

From precarious conditions to permanent positions? Problems, responsible actors, and solutions for strengthening the academic mid-level staff in Switzerland

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Abstract

The precarious situation of doctoral and postdoctoral researchers, resulting from fixed-term contracts and the demanding working conditions of young researchers at Swiss universities, has been increasingly discussed in recent years by academic organizations, political actors, and the broader public. While discussions on various levels are intensifying, concrete measures remain largely absent, and young researchers find themselves in an environment of job insecurity and a lack of prospects. Therefore, we organized a panel discussion on why and how to create permanent positions in the Swiss academic system during this year's annual conference of the Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research (SACM). The panel included presentations of preliminary results from a recent study analyzing the working conditions of young and emerging communication and media scholars in Switzerland as well as discussions with researchers and actors from science organizations regarding: 1) the need for improvement of the current working conditions and the future perspectives of mid-level staff at Swiss universities, 2) the responsibilities of different actors, and 3) alternatives to the status quo that help solve the precarious situation of young and emerging scholars in Switzerland and beyond. The discussion showed several reasons for establishing more permanent positions and inducing a systemic change. While there are manifold arguments for creating more permanent positions, these arguments must appeal to those with decision-making power.

1 Introduction

Members of academic mid-level staff (i. e., research and teaching assistants, doctoral candidates, postdoctoral researchers, and non-tenured assistant professors) significantly shape the development of a research field and make an indispensable contribution to the advancement of scientific knowledge (Eisenach, 2022; Wirth, Stämpfli, Böcking, & Matthes, 2008). In comparison with other countries, Switzerland has a high share of academic staff working under precarious conditions, with approximately 80 percent of under 45-year-olds employed on temporary contracts (OECD, 2021).

The academic, public, and political discourse about the working conditions in academia and the situation of the mid-level staff is a perennial issue. Precarious working conditions have been critically discussed for over 60 years in Switzerland (Hirschi, 2021) and are also heavily contested in the German-speaking neighboring countries (Baranyi & Sill, 2021; Johann, 2019; Menke & Niemann-Lenz, 2020; Wirth, Matthes, Mögerle, & Prommer, 2005). While some measures have been taken to tackle the issue, including increasing the number of tenure-track assistant professorships, a recent study by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) surveying young and emerging scholars



in Switzerland across disciplines revealed that job security is a major issue with which a high number of the respondents are dissatisfied (Legner, Pekari, & Cohen, 2022). Other reports, studies, position papers, and initiatives have been published, and all tend to agree on one point: The current conditions of young and emerging scholars are dysfunctional and need to be fundamentally restructured (Action-uni, 2017; Bahr, Eichhorn, & Kubon, 2022; Hildebrand, 2018; Nauer, 2022; Petition Academia, 2020; Schmidlin, Bühlmann, & Muharremi, 2020). One of the most recurrent and fundamental changes proposed by the reports and studies is the creation of more *permanent* positions, including creating more of the so-called “third space”¹ positions, i. e., lecturers, data stewards, or research managers (Bahr et al., 2022; Nauer, 2022; Petition Academia, 2020).

Like in Switzerland, the academic and public debate surrounding the precarious situation of young and emerging scholars has recently become more intense in Austria and Germany. The amendments of the German and Austrian higher education laws have caused furious reactions and led to ongoing protests of scientists across German-speaking countries (and beyond), pledging for an improvement in working conditions using the hashtag #IchBinHanna since mid-2021 (Bahr, Blume, Eichhorn, & Kubon, 2021; Baranyi & Sill, 2021; Siegrist, 2022).² Accordingly, both the German and the Austrian

higher education law failed to achieve the claimed advantages (Bahr et al., 2021; Baranyi & Sill, 2021) and were labeled “toxic for academia” and “detrimental to society” by initiators of #IchBinHanna (Bahr et al., 2021, p. 1114).

In communication and media research, a discipline anchored at relatively few Swiss higher education institutions,³ the number of permanent positions is even more limited compared to larger disciplines. Although the public and scientific debate about the poor working conditions of mid-level researchers has increased (Bira, Evans, & Vanderford, 2019; Eisenach, 2022; Siegrist, 2022), we believe we are far from solving the problem. Most importantly, it has not yet been sufficiently discussed *how* to provide more permanent academic positions in Switzerland.

