Propositions to Challenge Inequality and Precarious Working Conditions in Swiss Academia

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Problem 1 - Universities as Employers

Many PhDs and PostDocs are worn down by conflicting incentives in the hierarchical structure. Faculty act as mentors, advisors, employers, and superiors at the same time. Dependency on faculty for continued employment, letters of recommendations, etc. can result in labour abuse or harassment. Duties, rights, and protections that exist for employees are often disregarded for PhDs and PostDocs, because of their supposed status as students, trainees, or "apprentices." For example, the "protected research time" that SNSF-funded projects require is often violated, and the time available for the PhD research diminishes. Moreover, misconduct of faculty, ranging from negligent advising to gross malpractice, affects PhD and postdoctoral research workers disproportionally. If, for example, a faculty member is fired for scientific or sexual misconduct or denied tenure, the members of their research group will be at high risk of losing employment and years of work without being responsible for the misconduct.

Solution 1

The participants propose to fully recognize and treat PhDs and PostDocs as employees. This includes a definition of their work, tracking work hours outside the "protected research time", introducing realistic target agreements and compulsory reviews, and issuing work instead of student resident permits. Group leaders should be adequately trained, monitored, and held accountable in cases of misconduct. PhD students should be supervised by a committee that is composed of internal and external professors, and an independent faculty member should be designated as director of graduate studies within the faculty.

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Problem 2 - Working Conditions

Research and education are the core mission of universities. However, 80% of the staff that does the teaching and research at Swiss higher education institutions is on fixed term contracts. Many of these temporarily employed PhDs and PostDocs work unpaid overtime to complete all the tasks. These precarious and unstable work conditions result in lower research productivity and quality, increase the likelihood of underprepared teaching, and create an environment in which scientific integrity is at risk. These work conditions are not sustainable, and many highly qualified researchers leave Swiss research institutions.

Solution 2

The participants suggest that at least 80% of research, teaching, and administration of universities should be carried out by permanently employed and adequately qualified employees and should not be delegated to staff on fixed term contracts. This would require a shift from project-based funding and a strengthening of national and cantonal core funding of universities.

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Problem 3 - Equity

There are many barriers in Swiss higher education and research institutions. People from historically marginalised groups face frequently insurmountable barriers. While gender inequality has been addressed by the partners of SERI (Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation; partners include Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences, ETH Board, Innosuisse, Swiss National Science Foundation and swissuniversities), there is a lack of understanding how gender works intersectionally and issues like structural racism and classism are still sidelined and declared as non-issues.

Solution 3

The participants suggest that the recruitment process for all positions should be open and competitive but that it should also ensure that candidates from historically marginalised groups are no longer underrepresented in recruitment for permanent positions. While there are some measures that aim to ensure gender equality (between cis men and women), they are not sufficient and other categories of inequality such as gender identity, disability, racialization or class background are not sufficiently considered. Universities should invest in measures that monitor and combat bias and increase hiring candidates from historically marginalised groups. This could include collecting intersectional equality data, action plans to combat institutional racism, implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities.

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Problem 4 - Internationality

Switzerland strives to be a global leader in research and innovation. A growing number of foreign students study at Swiss universities, and more and more researchers from abroad do scientific work and teach at Swiss universities. However, many legal and regulatory documents are only available in the Swiss national languages, preventing students and employees from exercising their rights and fully participating in the workplace.

Solution 4

The participants suggest making all research- and teaching-related laws and regulations as well as contracts and forms available also in English.

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Problem 5 - Participation

Non-professorial staff members are insufficiently involved in the governance of universities. Consultation of those who constitute the majority of research and teaching staff often takes place on an ad hoc basis, and the democratic involvement of mid-level staff in decision-making is limited. The involvement of members of universities other than professors in the identification of issues, in the discussion of suitable solutions, and in decisions on measures is fragmentary on all levels. Finally, existing mid-level staff organizations are insufficiently funded.

Solution 5

The participants propose that all members of the universities should be involved in the democratic governance relative to their proportion of the total number of university members. The principle of academic self-administration should apply to all levels, from the institutes to the national level. This should be enabled by the allocation of appropriate funds to the respective institution's body of mid-level staff associations.