

Retrospective Evaluation of the COMET Career Programme – Coaching, Mentoring and Training (2017-2020)

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1. The COMET Career Programme

The University of Bern's COMET career programme consists of the three core elements coaching, mentoring and training and is aimed at female postdoctoral scientists of all faculties. Coaching entails support from professional coaches for individual questions concerning topics like grant applications, leadership, career planning, work-life-balance, etc. In the mentoring part, participants select a professor of the same or a related discipline as mentor for the duration of the programme, who supports them in the planning of the next career steps. The training entails workshops on different topics selected by the participants, e.g. research funding, application training for professorships, leadership, self-marketing or the interaction in power games.

The programme is part of the University's Strategy 2021 and the University's Gender Equality Action Plan 2017-2020 and was funded by the University of Bern for an initial period of 4 years (2017-2020). It aims to increase the proportion of women at the upper academic levels with targeted support, thus contributing to a greater representation of women among professors in the longer term. Participation in the COMET career programme is intended to support young female scientists in successfully realizing their next career steps in academia. The programme, which can be adapted individually, aims to strengthen competencies, know-how and motivation for a scientific career and to expand the network of participants.

In 2017, the COMET career programme launched its first round. Since then, a total of four COMET runs with 21 participants each (total 84) have been successfully carried out (2017-2020). The participants were selected by a board according to defined criteria (academic achievements and perspectives, motivation, diversity of career stages and background, etc.). For each round, the success rate for applications was between 50-60%. Each COMET round was evaluated after its conclusion. Starting from 2021, the COMET career programme was funded for another 4 years period by the University of Bern (2021-24).

2. Retrospective Evaluation of the COMET Career Programme 2017 – 2020

In order to evaluate the first funding period of 2017-2020, a questionnaire was designed and sent to all women who took part in COMET. The aim was to find out what the longer-term effects of the

programme were on the careers of the former participants and how they assessed the benefits of the programme in retrospect. Among other things, this was to provide insights into whether the programme's overarching goal of promoting the careers of women in science could be achieved. Furthermore, the survey should help to optimally adapt the programme to the needs of the participants in the new implementation period 2021-24.

During August and September 2021 data was collected. From the 84 participants, 80 could be contacted and 55 participants completed the survey, which represents a 69% response rate. 11 participants of the first round took part in the survey, 14 participants of the second round, 17 of the third and 13 of the fourth round.

In the evaluation, the past and present professional situation of the former participants was surveyed, the perceived effect of the COMET programme on their scientific career and their retrospective satisfaction with the programme. The most important results of the evaluation are summarized below.

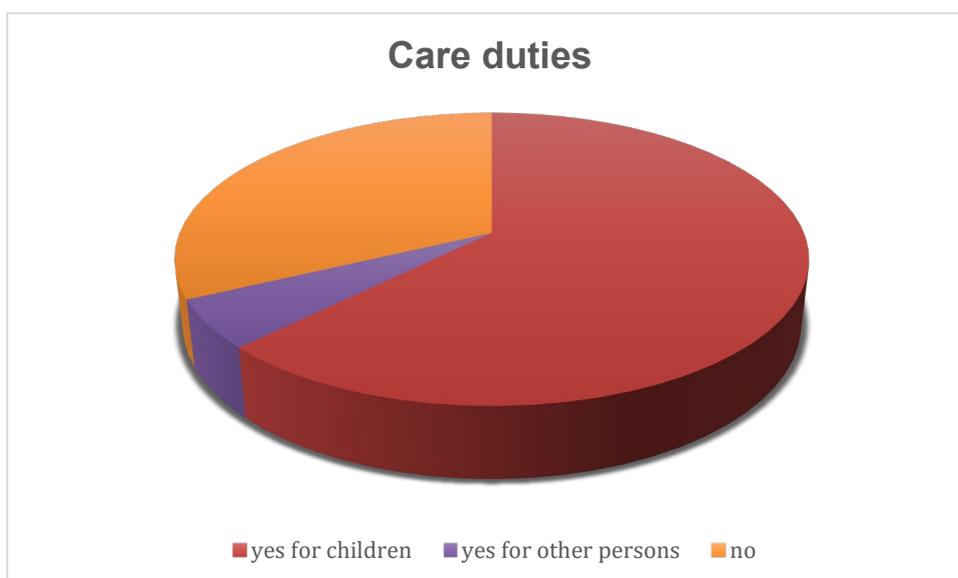
2.1 Questions about Past and Current Professional and Personal Situation

In the first part of the questionnaire, the participants were asked about their past and current professional and personal situation.

