

CISPA

SECURITY | CISPA HELMHOLTZ CENTER
FOR INFORMATION



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English Edition

DEAR READERS,

Research often begins with a question. Sometimes it's big and hard to grasp, sometimes quite tangible and born from a personal moment of insight. All questions share the urge not to leave them unanswered. That's exactly what drives us at CISPA and what shapes the lives and work of our doctoral researchers.

A doctorate is not a job like any other. It's an adventure, a struggle for insight, a daily practice in patience, precision, and creativity. Those who choose this path don't just want to know something, they want to contribute something. It's for these people that we've created an environment at CISPA dedicated to making good research possible.

That means more than providing offices, books, and laptops. It takes open exchange, honest feedback, good supervision, room for ideas—and support when things get complicated. That's why we accompany young researchers not only in their academic work, but also as they arrive in a new country, a new city, a new phase of life.

We know that research doesn't happen in a vacuum. It lives through people, through connection, trust, and exchange. That's why we create conditions that not only enable excellent work, but also take seriously the people behind that work.



Prof. Dr. Dr. h. c. mult. Michael Backes © Jennifer Weyland

Anyone who takes the step into an academic career today enters new territory. It's not always easy. But it's worth it. Because those who do research change the world—sometimes quietly, sometimes radically. At CISPA, we want to be the right place for that.

Enjoy reading!

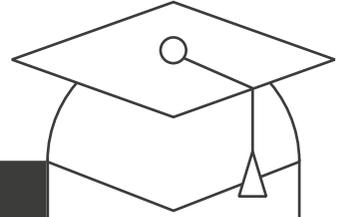
A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Backes'.

Prof. Dr. Dr. h. c. mult.
Michael Backes

FACTS ABOUT CISPA

Information as of: 2025/9 *Source: N2 Survey/ Helmholz Juniors

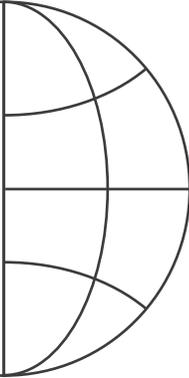
Years of perseverance, ideas, and persistence—culminating in a PhD or an independent research group. Our early-career researchers in numbers.



205

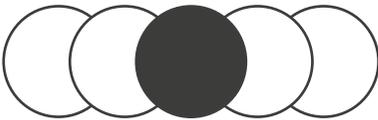
doctoral researchers at CISPA

Our doctoral researchers come from
32
countries



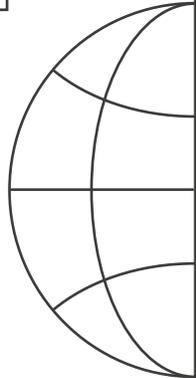
Duration of the PhD

4,3
years on average*



37
postdoctoral researchers

from 16 countries



SUPPORT FOR EARLY-CAREER RESEARCHERS AT CISPA

At CISPA, doctoral candidates and postdocs are not left to fend for themselves. The Early Career Support (ECAS) team ensures that early-career researchers can focus on their work while also receiving guidance for their personal and professional development. “We’re the central point of contact for PhD candidates, postdocs, and their supervisors,” explains team member and ECAS deputy head Barbara Plunien. “Our work is diverse: We offer workshops, career counseling, and create opportunities for exchange and networking.”

A key component is the PhD Training Program, which is specifically tailored to the needs of doctoral researchers. It includes both mandatory and optional workshops, ranging from communication and presentation training to time and project management and career orientation. In addition, participants can attend courses on topics such as mental health, networking, or negotiation strategies. The workshops are offered in close collaboration with the Scientific Writing and Presentation (SWAP) team at CISPA.

A special highlight for newcomers to CISPA are the PhD Kickoff Days which are held twice a year. These events provide new doctoral researchers with essential information about internal points of contact, the center as a whole, and topics such as good scientific practice, intercultural collaboration, and research ethics. “The Kickoff Days are often the first contact between our team and the doctoral researchers,” says Isabel Keller, head of the ECAS team. “Various departments introduce themselves, and participants gain an initial overview of topics relevant to pursuing a PhD at CISPA.”

Career development is another central focus. Within the framework of four career tracks—Academia, Public Sector, Private Sector, and Entrepreneurship—external experts offer insights into possible career paths. “Sometimes representatives from governmental institutions or companies share their experiences, at other times, the focus is on strategic career planning within academia,” Barbara explains.



