
SNF futuro

Final Report on SNSF Reform

Executive Committee of the Foundation Council
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1. Initial Position

The Swiss National Science Foundation for the support of scientific research (SNSF) is the most important institution for promoting research in Switzerland. It promotes projects in investigator-driven and targeted research and supports the education of young scientific researchers in all disciplines and specialities.

The SNSF's work is generally recognised as being objective and of high quality. New challenges are forcing the SNSF to rethink its structure and operating procedures. The following points are notable in this regard:

- The SNSF is playing an increasingly important role in national and international science policy. This, together with political requirements, will contribute to a much higher work load for the SNSF in the future. Financing overheads in project support and assuming the project evaluation for larger integrated research projects, even when these are not, or are only partially financed by the SNSF, change the role of the SNSF significantly.
- There is growing international competition in recruiting first-rate experts to judge applications.
- In a 2001/2002 poll of researchers, despite a generally very positive assessment of the work of the SNSF and quality, criticisms were raised that must be taken seriously: Researchers perceive that interdisciplinary research is not promoted sufficiently; feedback on submitted applications is sometimes inadequate; and the evaluation process is not transparent enough. Furthermore, the absence of science and the SNSF in politics and the public realm was criticised. Despite some improvements, there is still a need for further action.

Weak points were also identified in the bodies of the SNSF themselves, for instance in the process of evaluating applications. Over time, cultural differences between the research council divisions have developed that can only be partially justified on the grounds of content or discipline. The fact that there is no single uniform scheme for classifying submitted applications that would allow their systematic comparison has been increasingly cited. Furthermore, there are no working groups for international relations or for the support of individuals in the Research Council that would allow a more intensive exchange on these themes and the development of a coherent strategy.

2. Procedure

The reform process was initiated by the Executive Committee of the Foundation Council in 2004 through a mandate to the former director of the SNSF, Hans Peter Hertig. He suggested various measures to the Executive Committee, particularly ones relating to the procedure for evaluating applications, in the "SNF 2008" report of late 2005.

After a joint analysis of the reports by the Executive Committee of the Foundation Council, the Research Council, and the administrative offices, in May 2006 the Executive Committee of the Foundation Council set up a project committee and

charged it with recommending structural and organisational measures by January 2007 to deal with the problems and challenges identified so far.

The project committee SNF futuro consisted of the nine members of the Presidial Board of the Research Council, three members of the Executive Committee of the Foundation Council, the directors of the administrative offices, and an external expert for organisational questions. The previously mentioned report “SNF 2008” formed the basis of its work along with extended and deepened analyses by the bodies of the SNSF; numerous discussions with persons from the Research Council and administrative offices as well as external experts.

In December 2006, the project committee SNF futuro submitted its report to the Executive Committee of the Foundation Council. It contained a package of recommended measures for reforming the SNSF. Based on these recommendations, in January 2007 the Executive Committee of the Foundation Council decided on the reform programme detailed in the following section and instructed the Research Council and the administrative offices to take concrete steps to implement it.

3. Guidelines for the Reform of the SNSF

3.1 Structure and tasks of the National Research Council

The central scientific body of the SNSF is the National Research Council. The most important tasks of the National Research Council are the evaluation of the submitted applications for projects, support of individuals, and programme promotion and the allocation of funds necessary for their implementation. In addition, the National Research Council is responsible for designing the research funding instruments of the SNSF.

3.1.1 Structure, size, and term of office of the Research Council

The National Research Council will continue to be structured primarily according to disciplines (or groups of disciplines). An additional level will now accommodate interdivisional topics.

Vertically, the National Research Council consists of **divisions**. The past allocation of disciplines to divisions I - III will be maintained, and division IV will remain responsible for (national) programmes.

Horizontally, new **expert committees** for interdivisional areas will be formed. Specifically, these are the areas of **support of individuals**, **international collaboration**, and **interdisciplinary research**¹. The Executive Committee of the Foundation Council can, with the mandate of the Presidial Board, decide on the initiation of further expert committees.

