

Putting the data into context: A statement from actionuni's co-presidents on the SWiMS survey 2024

As the co-presidents of actionuni, the umbrella organisation of academic mid-level staff¹ in Switzerland, we are pleased to present the results of the Swiss-Wide Mental Health Survey (SWiMS) 2024. Together with 13 mid-level staff associations across Switzerland, our team conducted this survey in 2024, gathering 2'518 responses from 13 different higher education institutions. The aim was to produce knowledge on the mental health and working conditions of mid-level staff at the Swiss level — data that has been lacking until now — to objectively assess the situation and inform political decision-making.

At first glance, an academic career presents appealing prospects, mainly the ability to pursue research that will benefit society. But many of those who embark on such a career in Switzerland quickly face the lack of medium- and long-term job prospects, a string of fixed-term contracts and the underlying implicit demand of working more than one is getting paid for. This leads to a profound sense of unease and helplessness: a fifth of those surveyed show elevated symptoms of depression, as our report shows (p. 25), and many report feeling burned out (p. 33). Along these lines, over half lack awareness or trust in their institution's mental health resources (p. 41). In summary, our report shows that the topic of mental health in academia demands urgent attention and targeted action from cantonal and national bodies.

SWiMS 2024 highlights three main areas of concern, that academic mid-level staff face in Switzerland: (i) precarious employment, (ii) unethical behaviour, and (iii) high competition, which compromises the quality of research. In the hope that the survey results will help drive long-overdue improvements to working conditions in academia, we are submitting various structural measures to stakeholders for consideration. However, we would firstly like to highlight that none of these necessary measures could be implemented if the Federal Council's proposed cuts in education, research and innovation are approved by the National Assembly, and that these cuts would further deteriorate the situation of mid-level staff².

i. Precarious employment

The SWiMS 2024 data shows that the primary stress factor for academic mid-level staff is “uncertainty about your next career steps”: 39% report being “completely” stressed by this uncertainty, especially postdocs (59%), while 78% report being at least slightly stressed by their workload and 61% by their “low salary” (p. 65, p. 70, pp. 73-74). This is especially the case for foreign researchers with a non-permanent permit, who show even higher stress levels than Swiss citizens or holders of a C permit (p. 72).

This stress is caused by the structural features of the Swiss academic system, in which 80% of universities teaching and research staff are on fixed-term contracts³. Working a string of fixed-

¹ The term “academic mid-level staff” covers a range of research and teaching positions at Swiss universities: PhD researchers, teaching assistants, postdoctoral researchers, lecturers, “maître-assistant·es”, “maître de l'enseignement et de la recherche”, “chargé·es de cours et d'enseignement”, “vacataire”, “privat·dozent”, scientific collaborator. We do not use the increasingly common term “early career researcher” because it obscures part of the reality: a significant proportion of academic mid-level staff are over 40 years old and have been in the academic system for a very long time.

² Our detailed position can be found here: <https://actionuni.ch/response-to-the-austerity-measures-consultation/>.

³ <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/fr/home/actualites/quoi-de-neuf.assetdetail.35788489.html>.

term contracts is precarious, as has been underlined by a report commissioned by the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI). The report observes numerous “fixed-term positions, lack of clear prospects in academia, lack of clear career prospects in general, lack of recognition, lack of career plans” in the Swiss academic field⁴. Permanent contracts are rare because the higher education institutions are highly hierarchical, with professors at the top of the pyramid, who are often overwhelmed by the quantity of administrative, teaching, and supervisory responsibilities. Another distinctive feature of Swiss institutions is that federal research funding – despite being substantial and financing many researchers – does not allow for stabilization. Significant public investment is made without any medium- or long-term personnel policy, as if research existed independently of those who conduct it. Working in research and higher education is no different from working in other public or private sectors: workers should be guaranteed decent working conditions and long-term job prospects.

