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The fundamental principle of the Max Planck Society is to allow outstandingly creative scientists, who think in interdisciplinary terms, scope for independent scientific development. This Harnack principle takes its name from the first President of the Kaiser Wilhelm Society, which was the Max Planck Society's predecessor organization. It represents a traditional policy of appointing the brightest minds as Scientific Members of the Max Planck Society, and building whole departments around these exceptional individuals when they become departmental directors. Yet the Harnack principle is concerned with more than just the central role of these researchers. It can also be seen as a complex of guiding principles for the overall organization of research, with the aim of making new scientific perspectives effective in the long term. The necessary freedom to achieve this aim is afforded by the Society's exceptional organizational structure. The Scientific Member alone decides on his or her research objectives and methods. Such conditions, combined with rigorous selection of candidates for appointment, have made the Max Planck Society one of the most attractive destinations in Germany for leading international scientists. Once appointed, the heads of department or Max Planck Research Groups do not follow a curriculum or research programme determined by the organization or by market requirements. Instead, they rely on their own intuition, which allows them as researchers to transform and advance the cause of science

Appointments, made in accordance with the Harnack principle, involve the provision of funding based on a profound leap of faith. Therefore, the Max Planck Society's finance model for Scientific Members is often referred to as being based on a high-trust principle. This contrasts with the low trust principle, whereby funding is allocated purely on a project or programme basis. At a Max Planck institute, when a scientist is appointed as director, he or she is provided with resources until his or her retirement as a Scientific Member.

An important factor in the success of the Max Planck Society is the commitment of Scientific Members to think beyond their own departments in the interest of the Society as a whole. This commitment is exemplified by the regular meetings of the three Sections (Biology and Medicine; Chemistry, Physics and Technology; and the Humanities). The Sections include all Scientific Members and representatives of the other scientific staff members for each of the scientific fields. At these meetings, the Sections discuss the future scientific development of the Max Planck Society and establish the basis for key decisions.

A natural starting point for the reorientation of institutes arises when Scientific Members retire. At such times, suitable new topics are integrated into the portfolio of the institutes through the careful development of existing topics, and ways of launching new areas are established. The approach adopted varies depending on the situation.

If only one director leaves, an institute is requested to identify an outstanding researcher who best matches the institute's overall profile and who can offer the greatest potential for innovation. As part of this process, the institute consults with the Perspectives Commission of the relevant Section. An appointment committee, comprising high-ranking internal and external individuals established by the Section, examines the proposal and independently looks for suitable candidates. Following evaluation by a large number of renowned international experts, the final scientific assessment is carried out by the Section members. A core element of the Max Planck Society's culture is to expand the organization's common scientific basis by recruiting highly creative minds, and to improve the society's overall performance continuously through the appointment of outstanding colleagues.

If several Scientific Members leave an institute, or if it is deemed appropriate by the President or the Sections for other reasons, consultation on the subsequent procedure takes place at a higher level. A Core Committee or Presidential Committee consults on development options, suitable fields and possible candidates. An extensive range of instruments, such as search symposia and the drawing up of competing strategic proposals is available for this task. The Max Planck Society also attaches great importance to external expertise in these processes.

Although research fields are sometimes first identified during the appointment procedure, this does not conflict with the concept of appointments based on the Harnack principle; the main focus always remains the person to be appointed. If the best possible person cannot be attracted in a particular field, a new research topic is selected. Excellence is not compromised. The Max Planck Society sometimes identifies outstanding researchers before establishing the Max Planck institute that would provide the most beneficial working opportunities for them. When a suitable candidate is identified, the decision to appoint him or her is made by the Senate of the Max Planck Society. This body is made up of outstanding figures from the fields of science, industry and politics, and further social groups. As with other important decisions, such as the founding of new institutes, the Max Planck Society also avails itself of independent assessments by external experts in this instance.