

**MAX  
PLANCK  
SCHOOL**

**of  
cognition**

# PhD Candidate Handbook

Orientation Phase  
Last edited April 2026



# PhD Candidate Handbook

## Orientation Phase

Information given in this document is subject  
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Dear PhD candidate,

We would like to welcome you to the Max Planck School of Cognition (MPSCog)!

This handbook provides an overview of the MPSCog's four-year doctoral program and guides you through the administrative steps which are required to start your doctoral studies in Germany and progress to the doctoral phase.

We strive to continuously improve our program. Therefore, the MPSCog's coordination team would greatly appreciate your feedback! Please let us know if you have any comments or suggestions for updating this handbook by contacting us at [cognition@maxplanckschools.de](mailto:cognition@maxplanckschools.de).

The Max Planck Society offers a brochure on working and living in Germany which you may also find interesting: [MPS Working and Living in Germany](#).

We wish you a successful, exciting and enjoyable time at the MPSCog!

Your MPSCog coordination team

# 1. THE MAX PLANCK SCHOOL OF COGNITION

## 1.1. MPSCog: A doctoral program in Germany

The Max Planck School of Cognition (MPSCog), one of three pioneering national Max Planck Schools, was established in 2018 as a joint initiative of the Max Planck Society, leading German universities, the Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft, the Helmholtz Association, and the University College London.

The MPSCog is characterized by the passion to better understand both human and animal cognition, and “mental phenomena” potentially occurring in non-biological systems and agents (artificial intelligence). The interdisciplinary and customized four-year doctoral program at the MPSCog offers exceptionally bright PhD candidates the opportunity to acquire a multi-faceted understanding on the different methods and approaches used in the rapidly evolving field of cognition.

The MPSCog includes an outstanding and world-renowned cluster of faculty researchers from diverse scientific backgrounds (Figure 1). The researchers come from [Max Planck Institutes](#), [Universities](#), [Helmholtz Association](#). Fifty world-leading researchers from 17 different universities (including University College London, an international partner of the School) and 15 non-university research institutions are involved in the School’s training. Through close personal exchange and mentoring, living and studying together in small groups, and with the help of an excellent infrastructure, the most ambitious Bachelor and Master graduates will be able to learn from the leading experts in various disciplines — all driven by their passion for science.



Figure 1. Variety of research domains within the MPSCog



## PART II – Structure

### 1.3. Coordination Team & the Berlin Satellite Lab

MPSCog does not have a physical campus. The central offices of the coordination team are situated at the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Science (MPI CBS), Leipzig.

#### Administrative location

Max Planck School of Cognition  
Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences  
Stephanstraße 1A | 04103 Leipzig | Germany

Figure 3 shows the organization chart of the MPSCog coordination team.



Figure 3. The MPSCog coordination team

#### The MPSCog Berlin Satellite Lab

MPSCog PhD candidates who need office space during their time in Berlin may request a working desk within the Berlin Satellite lab (Figure 4). Please reach out to the coordination team if interested.

Address of the MPSCog Berlin Satellite Lab:  
Max Planck Dahlem Campus of Cognition (MPDCC)  
Dillenburger Str. 53, 1st Floor | 14199 Berlin

Bus station: Dillenburger Straße, Bus Nr. 101, 248, 282  
Subway station: Breitenbachplatz, Subway U2, U3

Opening hours of the building: Monday–Friday: 08.00–18.00

At the MPDCC, there are several research labs (e.g., Virtual Reality Lab, MRI Lab, EEG Lab), multi-user offices, and an Open Space Room for meetings which can be booked. Offices are available upon request for MPSCog members who need office space for a period of time in Berlin. The buildings on the Campus offer Wi-Fi, a library, kitchen facilities, lockers, and a canteen.

## PART II – Structure



Figure 4. Rooms in the MPSCog Berlin Satellite Lab

A weekly meeting (Tuesdays, 13.00–14.00) will be organized — the so-called *Campus Werkstatt* — which is a forum for exchange between all user groups. The *Campus Werkstatt* meetings are hybrid: They will take place physically in the MPDCC meeting room as well as virtually/online via *Webex*. All researchers at the MPDCC including MPSCog members transiently located there are invited to join to present ongoing work-in-progress, to pitch novel research ideas especially for collaborative research projects, and to get support and feedback on scientific and methodological challenges.

## 2. ORIENTATION PHASE

Every September, a new cohort of PhD candidates joins the MPSCog. The candidates come from all over the world and from diverse backgrounds. In order to welcome incoming candidates and ensure a smooth and swift transition, the coordination team will support candidates through the onboarding process as soon as they are accepted into the program.

The MPSCog offers a four-to-five-year doctoral program with three parallel tracks:

- Bachelor Entry Track (BET) (5 years): for candidates entering with a Bachelor's degree, completing first a Master's program and then the PhD program
- Master Entry Track (MET) (4 years): for candidates entering with a Master's degree
- Clinician Scientist Entry Track (CSET) (4 years): for candidates entering with a degree in medicine

### 2.1. Onboarding steps – Before arrival in Germany

Coming to Germany as an international candidate can be challenging given potentially unfamiliar regulations. Some of the necessary procedures involve the German embassy or consulate, and must be started immediately after admission to the MPSCog doctoral program. This section guides our candidates through the necessary steps when moving to Germany. Candidates are encouraged to contact the coordination team for specific questions.

The program starts with an orientation phase and candidates need to provide required information to ahead of time. This information is further described on the following pages.

<b>Submit documents</b>	Submit the documents necessary to set up your scholarship agreement with MPSCog. You will receive an e-mail from the coordination team with instructions after admission to the program.
<b>Choose labs for rotations</b>	We will ask you to let us know your preferred labs for the rotations in order to arrange your lab visits with the respective fellows.
<b>If applicable: Apply for Master's program</b>	Bachelor's students need to apply to a Master's program at either Berlin School of Mind and Brain or at Freie Universität Berlin.
<b>If applicable: Apply for entry visa</b>	If you are a citizen of a non-European country, then you need to apply for a visa before entering Germany. Appointments at German Missions abroad are always free of cost! Travel health insurance for the way to Germany is recommended. Private health insurance is possible with <i>Mawista</i> . Close support will be given by the coordination team. Please see section 2.2.3 below.
<b>Register with Leipzig Uni</b>	It is required to be registered as preliminary PhD candidate with Universität Leipzig for the duration of the orientation phase. The coordination team will approach you regarding this.
<b>Look for housing</b>	In some cities, it can be very difficult to find reasonable accommodation. Thus, it is highly recommended to start looking for it as soon as the first lab rotation is set. Candidates from previous cohorts might be able to give advice.
<b>Schedule appointments</b>	Given long waiting times, it is recommended to schedule appointments with the residents' registration office in the city of the first lab rotation, and with a bank to open a giro account before actually arriving in Germany. The coordination team can assist with this.

**Please note: The FU requires a pre-check of documents that takes additional 4-8 weeks prior to their application deadline.**

Figure 5. Checklist for the necessary steps after admission to the MPSCog

## PART III – Onboarding steps – Before arrival in Germany

The checklist in Figure 5 provides an overview of the required steps and recommended timing. Some processes run in parallel, and not all of them apply to every candidate. Candidates from non-European countries have to complete a few additional steps, such as applying for an entry visa in their home country and applying for a residence permit after having moved to Germany.

Candidates planning to move to Germany with their spouse or partner, please refer to *Section 2.1.3*.

### Tips for appointments with authorities

Appointments with the residents' registration office (*Bürgerbüro*) and foreigners' authority (immigration office, *Ausländerbehörde*) are explained in detail in *Section 2.2*. To avoid long waiting times, however, we recommend scheduling appointments with these authorities online before even arriving in Germany. The MPI CBS International Officer, Nicole Lorenz ([lorenz@cbs.mpg.de](mailto:lorenz@cbs.mpg.de)), can give support with scheduling those appointments.

### 2.1.1 Application for an entry visa (if applicable)

International candidates need to apply for an entry visa before traveling to Germany (Figure 6). The visa application process requires time and effort and varies depending on the candidates country of origin. Candidates should consult with the local German embassy or consulate for the most up-to-date information for their individual situation — ideally immediately after admission to our program. Detailed information is available on the embassy websites where candidates can also book appointments to submit the application documents. Appointments at the embassy should be booked well in advance and the purpose of the stay (doctoral studies) should be clearly indicated the when applying for the visa to avoid complications later on.



Figure 6. Do you need a visa? Non-EU citizens need to apply for an entry visa in their home country or the current country of living, and extend this visa into a residence permit after arriving in Germany

Be prepared to provide the following documents at the embassy — both as original documents and as a copy:

- visa application form for (doctoral) studies (§16b)
- passport
- biometric photo
- admission letter (provided by the coordination team)
- proof of financial means (letter of intent, provided by the coordination team)
- proof of health insurance for the orientation phase\*

### \*Health insurance for international candidates

Given that international candidates are not living in Germany when applying for the visa, they may need to arrange for an international private health insurance provider. Moreover, it is recommended to have a foreign travel insurance for the trip to Germany. Please see section 2.2.3 below for more details.

**NOTE:** The visa process may take several months to complete. Do not enter Germany with a tourist visa or a Schengen visa, or without a visa (although it would be possible e.g., for citizens from the USA or Australia), as this may cause serious problems for the visa process. Experience has shown that the first weeks of the program are intense and time-consuming. Arriving with an entry visa reduces the pressure to take care of the residence permit and allows the candidates to settle into the program and adjusting to the new environment.

### Useful websites

German Federal Foreign Office (Auswärtiges Amt)  
Make it in Germany  
Do you need a visa?  
Visa requirements  
At a glance: Visa for study purposes

### Coming to Germany with a spouse/partner

PhD candidates may bring their partners or spouses to Germany. It is recommended that the spouse or partner enters Germany together with the candidate rather than joining later, as “family reunions” tend to be more complex and time-consuming. The visa application is simplified considerably when the couple is legally married. If the candidate is entitled to statutory health insurance, the spouse can be insured as a family member. Please find more information [here](#).

