

better science

Better Science Initiative: Diversity, sustainability and equal opportunities in research culture

The project

Better Science was initiated and designed by the members of the working group „Critical discourse on excellence“ at the University of Bern. The project highlights the conditions under which researchers work at Swiss universities today and the barriers they face. The Better Science Initiative promotes the discussion of topics such as good research culture, leadership, and performance measurement. Measures in these areas are central to a diverse and equitable university environment that enables academic excellence for all.

Combining a focus on assessment practices, team culture and leadership, the project showed how research culture can become more diverse and sustainable for researchers. In 2021, the project launched a workshop for research groups and highlighted best practices on its website.

Achievements and work done

Collaboration

Constitution of the P-7 project group, which was responsible for the conceptual and content-related further development of the Better Science Initiative. Under the leadership of Lilian Fankhauser, University of Bern, these are Dr. Klea Faniko, Université de Genève, Dr. Susanne Burren, Pädagogische Hochschule der Fachhochschule Nordwestschweiz FHNW, lic. phil. Pia Ammann, University of Lucerne, Dr. Verena Witzig, University of St. Gallen, Dr. Patricia Felber, Zurich University of the Arts.

Discussions have taken place at four faculties of the University of Bern regarding signing the initiative as a faculty. The Vetsuisse Faculty has signed the initiative.

Network building

A workshop was developed based on the workshop „We Scientists 2035“ of the Swiss Academy of Sciences SCNAT. The workshop shows participants what opportunities they have to advocate for a diverse research culture. The workshop was held several times.

Together with Rector Prof. Dr. Christian Leumann, Prof. Dr. Silvia Schroer, Vice Rector Quality, and Prof. Dr. Virginia Richter, Vice Rector Development, a support group for the project was formed at the University of Bern to accompany the implementation of the calls for action at the University of Bern.

In order to promote the campaign in the national context, a pool of experienced and motivated researchers was assembled as ambassadors for Better Science. They present and discuss the project at various events.

A network of the various actors involved in research culture and scientific excellence was created. These include the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), the Swiss Academies, the Young Academy of Switzerland and various university groups.

Communication

In cooperation with Studio Way, a website was designed (www.betterscience.ch) to publish the ten calls to action. Together with various social media channels, the website serves to make the initiative and the associated events and discussions visible.

A collection of best practices for improving research culture has been published on the website (www.betterscience.ch).

The years 2022 and 2023 were marked by the consolidation of what had been achieved and the expansion of the network. The vision of a sustainable and diverse research culture was further discussed at a number of events at Swiss universities and conferences in Switzerland and abroad.

In 2024, qualitative interviews were conducted for the baseline evaluation report. Further events helped to grow the network and lay the groundwork for future projects. In doing so, the project supported research groups that have dealt with their culture of collaboration; for institutes which have adapted their employment guidelines and evaluation regulations and for faculties and centers which have set an example by signing the Better Science calls to action.

A short video showing how research assessment and research culture are linked was produced for use at events and on websites.

A social media campaign highlighted best practices by professors from all cooperation partner universities. The campaign reached over 10'000 people in Switzerland and beyond.

Over 60 events were held under the banner of Better Science. These included several workshops with researchers of the University of Bern, a panel discussion with representatives from the management of the University of Bern and the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), a lecture by renowned experts in the field and a full-day workshop and a lecture at the University of Vienna.

The project supported events at universities within and outside the project group, such as the Zurich University of the Arts (reflection and discussion as part of "Diversity Spotlights Week") and the University of St. Gallen (two lecture series, "Perspectives on Everyday University Life" and "A Passion for Teaching or a Job That Causes Suffering?"), the University of Geneva (Workshop on work-life-balance for researchers) and the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts (meeting of the equal opportunities officers of the departments).

Research culture development

Together with the working group „Critical Discourse on Excellence“, a survey on research culture at the universities participating in the project was developed and carried out as a baseline for the project.

An analysis of studies on research culture at Swiss universities was conducted in order to show the need for the application of the Better Science calls to action.

The Interdisciplinary Center for Gender Studies (IZFG) of the University of Bern was commissioned to conduct research on the topic of research culture in Swiss higher education. The results will be published in 2024.

The working group "Critical Discourse on Excellence" at the University of Bern acted as a sounding board and expert group for the sub-projects carried out, such as the collection of best practices and the discussions in the faculties of the University of Bern.

Vision and goals

Our vision for a better research culture

The initiative is supported and implemented by the various staff groups at as many universities as possible throughout Switzerland.

In Swiss higher education policy and at the universities, a more in-depth discussion is taking place about the concept of excellence, about equal opportunities and about gender equality.