Associations that represent academic mid-level staff in Switzerland have been highlighting detrimental working conditions for years. In 2021, a national petition calling for the creation of more stable positions in academia gathered more than 8'600 signatures. In 2022, following this petition, Parliament admitted that the situation for academic mid-level staff had to be improved⁵. Unfortunately, the federal budget cuts announced at the end of 2024 threaten the already limited financial resources allocated since⁶.

Against precarious employment, we call for:

1. **The recognition of the doctoral phase as primarily dedicated to research and writing a PhD.** Working conditions of PhD candidates should be harmonized and a minimum of 60% of protected research time guaranteed.
2. **The stabilization of all academic mid-level staff after the PhD.** Upon completion of the doctorate, higher education institutions should employ researchers only on a permanent basis. Modifying the Federal Act on the Promotion of Research and Innovation (RIPA) will additionally allow the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) to stabilize researchers⁷.
3. **Equal opportunities for Swiss and non-Swiss students and researchers to find employment within academia.** To this end, the duration of residence permits for foreign nationals holding a Swiss higher education degree should be extended from six to twelve months without administrative thresholds, and researchers with a C permit should be able to retain it after a research stay of up to two years.

ii. Unethical treatment

SWIMS 2024 shows the extent to which Swiss higher education institutions can be unethical work environments: 32% of respondents reported having been directly “bullied, discriminated against or harassed” while 74% have witnessed such a phenomenon (pp. 169-170)⁸. This survey also shows

⁴ Haering, B., Leimgruber, V., Lügstenmann, M. (2023). Precariousness, equal opportunities and academic succession in the intermediate body of Swiss higher education institutions – current situation. Zurich. Report commissioned by SERI, p. 7.

⁵ Postulate 22.3390 For equal opportunities and support for young scientists, <https://www.parlament.ch/de/ratsbetrieb/suche-curia-vista/geschaefte?AffairId=20223390>.

⁶ <https://www.netzwerk-future.ch/data/Reseau-FUTURE-Mesures-dallegement-des-finances-papier-de-position.pdf>.

⁷ The RIPA, Art. 10, para. 3 could contain the following change: “Within the framework of the tasks and powers entrusted to it, the SNSF determines the appropriate instruments and form of support. It primarily encourages: a. research projects of excellence; b. highly qualified young scientists, that will be stabilised at the end of a clearly defined career path.”

⁸ The extent of harassment that this study reveals echoes the results of university-level surveys or surveys on researchers funded via SNSF grants. These surveys can be found here: <https://campaign.petition-academia.ch/surveys-on-working-conditions/>; by 2026, these resources will be moved to actionuni.ch.

management problems: 59% of respondents report having experienced or witnessed “supervisors putting pressure on researchers to work at night, on weekends and/or during their holidays” (p. 170). 26% report that their supervisor does not promote “a good work-life balance” (p. 121). In addition, more than 60% of respondents reported experiencing or witnessing “other unfair treatment (e.g., unfair hiring practices, employment conditions)” (p. 170). In response to these issues, the current structure of higher education institutions is perceived as inadequate: 40% of respondents believe that their institution will not listen “if [they] raised [a] concern” (p. 145). 53% of researchers mention that they do not know or know little of mental health support and assistance services (p. 41). When they are known, these services are not perceived as helpful by 67% of respondents (p. 42).

In recent years, considerable efforts have been made in higher education institutions to improve the mental health of their members and the working environment. It is however apparent that the existing measures still do not respond to the systemic issues outlined above. The efforts made on cantonal and national levels to raise awareness on mental health issues, to change mental health culture, to give low-threshold access and trust in psychological counselling, as well as regular and mandatory training in management for professors, must be continued. But efforts should also focus on the structural changes that could enhance the effectiveness of these tools.

