Max Planck conducts huge bullying survey

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BY ALISON ABBOTT

M ost of the scientists who work for one of the world’s richest and most prestigious basic research organizations, the Max Planck Society (MPS) in Germany, have pride and trust in their institutes. However, cases of sexual discrimination and bullying occur regularly, and nearly half of foreign scientists working for the MPS don’t feel that they fit in.

These are some of the findings of a huge survey of the society’s staff and its working culture, which analysed answers from more than 9,000 people, or 38% of MPS staff, at the society’s 86 research institutes. The society commissioned the survey after two high-profile bullying scandals last year involving research directors. The draft conclusions were presented at the MPS annual meeting on 27 June in Hamburg.

“I wanted to get a picture of the general mood in the society so that we can base our responses to any problems on a more thorough understanding of how the society works,” says MPS president Martin Stratmann. The survey was conducted independently by sociologists at the Berlin-based Center for Responsible Research and Innovation, part of the Fraunhofer Society, Germany’s main applied-research organization.

BULLYING AND HARASSMENT

Overall, 76% of staff members who responded said they were proud to work at their organization and 84% said they would go above and beyond to support their institute’s success.

But about 10% said they had experienced bullying in the past 12 months, and 17.5% said they had done so over a longer period — figures similar to those found by surveys in countries including the United States. The incidence of gender-based discrimination or sexual harassment — reported by nearly 4% of respondents in the past 12 months — was below that found in other similar surveys (see ‘Working culture’).

“We have serious problems in dealing with gender-based violence.”

IN FOCUS

RESEARCH CULTURE

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That doesn’t excuse any case, says Stratmann, adding that he is committed to a zero-tolerance approach to both issues. The survey comes as the international academic community grapples with issues of bullying, which have emerged in the past year or so. However, many academic institutions have not had formal bullying policies or definitions of the behaviour. Stratmann says that the MPS is creating a code of conduct for bullying in response to the results, and is rolling out mandatory training.

The survey also found that more non-scientific staff members than scientific ones felt that they had been bullied — 23% compared with 13%. And 14% of women said they had experienced sexual harassment in a period longer than the past 12 months. But unexpectedly, says Stratmann, women in leadership positions reported experiencing sexist behaviour at a higher rate than others — 26% of directors and group leaders, compared with 23% of postdocs and 25% of PhD students.

“The Max Planck survey shows an apparently lower level of bullying than other academic surveys — but what really matters is that they say that the level they observe is unacceptable, and plan to do something about it,” says Loraleigh Keashly, an occupational psychologist at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, who specializes in workplace bullying.

Different people — for example, those from different cultures — might not consider the same types of behaviour to be bullying. So the survey asked respondents whether they had experienced particular behaviours that are indicated in the social-science literature to be bullying, such as having opinions ignored or being unfairly blamed, publicly humiliated or shouted at. Around 60% reported having experienced one or more such behaviours.

The MPS’s international make-up was another focus of the survey: 36% of research directors there are from outside Germany, as are 75% of postdocs. But 45% of the non-Germans working at MPS institutes felt excluded. “We have to be really worried about this,” says Stratmann, who speculates that one reason for this could be language barriers.

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