

Alumni at work: Franziska Bühler

# A historian in the age of the data deluge.

Interview: Bettina Volz

**Historian Franziska Bühler of the Swiss Federal Statistical Office is responsible for coordinating the exchange of population data between the Swiss residents' registers and Federal Statistical Office. Bühler serves as Section Head of sedex and Register Development, and she and her team play a key role in Switzerland's federal data management.**

**UNI NOVA:** Ms. Bühler, you studied history, philosophy and German philology, and you're now working in a management role at the Federal Statistical Office. How did your career path lead you here?

**FRANZISKA BÜHLER:** Back in university, if somebody had told me that one day, I'd be a key player in Switzerland's data management system and that I'd feel right at

home working in IT, I would have laughed out loud. I was always sure I'd end up in a museum, planning and managing exhibitions, or in an archive, documenting and filing archival materials. Never would I have imagined that 20 years later I'd be in charge of storing all of the data representing the Swiss public in the right place and in compliance with the law and ensuring that the information superhighway is primed to handle the needs of a digitalized Switzerland. But when I look back over the years, the common thread running through my career has been communication.

During and after my studies, I began working in adult education, and that really gave me a chance to familiarize myself with and take advantage of a range of tools and opportunities. Then, when I was on the project staff for a cantonal data platform, I was able to draw upon the experience in data security I'd gathered working at the Basel-Stadt State Archives. Later, I transferred to a federal office where I was working in an area in which data security, data flow, strategy, innovation and politics all came together to be coordinated and communicated across all levels of administration.

**UNI NOVA:** Describe a day on the job. What do you like most about the work you do?

**BÜHLER:** We build bridges across administrative levels – between the official Swiss population registers, between eGovernment projects and stakeholders, between the world of statistics and day-to-day business at local government offices. We take the IT data and translate it so it can be understood by everybody – and we try to

pass on some of the joy we take in our work, even though we're dealing with serious subjects. I handle an incredible array of topics; our team is made up of software developers, engineers, historians and IT support staff. We organize training sessions in municipalities and cantons, sit on the committees of national and cantonal data management projects and are asked to consult on issues surrounding innovation. We also make sure that our own services are kept up to date with the latest standards for data security and technology.

**UNI NOVA:** You have a degree in the humanities. What kinds of advantages has that presented in your current line of work?

**BÜHLER:** It's imbued me with a certain fearlessness, with the daring to explore strange new worlds. To start with a question and set out on a quest for an answer. I conduct research, evaluate sources, explore different points of view, try and weigh all perspectives, and I'm not afraid of foreign languages – in both a literal and a figurative sense. My studies taught me to maintain a broad perspective. As a newcomer to the field, that's all the more important. I don't take a textbook approach to my discipline, so I'm forced to delve deep and explore all kinds of questions and uncertainties. ■



Franziska Bühler

On a personal note

# Alumni are part and parcel of the university.

Text: Bettina Volz,  
Head of AlumniBasel

The goal is to involve graduates more in university activities. This new university strategy is the first to explicitly mention alumni as an integral and valued target group. At universities across Switzerland, alumni are playing an increasingly substantial role in both friendraising and fundraising. The President's Board and the University Council have also come to view alumni as an asset of growing importance to a university. Consequently, for the first time, the University of Basel's Strategy 2022–2030 specifically identifies alumni as a target group in several places throughout the document. Over the past year, this issue was the subject of intensive discussion with the President's Board, and as a result, an initiative was launched to restructure the relationships between AlumniBasel and the university.

## Expansion of the alumni strategy

One critical question for the university is how to remain in contact with all of its graduates after they have completed their studies. After all, the success of an academic institution is not based solely on its academic ranking; it also depends on the career opportunities available for its graduates. In the future, the university aims to be in a position to conduct surveys on the current careers of its alumni, even many years after they have graduated.

This means maintaining contact with all new graduates through the alumni organization, even if

they are not initially registered as members of AlumniBasel. On an operational level, this would require all graduates to be provided with an alumni email address to be issued free of charge after completing their studies. The Board of AlumniBasel had been considering this issue for several years, but the path was fraught with technical and institutional hurdles. Now, thanks to rapid developments in IT-supported alumni management, that situation has finally changed for the better.

## The fruits of digitalization

For AlumniBasel, this meant updating its digital alumni platform and shifting away from its former service provider of the past 15 years. The project will require increased cooperation with the university in order to coordinate a much broader array of alumni-focused activities, which are designed to serve the interests of both the alumni and the University of Basel. The Alumni Strategy 2021–2025, which will reflect these new priorities, is currently being drafted. These measures will be outlined in a service portfolio for existing member groups and expanded to include the target group encompassing new graduates and non-members.

