

University. Now.
Forum of Swiss mid-level academic staff

University of Lausanne, 5 & 6 December 2019

Call for proposals
Deadline: 20 September 2019

Publish or perish, scientometrics, unpaid work and burnouts. Confronted with these phenomena, we are constantly asked to look towards the future while preserving the status quo. For this Forum, we are inviting non-professorial fellow academics who contribute to the life of the university **today** to join us in reflecting – in a scholarly, critical and constructive manner – upon the conditions of our work, the solidarities and differences that exist within this heterogeneous group that we term, in Switzerland, “mid-level faculty” (MLF).

Starting points

The non-professorial teaching and research staff is the greatest work force of Swiss universities. Within institutions, most of these positions are consolidated in the *corps intermédiaire* or *Mittelbau*. In Switzerland, this staff, along with “other teaching positions” amounts to almost 40’000 people, that is to say almost 10 times more than the 4’363 members of the professoriate¹.

In spite of its size and its crucial importance for the mission of the university, the non-professorial teaching and research staff occupies a subordinate position in the governance of institutions as well as in the definition of their actions. Indeed, the *Mittelbau*, through which the institutional representation of a part of the non-professorial staff is organised, appears as a flexible and malleable mass, transitioning from one job to another and therefore institutionally disempowered. The very notion of *Mittelbau* can be understood as an administrative fiction, without any real community and with no shared condition or common interests. The differences between our disciplinary fields, as well as between our origins and career paths, impede the emergence of solidarities.

Lines of investigation

The first question therefore is about this fiction: should the non-professorial faculty maintain it, challenge it or, perhaps, renegotiate it? How can we take part in institutional representation in such a way that this fictional body can work for the interests of the teachers and researchers whose positions are the most insecure? What is the common ground for mid-level academic faculty members? Their precarious condition? Their transitory status? The invisibility in which they are maintained?

How do we extract ourselves from the endless debate opposing the local breed and the global academic market that mirrors the usual economic logic

¹Numbers from the year 2016 cited in Hildbrand 2018, 12.

opposing local protectionism and free trade? How can we rethink the vocabulary that we use to evaluate teaching and research? More particularly, how do we understand excellence and the conditions that make it possible?

The efficacy of the new administrative style enforced by big funding bodies and project-based functioning is regularly called into question by academics of all levels (Koschorke 2004; Jedlicki, Pudal 2018). In the domain of research politics, at what point do the power relationships and emergencies of the present become detrimental to the diversity of intellectual production? Can we speak of an implicit decrease in the freedom of research?

Is the participation of the non-professorial bodies in the governance of universities satisfactory? What is the real weight of the mid-level faculty, and what are the limits of its action?

In these different fields – institutional representation, production of research, participation in university governance – what are the objectives and needs of the mid-level academic staff? Do our ways of approaching these fields of action bring us together or drive us apart? How do the criteria of race, sex, gender, origin (or any other discriminating factor) reinforce differences?

What are the forms of precariousness within the university and in what environments do they manifest themselves? The mid-level faculty members who are relatively privileged – those on long-term contracts, with work rates permitting a certain economic security – work alongside temporary, substitute and visiting lecturers, whose interests are not represented and whose difficulties often remain invisible. It also seems necessary to reflect upon their status and their working conditions.

Format and deadlines

We invite you to send us your proposals to contribute to the organisation of the Forum according to one of the following options: 1) presentation of an individual or collective enquiry; 2) workshop on a specific theme; 3) personal testimony.

Proposals must be sent before September 20, 2019.

The working languages of the Forum are English and French, but we would be happy to receive testimonies in German and Italian.

The Forum will take place over two days.

On December 5, we will meet on the University grounds to reflect on the main topics of this collective investigation. We will privilege horizontal discussion groups and thematic workshops over lectures.

On December 6, we will focus on sharing the results of our reflections in a less formal setting.

We are planning a subsequent publication that will bring together selected enquiries and testimonies and serve as a basis for future associative action on a national scale. We also hope the volume will contribute to the global discussion on the subject.

During the next few months, we hope to hear from the mid-level faculty members who feel concerned by the issues raised in this call, whether they plan on taking part in the Forum or would simply like to contribute to our ongoing discussions at the ACIDUL.

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Organising committee: Clémence Demay, Alexeï Evstratov, Louise Hauptmann, Hugues Poltier, Maximilien Stauber, Amélie Stuby

References

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