

Summary and Position Statement of the MVUB on the Swiss-Wide Mental Health Survey (SWiMS)

The Swiss-Wide Mental Health Survey (SWiMS) 2024 is a nationwide initiative led by actionuni, the umbrella organization representing mid-level academic staff in Switzerland. The Mid-Level Staff Association of the University of Bern (MVUB) is also a member of this umbrella organization. Initiated by actionuni, the survey examines the mental health, well-being, and working conditions of doctoral candidates, postdoctoral researchers, and other non-professorial academic staff at Swiss higher education institutions.

Members of the academic mid-level staff play an essential role in research, teaching, and student supervision. Yet they are exposed to considerable professional pressures: heavy workloads, administrative burdens, academic competition, and often precarious employment conditions. International research suggests that 30–40% of early-career researchers suffer from mental health problems, with high rates of burnout, depression, and anxiety. ¹

Despite these alarming figures, comprehensive national data have so far been lacking in Switzerland. The last comparable survey dates to 2009.² SWiMS 2024 aims to establish a data-driven basis for improving the mental health and working conditions of academic mid-level staff in Switzerland. The report fills an important gap and is intended to provide evidence-based insights into institutional and national policy improvements.

SWiMS 2024 was jointly developed by actionuni and the mid-level associations of individual universities. Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Commission of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Zurich (No. 23.12.07). Data collection took place between 13 May and 31 October 2024. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Mid-level academic staff from 16 universities and higher education institutions were surveyed. In total, more than 2,500 valid responses were obtained, including 116 from the University of Bern. The average completion time per participant was 18 minutes.

The report covers several thematic areas: mental health (general mental health, depression, burnout, and awareness of institutional support resources), job satisfaction, perceived stressors (stress factors at the systemic, supervisory, collegial, self-management, and private levels), institutional climate (perceptions of supervisors, institutions, and research groups), experienced or perceived discrimination, and attitudes towards questionable research practices and their association with stressors and mental health outcomes.

Regarding demographic factors, the composition of survey participants at the University of Bern largely reflects the nationwide distribution, with the following exceptions: the proportion of female participants was somewhat higher in Bern than at other Swiss institutions; the natural sciences were very weakly represented, whereas medicine and the social sciences were strongly represented. Additionally, participants from Bern were less likely—compared to the Swiss average—to hold full-time positions (91–100% employment level).

In the following, we present the results of the individual thematic areas in detail, offer an assessment of the findings from the MVUB's perspective, and propose a set of measures intended to foster discussion on improving the working conditions of academic mid-level staff at the University of Bern.

(A) Mental Health and job satisfaction

Overall, the sample reflects a divided picture: roughly half of respondents at the University of Bern describe their mental health as good to very good, while the other half report a fair to very poor psychological condition. Twenty percent of respondents report clinically relevant depressive symptoms. Based on the normative data of the measurement instrument (DASS-21), this proportion among University of Bern mid-level staff appears to be approximately four times higher than in the general population.

Moreover, respondents in the natural sciences and the humanities exhibit higher depression scores than those in the social sciences and medicine. Individuals whose positions are funded through SNSF resources or university-internal fellowship schemes also appear to be more burdened than colleagues whose salaries stem from other third-party funding sources. This increased psychological strain is reflected in additional indicators: approximately 35% of respondents report feeling burnt out from their work at least once a week, thus exhibiting symptoms of burnout.

Job satisfaction and institutional support perceptions reveal an ambivalent pattern: although about 55% of mid-level staff report being satisfied or very satisfied with their professional situation overall, roughly 25% frequently or persistently consider resigning. Furthermore, around 40% do not believe that the mental-health-related services and resources available at their institution would be helpful to them.

(B) Stressors

When asked how often during the past year they had considered resigning due to their working environment, 45% of respondents from the University of Bern answered "sometimes," "often," or "always." This points to substantial dissatisfaction with the work environment. Additionally, 55% indicated that they feel strongly or very strongly stressed, while only 8% reported not feeling stressed.

