

“The world needs HSS now more than ever”

Historian and Research Council member Madeleine Herren-Oesch believes there is a danger that society and politicians are moving away from evidence-based action. To counter this risk, she advocates strengthening the humanities and social sciences (HSS) and creating an overall research policy for Switzerland.

Ms Herren-Oesch, the EU sets aside a lot of money for research funding. Doesn't this provide an interesting funding source for researchers in the humanities and social sciences?

For a long time, EU research funding favoured technological subjects, and while HSS took over the task of assessing the sociopolitical impact of technology, they did not define the key questions or shape how research was designed. The weak position of the HSS at European level is a result of this and is therefore a structural problem.

Does EU research funding recognise this?

I hope so. The realisation that HSS is not the problem, but in fact offers solutions for social problems, is gradually gaining ground. The refugee problem, Brexit and the US election made 2016 a year when policy- and evidence-based decision-making drifted apart alarmingly. Interdisciplinary HSS research can analyse this process, help people to understand the need for an educated and globally integrated Europe, and critically reflect on how diversity is handled.

What is the SNSF's role in this?

Its scope for action is determined by Switzerland's relationship with the EU. That is why Switzerland as a centre for research should not just concentrate on EU research programmes, particularly since Europe's global integration is becoming more of a challenge. My dream is for Switzerland to establish itself as a global academic hub. This would support research as a valuable public asset and help society to develop a global appreciation of the problems.

The SNSF is urging scholars working in the humanities and social sciences in Switzerland to apply for more funding from the European Research Council...

... This is an important message! And in order to support this, women whose applications are rejected by the ERC in the second round may submit their projects to the SNSF under simplified conditions. Applying to the ERC involves a lot of time-consuming administrative work, but ERC grants are important and are supported by the SNSF. I am confident that there are better times ahead for HSS. The 21st century world needs HSS more than ever.

A historian with many interests

Madeleine Herren-Oesch is a professor of modern and contemporary history, director of the Institute for European Global Studies, Basel (a research institute of the University of Basel), and a member of the Research Council (Humanities and Social Sciences division) of the SNSF. She has a particular interest in the global history of Europe, European expansion and integration, transnational movements, and the methodology and theories of historiography.



“We need more enjoyment and less of the treadmill”

At the beginning of 2017, Matthias Egger took over from Martin Vetterli as president of the SNSF. They both agree that the SNSF must continue to pursue the Open Science policy, and that young academics need better career prospects.

Mr Vetterli, how do you personally assess your time with the SNSF?

Martin Vetterli (MV): I don't regret a single minute. I had a wonderful, fascinating time at the SNSF. First, I got to know about the whole spectrum of research, including philosophy and the sociology of scientific knowledge. Second, I realised that although Bern is often regarded as slow to do anything, it can act very quickly when necessary. When the SNSF conjured the Temporary Backup Schemes out of nowhere as soon as the popular initiative against mass immigration was accepted in 2014, Brussels couldn't believe what it was seeing. No one there had expected it.

But the SNSF was not always fast enough for you.

MV: Indeed. In my view, we took a rather sedate approach to pushing ahead with Open Access, but the SNSF is of course not the only player in the field of Open Science...

Matthias Egger (ME): ... In this respect, the SNSF needs to finish what Martin Vetterli has started. Within a few years, all publications supported by the SNSF should be publicly accessible, as well as all data funded by tax revenues.

Mr Egger, what motivated you to take on the job of president of the National Research Council?

ME: First of all, I'd like to say that I am looking forward to my new role and I feel grateful to be appointed. I believe that my commitment to the value, integrity and openness of science enables me to bring a vision to the table that will help the SNSF to forge ahead.

MV: ... I am very glad that Matthias was appointed. Although we come from different disciplines, we think alike.

Switzerland's relationship with the EU is not without its difficulties. What would happen if Switzerland as a research centre were to lose its links with Europe?

ME: It would be a catastrophe.

