

Academic renown or a work-life balance?

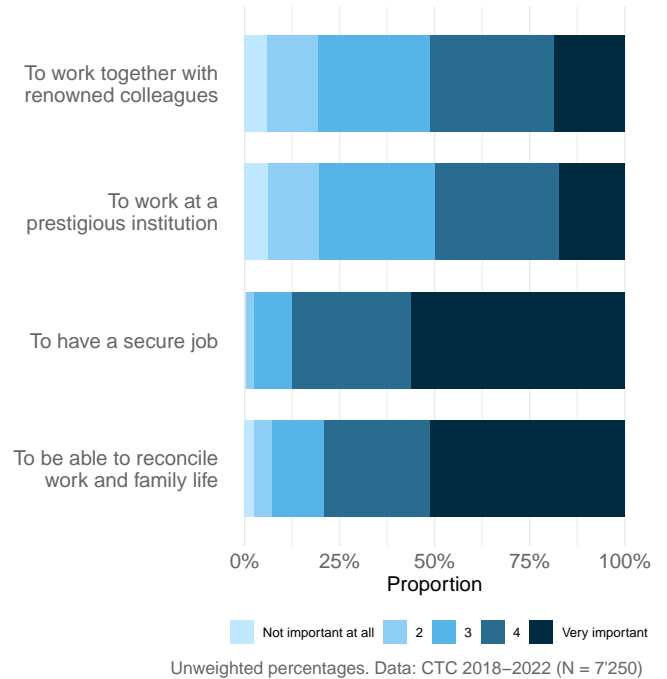
More than half (51.1%) of those surveyed in the CTC study consider a satisfactory work-life balance to be a very important aspect of their future career. Yet many respondents who left a comment expressed discontent with their current work-life balance.

"I still intend to become a professor, but I have serious doubts about the direction of higher education and of academic careers in terms of healthiness." (Senior researcher, 41 years old, 2023)

Working in a renowned academic environment, in contrast, is not the top priority for many in the CTC study. Instead, 56.2% of CTC respondents attach very high importance to having a secure job.

"I have spent 11 years on academic work, including 7 years after my double PhD, ticked all the boxes, and yet, here I am at the age of 35, grasping for straws of tiny contracts at 10–15%, completely dependent on my husband in terms of money, and with no serious prospects in the near future." (Scientific collaborator, 36 years old, 2022)

How important are the following aspects for your future career?



Declining confidence in academic career readiness

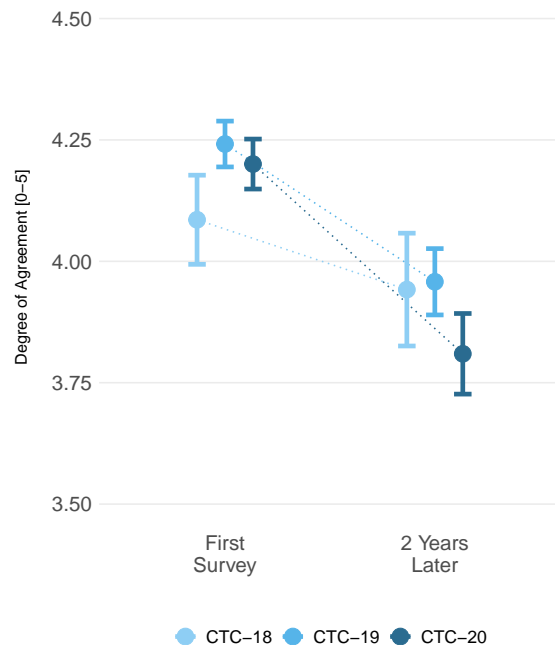
Most respondents express confidence in their ability to meet the demands of an academic career. Among those working in academic research, confidence in meeting the demands of an academic career declines over time. As the figure on the right shows, the data for the cohorts CTC-18, CTC-19, and CTC-20 reveal a slight downward shift in the two years following the first survey.

"I feel that my chances to get hired by an academic institution are lower than my chances to succeed in a startup. I have a very good CV, for which I have worked really hard, and yet, academia does not want me." (Scientific collaborator, 36 years old, 2022)

Strikingly, women significantly fall behind men (means: $3.95 < 4.11$, $p < 0.001$) in terms of self-evaluation regarding their ability to meet the demands of an academic career.

"It takes up a lot of time preparing proposals alongside conducting research, but it is extremely difficult to obtain career funding, especially if one wants to conduct research interdisciplinary and ambitious research in a new direction. At the same time, [...] the only way one will be able to get a permanent professorship position [is] by having a distinct and important research specialty." (Post-doc, 35 years old, 2020)

I am confident that I am able to meet the demands of an academic career



Unweighted means along with 95% confidence intervals. CTC-18/19/20 refers to respondents first surveyed in 2018/19/20. Data: CTC 2018–2022 (N = 4'906)

