

Summary of “Areas with Potential”

for the attention of the Rectorate’s Office of the University of Basel

Basel, May 2017 / avuba

Summary of doctoral student and postdoc perspectives of areas with potential for improvement with regard to current working conditions and career decision-making at the University of Basel

a) Contract issue

A lot of PhD students are still given yearly contracts while some PhD students are even given half-year or quarterly contracts, which leads to insecurity and stress. Renewal is often on short notice and conditions under which the extensions are granted depend on the professor. Maybe, standard rules could be implemented. In some faculties, the job contracts together with the doctoral agreement clearly describe tasks and responsibilities whereas in other faculties, these issues are only vaguely formulated. This can lead to confusion. In addition, very few research contracts lasting one year or more are available for postdocs, creating uncertainty in projects and teams.

b) Hiring committees

The observation has been made that candidates are selected based on the personal choices/preferences of members of the “search committees”. Furthermore, hiring practices often prioritize a candidate’s research excellence over everything else. New metrics to measure interdisciplinarity, engagement with society, teaching success, leadership and management skills, risk-taking ability, etc. could be developed and all excellence criteria could be published before positions are advertised. Statements could perhaps be produced legitimizing the choice of candidate with regard to these criteria.

c) Internationality

A lot of effort has already been made within the University of Basel to improve accessibility and overcome language barriers. However, to truly consolidate its position as a globally competitive and internationally renowned institution, the University of Basel would need to take more concrete actions to establish English as the lingua franca (e.g. provide a translation of the “Promotionsordnungen”).

d) PhD careers

Doctoral students are frequently trained exclusively for an academic career, despite the fact that the number of PhDs drastically exceeds the number of possible tenured positions. Alternative careers are often not considered or not made visible, and sometimes even discouraged.

Initiatives like the “Transferable Skills Program” are very useful in this regard and therefore should be expanded. Soft and industry skills such as presentation skills and team and project management should be an integral and certified part of a doctoral education.

The University of Basel could also further promote and organize exchange between academia and industry.

e) Postdoc careers

The majority of teaching and administration is performed by people on non-permanent contracts (PhDs and postdocs). This situation can sometimes lead to a conflict of interest between postdocs and PhD students (who both require publications) as well as the loss of highly qualified works and in-house knowledge. This creates mistrust in the academic employer, discourages people from working in scientific fields, and causes them to lose interest in science.

Due to financial uncertainty from 2018 onward, some professors are not being replaced. This may lead to reorganization and uncertainty for postdocs regarding their career prospects and the continuation of their projects.

To tackle this issue, a new scientific career path could be established: Long-term, non-tenure senior scientist positions at universities. At the same time, fewer postdocs could be hired.

f) Supervisor-student relationship

The triple role occupied by professors (superior, supervisor, and assessor) sometimes places students in an unbalanced power relationship – for example, when professors regularly cancel granted leave, demand that tasks are completed in an unrealistic timescale, or agree to accept a PhD candidate's thesis only on the condition that the candidate completes administrative work not related to the thesis. Further confusion can arise because the concrete criteria for PhD completion in some faculties are not officially declared.

g) Thesis completion dilemma

Sometimes, doctoral students are unable to finish their thesis within the scheduled four years (working out a proposal/project idea, administration, collecting data, teaching, peer review paper/publishing process). This creates uncertainty, e.g. what happens after these four years when funding finishes and the contract expires.

h) Work-life balance

In some faculties, pregnancy during a PhD is difficult and not advisable because your place on the research team/in the laboratory might be given to someone else and other team members might continue and publish your research results.

“Stay on track” could be expanded to both sexes. There is demand for a mentoring scheme for young male scientists similar to “antelope”.

Sources of information gathered in 2017: Six emails from assistants at the University of Basel, conclusions of the “We Scientists Shape Science” conference in Bern in January 2017, input from assistants at the University of Lausanne who established the online “For research” petition, and discussions with Agnes Hess from Career Advancement and Ariane Schnepf from Training and Development, who have both been offering anonymized coaching and counselling to assistants at the University of Basel for many years.