Within their domains, expert committees are responsible for developing a strategy for reviewing existing instruments and elaborating new ones as well as for application

¹ The “Kommission für Interdisziplinarität” (KID), initiated in autumn 2006, can be considered a forerunner of the technical committee for interdisciplinary research, assuming a positive evaluation after a two-year trial period.

evaluation. They have their own financial authority and report their decisions directly to the Presidial Board. Rules of procedure will be developed for each expert committee. These will be reviewed after a two-year test period and adapted if necessary. Expert committees are formed from members of all four divisions and can be supplemented by external specialists.

In order to strengthen the **exchange and the methodical coherence between the different departments**, the members of the Research Council are encouraged to rotate between departments I through III on the one hand and department IV on the other and, in the future, also between the technical committees.

Easing the work load of the members of the Research Council should not be achieved by increasing the size of the Council but rather through content-relevant and organisational measures. The size of the National Research Council should therefore remain limited to **100 members**. However, in order to increase the turnover in this highly influential position, the **maximum term of office shall be reduced from ten to eight years**.

In co-operation with the Executive Committee of the Foundation Council, the National Research Council will compile the **profile and candidacy requirements** for the members of the Research Council.

3.1.2 Presidial Board of the Research Council

The Presidial Board is responsible for **all of the scientific work of the SNSF and – together with the Executive Committee of the Foundation Council – its research policy**. It deals with questions of funding policy and the design of funding instruments. In addition, in the context of the budget, it is responsible for the allocation of financial resources to the divisions and the expert committees. The Presidial Board is responsible for overseeing all financing decisions of the SNSF. Individual decisions of divisions or expert committees will, in future, only be discussed upon request of a member of the Presidial Board.

For **compliance** assurance, that is, the adherence to internal (quality) standards, regulations, and equal opportunity, the Presidial Board will institute a **special committee**. This committee will report to the Presidial Board (and for informational purposes to the Executive Committee of the Foundation Council) and will submit recommendations for improving regulations and quality standards as necessary. Representatives from both the Research Council and the administrative offices will be part of the committee.

3.2 Application evaluation and project support

The measures in this section cover primarily **disciplinary project promotion**. Corresponding rules for other branches (support of individuals, international collaboration, national programmes, etc.) will have to be formulated according to analogous principles.

3.2.1 Managing an increasing number of applications

The members of the Research Council and the staff of the administrative offices work together and are **jointly responsible** for maintaining a high scientific standard and efficient administration in evaluating and processing applications.

For this purpose, the administrative offices will become more closely involved with the content of the evaluation process. In addition to their current tasks, the administrative office staff will, in future, suggest candidates for external experts to the referees in the Research Council. The referees will validate the suggestions before these experts are contacted by the administrative offices.

The competence of the administrative office to approve financially small-scale applications will be expanded. The administrative office and the referee in the Research Council will decide bilaterally on applications for conferences and publication submissions (without involving the entire division of the Research Council).

The SNSF will introduce a **completely electronic database** for the submission, evaluation, and administration of applications and projects. The current initiatives of the administrative office (GA-online, “mySNF”) serve as a basis for this.

The co-operation between the Research Council and the administrative offices will be finalised according to a **written performance agreement**. This will establish the standards for the basic services that the administrative offices supply to the Research Council.

3.2.2 Evaluation process

In future, the divisions will be able to apply the firmly-anchored process of evaluating applications via external experts in a more flexible manner. The divisions can have applications evaluated and assessed by (a) **external expert assessments by individual specialists**, as before or (b) (new) a **panel of experts**.

Panels lend themselves especially to speciality domains where, by experience, a large volume of applications is to be expected. The divisions are assigned with identifying those areas in which the first panels can be introduced as soon as possible.

After two years, the Research Council will present the Executive Committee of the Foundation Council with the first interim report of its experiences. At the beginning of 2011, the Research Council will compile an evaluation report.

Every application will be assigned a divisional referee and a co-referee. For evaluation by individual experts, a **minimum of two external expert assessments** must be available so that an application in a division can be treated officially. In obvious cases to be specially defined or where there are formal deficiencies, the administrative offices can, in co-ordination with the referee, reject an application without consulting an external assessment.

