy, family components, the recruitment bonus, the Sachkostenpauschale (material costs allowance) and moving costs. However, often these measures are not implemented because every institute or director can decide about these measures on their own.

2. PhDnet Status Report 2014

The SG, as the central organ of PhDnet gathered quite a significant number of MPIs in which the following issues were reported:

- Finishing the PhD while unpaid
- Initial duration of contract/stipend not being the recommended 3 years
- Discriminatory awarding of stipends and contracts based on nationality.

In our meeting in January with members of the General Administration (GA), we brought this to their attention. The GA promised to investigate the reports. However, both when asked for offering the choice between stipends and contracts and about the discriminatory awarding of method of payment based on nationality, the GA insisted that the method of payment is chosen by the director and the prospective candidate has the opportunity to reject the offer. We also reiterated the request to set the minimum contract level to 65% TVöD and requested that all the stipend measures are implemented. Again, the GA told us that this is up to the director because of the MPS building principle of administrative (and scientific) freedom of directors.

Taking into consideration that our issues stem from the MPS building principles, in February, Andreea Scacioc, Clemens Buss and Friederike Wrobel went to Berlin to meet with president Peter Gruss. The main topic of the meeting was the fact that some of the standards recommended by circulars 17/2010, 40/2010, 74/2011, 15/2012, 39/2012 and 11/2013, are not followed at many MPIs. This is why the president has sent a letter to all the directors and group leaders, asking that these recommendations ("can" rules) are followed. He also reiterated his support of PhDnet. Moreover, he stressed the importance of evaluations through SABs (Scientific advisory boards) from which he expects to identify exactly the problems reported in the Status Report. Moreover, during the discussion SABs were questioned as a way to evaluate the implementation of the payment and supervision standards and in general, the well-treatment of PhD candidates.

### 3. Evaluation of standards at the MPIs

Peter Gruss suggested that we bring local issues directly to him and to the GA; hence the steering group started an evaluation of the implementation of the MPS standards at the MPIs with the help of the local representatives. Having the presidential letter, quite a few local representatives improved their local situation and reported to the SG.

The evaluations contained information about the implementation of MPS standards and guidelines concerning the payment and general treatment of doctoral researcher at the local MPIs. This evaluation addressed the following topics: stipends vs. contract duties; health insurance; not being paid while still working at the MPI; discriminatory awarding of stipends; implementation of TACs (thesis advisory committees), among others. We got replies from 38 MPIs and this feedback was crucial in guiding our discussions with the presidential commission, general administration and the president.

### 4. Payment survey

Even though encouraged by president Peter Gruss, the validity of the data obtained through this evaluation was questioned as not being statistically representative. This is why, based on this evaluation, we identified recurring issues and organized a payment survey in August 2014 to check how often those
problems actually occurred. The idea was to report the statistically significant findings of this survey in a meeting with the GA and the president of the MPS in September. Nonetheless, while the survey was being conducted, we received a letter from the GA that the survey had to be suspended due to technical formalities. In May, an agreement with the general works council (Gesamtbetriebsrat, GBR) was put into effect which makes it mandatory to ask for the consent of the GBR before conducting any survey that collects data of MPS personnel. Moreover, a special tool, under the firewall of the GA, should be used for such a survey in order to protect the data of the employees. Although the purpose of this agreement was to protect the employees from the employer, i.e., the MPS, our survey also falls under this agreement. Since we first got to know about these regulations through the GA’s letter, our survey was not in accordance with it. We were obliged to stop the survey and to discard all the data that had already been gathered.

5. The response of the GA to the reported payment related problems

In the aftermath of the publication of the Status Report, i.e., sending it on the PhDnet mailing list, the junior scientists payment guidelines were changed through circular 20, 2014:

- The initial contract duration should be 3 years. Shorter periods should only be given in exceptional cases, i.e., discontinued third-party-funding. In addition, the general administration mentions the importance of international PhD candidates to have a minimum of 12 months of ensured payment for entering a statutory health insurance.
- An extension of up to 1 year can, and should be granted by the institute, if needed for finishing the thesis work. Especially since, in 2013, the average duration of an MPS thesis was four years. Further extensions have to be approved by the general administration, but are possible in general.
- The extension of the bonus of up to 100% E13 TVöD for MPS doctoral contracts is announced. Since 2010, it is possible that the 50% E13 payment is supplemented up to 100% E13.

Once the Status Report was mentioned in an FAZ article on June 11th, the new president, Martin Stratmann instructed GA members to collect the personnel data for the last 10 years from the MPIs mentioned in the status report.

