

# 8<sup>th</sup> General Assembly

*Leibniz PhD Network*

**Date: 07 October 2022**

**Venue: Max Born Institute for Nonlinear Optics and Short Pulse Spectroscopy (MBI), Berlin**

## Steering Committee 2021/2022

Larglinda Islami	Spokesperson
Valentin Hinterberger	Spokesperson
Sofia Hayden	Treasurer
Alexander Turtureanu	Section A Spokesperson
Tieza Mica Santos	Section B Spokesperson
Jantje Goerdten	Section C Spokesperson
Zahra Kafrashian	Section D Spokesperson
Simeon Choo	Section E Spokesperson



## **Morning Session**

For the first time in three years, the General Assembly commenced in-person, this time being held at the MBI in Berlin. To ensure convenience for everyone, registrants could also participate via Zoom. The morning session began with updates by both Larglinda Islami (LIR) and Valentin Hinterberger (IPK) on the current organisational situation (both Leibniz and N<sup>2</sup>), milestones accomplished by the Steering Committee, as well as ongoing work (e.g. campaigning for fairer working conditions like salary, abolition of scholarships in favour of proper working contracts).

Next, Dr. Marvin Bähr (Twitter: @marvin\_baehr) from the Leibniz Association elaborated further on the organisational structure and goals of Leibniz, as well as his role as a liaison between the Head Office and the PhD Network. He also emphasised the available career support options provided by the organisation, such as the Leibniz Leadership Academy, Mentoring Programme, funding opportunities for junior research groups as well as for female professors, a mentoring programme for female postdoctoral researchers aiming for managerial positions, consultation for start-ups, and relevant grants. A few questions were asked during the Q&A:

- Is there a possibility to standardise the contract T&Cs for PhD students across all disciplines?
- Who is responsible for advising PhDs on negotiating a fair contract?
- Can we be more open about working conditions in the Leibniz institutes e.g. making knowledge on current working conditions accessible to prospective PhD applicants?
- Could there be a feedback loop for the institutes? Note: Institute-specific data from the PhD Survey can be used to tactfully bring up issues to the management

Just before the coffee break, Dr. Marta Ferreira-Gomes (DRFZ) introduced the Leibniz Postdoc Network. She also shed some light on the challenges faced by postdoctoral researchers, such as limited contracts, understanding of working rights, having a smaller local network, and increased familial needs. At the moment, the Network is compiling the results of the PostDoc Survey 2020. The PostDoc Network Annual Meeting themed “Working for Better Working Conditions” is also scheduled for 16 - 17 November 2022 in a virtual format. A few questions were asked during the Q&A:

- Can there be a platform where PhDs and Postdocs can share information and experiences?
- Might there be a possibility to have a joint assembly (on-site) between PhDs and Postdocs?

With (almost) everyone feeling recharged from the coffee break, both Emilio Perez-Bosch Quesada (IHP) and Marco Gierke (IDS) introduced WG Survey, and presented key results from the most recent Survey. One crucial (albeit unsurprising) detail they found was that there was huge disparity between the percentage of PhD students working more than 40 h per week, and the percentage of these students actually contracted in a 100% position. Furthermore, they reported a huge uncertainty in the extension of a work contract among PhD students, as well as a strong correlation between satisfaction with one’s supervisor and a shorter time taken to complete the PhD. An interesting link was also observed where students in less attractive work contracts were more prone to experiencing power abuse. Currently, WG Survey is compiling the results of the 3rd Survey (since establishment of the WG), and are also actively looking for new members. Both speakers also strongly encouraged PhD students to realise when they are at their limit, and take a break to protect their physical and mental well-being. One question asked during the Q&A:

- The Survey results showed that senior PhDs become more ‘realistic’ on the timeframe for completion of the PhD. However, are they really becoming more ‘realistic’, or is it that there are unforeseen additional tasks that eventually extend their estimated timeline?

In line with the findings by WG Survey, both Sandy Bauherr (DRFZ) and Tommaso Rizzi (IHP) presented the work done by WG Mental Health. One particular work was the corona-specific survey conducted in 2021 (currently being compiled), which reported increased moderate to severe depressive issues among PhDs (in comparison to 2019). Non-EU-originated researchers were also more prone to depressive symptoms and increased anxiety. For its future work, the WG is planning a seminar tackling topics such as imposter syndrome, art/music therapy, as well as trying to make the psychological counselling database easily accessible. A few questions were asked during the Q&A:

- Some PhD students were working 0 - 20 h per week, and a certain percentage of them also experienced depressive symptoms. How can it be explained?
- Note: Barbara Honecker from the BNITM also offered her expertise and experience to those who are interested in implementing a survey for their own institute

## Afternoon Session

Aside from the Leibniz PhDs and postdocs, alumni are also represented by the Leibniz Alumni Network, which is headed by both Dr. Katarzyna Stoltmann (adesso) and Dr. Olga Naumov (Stadtwerke Leipzig). Dr. Stoltmann urged PhDs to make full use of the resources provided by the Alumni Network, and emphasised the importance of the PhD Agreement which governs the working rights of doctoral students. She also shared about recent Alumni events, such as a kick-off event discussing the transition from academia to industry (2 - 3 September 2022). Dr. Stoltmann also highlighted that the Network's goals were to connect former and current employees of the Leibniz Association (including non-academics), enable knowledge and technology transfer from science to industry and vice-versa, as well as the mentoring of alumni to aid them in the transition from academia to other areas of employment.