If the couple is not married, the accompanying partner needs their own purpose for staying in Germany, such as for academic studies or a professional activity. The partner must apply for their own visa, provide proof of sufficient financial means for the stay in Germany, and apply and pay for health insurance separately.

In line with the MPSCog’s commitment to supporting a healthy work-life balance, the coordination team is happy to support our candidates in this process.

### 2.1.2 Submit documents necessary to set up scholarship agreement

As the MPSCog is located at the MPI CBS in Leipzig, the administrative management is carried out by the Human Resources department of the institute. For the preparation of the scholarship agreement, candidates will be asked to hand in several documents. To help us move this process forward quickly, please submit all required documents in a complete and timely manner. The coordination team will reach out to you as needed.

### 2.1.3 Choose labs for rotation

During the Orientation Phase, candidates typically visit three laboratories. Each candidate will be asked to provide a list of preferred MPSCog faculty members and labs shortly after admission. Based on these preferences, the coordination team will organize an individually tailored first-year schedule. Please see *Section 2.3.3* for more information.

### 2.1.4 Application to a master’s program (for candidates of the Bachelor Entry Track)

PhD candidates entering the MPSCog program with a bachelor’s degree will need to obtain a master’s degree before entering the doctoral phase of the MPSCog program. Therefore, the candidates of the Bachelor Entry Track (BET) must apply to a master’s program either at the [Berlin School of Mind & Brain](#) (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin; as of 2026 only the Brain track is possible) or the [Cognitive Neuroscience](#) program (Freie Universität Berlin). Their place of living during this phase will therefore be in Berlin.

For the summer semester 2026, there will be a change in the application procedure for applicants with foreign qualifications. The Freie Universität Berlin is now a “VPD” university.

In general, prospective students with a foreign university degree must apply for a VPD “Vorprüfungsdokumentation”, preliminary review documentation) at uni-assist and then use this document to apply for a master’s program at Freie Universität Berlin within the application deadlines using the FU application portal. Please apply for the VPD as early as possible. The processing time is usually 4 to 6 weeks, but can take up to 8 weeks during peak periods.

In the first year, BET candidates have to fulfill the requirements of both, the MSc program and the MPSCog orientation phase. All effort is made to ensure both programs are compatible, e.g., by making the key elements of the program (e-learning, lab rotations) recognized by all programs (see Figure 7).

After admission	Orientation phase		Doctoral phase		
	1–12 months	13–24 months	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Choose the preferred MPSCog Fellows for the lab rotations</li> <li>Apply to the master's programs at the Berlin School of Mind and Brain (M&amp;B) at HU Berlin or Cognitive Neuroscience (CN) at FU Berlin*</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Orientation year of the MPSCog program</li> <li>Three Cognition Academies</li> <li>Mind and Brain or Cognitive Neuroscience master's programs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Master thesis of the master's programs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Thesis proposal</li> <li>Register at university of your supervisor</li> <li>TAC meeting</li> <li>Doctoral research work</li> <li>Two Cognition Academies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Doctoral research work</li> <li>TAC meeting</li> <li>Two Cognition Academies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Doctoral research work</li> <li>TAC meeting</li> <li>One Cognition Academy</li> <li>Award Ceremony</li> </ul>

\*Please follow the respective website for the most up-to-date information

Figure 7. Curriculum of fast-track candidates

**\*Attention:** Please follow the *Berlin School of Mind & Brain* and the *Cognitive Neuroscience* websites for the most recent information about the respective [selection processes](#). For the application process of the master's program at the "Berlin School of Mind & Brain", applicants should have ideally a GPA of 1.1 (German grading system) for the *Brain Track* due to many applications. As of 2026 the *Mind Track* is not an option anymore. The translated Germany grade for the Free University application should ideally be 1.3.

### Master's program "Berlin School of Mind and Brain" at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Detailed information about the master's program at the *Humboldt-Universität in Berlin* is provided on their [website](#). Here, candidates can see the FAQs about admission and get an overview of the program. They can also acquaint themselves with the organizational and bureaucratic steps needed before becoming a master's student at the Berlin School of Mind & Brain. Eligibility requirements can be checked [online](#) as well. The application period is usually in May of the same year (classes start in October).

#### Contact person at the Berlin School of Mind & Brain master's program:

Dr Dirk Mende  
Liaison Officer for Educational Programs  
E-Mail: [mb-education@hu-berlin.de](mailto:mb-education@hu-berlin.de)

### Master's program "Cognitive Neuroscience" at Freie Universität Berlin

More details about the master's program at the Freie Universität Berlin can be found on their [website](#). Here, candidates may acquaint themselves with the admission requirements and the contents of the program. They have an FAQ section that answers most of the questions about all the organizational steps needed to become a student there. Eligibility criteria can be found [online](#) as well. The application period runs usually from April to May of the same year (classes start in October). Important: Please note that the new pre-check of documents has to be done via uni-assist prior to the application deadline and can take up to 4 to 8 weeks. Thus, the process should be started in March.

#### Contact person at the Cognitive Neuroscience master's program:

Gianluigi Giannini  
Coordinator of the Cognitive Neuroscience Master  
E-mail: [gianluigi.giannini@fu-berlin.de](mailto:gianluigi.giannini@fu-berlin.de)

Combining both a master's program and the orientations phase at the MPSCog is a challenging task, hence the respective candidates are granted an extended orientation period in the MPSCog program. During the initial 18 to 24 months, master's students are expected to obtain their master's degree and complete the orientation phase of the MPSCog program. After that, they may move on to the doctoral phase at the MPSCog. For any additional questions regarding the overlap between the MPSCog orientation year and curricula of the two master's programs, candidates should reach out to Cristina Gonzalez-Liencrez ([cgliencrez@cbs.mpg.de](mailto:cgliencrez@cbs.mpg.de)), Sandra Zurborg ([zurborg@cbs.mpg.de](mailto:zurborg@cbs.mpg.de)), and Paula Baer ([baer@cbs.mpg.de](mailto:baer@cbs.mpg.de)).

### Printing master's thesis

The Graphics department at the MPI CBS can print the master thesis books necessary for submission at the university. Candidates can get in touch with the coordination team in case they are interested in that. Please note the shipping costs cannot be covered and must be borne by the candidates themselves.

### 2.1.5 Register with Universität Leipzig

In Germany, only universities can award academic degrees such as a doctoral degree. Therefore, affiliation with a partner university (alongside the affiliation with the MPSCog) is an academic requirement for all PhD candidates.

Getting registered and accepted on the so-called *vorläufige Doktorandenliste* (preliminary PhD candidates list) is a compulsory step to initiate the MPSCog program. The preliminary registration takes place at Universität Leipzig during the orientation phase. Registration is possible either at the Medical Faculty (with Prof. Arno Villringer) or at the Faculty of Life Sciences (with Prof. Erich Schröger) and will depend on the scientific background of each candidate (Figure 8).

The coordination team will advise our candidates on the suitable choice of faculty, and will take care of the actual registration. This process does not require anything from the candidate other than providing the required information in a timely manner. Candidates pursuing a Master's program (BET) will be registered with *Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin* through the *Berlin School of Mind & Brain* or with *Freie Universität Berlin* through *Cognitive Neuroscience*.

After successful registration on the doctoral list, candidates receive a confirmation for a preliminary admission as a PhD candidate (*Vorläufige Zulassung zur Promotion/Vorläufige Promotionsbescheinigung*). This confirmation will be added to the personal documentation at the MPI CBS Human Resources department and at the MPSCog, and thus the candidates must upload it to the MPSCog's curriculum database [Open Campus](#).

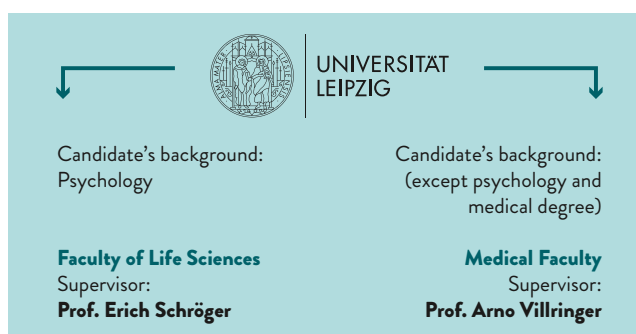


Figure 8. Preliminary registration as a doctoral candidate during the orientation phase is possible with two faculties at Universität Leipzig. Clinician scientists (i.e., candidates holding a medical degree) cannot be registered at the Medical Faculty of the University of Leipzig. They are therefore encouraged to enroll at another university. Individual arrangements will be discussed with each candidate as needed.

### Research Academy Leipzig (RALeipzig)

During the orientation phase, MPSCog candidates preliminarily registered at Universität Leipzig can profit from [Research Academy Leipzig](#) (RALeipzig) offer for pre-doc candidates, such as webinars on e.g., career or mental health. To stay informed about the offer candidates can register for a [RALeipzig Newsletter](#).

**Attention:** Please keep in mind that this preliminary registration will need to be revised at the end of the orientation phase, once the candidate proceeded to the doctoral phase. Thus, some candidates will need to cancel their registration at Universität Leipzig and re-register at the university where their supervisor holds a professorship. MPSCog candidates who switch from Universität Leipzig to another university after the orientation phase, will automatically be excluded from RALeipzig.

### Enrollment as student

In addition to registering on the doctoral list (mandatory), candidates may choose to enroll as a student at any university, if they wish to receive associated benefits (e.g., a public transport ticket). However, since this is optional and not a requirement for the MPSCog doctoral program, **the registration fees will not be reimbursed.**

### 2.1.6 Look for housing

PhD candidates are responsible for finding their own accommodation and should start their search as soon as the location of the first lab rotation is confirmed.

