

# OberassistentInnen at D-USYS

Short report on results of a survey with respect to the careers of former “Oberassistenten” and “Oberassistentinnen” at D-USYS (and its predecessor departments D-UWIS and D-AGRL)

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# 1 Summary

A survey in March 2015 among the professors of the Department of Environmental System Science (D-USYS) regarding the career development of 130 Oberassistenten and Oberassistentinnen, who have left the department within ten years, 2005-2014, shows that the perspectives of the non-tenured scientific staff at D-USYS are intact. In particular, they are by no means as bad as the international media generally suggest for non-tenured scientific staff at universities (i.e., Oberassistent/innen, assistants and postdocs). Of the former USYS Oberassistent/innen, 78% have an open-ended, 20% a temporary and only 2% no employment contract. Two thirds of them continue to work in academia. However, a comparison of the cohort of Oberassistent/innen leaving D-USYS between 2005 and 2009 with the cohort leaving between 2010 and 2014 implies a tendency towards deteriorated professional perspectives. For example, there is a halving of the number of procured professorships, which is only partly compensated by an increase in the number of procured assistant professorships. This might be linked to the paradigm shift that is associated with the introduction of an American-style system, in which postdoctoral fellows tend to be hired as assistant professors, instead of having long-duration assistants or Oberassistent/innen who are then hired as full professors. The survey does not provide information about the subjective well-being, or lack thereof, of the non-tenured scientific staff at D-USYS, nor does it contain their own perspective on the situation. The department has started a dedicated study in order to obtain this information from alumni as well as from the presently employed scientific staff members. Within this study we will directly contact the concerned individuals by means of questionnaires. Results are expected by early summer 2016.

## 2 Background

As part of the welcome visit of the new ETH executive board, the representatives of the non-tenured scientific staff brought up the topic of further job prospects after the academic assistantship time. That here is obviously room for improvement was already addressed in various media (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Titles of a few recent publications of German-speaking print media, authorities and institutions.

But are the perspectives of the non-tenured scientists really as bad as it seems at first glance? To find out, a survey regarding the careers of former Oberassistent/innen was conducted by the Department of Environmental Systems Science among its professors. This survey also served as a basis for further discussion in the so-called “Dialoggespräch” (dialogue) between the department and the executive board of ETH Zurich.

## 3 Realisation of the survey

### 3.1 Setting up the survey scope

Initially the idea was to base the survey on the entire mid-level faculty (postdocs, assistants, OberassistentInnen). However, it turned out that this is a very large group of people, and that the distinction between doctoral students and assistants is difficult in ETHIS (ETH Information and Support System) due to several classification changes over the years. Therefore, it was impossible to obtain a reliable evaluation before the “Dialoggespräch” in spring 2015. Therefore, the category of

persons had to be restricted to those individuals who have worked as Oberassistent/innen at the department between the years 2005 and 2014. This comprises a total of 130 individuals.

### 3.2 Data collection and handling

From the ETHIS the following data were filtered for the selected 130 persons:

- Responsible Professor
- Name, first name of Oberassistent/in
- Duration as Oberassistent/in in months
- Leaving Date

The data collection from the ETHIS showed that not all personnel data were retroactively transferred from SAP into ETHIS (there are virtually no details from prior to 2005) and that the selection of the Oberassistent/innen was not unambiguous (as some employees were tagged as “higher research assistants”). The consequence for data collection were uncertainties in employment duration and that some individuals might have been overlooked. Errors were minimized by useful corrections provided by the professors.

These raw data were sent to the responsible professors with the request to add the following information for the people from their group *as anonymised data*:

- Was the person a doctoral student at the ETH before becoming Oberassistent/in?
- Percentage of working load for own research / teaching / projects?
- In what type of employment did the person transfer immediately after leaving D-USYS?
- What is their current employment (March 2015)?
- Is the person currently on a temporary or open-ended contract?
- Which details can be provided with respect to the current employment?

Finally, the professors were asked to recap how many of their former employees now work as a professor (this question was not restricted to the subgroup of the Oberassistent/innen).

