



# Chapter 5

## SNSF Professorships: Gender Selection Hidden by Criteria of Excellence?

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### Introduction



Like other European academic institutions, Swiss universities are going through rapid and profound changes (massification, internationalisation, globalisation, etc.). This context helps to promote ‘academic excellence’ as the central criterion for selecting among candidates for academic careers and in particular in one of the instruments that the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) has implemented to promote excellence among ‘young researchers’, namely the SNSF Professorships.

In this paper, we examine how the more precise criteria that confer the quality of ‘excellence’ on this programme are gendered and may undermine the policies aimed at establishing (more) equality among the academic staff and mending the ‘leaky pipeline’. This point is crucial since, for more than ten years, the SNSF has also been working to increase the participation of women in the making of science. In the case of the SNSF Professorships, this translates into the fact that this institution has set a target of at least 30% women among the selected candidates.

Our comments are based on the critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk 1993, 2001) we performed on this institution’s website, as the ‘black box’ of the selection practices was impossible to open because neither the names nor the positions of the experts are made public. Based on our previous research on academic careers (Fassa et al 2012; Fassa and Kradolfer 2010; Fassa and Gauthier 2010, 2012), we will mainly discuss the transfer to the humanities of criteria commonly accepted in the data-based sciences and their consequences for the gender of science and consequently on women’s careers. Therefore, we will first provide some information about the context and structure of research in Switzerland, then examine the SNSF Professorship Programme and discuss the criteria for qualifying for such a bursary. The discussion of the criteria will be focused on age and/or velocity and the scientific portfolio, as these two requirements were changed during our work on academic careers, giving

testimony that what is said to be excellence is subject to revision. The academic age (reckoned from the PhD) replaced the biological age in 2008 and the definition of the type of publications desired changed from ‘publications in scientific journals with high impact factors’ to ‘publications in high-level journals’ during winter 2011–2012. The last part will discuss the fact that the Professorship Programme is presented as ‘gender friendly’.

## Context and structure of research in Switzerland

Unlike France, for example, with the CNRS, Switzerland has no quasi-university institution devoted exclusively to research. As a consequence, apart from private laboratories offering career opportunities to researchers in chemistry and some engineering sciences, all fundamental research takes place in the universities and other higher education institutions. There, all researchers have both teaching and research commitments and there is no other setting enabling persons with a doctorate to pursue high-level scientific research on a full-time basis. Moreover, the Swiss academic landscape is strongly fragmented (ten cantonal universities, two federal institutes of technology and universities of applied studies) because the universities and other higher education institutions are governed by a great variety of local, mainly cantonal rules. In this landscape, the Swiss National Science Foundation is ‘the most important Swiss agency promoting scientific research. It supports, as mandated by the Swiss Federal government, all disciplines, from philosophy and biology to the nano-sciences and medicine’ (see SNSF no year). The SNSF supports scientific research (both freely chosen and targeted) as well as the academic *relève* (*relève* has multiple uses and meanings in the Swiss university system. We have adopted a broad definition of the term, as given by the Swiss Science and Technology Council (SSTC): ‘The *relève universitaire* consists of students preparing their thesis and young post-doctoral researchers seeking a professorial post. This second category is often referred to as the “intermediate corps” (CSST 2001: 8)) through various instruments that fall into essentially two categories: financing of research projects and teams (within which doctoral and postdoctoral grants are funded); and individual support of persons, which since 1999 has included the Professorship Programme. More than half the resources allocated to the support of persons by the SNSF were assigned to this programme in 2011 (73.2 million Swiss francs, see SNSF 2011: 38). It awards *ad personam* grants, to around 30 persons each year, which are predominantly research-oriented (80% of working time), to fund junior professors and their research teams for a period of four to six years. Thus, as the SNSF operates as a central actor in Swiss scientific policy,

the norms and models it promotes are diffused in the universities, although not uniformly.

It should be added that Switzerland has quite a peculiar situation concerning the participation of women in the labour market, especially as regards highly qualified professions. Due to the lack of care infrastructure and the tax policies, the majority of working women occupy their position on a part time basis. This situation, sometimes interpreted as a waste of money and talents, is partially at the roots of the rapid emergence of equality policies that also respond to the fast increase in the proportion of women in tertiary education and to the demands of feminist organisations for a reshaping of the labour market on fairer basis. Different types of initiatives have subsequently been taken to attract women in the field of STEM (Sciences, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and to help those who want to stay in sciences to accomplish a career as academics. Despite these efforts, the participation of women in science is still marked by a double segregation: first, women remain in a very small minority in STEM sciences (according to the Swiss Statistics office, in 2011, they amount to 20.2% of the students in the 'exact sciences' and 14.3% in 'engineering sciences' (BFS 2012a)) and second they still face more obstacles on their way to an academic professorship than their male colleagues, representing only 17% of the professors and 25.5% of the other teaching bodies (BFS 2012b) (for more analyses of the reasons for their exclusion see also Fassa and Gauthier 2010; Fassa and Kradofer 2010; Leeman et al 2010; Studer 2012).