A different evaluation practice of scientific research, as required by the DORA declaration, is becoming established in the appointment procedures and in the assessment of scientific research: quality instead of quantity.

A new culture of diversity and equal opportunities has emerged at Swiss universities.

Goals 2021-2024

- ✓ Establishing a baseline for the evaluation of project outcomes
- ✓ Constitution of the P-7 project group, which is responsible for the conceptual and content-related further development of Better Science.
- ✓ Development of a workshop structure for organizing events with and about Better Science.
- ✓ Development of an implementation proposal for the calls for action to university management.
- ✓ Collection of best practice examples from research, teaching and administration.
- ✗ Development of political demands.
- ✓ Commissioning of research to support Better Science in terms of content.
- ✓ Analyse and adapt the calls to action to fit teaching culture.
- ✓ The website www.betterscience.ch is used as a tool to make the initiative visible.
- ✓ Implementation of a social media campaign on Twitter.
- ✓ Better Science is presented at 20 universities.
- ✓ Better Science is presented at at least 5 conferences and other events.
- ✓ Support for the project and the network is made visible by updating the testimonials on the website.
- ✓ The website is continuously updated, content is adapted (in particular literature, event calendar and best-practice examples).
- ✓ Launch of the working group/round table Better Science as part of the Forum, at least 2 meetings per year with interested people from practice and theory.
- ✓ A package offers external parties the opportunity to integrate Better Science into their own events or projects.
- ✓ A concept for the exchange with participating offices (HR departments, research commissions, etc.) is being developed.
- ✓ A public event will take place at each of the participating universities during these years.
- ✗ Meeting with interested members of parliament. The aim is to exchange ideas and raise awareness among politicians for this important topic.

10 calls to action for a more diverse and sustainable research culture

Highlight extra-academic work

Make all tasks and achievements in- and outside academia visible in your CV. Show, what you actually accomplish, besides research, teaching, administrative work, in public and social areas as well as in care work.

Take your time to think

Already as a young researcher, take time to think, to read, to write. Some time of leisure without performance of academic duties benefits your concentration and creativity. Such a retreat gives your work a boost!

Put quality before quantity

In research as well as in teaching, always choose quality over quantity. Expect everyone, including yourself, to do his or her best, but do not expect perfection. This is excellence.

Prioritise thoughtfully

Know your resources and priorities: Think about the tasks for which you can and want to take responsibility and strive for an optimal distribution of your work between research, teaching, and administration.

Careful communication

Communicate carefully. Write thoughtful emails and influence the culture of communication positively. Demonstrate that there is more to life than work. Allow yourself and others the liberty to not answer emails in the evening and on weekends.

Enable a healthy academic culture

Enable a healthy academic culture for everyone: Allow criticism and show appreciation. Take time to supervise your students, doctoral candidates and postdocs, and encourage and support young scientists.

Evaluate comprehensively

When evaluating academic work, do so according to the DORA Declaration: Evaluate and reward work or research proposals that place quality over quantity. Evaluate and reward teaching, administration, public relations, data collection, committee work, and other commitments.

Appreciate the team

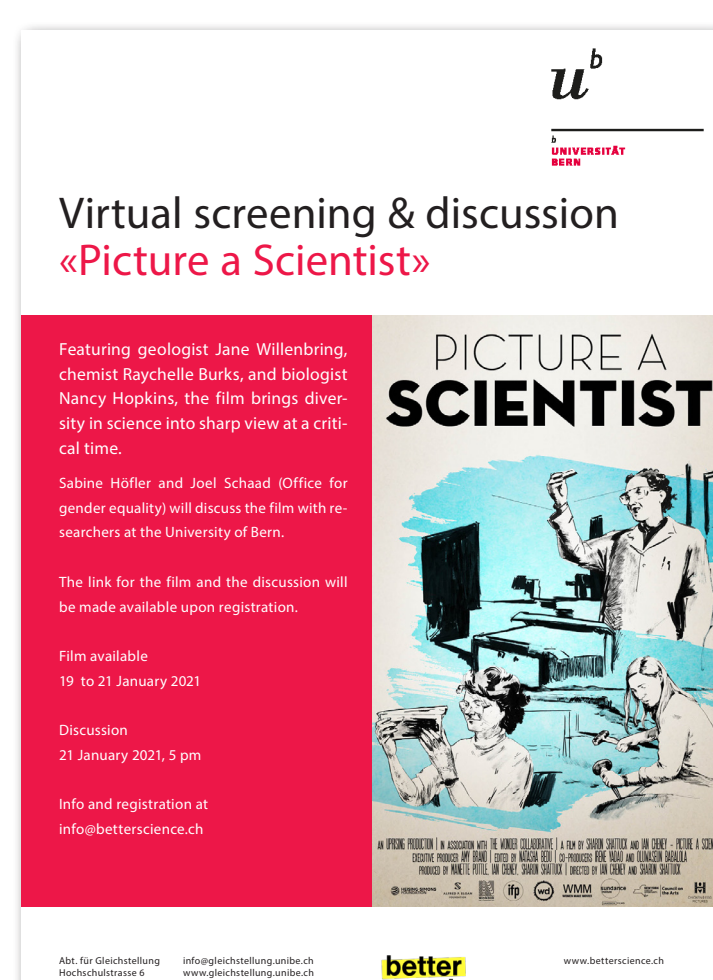
As a leader, work consciously in a team and show appreciation for the work done by your team members in all areas of work. Create a pleasant working atmosphere with a constructive error culture. Pay attention to what is good for you and the team.