To enable a safer working environment, we call for:

1. **Autonomy of academic mid-level staff.** PhD theses should be supervised by more than one supervisors. After completing their thesis, researchers should be able to conduct their research independently and being hosted at departments or laboratories without direct supervision.
2. **Less concentration of power in the hands of professors.** To ensure this, the logic of professorial chairs should be abandoned in favour of a system of smaller teaching and research organisations. In addition, job sharing should be encouraged for professor positions. Professors and principal investigators should be accompanied by HR in all recruitment processes. Staff evaluation, career development, and workplace conflict resolution should only be carried out by independent human resource staff.
3. **The empowerment of academic mid-level staff.** To allow them to defend themselves in cases of abuse of power, moral harassment or sexual harassment, it is necessary to hire two full-time legal experts to provide independent legal advice and representation. Swissuniversities, the SNSF and Innosuisse should remunerate these people and actionuni should handle their hiring and management.

iii. Research quality at risk

Our survey examined questionable research practices, such as plagiarism, falsifying data and claiming undeserved authorship. In Swiss higher education institutions, concerns about authorship emerge most frequently: 24% respondents have observed cases of undeserved authorship and 18% have observed authorship being denied to contributors (p. 187). More broadly, 34% of respondents report having “experienced or witnessed pressure to perform questionable research practice” (p. 169). The systemic culture of prioritizing quantity over quality seems to be encouraged in some cases by senior management: 15% of respondents indicate that their supervisor(s) encourage(s) them to prioritize quantity over quality (p. 122), 22% that their

institution does the same (p. 145), and 24% that their supervisor(s) do(es) not promote “a collaborative culture” (p. 121).

High-quality scientific work is a collective endeavour that develops over a very long period. The current organisation of the Swiss academic system forces researchers to produce results in a very short time frame and discourages collaboration. The competition and pressure felt by researchers not only puts mental health at risk but also jeopardizes the quality of research they produce⁹. At a time when knowledge and learning are under threat, Switzerland should strive to protect the quality of its research by giving its researchers required time and resources.

To protect research, we call for:

1. **The protection of research authors from the appropriation of their ideas, findings and results by others.** Active encouragement and financial support for open science practices, both for research data and open access platforms not controlled by publishers should be continued¹⁰. Each research institution should establish an independent committee, co-elected by the academic mid-level staff, capable of ruling in complete confidentiality in cases of disputes over authorship.
2. **The promotion of quality over quantity.** The DORA charter criteria¹¹ should be applied in all recruitment processes to ensure explicit, transparent criteria that prioritizes the intrinsic scientific content and societal value of researchers' work over their publication metrics or the reputation of journals.
3. **The stabilization of all academic mid-level staff after the PhD.** This would ensure that research is not driven by pressure for fast and low-quality output that fosters questionable practices, but by a commitment to high-quality work that society can benefit from.

Summary

According to the Higher Education Act, “The Confederation and the Cantons shall see to it that public funding of the higher education sector is enough to ensure high-quality teaching and research” (art. 41, para. 1). Actionuni urges all stakeholders involved in shaping higher education policy to take the issues of mental health and working conditions seriously, so that their commitment can be fulfilled – for the benefit of academic mid-level staff, the quality of research, and our future.

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⁹ Anderson, M. S., Ronning, E. A., De Vries, R. et al. (2007). The Perverse Effects of Competition on Scientists' Work and Relationships. *Sci Eng Ethics*, 13. Hill, R., Stein, C. (2025). Race to the Bottom: Competition and Quality in Science. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 140(2); Maddox, J. (1993). Competition and the death of science. *Nature*, 363(667); Železný, J. (2023). Why competition is bad for science. *Nature Physics*, 19(300).

¹⁰ For more information on open science positions, see: <https://www.sbf.admin.ch/en/open-science-en> or <https://www.swissuniversities.ch/en/news/press-releases/swissuniversities-and-snsf-present-revised-open-access-strategy-for-switzerland>.

¹¹ San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment. (2012), <https://sf-dora.org/read/>.