

Unique, thanks to competition



“One clear goal: to secure the future of truly original and competitive research.”

The singer and multi-instrumentalist Prince once told an interviewer that he never felt he was competing with anyone. He considered himself unique, and he intended to remain so. Competition was for the others! An assertion that only an outstanding personality like Prince could afford to make. But it was also misleading: before achieving stardom, Prince developed his personality and musical skills by meeting and pitting himself against many other singers, bands and styles of his hometown, Minneapolis. Only after winning the respect of his peers did he go on to take the American music industry by storm and become a global megastar. But from an early age, he also worked tirelessly and fought for his independence in order to create music that was both powerful and original.

In the world of research, the most talented researchers also work tirelessly at their “home base” first, developing their ideas by talking to colleagues and mentors and submitting to the judgement of their peers, before taking off internationally. Such competition marks a crucial stage in the careers of young researchers. However, contrary to the rough and tumble of the music industry, it needs to be as fair and objective as possible, without favouritism, judgemental bias, partisan interests or any alleged “demand” of the market. Excellence and originality must be the key criteria for promoting outstanding young researchers.

This is where the SNSF steps in, as an evaluator with clear and transparent procedures, access to international experts and a Research Council composed of excellent scientists. The latter – in keeping with the metaphor of the music industry – conduct a casting session with each application (see article on page 6). The projects and careers of the young people who want to dedicate themselves to research are examined carefully, conscientiously

and with respect in order to identify and support the most promising talents. And who knows, one or the other may even go on to achieve a level of excellence that would make them unique too. The above-average success rate of Swiss applicants for European research funding is a clear indicator of their high quality – and many of them had previously been grantees of the SNSF.

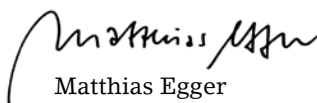
Because science is always in motion, the methods used to evaluate it must also be constantly... re-evaluated. Despite the considerable progress achieved in recent decades, there is still room for improvement: subconscious biases that can influence funding decisions must be reduced as far as possible. The SNSF is constantly working to tackle this concern by reinforcing its provisions on conflicts of interest and, in particular, by implementing the principles laid down in the DORA Declaration. This requires taking into account the value and consequences of all research results, instead of using bibliometrics as a substitute for a qualitative assessment.

Finally, by strengthening its Open Access and Open Research Data policies, the SNSF wants to give the scientific community and the public at large access to the fruits of high-quality research funded by taxpayers. Not only is such knowledge sharing the key to scientific progress – now more than ever it is a driver of innovation and therefore essential to this country’s prosperity.

All of these measures and procedures have one clear goal: to secure the future of truly original and competitive research. Switzerland may be – like Prince – unique in many respects, but that doesn’t diminish the fact that it needs to compete both scientifically and economically with the rest of the world.



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