



swiss young
academy



Innovative Policies for Fostering Academic Careers in Switzerland

Policy Highlights

Resilience and well-being in academia

Motivation

An academic career track is an ultramarathon that is often attempted to be run as a sprint. This approach tends to leave researchers with little time or energy for life outside of work and very few resources to cope when faced with challenges. However, a healthier approach to research is possible and is essential if researchers are to build a sustainable career in academia. Despite increasing diversity, researchers tend to harbor a common chorus of voices in their heads. Voices that demand perfection, or that tell them they aren't good enough and they don't belong here; voices that have driven them to excel, but that also charge a high tax. A tax on their emotional, mental, and physical health.

Action

We have introduced a wide range of courses on mental health, especially over the last several years. Though we have had courses on dealing with stress and time management for over a decade, more recently we have addressed mental resilience and well-being. The courses enable participants to:

- Identify the common challenges facing early career researchers and normalize the experience for what it often is – a rollercoaster of highs and lows, wins and losses, and hard work.
- Identify ineffective coping strategies (e.g. procrastination) and learn how to approach challenging or unenjoyable tasks through a different lens.
- Learn how shifting one's mindset can help reframe thoughts, feelings, and outcomes using a range of psychological tools, including mindfulness practices.
- Begin to understand the concept of self-compassion and how they can benefit from a kinder voice in their head.
- Reduce stressors and strains and focus on their career.
- Learn to observe stress and challenges (e.g. decision-making or navigating conflict) from a perspective of mindfulness and how they can be dealt with skillfully.

Learning

It is certainly a challenge to facilitate courses on mental health that can address the broad range of concerns affecting researchers. Expectation management in the course descriptions is thus important, to avoid what kind of issues can and cannot be tackled. The focus of such courses is less on solving problems and far more on preventing them – which means researchers should be encouraged to join at an early stage in their academic career and not wait until issues have manifested. Thus, in the future, I would explore how to better reach early academic researchers at the earlier stage in their careers.

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