

Press release, Switzerland, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2020

***Launch of the Petition to end precarity in Swiss higher education and research institutions***

*Researchers Are Suffering*

The scientific excellence of higher education and research in Switzerland is recognized worldwide and contributes to the country's high international reputation. Thus, the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) publishes one report after another, in which they highlight that Switzerland is among the countries with the most scientific publications per inhabitant. Nevertheless, the vast majority of researchers generating these publications experience a steady deterioration of their professional situation: repeated fixed-term contracts, difficult and uncertain work conditions, increasing dependence on supervisors and superiors, and a detrimental working culture based on overly fierce competition. The resulting precarity takes a toll both on the individual and the collective: renunciation of family life and/or parenthood, financial strain, mental health issues (stress, anxiety, burnout), vulnerability in terms of mobbing and sexual harassment, and a decline in research quality.

The deterioration of working conditions in Swiss research and higher education has been known and documented for years. The number of scientific publications, op-eds and manifestos, demonstrations and strikes has been growing both abroad and in Switzerland. At the beginning of 2020, the Swiss press reported on the intense precarity of the country's next scientific generation. A study by the Swiss Academy of the Humanities and Social Sciences (SAGW/SAHSS) had previously highlighted the harsh reality of the Swiss academic system: only professors have chaired positions (with few exceptions), whereas 80% of the scientific staff is employed on precarious contracts<sup>1</sup>. This percentage represents more than 40'000 people, who constitute the so-called mid-level academics; doctoral students, post-doctoral researchers, teaching staff, and scientific collaborators.

*Still Waiting for Solutions*

Associations representing mid-level academic staff have been sounding the alarm for years. In 2018, the SAGW/SAHSS concluded their study demanding that "the number of permanent positions for highly qualified scientists be increased"<sup>2</sup>. These calls went unheard. On the political side, national representative Fabien Fivaz (Neuchâtel) submitted a parliamentary appeal in March of this year demanding that the Federal Council report on the measures taken to alleviate the precarious state of the mid-level academics<sup>3</sup>. In its utterly disappointing reply,

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<sup>1</sup> Académie suisse des sciences humaines et sociales (2018). [\*Next Generation: pour une promotion efficace de la relève\*](#). Swiss Academies Reports 13 (2), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Académie suisse des sciences humaines et sociales (2018). [\*Next Generation: pour une promotion efficace de la relève\*](#). Swiss Academies Reports 13 (2), p. 45 (our translation)

<sup>3</sup> Interpellation submitted March 12, 2020 : <https://www.parlament.ch/fr/ratsbetrieb/suche-curia-vista/geschaefft?AffairId=20203121>

the Federal Council passed the parcel back to the higher education and research institutions and their responsible bodies, pointing out that it has always supported their efforts to promote the next academic generation.

Even though the relevant authorities recognize the problematic situation, no resolution is in sight. On the contrary, the problems have been aggravated by the COVID-19 crisis, revealing once again the fragility of these jobs and the vulnerability of the researchers. At a time when Switzerland plans to invest twenty-eight billion CHF in education, research and innovation<sup>4</sup> over the next four-year period, this unacceptable situation remains unaddressed. Thus, the authorities of the academic system accept, consciously or not, that the vast majority of higher education employees are bound to the “Danse Macabre” of precarious contracts and the resulting professional and personal uncertainty.

### *Nationwide Mobilization of Mid-Level Staff*

In reaction to this counterproductive and unacceptable situation, a committee of associations representing the mid-level staff in Switzerland launched the petition “*For the creation of more permanent positions for postdoctoral researchers*”. The signatories call on the Federal Assembly to take concrete measures in order to improve the working conditions, to guarantee the quality of the research output, and to protect the health and family life of the academic staff. The petition calls for a fundamental change of the employment policies and the promotion of mid-level academics with the prompt creation of a significant number of permanent positions that can be obtained shortly after the doctorate. The goal of this reform is to stabilize the employment situation for mid-level academic staff through permanent contracts thereby eliminating the structural job insecurity that has been characteristic of the Swiss higher education sector. This would enable researchers and teachers to contribute to the creation and transmission of knowledge in an independent and in a sustainable way, in short, this would allow them to work under fair and dignified conditions.

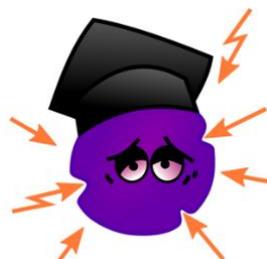
#### **The Petition Committee**

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<sup>4</sup> « Encouragement de la formation, de la recherche et de l’innovation 2021-2024 », in *Site de la Confédération suisse, Secrétariat d’État à la formation, à la recherche et à l’innovation SEFRI* (<https://www.sbf.admin.ch/sbf/fr/home/politique-fri/fri-2021-2024.html>).