

Conference Report

Preparing for the Transition to Professional Life:

The First Experiences with the New Mentoring Program of the SCS

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Introduction

Access for companies to qualified graduates (talent acquisition) is of central importance for Switzerland as a strong business and research location. For Swiss universities, on the other hand, it is crucial to exploit this locational advantage and offer students the best prospects in a global competition.

Both students and companies observe that the transition from education and training to working life, *i.e.* the recruitment process, does not always go as planned. While students are sometimes confronted with unexpected difficulties to find open positions, companies do not always find a selection of applicants that meets their requirements.

The current experience is that the vast majority of Master, PhD and postdoctoral students in chemistry and related fields from Swiss universities will find a job that meets their expectations. However, the search for a job usually takes longer than students tend to anticipate. Often, this delay is due to the fact that students are not familiar enough with the job market, *i.e.* they are not aware of the range of companies on offer nor of the career opportunities that are available.

Most universities nowadays have career centres that advise students. Student organizations are also aware of the interface between education and career and at ETH Zurich, for example, they offer a job fair which has previously been reported on in *CHIMIA*.^[1,2]

A few years ago, the Swiss Women in Chemistry (SWC) launched a mentoring program supporting female students in their transition to professional life.^[3]

Last year, the SCS Foundation, in collaboration with the SCS and the youngSCS, implemented a complementary, gender-neutral mentoring program.^[4] The program supports the personal and professional development of Swiss university students by providing guidance, advice, and feedback from senior professionals of industry, academia, higher education, and governmental agencies in various functions.

The first edition of this program was very successful and has been relaunched for the current academic year (September 2024–June 2025). In the following, we report on the program, the structure as its success factor, and the experience gained.

Program Structure

The most important feature of the program is that the mentors and mentees work in small teams. There is no 1:1 mentor to mentee relationship, but an open, dynamic structure. Different formats of training and exchange are offered, including round tables and discussions in small groups, lectures, company, or lab visits, as well as social activities (see Fig. 1).

The program is open to MSc, PhD, and post-doctoral students from all Swiss universities. Participation is free of charge. The par-



Fig. 1. General program structure.

ticipants are selected based on the application documents submitted (CV, motivation letter) *via* the website of the SCS Foundation.

Classes are offered in four different regions: The Arc lémanique, Basel, and Zurich areas, plus the Bern-Neuchâtel-Fribourg cluster. Each of these classes is led by a management team consisting of representatives from the youngSCS. The management teams are in charge of organizing and leading the events. They are supported by the SCS office but are independent when it comes to planning their program and activities. They have a budget provided by the program sponsors (Table 1).

The classes run from September to June, include a kick-off event, at least two activities during the terms, and a closing event. There are a maximum of 20 mentees per class, with a mentor to mentees ratio of approximately one to three.

Table 1: The four clusters, their management teams and the team of mentors.

Cluster	Management Team	Mentors
Basel	Dr. Anton Kudashev Titus Wuermeling Andreas Ostertag	Dr. Leslie Anne Fendt Prof. Catherine E. Housecroft Prof. Malte Oppermann Dr. Gloriana Reginato Dr. Mathias Wipf Dr. Claudio Meyer Dr. Tim Mollner
BeNeFri	Dr. Gaetano F. Geraci Sophia Belrhomari Marie-Désirée Schlemper-Scheidt	Prof. Christian Bochet Dr. Stefan Irmler Dr. Stefan Dolder Prof. Alke Fink Dr. Gordon Honeyman
Leman	Miguel Lopez Tena Ojaswita Pant	Prof. Takuji Adachi Prof. Philippe Schwaller Dr. Jonathan Brand Florent Héroguel Pierre Yves Dapsens
Zurich	Tim Doerenkamp Marie Perrin	Prof. Nako Nakatsuka Prof. Michal Juricek Dr. Sergio Grunder Dr. Christopher Gordon Dr. Nataša Budimirović Dr. Hans Peter Lüthi Dr. Stefan Hildbrand

The Basel Cluster

The Basel cluster program started in October 2023 at the FHNW Campus Muttentz, where the mentors and mentees introduced themselves, and networked over an apéro. This was followed in November by a lunch talk with *Mathias Wipf*, CEO of Momm Diagnostics, on the challenges of start-ups. In February,

the mentees toured the artful Novartis Campus, guided by Basel Tourism. **Tim Mollner** and **Claudio Meyer** then spoke about their careers and the work opportunities at Novartis, which ended in a tour of the Novartis Pavilion. The program concluded with a discussion at the University of Basel and a visit to Roche in July. **Catherine E. Housecroft** talked about her experiences as a female professor, while **Malte Oppermann** spoke about the challenges of a modern academic career. **Gloriana Reginato** from Basilea Pharmaceutica spoke about the challenges of a career in the industry. At Roche, **Andrea Eichelmann**, **Jean-Yves Wach**, and **Leslie Anne Fendt** presented various career paths inside and outside research and development (see Fig. 2), which was followed by a dinner and round table discussion in Basel.