**To start with...** Many German students offer their apartment or shared apartment room for a temporary sublease while they do an internship or travel. This is the most convenient form of accommodation during lab rotations, as the main renter will usually leave all furniture and other essential inventory. For candidates coming from abroad, renting an empty flat for only a few months can be challenging. Thus, candidates are encouraged to look for temporary living options.

Links for finding temporary living:

- [Housing anywhere](#)
- [WG-Suche](#)
- [wg-gesucht](#)
- [Das schwarze Brett](#)

**Apartment sharing.** A common alternative to living by oneself is apartment sharing. Many students live in a so-called *Wohngemeinschaft* or WG for short. It has many advantages, such as sharing costs for electricity, internet, and TV license fees. The monthly rent consists of the rent itself (*Kaltmiete*) plus running costs (*Nebenkosten*) including water, heating, and garbage collection (*Warmmiete*). Additional costs are electricity and internet. Usually, one will have to pay a deposit to the landlord. In most cases, this is between 2 to 3 times your portion of the overall monthly rent for the room. The money will be returned about 2-3 months after the contract ends. If the flat needs to be renovated in some form, the landlord may keep parts of the deposit to cover the costs.

**Student housing.** The *Studentenwerk* (Student Union) of a university is a service provider that offers the option of a student dorm (single or double room) or apartments. These accommodations may require a minimum contract time. Rent usually covers most incidental costs such as electricity, water, heating, and internet access. Generally, the rooms are furnished, but for hygienic reasons, own bedding and kitchenware might need to be brought along. To use this option, it is usually required to be enrolled as a regular student paying semester fees, however, there may be exceptions for candidates who are at least registered on the university's doctoral candidate list.

The following topics will come up with housing:

**Broadcasting fees:** In Germany, every household has to pay a broadcasting license fee for the public-service TV channels, radio stations and online streams of these services — even if one does not have a radio or TV set. This fee is a fixed sum (currently 18,36 € per month), regardless of how many persons live in the household. Candidates should receive a letter from the company automatically. For more information, please visit this [link](#).

**Internet/telephone:** Even though many public areas have free wifi (a.k.a. WLAN in Germany), candidates might want to have wifi at home. If candidates have their own apartment, they have to select a provider. The main providers in Germany are *Deutsche Telekom*, *Kabel Deutschland*, *Vodafone*, and *1x1*. They all vary in their monthly rates. Thus, a comparison of the current offers is advisable, such as on the websites [Telefontarife](#), [Verivox](#) or [Check24](#).

**Electricity:** There is always a basic electricity supplier when renting an apartment, which may be a little more expensive than offers online. If candidates want to save some money, they can compare prices with webpages such as [Check24](#) or [Verivox](#).

### 2.2 Onboarding steps – After arrival in Germany

It is advisable to arrive in Germany one or two weeks before the welcome week to take care of essential onboarding steps (Figure 9). Many appointments with authorities can be scheduled online in advance, making it easier to take care of these tasks before starting the program. The International Officer at the Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences (MPI CBS) is able to assist with any of the necessary steps.



Figure 9. Administrative steps necessary after arrival in Germany

The following official information from the health insurance is required:

- Name and address of the insured candidate (not just of another family member)
- Starting date of this insurance
- Monthly amount split into “Health Insurance” premium (Krankenversicherung) and “long-term-care-insurance” premium (Pflegeversicherung)
- for a private insurance, a reference to the insurance being valid in reference to “§257 Abs. 2 a SGB V”
- see also section 2.2.3 below

#### 2.2.1 Register with a city

In Germany, everyone is obliged to register in the city of living within 14 days after arrival at the residents' registration office, the so-called *Bürgerbüro*. Candidates need to stay registered in Germany throughout the complete orientation phase. For PhD candidates coming from abroad, this would be in the city of the first lab rotation. If a lab rotation requires a move to another city within Germany, candidates do not need to de-register, but must register in the new city within 14 days of moving. Registration in another city is not necessary if candidates keep a permanent residency elsewhere in Germany where they are registered and if the stay in the other city is less than three months. If candidates move abroad for their doctoral phase, de-registration in Germany is required.

Scheduling an online appointment well in advance might be necessary to avoid long waiting times. Unfortunately, some website are in German only. If candidates have difficulties navigating the German language, please contact the coordination team.

## PART III – Onboarding steps – After arrival in Germany

Here is what you need to bring to the Bürgerbüro:

- Completed registration form (typically available online or at the *Bürgerbüro* office, *Anmeldeformular*)
- ID card and/or passport
- Written tenant confirmation or renting agreement signed by the landlord (*Wohnungsgeberbescheinigung*; templates are available online)

At the *Bürgerbüro*, candidates will receive a registration confirmation (*Meldebescheinigung*) which allows them to open a bank account and to apply for a residence title. A few weeks after the registration, candidates will receive their personal tax identification number automatically via mail.

### 2.2.2 Opening a bank account (*Girokonto*)

In order to receive and make regular payments in Germany, one needs to have a **German** giro bank account (*Girokonto*), for example with Deutsche Bank, Commerzbank, Postbank or Sparkasse which have branches in the bigger cities, or online banks like DKB, ING DiBa or N26. If the monthly income on the account is more than 700 Euros, most banks waive the account fees. However, the banks also differ in English language services and ATM coverage. The common EC card (Giro card) is being replaced by a so-called Debit Card which is free when opening of the account and similar to a credit card. Unlike to a credit card, payments with debit cards will be taken off your account immediately, and not only at the end of the month. Credit cards may cost an extra fee.

The following documents must be submitted at an appointment at the bank of your choice:

- Passport or ID card
- Registration confirmation from *Bürgerbüro* (*Meldebescheinigung*)
- Scholarship agreement
- Tax identification number

#### **Transferring money to a German account**

If candidates intend to transfer some of their savings to a German bank account, [Wise](#) may be a good option. It is a cheap service for transferring money from one country to another. One can also exchange money from a different currency to Euro at a very good rate.

### 2.2.3 Health insurance

Health insurance is compulsory in Germany — a travel insurance does not provide sufficient insurance cover when studying in Germany and will not be accepted by the MPI CBS administration. The healthcare topic is quite complex and can be confusing. Thus, please do not hesitate to contact our International Officers at MPI CBS for support with any question regarding individual health insurance options.

There are two types of health insurances: the statutory one (public healthcare system, more common) or the insurance with a private company. Membership in a statutory insurance is recommended, but is only possible for candidates who have been insured in a statutory insurance company in Germany or Europe before. Candidates moving to Germany from a non-European country, have to choose private coverage until they receive a doctoral contract.

In contrast to statutory health insurances, contributions to private insurances are based on factors such as age, gender, and state of health rather than income. Moreover, doctor's visits have to be paid in advance and will be reimbursed by the provider. In public health insurances, doctors directly settle treatment costs with the health insurance company.

A comprehensive health insurance coverage is required to receive the stipend. A very basic tariff of a private insurances is not sufficient. The monthly insurance fees consist of two parts: health insurance and long-term care insurance. For candidates of MPSCog, the Max Planck Society provides a subsidy of 50 % of the monthly fee, up to a maximum of 100 €. This applies to statutory insurance. In the case of private insurance, the provider has to issue a confirmation "*Arbeitgeberbescheinigung nach § 257 Abs. 2a SGB V*" to confirm that the benefits are equivalent to those of a statutory health insurance. Currently [Mawista](#) seems to be the only private health insurance provider that candidates can choose. Dr Walter and CareConcept do not offer comprehensive health insurances.

**EU RESIDENTS** **You have a statutory pre-insurance in another European country or UK?**

**Then apply for membership in a German statutory health insurance company (e.g. TK, AOK, Barmer)**

Costs: approx. 250 € per month; subsidy from MPSCog: 50 % (max. 100 €)

**Necessary documents:**

- Application form from the German insurance company
- Confirmation of former health insurance (E104) or copy of former health insurance card (EHIC)
- City registration confirmation from *Bürgerbüro* (*Meldebescheinigung*)
- Copy of ID card or passport
- Scholarship agreement
- Electronic photo for insurance card

For students coming from UK, it is helpful to provide a registration confirmation with a GP, the NHS number or a tenancy agreement confirming your residence in UK.

**NON-EU RESIDENTS** **You are moving to Germany from outside EU?**

**Then you have to apply for a membership with a private health insurance company (Mawista)**

Costs are age- & tariff-dependent:

- Apply for a comprehensive insurance coverage which is equivalent to a statutory insurance;  
ca. 250 € per month  
subsidy from MPSCog: 50 % (max. 100 €)  
confirmation about insurance "according to § 257 Abs. 2a SGB V" is necessary (see also section 2.2.3)
- The cheap basic tariff covering only the very basic medical treatments  
ca. 50 € per month is not acceptable

**MASTER'S STUDENTS** **Follow the steps under EU RESIDENTS to apply for a student tariff membership with a statutory health insurance company. You need to additionally provide the matriculation confirmation.**

Figure 10. Options for health insurance coverage in Germany

The following official information from the health insurance is required:

- Name and address of the insured candidate (not just of another family member)
- Starting date of this insurance
- Monthly amount split into “Health Insurance” premium (*Krankenversicherung*) and “long-term-care-insurance” premium (*Pflegeversicherung*)
- for a private insurance, a reference to the insurance being valid in reference to “§257 Abs. 2 a SGB V”

BET candidates are eligible to apply for membership in a statutory health insurance program as they are enrolled as master student and are usually under the age of 30.

### 2.2.4 Application for a residence permit (if applicable)

If the candidate is a non-European citizen, they must apply for a residence permit at the foreigners’ authority within 90 days after entering Germany. Since the waiting time for an appointment is often long and the process can take several months, it is strongly recommended to schedule an appointment online before entering Germany, to increase the chance of completing the process during the first lab rotation. The International Officer at MPI CBS will support with this, as appointments can only be booked from an IP address within Germany.