The number of years that have passed since the PhD for all participants spans a broad range: 1-4 years (24%), 5-8 years (47%), 9-12 years (20%), 13 years and more (9%). This reflects the programme's policy to include more junior and more advanced scientists in the same group to maximize peer-mentoring effects.

Most of the participants are presently working in Switzerland (78%). The rest (22%) is working abroad (Germany, Netherlands, Austria, Greece, Canada, Australia, Sweden, Denmark).

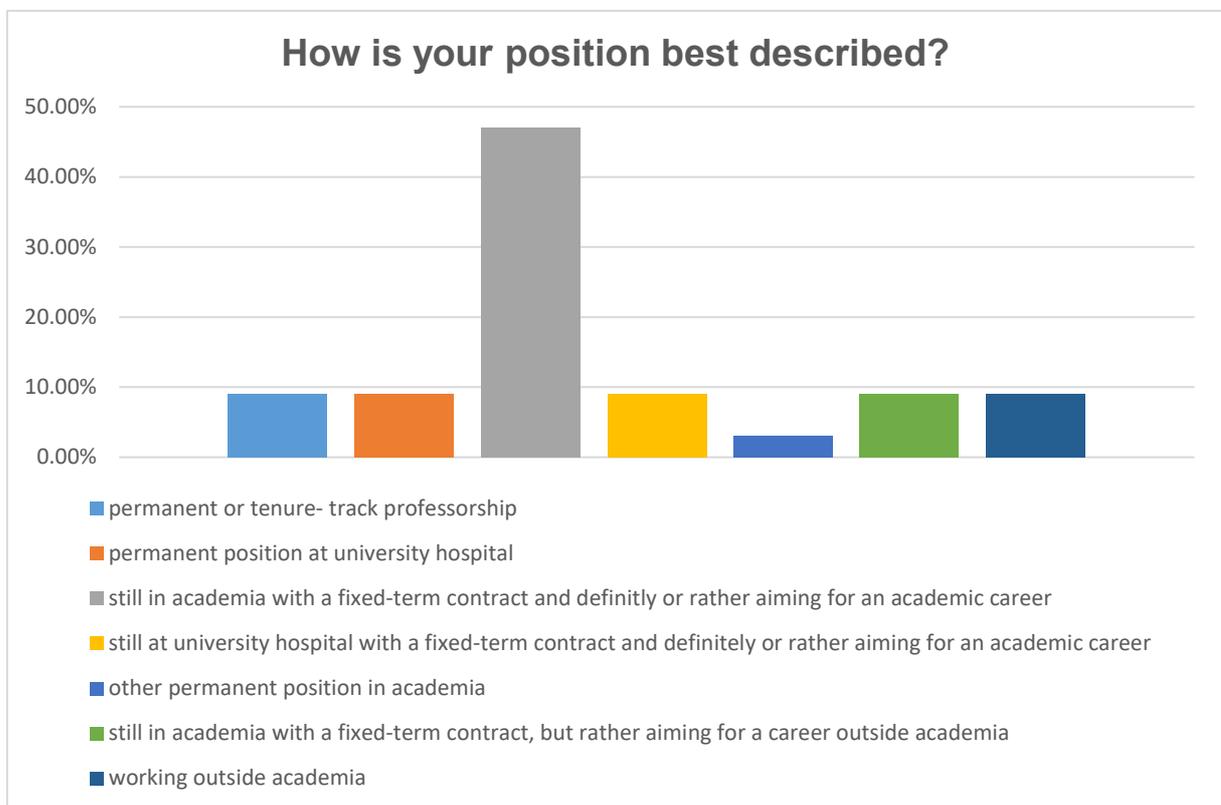
More than two thirds of the participants (68%) have care duties, 63% for children and 5% for other persons.