3.2.3 Transparency of decisions and response to applicants

The SNSF will pass on to the applicants **all relevant passages** from the anonymised external experts' assessments and from the proposal of the referee.

Consultations with applicants regarding open questions (for example, instrumental equipment or critical points raised in the external assessments) are conducted in writing and exclusively via the administrative office staff.

All divisions and expert committees of the SNSF are now to use a **unified assessment scale**. The scale will be used to assign a rating to each application. Its formal arrangement (letter combinations, numbers, etc.) as well as the number of levels and their meaning will be prepared together by the divisions.

The SNSF will inform the applicants of the **rating of their application** and **how it compares with those of other applications** (a percentage comparison with other applications handled in the same time period by the division or the expert committee). Applicants will also be informed of the **lower threshold value** of the ratings **above which applications were financed**.

3.2.4 Project support models

Currently, there are large differences between the divisions in the way they design project financing. These differences will be equalised as far as possible in the framework of SNF futuro. The SNSF will ensure that a project that the Research Council has judged worthy for funding can reasonably be conducted with the awarded grant.

At present there are different practices among the divisions as to how and under what conditions they approve single or multiple applications from the same researchers. In the future, the applicants will be able to submit **separate applications for multiple, clearly separable themes** according to unified rules if they can show that they have sufficient (time) resources to devote to each submitted project. The main applicant need not necessarily be the professor or the group leader but may be anyone who manages the content of the project. A simplified procedure for extending the project duration to a total of max. 5 years will be introduced for projects of successful and experienced researchers.

3.2.5 Monitoring and performance checks of sponsored projects

The responsible division or expert committee can decide to conduct **site visits**. These serve to judge the general progress of a research group and are temporally and substantively separate from the evaluation and approval process of an application. Site visits will be documented in writing.

The required **interim and final reports** will be simplified. In interim reports, central indicators (such as publications, completed dissertations, acquired third-party funding) and any changes in the research plan, etc. are listed. The final report additionally includes a concise and generally accessible summary of the questions investigated and the results achieved.

3.3 Role of the SNSF in science policy

The Presidial Board will assume a **stronger role in science and research policy** and will represent the SNSF in the (national and international) research landscape.

To fulfil their strengthened role in science policy, the members of the Research Council will need a wider range of expertise. Therefore, in recruiting members of the Research Council, attention will be paid to the broader interest of the candidates in scientific and science policy questions in addition to their scientific reputation in their own disciplines.

As in the past, the SNSF **will not pursue its own explicit policy in the the Swiss university landscape**. In particular, it will not define its own thematic research priorities. However, it is obvious that – in areas such as the social sciences and humanities where the SNSF already supports practically the entire research – *de facto* the SNSF does exert an implicit influence by the way it designs the instruments for project funding and support for individuals. The SNSF will therefore regularly examine its existing and new funding instruments for their possible influences on structural change in Swiss universities and particularly whether they are in the interest of Switzerland as a knowledge centre.

In certain cases to be specially defined, the SNSF will provide **evaluations for significant (national and international) research projects and groups**, even when these are not – or are not completely – directly financed by the SNSF (for example SystemsX.CH). The Presidial Board will determine the criteria for selecting such research projects and groups and the exact implementation of the evaluation services. Relevant criteria may include for instance the federal government as funding source and a geographically cross-cutting effect on the Swiss research landscape.

The collaboration between the Foundation Council/Executive Committee of the Foundation Council and the Presidial Board of the Research Council will be improved and intensified.

4. Next Steps

On the basis of the principles presented herein, the Executive Committee of the Foundation Council issues the following new mandate to the project committee SNF futuro:

“The Executive Committee of the Foundation Council has acknowledged the report *SNF futuro – Report of the Project Committee for the Executive Committee of the Foundation Council*. Based on its resolutions of 26 January 2007, it assigns to the project committee it launched in May 2006 the task of working out a concrete implementation plan as well as suggestions for statutory revisions by the ordinary session of the Foundation Council in March 2007. The implementation plan shall include an overview of the legal bases to be adapted or newly established (including corresponding authorities) and of the necessary organisational measures (including an estimate of the costs) as well as an implementation timetable.”