Stress in the survey was defined as "a situation in which a person feels tense, restless, nervous or anxious or is unable to sleep at night because their mind is troubled all the time." According to this definition, stress constitutes a psychological burden that impairs well-being. The fact that a large number of respondents report experiencing stress constitutes a warning signal that must not be ignored. Respondents identified several contributing factors: uncertainty regarding future career steps, heavy workloads in research, teaching, and administration, insufficient protected time for one's own research, and low salary levels. Notably, among those reporting uncertainty in career progression, the age group 31–40 exhibits the highest stress values. This differs markedly from non-academic work environments, where younger cohorts tend to report the greatest uncertainty, while employees aged 30–40 have often established themselves professionally and experience fewer career-related concerns. It is also noteworthy that at the University of Bern, stressors such as "high demands by supervisors," "lack of support," and "unclear expectations from the organization or supervisor" do not decrease with age but instead show a slight increase. This contradicts the nationwide trend, where these stressors typically diminish with increasing age and experience within academic environments.

(C) Discrimination

When asked whether mid-level staff in their position at the University of Bern had experienced bullying, discrimination, harassment (psychological, physical, sexual, or verbal), or subtle forms of aggression (being snapped at or ignored), an average of 25% responded “Yes, several times in the past year” or “Yes, once or twice in the past year.” Notably, respondents at the University of Bern reported discriminatory experiences more frequently than those at other Swiss institutions. A comparatively high number of mid-level staff indicated experiencing systematic discrimination, such as repeatedly being overlooked for authorship. Approximately 40% of respondents from Bern also reported that their supervisors exert pressure on them to work in the evenings, on weekends, or during holidays. Gender differences are more pronounced at the University of Bern than at other Swiss universities across nearly all discriminatory factors, with women in the mid-level staff clearly being disadvantaged. Early career researchers and postdocs report discriminatory experiences particularly frequently. Discrimination rates in the humanities at the University of Bern are especially high, ranging from 25% to over 60%. Care responsibilities appear to play a certain role, with respondents reporting discriminatory behavior related to these obligations. Nevertheless, hierarchy emerged as the primary source of discrimination of all types. Particularly concerning is that many respondents from Bern indicated that supervisors often do not communicate any information about where to report discrimination. The survey findings suggest that some supervisors at the University of Bern may be neglecting their duty of care, leaving mid-level staff without adequate support. The SWiMS report shows that supervisors can also be the source of discriminatory behavior.

(D) Questionable Research Practices (QRP)

When asked whether they had experienced questionable scientific conduct in their position at the University of Bern, up to 20% of respondents answered affirmatively. The most frequently mentioned issues concern authorship and the application of statistical methods. Here, too, gender differences are evident, particularly regarding the underrepresentation of the scientific contributions of women in the mid-level staff.

(E) Significance of the Findings and Measures for Improvement

Making Reporting Channels Visible and Easily Accessible

Despite the range of existing services, only few mid-level staff members know where to report discrimination, and trust in the available services is limited.

Proposed measures:

- Continuous, proactive promotion of the university’s counselling services in German, English, and French, and across multiple formats (online, posters, regularly organized events).
- Establishment of a university-wide case management system to avoid redundancies and advisory fatigue.
- Internal university units should be provided with clearly defined mandates and decision-making authority to distribute institutional responsibility and enable low-threshold responses.

Mandatory Leadership Training and Regular Continuing Education for Supervisors

Supervisors of mid-level staff are at times responsible for discriminatory behavior or fail to adequately fulfil their duty of care.

Proposed measures:

- Requiring proof of leadership training—or making such training mandatory—within job advertisements and position descriptions to ensure qualified leadership personnel at the University of Bern.
- Mandatory frequent participation in training programs (fair performance assessment, recognizing and preventing abuse of power, intercultural sensitivity, gender bias, etc.) for all supervisors.
- Regular performance review meetings (MAGs) with senior-level supervisors for all leadership figures, including professors, to identify and address leadership deficiencies in a structured manner.
- Periodic standardized evaluations of the leadership competencies of all supervisors to identify problem areas based on evidence and take corrective measures as needed.

Clear Research and Authorship Guidelines & Code of Conduct

Many mid-level staff members are unaware of institutionalized standards for “good scientific practice.” Conflicts concerning authorship are widespread.

Proposed measures:

- Development of binding guidelines, particularly on authorship. These guidelines should be formally acknowledged and include consequences for violations.
- Provision of accessible checklists for early-career researchers on authorship, statistics, and data management to facilitate the early identification and reporting of potential misconduct.
- Mandatory participation in regular training sessions and workshops on these guidelines for all career stages and leadership levels.
- Early and binding discussion and completion of authorship agreements to prevent later conflicts.

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ii ActionUni (2025): Swiss-Wide Mental Health Survey (SWiMS) 2024: Institution Report.