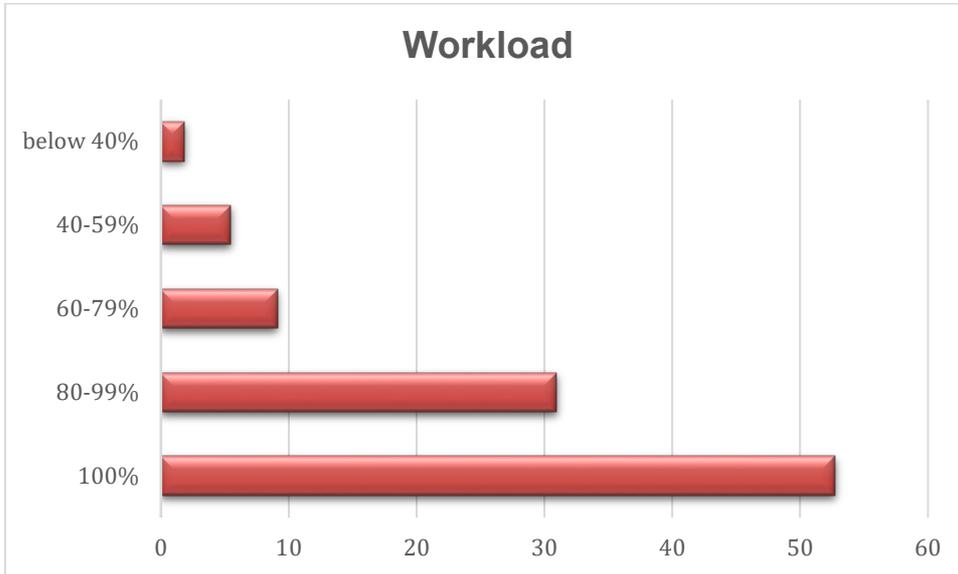
The participants were asked about their position at the beginning of the COMET programme and presently. At the beginning of the programme, half of the participants were employed as postdocs

(51%) and 11% each as assistant, "Oberassistentin" and "Oberärztin". None of the participants was employed as a professor. Presently, there are nine persons employed as professors (including Eccellenza, PRIMA, assistant, associate and full professorships) and there is one "leitende Ärztin". The number of participants with an Ambizione or Marie S. Curie Fellowship slightly increased compared to the position at the beginning of the COMET programme (four participants at the beginning vs. six now). The share of postdocs, assistants and "Oberassistentinnen" is significantly lower than at the beginning of the programme. This shows that some of the women could already make a next career step towards academic independence or even a permanent position.

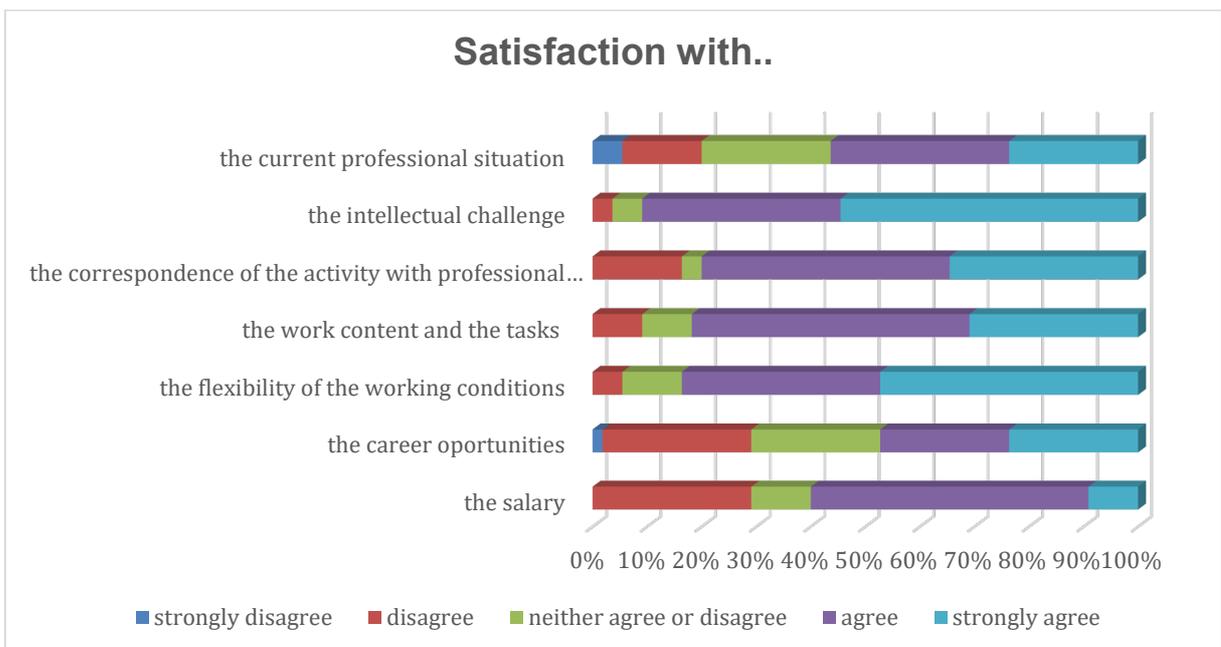
Nearly half of the participants (47%) describe their present position as "still in academia with a fixed-term contract and definitely or rather aiming for an academic career". Six participants (9%) even reached a permanent or Tenure Track professorship. Only six women (9%) are not working in academia anymore.