For this reason, we dedicated a panel discussion on creating permanent positions at Swiss universities during the annual conference of the Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research (SACM) in April 2022 bringing together representatives of key actors in the Swiss scientific system.⁴

The five discussants included Dr. Julia Cahenzli Jenkins from the SNSF which plays a vital role in funding research and shaping research conditions of scientists at Swiss higher education institutions. She was joined by Prof. Dr. Hans-Johann Glock, full professor and chair of theoretical philosophy at the University of Zurich. He has worked in the academic systems of Switzerland, Germany, Canada, and the United Kingdom for over 30 years and has gathered experience as a mid-level researcher, lecturer, reader, and professor. Glock has also been engaged in the debate about precarious working conditions for years (Glock et al., n. d.). Dr. Heinz Nauer,

1 Jobs in higher education institutions have traditionally been viewed in binary terms – an academic domain and an administrative or management domain. The term “third space” describes positions located between both domains (Whitchurch, 2008).

2 In a video by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research that was subsequently deleted, a fictitious character called Hanna embodied a prototypical mid-level researcher. The video attempted to explain, from the ministry’s perspective, that without the amendment of the university law (Wiss-ZeitVG), doctoral and postdoctoral researchers would “clog the system” and argued that the constant turnover of researchers was necessary for innovation in academia (Bahr et al., 2021, p. 1114).

3 For an overview, see the “KMW-Atlas” created by the SACM: <https://sgkm.ch/en/about-us/kmw-atlas>.

4 The panel discussion was organized by the four authors of this report. Sarah Marschlich is a member of the SACM’s board of administration, serving as a representative of junior scholars, and Silke Fürst is a member of the executive board of the SACM.

scientific editor at the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences (SAGW), has authored several articles and papers discussing the current conditions of young and emerging scholars in Switzerland (e.g., Nauer, 2022). Prof. Dr. Colin Porlezza, senior assistant professor of digital journalism at the Università della Svizzera italiana (USI), Lugano, has experienced different systems as a postdoc, lecturer, and assistant professor and was formerly an SACM spokesperson for young researchers. Hannah Schoch, co-president of the Association of Junior Researchers of the University of Zurich (VAUZ) and member of the collective Petition Academia, completed the round.

In addition to the discussion, preliminary results of a study analyzing the working conditions of mid-level communication and media scholars in Switzerland, supported by the SACM and SAGW, were presented in three short input presentations by the organizers. The study entailed focus group discussions with 22 mid-level communication researchers employed at research universities and universities of applied sciences in the French, Italian, and German-speaking parts of Switzerland.

2 Need for action

The preliminary results of the focus group discussions indicate system-inherent features in addition to individual, chair-, and institution-specific factors related to the dissatisfaction with working conditions among many mid-level researchers in communication and media sciences. The study shows that many young and emerging scholars in Swiss communication and media research departments, particularly postdoctoral researchers, are dissatisfied with their current working conditions and are getting even more deeply concerned during their careers.

In line with previous findings (e.g., Castellacci & Viñas-Bardolet, 2021; Lesener & Gusy, 2017; Siegrist, 2022), we found three main causes of dissatisfaction with the working conditions, resulting in many scholars considering leaving Switzerland

or the academic system: Firstly, the high workload that causes a poor work-life balance; secondly, the expectation of increased mobility, which comes at the expense of maintaining acquaintances, friendships, love relationships, and family planning; and thirdly, the fixed-term contracts. The participants in the focus groups described fixed-term contracts as the origin of many problems because they increase the individuals' feelings of stress and insecurity and other mental health issues related to unpredictability and perceived job insecurity. Our study further indicates that temporary contracts in the postdoctoral phase promote uncertainty and competitiveness, restrict academics in their future planning, encourage unpaid overtime, and often lead to involuntary mobility.

After having presented these preliminary results, we opened the panel discussion and asked the panelists to share their thoughts concerning the status quo of the working conditions of young academics in Switzerland. All panelists raised concerns about the current working conditions of mid-level staff. While the high workload and expected mobility were not considered equally problematic by all panelists, all agreed that the uncertainty caused by fixed-term contracts is the most significant issue. Schoch and Porlezza pointed out that the issue of mental health is closely linked to the precariousness of academic working conditions but has not yet gained sufficient attention in academic, political, or public debates. Porlezza argued, “in general, we can say that the awareness of the problem of the precarious working conditions of academic mid-level staff has increased, even outside the academic system. The awareness has risen in the political arena. While in the public discourse individual issues have become more prominent, such as competitiveness and abuse of power, other relevant problems have been stigmatized and talked down, such as mental health – but these problems are systemic, even if they are not presented in this way.”

