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## **Response from actionuni, Swiss Midlevel Academic Staff, to the consultation procedure about the ERI dispatch 2025-2028**

Dear Sir or Madam,

Please find below the position paper of actionuni, the umbrella organization for midlevel academic staff at Swiss higher education institutions (HEIs), on the draft of the Federal Council's dispatch on the promotion of education, research and innovation for the period 2025 to 2028 (ERI dispatch 25-28).

### **1. Preliminary remarks**

Actionuni is grateful for the opportunity to get consulted on a preliminary version of the ERI dispatch 2025-28 and would like to see this practice repeated for future ERI dispatches. We welcome the importance given to the fields of education, research and innovation, but the planned funding is too low. We therefore strongly oppose the substantial budgetary cuts that would result from the contributions proposed in the current version of the ERI dispatch 2025-28. While we are aware of the delicate financial situation of Switzerland, **we urge you to keep adequate funding for HEIs in Switzerland, in order to maintain the quality of the education, research and innovation that make Switzerland an internationally attractive**

**place for science.** The proposed budget cuts will have a severe impact on institutions in the ERI sector, adding to the tensions in a context already marked by numerous crises, such as rising energy prices, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and climate change. Competition for limited financial resources, whether between the various players in the ERI sector or within the HEIs themselves, will be detrimental to the quality of education, research and innovation, and thus to society as a whole.

You will find below our consolidated opinion on the issues most relevant to doctoral students, post-docs and the rest of the scientific employees who make up the midlevel academic staff at Swiss HEIs.

## **2. Objectives for higher education institutions (section 1.3.2)**

**Objective 1:** The institutions of the ETH domain maintain their excellence in teaching and research, and make a substantial contribution to developing solutions to urgent challenges in science, business, society and politics.

Actionuni supports this objective. Maintaining the level of excellence of the institutions of the ETH Domain requires sufficient funding (see part 1) and strong international collaborations (see part 3). Furthermore, excellence in research is not just a question of scientific output, but also of the quality of the research process. **Scientific integrity and an improved research culture are central to ensuring the excellence of Swiss HEIs, and of the ETH domain institutions in particular.** To this end, all Swiss HEIs have signed the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA). In our view, initiatives to improve research ethics should be explicitly mentioned in the ERI dispatch 2025-28.

**Objective 2:** Higher education institutions train the next generation of scientists, economists and social scientists. By promoting diversity, equal opportunity and inclusion, they make the most of existing talent potential.

For actionuni, training the next generation of scientists is one of the pillars that will enable Switzerland to maintain its status of scientific excellence (see section 4). The next generation of scientists consists mainly of doctoral and post-doctoral students at Swiss HEIs. **Training the next generation requires structural and financial commitments to improve conditions for young scientists:** less precarious career prospects, fair and clearly defined framework conditions, minimum salaries that allow for a decent standard of living, and support structures, particularly to ensure good mental health. To ensure a lasting improvement in working conditions for the next generation, we also need to give them a seat at the table. For this reason, actionuni suggests adding "representation" to this objective:

**Objective 2:** Higher education institutions train the next generation that science, the economy and society need. By promoting diversity, equal opportunities, inclusion **and representation**, they make the most of existing talent potential.

Midlevel academic staff is currently under-represented in strategic discussions at Swiss HEIs, particularly at federal level. One of the only federal bodies on which actionuni has voting representation is the Swiss Accreditation Council (SAC). For the period 2021-24, actionuni was represented by two seats, one of which was shared with the Swiss Student Union (VSS/UNES).

When the SAC was renewed, the number of SAC members was reduced from 20 to 15, and a single seat was allocated to actionuni. Project 15 of the ERI dispatch 25-28 proposes amending Art. 21 of the Federal Act on Funding and Coordination of the Swiss Higher Education Sector (HEdA), in order to reduce the number of SAC members required to carry out their main activity abroad from "five" to "three to five". This change will bring the number of members working abroad into line with the total number of SAC members, thus ensuring an appropriate balance of interests. **Actionuni is opposed to reducing the number of SAC members** and therefore proposes to reject the amendment to Art. 21 HEdA. On the other hand, we believe that the HEdA should be amended to include the national associations representing the Swiss intermediary corps (actionuni) and students (VSS/UNES), for example as standing committees to prepare the decisions of the University Council, as defined in art. 15, paragraph 1 HEdA. **This should go hand in hand with a financial contribution to enable these two associations to establish and maintain a permanent secretariat.** This support will enable the next generation of scientists to participate and be represented in a way that will no longer be subject to the recurrent fluctuations and loss of knowledge that currently hinder the full participation of early career researchers in debates, at a level as informed as that of other stakeholders, who are far more professionalized.