Half of the participants (53%) have a 100% workload, 31% of the participants have a workload of 80-99% and 16% have a workload of less than 80%. Of the participants working part-time, 35% would like to have a higher percentage of employment, 78% of these are presently working under 80%. This shows that mainly those women who work under 80% would like to have a higher percentage of employment.



Only a little more than half of the participants (56%) agree or strongly agree to be satisfied with their current professional situation. This not particularly high approval rate could be related to the fact that most participants have fixed-term rather than permanent positions. However, nearly all (91%) agree or strongly agree to be satisfied with the intellectual challenge. Most of the participants (80%) agree or strongly agree to be satisfied with the correspondence of the activity with their professional qualifications. In addition, the majority of the participants (82%) agrees or strongly agrees to be satisfied with the content and tasks of their work. Most (84%) are also satisfied with the flexibility of the working conditions.



Other aspects are viewed more critically by a large number of participants: Just under half of the participants (47%) agree or strongly agree being satisfied with their career opportunities, a large minority of about one third of the participants (29%) strongly disagrees or disagrees in this question. This could be explained by the insecure and often unclear career options of junior scientists and the

small number of permanent positions available. Salary is also viewed critically by many participants. While 60% agree or strongly agree being satisfied with their salary, 29% of the participants strongly disagree or disagree, 11% are undecided.

2.2 Questions about the COMET Career Programme and Accomplished Career Steps

In this part of the questionnaire, the participants were asked about the effect of the COMET programme on their scientific career, especially on their career steps reached since the participation in the programme.

Participants could choose from a list of possible effects the COMET programme had (multiple answers possible). The most frequently selected effects were "better knowledge of academic system" (44 mentions) and "more self-confidence" (43 mentions). With 34 mentions "better knowledge about ones strengths and weaknesses" and "clarification of next career steps" were also often selected. This indicates that the programme's goals of providing targeted support to women in their next career steps could be achieved. Moreover, "long term motivation to continue an academic career" (30 mentions), "more self-efficacy", "support in concrete applications for grants and positions", "extended network" and "better knowledge about gender equality" (26 mentions each) were also frequent effects the participation had.

Of all the program elements, coaching (29%) was most frequently rated as an especially helpful element, followed by training (24%), networking (22%) and mentoring (20%). It is striking that all three official programme parts (coaching, mentoring, training), as well as the additional networking aspect that comes from the peer exchange, are seen as especially helpful by roughly the same number of people. This shows that different emphases on the respective elements were set by participants depending on their individual needs.