The evaluation of the feedback has been divided into

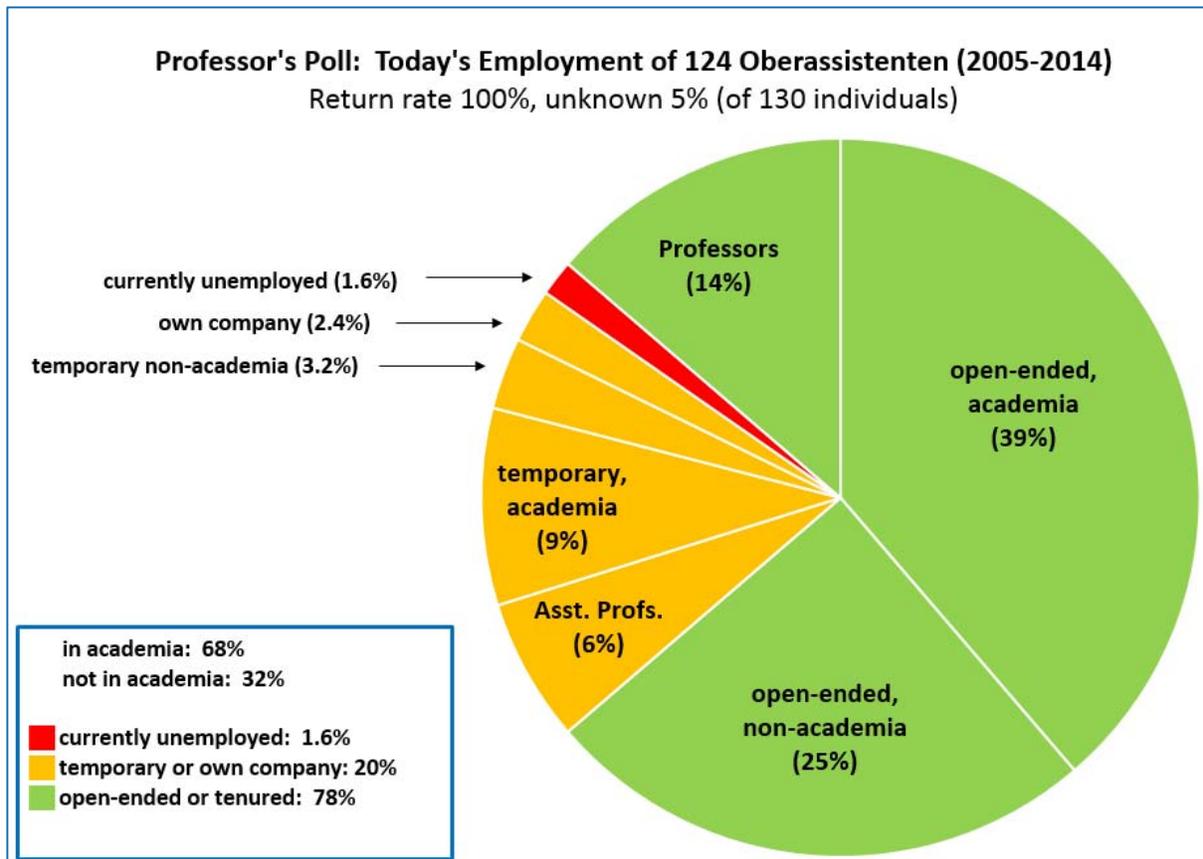
- current position as professor, yes or no,
- employed temporarily or on an open-ended basis,
- working in an academic or non-academic environment.

In order to detect temporal changes the feedback was divided later into two cohorts, those who left ETH between 2005 and 2009 and those who left between 2010 and 2014.

## 4 Results and interpretation of the survey

### 4.1 Overview

Overall, feedback was provided for 124 out of the 130 former employees with known career paths (> 95%). For the remaining 5%, the career development is unknown (and could not be retrieved unambiguously from a Google search). For all former OberassistentInnen from D-USYS 2005-2014, the current employment situation is as follows (Fig. 2).