Barbara Plunien and Isabel Keller from the Early Career Support team are the first point of contact for early-career researchers at CSPA.

The team also offers individual consultations. “We’re not a psychological counseling service,” Isabel emphasizes, “but we listen, provide support with everyday challenges, and refer people to the right services when necessary.” An important aspect of their work is recognizing the diversity of the PhD community. “Our doctoral researchers come from very different cultural backgrounds. That’s a tremendous asset, but it can also pose challenges,” Barbara adds. “We aim to raise awareness of these issues and foster intercultural competencies.”

Barbara recalls the first PhD and postdoc retreat organized by ECAS with particular enthusiasm: “It was wonderful to see so many doctoral researchers and postdocs coming together and engaging beyond their research

groups.” In addition to expert talks academic presentations, the event included playful formats and valuable networking opportunities.

Isabel summarizes her motivation for her multifaceted role: “I know from my own experience what it’s like to pursue a PhD. For me, it’s deeply meaningful to support doctoral researchers and postdocs in developing their skills and planning their careers as well as to explore possible paths together.”

In this way, the ECAS team at CSPA builds bridges between research and administration, strengthens early-career researchers during a crucial phase, and helps ensure that PhD candidates and postdocs not only conduct successful research but also grow and thrive in the long term.

“WE WORK ON UNSOLVED PROBLEMS HERE—AND WITH GREAT FREEDOM.”

Keno Hassler conducts research at CISPA and, as a doctoral representative and member of the Helmholtz Juniors, advocates together with colleagues for the interests of early-career researchers. In this interview, he talks about how he organizes his research work, what drives him, and why fair conditions in academia are important to him.

Hello Keno, why did you decide to pursue a PhD at CISPA?

The proximity to my home played a role—I’m from Rhineland-Palatinate, so logistically it was quite convenient. But above all, CISPA’s excellence was decisive. A major reason I applied here was the opportunity to work with Thorsten Holz. In addition, the conditions offered here are very attractive: having a full-time position while doing a PhD—unfortunately, that’s not something you find everywhere.



Keno Hassler © CISPA/Tobias Ebelshäuser

How did you find out what exactly interests you and which area you wanted to do research in?

I experimented a bit to see what suited me and what I enjoyed. During my master’s studies, system security emerged as my focus area. It’s fun to “break” programs—though we do this ethically, with the goal of making systems more secure.

What's special about the research environment at CISPA?

The atmosphere and diversity. We have flat hierarchies—you can talk to anyone at any time, from colleagues to Faculty. And we have a great mix: people from all kinds of research fields, but also plenty who specialize in my area. Especially in my field, fuzzing, there are several experts—that creates so many opportunities for exchange and collaboration.

What does your typical workday look like?

It's very self-structured. I find it helpful to keep regular office hours. I plan my work packages a few days ahead and usually have one main project and one side project. Over time, you develop a structure.

What motivates you to keep going?

What motivates me most is that we're working on truly exciting, unsolved problems—with a lot of freedom. That kind of freedom is unthinkable in most industry jobs.

Which programs or offers at CISPA do you find especially helpful?

When I started here, the structured PhD Training Program we have now didn't exist yet. I think we've developed a lot in that regard. For example, there are now many opportunities for career development, like spending a few months

gaining experience in industry or at other research institutions. I also really enjoyed the PhD retreat, which took place for the first time this year. It was so valuable to exchange ideas with other PhD students about research challenges and other issues.

You're also active with the Helmholtz Juniors. What do you do there?

That's the PhD student representation within the Helmholtz Association. We advocate for better working conditions: fair pay, better contracts, less psychological pressure. CISPA is already a role model in many ways, but of course, there's always room for improvement.

What advice would you give someone who's thinking about doing a PhD at CISPA?

It really depends on your motivation. Doing it just for the title or better career prospects shouldn't be the reason. What matters most is a genuine interest in your research topic and a love of learning. If you enjoy tackling new and challenging problems, you'll be in exactly the right place here.

The interview was conducted by Annabelle Theobald. The entire conversation is available at: <https://cispa.de/en/interview-keno>

MORE GOOD NEWS

CISPA has new partnerships with the University of Cape Town (UCT) and the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS). The goal: to strengthen international exchange in cybersecurity and trustworthy AI and to enable new joint research projects and co-supervisions. This means exciting opportunities for researchers to connect, collaborate, and explore new research perspectives across continents.