The participants were further asked why the selected programme element was considered helpful. Some of the answers can be seen in the following table:

Coaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - very helpful in preparing grants/ funding applications (e.g. Ambizione; <i>several similar comments</i>) - helpful in gaining insight of jobs outside of academia and how to prepare for them - acquiring of skills and awareness - improving CV and presentation - extremely helpful for career planning - great opportunity to reflect on concrete challenges - self-confidence, assess specific challenging situations - knowledge and tips on academic career and presentation - being told I was good enough to apply for high ranked grants - tailor-made support, boost of confidence, help in navigating difficult situations (competition)
Mentoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - increased self-confidence - lead to support network outside of current (dependent) employment position - establishing new contacts and see how someone with a similar familial situation in a

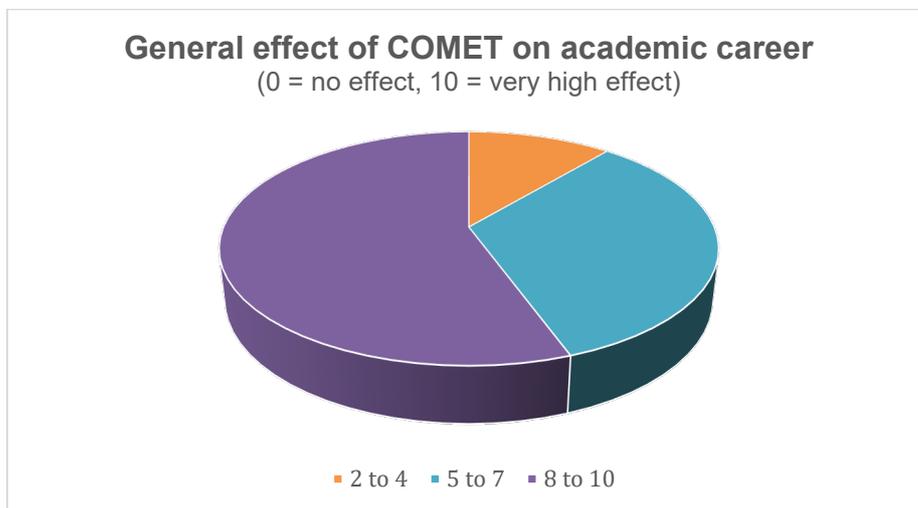
	<p>more advanced academic path coordinates work and family</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - it was great to discuss and get advise from someone senior not directly involved in my projects - networking, support by a female professor with children, also a very good example that it can work (and how hard it can be...) - my mentor had so much knowledge to share! - gave me the opportunity to go abroad - establish contact with people who might introduce/help me to find job opportunities
Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - more self-confidence - gaining new knowledge - the courses were very interesting and helped getting a better understanding of the academic world including its challenges - the Gerzensee retreat is magic. This is where a group spirit evolves and in-depth work is possible. I learnt a lot and it was extremely motivating - workshops were just great and inspiring - more self-confidence, power game awareness, gender equality awareness - a lot of very useful content knowledge that I still refer to in my daily activities
Networking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - possibility to get to know other females in a similar career path that share the same goals and challenges - peer-support: To note that I am not the only one with certain difficulties - friendships with other colleagues! - strong and inspiring women - still in touch with the amazing women I met in 2019!

The free-text responses show that the different programme elements were used in very different ways. In the coaching part, different effects were achieved: concrete support in submitting grants or improving the CV, but also an increased self-confidence or a clarification of one's own situation. For some participants, the effect of the mentoring element was an expanded network, increased self-confidence, or to have found a role model in terms of work-life balance. For others, it was used to work on the participant's CV, receive concrete feedback on the content of a project, or get specific support in the job search. In the training part, the effect of increased self-confidence is often mentioned, too. Here, aspects like better knowledge about equal opportunities or unwritten rules of the academic system played a role for some of the participants. Peer-networking also was very important to many participants – for motivation, inspiration and increased self-confidence. Several participants stress that they are still in contact with some of the other alumnae.

