

avuba working group (AAG) on appointment and employment conditions

Position paper on the planned reform of appointment and employment conditions for doctoral and postdoctoral researchers at the University of Basel

(Dated: May 2, 2014)

1. Initial position and process to date

The Office of the Administrative Director at the University of Basel is currently preparing to reform appointment and employment conditions for doctoral and postdoctoral researchers. This is based on long-existing disparities in appointment and employment conditions (positions, salary, teaching duties etc.) which have evolved over time and to some extent depend on the culture of the subject area, and which are to be leveled out or rather harmonized. These efforts are aimed toward different groups of doctoral and postdoctoral researchers (e.g. regular assistants to professors vs. SNSF project assistants, humanities and social sciences vs. natural sciences). The current reform efforts were prompted by the recent modification to appointment conditions for SNSF-funded doctoral and postdoctoral researchers, the results of which included an increase in salary for SNSF doctoral researchers and the reorganization of working hours.¹

The Office of the Administrative Director initially discussed its reform plans in an informal working group that it had formed comprising a total of four assistants (two doctoral and two postdoctoral). It also presented the current status of the reform to a wider group of assistants in an avuba lunchtime meeting on February 19, 2014 to which avuba had invited its members. The model presented met with a very critical response from most of the assistants present.

Several avuba members then initiated a discussion process, which first led to an application to set up an official avuba working group. The avuba board accepted the application unanimously. The newly founded avuba working group (AAG) on appointment and employment conditions for assistants, in which all faculties are to be represented, aims in the short term to critically appraise the ongoing process of reforming appointment and employment conditions for assistants and to develop strategies to enable the assistants to represent their interests. In the medium and long term, the working group aims to become actively involved in the sustainable improvement of employment conditions for assistants. This is to be linked with existing discussions regarding the status of early career researchers at the University of Basel and at other Swiss universities.²

This position paper collates the discussions conducted by the AAG to date.

2. Description of the reform model proposed by the Administrative Director (on February 19, 2014)

The reform model provides for changes to the *degree of employment, teaching duties and salary levels* of doctoral (a) and postdoctoral researchers (b). Assistants to professors and project assistants are to have equal status in all cases and all matters: The same degree of employment, the same salary, the same teaching duties.

¹ As of January 1, 2014, the SNSF increased doctoral wages by an average of 7% (minimum annual gross salary). In addition, "protected time" of at least 60% of a full workload was introduced for the dissertation period.

² See the report compiled in 1999 by the "Teaching and Research Assistants" Senate committee on the topic of "Measures to improve the situation of teaching and research assistants at the university", the results of the 2011 employee survey at the University of Basel, the report and recommendations of the Swiss Science and Technology Council (SSTC) on the subject of "Career development for an innovative Switzerland. Bases for comprehensive talent promotion in academia, industry and society" from 2013 (http://edudoc.ch/record/109842/files/web_nachwuchsfoerderung_dt.pdf) and the activities recently launched by actionuni (www.actionuni.ch/activities/past_activities).

(a) The model includes the following adjustments for **doctoral students**:

- *Degree of employment*: As a rule, all doctoral students are to be appointed with an employment level of 70%. For some assistants (particularly assistants to professors), this means an increase in their regular employment level from 50% to 70%, while for others (particularly project assistants) this will decrease from 100% to 70%.
- *Salary level*: As at January 1, 2014, remuneration rates for doctoral assistants to professors have been aligned with the new SNSF rates without changes to the degree of employment. As part of the planned reform, the SNSF salary rate that now applies to all doctoral students (gross annual salary) will, in the future, be paid for a regular employment level of 70% (rather than 50% or 100% as previously). For assistants with a previous employment level of 50%, this equates to a 28% reduction in their hourly rate.³ For assistants with a previous employment level of 100%, the hourly rate will rise by 42%.
- *Teaching duties*: Only since January 1, 2014 has the SNSF explicitly permitted the involvement of SNSF doctoral students in teaching and work at the chair (taking into account a protected time level of 60% with a workload of 100%). As part of the reform, all doctoral students (assistants to professors and project assistants) will, in future, be assigned a mandatory workload of 2 hours per week in semester. They will be exempt from teaching every fourth semester. De facto, this results in teaching duties of 1.5 hours per week in semester on a normal contract duration of four years. For some assistants (particularly assistants to professors), this means a reduction in mandatory workload from 2 to 1.5 hours per week in semester, while for others (particularly project assistants) it entails an increase from 0 to 1.5 hours per week in semester.