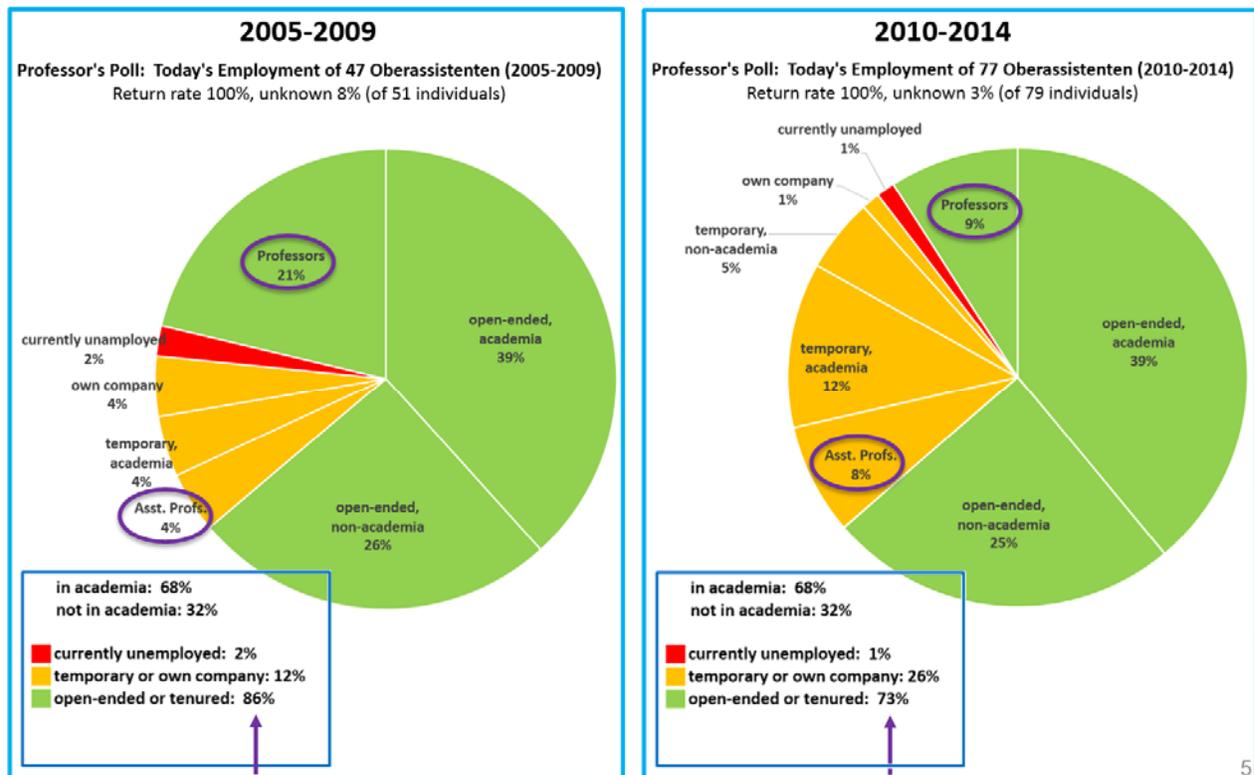
**Fig. 2: General survey over the results of the poll of professors at D-USYS concerning the career development of all 130 "Oberassistent/innen", who left the department in the years 2005-2014.**

Thus, the general results of the poll March 2015 are:

- 14% of the former Oberassistent/innen are professors.
- 6% are assistant professors.
- Across all fields of occupation, 78% have an open-ended contract.
- Across all contract types, 68% are employed in an academic environment.

## 4.2 Chronological breakdown

The separate analysis of the cohorts of Oberassistent/innen who left in 2005-2009, and those who left 2010-2014 shows the following picture (Fig. 3).