## The SNSF professorships

In order to organise the passing-on of professorial posts – since half of the professors were due to retire around 2000 (Fleury and Joye 2002) – the SNSF Professorships Programme followed on in 1999 from another tool for supporting teacher-researchers, the federal *relève* programme, which ran from 1992 to 2004, funding postgraduate assistant posts, junior postdoctoral lecturer posts and assistant professor posts. Designed to reintegrate Swiss researchers who were abroad and to attract 'brains' from the international academic market (Bashung et al 2011; Leresche et al 2009), the SNSF Professorships Programme follows a more 'competitive' logic than its predecessor, since it funds persons rather than posts as under the federal *relève* programme. The search for excellence mainly through research results also shows the competitive turn taken by the SNSF in the context of the development of the so-called knowledge economy: the needs of local universities and their students are evaluated in terms of what most contributes to visibility in an internationalised market. As a consequence, this programme is seen as an intervention by the

Confederation in appointments (albeit only for limited-term contracts) at universities that are normally themselves responsible for making appointments to professorial posts and which advertised vacancies on the basis of their teaching and research needs as opposed to the research profiles of individuals to be funded. In the appointment procedures, the aim of the SNSF is to remain sovereign so as to assess applications only on the basis of the academic quality of the individual candidates without regard to the local interests of the universities.

The SNSF had set itself a ratio target of at least 30% of women among the grant-funded professors. It nearly meets this target, as 28% of the 485 programme beneficiaries for the period 2000–2012 were women (SNF 2012). It should be noted that their appointment reflects the horizontal segregation whereby they are strongly represented in the human and social sciences, less present in the exact and natural sciences, medicine and pharmacy, and very little active in economics, law and the engineering sciences (Goastellec et al 2007: 43). This programme could thus help to raise the low percentage of women in senior positions in the academic hierarchies (16.4% of tenured professors in 2009) (UoG no year) despite the fact that since 2001 women have been in the majority in the Swiss student population.

In the evaluation of the Professorship Programme conducted in 2006 ‘four profiles of beneficiaries, which represent the plurality of the trajectories leading to scientific excellence’ (Goastellec et al 2007: 5) could be distinguished:

- ‘A first group [23% of the beneficiaries] is made up of foreign researchers in engineering and the exact and natural sciences. These are for the most part men with very strongly internationalised academic trajectories.
- A second group [38%], again consisting mostly of men, represents a national *relève* in the experimental sciences, economics and law.
- Two other groups are marked by a stronger representation of women: one of them, relatively ‘classic’ in terms of profile, is in its majority made up of Swiss female researchers working in the human and social sciences [25% of the beneficiaries]. The other, more unusual, group [14%] consists entirely of women and is characterised by a lower average age than the other groups. Foreigners are over-represented there and, with the exception of the human and social sciences, all disciplines are concerned’ (Goastellec et al 2007: 6).

## Gendering excellence, motherhood and academy

The elements that are presented as decisive in proving the excellence of a candidature are autonomy and the capacity to lead a research team in the framework of a freely chosen problematic, and the scientific importance of the research projects already accomplished and the related publications, but some less academic criteria also appear, such as the importance of age and the speed with which Professorship candidates have completed the initial tasks inherent in the academic career (completing the doctoral thesis – or *habilitation* thesis in German-speaking Switzerland – and a postdoctoral research project, preferably abroad).