Porlezza's claim is in line with recent studies in higher education research, psy-

chology, physiology, and communication and media research (e.g., Bira et al., 2019; Evans, Bira, Gastelum, Weiss, & Vanderford, 2018; Hanitzsch, Markiewitz, Fröbel, Langecker, & Bødker, 2022). The uncertainty concerning the personal and professional future in combination with the high-performance pressure threaten academics' mental health (Bira et al., 2019; Hanitzsch et al., 2022; Lesener & Gusy, 2017; Siegrist, 2022). Additionally, other scholars showed that researchers with permanent contracts are more satisfied with their jobs than those employed temporarily (Castellacci & Viñas-Bardolet, 2021).

While agreeing that the high expectations regarding mobility and workload are indeed problematic, Glock emphasized that they are somehow inherent to the system. Concepts such as “work-life balance” and “diversity” did not play any role up until recently, Glock argued, and the expected mobility has always been part of the “academic game.” Glock observed some progress in terms of hierarchies, which are now not as pronounced as they used to be in the past. In his view, the most pivotal task today is to create more permanent positions. As the discussion progressed, the panel guests discussed the role of competition among scientists and its implication on an individual and academic system level. While a danger to mental health, a certain level of competitiveness in the academic system could also be considered a driving force for scientific progress, Cahenzli Jenkins argued. According to her, the SNSF considers competition and a certain level of change – including fixed-term contracts – as essential elements of excellent research and innovation. In contrast, Schoch argued that the high level of competition among young and emerging researchers and feelings of uncertainty due to non-permanent contracts weaken Switzerland as an attractive research location and reduce the effectiveness of the entire higher education system. According to Schoch, the most competent and highly qualified individuals who initially were (and ideally still are) highly intrinsically motivated may increasingly leave Swiss academia disillusioned because they can-

not thrive in a system that encourages suffering from mental stress.

3 Responsible actors and opportunities for improvement

After having discussed the status quo and the consequences of non-permanent employment of young and emerging scholars, we talked about *who* would be in charge of changing something and what can or should be done to improve the status quo.

The five panelists agreed that we could find useful approaches to improve the status quo in Switzerland by looking at other European countries, including the United Kingdom (UK). However, Switzerland can provide good examples of sustainably creating more permanent positions. Within the Swiss system, the hiring practices of some universities of applied sciences were highlighted by several panelists as an ideal: Even when employed for SNSF projects, most mid-level researchers at Swiss universities of applied sciences get permanent positions that come with a significantly higher teaching load compared to research universities.

Porlezza and Glock have both worked for a longer period in the UK and reflected on the main differences between the British university system and the Swiss academic system with its very high share of non-permanent positions. Why is the share of British mid-level staff without permanent positions significantly smaller than in Switzerland? Doctoral candidates in the UK are supposed to mainly focus on their dissertation rather than being a research and teaching assistant, as is often the case in Switzerland. The doctorate is considered the highest academic degree in the UK. Academic employment after the doctorate is often based on permanent contracts (HESA, 2022). There is no equivalent in the Swiss system for these permanent positions, such as research associates, research fellows, lecturers, senior lecturers, and readers. Hence, the British system offers more permanent positions, which decreases the perceived job insecurity of mid-level staff at an earlier

stage. However, as Porlezza asserted, the British system currently faces more challenges than in the past, as the number of temporary or part-time teaching jobs has also increased. Although the British academic system can serve as a role model for Switzerland in many regards, the discussants agreed that it also has disadvantages, such as high competitiveness regarding doctoral positions.

The focus group discussants and the panelists widely agreed that, in the Swiss system, one of the aspects perceived as most problematic is the lack of choice between different career paths after achieving the doctoral degree. The professorship often seems to be the only option for young and emerging scientists. In the focus groups, it was often described as an “academic one-way street” that many participants only pursue due to a lack of alternatives. However, professorships are rare in Switzerland and German-speaking countries, thus intensifying the pressure to work hard with existential concerns about the future. So, which actors are responsible for substantially improving the situation? According to the panelists, universities have various possibilities for action that they should take: Nauer advocated for a stronger promotion of alternative career paths after the doctorate other than professorships, e.g., permanent positions in the third space. Porlezza stressed the importance of flattening hierarchies within the system and shifting the possibility for tenure-track positions to an earlier career stage.

The panelists agreed that both the universities and the political system have opportunities and responsibilities for action. Schoch highlighted that the academic system will not renew from within because higher education institutions are not innovative in terms of their own structures. They typically do not proactively engage in developing and implementing concepts for sustainable personnel development (Bahr et al., 2022, p. 98). Rather, political and public pressure, as well as incentives set by the federal parliament, are needed to drive reforms forward. Adjusting the allocation formula by raising basic public

funding at the expense of project- and performance-based funding could indirectly increase the number of permanent positions, as Nauer noted. However, he finds it problematic that federal politicians tend to move the responsibility to the cantons, thus complicating regulatory actions.