## PART III – Onboarding steps – After arrival in Germany

Most foreigners' authorities accept residence permit applications via e-mail and offer an appointment for collecting the residence permit. Please consult the website of the relevant local foreigners' authority for current information on submission processes.

In some cities, it seems very difficult to find available slots online. As the coordination of the MPSCog is based in Leipzig, the connections to the local authority there and their service is extremely good. For candidates registered in Berlin, we can offer to make use of the [Business Immigration Service \(BIS\)](#). The application will be submitted by the International Officers at MPI CBS on behalf of the international candidate.

In general, the following documents need to be provided both in original and as a copy when applying for a residence permit:

- Completed visa application form
- One biometric photo
- Passport plus copy of passport
- Copy of the rental contract
- Registration confirmation from the residents' registration office (*Bürgerbüro*)
- Copy of scholarship agreement
- Copy of health insurance
- MPSCog admission letter issued by the coordination team

For MPSCog candidates, the residence permit is free of charge as the stipend comes from a public institution. Unfortunately, the validity period of residence titles during the orientation phase varies from authority to authority.

### 2.2.5 Income

During the master's program, BET candidates receive a stipend in the amount of between 1,565 € and 1.665 € per months. MET candidates receive ca. 1,900 € during the orientation phase (Figure 11). The health insurance subsidy is granted to candidates who are members of a statutory health insurance company or have comprehensive private health insurance coverage equivalent to a statutory insurance (see [Section 2.2.3](#)).

The scholarship during the orientation phase is set up at the MPI CBS and will be transferred to the candidate's German account at the end of each month. Thus, the first payment will be made at the end of September, provided that all documents have been submitted on time. Otherwise, the first payment will be slightly delayed.

A scholarship is considered as a financial support in the form of a contribution to living expenses and is paid tax-free. Candidates become liable to pay taxes in Germany with the transition into the doctoral phase and receive a doctoral contract from the institution (Max Planck Institute, university, or other) where their doctoral supervisor is based. The employer will directly deduct the taxes and duties from the salary (*Brutto*), pays them directly to the state, and transfer the remaining amount (*Netto*) to the candidate's account. The exact amount depends on factors such as the region within Germany, income, marital status, or associated tax bracket.

**Attention:** Please note that the preparation of the contract for the doctoral phase in the institution where the doctoral project will be conducted may take 2–5 months, depending on the institution. Therefore, the supervision arrangements the doctoral project must be clarified by May of the orientation phase, at the latest.

### 2.2.6 Personal, scientific, and mental health support

Participating in a doctoral research program can be challenging on both, professional and personal level. There will be stressful times as well as unexpected events that may create a difficult situation.

If a candidate experiences prolonged stress or is under strong pressure, they should not hesitate to contact the coordination team. No matter how big or small the concern is – we are happy to support our candidates! The MPSCog team will happily help and/or assist in finding the right contact point. The coordination team can offer internal confidential consultations, assist in contacting external professional counselling services, and also serve as a general information and contact point for a variety of issues.

### **MPSCog internal consultations**

If candidates experience any issues with their research project, it is advisable to first contact and discuss with the supervisor(s) and/or advisors. For concerns related to supervision or questions that are connected to the MPSCog program, they can contact the MPSCog Scientific Coordinator [Natacha Mendes](#).

Additionally, candidates in the orientation phase might find themselves in a conflict or problematic situation they cannot resolve themselves. Depending on whether it is a conflict with the peers, the supervisor, or other staff members, whether there are feelings of discrimination, or whether candidates feel unable to perform the way they wish they could, owing to professional or private issues can find assistance and advice from different contact points at MPI CBS:

**Conflict management at the Max Planck Society.** The Max Planck Society has set up a [website](#) regarding conflict management and relevant contact points.

The MPI CBS has also a [website](#) on this topic on the MAX intranet.

**Equal opportunities officers.** The Max Planck Society and each of its institutes support and promote employees regardless of gender, nationality, religion, disability, age, cultural origin, or sexual identity. Whenever needed, PhD candidates in the orientation phase could seek out the [equal opportunities officers](#) at the MPI CBS.

**Ombudsperson.** Scientific integrity is one of the most highly valued assets in science. This includes an open debate about what constitutes good scientific practice and according to which rules scientific activity is pursued. Generally speaking, the role of an ombudsperson does not concern severe violations in the sense of potential scientific fraud, but rather conflicts that arise from scientific practice. Unresolved conflicts may have an impact on the overall working climate and may significantly affect motivation. Thus, conflicts need to be addressed and solved in a sustainable manner. Most of the discussions held by ombudspersons concern issues of authorship, i.e., questions relating to the fair acknowledgment of scientific contributions to a certain publication on the part of individuals. Candidates in the orientation phase can reach out to the MPI CBS [ombudspersons](#).

### **External consultation**

If you need help in resolving personal problems and issues that impact your well-being at work, an Employee and Manager Assistance Program (EMAP) is available through the Fürstenberg-Institute: by telephone, online, or in person. Services are free of charge and, importantly, also available in English and several other languages.

**MPSCog persons of trust.** MPSCog has appointed two Fellows as trusted contacts for candidates. They can be approached for confidential advice regarding conflict situations or questions about good scientific practice.

If you have a short-term request you can call 0800-387 78 36

After you have presented your concern there, you will be forwarded to an advisor. The number is free of charge from the German landline network. Free telephone numbers from abroad can be found at [www.fuerstenberg-institut.de](http://www.fuerstenberg-institut.de). More information about the EMAP can be found [here](#).

[Here](#) is information about their services on the MPS PhD net website.

## 2.2.7 Further helpful information

### **Emergency numbers and medical services**

Fire Fighters & Emergency: 112

Police: 110

On-call medical service: 116 117

**German courses:** Taking German classes during the time in Germany is voluntary, but advisable, especially when working with participants as not everyone in Germany speaks English fluently. The universities (e.g., Research Academy at Universität Leipzig) offer (online) language courses, but also other institutions like the local Volkshochschule or the MPI CBS in Leipzig. The MPSCog can cover course fees during the Orientation Phase, provided that the financial and scientific coordinators have been consulted in advance and have approved the request. For reimbursement of German course fees through MPSCog, please follow the steps outlined below:

### Requesting Fee Coverage

1. *Research German Course Providers:* Explore various German course providers and choose the one that align best with your needs.
2. *Contact Your Preferred Provider:* Reach out to your selected German course provider.
3. *Request Official Course Offer:* Solicit an official course offer from the provider.
4. *Approval Process:* Forward the obtained offer to Mario Fischer at [fischer@mcb.mpg.de](mailto:fischer@mcb.mpg.de) for approval. Please note that MPSCog will only cover expenses for courses approved before their commencement and provided that MPSCog funds are available.

### Reimbursement Process

Upon receipt of the invoice from the German course provider, follow these steps:

1. *Advance Payment:* Make the payment in advance.
2. *Submission of Documents:* Forward both the invoice and evidence of payment (e.g., bank statement or receipt) to Mario Fischer.
3. *Reimbursement:* Await reimbursement from MPI CBS.

**Insurance of contents:** An *insurance of contents* covers the personal belongings at home (and in some cases, also if they leave the home) against elemental damage (fire, storm, flood, theft), damage through pipe water, burglary, and vandalism. One is not required to have such an insurance, but it would be advised to, since they are usually not very expensive.

**Liability insurance:** While not legally required to have liability insurance in the majority of cases (see below), it is strongly advised to get the coverage. Some landlords may want to see a proof of insurance. Private insurance companies often provide combined health and liability insurance. It protects the policyholder against compensatory financial claims caused by damage to the property of a third person, in business or in private context. While being on lab rotations, it might, for example, happen that a candidate accidentally drops an expensive device and it breaks. Every institution has its own regulations and cover of such accidents, but it might be that they are not going to cover the damage. Then it is good to have such liability insurance. More information can be found [here](#). Insurance providers can be found online.

**Medical practitioner:** If a person is feeling sick, a general practitioner (*Hausarzt*) would be the first place to go. We recommend to schedule an appointment beforehand, otherwise it may take a while before being seen. If one needs to see a specialized physician (*Facharzt*), the general practitioner might need to issue a transferral form. If getting sick (not life-threatening) over the weekend or after the opening hours of the general practitioner, a medical service can be called: 116117 (*Ärztlicher Bereitschaftsdienst*). They will try to immediately assess the situation at hand and will report to a doctor. In case of a medical emergency, please call 112 or go directly to a hospital nearby (*Notaufnahme*). Please contact the secretary of the lab for tips on English-speaking doctors, or do an online search. The health insurance will always cover these visits and any emergency services! Bring the insurance card or proof of insurance coverage for consultation. Candidates who have private health insurance will receive an invoice from the doctor after consultation. This invoice needs to be submitted to the health insurance company for reimbursement.

**Mobile phone contracts:** In Germany, one can choose between two ways to use a mobile phone. The first option is to get a prepaid card for your phone, which is often easier than getting a contract. A prepaid sim card can be purchased in any supermarket. One should compare the prices and packages, also with the second option which would be by contract. Here, one pays monthly and usually has a 2-year contract. It is a bit more complex and there are various phone companies to choose from (e.g., Vodafone, Telekom, O2, a comparison of the current offers can be found here: [Telefontarife](#), [Verivox](#) or [Check24](#)).

**Parenthood:** Candidates who become parents during the program, are eligible to receive full state support – prolongation of a stipend and are also eligible to take parental leave.

**Second-hand sales:** If candidates need any furniture or a bike and do not want to pay the full price, second-hand is an alternative option. The most commonly used websites are [Kleinanzeigen](#) or [Das Schwarze Brett](#), but Facebook Marketplace or local Facebook groups are also very common.

**Shop business hours:** Usual opening hours of shops in Germany are from 10:00 to 20:00. Smaller shops often vary in their opening times. Most supermarkets are open from 07:00 until 22:00 h from Monday to Saturday. Shops are closed on Sundays, although there are exceptions: Stores in central train stations are usually open

on Sundays for limited hours, some bakeries are open on Sundays, and petrol stations which often offer basic food are typically open 24/7. There are low-priced discounters like Aldi, Lidl, Netto, or Penny, and regular supermarkets like Edeka, Kaufland, Globus, or Rewe.