(b) The following changes are planned for **postdoctoral researchers**:

- *Degree of employment*: According to the reform plans, the employment level for all postdoctoral researchers is to be between 40% and 100%. Generally, this should be at least 70%.
- *Salary level*: In the previous remuneration system, some people found that their salary decreased when transitioning from doctoral work to the postdoctoral phase. To counteract this, rates were adjusted on January 1, 2014. Furthermore, in the future all salaries for postdoctoral researchers are to be based on the SNSF regulations. This may result in decreased salary levels for some postdoctoral researchers (particularly those employed by the University of Basel).
- *Teaching duties*: In future, all postdoctoral researchers are to be allocated a teaching workload of 4 hours per week in semester (with an employment level of 100%).

3. Critical appraisal of the present reform

The group of assistants takes an essentially positive stance toward the reform intentions of the Office of the Administrative Director. It recognizes that the University of Basel intends to fulfill the aspiration it is constantly communicating of promoting early career researchers (3.1). At the same time, the group observes considerable shortcomings in the material, conceptual and procedural composition of the reform (3.2).

3.1 Positive aspects of the reform proposal

(A) *Fundamental desire for reform*

As people directly affected by the reform efforts, the assistants at the University of Basel welcome the fact that the Office of the Administrative Director is looking into the appointment and employment conditions that many assistants consider problematic or at least in need of some improvement. The assistants regard this as a great opportunity to incorporate various existing discussions and initiatives to improve the employment conditions of assistants (see footnote 2).

³ Rate A12, 1st year of doctorate, Uni Basel 2014: Annual salary 100% old (EL 50%): CHF 94,080, rate A12-100, 1st year of doctorate: Annual salary 100% old (EL 100%): CHF 47,040, annual salary 100% reform model (EL 70%): CHF 67,200.

(B) Increasing budget resources

The group of assistants welcomes the fact that the reform plans are accompanied by an increase in the budget resources employed for assistants.

(C) Wage increases for some assistants to professors

The assistants are pleased that, as of January 1, 2014, remuneration for assistants to professors has been aligned with those of project assistants funded by the SNSF (each in the doctoral group). The previous disparities in salary levels in some areas have been rectified through an average rise of 7%.

(D) Increase in salary when transitioning from the doctoral to postdoctoral phase

The assistants welcome the efforts already made to ensure that the salary for doctoral students increases when they move to the postdoctoral stage.

3.2. Negative aspects of the reform proposal

In addition to the positive aspects mentioned, the present reform proposal appears to have some profound design flaws that are diametrically opposed to the aim of promoting early career researchers. In particular, the assistants criticize significant components of the material reforms apparent so far (A), which are based on a problematic conceptual arrangement (B) and procedural composition (C).

(A) Reduction in salary, loss of flexibility, less family/career compatibility

From a material perspective, the reform infringes on the University's aim of promoting early career researchers. The consequences of the reform thus far foreseeable go hand in hand with a (in some cases considerable) *deterioration in the actual situation* of many assistants, which are neither disclosed nor convincingly justified:

