

Statement by the Assistants' Association of the University of Basel on the SNSF Multi-Year Program 2017–2020

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A) avuba position on the SNSF multi-year program 2017–2020

As a body representing the interests of doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers at the University of Basel, avuba (the Assistants' Association of the University of Basel) has prepared a statement on the multi-year program; see

http://www.snf.ch/SiteCollectionDocuments/mehrjahresprogramm_2017_2020_e.pdf,

<http://www.snf.ch/en/funding/projects/innovations-project-funding/Pages/default.aspx> and

<http://www.snf.ch/SiteCollectionDocuments/projektfoerderungsreglement-e.pdf>

According to the SNSF, the multi-year program 2017–2020 aims to ensure the development of Switzerland's research and its excellent international position. avuba supports this aim, but regrets that the SNSF has evidently decided to act independently. avuba particularly regrets that the SNSF has not incorporated the many suggestions developed over the past months and years in numerous discussions about the situation of Swiss early career researchers, nor has it communicated or commented on these suggestions via "state of the art" means.¹ In particular, evidence has not been provided to back up the supposed benefits of the new funding instruments or to demonstrate experience gained.

avuba sees significant disadvantages in the restructuring of early career researchers' development, particularly for doctoral students at cantonal universities, who are not funded by the SNSF. One-project funding also has negative consequences for smaller departments. Finally, it appears that the SNSF requirements for top-level research are oriented toward the natural sciences and do not take into account the different subject cultures and their specific forms of research.

B) Critical statement from the perspective of doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers (relating to the document "Multi-Year Program 2017–2020")

2.2 Aims of the SNSF (page 8 et seq.)

○ Internationality

SNSF: According to the SNSF, by far the largest proportion of funding is to continue to be awarded in a purely competition-focused, research-driven manner without

¹ In particular, greater reference could have been made to the suggestions discussed by the Swiss Federation on the part of the "group of young researchers" (Vision 2020):

<https://www.parlament.ch/centers/documents/de/positionspapier-vision-2020-d.pdf>;

On April 22, 2015, avuba also publicly addressed this topic: "Propelled into an uncertain future!? Unclear prospects for early career researchers at Swiss universities."

any thematic, strategic, or structural conditions. Above all, the internationality of research will be promoted with corresponding incentives.

Criticism: For subject-specific reasons, projects from the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Law generally have fewer opportunities for international networking. Based on the realignment of the allocation criteria, it is to be assumed that projects submitted from these subject areas will receive less attention in the future, while projects from the ETH Zurich or EPFL will receive greater financial support. This gives the impression of an unspoken agenda on the part of the SNSF to reduce early career researchers' development in the disciplines outside the MINT subjects, with the consequence that these subject areas will become less innovative and competitive in the medium term.²

The sole focus on internationality also moves the emphasis away from the possibility of interdisciplinary and interuniversity core research areas, forgoing opportunities to develop national focal areas outside large-scale national research programs (NRP/NCCR/Synergia).

Part 1: Priorities 2017–2020 (page 12 et seq.)

○ Excellence

SNSF: Through the competitive allocation of funding, the SNSF is making a major contribution to the setting of academically comparable standards. Awarding funding to large and collaborative projects aims to support (1) interdisciplinarity and (2) “breakthrough research”.

Criticism: The SNSF has presented no experience to support the project allocation strategy proposed. No reasons have been given to explain how this strategy sets a particular academic standard. Nevertheless, the SNSF measures work on the assumption that greater competition in research will prove a greater driving force for “breakthrough research” than a culture of enablement. The term “breakthrough research” is imprecise and difficult to define. And it is not clear how this is to be made an equal quality criterion for different subject cultures. In addition, the SNSF has signed the Dora Declaration (declaration of research assessment). This calls for the waiving of only publication-based measurement methods when making decisions on funding, employment, appointments, and promotions.

○ Evaluation

SNSF: The SNSF has identified the practice of evaluating research as a “challenge” and, at the same time, has declared that the fair competition of ideas between researchers is to be promoted. It also makes reference to the great burden placed on the Research Council and external experts.