### *Velocity*

The search for ‘young’ researchers (in the biological sense) was clear until 2008, since the rules of the programme required candidates to be no older than 40. It is particularly interesting in this context to note that between 2002 and 2007 the SNSF removed the biological age limit for female candidates (only women could benefit from the lifting of the age limit, because they were regarded as ‘late’ in career terms and therefore having atypical trajectories relative to their male counterparts) for other programmes supporting the academic *relève*, such as the schemes for supporting doctoral and postdoctoral researchers – but not for the Professorship Programme. Since 2008, for all grants programmes, the criterion has been the ‘academic’ age limit, meaning that candidates for Professorships have to have a minimum of two years and a maximum of nine years of postdoctoral research experience. This shift is interesting as such since it shows a new understanding of what Equality Programmes should aim to do. Following the ‘gender mainstreaming’ line, it endorses the reality that women and men professional trajectories do not follow the same patterns and therefore allows partially people with different backgrounds to apply for such bursaries. Despite this opening to alternative individual trajectories, it has to be acknowledged that the introduction of competitive models of knowledge production on the ‘academic markets’ and ‘university staff markets’ (Leresche et al 2009) favours the profile of ‘meteors’ (cf. Marry 2007, or ‘precocious excellence’ in Goastellec et al 2007), ‘more susceptible than others to the virus of excellence’ (Joseph 2009: 31) and perhaps more likely, in the eyes of the FNS and faculty authorities, to develop into ‘knowledge entrepreneurs’ (Kleiber 1999) on account of their young age and/or their velocity at the time of their first appointment to a professorial post.

This ‘meteor’ model is currently privileged in the data-based sciences where theses are conventionally written in the framework of research groups strongly structured around a common project and supported by

subsidies – or commissions from other bodies – assigned to a senior figure. In this type of research structure, competing to maximise their ‘impact factors’, doctoral students collaborate to produce collectively a knowledge whose orientation has been decided by the professors who have secured the funding, and set themselves in hierarchies whose members find the division of labour convenient for themselves. Such an organisation of research also has a very favourable effect on the output of publications since the various members of the team co-author and respond to one another in processes that help to drive up their citation indexes. In addition, the junior researchers benefit from association with the professors who oversee their individual work in the framework of much broader research projects. They thus learn the formal and informal rules of the craft and are integrated into networks that favour the diffusion of their publications. Tutoring by seniors is less commonly afforded to women, as shown by Leemann et al (2010) in a study of the SNSF, by Dafflon Novelle (2006) on the Economics and Social Science Faculty of the University of Geneva, or Backouche et al (2009) on the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris.

### *The research portfolio*

The central importance that the SNSF gives to the research portfolio as a criterion for the award of the Professorships, and especially the type of measurements initially proposed to assess their quality (‘publication in scientific journals with high impact factors’), correspond on the one hand to disciplines that are relatively unfeminised (horizontal segregation) and on the other to methods that often privilege quantitative and experimental approaches leading to relatively short texts such as journal articles. These unexpected outcomes are probably at the roots of the change made in the labelling of the type of publications desired. Since winter 2011–2012, the phrasing changed and what used to be ‘publication in scientific journals with high impact factor’ became ‘publications in high-level journals’ to avoid the exclusion of less specific profiles. While this change suggests that the bias that prevents a real ‘parity of participation’ (Fraser 2003: 36) is beginning to be taken into consideration, it remains very difficult to know how far this textual change will influence the judgement of the experts, who were appointed before this change.

Prior to the shift of wording, different research undertakings, as in the work of researchers in the social and human sciences – which sometimes have very local scope (Swiss history, French-Swiss literature, etc.) – and which publish their findings in monographs (as in history or anthropology) were consequently often relegated to a less prestigious category

giving less scope for ‘profiles of excellence’. Thus, this type of measurement – and the organisation of research that goes with it – integrated perfectly the ‘publish or perish’ trend that constitutes the core of the new mantra of excellence. Beaud, discussing the influence of such an obligatory velocity and of these types of measurements on the social sciences, observes that ‘[t]oday, sociology is seeing its academic requirements largely shaped by standards that are imposed from the outside by the so-called ‘exact’ sciences, disciplines that are more dominant than ever in these times of the omnipotence of Shanghai ranking’ (2012: para. 17). He adds that they will tend to select the candidates on social grounds, since “‘inheritors” have more of the dispositions needed to cope with the acceleration of the research and publication time’ (2012: para. 20). In this regard, Goastellec et al significantly remark that the figure of the outstanding young female researcher ‘is found in all disciplines except those of the human and social sciences’ (2007: 54).