MV: It's like climate change: you may not perceive it immediately, but over the longer term we'll all be feeling the heat. The adverse effects are obvious. The first question asked by researchers from abroad when they are interested in Swiss universities is: "What is Switzerland's relationship with Europe, and do we have access to ERC funding?" Switzerland's position as an open, international and competitive research location remains under attack. The implementation of the mass immigration initiative, as approved by parliament at the end of last year, will allow us to participate in Horizon 2020 for some time to come, which I hope will calm things down somewhat.

ME: What happened in Switzerland is also happening in the United Kingdom with Brexit. Places become less attractive as a centre for research, and it becomes difficult to recruit and retain good people.

Mr Vetterli, you have repeatedly spoken of the crisis in science, with particular reference to the non-replicability of experiments and the number of publications...

MV: I have not criticised science. I'm just saying that we have to reinvent how we do science.

ME: I share that view. Publication practices are strongly influenced by results: negative results are important too, but are often not published. And quantity takes priority over quality.

What does the SNSF need to do?

ME: The SNSF has signed the Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), which contains a range of recommendations for improving the ways in which scientific output data is evaluated. This is a step in the right direction. My job now is to implement these guidelines and establish what they actually mean in practice. It is not going to be easy.

Matthias Egger

Matthias Egger has been President of the National Research Council since the beginning of 2017. He is a professor of epidemiology and public health; from 2002 to 2016 he was Director of the Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine at the University of Bern. He has been a member of the National Research Council since 2009 and is therefore very knowledgeable about Swiss research policy. Egger spent a considerable portion of his career in the United Kingdom at University College, London and the University of Bristol.



Matthias Egger (at left) and Martin Vetterli in conversation.

What obstacles are you expecting?

ME: We will have to find a consensus. Biomedicine and the social sciences, for example, need to agree on the criteria that ought to be used to measure excellence in the future.

MV: I see more and more brilliant young people who no longer wish to play the “game” of science. When I was young, I worshipped at the altar of science, and thought that science was the best thing anybody could do. Today, many young people are sceptical about the way science works. If we lose these people – the ones who can think critically – and we are just left with those who play the game, and don’t ask the deeper questions, it will be a disaster.

ME: Instead of demanding a huge list of publications, the SNSF should ask: Which are your five best publications?

MV: We need to return to quality, which seems an obvious thing to say, but it means a change in culture.

What does this mean in terms of nurturing young researchers?

MV: Nurturing young researchers is the biggest challenge. The SNSF has shown the way with the Ambizione grants, but their impact has not been great enough. The universities have a responsibility in this respect, and need to do more. Young researchers need better working condi-

tions. If you ask full professors about this, they will tell you everything’s fine. Perhaps you have heard this anecdote? At Versailles on 14 July 1789, Louis XVI wrote in his diary under Events: “Nothing.”

So what should the universities be doing to prevent young researchers from storming the ivory towers?

MV: They must reform the professorship system and bring in more tenure-track positions. We need fresh ideas from below.

ME: I stepped down as a professor of the Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine, which I headed for fourteen years, in order to make way for someone younger and give them their chance. More broadly, though, I would like to set up a system of evidence-based, scientific research funding in the SNSF. We have little data about the people who have received funding. We need a longitudinal study in order to gain a better understanding of why promising people drop out. This kind of data would also enable us to present better arguments to the politicians, and formulate better solutions.

So monitoring would help encourage the right people to take up a scientific career?

ME: Yes, I hope so. We need to change the conditions and make research more attractive. We need more enjoyment and

less of the treadmill. And I’m glad to have Martin Vetterli, who thinks the same way, as a partner at EPFL.

Martin Vetterli

Martin Vetterli was president of the National Research Council from 2013 to the end of 2016. He is an electrical engineer who worked at Columbia University in New York and the University of California in Berkeley before being appointed to the Federal Institute of Technology, Lausanne (EPFL) in 1995. From 2011 to 2012, he was Dean of the School of Computer and Communication Sciences at EPFL, where he still leads a research team. Vetterli took over from Patrick Aebischer as President of EPFL at the start of 2017. He is regarded as a pioneer of Open Science.