

Career after PhD

An imMed Alumni Survey

Stefanie Keiser / Adriana Rüegger

Stay at university and pursue an academic career, switch to the private industrial sector, or better stay at home as a full-time parent? This is a question every PhD graduate (or survivor) eventually has to ask themselves. Do women and men answer this question differently? What has to be done to give everyone, regardless of age, gender and origin, the same opportunities? Since the ZIHP will launch a pilot project on supporting academics with <unconventional careers> in 2022, we are particularly interested in what our imMed alumni had to say about this topic.

At the 17th ZIHP Symposium this year the question arose as to why so many female students after finishing their PhD change into the private industry sector instead of pursuing their academic career. Driven by the following lively discussion we decided to perform a survey amongst all imMed Alumni to get an insight into their different career paths after their PhD.

Where are our imMed Alumni now?

A total of 70 alumni completed the questionnaire. Of the 70 participants, 64.3% identified as women and 35.7% as men. Most of them were between 30 and 40 years old. The participants were



PhD in the bag - but what next?

from 22 different countries, with most of them being Swiss (41.2%), German (14.7%) and Italian (7.4%). Around half have turned their backs on their original field of study. 50% are currently working in research in a pharmaceutical industry, 24% are still working in the academic environment of a university, 11% work in the private sector in a non-medical field and 3 participants are now a homestaying

parent. If you look at the distribution within the genders, a similar picture emerges: 59% of women work in the industry and 27% at a university, and for men it is 68% compared to 16%.

Satisfied alumni?

When asked whether one could imagine switching back from the private sector to a university, more than half (57.6%) said that they couldn't imagine doing so. Only 13.6% would be willing to return to the academic environment. Vice versa, the results were slightly different. 36.7% of the people who are currently employed at a university have a positive attitude towards switching to the private sector, 10.5% could not imagine this, and more than half (52.7%) are unsure.

With regard to equality, 21.4% of all alumni felt disadvantaged because of their gender (32.5% of women and 2.3% of men). The disadvantages cited most frequently included points relating to the compatibility of family and work. There is little support and understanding during and after pregnancy, and working part-time is often not possible, especially in higher

positions. In addition, female participants complain that it is difficult for them to get into higher job positions and that they have to work harder to get a reputation. 30.4% of the participants stated that their gender had influenced them in their career decision.

Is it a gender problem?

«I don't think it is solely a gender issue, it is academia itself that is currently difficult for many,» stated one participant. Although more women than men feel disadvantaged because of their gender, many male participants also expressed that it was difficult for them to combine work and children. The reasons being that there are not enough part-time positions, and that men are more often expected to continue to work 100% after they have become a parent.

When asked what would have to be changed in order for more women to pursue an academic career, there were a number of

answers - most of them can also be transferred to men. On the one hand, better compatibility with the family should be promoted. We need more part-time jobs, a better care system for children, and the stigma surrounding simultaneous parenting and work needs to be changed. Working conditions should also be improved, as was proposed by many participants. Overtime can rarely be compensated, and short term contracts and the associated financial uncertainty in particular lead to dissatisfaction among both women and men. One participant's answer sums up the problem well:

«The academic structure was built and maintained by people with few 'obligations' toward family and society. Mostly rich and noble could do science earlier. Later these were replaced by regular citizens, which could cut their costs of living – no family, no further hobbies, no further 'obligations'. Even today a good young scientist must be

underpaid (no 100% positions), work on the weekend and evenings. ... The first victims of this 'nerd' cult are women, because of their physiological maternity obligations, which cannot be sacrificed. However, it is incorrect to underestimate the high number of 'nerd' cult victims among men – this is less visible, less dramatic, but it is as well present. Both men and women have no problems to combine their professional aims and private obligations outside of the academy.»

In conclusion we can say that although women have to overcome more hurdles to stay in academic science than men, there are some issues the university could work on to make its working environment more attractive to everyone so that valuable staff does not get lost into other sectors.