

Swiss mid-level academic staff associations call for maintaining funding for Switzerland's high-quality research and teaching

Switzerland's education and research system is under an unprecedented threat of funding cuts. These budget reduction programmes endanger the stability and quality of Swiss universities, research institutions, universities of applied sciences and the overall educational ecosystem, from primary to tertiary education.

As associations representing mid-level academic staff in Switzerland, we join our voices with those of the higher education institutions that strongly opposed these cuts during a joint conference on 11th February 2025 – namely swissuniversities, the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences, the ETH Board and Innosuisse. As they argued, drastic cuts in federal finances are a very clear threat to the country's competitive edge in global research and innovation. In particular, the cuts in federal contributions to universities and research funding will hinder the development of institutions that play a vital role in the nation's economic, cultural, and intellectual prosperity.

As part of this debate, we wish to highlight the unique position of mid-level staff in Switzerland's higher education institutes, who will be disproportionately affected if Parliament adopts these cuts. Numerous surveys have shown that mid-level staff already face significant job insecurity, primarily because over 80% of positions in Swiss universities are fixed-term contracts¹. While the situation is already difficult, the announced budget cuts threaten 700 research projects funded by the SNSF, which in turn puts 2,000 research positions at risk². Yet these positions are essential to the future of Swiss scientific research and teaching at all levels. They allow us to teach and train thousands of students every year, publish and share the results of our research projects, expand our knowledge and skills, and build national and international networks – all for the benefit of society. These positions, without which higher education institutions could not function, risk disappearing overnight due to indiscriminate and brutal budget cuts that ignore societal needs.

Additionally, planned reductions in mobility fundings will affect doctoral researchers and postdocs, limiting international collaboration and career development³. Moreover, within the ETH Domain alone, reserves by 2028 (relative to 2019) will be reduced by over 1 billion francs, making flexible and long-term investment for research almost impossible. At the same time, the teaching burden on scientific staff continues to grow, as student numbers within the ETH Domain are expected to rise from 37,000 to 40,000 between 2022 and 2025⁴.

As if that weren't enough, these cuts jeopardise the limited progress recently achieved through national efforts to improve conditions for academic mid-level staff. In October 2021, a petition with more than 8,600 signatures was submitted in Bern, calling for the creation of stable positions

¹ For surveys on Swiss academic mid-level staff, see <https://campaign.petition-academia.ch/surveys-on-working-conditions/>

² Netzwerk Future, « Investir dans la formation, la recherche et l'innovation pour une Suisse plus prospère et plus sûre », <https://www.netzwerk-future.ch/data/Reseau-FUTURE-Mesures-dallegement-des-finances-papier-de-position.pdf>, 11.02.2025.

³ « Overview of the package of measures and consultation draft », <https://www.news.admin.ch/newsd/message/attachments/91622.pdf>, 29.01.2025.

⁴ <https://ethrat.ch/en/eth-domain/financial-and-investment-planning/>

in the Swiss academic system⁵. The goal was to improve living and working conditions, uphold the quality of the country's education and research, and strengthen its position as a leading centre of scientific excellence. On 9th June 2022, Parliament voted on a postulate recognising the need for measures to improve the situation⁶. Following this vote, funding specifically dedicated to the next generation of scientists was approved through a Project-based Grant (PgB). This represented a crucial opportunity to initiate discussions on transforming the academic structure and addressing some of the most harmful aspects of the Swiss academic system. However, PgB funding, which supports numerous university initiatives, will now only be allocated for 2025, making the implementation of solutions nearly impossible.

If the proposed drastic cuts are implemented, the consequences will be severe: fewer research positions, declining international competitiveness, and the loss of top talent scientists and teachers to better-funded institutions abroad. Short-term savings risk inflicting long-term damage on Switzerland's academic excellence, innovation capacity, cultural and intellectual vitality, and economic future. Drastic, arbitrary and poorly considered cuts not only threaten the country's academic excellence but also undermine the quality of its research and teaching. More broadly, they jeopardise our ability to offer a public educational system that is both excellent and accessible to all.

Our politicians must ask themselves what they will truly have achieved when they have gutted the country's higher education, driven out those who sustain it, and degraded the quality of education across the primary, secondary and tertiary levels – and with it the future of Switzerland.

ACIDUL (University of Lausanne)
ACORDER (University of Geneva)
ACINE (University of Neuchâtel)
actionuni, representing scientific staff in Switzerland
AMb (Bern University of Applied Sciences)
AVETH (ETH Zurich)
AVUBA (University of Basel)
ELSA (ETH Lausanne)
CSWM (University of Fribourg)
MOL (University of Lucerne)
MVUB (University of Bern)
Representatives of mid-level academic staff in the Senato Accademico (USI)
VAUZ (University of Zurich)

Contact:

Joanna Haupt, co-president of actionuni (German)

079 812 28 80

joanna.haupt@actionuni.ch

Laure Piguet, co-president of actionuni (French and Italian)

076 462 94 97

laure.piguet@actionuni.ch

⁵ For information on this mobilisation, see <https://campaign.petition-academia.ch/>

⁶ For the results of this survey, see Haering, Barbara, Leimgruber, Vera and Lügstenmann, Marco (2023): Prekarität, Gleichstellung und akademischer Nachwuchs im Mittelbau an Schweizer Hochschulen – Bestandesaufnahme. Im Auftrag des Staatssekretariats für Bildung, Forschung und Innovation. Zürich, https://www.sbf.admin.ch/sbf/de/home/dienstleistungen/publikationen/publikationsdatenbank/chancengleichheit_foerderung_akademischen_nachwuchs.html