## Spring member survey

The future service portfolio will place increased emphasis on gathering and incorporating options and feedback from members. What expectations do you have for an alumni organization? What kinds of activities and offerings do members enjoy? Do the available offerings meet your expectations? Do you have suggestions for improvement? Ultimately, member satisfaction with available offerings governs the success of any alumni organization. The survey will be sent to around 6,000 members of AlumniBasel in Spring 2021. Results and findings from the survey will appear in the fall issue of UNI NOVA. ■

## Alumni initiatives

**Salz + Kunst.**

Alumni Corinna Virchow and Mario Kaiser are already well known for their innovative magazine *Avenue*, which launched in 2015 and has since successfully established itself on a highly competitive market. But the two publishers are not content to rest on their laurels. Instead, they have channeled their abundant creative energies into a new venture: In December 2020, a brand-new initiative took shape. The two creators were struck by the worsening fallout from the coronavirus crisis, which robbed them of their creative outlets and threatened the existence of their fellow artists. So, they banded together with a software developer, a media specialist and a culture manager, founded an organization and launched the new online platform “Salz + Kunst.”

Artists of all stripes can use this website to present work and sell their products to customers. The only requirement is that their works of art must be presented or performed in compliance with pandemic-related public health measures, for example in a garden or on the street. Customers can purchase readings, concerts, plays or paintings for themselves or others to be performed live or via online stream or sent by post. There are products available for every budget, ranging from bedtime stories read for CHF 20 and jazz concerts for CHF 600 to original works of art available for purchase at a price of CHF 10,000. Anyone feeling a need for art in their life will find just what they have been looking for on this innovative platform. ■

[salzundkunst.ch](http://salzundkunst.ch)

## Alumni Annual Meeting

**Library renovation.**

This year's Annual Meeting of AlumniBasel will be held on 15 June in the newly renovated University Library Basel (UB). For many alumni, this where they actually did their studying: browsing the stacks in the lending section, analyzing texts in the reading room, writing papers and participating in discussions and study groups in the cafeteria. Now the next generations of students study here, and along with them, new types of learning have become part of this venerable establishment. Extensive renovation work has recently been completed, updating the library to handle these changes. New UB Director Dr. Alice Keller and the architects of the renovation plan to provide participants at the Annual Meeting with information on all of the new developments at the library. ■



## Startup Ketoswiss

**Taking control of migraine headaches.**

Elena Gross studied in Basel and earned a doctorate in neurobiology. In 2017, she launched her startup “Ketoswiss,” which has already registered two patents in the field of migraine treatment. The Swiss National Startup Team selected Ketoswiss as one of the top ten startups of 2020 among a cohort of 60 applicants. Together with the other selected ventures, the talented young entrepreneur had the opportunity to participate in the Boston roadshow, where she was able to expand her business network and meet investors. ■

[keto.swiss](http://keto.swiss)

# On being human in Africa.

## Divine Fuh

is director of the Institute for Humanities in Africa (HUMA) at the University of Cape Town. He completed his doctorate at the University of Basel from 2005 until 2009 at the Institute of Social Anthropology and Center for African Studies.

I am a social anthropologist and currently the director of HUMA, the Institute for Humanities in Africa at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. I have held this position since January 2020, when I returned from a three-year stint at the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (Codesria), one of Africa's leading social science research organizations.

HUMA was founded in 2010 to position the humanities as a central hub for critical thinking about the rapid dynamics of South African society. As director, I have made it my mission to build a global institute at this world-class university in Africa, with feminist approaches as part of the organizing principle. We are particularly interested in exploring ethical issues that frame the question of being human in Africa and being African in the world, and that also underpin our ethics toward others. We are a truly diverse institute with a team from across the African continent and around the world.

Some of our current projects include the Future Hospital project and the Knowledge Activism project to strengthen African scientific publishing. The former initiative, Future Hospital and AI, is fascinating because it looks at the ethics of artificial intelligence and imagines the future of care and hospitals. Our knowledge activism initiative addresses

the challenges facing Africa's knowledge ecosystem, with the goal of strengthening the publishing infrastructure. Another example is the Feminist Alternatives for (post-) COVID-19 Engagements (FACE) project in Africa. It addresses the attacks on women and feminist expressive spaces as a result of lockdowns.

In Cape Town, I get to experience one of the most beautiful, complex, sophisticated, and cosmopolitan cities in the world. However, South Africa is also a place of contradictions, revolutions and aspirations. I grew up in one of those contradictions, Cameroon. I was born in the heartland of a radical decolonization movement in Batcham, the same place where a brutal massacre of revolutionaries and the community that hosted them occurred in the 1970s. I lived through the protests of the 1980s, the hardships of the economic crisis and structural adjustment and the upheavals of the 1990s triggered by demands for multiparty democracy. Today, this place of my childhood dreams and memories is mired in conflicts caused by a combination of factors. At its core are, among other things, social abandonment, neglect by the state and the government's inability or unwillingness to fulfill the social contract. That my work also focuses in particular on the politics of suffering and smiling is no coincidence. ■