Following this, administrative matters concerning the PhD Network were also discussed. Simeon Choo (IOW) presented the financial report for 2021/22/23, on behalf of the Treasurer Sofia Hayden (MfN), who is currently on a fieldwork assignment in Australia. Expenses were mainly incurred for the annual General Assemblies, N<sup>2</sup> events, and digital tools and travel needs by the Steering Committee and Working Groups. Additionally, funds were also disbursed for the video conferencing tools for the Future Workshop (online) in 2021. A provisional budget has also been planned for Small Events to be held in both 2022 and 2023. The annual budget for 2021 and 2022 has been set at € 25,000, while the budget for 2023 is awaiting confirmation. Aside from the usual annual activities, part of the budget in 2023 will also be set aside for the Opportunity Workshop and the N<sup>2</sup> event. One question was asked during the Q&A:

- Is it possible to carry leftover funds from the previous year into the subsequent year? Marvin: Unfortunately that is not possible. The only way is to apply for funding for the subsequent year.

The next activity was the election of the new Steering Committee (2022/2023). The elections concluded with the successful election of the new SC:

- Spokespersons – Eframir (IAP) and Sadia (KIS) with 35 votes (out of 35)
- Treasurer – Dominik (HPI) with 35 votes (out of 35)
- Section A Spokesperson – Mitja Musberg (DBM) with 10 votes (out of 12)
- Section B Spokesperson – Aravind Subramanian (IKZ) with 5 votes (out of 6)
- Section C Spokesperson – Franziska Krause (LSB) with 9 votes (out of 14)
- Section D Spokesperson – Eleni Sachs (DWI) with 10 votes (out of 14)
- Section E Spokesperson – Robin Biermann (IGZ) with 1 vote (out of 3)

Following the election, Alexander Turtureanu (ZAS) presented some ideas for restructuring the PhD Network to better serve the needs of the PhD community. One of the suggestions was the creation of the Interactions Section Spokespersons (SSP) post, where duties include managing mailing lists and organising section meetings online. One current problem faced is that the strong irregularity in election of PhD Reps during the year, which does not occur tandem with the election of the SC, resulting in a situation where the current SC does not

recognise the new PhD Reps (and vice-versa) by the time the annual GA takes place, resulting in a weaker cohesion between the SC and the PhD Reps. A possible solution was mooted, which was to set a suitable timeline for election of the SC and the PhD reps, such that the SCs and the PhD reps have a good amount of time to get to know each other. Other suggestions/comments from the audience:

- Denis (IPK): Provide a two-week window for the elections, so that there is maximum participation, instead of a single online/on-site meeting where some people might not turn up
- Dominik (HPI): If we get at least 50% of institutes to implement this timeline-related solution, it would be a huge step forward
- Barbara (BNITM): Narrow down the election process to a certain time range within the year. Current practice in one institute is that they elect their spokespersons bi-annually i.e. one in the middle of the year and another at the end/start of the year, making sure there's a good overlap for handing over duties

Alexander also led the Discussion workshop, where participants were split into 5 groups to discuss topics of interest. At the end of the workshop, each group presented the issues they had discussed:

- Contract conditions
  - Clearer contract guidelines e.g. 6 months before end of contract, whether one can definitely get an extension
  - Someone suggested raising the issue of contract guidelines to a larger audience (news media) to put pressure on the institute. However, Dr. Stoltmann cautioned against such a drastic measure, sharing that a similar situation happened previously with a Max-Planck institute, and the media proved dishonest by manipulating the situation create more unpleasant drama which placed the victims in a bad light in the end
- Corona bonuses and corona delays
  - Stipend holders did not receive corona bonus: this issue was raised at several institutes but to no avail. This begs the question: Why are stipend holders not treated equally?
  - Suggestion to understand the individual reasons for delay due to corona, and bring this up to management; however, corona is not a priority anymore due to funding cuts from the impending recession
  - Suggestion that maybe institutes could use the extra money from government-provided tax deductions (arising from rising gas prices) to pay the corona bonus
- Diversity
  - For institutes with no Equal Opportunity officer, PhD reps might be able to step up to this role
  - Tasks include handling discrimination, promoting diversity
  - There are Equal Opportunity Officers higher up within the Leibniz Association, their resources can be utilised
- Power Abuse

- Suggestion that formulation of guidelines on power abuse could be done with an external person (e.g. from a different field), which can prevent conflict with one's colleagues
- Mandatory workshops for all levels of hierarchy for power abuse
- The problem also is, there are resources within the institute for reporting/sharing on power abuse, but victims are unwilling to speak up about it maybe because they don't trust the process, or they fear a backlash
- PhD On-Boarding
  - On-boarding of Masters students before starting their PhD can help avoid many issues i.e. allowing time for the student to evaluate if she/he made a wise decision
  - Suggestion for a 6-month Hiwi-like contract (minus the pressure of a PhD)
  - Sometimes no idea that there are new PhD students, suggestion to put a contact person on the welcome letter and relevant instructions, so that PhD students already have an avenue for contact right at the beginning of their PhD
  - Try to understand the guidelines for on-boarding across institutes, also so as not to clash with the on-boarding process of the HR department

With that, the 8th General Assembly of the Leibniz PhD Network was concluded, with gratitude to all who participated, and especially to the organising individuals.