Distribute tasks fairly

As a leader, create the space for co-workers to say "no" and make sure that tasks are distributed fairly within the team.

Be a role model

Do not underestimate your influence on the students and your staff. Recognise your responsibility, be a role model, and create space for better science.



Learnings

The expectations of research systems and the values of universities have a significant impact on research culture. These values are often characterized by contradictions which influence different perceptions of research culture. They determine how research is conducted, which research is funded, and they affect the careers of researchers.

Universities must become subjects of research themselves

Universities are said to be institutions with a pronounced ability to persist, in which change processes are slow. Nevertheless, universities have a great influence on the values and expectations that shape academia. Transparent processes and structures help to enable participation. In this way, innovation can also help to ensure that structures can be adapted to meet needs and ideals can be redefined.

Excellence: an „empty signifier“?

In the current scientific context, the maxim of excellence is applied everywhere, but clear criteria for it are often lacking. Excellence is used as a placeholder term whose meaning varies depending on the context. A high publication output is often seen as a mark of excellence, but it has little positive impact on research culture. The construct of excellence is thus strongly influenced by existing structures and power relations and acts as an exclusion mechanism.

The image of the "ideal academic" remains crucial for the assessment of academic achievements. By detaching excellence from the individual and linking it to collective achievements, it becomes clear that research and teaching are inextricably linked: without research there is no teaching, and without teaching there are no academics.

With a redefinition of excellence, a variety of role models can be made more visible, which is not the case at the moment. Excellence is likely to remain a central principle. To show that diversity and equal opportunities are essential for excellence, the term must be expanded to include a broader variety of concrete criteria.

Competition v. collaboration

Individualized career assessment focuses on the idea of brilliant scientists, although research is usually a collective effort. Research funds and positions are often awarded to individuals, while collaborative approaches take a back seat. This tendency is also evident in the structures of the mid-level faculty. The image of the "ideal scientist" is also aligned with hegemonic masculinity, and a narrow understanding of excellence promotes social selectivity.

Transparent evaluation criteria, fair recruiting processes and the implementation of third party supervisors or supervision boards ensure that existing inequalities can be overcome.

The genius academic

The individualized career competition and impermeable subject boundaries lead to a singularization of university members. A "collective of academics" does not exist as such, which hides inequalities and hinders collective change. The degree of individualization varies depending on fields and institutions.

Therefore, collaboration and cooperation must be given more emphasis when evaluating research and researchers so that science can be recognized as a team effort.

Science as a profession or a vocation?

It is a widespread belief that research must be done out of passion. Recognizing passion as the basis for good research performance reinforces (self-)exploitative tendencies and the blurring of boundaries between work and private life. The image of the „called scientist“, for example, is often associated with the expectation that researchers will make themselves available for their work for an unlimited period of time. The narrative also contributes to the assumption of a gatekeeping function in the (self-)selection of young researchers.

This understanding of work leads to a blurred distinction between working hours and private time. Constant availability is at odds with private care work and extra-university activities, which have little space and receive little recognition. Thus, these expectations, among other things, support the exclusion of people who cannot or do not want to subordinate their private lives to their working lives.

On the other hand, work as a scientist is perceived as a privilege, for which disadvantages are accepted. This is central to the question of a good research culture: passion for a cause must not be systematically exploited, and expectations of passion should not lead to a demand for perfection.

By diversifying career paths, it is possible to do academic work outside of the precarious sector. Although the number of Third Space positions is growing, there is a lack of recognition that such positions are essential for top performance. Quality before quantity: it must be shown that more is not better. In this way, the profession of an academic can be reconciled with care work and other private commitments.