© CISPA/
David Rohner

Carolyn Guthoff (links) © Privat



Three months in Seoul: K-pop, K-dramas, and kimchi—South Korea is known for its pop culture, its TV series, and its exquisite cuisine. During her PhD, CISPA researcher Carolyn Guthoff had the opportunity to not only advance her scientific work in the Land of the Morning Calm, but also gain valuable intercultural experiences and new perspectives on international research. In this interview she talks about her impressions, the challenges, and the insights she took away from that time.
Read the full interview here: <https://cispa.de/en/seoul>

Award-winning welcoming culture: CISPA offers its researchers a world-class international environment and continues to expand it. To live up to this ambition, we are constantly working to attract top talent from around the globe. Some of these new colleagues travel long distances, cross cultural and language barriers, and must quickly adapt to a new environment—and they should feel at home here. To make their arrival at CISPA as smooth as possible, our Onboarding and Integration Team continuously improves its support offerings. For its outstanding work, the team received the 'Welcome Star' award in the 'Arrival' category from the Saarland Ministry of Economic Affairs in 2025.



Alexander Baltes, Michaela Neumayr
© CISPA/David Rohner

© CISPA/Tobias Ebelshäuser



European Hackathon Series launched: Supporting young talent and training the next generation of researchers are among CISPA's core missions. With the introduction of the CISPA European Cybersecurity & AI Hackathon Championship, this mission gains another exciting dimension. The Championship will take place between November 2025 and June 2026 in major European university cities. It's an ambitious, Europe-wide initiative aimed at shaping a secure digital future by mobilizing and inspiring Europe's brightest young minds.
Find out more here: cispa.de/en/cispa-hackathon-championship

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DOCTORAL CANDIDATES AT CISPA: ARRIVING AND FEELING WELCOME

YOUR PATH TO CISPA



1 WE ARE LOOKING FOR YOU ...

Our Scientific Talent Acquisition team is constantly on the lookout for motivated young talents to join our research groups—maybe even you!

They support our researchers in finding new team members, coordinate recruiting events, and showcase career opportunities at CISPA—both in research and beyond.



3 WE REVIEW YOUR APPLICATION

First, your application is handed to the Application Team, then to the research group leaders.



5 HOW WE SUPPORT YOU UPON YOUR ARRIVAL

Our onboarding team helps you find an apartment—including helpful advice, contacts, and information about neighborhoods, prices, and more. Even without German language skills, no problem!



2 ... OR MAYBE YOU ARE LOOKING FOR US

Find a suitable position in one of our research groups on our website.

PREPARE APPLI- CATION DOCUMENTS AND UPLOAD THEM

CV, cover letter, transcript—please submit everything as a PDF on our application portal.*

*On average, it takes us six to ten weeks from the application to the response. Visa requirement? Sometimes it takes longer—but we'll support you along the way!

4

INVITATION OR REJECTION

If your profile fits: invitation to an interview. If not: feedback by email.

INTERVIEW

Get to know us better and we get to know you. Then the decision follows.

HIRING

You'll get all the information from HR—and then it's time to get started!

6

ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

We show you the steps you need to take after your arrival and help you with appointments at the town hall or the immigration office.

ONBOARDING- SESSION

On your first day of work, you'll receive hardware, access data, information about CISPA, and get to know other newly arrived colleagues.



TRAVELING WITH FAMILY?

We support you in finding the right daycare or school if you come to Saarbrücken with your child(ren).

DUAL CAREER FOR PARTNERS

Is your partner looking for a job in Germany? We offer counseling, job advice, and networking, tailored to their field of expertise.

INTERNATIONAL WELCOME HUB

Our central point of contact for all international employees with information on everyday life, health, authorities, integration, and more.

BUDDY PROGRAM

Meet other CISPA employees who can help you get started—for a coffee, lunch, or just to ask questions.

EVENTS & ACTIVITIES

From movie nights to alpaca hikes to pub crawls: We regularly organize events for new employees. Guaranteed to make connections!

SOCIAL HUB

Are you looking for people who share your hobbies? Our internal network brings you together or you can simply start your own group.



WANT TO KNOW MORE?

international.cispa.de

QUESTIONS?

welcome@cispa.de

YOU CAN FIND OPEN POSITIONS AT

cispa.de/en/career