### 2.3 Doctoral curriculum and initial academic steps

Conducting a doctoral program is a huge project. The coordination team is there to support the candidates in all stages of the program.

#### **Matching between the accepted candidate and the doctoral supervisor**

Entering the doctoral program begins with a provisional match between each candidate and an MPSCog fellow. During the orientation phase (first year), candidates complete rotations in approximately three different fellows' laboratories. The first rotation takes place in the laboratory of the fellow with whom the candidate was initially matched. This period allows both the fellow and the candidate to evaluate the suitability of their future collaboration into the doctoral phase.

At the final stage of the selection process, each successful candidate will be matched with the MPSCog faculty member, who will be their doctoral supervisor. The matching is made based on the mutual preferences and complementing research interests of both parties. This initial matching is provisional. A lab rotation in the lab of the provisionally matched faculty member is scheduled at the start of the orientation phase for each candidate. If the faculty member agrees to accept the candidate, and there is a mutual agreement to continue working during the doctoral phase, the candidate can then settle into the desired lab at the start of the second year. In cases where the initial match cannot turn into doctoral supervision, new options for supervision are explored and arranged.

The final decision on the doctoral supervision must be made, at the latest, by May of the orientation phase. Towards the end of the orientation phase (around May), candidates with established doctoral supervision should initiate preparation of their doctoral contracts at the hosting institution. They should discuss the relevant steps with their main supervisor and/or his PA who will be able to refer them to the HR person in charge. Our MPSCog Financial Officer, Mario Fischer, can guide candidates to the respective HR in case of doubts. Some institutions require a health check which should be sorted out before going on summer vacation.

#### 2.3.1 Overview of the first year and beyond

During the first year of the MPSCog doctoral program, there is an emphasis on two academic elements: lab rotations and e-learning. This so-called orientation phase offers a unique, individually-tailored curriculum to explore research fields across different labs. It also covers the fundamental knowledge from the broad field of cognition via e-learning courses and cognition academies. Applicants may enter the MPSCog program through one of three routes: with a bachelor's degree (Bachelor Entry Track, BET), with a master's degree (Master Entry Track, MET), or with a medical degree (Clinician Scientist Entry Track, CSET). Figure 11 gives an overview of each of the five years of the MPSCog program.

Furthermore, the orientation phase includes three Cognition Academies, as well as Welcome Days in September. These events provide opportunities for candidates, who are based across Germany, London, and Nijmegen, to meet in person and strengthen their network within the program.

At the end of the first year, candidates' progress is evaluated based on their accomplishments, including participation in e-learning modules, completion of lab rotations, presentations within the host labs, and attendance at the Cognition Academies. Candidates who successfully meet the requirements of this evaluation, and thus remain in good standing within the MPSCog program, can proceed to the doctoral phase. Please note that e-learning courses, and participation during the Cognition Academies, Welcome Days, and Max Planck School Days are mandatory.

#### **First week at the MPSCog: What to expect**

At the beginning of the first year, candidates take part in the Welcome Days at the Harnack House in Berlin. During these days, candidates will:

- meet their fellow doctoral peers, the coordination team, the spokesperson(s), and some fellows in person
- be introduced to the program structure and the e-learning platform
- present their previous research experience to the group
- attend introductory talks given by MPSCog fellows

## PART III – Doctoral curriculum and initial academic steps

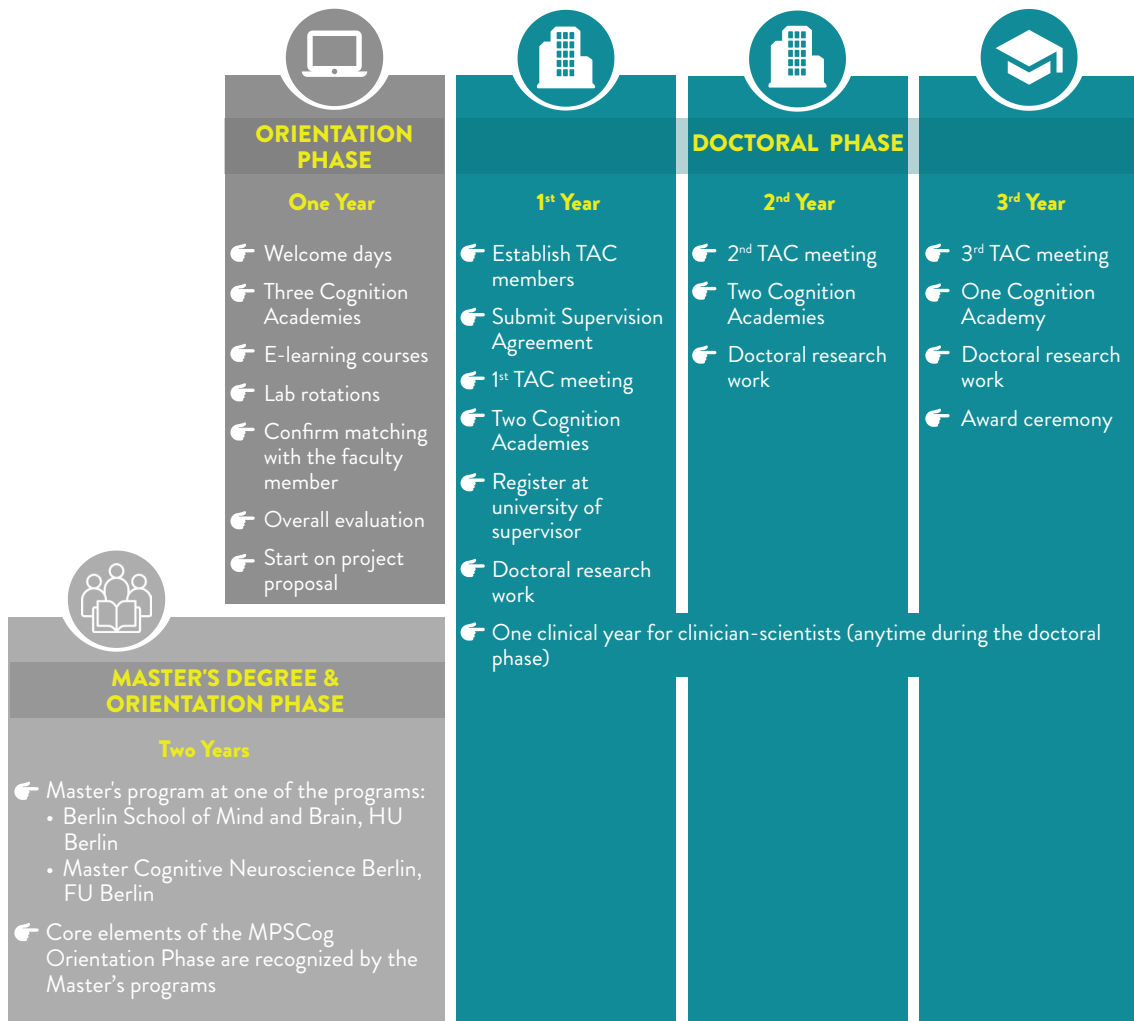


Figure 11. Timeline of the MPSCog doctoral program

The Welcome Days serve as an important opportunity to become part of the MPSCog community, to exchange ideas, and to build connections that will accompany you throughout your doctoral journey. In addition to the Welcome Days, all new candidates are invited to participate in the Max Planck Schools Day (Figure 12), held in September or October. This joint event officially welcomes PhD candidates from all three Max Planck Schools and offers opportunities for interdisciplinary exchange with peers, faculty, and researchers at different career stages.



Figure 12. Picture from the first Max Planck Schools Day in 2019. The German Science Minister Anja Karliczek also took part in the event, pictured here with the Max Planck President Martin Stratmann, the Vice-President of the Max Planck Society Ferdi Schüth and PhD candidates of the three schools (Bojana Grujičić from the MPSCog)  
(Picture: Max Planck Society/David Ausserhofer)

### Peer support across MPSCog cohorts

Candidates from [previous cohorts](#) offer support, advice and serve as mentors for the new candidates. We strongly encourage networking and exchange across the cohorts. Getting direct advice from someone who already gained experience in for example, a specific lab or found an accommodation in a specific location can be precious. If candidates are unsure whom to approach from a previous cohort, the coordination team is happy to help establish a suitable connection.

### Student representatives

Student representatives act as a liaison between their respective cohort, the coordination team, and the faculty members. They help to optimize the working environment for their cohort and to improve information flow and exchange with the coordination team. Student representatives can join meetings between other PhD candidates and, for example, the coordination team or Arno Villringer (Spokesperson). Each cohort elects two representatives at the start of the doctoral program and hold elections on a yearly basis. The student representatives are indicated on the MPSCog [website](#) under their respective cohorts.

### Good to know

**E-mail addresses:** Every PhD candidate will be given an official e-mail address (Name.Surname@maxplanckschools.de) and each cohort will have a group contact (e.g., doccandidates2020@maxplanckschools.de) through which the coordination team can contact the candidates and share all important information. In addition, an MPI CBS account will be created to access the online library and to receive internal e-mails. Be aware that all the communication from HR will be made through your CBS account! If keeping track of multiple inboxes feels overwhelming, candidates can set up automatic forwarding so that all messages are directed to the main account they use most regularly. Please note that this cannot be an account outside of Germany (e.g., gmail) due to data protection reasons!

**Curriculum management/Open Campus:** PhD candidates will be introduced to the [Curriculum management/Open Campus tool](#), a system for managing academic data collected throughout the doctoral program.

**MPI CBS Library:** As scholarship holders with the MPSCog/MPI CBS, the candidates are also given access to the [virtual library of MPI CBS](#) during the orientation phase. Introductions will be given during the first weeks of the program.