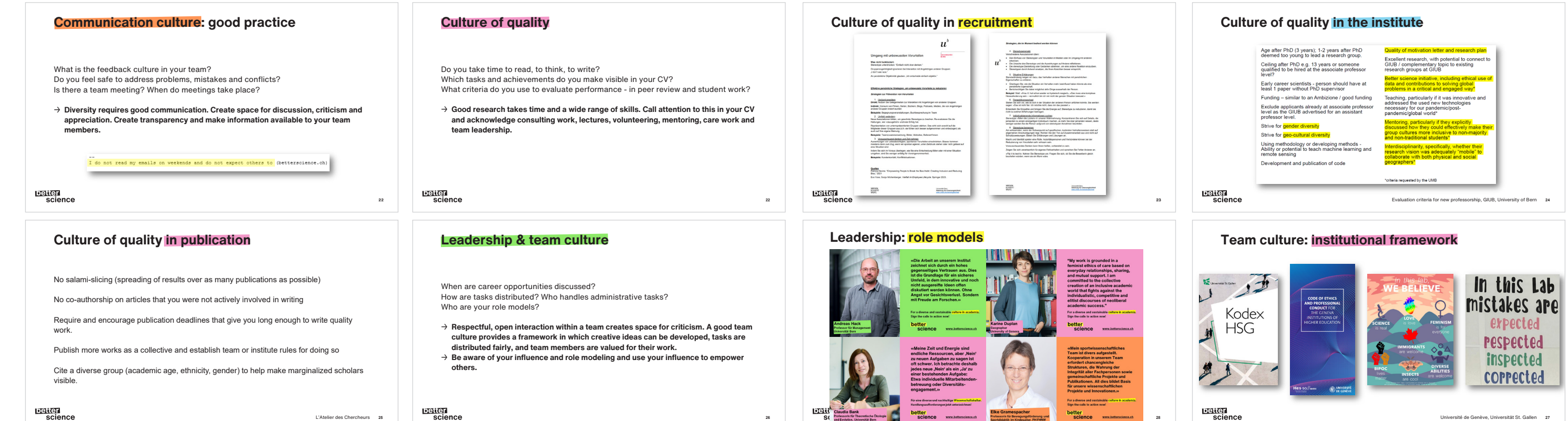
Supervision v. leadership

There exist multiple dichotomies and paradoxes concerning academic leadership. Professors and PIs are in their positions primarily due to their professional qualifications - leadership skills are valued less highly. Professors and Postdocs combine supervisory and leadership tasks, whereby these two tasks can be mixed. Management positions at institutes and faculties, for example, are often assigned on a rotational basis for a certain period of time. This can mean that professors who return to the ranks of their colleagues after their term of office tend to make less controversial decisions as managers. Flat hierarchies often mean that managers do not adequately fulfill their duty of care towards their employees. The relevance of leadership is seen as low: there is "no need to lead experts".

Academic leaders have to manage various external factors: Publication pressure, competition, precarity. However, inadequate protection and promotion of team members leads to mental health issues, bullying, exploitation, integrity violations and lack of equal opportunities. This contrasts with a transformational leadership style that promotes integrity, prevents conflict, takes a reflective approach to diversity, is committed to the health and integrity of team members and provides psychological safety for all team members.

Good practices and the way forward

To achieve a research culture in which a diversity of talents flourishes, top-down measures are needed, which must come from universities and the education system. Vice versa, good research culture also requires bottom-up efforts to create a better research environment. Everyone in academia can contribute to this.



What's next for the initiative?

The "Better Science" project aims to promote a diversity-conscious and inclusive leadership and team culture at universities and universities of applied sciences. The central question is: how can Better Science be implemented and lived in everyday life? In the future, the project aims to close a gap in the existing gender equality measures by developing concrete support offers for research groups and managers aimed at creating a culture that enables belonging, authenticity, diversity of perspectives and equal opportunities.

A further development of the existing initiative includes the development of a framework for a diversity-conscious team culture and the provision of tools and

training materials. Good practices and role models are also to be made visible. An in-depth analysis of existing university structures which promote diversity-conscious and inclusive leadership and team culture is required as basis for future work.

With the help of intensive peer networking and the creation of exchange platforms for stakeholders, learning and development across hierarchies and organizations can be promoted. Building on the existing Better Science Initiative and its network, coordinated campaigns, various events and an online platform support the implementation of a diverse research culture in the long term.

Leading house

Cooperation partners



Fachhochschule Nordwestschweiz Pädagogische Hochschule



Universität St. Gallen



hdk

Zürcher Hochschule der Künste Zurich University of the Arts