Such a statement makes it possible to grasp one very specific dimension of the ‘leaky pipeline’, the one that causes its leaks to be greatest in the most feminised disciplines. For some observers they are related to disciplinary traditions, for others to the ‘gendered scripts’ (Le Feuvre and Lapeyre 2005) attached to the academic professions. In the academic world, and in other highly qualified and prestigious occupations, the gendered scripts which form ‘stereotyped models of the ‘prototype’ of reference in [a] segment of the profession’ (Le Feuvre and Lapeyre 2005: 112) prescribe that a total commitment to one’s occupation must be the core quality of candidates for academic careers. Marry and Jonas (2005) show in their study of biologists that such a requirement is more demanding for women due to the fact that it generates a conflict between their ideal of motherhood and their profession. The research we conducted in Lausanne University shows that this quality is presumed (this point emerged during the interviews that we conducted with the management of the seven Faculties that form Lausanne University) to be lacking by definition in women who are seen above all as (real or potential) mothers, unlikely to be able to commit themselves wholly to their jobs (Fassa and Kradolfer 2010). The insistence on speed in the completion of the postdoctoral accomplishments clearly expresses the demand for total commitment to the occupation, a commitment that can only be given by delegating the activities of daily life to other people. Selections thus emerge that have their roots in the social and financial capacity of individuals to delegate these tasks to others – to the spouses of men involved in the academic world and/or to a woman hired to deal with everyday contingencies. While female academics are seen first and foremost as real or potential mothers, the question of men’s real or potential

paternity is very rarely considered. As a consequence, the difficulties of the academic career and the ‘delays’ attributed to women are presented in terms of that vision.

Our argument is that the extension to social and human sciences of the model of data-based science is therefore a gendered choice, as it forces women of all disciplines to conform to norms that are mainly produced and reproduced in the more masculinised fields of science, even if the conditions of scientific work are not the same. Furthermore, the previous research we conducted on the University of Lausanne (Fassa et al 2012) shows that postdoctoral posts are more numerous in masculinised faculties and that their beneficiaries have more time to build up a solid research portfolio which then enables them to apply for professorial posts (Fassa et al 2012). The results of Studer (2012) follow the same line as he remarks that the opportunities for the very few female doctoral students to finish their PhD are greater in the masculinised disciplines, due to the organisation of work and possibly to the fact that these women may benefit from some kind of tokenism, ‘an intergroup context in which the boundaries between the advantaged and disadvantaged groups are not entirely closed, but where there are severe restrictions on access to advantaged positions on the basis of group membership’ (Wright 2001: 224). Thus the beneficiaries of the SNSF Professorships present an image of excellence that the Faculties endorse all the more readily when it corresponds to the tradition of their discipline.

#### *SNSF professorships as a ‘gender friendly’ reference model?*

Beyond the weight of the Professorships within the SNSF, it should be noted that in a good number of universities this programme is perceived as an example to be followed. Thus, parallel to the setting up of the programme, the Swiss Science and Technology Council (SSTC), ‘the advisory body to the Federal Council for issues related to science, higher education, research and technology policy’ (SSTC no year) recommends the setting up of posts of similar type to the SNSF Professorships, but combined with a conditional appointment – a tenure track – so as to be able to offer working conditions that can attract and/or retain the best junior professors in Switzerland (CSST 2001). In practice, the *Ecole polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne* (EPFL) had already led the way in 2000 by creating a scheme for assistant professors on tenure track, imitating the British and American model; it was subsequently followed by the other Swiss universities. The similarities between the logics of the SNSF Professorship and the assistant professorships are moreover perfectly clear when one knows that in most universities the holders of SNSF Professorships have been given the status of assistant professor

in their host institution and that they therefore appear in the statistics within this professional category.

Moreover, some actors in the Swiss scientific landscape declare that the tenure track schemes are beneficial for women's careers. For example, Charles Beer, the State Councillor in charge of the Department of Public Education, Culture and Sport of the Canton of Geneva, announced in a speech on 12 November 2004 that: 'The University has proposed to the Department of Public Education that it create the new position of 'tenure track' to advance promising young scientists, which will make it possible to better advance women in the academic career' (Beer 2004) The website of the Equal Opportunities Office of the University of Geneva (EOG no year) presents the tenure track in these terms:

The 'Tenure Track' is the possibility for a professor starting his or her career to be appointed as Assistant Professor for a limited period of four to six years maximum, with the quasi-guarantee of promotion to a post of permanent professor (Full Professor or Associate Professor) if he or she meets conditions defined at the outset. Evaluation is generally conducted by a committee.

One notable advantage is the possibility of career planning, as well as autonomy (during the 'probationary' years) and the transparency of the evaluation. For women, this type of functioning is favourable, given that it generally provides for a pause for maternity; moreover, it counters co-option by a boys' club.

