

## **avuba PhD & postdoc survey: assistants would like more transparency, more security**

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*No structural overload and longer employment contracts: these are two of the key concerns of assistants brought to light by a survey of the Assistants' Association (avuba). Initial solutions were discussed in talks between avuba and Vice President Thomas Grob.*

In autumn 2018, doctoral students and postdocs at the University of Basel were asked to take part in a survey. The [results of this survey](#) were then analyzed by the Assistants' Association of the University of Basel (avuba) and presented to the President's Board. This analysis revealed that the results, when broken down by individual faculty or by gender (male and female assistants), diverged in only a handful of cases.

The assistants' assessment of direct supervision was very positive: a large majority felt that their work is valued, that they have enough freedom in terms of conducting their research and organizing their own time, and that the quality and/or format of discussions with their advisors is valuable.

### **Working hours insufficient**

However, many of the respondents complained that their paid working hours are not enough to enable them to complete their assigned work and spend time on their own research. There is no simple solution to this problem, stresses Professor Thomas Grob, Vice President of Teaching, "because interests can differ greatly depending on the chosen career path. Someone aiming to enter the private sector as soon as they receive their doctorate will only be interested in their dissertation," he says. "But for someone aiming for an academic career, experience in supervising students, in teaching and administration are valuable elements in a CV." He added, however, that it is important that this should consist of actual academic work and not administrative tasks for which no one else is available.

### **Transparency in workload**

"Many assistants complain that they have to work weekends to complete their workload – no matter how high their employment grade," says Patricia Eiche, avuba's Head of Administration. Vice President Thomas Grob takes this state of affairs very seriously. "If this commitment is not voluntary and there is no time left over for friends, family, free time or holidays, then that is not at all in line with the objectives of university management," he says, adding that structural overload is therefore unacceptable. Many researchers may spend longer in the laboratory or the office than required, "but if they are doing so out of passion for their work, there is no reason not to," says Vice President Grob. "In such cases, we have to be honest and say: if you have an academic career in mind, you won't get far with a 42-hour week."

Many assistants complained in the survey that the mutual expectations around workloads were not clearly discussed and defined at the beginning of their doctorates. The most important thing is transparency, says Grob, “because doctoral students need to know from the beginning what is part of their job and what isn’t.” He adds that “the requirements can differ greatly from division to division, and from project to project. But there must be certain ground rules.”

### **Desire for more security**

Both doctoral students and postdocs have fixed employment contracts, with the majority of respondents on contracts of one year or less. Not only does this lead to constant insecurity regarding their working conditions and career planning but also a greater dependence on supervisors, who decide on the actual work that they do, as well as any contractual extensions.

Vice President Grob promises that university management will consider this concern in good faith, adding that there is a general desire to evaluate interdependency. One possible solution at the doctorate level may be to nominate a secondary supervisor upon concluding the doctorate agreement. “This would ensure that the doctoral student always has a second contact, who would also be able to take on something of a monitoring function,” says Grob. The link between supervisory and evaluating roles, as well as the high number of short contracts, will also need to be discussed. Also up for consideration is whether the introduction of a postdoctorate contract might prove beneficial.

Together with representatives of the assistants, university management will now work on solutions to deal with the problems raised in the survey as quickly as possible.



Thomas Grob in a discussion with Patricia Eiche