**CV:** Every candidate, will have a personal CV page on the official MPSCog website [CV page on the MPSCog website](#). The coordination team will approach the candidates during the first lab rotation.

**Laptops:** If a private laptop is not sufficient for doctoral work, PhD candidates have the possibility to borrow a Windows laptop from the MPSCog during the orientation phase. Candidates should reach out to the coordination team for more details.

### MPSCog affiliation and acknowledgments

PhD candidates are asked to add the MPSCog affiliation to the e-signature in their emails: “PhD candidate at the Max Planck School of Cognition”. Moreover, please do not forget to mention the MPSCog affiliation on posters and publications: “Max Planck School of Cognition, Stephanstrasse 1A, 04103 Leipzig”.

### Orientation phase

After the Welcome Days, PhD candidates will relocate to the institution where their first lab rotation is taking place. The e-learning sessions will commence approximately in the second half of September.

In the orientation phase, PhD candidates complete laboratory rotations and attend lectures, the latter consisting of e-learning and classroom teaching (i.e. Cognition Academies). The laboratory rotations aim to equip PhD candidates with the necessary interdisciplinary knowledge and hands-on research experience via three rotations (on average) in partnering laboratories. Moreover, the rotations will aid candidates in making an informed decision about the focus of their doctoral work, as well as their preferred supervisor(s) for the

following three years. Given the collaborative and interdisciplinary nature of the MPSCog doctoral program, candidates are encouraged to select faculty members with different but complementary research fields as co-supervisors.

In the following sections, the academic components of the first year are further described (Figure 13).

### 2.3.2 Cognition Academies

Cognition Academies are planned for each year of the program and are mandatory (Figure 11). They present an opportunity to meet and collaborate with other candidates, lecturers, faculty members, invited speakers, and the MPSCog coordination team.

#### Purpose of the Academies during the first academic year

- Further and more advanced discussions of topics covered in the preceding learning courses
- Chance to attend talks of the MPSCog faculty members and other invited speakers
- In-person opportunity to discuss the learning progress with e-lecturers
- Chance to present data and findings from lab rotations and obtain feedback
- Opportunity to socialize with the other PhD candidates, including those from other cohorts

**Attention:** PhD candidates are expected to actively participate in all Cognition Academies, and to give at least two presentations (talks or poster presentations) on their research projects during the orientation phase.

#### Organization of the Academies

Cognition Academies are centrally organized by the MPSCog and usually take place in Berlin (Figure 14) and Leipzig, with one additional national location. If candidates miss sessions of a Cognition Academy or the entire Academy without a justified and timely explanation, they will be responsible for arranging their own accommodation for future Academies, as MPSCog will no longer handle their room reservations. Travel arrangements, however, must be made individually and will be reimbursed afterwards. For more information, please see Section 2.4.1.

**Note:** Candidates need to make sure they have a private accommodation throughout the whole orientation phase. MPSCog is not able to cover living arrangements in case of illness or other absences prior to a Cognition Academy

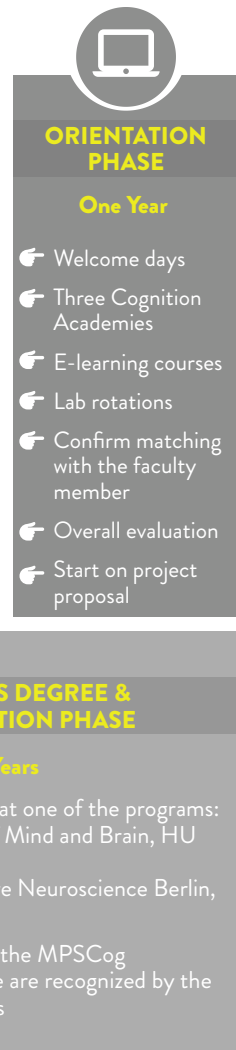


Figure 13. Academic components of the orientation phase



Figure 14. Harnack-Haus in Berlin – a conference center of the Max Planck Society where Cognition Academies often take place.



Figure 15. Impressions from a Cognition Academy

### 2.3.3 Lab rotations

Candidates will have on average three lab rotations with MPSCog faculty members during the orientation phase. First (or second) of the lab rotations will be arranged in the lab of the provisionally matched doctoral supervisor. The coordination team will contact candidates to get to know their preferred list of lab rotations. Based on these preferences, an individual lab rotation schedule will be designed for each candidate. If a match is already fairly certain, we would advise to start working on the project proposal for the doctoral phase already. Please note:

- Please select lab rotations at labs of fellows or associated fellows of the school. Lab rotations abroad (except UK and Nijmegen with the respective fellows) are not an option.

Purpose of lab rotations are:

- provide both the candidate and the preliminarily matched supervisor with the opportunity to work together directly. This allows both sides to assess research compatibility, supervisory and working styles, and the
- potential for establishing a successful long-term supervisory relationship during the doctoral phase
- Gaining more experience in a relevant field
- Exploring novel areas of research and techniques
- Getting to know the overall laboratory and location

**Attention:** It is necessary — especially for insurance reasons — to have some kind of guest contract or internship contract with the institutions of the candidate's lab rotations. This is important for both the candidates and the hosting institution. Please contact the coordination team if any problems arise concerning this issue.

#### Which labs to choose for the lab rotation?

PhD candidates may select their rotation labs from among the official MPSCog Faculty Members. In addition, it is possible to complete one rotation with an Associated Faculty Member.

#### How long should the lab rotations last in total?

The total time spent in lab rotations should not be less than 33 weeks. The timeline of the lab rotations must be compatible with the schedule of e-learning and Cognition Academies (Figure 16). The usual timeline is approximately:

- Rotation in the 1<sup>st</sup> lab: September – November
- Rotation in the 2<sup>nd</sup> lab: January – mid-March
- Rotation in the 3<sup>rd</sup> lab: May – mid-July

## PART III – Doctoral curriculum and initial academic steps

	SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER
2025 AUTUMN 2025	1 8 15 22 29	6 13 20 27	3 10 17 24	1 8 15 22 29
	WELCOME DAYS		E-learning	
	LAB ROTATION 1		COGNITION ACADEMY I	
2026 WINTER 2026	5 12 19 26	2 9 16 23	2 9 16 23 30	6 13 20 27
	E-learning		COGNITION ACADEMY II	
	LAB ROTATION 2		SPRING BREAK (Easter Apr 2-10)	
2026 SPRING 2026	4 11 18 25	1 8 15 22 29	6 13 20 27	3 10 17 24
	E-learning		COGNITION ACADEMY III	
	LAB ROTATION 3		SUMMER BREAK	

Figure 16 Example of a timeline of Cognition Academies and lab rotations throughout the program

### Flexibility of rotations

The total number and length of lab rotations can vary from the standard (above mentioned) schedule. There is some flexibility in adjusting the timeline of lab rotations. Therefore, in case of queries, the candidates should contact Paula Baer.

**Attention:** We highly recommend getting liability insurance as it will pay if someone causes harm to someone else, such as if a candidate accidentally breaks something in a lab (see *Section 2.2.7*).

### If applicable: Visa for lab rotations in the Netherlands or UK

Should a candidate plan a lab visit outside Germany, but within the EU, it is not always necessary to apply for another visa. Research stays in the Netherlands, for example, do not require a visa if the stay does not exceed 3 months, but candidates still have to be registered in Germany during that time. However, for a lab rotation in the UK, international candidates would need to undergo the standard visa processes, whereas EU citizens can stay up to 6 months without visa with a valid passport.

### Evaluation of the lab rotations

- One month before the end of lab rotation, faculty members supervising lab rotations receive an Evaluation Questionnaire. They are asked to assess candidate's overall performance and the oral departmental presentation (in front of the department or the research team).
- Most essential points of the evaluation are available to the PhD candidates within their individual profiles of Curriculum management/Open Campus portal (see *Section 2.3.7*).
- MPSCog does not require any written work or report **from the candidates** about the lab rotation.

### Lab rotations for BET candidates

Candidates need to accomplish 300 working hours of lab rotations so that it is recognized by both the MPSCog program and the cooperating master's programs (Berlin School of Mind and Brain and the Cognitive Neuroscience Master's program).

### Locations

- Lab rotations are primarily based in Berlin laboratories, enabling candidates to simultaneously attend the in-person courses of the Mind and Brain Master's program and the Cognitive Neuroscience Master's program.
- Typically, BET candidates use their lab rotation(s) to carry out the research project required for their master's degree (thesis project).

**BET candidates** are not required to complete the three lab rotations. As long as the **requirements of the cooperating master's program** are fulfilled, the MPSCog will also recognize the rotation(s) as sufficient.

### Logistics of lab rotations

The logistical arrangements for lab rotations should be organized by the PhD candidates. Travel costs from Cognition Academies to lab rotations are reimbursed by the MPSCog. It is also possible to combine trips to/from lab rotations and academies with visits to home (for detailed procedure, see *Section 2.4*). Accommodation costs during lab rotations cannot be covered by the MPSCog. Our team is ready to support candidates in finding appropriate accommodations (see *Section 2.1.6*).

### Advice for PhD candidates when starting lab rotations

It is entirely up to the faculty member and PhD candidates to decide how the lab rotations are structured. Candidates can take up to two weekdays per week to their e-learning commitments: One day for preparation and another one for attending the online sessions. Candidates are encouraged to contact faculty members in advance to discuss mutual expectations and clarify the scope, responsibilities, and learning objectives of the planned lab rotation (Figure 17). For the lab rotation with a matched supervisor for your PhD, it might be advisable to start on project proposals and first steps of your PhD to save time.