Health insurance situation: group health insurance for stipend holders

Another pressing priority of the SG2014 was to work towards improving PhD candidates’ access to adequate health insurance. The health insurance subscription amongst doctoral researchers in the MPS is divided into two categories: contract holders and stipend holders. For contract holders a statutory health insurance is regulated by law to be paid half by the employer and half by the employee. But stipend holders have to pay for the whole insurance on their own, and for many of them, the high cost of a statutory-equivalent health insurance can be prohibitive. Moreover, it is difficult for outside-EU doctoral
candidates to access statutory health insurance. Often, these researchers end up relying on cheaper insurances that offer less coverage.

In order to address this problem, the Max Planck Society introduced a health insurance subsidy. Since January 2012, MPS stipend holders are entitled to a subsidy of max. € 100. In order to assess the health insurance situation, the SG2014, together with Rohit Jain (MPI biophysical chemistry PhD candidate), organized a survey in January 2014 and gathered data from 1518 MPS PhD candidates and postdocs. It resulted that 28% of the MPS young researchers do not have a statutory or statutory-like health insurance. Moreover, less than half of the MPS stipend holders enjoy the health insurance subsidy. Finally, 78% of them would join a group health insurance. This is why, throughout the year, the SG has been in touch with several health insurance companies in order to find a company who would be willing to offer MPI stipend holders an affordable and good health insurance coverage.

We have compiled a list of potential offers and discussed it with the GA together with other possibilities. The most promising route, suggested by the GA, seems to be a Europe wide auction for a group health insurance. The GA would make an invitation for tenders addressed to all health insurance companies operating in Europe and would pick the offer that fits best to our situation.

In order to address the issue of the 28% of MPS stipend holders not enjoying a statutory or statutory-like health insurance and the fact that more than half of them do not avail of the health insurance subsidy, the GA changed the guidelines for the MPS junior scientists through circular 42/2014:

MPS Stipends (PhD and postdoctoral) will be awarded only against proof of statutory or statutory-like health insurance. It is now obligatory for every stipend holder, who started research at an MPI on August 1st or later, to give proof of sufficient health insurance coverage. Sufficient in this sense means either a statutory health insurance (Germany, EU, EWR or Switzerland) or a private health insurance qualifying for a certificate after §257, Abs. 2a Sozialgesetzbuch V (a certain paragraph in the German Social Security Code). In case of a non-German statutory insurance the stipend holder has to provide a confirmation that this insurance is valid in Germany.

In order to facilitate the entrance into affordable health insurance packages that would avail of this condition, the SG gathered the details of some health insurance companies with whom local MPIs had a good experience. The list is not exhaustive. Hence: be aware that this is not a recommendation, but rather a report of good experiences!

First, there is an existing group health insurance contract between the MPS and a German health insurance company, DKV. This contract was established for MPS employees in Tübingen years ago and is now used more widely. According to the local insurance agent, this group contract can be applied to all MPS stipend holders as long as they are enrolled at a German university. A PhD candidate can expect to pay a bit more than € 200. DKV cannot decline potential, but additional
risk premiums can be applied. And internationals have to provide additional disclosure.

Contact details: Herr Klaus E. Wutzler, DKV-Service-Center Tübingen, klaus-e.wutzler@dkv.com, +49-7071-859-405

Another option, which is fully equivalent to the public health insurance (but pre-existing conditions and dental restorations are excluded), is offered by Deutscher Ring. As the international office of the MPI Nuclear Physics reports, many new foreign stipend holders take this options which costs around € 100 (including nursing insurance). The responsible insurance agent operates in all of Germany, and English documents are available.

Contact details: Frank Vorlauffer, Signal Iduna Heidelberg, frank.vorlauffer@signal-iduna.net, +49-6221-181573

One reasonable offer comes from BARMER GEK in Göttingen, which insures stipend holders as long as they enter the contract as soon as they arrive in Germany. In the reported case, communication with the company was very constructive; a way was found to enter this public health insurance plan when coming from a private travel insurance. The costs are the usual costs for a public plan.

Contact details: Frau Heike Vernaleken, BARMER GEK Göttingen, heike.vernaleken@barmer-gek.de, +49-800-332060 55-1175

To these we would add Mawista HALLESCH E which has already a negotiated package with the MPS.

