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The Max Planck Institute for Astrophysics in Garching, Germany, is carrying out a survey to find out whether people are being bullied.

GERMANY

## Max Planck bullying controversy intensifies

*Astrophysicist defends her behaviour and her institute steps up its response.*

BY ALISON ABBOTT

A saga concerning allegations of abuse at the Max Planck Institute for Astrophysics (MPA) in Garching, Germany, is coming to a head. An MPA director accused of bullying has for the first time spoken out to defend herself. And the prestigious Max Planck Society, which funds the MPA, is investigating fresh allegations of bullying and sexual harassment at the institute following an anonymous survey of its young scientists — it is not clear whom these new allegations concern.

The difficulties at the MPA first surfaced publicly in an article in the news magazine *Der Spiegel* in February. The article detailed accusations of bullying of graduate students and post-docs by a director at an unnamed Max Planck institute in Bavaria. A news report by BuzzFeed Germany on 27 June then named the director as astrophysicist Guinevere Kauffmann, and added further details — including allegations of racist comments.

Now, Kauffmann has corresponded with *Nature* to explain the alleged behaviour. “I am not a racist. I am half Chinese and half

German-Jewish,” she writes. “Because of my mixed-race background, I am very interested in cultural differences between people and I regret very much that my comments have been taken out of context and distorted,” she adds.

“Regarding ‘bullying’ — I am of the generation that was subjected to very high-pressure supervision. I realize that this has now become unacceptable. I believe I have modified my behaviour very substantially in the last 18 months, since the complaints were made.”

One MPA graduate student who spoke to *Nature* on the condition of anonymity said ▶

► that bullying had been a major disruptive force at the institute, causing, in the student's opinion, at least two young researchers to leave their positions prematurely.

Kauffmann says: "Our procedures for evaluating graduate students and providing honest feedback are still not uniform enough, in my opinion. Approaches vary greatly, from 'keep quiet if the student is not doing well and let him/her sink in the exam or job market', to 'attempt to steer towards a successful career with all your strength'. I believe I fall into the latter category. Nobody I had trouble with ended up quitting astronomy."

#### MEASURES FOR IMPROVEMENT

The MPA leadership learnt of the bullying allegations in 2016, when the institute's external scientific advisory board described a complaint from young scientists, says Eiichiro Komatsu, a director at the MPA. Komatsu, who was managing director at the time, says that he and his colleagues responded immediately, and provided coaching for Kauffmann, who also agreed to daily monitoring.

Software engineer Andressa Jendrieck, who was a graduate student at the MPA between 2011 and 2014, told *Nature* that for

many years, young researchers were afraid to make complaints and believed that there was no independent person they could turn to.

In its report to the MPA leadership, the external board noted that "there is no effective mechanism for individuals at the MPA to file formal complaints to the Max Planck Society if they have been treated inappropriately by other members of the institute", says Komatsu.

In response to the February article in *Der Spiegel*, the MPA conducted an anonymous survey of its young scientists. It asked about their experiences of bullying or sexual harassment at the institute, among other things.

The results, which were due to be presented at the institute on 13 July but have now been leaked, show that the MPA sent the survey to 120 master's students, PhD students and post-docs, and that just over half responded. Three report that they were bullied and two report that they were sexually harassed. It is not clear whether these new accusations are related to the earlier allegations, nor whom they concern.

The Max Planck Society says that it has commissioned an independent law firm to investigate the new allegations. "We need to clearly define these allegations in order

to assess the severity of the incidents and to intervene accordingly," says the society's press officer, Christina Beck.

Beck says that contact details of the law firm will be sent to MPA staff in the coming weeks — and that scientists will be able to speak to the firm in full confidentiality. The firm will report its conclusions to the MPA leadership. Beck hopes that those affected will take advantage of the independent mechanism to report their allegations.

The unnamed graduate student who spoke to *Nature* says that researchers would probably engage with such a process. But the student also notes that, in their opinion, confidence in the Max Planck leadership has slipped because its responses in 2016 came too late, and were not tough enough.

The allegations at the MPA come in the wake of separate complaints by scientists at the Max Planck Institute for Biological Cybernetics about how the society is handling animal-welfare charges against a leading neuroscientist. Beck says that the institutes are independent of the society's general management, which only advises the institutes' leaderships and checks administrative procedures. ■

#### RESEARCHER MOBILITY

# Scientists call for migration reform before Brexit

*Figures on foreign-researcher mobility highlight need for UK policy change.*

BY ELIZABETH GIBNEY

The UK immigration system may need to process tens of thousands more visas for scientists each year if European Union citizens lose their special immigration rights after Brexit, figures obtained by *Nature* suggest. The numbers underscore the urgent need for reform of the rules governing immigration by researchers — a topic that a parliamentary group has been investigating since May.

Immigration data gathered by *Nature* also highlight that the current system is not working well for scientists who come from outside the EU, irrespective of Brexit. One type of visa — called Tier 1 Exceptional Talent, and designed to attract leaders and emerging leaders from overseas, largely in the sciences and engineering — is vastly underused, with fewer than half of a possible 1,000 visas taken up last year. And non-EU researchers already often struggle to get visas for short visits for conferences and collaboration.

Despite recent tweaks to immigration rules in favour of researchers, many scientists see Brexit as an opportunity for further, much-needed reform to the entire system for highly skilled workers. "Maybe when the dust settles we can get a system that's better for those coming from all over the world," says Richard Catlow, foreign secretary at the Royal Society in London.

#### SYSTEM CHANGE

Immigration data requested by *Nature* from the UK Home Office under the Freedom of Information Act show that the United Kingdom approved visas for about 20,000 academic researchers and non-academic PhD-level research professionals from outside the EU in the 2016–17 academic year (see 'Researcher mobility after Brexit').

Because EU nationals currently have automatic rights to work in and travel freely to the

United Kingdom, comparable figures for the number of European researchers entering the country do not exist. However, data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency show that over the same period, UK universities hired about 10,500 researchers who were EU nationals: 5,760 full-time academics and 4,835 post-graduate research students. And calculations by *Nature*, based on migration data and annual labour surveys, suggest that each year, thousands more EU citizens take up research roles in UK industry, charities and government.

Neither count includes visitors coming to Britain on short trips, such as to attend conferences or for collaboration meetings. But data from the UK Office of National Statistics shows that in 2016, EU residents made more than three times as many business visits — which would include short, scientific trips — as did citizens from the rest of the world combined.

After Brexit, many of these thousands of EU researchers coming to the United Kingdom are likely to need some form of visa (the country

**"The system would have to deal with an approximate doubling in capacity."**