

Summary of “Areas with Potential” including feedback from the President’s Office of the University of Basel

Basel, July 2017 / avuba

Black text: Taken from avuba’s official “Summary of Areas with Potential” statement, which was discussed with the President’s Office on May 8, 2017

Purple text: Taken from the President’s Office memorandum for the President’s Office meeting on May 5, 2017 about the “Concerns of avuba” agenda item

Green text: avuba notes on discussions with the President’s Office and HR in May/June 2017

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

Comment from President’s Office according to memorandum of 5/16/2017:

On May 8, 2017, the avuba executive board met with the President to discuss some matters of concern to the doctoral students and postdocs at our university. These concerns are listed in the paper “Summary of Areas with Potential for the Attention of the President’s Office of the University of Basel”. The President’s Office looked at the paper in meeting 17/14, took note of the concerns expressed, and commented on some of the points addressed.

The President’s Office will also make the deans aware of the concerns of doctoral students and postdocs within the President’s Council and will ask the faculties to attend to the groups’ concerns.

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.

Comment from President’s Office according to memorandum of 5/16/2017:

In the Faculty of Science, new contracts are not being issued for doctoral students and postdocs because only minor alterations have been made to the terms of employment.

Additional comments from avuba:

Upon request, the university’s human resources department provided avuba with the following statement: “All assistants who were moved to a different pay scale group as of February 1, 2017, received corresponding confirmation from HR. This stated that the existing employment contract would remain valid. Since salaries have changed for some people only, we in HR decided not to issue new employment contracts.”

In summer 2017, HR will analyze the duration of employment contracts for doctoral students in the Faculty of Science and will share the results with avuba.

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.

Additional comments from avuba:

According to the President’s Office, leadership is something that a person must apply/learn through practice. Given the high degree of diversity in these committees the mentioned risk is thought to be minimized. Furthermore, research excellence comes first, followed by the link between research excellence and other factors (teaching, engagement with society, etc.). Therefore, publications are and remain very important – they are valued and taken seriously by peers. Researchers therefore also value the “letter of references”.

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”).

Comment from President’s Office according to memorandum of 5/16/2017:

It would cost a lot to translate the university’s legal regulations, including its doctoral study regulations and many more; this is not the top priority at present. The organizational units are free to pursue this matter themselves.

d) Doctoral careers

Doctoral students are frequently trained exclusively for an academic career, despite the fact that the number of doctoral students drastically exceeds the number of possible tenured positions. Alternative careers are often not considered or not made visible, and sometimes even discouraged. Initiatives such as the transferable skills program are very useful in this regard and therefore should be expanded. Professional and “soft” skills such as presentation skills, team working, 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.

Additional comments from avuba:

According to the President’s Office, assistants at the University of Basel may use the university’s own services and the transferable skills services offered by Eucor. Exchange with industry should take place during a person’s studies where possible, for example as part of an internship. Certain doctoral programs already cover the targets and opportunities addressed.

e) Postdoc careers

The majority of teaching and administration is performed by people on non-permanent contracts. 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 work 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.

Additional comments from avuba:

The President's Office states that, in summer 2017, the university will know how many cuts are required. No statements can be made on this topic before this point. Professor Schenker-Wicki will be very happy to answer all open questions from assistants at the avuba lunchtime meeting on September 26, 2017. By then, she will have a better idea of the cost-saving measures to be taken.

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.

Comment from President's Office according to memorandum of 5/16/2017:

A doctoral agreement must be concluded between supervisors and doctoral students in all faculties in accordance with the applicable regulations; the rights, duties, and tasks of a doctoral student must be defined here in agreement with the supervisor to ensure that doctoral students have sufficient time for their dissertation and are not burdened with unexpected tasks (such as administration).

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 as to what happens after these four years when funding finishes and the contract expires, for example.

Comment from President's Office according to memorandum of 5/16/2017:

When an employment contract expires, so does the insurance coverage that doctoral students require to work in the laboratories. The university must ensure that university staff not employed on a permanent basis also have liability and accident insurance (this is the responsibility of the executive director).

Additional comments from avuba:

The President's Office points out that funds are limited. In specific cases, individual solutions are preferable to rigid general rules and are considered to be more targeted. Problems can also be escalated if an agreement cannot be reached with the person in charge. To date, very few cases have been presented to the President's Office in this matter.

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".

Comment from President's Office according to memorandum of 5/16/2017:

This matter will be passed on to the Equal Opportunities Office for review and statement.

Sources of information of the "Summary of Areas with Potential" 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.