Contact details: 
Albstraße 26 
73240 Wendlingen 
Tel. +49 7024 469510
Fax. +49 7024 4695120
Email: info@mawista.com

Supervision

When PhDnet was founded, one main goal was the introduction of the TAC (thesis advisory board) system for all Max Planck PhD candidates. One opportunity to achieve this goal came when Reinhard Jahn was delegated in 2012, by the former president Peter Gruss to lead a commission for the purpose of renewing and improving the guidelines for the promotion of young researchers on all levels. The result would be a set of recommendations for the general education of all PhD candidates, with special guidelines for IMPRSes.

This document was discussed in several sessions. PhDnet continued to provide input to this commission following an invitation to a session in Munich in June.
PhDnet’s position has a special focus on TACs, since it has been our goal for more than ten years. During the June meeting, the SG presented their view on the benefits of such independent evaluation of a thesis and proposed to implement TACs as a „must“ for all PhD candidates; they are already mandatory for IMPRSes. In order to support this view, the SG organized a petition: TACs as MPS norm. This petition gathered 752 signatures in two weeks among them 14 IMPRS coordinators and 38 principal investigators (3 Max Planck directors).

The MPS-internal process of approval of the renewed guidelines is still ongoing, but the final document will not contain the obligation of TACs.

Open Access

MPS has a commitment towards Open Access. This is why they organized a conference, Open Berlin11 and set up, together with PhDnet, the Open Access (OA) Ambassadors program. The OA ambassadors program will have a conference on 3rd-4th of December. Moreover, our BMS representative in the SG, Prateek Mahalwar, was named by eLife (open access life sciences journal – one of its founders is in the MPS) for their Board as an Early Career Researcher.

During this year, the Offspring group has set Open Access as a theme. They have organized a survey to assess the awareness of MPS PhD candidates and postdoctoral fellows. They have summarized the results in an article for one of the scientific journals. It will be submitted soon.

PhDnet representation inside the MPS

1. Interactions with the General Administration and the MPS president

On 20th of January, the SG met with members of the GA from Referat II c. We presented the Status Report with the list of MPIs in which recurring problems occurred and the health insurance survey. Moreover, we discussed the fact that the PhDnet 2012 survey shows alarming numbers for back pains, insomnia, burnouts etc. among MPS PhD candidates. Dr. Anke Soemer took these numbers very seriously and invited the survey group to further discuss the details of the PhDnet survey.

On 19th of February, the SG met the MPS president Peter Gruss. The main topics discussed are already mentioned above.

In the meeting with the GA on 1st of September, among many topics, we were informed that the GA, on our inquiry about measures for parents in the MPS, put together a new brochure explaining the measures available for parents in the MPS. On the same date we met with Rüdiger Willems, deputy secretary general, and with the MPS president, Martin Stratmann. The president presented his visions of the future support of young scientists. He also pointed out the big benefit of a bottom-up, self-organized PhDnet.
2. Further meetings with organs of the MPS

Other important meetings attended by SG members were the presidential commission meeting on 3rd of June and a meeting with the Joint Works Council on 8th of September.

3. Interactions within PhDnet

In 2014, the PhDnet SG continuously tried to foster the connection between PhD candidates and their representatives at all institutes. In order to do this, we relied on different means and media, such as a presentation of PhDnet at different institutes; phone conferences; newsletters; surveys; petitions; and a continuous email exchange between members of the SG and PhDs from local MPIs.

Between 2013 and 2014, members of the PhDnet SG and other engaged local PhD representatives conducted information dissemination presentations of PhDnet at several MPIs. In 2014, this presentation was brought to the MPI for experimental medicine in Göttingen, the Garching campus, the Berlin MPIs, the Dresden MPIs and the Martinsried campus.

In order to keep PhDs updated about news on current PhD events, doctoral training, life at the institutes and all other information that may be relevant for PhDs, the SG puts together and regularly sends out a newsletter to the mailing list of PhDnet.

The SG organizes biannual phone conferences to discuss updates and news within PhDnet. We organized one in November 2013 and one in May 2014.

maxNet is an internal platform for information dissemination where we upload circulars and documents of interest for PhDnet. Similarly, we have a webpage with a regularly updated info desk and news section. Last, but not least, we are present on Facebook.

PhDnet representation outside the MPS

In order to achieve its goals, the steering group attended several meetings outside the MPS.

THESIS e.V.: Andreea Scacioc attended the Thesis e.V. annual meeting on 15th - 16th February 2014. THESIS e.V. is a 20 years old organization of ~600 members. They represent the interests of the PhD candidates Germany.

Helmholtz Juniors: Friederike Wrobel attended their annual meeting in order to exchange views on common issues of PhD candidate in both research organizations.