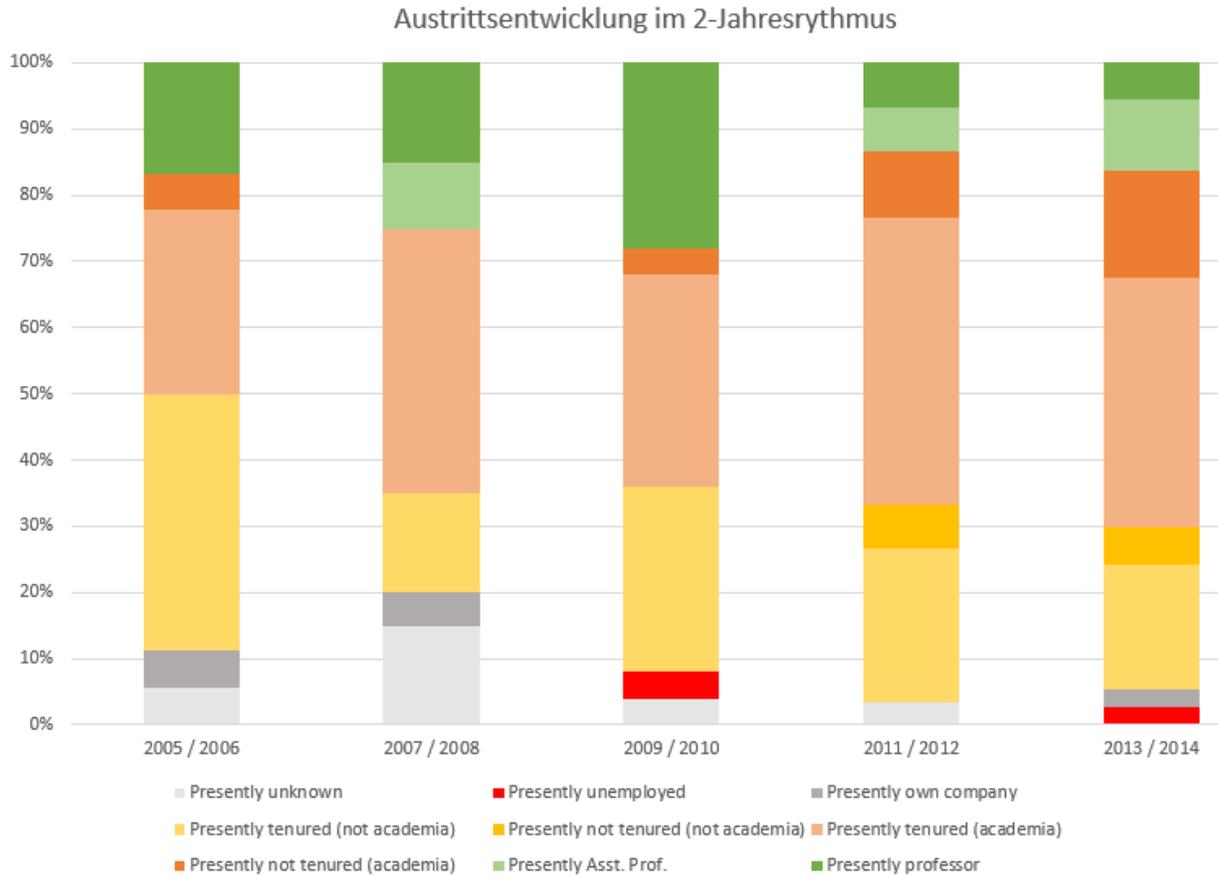


**Fig. 3: Results of the poll amongst professors at D-USYS with respect to the career development of 130 "Oberassistent/innen", who left the department recently. Left panel: subgroup leaving in the years 2005-2009. Right panel: subgroup leaving in 2010-2014.**

This suggests the following interpretation:

- The number of professorships taken by these former employees has approximately halved, when comparing the cohort leaving between 2010 and 2014 to those leaving between 2005 and 2009. Whether the reason is that it takes a "long breath" in order to become a professor or whether the options have deteriorated over the years, cannot be said with certainty based on this data collection alone. However, it is unlikely that there are several years between a position as Oberassistent/in and an employment as professor. Therefore, the likely reason is a deterioration of conditions to reach an associate or full professorship.
- For the assistant professors the situation is exactly the opposite: their number has doubled. This is likely due to the change of the university system, namely enhanced appointments of assistant professors rather than of full professors.
- The number open-ended employees is high in both groups, though slightly higher in the earlier group with 86%, while only 73% in the later group.
- The ratio of employment in the academic vs. non-academic environment remained unchanged.

When refining the statistics even further by introducing 2-year intervals, the following picture emerges (Fig. 4).



**Fig. 4: Detailed results of the poll at D-USYS concerning the career development of 130 previous “Oberassistent/innen”. Each column shows the cohort leaving the department within the specified two-year period.**

When leaving ETH the Oberassistent/innen who left in 2009/2010 had a high proportion of today's professors. Thereafter, fractions were decreasing significantly for the professors, but increased for the assistant professors. While in 2009/2010 there were still 7 professors, there were only 2 in 2013/2014, but 4 assistant professors. A setback occurred in 2011/2012 with only 4 professors in total. This development might indicate an acceleration of the system change by which those individuals who fall into the transitional phase are affected the most.

However, the results presented in Figs. 2-4 have only indicative character. These graphics and interpretations rely on feedbacks that have been provided in terms of knowledge and memories of the professors. The figures do not say anything about the subjective decisions or the active career planning of the former Oberassistent/innen.

### 4.3 Further details on the careers of the OberassistentInnen

Further interesting results of the poll that have not been analysed in depth:

- 57 of the 130 former Oberassistent/innen have received their PhD at ETH Zurich, i.e. about 44%. In the cohort of those who left in the years 2005-2009, this fraction was still 37%, while it rose to 48% for those leaving in 2010-2014.
- On average the 130 co-workers were employed for 35 months as Oberassistent/innen, i.e. for somewhat less than for 3 years. The duration of the periods as Oberassistent/innen grew from the first to the second cohort from 22 months to 43 months, i.e. almost a doubling.

The fact that almost half of the Oberassistent/innen obtained their PhD at ETH—probably even in the own group—is by itself critical, as it might indicate a lack of mobility. On the other hand it is comforting that the period as Oberassistent/innen was on average less than half of six-year maximum duration. However, the evolution from the earlier to the later cohort shows significant increases in both, the fraction of ETH PhD students as well as the duration in the Oberassistentenz. Both findings support the hypothesis that a pronounced system change is underway and that Oberassistent/innen are under increasing pressure.