The participants reached different career steps since the COMET programme: Two participants work as a full or associate professor, four an assistant professorship with tenure track. 15 participants reached a more senior position at university (e.g. assistant professorship without tenure track, group leader, senior research assistant, etc.). 20 participants have successfully submitted a fellowship or

grant application (SNSF grants like Eccellenza, PRIMA, Ambizione, Postdoc.Mobility; Horizon 2020 grants like Marie S. Curie, ERC; smaller grants). Three participants won a prize, six reached a next formal qualification step, most of them the habilitation. 33 participants published peer-reviewed articles and/or monographs. The COMET career programme had the highest impact on the publication of peer-reviewed articles and/or monographs and on the successful submission of fellowship or grant applications.

In the end of the survey the participants made a general assessment how they would judge the effect of the COMET programme on their academic career in general. They could chose a range from 0 (no effect) to 10 (very high effect). The most selected options were 8 points (28%) and 10 points (19%). Over half of the participants rated the effect with 8-10 points (56%), one third with 5 to 7 points (33%) and 11% with 2 to 4 points. None of the participants only rated it with one point. Thus, over half of the participants still think the effect of the COMET programme on their careers was high to very high (8-10) and another third deems it medium to high (5-7).



In the end of the survey, the participants could name further effects the programme had. Some of the effects were: better feeling about the possibility of work-life balance in academia (*several statements*), empowerment, confidence building, realization of own worth as a scholar for the institution, negotiation skills, sense of community and support network, friendships, inspiration on a peer level, awareness, personal development.

In addition to a great number of positive responses, there was some critical feedback in the free-text responses. One participant remarked that gender aspects had taken too much space for her in the programme. Another thought the programme was too focused on a career that can only be pursued with a fulltime job and that a discussion of job-sharing options should also be part of the programme. Moreover, some participants said it was too early for them to really see a longer term effect of COMET on their careers.

Nearly all of the participants (98%) would recommend COMET as programme supporting the academic career of women. One of the women writes: "It is a fantastic program that I always recommend to colleagues". Another woman states: "The personalized aspect of the training/coaching [...] also makes it a unique and productive tool that ensures the success of each and every of us, whatever direction we took. Thank you!"

3. Conclusion

The retrospective survey of the COMET Career Programme could provide some interesting insights into the present career situation of former participants and into longer-term effects of the programme.

Some reservations regarding the significance of the data have to be taken into account, since for some women, the participation was just some months back and the longer-term effect not yet assessable. However, it still seems possible to draw some conclusions.

It is notable that a very large number of former COMET participants, about 90%, are still working in academia and most of them, about 80%, are aiming at an academic career. Most of the former COMET participants still have non-permanent positions. This is reflected in the fact that while most are satisfied with the work content and the intellectual challenge, the career perspectives are viewed more critically by many. However, it is remarkable that many of the former COMET participants could already accomplish a career step. While two women already reached a full or an associate professorship, four reached an assistant professorship with tenure track. Another 15 people (27%) moved into a more senior position. Over one third (36%) of the participants successfully submitted grant proposals. While a direct correlation between the participation in COMET and the successful continuation of the academic career of the participants cannot be made, their retrospective assessment can still point to the perceived effect the COMET programme had on their careers. It is notable that over half of the participants rated the longer-term effects of COMET on their career as high to very high and another third as medium to high. While effects could be detected in several areas, they were most prominent in the area of self-confidence and of better knowledge of the academic system. A clearer view of the next career steps and one's own strengths and weaknesses was also frequently mentioned.

Interestingly, the positive effects on the careers of former participants seem to have resulted from different programme elements. While for some participants, coaching seemed to have been most helpful, for others it was mentoring, training or peer-networking. This shows that different priorities could be set according to participants' individual needs. It therefore makes sense to continue to attach great importance to all four components in the next rounds of the programme.

Generally, one can conclude that the COMET Career Programme can be seen as one possible successful means to provide women with targeted support in their academic careers. Especially promising seems to be the combination of different elements and the individual flexibility of the programme, which allows participants to focus on different aspects and topics that are relevant for their careers. Besides the individualised nature, the exchange with peers in similar professional and personal situations was mentioned by many participants as especially important, not least in enhancing their self-confidence.

While first positive effects of COMET could be detected, it remains to be seen how the careers of the former COMET participants develop in the future. Another longer-term evaluation 4-7 years after the programme participation would therefore be useful.