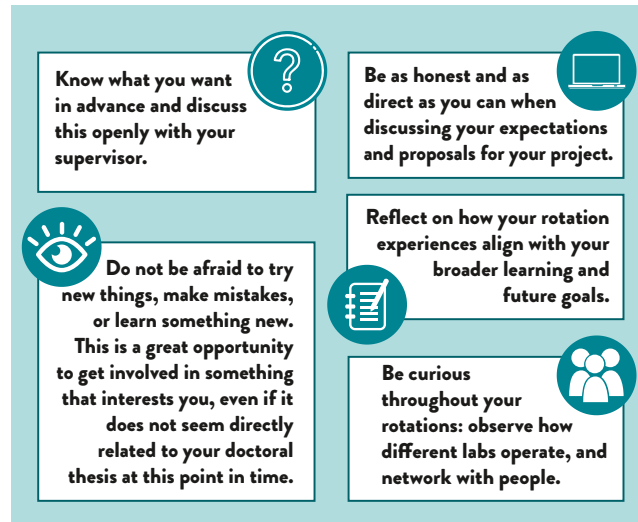


Figure 17. Tips for success during lab rotations

The orientation phase ends with a general evaluation designed to determine if candidates are in good standing and eligible to advance to the doctoral research phase. This evaluation will consider several points (Figure 18).

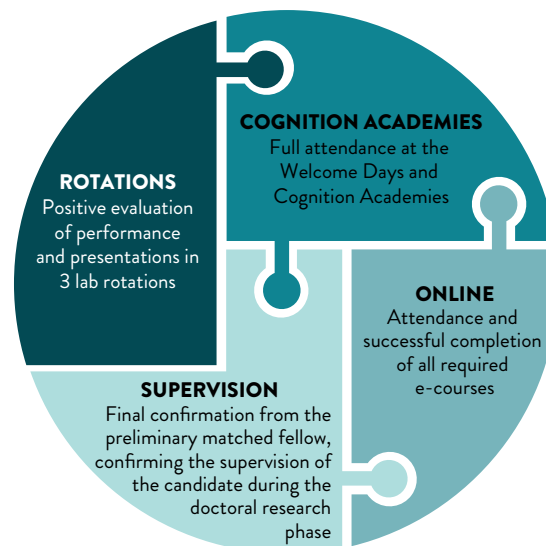


Figure 18. Parameters used to determine whether candidates are in good standing and eligible to advance to the doctoral research phase of the program

### Thesis project proposal

A project proposal is to be submitted ideally before the start of the doctoral phase (if preparation during a lab rotation is possible). All candidates are requested to prepare a maximum three page proposal outlining their upcoming doctoral plans with their matched supervisor. The proposal needs to be submitted before the start of the doctoral phase.

In the proposal, candidates are expected to:

- present a brief literature review on the proposed topic(s)
- explain, without going into details, the main idea(s) behind their planned research.

## 2.3.4 E-learning

### General information

The orientation phase of the MPSCog doctoral program is divided into three terms: Autumn (September–December), Winter (January–April), and Spring (May–July). In total, PhD candidates will complete approximately three lab rotations (see Section 2.3.3) and eight foundational e-courses and occasional discussion group meetings (Figure 17). Each term will include one lab rotation and no more than three 10-week e-courses running in parallel. After these foundational courses, each term culminates in a Cognition Academy, during which PhD candidates, lecturers, and faculty members of the MPSCog will come together for one week of advanced lectures and workshops around the subjects taught during the respective term.

The overarching goal of e-learning is to equip the candidates who come from diverse academic backgrounds with the knowledge and skills necessary to produce outstanding research in the field of cognition. As the candidates complete three lab rotations during this period and are spread out across various locations, e-learning is an integral part of the education process.

By utilizing an e-learning platform, the MPSCog has transcended the traditional classroom-recording format and works with an inverted classroom approach. The courses contain both synchronous (face-to-face live sessions) and asynchronous (self-paced) learning elements supported by a variety of high-quality media learning resources and the guidance and feedback of lecturers.



### Administrative and Technological Support Coordinator

baer@cbs.mpg.de  
Phone: 0049 341 9940 164  
Room @ MPI CBS: C105

Paula Baer will be the primary point of contact for everything related to e-learning. A full and up-to-date overview of the lecturers teaching the e-courses can be found [online](#).

Eight online courses (Figure 19) will cover the fundamentals on different topics related to cognition:



Figure 19. Online courses and discussion sessions offered at the MPSCog

Throughout the year, PhD candidates will also participate in occasional discussion sessions (*Cognitive Science Discussion*) about various topics within cognitive science led by faculty members or lecturers of MPSCog. Attendance at all Cognitive Science Discussion sessions is mandatory for every PhD candidate, with no option to opt out.

### Personalized curriculum

If a PhD candidate has demonstrable expertise in the topic of an e-learning course (e.g., covered equivalent content within previous bachelor's or master's studies), there is the possibility to opt-out from that course. The decision of whether the PhD candidates can or cannot opt-out will be made by the lecturer of the course, based on the previous course syllabus and transcripts, and an assessment of the candidate's knowledge. After the assessment, the tutor will decide whether or not the candidate is granted:

- a complete opt-out (no need to undergo an exam/evaluation at the end of the course),
- a conditional opt-out (may opt-out from certain weekly course activities and synchronous online sessions, but still needs to undergo and pass an exam/evaluation at the end or complete one or several assignments), or
- no opt-out at all.

The PhD candidate who opts-out from a course is expected to inform Paula Baer in a timely manner of the sessions they opted out of and if there is going to be an alternative mode of evaluation.

There is no limit to the number of opt-outs. However, if a PhD candidate chooses to completely opt-out of more than two courses across the orientation phase, beginning from the third such course, they are required to choose one of the two options below:

- participate in an alternative course of an advanced level in the area of the opted-out course, or a beginner level course in an area not covered by the eight courses within MPSCog, or
- participate in the opted-out course as a Teaching Assistant.

The specifics of such an arrangement must be discussed with the tutor and the coordination team.

### Course structure and format

With the exception of one or two courses, of one or two courses, each course lasts for 10 weeks, concluding with a pass/fail assessment.

**Note:** There is an exception for BET candidates, who will receive grades according to the partner master's programs' requirements.

The courses consist of two parts: weekly face-to-face live sessions and self-paced learning. Weekly live sessions (90 minutes) require candidates to be virtually present in the same online place at the same time to directly interact with lecturers and classmates. For the self-paced learning component, PhD candidates should review the provided materials (e.g., pre-recorded video lectures, assigned reading) and complete assignments and activities before the deadline at their own pace. Attendance at these sessions and completion of all the materials and assignments/activities before given deadlines is mandatory.

### Virtual campus

We are using [Open LMS](#) as the e-learning platform for the MPSCog. *Mastersolutions* provides the virtual classroom for the weekly live interaction with tutors.

### What technology is required?

- A computer with
  - an up-to-date operating system (e.g., Windows or Mac) and an internet browser (we suggest using either Chrome or Firefox)
  - basic computer audio/video equipment: microphone or headset with microphone and webcam
- Broadband/high-speed internet connection (1.5 Mbps download, 750 Kbps upload minimum)

**Attention:** If PhD candidates do not have access to the required equipment, they should inform the coordination team as soon as possible.

### Rules and regulations

- Passing all e-courses during the first year is a requirement of the MPSCog doctoral program.
- It is the responsibility of the PhD candidate to ensure attendance of all e-learning courses, including weekly online face-to-face sessions with tutors.
- In case of a justified absence, such as sick leave, PhD candidates must inform the respective lecturer and Paula Baer of their absence by immediately marking it in the Curriculum management/Open Campus calendar (see *Section 2.3.7*).

## PART III – Doctoral curriculum and initial academic steps

- If a candidate does not meet the deadline to request an opt-out, the request will not be considered.
- The candidates are expected to prioritize weekly synchronous sessions over e.g., lab work, meetings, presentations, and other events that might conflict with these sessions.
- Attending all the Cognition Academy sessions is mandatory, and the candidates should avoid booking any trips and/or having appointments during the event.
- We ask the candidates to keep their camera on during synchronous online sessions.
- In case of any queries regarding the course schedules (e.g., special arrangements etc.), Paula Baer should be contacted.

The PhD candidates should follow the good e-learning practice and tips to have successful online learning experience (Figure 20).

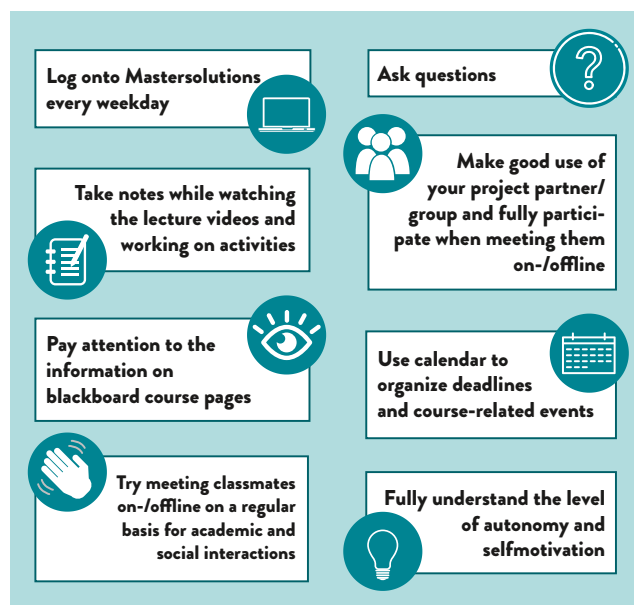


Figure 20. Tips for success in online courses.

In addition to the aforementioned e-courses, candidates are also required to attend a “Good Scientific Practices” workshop, which is offered during one of the Cognition Academies in the orientation year.

### 2.3.5 Short visits to labs beyond the required three rotations

PhD candidates who want to visit and explore different laboratories can arrange short visits (e.g., max. 5 working days) to labs associated to the MPSCog during the orientation phase. This is an opportunity to meet more faculty members and to get to know these labs, which could also be considered for the doctoral phase of the program. The visits can be arranged individually or in small groups by contacting the faculty members directly. The visits can be planned at any time during the orientation phase, ideally during the breaks between the *official* lab rotations. The travel costs of these visits can be reimbursed for a max. of 5 business days and with prior agreement by the coordination team (see Section 2.4.1.). The visits are the initiative of the PhD candidates, but the coordination team can provide support if needed. Please follow the general procedure of a business trip described in Section 2.4.1. The first year is quite busy, leaving little time for additional activities.