Actionuni welcomes the fact that the promotion of diversity, equal opportunity and inclusion is included in this Objective 2. Our position on this topic is developed in more detail in section 6.

**Objective 3:** Higher education institutions preserve and develop their specific typological profiles.

As a result of the academicization of Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS), UAS researchers are becoming key players in the new research model currently being developed. They are developing research projects funded by the highest scientific authorities, in applied sciences as well as in other fields. These bodies are also developing inter-institutional collaborations within Switzerland and internationally. This change in the research landscape should be reflected in **more substantial encouragement of research and early career researchers within UAS** and the collaborations mentioned above.

**Objective 4:** Higher education institutions strengthen their international cooperation to ensure the competitiveness of the entire Swiss ERI system and increase its resilience.

International cooperation is an essential quality factor for research in Switzerland. Actionuni fully supports this objective (see part 3 for more details).

### **3. International cooperation**

International cooperation is essential to ensure the quality of teaching, research and innovation at HEIs. For Swiss early career researchers with ambitions of a career in academic research, it is vital to be able to build up an international network, in particular by participating in collaborative projects with institutions outside Switzerland, and to be able to spend part of their career abroad. Actionuni therefore fully supports the proposed guarantee credit for international cooperation in education, research and innovation.

Non-membership of the Horizon Europe program is particularly detrimental to young scientists. Actionuni welcomes the transitional measures that have been put in place to address the fact that Swiss researchers are unable to receive project funding from the EU. However, these measures are no substitute for full participation in the research program, and we are convinced that **association with Horizon Europe, as soon as possible, must be an absolute priority for the Federal Council.**

#### **4. Academic career and next generation scientists**

Actionuni welcomes the explicit prioritization of fostering the next generation of scientists and promoting equal opportunities and diversity. This is absolutely essential to ensure the quality not only of research, but also of higher education in the long term.

What is needed are not only career development opportunities within and outside higher education, but also **structures that support early career researchers during the particularly difficult transitional phases in their careers.** One of the biggest obstacles for young scientists are fixed-term contracts, corresponding to the duration of research projects, and the resulting uncertainty. Switzerland has a lower proportion of fixed scientific collaboration positions than the rest of Europe or the USA. It is crucial to **diversify academic careers** to avoid the almost binary choice that currently exists: either try to become a professor, or leave the academic world. This is why actionuni is proposing the **creation of more permanent positions for scientific collaborators within HEIs**; this will reinforce the quality of research and teaching, which is necessarily a long-term process. Similarly, early selection should not be based solely on academic output criteria, but should respect and encourage diversified career paths, thus guaranteeing and reinforcing the priority of equal opportunities.

Actionuni welcomes the adoption of postulate [22.3390](#) "For equal opportunities and support for early career researchers" by the National Council on June 9, 2022. We expect the answers to the questions raised in this postulate to provide new insights into the promotion of academic careers and equity. We encourage the Federal Council to **incorporate the conclusions of this postulate into the final version of the ERI 2025-28 dispatch.**

#### **5. Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF)**

A further measure to improve conditions for early career researchers would be to **strengthen the SNSF's career support instruments.** This would enable the SNSF to better meet its objectives of fostering highly qualified young scientists and ensuring the sustainability of research, both of which are cited in the preliminary draft of the ERI 2025-28 dispatch. The various career support instruments proposed by the SNSF are inadequate: the conditions to enable researchers to carry out high-quality work are not in place, as highlighted by the actions taken by the bearers of the [Petition Academia](#) on academic insecurity, addressed to the Federal Assembly on October 8, 2021.

Although the SNSF's statutes state that the foundation's objectives are to fund projects, not positions, it is urgent and indispensable for the SNSF to deploy greater and more significant resources to offer researchers decent conditions. The SNSF must develop **solutions to**

**provide greater support for the stabilization of early career researchers conducting independent projects, as precariousness cannot be the breeding ground for excellence.**

We consider that the laureates of grant projects enabling scientific independence (such as the scholarships "Ambizione", "SNSF Starting Grants" or "SNSF Consolidator Grants") should be able, after expiration of their financing, to keep an employment rate of at least 20 % within their institution. This would provide them with a degree of security when applying for the funding they need to continue their careers. The financing for these positions could be a contribution borne partly by SERI, partly by the canton to which their institution belongs, and partly by their university.

Finally, to ensure equity, we call for an **independent evaluation to ensure that SNSF guidelines and standards are respected at all HEIs**. Some doctoral students whose projects are funded by the SNSF are hired on part-time contracts, even though they work full-time. In some institutions, such as the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID) in Geneva, PhD students have to pay high tuition fees, spend more than the recommended 20% of their time on tasks unrelated to their thesis (notably teaching duties), or have no access to the resources and infrastructure required for their research. HEIs should be held to stricter standards regarding employment and working conditions for doctoral students taking part in SNSF-subsidized research, such as a minimum percentage, guaranteed protected time for research and optimized supervision by the thesis director.