- *Reduction in salary levels:* Increasing the general employment level from 50% to 70% means that doctoral students currently employed at 50% on the A12 rate will effectively see their hourly rate decrease by 29%. The alignment of the payment of postdoctoral researchers with the SNSF regulations means that (according to a new remuneration table presented by the Office of the Administrative Director at the avuba lunchtime meeting) a group of postdoctoral researchers will see a decline not only in their hourly rate, but also in the salary paid. For postdoctoral researchers financed by the university with a 100% workload, the downward adjustments to the remuneration table will lead to an absolute pay cut of up to 20%. Overall, some doctoral students (particularly in the humanities) and postdoctoral researchers will essentially see their work devalued. Furthermore, the introduction of mandatory teaching duties for SNSF doctoral students in the Faculty of Humanities will involve further financial losses because the teaching conducted by SNSF project assistants was previously compensated via paid teaching contracts. The reduction in pay levels will hinder salary negotiations when changing jobs in the future and will therefore impair long-term individual salary development. For early career researchers, whose actual working hours often massively exceed those formally agreed in their contracts, such a reduction in annual salary shows just how little the university values their work and represents a serious deterioration in subjective employment conditions. This is expected to result in reduced motivation and identification with the university. When we consider the significantly more attractive employment conditions (salary level and working time regulations) outside the university, this risks not only a loss of qualified early career researchers to other employers, but will also make it very difficult to recruit qualified staff.
- *Loss of flexibility:* Increasing the general employment level to 70% means that doctoral students previously employed at 50% will see their conditions more closely reflect the reality of their working lives, as most will work far more than 50%. However, this means they will largely have no opportunity to take on additional work from other projects or to become involved in other university (e.g. teaching) and non-university activities. This will impede not only motivation to acquire project funding, but also the transfer of knowledge from the university to society. Moreover, the new mandatory teaching duties restrict the mobility (e.g. research periods at other universities, fieldwork) of those assistants who previously were not required to teach. It will also remove opportunities to develop a second professional area outside academia (for example via continuing education or consultancy, work in legal or religious offices, etc.). This will intensify the professional risk for academics because the university offers very few long-

term prospects other than professorships. In practice, doctoral students previously employed at 100% will not find that the reduction in employment level to 70% brings increased flexibility because – as a rule – they too will be expected to work as though employed on a full-time basis. Overall, the reform simply trades ostensible increases in flexibility for a limited few for actual losses of flexibility for many other assistants.

- *Less scope for combining family and career:* The planned measures come at the expense of family/career compatibility. The targeted general employment level of 70% for doctoral and postdoctoral researchers represents a formal increase in workload without a corresponding increase in income. This will restrict free time without improving the financial conditions for those affected. Overall, it will become more difficult to pursue alternative professions and life plans through which academics have further social responsibilities and needs in addition to their employment at the university. Years of demanding more flexible appointment models to make families and careers more compatible are being ignored.

(B) Superficial analysis of problems, lack of defined goals, unclear consequences

In addition to content-related criticisms, the assistants also detect shortcomings in the conceptual design of the reform.

- The *analysis of the initial position* is incomplete and indiscriminate. There has been no comprehensive and differentiated analysis of the initial position that acknowledges and represents the diverse appointment and employment conditions of different subgroups of assistants. So far, the analysis of the initial position has concentrated solely on quantifiable formal indicators (employment percentages, salary, teaching duties) but ignores the different material realities in the various faculties. A realistic analysis must consider the fact that, at present, the actual employment conditions (hours worked, teaching load) largely do not match those agreed in the contracts.

Furthermore, there has been no comprehensive analysis of the initial situation in the faculties. For example, introducing a mandatory teaching workload of 1.5 hours per week in semester for all doctoral students working in the natural sciences does not even come close to meeting the existing demand for courses. In the humanities, where SNSF funds are much less regular and reliable, there is a danger that incorporating SNSF project assistants will lead to considerable fluctuations in the curriculum. This raises the question of whether and to what extent volatile project funds can actually be used as the basis for a structured curriculum.

Finally, the introduction of a standardized teaching workload fails to consider that teaching practices differ considerably both between the faculties and within individual faculties. The effective workload for preparing and conducting courses varies greatly depending on the type of course (seminar, exercise, tutorial), the phase of study (Bachelor's, Master's), the relevant teacher/student ratios, etc.

- The *aims and success criteria* of the reform remain unclear. Only one harmonization objective is discernable that is based on equality considerations. However, the notion of fairness implicitly connected with this evens out differences in the initial conditions of different subgroups (see above) and leads to new inequalities in actual day-to-day work.

The present reform plans do not clarify how they correspond to the university's overall strategic goals, for example promoting early career researchers. By their very nature, the plans suggest that academic qualifications are regarded as a matter of private interest for assistants and are not entirely part of regular employment and, therefore, not to be fully remunerated. This suggests a limited idea of the university as a school-like educational establishment.