- According to the estimates of their former supervisors, the OberassistentInnen spent on average 51% of their time performing own research, 25% with leading and managing projects, e.g. doctoral projects, and 21% with teaching and tutoring of MSc/BSc students. These numbers practically do not change from the first to the second cohort, with a small increase in favour of own research from 48% in 2005-2009 to 53% in 2010-2014.

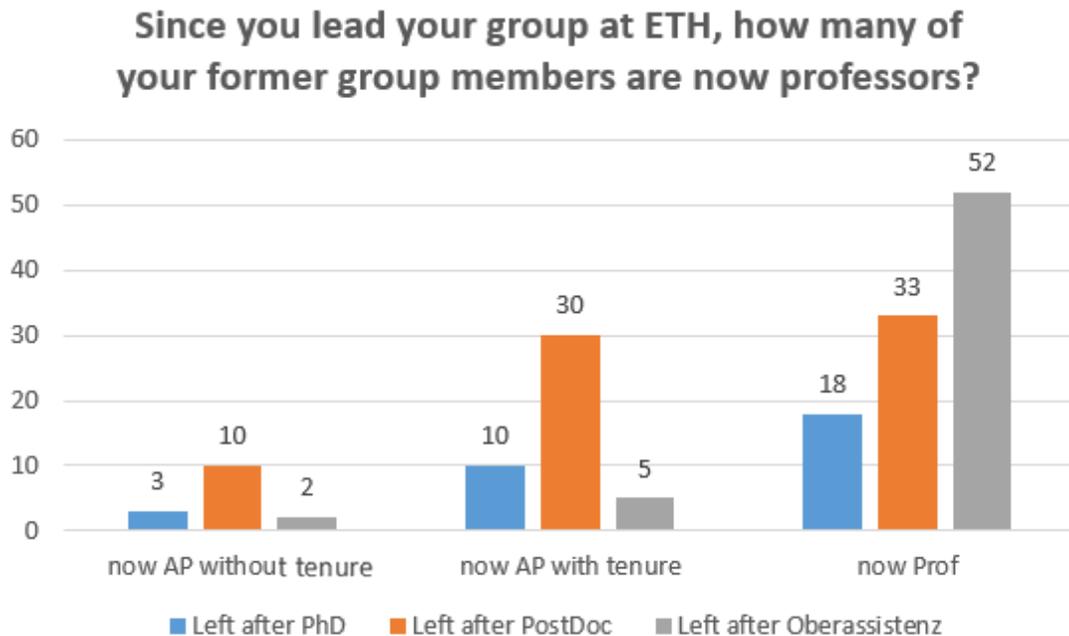
This information suggests a balanced distribution of the working time. However, this depends on the assessment of the estimation of the previous superiors.

The following detailed information was provided on the present employments of the previous 130 Oberassistent/innen (listed in decreasing number):

- 58 senior scientists
  - 43 in academia
  - 12 in research departments of public agencies
  - 3 in research departments of companies
- 26 professors
  - 10 full professor
  - 8 associate professor
  - 8 assistant professor
- 17 higher administrative position
  - 7 in national or international agency
  - 5 in academia
  - 5 in reinsurance firm or other company
- 6 higher technical position
- 5 teacher
- 3 own company
- 3 retired
- 2 unemployed
- 2 alternative medicine
- 1 postdoc
- 1 deceased
- 6 *unknown*

## 4.4 Appointments as professors

If one finally looks at the recapitulation of the professors about how many of their former employees now work as a professor (regardless of the group of Oberassistent/innen) the following picture emerges (Fig. 5).



**Fig. 5: Results of the poll amongst professors at D-USYS in March 2015, asking how many of their previous personnel (PhD students, postdocs/assistants, “Oberassistent/innen”) are employed as professor at the present time.**

Out of the 39 professorships at D-USYS, a total of 163 former employees (since the present professor is leading the group) is now working as professors. Of these 163 former employees (Oberassistent/innen, assistants, and postdocs) 103 are working as professors (ordinary and extraordinary), which corresponds to a rate of 63%; the other 37% are assistant professors with or without tenure track.

## 5 Acknowledgements

We thank all the professors and group leaders of the D-USYS, who were supervisors of the Oberassistent/innen and provided feedback, as *anonymised data*, on the subsequent careers of their former employees. Without their prompt and non-bureaucratic feedback, this survey would not have been possible in its present form. We gratefully acknowledge Dr. Dagmar Schröter from the USYS TdLab for critically counterchecking this report.