On account of its valorisation of early excellence, the Professorship Programme – as the tenure tracks procedures – is presented as favourable to women because it allows them to desynchronise career imperatives from questions related to what is commonly called the 'biological clock' (see Löwy (2009) for a critical reflection on this concept) and the possible wish to build a family. But, on the contrary to the tenure tracks, it disrupts the strategies of appointment by consensus that may prevent recognition of 'excellence' in 'others' (Cockburn 1983; Hacker 1981; Kanter 1977).

Thus, the SNSF Professorship programmes, like the tenure track appointments – for example at the University of Lausanne in 2011, women make up 45% of the corps of assistant professors, 19% of the associate professors and 15% of the full professors – are associated with support for female profiles. We must recall some of their central features before considering their vision of careers and its gendered dimension: both of them keep individuals in a precarious position for several years and so require women to provide proof that they are as excellent as the men, if

not more so, and that they possess the ‘stuff of a researcher’, of which Stengers points out the gendered dimension:

The ‘stuff’ that makes the ‘test pilot’, his ‘worth’, seems to me to have the constitutive feature of a ‘gendered’ category in the sense that, unlike the ‘worths’ of Boltanski and Thévenot, it is defined by the negative, i.e. does not found a ‘polity’, but much rather defines a binary, hierarchising contrast that defines the superior gender as non-marked. It is not known what makes a good pilot. The ones who are marked are the ones who have killed themselves. The crash shows they did not have what the others have. But it is also important to stress that the stuff that one has, or does not have, is a construction in the strong sense, in the sense that a construction ‘holds things together’, it implies an ethos, it produces a particular relation to oneself and to others (2010: 27).

## Conclusion

With evaluation of the scientific quality of SNSF Professorship candidatures being conducted by comparing portfolios from different disciplines and different regional origins, it can be observed that it applies criteria of excellence transposed from those prevalent in the data-based sciences, which are tending to colonise all disciplines, including the social and human sciences. The categories mentioned by the evaluation report on this programme by Goastellec et al (2007) show that the implicit norm of excellence relates to the specificities of the data-based sciences, and more especially the physical and natural sciences.

Thus the publication of monographs is less and less valorised in the face of the need to publish scientific articles in journals with high impact factors. It also becomes increasingly difficult to aspire to an academic career when the candidate’s trajectory is marked by hesitations, bifurcations, even new directions or professional experience outside the academic milieu. Mobility has become a necessity whereas it appeared ‘only rarely [as] an explicit criterion of excellence in the university appointments committees in the social and human sciences’ (Merz 2009: 25). As the author explicitly states a little later, ultimately: ‘the SNSF is moving towards a comparative multidisciplinary norm and tending to align itself on an evaluation practice established for the natural sciences, which for the social and human sciences represents a shift from the established models’ (Merz 2009: 25).

Women have endeavoured, as Stengers puts it, to show that they have ‘the stuff of a researcher’, and, like their male colleagues, have had to ‘accept truly sacrificial working conditions, in a merciless competition.

They are expected to grit their teeth and bear it, because that is the price to be paid, a price that discourages those who do not have the vocation, who cannot renounce the temptations of the world to devote themselves to it body and soul' (2010: 26). But the price to be paid to conform to this *ethos* whose historical construction is androcentric becomes even heavier when 'excellence, which is the new mantra both for universities and for research groups and individual researchers, is measured by such data' (Stengers 2010: 30) and may not have much to do with what makes the attraction towards the sciences: curiosity and the taste for discovery, questioning and doubt. The rapidity, the unbroken velocity demanded of academic careers to make them 'excellent,' is much better suited to 'the data-based or evidence-based sciences [that] seek to define a situation in terms of objectively measurable data that make it possible to evaluate and decide' (Stengers 2010: 30) than more fundamental questionings that might challenge a conception of science more concerned with proving its efficacy than addressing the questions that arise outside the academies.

Inspired by the logics of New Public Management, the SNSF Professorship Programme targets a new type of researcher whose profile responds to the changes confronting the academic world, since they are regarded as 'knowledge entrepreneurs', i.e. 'mobile young researchers, capable of holding their own against competition and therefore as capable of pursuing a university career as of pursuing high-level research activity outside the universities' (Kleiber 1999: 134). The requirements of this programme are particularly demanding for women since the single profile of excellence designed by the criteria to apply for such a bursary asks them to adapt to norms that are derived from disciplines in which they are a clear minority. Is this really what we want? Can we really regard such demands as gender friendly?

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