## **6. Equity: diversity, inclusion and equal opportunity**

From the perspective of actionuni it is fundamental that the ERI dispatch 2025-28 has identified equity as a transversal topic. However - and precisely because this issue needs to be tackled on all levels of higher education - **actionuni would like to underline the importance of concrete measures to be taken by all HEIs to encourage equal opportunities and access**. Persisting challenges, such as the "glass ceiling" for women hindering them to attain positions of high responsibility and leadership in research or management, show that it is not sufficient to intervene on solely one dimension or career step.

To actively address these issues, HEIs should not hope for digitalization as a quick-fix solution for a more democratic access to education (p.38 ERI dispatch). Besides national initiatives promoting equity and the fostering of diverse academic careers, **actionuni urges the HEIs to propose local solutions**. Much of the success of a scientific and professional career depends on knowing how to navigate the specific disciplines, being part of the "right" networks, and being aware of opportunities and pit-falls during the time at the university. Hence, we propose to implement **peer-to-peer support on all levels**, ideally pair-wise between more advanced students and beginners and between more advanced researchers and PhD students. Such an offer would especially benefit those in higher education whose parents do not have an academic background, and those who are not well acquainted with the local language, customs, and policies. These students and young researchers need a trustful contact whom they can ask questions that they would not ask to their supervisor. This will reduce imposter syndromes, make them feel part of the community and increase their self-confidence to aspire to pursue a career in research, management or leadership.

Many researchers undergo the stress of living as a single parent, which deplete their chances of enjoying responsibilities they could accomplish if measures were developed to decrease these circumstantial inequities. In most cases, these parents who carry most of the children-rearing responsibilities after a separation are women. This can for example affect the ability of these researchers to take part in international conferences at which they can present their scientific findings and network, as well as have an impact on their academic mobility, an essential aspect of an academic career. We therefore encourage the development of programs which would a) acknowledge and document the specifics of these situations and their impact on parents' possibilities to achieve their potential b) provide encouragement for those in this predicament.

Finally, in order to support equal opportunities for early career researchers, it is essential to increase funding and address the structural problem of precariousness. In some institutions, it is sometimes necessary to find alternative sources of funding to complete a doctorate, as salaries for doctoral students and teaching and research assistants are extremely low and limited to four years. In this context, doctoral students whose families can support them financially have privileged access to doctoral studies.

## 7. Open science

Actionuni supports the Open Research Data (ORD) strategy and its corresponding action plan. However, while strategic planning is crucial, implementing open science practices requires more than just strategy. The ORD council should also play a role in providing guidance and resources for the practical implementation of open science across HEIs. **Actionuni recommends the creation of a centralized platform dedicated to open science and digitization at the national level.** This could for example be a website, serving as a centralized hub for scientific members across Switzerland. This national platform should host information, resources, and updates related to open science practices, digitization techniques, and relevant policies. It could function as both an information center and a training hub, providing comprehensive resources, guidelines, and case studies related to open science practices. It would bridge the information gap by providing comprehensive details about practices such as preregistration, transparency, and accessibility. Standardizing recommendations across HEIs through such a platform would promote a better integration of open science practices and ensure transparency and consistency in research methodologies.

To accelerate and consolidate open science, actionuni also advocates in favor of **establishing dedicated offices or departments for Open Science within the different Swiss higher education institutions.** Long-term planning and budget allocation are crucial to ensure the sustainability of these departments. Adequate resources would support training activities, promote awareness, and facilitate the implementation of open science practices across various research fields.

It is also essential to **provide clear information on whether open science is compulsory or recommended**, especially in relation to funding from organizations like SNSF. Addressing questions about rewards, assessment, and career growth linked to open science practices can incentivize researchers, particularly early career researchers, to embrace these practices. When it comes to publishing fees, funding plans that cover publishing fees can alleviate financial

barriers for researchers aiming to publish in open access journals. Expanding funding availability beyond specific disciplines, such as social sciences and humanities, can promote inclusivity in open science adoption. Actionuni recommends developing publishing in non-traditional venues. Encouraging and recognizing publication in unconventional platforms (like blogs, preprint servers, etc.), often referred to as "publishing in the wild," can diversify the dissemination of research findings and contribute to more open and accessible science.

Finally, we encourage a nuanced reflection around the issues related to open science, as there are substantial disciplinary differences in how, when, and in what interest data can be publicly shared and re-used (e.g. statistical data, codes, qualitative interviews, etc.)