In conclusion, our mentors gave invaluable insights to the mentees about various career paths and connected with the future generation of natural scientists.



Fig. 2. Company visit to Roche. Photo credit: Dr. Anton Kudashev.

The BeNeFri Cluster

The BeNeFri cluster was by far the most diverse cluster of the four: Four research institutions, three cities, mentors from academia, industry, a start-up, the publishing sector, plus a high school teacher and a representative of a federal institute. During the kick-off event (see Fig. 3), we got to know each other and identified topics of interest to the mentees and mentors during an apéro. We discussed topics ranging from possible careers in a variety of sectors, publishing, teaching, how to go from being mentee to becoming a mentor and ethics in science, especially the definition of scientific misconduct proposed by the ACS. Also, we had the opportunity to visit the Kantonsschule Lerbermatt and track the day of a high school teacher. During our visit of Agroscope (see Fig. 3), organized by Dr. Stefan Irmler, we had the chance to get insight into the manufacturing, cultivation, and conservation of microorganisms for the production of Swiss cheese. To wrap up the event, we organized the three-lake boat cruise, which ended in the sharing of a local speciality, the Gâteau du Vully.

To sum up, it was a very nice first edition of the SCS Mentoring program, and we are all looking forward to welcoming new mentors and mentees for the second edition!

The Léman Cluster

This year's Léman class was composed of 14 mentees, MSc and PhD students from EPFL and UNIGE, plus 5 mentors with different backgrounds such as R&D in industry, founding a start-up, or pursuing an academic career.

Activities were divided evenly between Lausanne and Geneva, from the first meet up, having an apéro next to the Rhône, to a team building and career workshop at EPFL campus (see Fig. 4). Also, the mentees were delighted to enjoy a customized tour



Fig. 3. Impressions from the different events of the BeNeFri cluster, our kick-off event in Fribourg on top and the visit to Agroscope in Liebefeld on the bottom. Photo credits: Marie-Désirée Schlemper-Scheidt and Dr. Gaetano F. Geraci.



Fig. 4. Lemman Cluster cohort at the kick-off event which took place in Geneva on September 2023. Photo credits: Miguel Lopez Tena and Ojaswita Pant.

of the research and production facilities at Givaudan in Vernier, hosted by one of the mentors.

To conclude this fruitful year, mentees and mentors sailed together the calm waters of the Léman lake on a round-trip cruise from Lausanne to Montreux. During the event, the participants were able to share their thoughts, experiences and career plans and prospects, meanwhile admiring the breath-taking surroundings.

The Zurich Cluster

The Zurich cohort was the largest, accounting for 15 mentees and 7 mentors representing academic and industrial careers alongside start-ups and consulting. It has been an incredible journey of growth, connection, and discovery. We kicked off the program with interactive games that helped participants get to know each other and establish clear goals (Fig. 5.1). This set the stage for a productive and supportive environment. We continued with a team-building activity which took place in an escape room, where participants had to work together to solve challenges, fostering collaboration and trust among the group (Fig. 5.2). The highlight of the program was the career event, featuring an invit-



Fig. 5. 1. Kickoff at ETH Zurich; 2. Team building event; 3. Career planning event; 4. Industry visit at DuPont; 5. Closing event on Lake Zurich. Photo credits: 1,2,4,5 to Marie Perrin and for picture 3 to Hervé le Cunff.

ed talk by a professional career coach **Dr. Andrea Biedermann**. Participants engaged in intensive exercises, including mock interviews, and had their CV pictures taken. A panel discussion provided valuable insights from experts in academia as well as industry, equipping mentees with the tools they need to succeed (Fig. 5.3). The program also included a visit to DuPont, offering a unique glimpse into the corporate world and an opportunity to network with professionals (Fig. 5.4). We concluded the program with a cruise on the Zurich Lake, where we reflected on the goals we set at the beginning and celebrated the achievements of the mentees (Fig. 5.5). The bonds formed and the knowledge gained will undoubtedly have a lasting impact on everyone involved.

Outlook and Conclusions

The feedback from mentees and mentors was very positive. One of the key factors for success was the setting as a team event, rather than a 1:1 mentoring arrangement. This allowed participants to exchange ideas with multiple mentors, as well as among mentees in a very informal way. This format also makes the discussion of general topics such as the professional opportunities for a chemist and the job-market more fruitful as several voices were able to contribute. Also issues such as work-life balance and dual career issue were discussed. This format still allowed the possibility to discuss personal questions with a mentor or another mentee. In essence, all participants learned a lot from each other.

The program will be continued, maintaining the format. Again, the program will be partitioned into four clusters, a setting which allows after-work meetings to be held, thus making participation easy and less time consuming.



Table 2: The sponsors.

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- [4] <https://foundation.scg.ch/mentoring>.