Ambivalent thoughts on future career plans

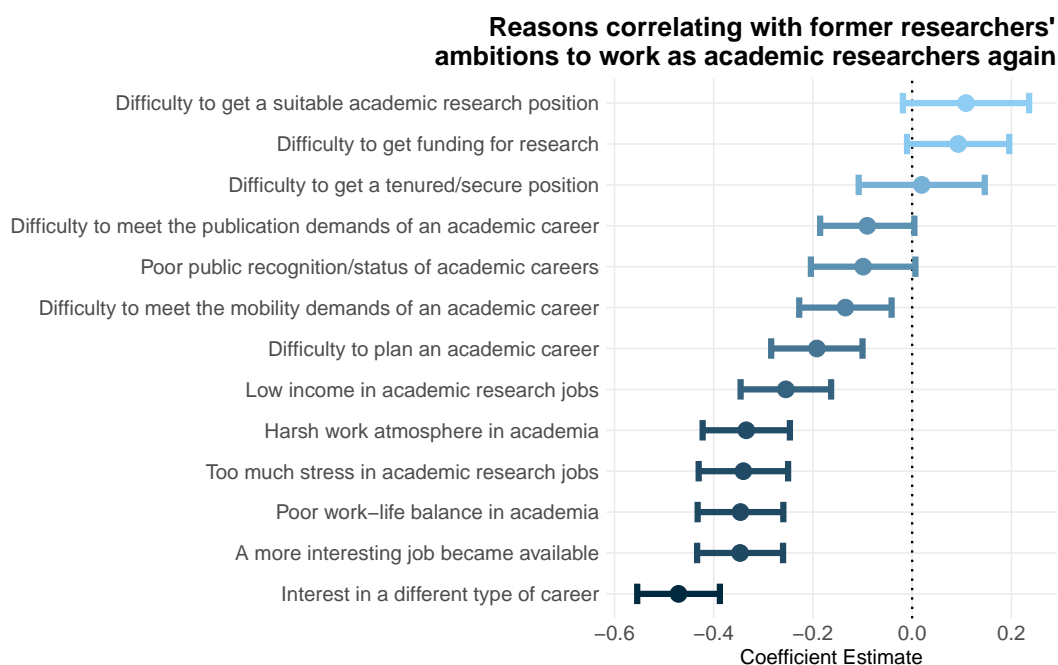
It is apparent from the comments that a non-negligible share of respondents are contemplating pursuing career paths outside of academia.

"Unfortunately, work conditions in academia, requirements to keep changing location for many years, uncertainty, salary, work-life balance, stress and mental health conditions in this insanely competitive environment pushes out smart people." (Postdoc, 33 years old, 2022)

Looking at those in the CTC data who are employed outside academia, 60.4% have little or no ambition at all to work in academia again one day. The figure below illustrates the relation between the reasons given for currently not or no longer working as an academic and the ambition to work in academia again in the future. Among

the reasons for the lack of desire to work as an academic researcher again, the most prominent factors include the appeal of alternative career paths outside academia, perceptions of poor work-life balance in academia, excessive stress associated with academic jobs, and a harsh work atmosphere. Interestingly, perceptions of the difficulties of getting funding or a suitable or tenured position do not appear to influence respondents' ambition to pursue a future career in academia.

"Leaving research has improved every aspect of my work life: salary, work-life-balance, workplace relations, ability to implement my own projects, networking, and long-term career prospects." (Public official, 38 years old, 2022)



Coefficients from unweighted bivariate linear regressions along with 95% confidence intervals. For example, every additional point on a relevance scale regarding interest in a different type of career decreases the ambition to work as an academic researcher again by 0.47 [\pm 0.83] on a 5-point scale. This effect is statistically significant as it does not intersect the dotted line at 0.0. Data: CTC 2018–2022 (N = 348)

Strong commitment with ifs and buts

Alongside the many remarks addressing the challenges faced by postdocs and detailing their struggles, there are also uplifting comments. For instance, respondents frequently express their commitment to research and convey their motivation and joy in engaging in it.

"I love doing research [...] but honestly, would be happy if more permanent research staff positions were available. I find the lack of job security as a postdoc to be severely detrimental to my mindset and distracting from the quality and efficiency of research I conduct." (Postdoc, 31 years old, 2019)

The survey results underscore this dedication, with 91.2% of respondents fully or mostly agreeing with the statement, "I have a strong commitment to scientific work." However, intertwined with expressions of commitment and job satisfaction are concerns and apprehensions, particularly regarding career progression, work-life balance, and overall well-being.

"I'm very satisfied with my work, life, and work-life balance. But I'm very unsatisfied and worried about the prospects and chances of carrying out research for people over 35–40 years." (Postdoc, 43 years old, 2020)

Up next

In April we will start the next field phase and will survey the participants of the CTC-19, CTC-20, and CTC-21 spring cohorts. We eagerly anticipate receiving your responses and comments, and we extend our sincere gratitude to all participants in advance for their contributions.

After the field phase, a new data release, including the 2023 survey data, will be released on SWISSUbase. The data are accessible free of charge for all interested scholars. Take a look at the CTC website, where empirical results of the CTC study are regularly published.

About

The Career Tracker Cohorts (CTC) project of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) is a longitudinal panel study with four cohorts (CTC-18–CTC-21). It aims to track the career paths of researchers applying for SNSF career funding schemes at the postdoctoral level (Early Postdoc.Mobility, Postdoc.Mobility, Ambizione, Eccel-

lenza, and PRIMA). The main goals of the CTC are to monitor the careers of these researchers and to evaluate the impact of the different career funding schemes of the SNSF. The CTC study is affiliated with the Interfaculty Centre for Educational Research (ICER) at the University of Bern.

For more information see: <http://careertrackercohorts.ch/>

How to cite this document:

Benz, R., Lüthi, J., Wilhelmi, B., & Erzinger, A.B. (2024). SNSF Career Tracker Cohorts (CTC) Newsletter 2024/1. Bern: Interfaculty Centre for Educational Research and Interdisciplinary Centre for Gender Studies, University of Bern. Available from <http://doi.org/10.48350/193311>