## **8. Grants for international students**

Excellence grants for foreign students are an important and unique means of encouraging excellent early career researchers of foreign origin to spend part of their scientific career in Switzerland. In return, Swiss research benefits from a cultural and social diversity that fosters creativity. In this way, Switzerland supports the scientific training of young people who will then return to take up positions of responsibility in their countries of origin. This scholarship program is therefore an important tool for scientific diplomacy, much appreciated by Swiss embassies abroad. However, **it is imperative that the conditions governing these excellence scholarships be improved: the financial support per researcher must be increased, and the duration of doctoral scholarships must be extended.**

Current doctoral scholarships amount to CHF 1,920 per month, which means an extremely precarious situation for many doctoral students. For a full-time job, this works out at around CHF 10-11 per hour<sup>1</sup>. By way of comparison, the cities of Geneva, Winterthur and Zurich, which have introduced a minimum hourly wage, have set it at between CHF 23 and 24 per hour. The minimum gross salary for doctoral students set by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) is CHF 47,040 per year, or CHF 3,920 per month<sup>2</sup>. The amount of the doctoral excellence grants is therefore more than twice as low as the estimated minimum salaries needed to live a decent life in Switzerland. In addition to the precariousness caused by this very low amount, it also gives rise to unacceptable discrimination: doctoral candidates fulfilling very similar functions in the same group are paid differently depending on their nationality. Highly competent early career researchers, selected for their scientific excellence, find themselves confronted with social problems caused by the size of the grant, which damages the reputation of these scholarships.

**Actionuni demands that fellows receive a grant equivalent to the minimum wage of CHF 3,920 per month set by the SNSF.** This could be achieved, for example, by increasing the

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<sup>1</sup> Calculated on the basis of an 8.4-hour working day and 21 to 22 paid working days per month. Doctoral and post-doctoral students do not usually count their working hours. Overtime is unpaid, and PhDs and post-docs often work more than 8.4 hours a day, which means that their real hourly wage may even be below the CHF 10 per hour mentioned above.

<sup>2</sup> Source: General Implementing Regulations for the Subsidy Regulations, [Appendix 12](#): "Salary ranges, guidelines for employees in SNSF-supported projects, and flat-rate social security contributions", version dated September 24, 2019 (self-translation)

amount of the fellowship by 50% (i.e. CHF 2,880 per month), which would then be topped up to the level of the minimum salary by the university, institute or research group receiving the early career researchers. This practice of topping up fellowships is already in place at EPFL, ETH Zurich and the University of Zurich. Other HEIs should implement similar measures. However, the share paid by the HEIs, institutes or research groups must be reasonable, otherwise certain research groups or fields that are struggling to secure funding will no longer be able to take on excellence fellows from the Confederation.

In addition to the financial issues, these young scientists may also have other difficult experiences during their stay in Switzerland. **We recommend that institutions and research groups hosting fellows pay particular attention to their inclusion.** They need to be given as much support as the rest of the intermediary corps in the challenges some of them face, such as mental health problems, plagiarism and sexual, moral or academic harassment.

Doctoral excellence grants can currently only cover a maximum of three years' research. However, in many scientific fields, three years of research is not enough to complete a doctorate. **Actionuni therefore also recommends amending the scholarship regulations to allow scholarship holders to benefit from a fourth year of doctoral studies in cases where this is required.**

Post-doctoral fellowships amount to CHF 3,500 per month, which is also well below the minimum amount set by the SNSF (CHF 80,000 per year, or CHF 6,666 per month), and below the minimum hourly wages set in some Swiss cities. **Postdoctoral grants must also be increased,** to a higher level than that of doctoral candidates.

The guarantee credit proposed for the 2025-28 excellence scholarships in the ERI dispatch put out to consultation amounts to CHF 39.7 million (Project 6, art. 3, para. 2), which is only slightly higher than the 2021-24 credit of CHF 39.6 million. The guarantee credit for 2025-28 is therefore too low to allow for a sufficient adjustment of the financial amount of the scholarship and an extension of some doctoral scholarships. In order to cover the additional expenditure involved in increasing the amount and duration of excellence scholarships, **we are requesting a 50% increase in this guarantee credit, to CHF 59.55 million.**

Without an increase in the guarantee credit for scholarships for foreign students, an adjustment of the scholarship amounts would result in a reduction in the total number of scholarships. The scholarship allocation rate currently stands at less than 25%. Every year, high-quality applications have to be turned down for lack of funds. **The number of scholarships awarded each year must not be reduced.** Furthermore, scholarships awarded to nationals of so-called "industrialized countries" are usually accompanied by reciprocity agreements, meaning that Swiss early career researchers in return benefit from opportunities to do a PhD or postdoctorate in another country. Reducing the number of scholarships would therefore mean having to renegotiate these agreements with each of the countries involved.

We thank you for your attention to our position and remain at your disposal should you have any questions.



Yours sincerely,

Hannah Schoch  
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