EURODOC: Prateek Mahalwar visited Eurodoc Annual Conference, which took place between 25th and 27th March 2014 in Budapest, Hungary. The conference
brought together junior researchers, as well as representatives of the EU institutions, member States and experts from various funding bodies. The conference had a number of plenary sessions and workshops focusing on a variety of issues such as women in science, structural changes in order to improve the position and professional development of ESRs, Open Access and Interdisciplinary research.

GEW: In the weekend of 13th to 15th of June, members of the Steering Group participated in a seminar of the GEW (the education and research union) on the social security situation of the PhD candidates in Germany. One of GEW’s major goals is fair social benefits for all and contracts instead of stipends. Moreover, GEW is promoting structured doctoral training, e.g., in graduate schools.

Leibniz Association: On 11th and 12th of September, 2014 Leibniz Association, Section A "Humanities and Human Development" organized their annual meeting in Bochum, Germany. The main goals of the meeting were possible career paths after the PhD and the establishment of a young researchers network. Max Planck PhDnet was invited to talk about the structure and working of our network. Max Planck PhDnet was represented by Prateek Mahalwar, Biomedicine Section representative.

BuWiN: On 4th of November, Andreea Scacioc and Friederike Wrobel represented the Max Planck PhD candidates at the BuWiN input at BMBF. BuWiN is a report on the situation of young researchers in Germany that is published every four years.

The general situation of PhD candidates in the MPS was in the German news this year. Two FAZ articles, on June 11th and October 22nd, discussed the circumstances of doctoral training in the MPS, with a special interest in the social security of stipend holders and their dependency on their institute’s director, and addressed the lack of fundamental improvements in terms of how to improve the promotion of young researchers. Recent advancements by the General Administration have been described, but the article’s author criticized the faulty implementation of these advancements; allegedly due to the protection of the directors' interests. Moreover, a Spiegel magazine article (issue 33/2014) discussed problems with the budget spending inside the MPS and mentioned PhDnet as trying to improve the payment conditions of PhD candidates.

Recommendations for the future

In terms of payment related issues, one task would be to restart the payment survey on the right platform and following the regulations. An important debate that should be continued is whether PhD candidates are employees or students, i.e., with respect to the status determination of stipend holders.

The future steering groups should follow up on the health insurance situation:
- Set up the Europe-wide auction in cooperation with the GA
- Expand and distribute the list of good practice examples for private health insurances
Health insurance subsidy covering only ~1/3 of the actual costs because the Sachkostenpauschale and the health insurance subsidy itself are taken into account for the basis of calculation. The GEW already is working on this aspect and cooperation with them could be continued.

One way to solve the health insurance coverage issue – and also other social security gaps – for stipend holders would be to give them a status in the Sozialgesetzbuch V. This is also a long-time goal of GEW.

When it comes to **supervision**, in principle, the quality of supervision is evaluated regularly in the IMPRS evaluation commissions and by the scientific advisory boards (SABs). Soon, the MPS guidelines for doctoral education will be published. We advise student representatives that, during evaluation meetings and SABs, they compare the actual situation at their institute with these recommendations and demand their implementation.

As a goal for the future, the SG wants to encourage PhD candidates (former and current ones) to evaluate their supervision, building a basis for subsequent improvements in the daily communication with their supervisors for future generations of PhD candidates. Identification of the problematic cases will be an incentive for the MPS to evaluate group leaders not only by their scientific results but also by their communication and education skills. In this respect, a supervision survey or an evaluation campaign as done in 2014 for the payment situation could solve existing local problems in 2015. As a basis for supervision standards, we recommend the future doctoral education guidelines developed by the presidential commission.

Our evaluation of SABs showed that many PhD candidates do not know that SABs are the place to honestly and openly evaluate the implementation of payment and doctoral education standards. Many also report that payment issues are not properly addressed, while some say that they are prevented by local directors and group leaders to speak up. We would like to raise awareness among PhD candidates that they should use SABs as a proper evaluation tool for their situation.

People can demand their rights only if they are aware of them. This is why we hope that in the future more **Info dissemination sessions** will happen to include all MPIs. This can be done only with the active involvement of local representatives.

We would like to continue the discussions started about **Open Access and the culture of science**. Within the same discussion on the culture of science, other proposed topics would be the workplace atmosphere and how beneficial TACs would be. Furthermore, an important discussion could be around the question of what expectations should one have once the PhD thesis is completed. This could lead to understanding what career support we need from the MPS.

Finally, we would like the newsletters to continue and also the trend of gathering good practice examples from several MPIs.