### 2.3.6 External activities

The main focus of the first year is participation in the e-learning courses and Cognition Academies, as well as taking full advantage of the lab rotations experience. Typically, the first year is rather busy and little time remains for any additional activities. The PhD candidates can participate in conferences, especially if they can already present data. They can also attend external (research-related or soft skills) training, including online courses, workshops, and summer schools. All external activities should be relevant and must be approved by the coordination team.

**Attention:** Additional external activities must not overlap with the Cognition Academies, as the attendance at the academies is mandatory.

PhD candidates who wish to attend a conference or a workshop are asked to:

- Discuss attending the event (possible absence from the lab) with the supervisor of the lab rotation and e-lecturers.
- Inform the Scientific Coordination (Natacha Mendes) as soon as possible prior to the event so that the request can be adequately considered.
- Start the procedure for business trips with the MPSCog (see *Section 2.4.1*).
- Present their research as poster or talk.

### **Budget for the orientation phase**

During the orientation phase, PhD candidates may participate in relevant scientific activities, provided they present their work (e.g., in a talk or poster format) and the event does not conflict with e-learning courses or lab rotations. Short research visits of up to five working days to associated labs may also be supported.

MPSCog will cover up to 1,000 € per candidate, provided the above conditions are met and the activity has been approved in advance by the coordination team.

**Note: For the first month after arrival**, candidates should focus on settling into their lab rotations, their courses, and the program. **External activities are not recommended during this time and therefore will not be funded.** If you would like to engage in external activities later, please contact the lab rotation supervisor for permission and Paula Baer ([baer@cbs.mpg.de](mailto:baer@cbs.mpg.de)) about the content, dates, and estimated costs.

### 2.3.7 Curriculum management within Open Campus

*Curriculum management/Open Campus* is a general database for all PhD candidates of the MPSCog. It has been established to facilitate the management of academic data, accomplishments, and progress reporting of PhD candidates. Up-to-date maintenance of the information collected within the *Curriculum management/Open Campus* is required of each candidate and is monitored by the coordination team.

#### **How to access Curriculum management within the Open Campus platform?**

At the start of the program, candidates will automatically be granted an access to “Year 1 Curriculum management” within their profile in the [Open Campus](#) platform, which they used for applying to MPSCog. If needed, a new password can easily be requested when logging in.

#### **Type of data collected within the candidate’s profile in Curriculum management:**

- University registration information
- Lab rotation evaluations from faculty members and feedback from candidates
- E-learning assessments and opt outs
- Supervision agreement, project proposal, and progress reports (TAC feedback forms from second year onwards)
- Information on publications, awards, and external activities
- Satisfaction questionnaire
- Absence record — candidates can mark planned and unplanned (sick leave) absences
- Certificates of attendance at courses/workshops etc.

#### **Advantages of using Curriculum management/Open Campus for the candidates and the MPSCog**

- Collecting and managing all academic records in a consistent and transparent way (e.g., for the first year evaluation)
- Data protected and secure system with tailored access rights to the collected data
- Uploading files and sharing information in a user-friendly manner (e.g., planned absence)
- Effective monitoring of the progress of the research projects (e.g., scheduled progress reports) via sending automatic reminders

## PART III – Doctoral curriculum and initial academic steps

To move on to the doctoral phase (2<sup>nd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> year), PhD candidates must fulfill the following criteria by the end of the orientation phase:

- Complete all online courses successfully
- Participate in all three Cognition Academies including at least two presentations per PhD candidates
- At least three confirmed lab rotations with positive evaluations
- Confirmed primary supervisor for doctoral research work

### 2.3.8 End of first year evaluation

These accomplishments serve as a foundation and preparation for the doctoral phase. Candidates who do not fulfill all of the aforementioned criteria will not be able to move on to the doctoral research phase immediately. In such a case, a decision on the next steps for the particular candidate will be made by Prof. Arno Villringer/ Prof. Katrin Amunts (Spokesperson at the MPSCog) and Natacha Mendes (Scientific Coordinator).

## 2.4 Administrative processes

### 2.4.1 Business trips

Business trips need to be applied for and approved by our Scientific Coordinator Natacha Mendes. Approved business trips of Max Planck Society (MPS) scholarship holders are automatically covered by its group accident insurance policy.

As MPSCog is bound to the regulations of the German Federal Travel Expenses Act, travelers must adhere to several important rules when planning business trips (see Figure 21). These include:

1. Submitting the business trip application form before making any bookings.
2. Complying with prescribed limits on accommodation costs.
3. Booking designated travel classes.
4. Submitting reimbursement claims together with original travel tickets after the trip.

These are just a few of the key requirements to ensure compliance with the Act.

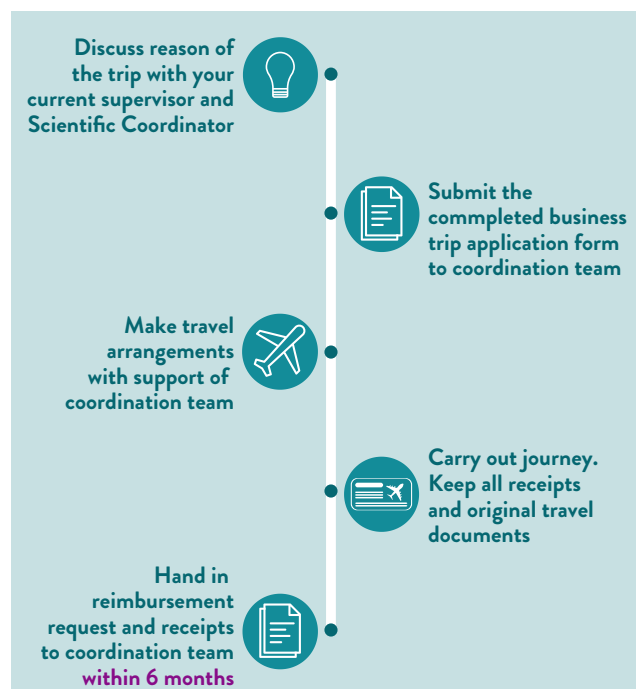


Figure 21. Business trip procedure in the orientation phase

Forms are available at the MPS Cog Wiki on Open LMS under “Important documents”.

During the orientation phase, PhD candidates will travel a lot – from one Cognition Academy to a lab rotation, moving on to the next Cognition Academy, possibly combining their travels with a private trip home. To avoid any unexpected issues, it is recommended contact the coordination team whenever planning a business trip.

### Which trips can be refunded?

- During the orientation phase, PhD candidates may participate in relevant scientific activities, provided they present their work (e.g., in a talk or poster format) and the event does not conflict with e-learning courses or lab rotations. Short research visits of up to five working days to associated labs may also be supported. MPSCog will cover up to 1,000 € per candidate, provided the above conditions are met and the activity has been approved in advance by the coordination team.
- Several business meetings/conferences can be combined.
- Trips can also be combined with private trips; in that case, special rules apply and should be discussed with the coordination team beforehand.

### Which costs can be reimbursed after prior approval?

- Economy class flight tickets
- Second class train tickets
- Private car (0,20 €/km, max. 150 €)
- Public transportation tickets
- Accommodation (there is a limit – please ask the coordination team before booking!)
- Registration fees (but please check beforehand with the coordination team)
- Required courses for lab rotations
- if applicable: visa costs
- Membership fees: If a membership in a society is required to submit an abstract or to attend a conference, then the fees can be reimbursed after the conference along with the travel reimbursement request.

### Our reimbursement procedure

Fill in the reimbursement form (available on Open LMS) and submit it with the original tickets **within 6 months** after the end of the trip. Reimbursement requests submitted after this deadline will no longer be accepted. Kindly send the completed documents to the following address:

Max Planck School of Cognition  
Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences  
Stephanstr. 1A  
04103 Leipzig

If online tickets were used, it is sufficient to send the forms and invoices via e-mail to either of these addresses: [fischer@cps.mpg.de](mailto:fischer@cps.mpg.de) and [baer@cps.mpg.de](mailto:baer@cps.mpg.de)

### Can high costs be reimbursed in advance/before the actual trip?

It is possible to receive reimbursements before the event actually has taken place. Candidates must still submit a signed business trip form prior to any purchases. After getting approval for the trip, candidates should then complete the *Business trip advance payment.docx* form available on Open LMS and send it to the coordination team who will further explain the procedure.

## 2.4.2 Vacations, sick leave and virtual mode

We ask candidates to inform the coordination team about their absence via filling out and submitting an “Absence request” in the [Open Campus](#) portal (at the bottom of Year 1 progress tree).

The portal distinguishes two types of absence:

- Planned, e.g. vacations
- Unplanned e.g. sick leave

Based on the information that candidates share with us, we approve the absence.

### Vacations

The break slots (winter, spring and summer breaks) in the orientation phase calendar are optimal for taking vacations. However, if a candidate’s planned absence falls outside the break slots, the plans need to first be discussed with the lab rotation supervisor and then a request has to be submitted into the [Open Campus](#) portal. A short explanation will be required to submit your request.

The number of vacation days should not exceed 30 business days per year.

### **Sick leave**

If a candidate feels sick and needs time to recover, they need to submit a request for “unplanned leave” on Open Campus and inform Paula Baer.

Please note: If the candidate’s absence is on short notice and they cannot attend an e-learning session, Paula Baer and the respective lecturers need to be informed about it.

### **Requirement to remain in Germany**

Please keep in mind that due to tax and insurance reasons the candidates need to remain in Germany throughout the program. Exceptions are the lab rotations (or doctoral phase) based at the partner institution in the Netherlands or in the UK, or holidays.