- The *consequences and outcomes* of the reform remain largely unclear. The process of harmonizing the extremely heterogeneous employment conditions of assistants at the University of Basel and beyond affects different groups of assistants in very different ways – some will find themselves better off, while others will find themselves in a far worse position. As yet, these deeply varying consequences and outcomes have not been adequately analyzed.

Furthermore, the direct costs and benefits of the reform (both in a financial sense and relating to increases in teaching capacity at the university) have not been disclosed. This gives the impression that the University of Basel is using the reform of appointment conditions as a covert aus-

terity plan at the expense of assistants. For example, introducing a mandatory teaching workload for SNSF doctoral students will create considerable teaching capacity, which could reduce university-funded assistant positions and save on costs of temporary teaching contracts.

From the perspective of the assistants, the consequences of the reform for specific employment conditions are also unclear. This creates uncertainty, for example about the use of laboratories and other facilities as well as the associated insurance protection for a regular employment level of 70% rather than the previous 100%. The consequences of the reform for social security (claims to unemployment benefits, old age and survivors' insurance, pension funds, etc.) also remain largely unknown.

To date, the medium- and long-term effects of the reform have not been taken into account at all. For example, no consideration has been given to how the reform will affect the attractiveness of the University of Basel as an employer in a national and international context.

(C) Insufficient participation, lack of transparency and rushed decisions

From a procedural perspective, the present reform process does not satisfy the legitimacy requirements associated with such a potentially far-reaching and controversial reform. For the assistants, the present reform process has three key problems.

- *Insufficient participation opportunities for assistants and other parties:* To date, only four assistants have been involved in shaping the reform as part of an informal working group of the Office of the Administrative Director. This working group has no verifiable authority, nor does it represent the diverse range of people in this group. In addition, the working group seems to have limited opportunities to influence the reform model because – in the view of the Office of the Administrative Director – this is merely an informal consultation. As yet, representatives of the faculties and other administrative bodies have been neither included nor consulted. Ultimately, and contrary to the relevant provisions of the staff regulations, neither avuba nor other social partners have been sufficiently included in the decision-making process.⁴ This failure to involve the persons affected or other parties is also reflected in the inadequate analysis of the consequences and outcomes of the reform.
- *Insufficient transparency in the process:* The reform intentions, the specific reform model and the reform process were kept under wraps for a long time. The discussion process was not documented within the informal working group, nor has the status of the discussions been communicated to the outside world. Although the reform plans were presented to a wider group of assistants during an avuba lunchtime meeting, the presentation documents were not made available until several weeks later and were incomplete. This selective information policy has created a great deal of uncertainty. Moreover, the assistants are unclear as to what the process will entail and the opportunities for discussion and intervention as the process progresses.⁵ This too makes it impossible for the group mainly affected by the reform to come to well-founded decisions.
- *Unreasonable timeframe for the process as a whole:* The timeframe for the reform process is extremely ambitious. According to the current plans, the reform will take effect on January 1, 2015. The timing of the present reform process suggests that key decisions are to be made before or during the summer break in an attempt to “rush them through”. Considering the importance, complexity and potential for conflict and errors in the reform, the assistants regard this timeframe as unreasonable, particularly given the withholding of information by the Office of the Administrative Director, which means that there have, as yet, been barely any opportunities for systematic decision making on the part of the assistants and other persons affected (such as professors).

⁴ As stated in the staff regulations of the University of Basel dated February 19, 2009: “Social partnership: – The University of Basel is committed to a sound level of understanding between the social partners. This is a prerequisite for successful cooperation. – The staff associations are involved in the decision-making process for fundamentally important HR issues at an early stage.”

(http://www.unibas.ch/doc/doc_download.cfm?uuid=B719F694C09F28B63477F80C8B900967&vobj_id=449)

⁵ The schedule for implementing the reform recently submitted to the Deans by the Office of the Administrative Director and made available to avuba is of little help here. Although the involvement of avuba is mentioned at two points in the draft process, it remains unclear as to exactly how it will be able to contribute.