To ensure intergenerational justice of academics, Glock suggested the creation of new permanent positions with new job profiles rather than extending current fixed-term contracts of existing positions. According to Glock, the latter would make it significantly more competitive and challenging for the next generation to find employment.

Another challenge lies in the ambiguous responsibilities and diversity of actors involved, e.g., the Swiss federal government, the cantons, the universities, and academic organizations, such as the SNSF. This complex constellation of responsibilities, in turn, decreases the pressure on each individual actor involved and opens the door to “passing the buck” to other actors, which thus maintains the status quo (Bahr et al., 2022, pp. 107–108). Cahenzli Jenkins emphasized that the SNSF – one of the most influential academic organizations and most important sources of funding for research in Switzerland – does not oblige universities to employ their researchers in fixed-term contracts. She underlined that it is the universities themselves, not the SNSF, which employ pre- and post-doc researchers for SNSF-funded projects and decide on the terms and conditions of their contracts. For instance, universities of applied sciences increasingly employ doctoral and postdoctoral researchers on permanent contracts even though the SNSF-funded projects in which they work are temporarily restricted. The role of the SNSF, in Cahenzli Jenkins’ eyes, is two-fold: 1) funding of research projects in which the universities themselves can determine the contracts of employment and 2) the promotion of excellent researchers, especially women. In addition, Cahenzli Jenkins considered policymakers to be responsible for reforms and for strengthening Switzerland as an attractive and innovative place for sci-

ence and researchers. In contrast, Schoch argued that the SNSF should play a more active role in improving the working conditions of young scholars. It should clearly and publicly express its support for the creation of permanent positions and send strong signals to universities and political actors, e.g., by creating funding guidelines that oblige universities to create a certain amount of permanent jobs when receiving funding.

4 Concluding remarks

The discussion revealed good reasons for establishing more permanent positions and for inducing a systemic change – most notably to fight young researchers' precarious working conditions and insecure future prospects and to ensure that the Swiss university system promotes thorough and innovative research and attracts high-quality researchers. For now, fixed-term contracts are still the norm. In communication and media sciences – a discipline anchored at relatively few Swiss universities – the number of permanent positions is even more limited than in other fields. Even though the public and scientific debate about the poor working conditions of mid-level researchers has markedly increased during the past years (Bira et al., 2019; Siegrist, 2022), Schoch highlighted that there is still a long way to go to solve system-inherent problems. After decades of criticism, many discussions still revolve around the key problems themselves and who to hold accountable rather than discussing alternatives and solutions – most importantly, how to create more permanent positions and new types of academic positions at the postdoc level in Switzerland.

Glock reminded us that the arguments for creating more permanent positions need to appeal to those with the decision-making power. Dissatisfaction, distress, and mental suffering of young researchers resulting from precarious working conditions and job insecurity may not be crucial points addressing the specific logic of decision-makers. Rather, we particularly

need to point out that the current conditions of the Swiss higher education system lead to 1) many researchers undergoing an extensive and very specific training that is eventually cut off from its utilization. Schoch highlighted that this is a “waste of public resources” that would not be possible in the corporate sector; 2) competitive disadvantages for the Swiss higher education system with many highly qualified researchers leaving Swiss academia for attractive and secure jobs in the corporate sector or at universities in other countries; 3) a decline in the quality and innovativeness of Swiss research because the daily working routines of young researchers are often not characterized by thorough elaborations and investigations of new ideas and concepts but rather by hecticness, stress, adaptations to mainstream research, and striving for the highest possible output to get the next (temporary) position (Bahr et al., 2022, pp. 106–108, p. 118; Nauer, 2022). Overall, we need to point out such arguments to emphasize that the current conditions are not beneficial for doctoral candidates, postdoctoral researchers, the scientific system, or society at large.

Most recently, in June 2022, a motion for equal opportunities and the promotion of young academics was adopted in the National Council. It mandates that the Federal Council investigates the precarious working conditions at Swiss universities and creates more stable positions for postdocs. This is a slight progress with decision-makers becoming more aware of the problem and addressing it. However, political decision-making processes are time-consuming, and it will take more time for young and emerging scholars to encounter satisfactory and sustainable solutions. Schoch noticed that the most significant recent achievement is the growing awareness of the problem and the demise of voices arguing that nothing needs to be done. Hence, it is crucial to continue discussing the issue and advocating for improved conditions. Every single one of us can raise awareness in his or her environment regarding basic problems in the academic system for mid-level staff and

the profound implications of short-term contracts on science and society.

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