Criticism: No mention is made of the evaluation criteria to be applied. According to the Dora Declaration, the criteria used to evaluate submissions are to be “explicitly” stated. To simply identify these criteria as a “challenge” does not equate to a transparent evaluation process.

With regard to the great burden on the Research Council and external experts, it is also unclear why plans are underway to centralize evaluations (Doc.Grants).

² The President of SANAS (Swiss Association for North American Studies), Professor Philipp Schweighauser, has already highlighted significant problems for the social sciences and humanities (Message from the SANAS President, April 6, 2016).

Part 2: Funding portfolio 2017–2020 (page 22 et seq.)

○ Project funding

SNSF: As a rule, researchers can only submit applications for one ongoing project in a particular funding period. The SNSF may allocate a second amount of money if the topic of the overlapping research project clearly differs from the project already underway and the person submitting the application proves that they can also make a substantial contribution to the second project.³ The SNSF awards funding for a maximum of four years.⁴

Criticism: The one-project rule is difficult for small subject areas and research projects with only a few doctoral positions. If an applicant is no longer able to submit another project, the previous university-financed start-up funding will come to nothing. Projects that focus more strongly on the interests of the doctoral student will also be made more difficult. In addition, certain topics can be better addressed in small projects than if they had to be tackled as part of one large, combined project.

It is impractical for the research period to cover the same timeframe as the matriculation period because – particularly in the first year – the detailed concept must be developed with the aid of start-up funding for doctoral students. This will no longer be possible unless the SNSF extends funding to five years from the time of matriculation.

○ Doc.Grants

SNSF: Doc.Grants replaces Doc.CH and Doc.Mobility. Submissions will be evaluated at a national level.

Criticism: In the future, only one source of career support will be available to all disciplines at doctorate level. The withdrawal of Doc.Mobility means that university-funded doctoral students will be excluded from the mobility program. SNSF-funded doctoral students from all subject areas are to benefit from SNSF mobility grants, while doctoral students in receipt of university funding will be excluded. This goes against the principle of equal treatment and equal opportunities. Within the SNSF mobility grants, there is also a danger that – due to the restrictive SNSF project funding for social sciences and humanities – most opportunities will be granted to doctoral students from natural science subject areas.

Doc.CH was predominantly a line of funding for the humanities. Now, all disciplines can apply for money from this fund. This is to be welcomed if accompanied by a substantial increase in awards. Otherwise, this gives the impression that these changes are designed to reduce the funding allocated to the humanities.

Since Doc.Mobility is being replaced by Doc.Grants, the task of evaluating early career researchers is being transferred from local research committees to the SNSF. There is still no evidence that the principles of equal opportunities and diversity can be maintained despite central and formalized evaluation.

³ (<http://www.snf.ch/SiteCollectionDocuments/projektfoerdersreglement-e.pdf>, Art. 13).

⁴ (<http://www.snf.ch/SiteCollectionDocuments/projektfoerdersreglement-e.pdf>, Art. 2)

C) Conclusion

Contrary to Switzerland's political conventions, the SNSF has not carried out a consultation or drawn up an implementation plan or schedule for its concept to allow the many people affected by the reform to participate in the process. Instead, the SNSF is now informing them of measures already agreed and published.

avuba therefore criticizes not only the various premature or underdeveloped policy decisions made, but also explicitly regrets the authoritarian and technocratic manner in which the SNSF has treated its university partners. It also criticizes the waiving of both academic discourse and academically based processes as the foundation for important decisions affecting the whole of Switzerland. avuba fears this will damage Switzerland as a research location, the cantonal universities, and Swiss early career researchers. Although the SNSF states that early career researchers' development will remain the "top priority" for higher education institutions in the future, the reform leaves central aspects open. For this reason, avuba calls on the National Research Council of the SNSF to return to the points mentioned and, in particular, to critically examine the many suggestions raised for discussion by various parties over the last few months.