4. Specific demands of assistants

In light of the potentially far-reaching effects of the planned structural reform on the everyday working lives of assistants and the conflicts associated with such reforms, as well as the potentially extensive consequences for the positioning of the University of Basel as an attractive employer and distinguished academic institution in the national and international academic landscape, the group of assistants advocates a particularly cautious approach to organizing, planning and implementing the reform. In view of the criticism leveled at the composition of the reform, the AAG calls for adjustments to the following material (A), conceptual (B) and procedural (C) cornerstones of the reform.

(A) Lasting improvements for early career researchers!

From a *material perspective*, the assistants call for a reform oriented toward the university's overall aim of promoting early career researchers. Therefore, those reform elements that will lead to a predicted deterioration in appointment and employment conditions for individual subgroups of assistants are particularly unacceptable. The assistants see the reform as an opportunity to take an important step toward future-proof appointment and employment conditions and thus to fulfill the strategic aim of the University of Basel of promoting early career researchers. The vision of sustainable appointment and employment conditions for assistants is based on the following key pillars:

- *Appropriate remuneration:* Recognition of the assistants' accomplishments in research, teaching and self-organization by means of remuneration suited to their versatility, grade and individual commitment. Under no circumstances can remuneration that meets these requirements lead to a reduction in hourly or annual pay. Instead, it demands a further increase in the staff budget for teaching and research assistants and a long overdue increase in salary for postdoctoral researchers too.
- *Realistic employment contracts:* Consistency between formal and "actual" contracts, i.e. employment contracts and job descriptions that reflect the research (including qualification work), teaching and self-organization involved.
- *Flexible degree of employment:* Flexible framework conditions for university employment (part-time, job sharing) to meet the needs of different family structures and to allow both mothers and fathers to look after their children.
- *Long-term prospects:* Alternative university career prospects for academics other than professorships as part of a distinction between academic job profiles; in particular, this also includes long-term and separate (i.e. independent of professorial directives) employment opportunities in research ("researcher") and teaching ("lecturer").⁶

(B) A reform that is appropriate to context, purposeful and sensitive to consequences!

From a conceptual perspective, the group of assistants calls for a comprehensive and differentiated analysis of the problems to be addressed by the reform, the identification and justification of the objectives pursued with the reform and the success criteria against which the reform must be measured, as well as an appraisal of the direct and indirect consequences of individual measures and the reform as a whole.

- *Differentiated status quo analysis* taking into account the following points:
 - Appointment and employment conditions for different subgroups of assistants (doctoral and postdoctoral; budget-funded positions, SNSF funding and other funding; different faculties and subject areas). Existing analyses – such as employee surveys at the University of Basel and studies on the status of early career researchers in Switzerland – are to be included in particular;
 - Situation in teaching (teaching requirements, etc.) and research (research cultures, etc.) in different subject areas.
- *Clarification of the reform objectives and success criteria*, including
 - Orientation toward comprehensive objectives and principles authorized by university bodies (such as promoting early career researchers);
 - No premature decisions on principles and objectives that do not result from existing cross-university goals (such as the principle of harmonizing appointment and employment conditions for different subgroups).

⁶ See here the notes in footnote 2, particularly the report and recommendations of the SSTC.

- *Calculation of the direct and indirect consequences of measures* and the selection of suitable, promising measures with few indirect consequences.

(C) Broad support base, transparent structure and slower decision making!

From a *procedural perspective*, the group of assistants calls for the subgroups affected by the reform in different ways (doctoral and postdoctoral researchers from various faculties and positions) to be comprehensively and substantially involved and for the decision-making and communication processes associated with the reform to be structured transparently and executed in a timeframe appropriate to the scope and complexity of the reform. In detail, this includes:

- *Opening up and broadly supporting the reform process* in the form of comprehensive, representative and effective participation by the assistants in a separate Senate committee that also incorporates other status groups (particularly professors) indirectly affected by the reform. The social partners are to be included in the decision-making process from an early stage.
- *Transparent structure to the reform process*: Documentation and access for all university members to all information about the reform proposal (including the as yet unpublished planned adjustments to the remuneration tables).
- *Slower pace to present process*: Postpone the date on which the reform will be implemented and place the reform in an appropriate timeframe.