

## Lectures

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Press Conference

# Further strengthening of management culture

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Prof. Dr. Joël Mesot, President ETH Zurich

Ladies and gentlemen

To be frank, I had imagined my first media appearance very differently. As a physicist, it is in my nature to begin by thoroughly analysing and understanding the facts before trying to speak about them. Making hasty assumptions is not my style, and that is why I originally set aside 100 days to form a clear picture about the university and draw some initial conclusions.

But two reasons have now prompted me to call a press conference a month before the end of the traditional 100-day familiarisation period. On the one hand, we have reached an important decision on an ongoing case that we wish to communicate and put into context. On the other hand, Rector Sarah Springman and I would like to outline various measures that ETH will be taking, both in the short and long term, to avoid misconduct by professors in their supervision of doctoral students.

### **Regrettable incidents**

First of all, however, I would like to express my deep regret to all members of the ETH community who have been treated disrespectfully, especially those affected by their supervisor's unprofessional behaviour. This may have even ruined their enjoyment of science and in some cases caused them to feel that they must choose a different career path. Inappropriate behaviour by any supervisor is totally unacceptable.

Describing these incidents as merely the misconduct of individual professors would be an oversimplification: There have certainly been cases where ETH as an institution has made mistakes, failing to act

fast enough or respond quickly enough to protect those affected. During individual investigatory proceedings, communication with the parties concerned was not always ideal, either. I sympathise with those affected and on behalf of ETH I would like to apologise for these failings.

At a university with some 21,000 students and over 10,000 employees, it is impossible to rule out conflicts entirely. However, working with the Executive Board, I will do everything I can to ensure that such cases no longer happen in future.

### **Recommendation of the committee**

I have invited you here today to talk about the latest developments in the case of misconduct by a professor. ETH initiated dismissal proceedings in October 2018, after an administrative investigation lasting several months identified serious unprofessional behaviour over an extended period. The independent external investigator recommended termination of the employment relationship. A special committee was therefore appointed, as required by law, to review whether termination was appropriate. This committee only makes a recommendation; the final decision rests with the Executive Board and myself.

This recommendation has now been made: the committee – made up of ETH and non-ETH professors – has concluded that dismissal is not justified from a legal perspective. But it also concludes that the allegations contained in the investigation report are “mostly true”, that the professor’s behaviour towards her doctoral students was “unacceptable” given the highly dependent relationship and that she also showed a lack of insight into her behaviour. In addition, the committee recommends that the professor should be closely monitored in future and no longer be allowed to supervise doctoral students. This ban must remain in place for at least two years and can only be lifted if a set of specific requirements are met.

### **Decision: termination of employment**

Having considered all possibilities and engaged in extensive discussions with my colleagues on the Executive Board, we have decided to submit to the ETH Board a request for dismissal, despite the committee’s ambivalent recommendation. This was a very difficult decision. ETH – we, in other words – have made mistakes as well. The committee rightly points out, for example, that the warning given to the professor came too late. This made it impossible for her to improve her behaviour. On the other hand, the professor displayed a complete lack of insight during the entire disciplinary proceedings. Even today, she does not recognise any of her behaviour as misconduct, as the committee also confirmed. If there is no hope for improvement, I believe there is no longer any basis for trustworthy cooperation in future.

This decision was not only difficult, but also rather sad: the professor’s research had won international acclaim. If we had followed the committee’s recommendation, we would no longer have been able to entrust her with the supervision of doctoral students and other scientific staff, which would have made it impossible for her to continue her research at this level. Moreover, it should be stressed that the supervision of doctoral students is one of the key tasks of our professors. Anyone not able or not allowed to perform this role is incapable of fulfilling an essential part of their professional duties and responsibilities. On balance, this is not a good prospect for continuing research or teaching activity at ETH, nor

does it provide a reliable basis for trustworthy collaboration. For this reason, the committee's recommendation, which was based chiefly on legal considerations, was neither a realistic nor a practical option for us.

Here I feel it is extremely important to make it very clear that I do not wish to repudiate the committee's valuable work. On the contrary, I fully agree with all their points and also their criticisms of our processes, although I arrive at a different conclusion.

### **Ongoing investigations of alleged misconduct**

Allow me to give you a brief summary of the current situation. In recent months, allegations of misconduct have been made in various departments.

Two formal proceedings are still currently under way: an administrative investigation at the Department of Biosystems Science and Engineering in Basel; and at the Department of Mechanical and Process Engineering, an investigation into allegations of scientific misconduct. At present I cannot provide further information about these cases. We want to protect the personal privacy of everyone involved.

Following the conclusion of a disciplinary investigation, a professor at the Department of Architecture decided to leave the university in January. Although no misconduct could be proved in terms of criminal law that would justify dismissal, his behaviour was still found to be in clear breach of the ETH Compliance Guide. This type of behaviour cannot be tolerated. His resignation was therefore the best solution for all parties involved.

### **Lessons for the future**

Now I would like to take a look to the future. We have learned the relevant lessons from these incidents and taken appropriate measures. Together with Rector Sarah Springman, I'd now like to present some of these to you.

Let me start with two preliminary comments, one legal and one human. As a federal institution, ETH Zurich operates within a prescribed legal framework. In dealing with all these conflicts, ETH has complied with all regulations governing administrative proceedings and made every effort to protect the legal rights and interests of all parties involved. Even so, wherever people interact, there is no objectivity, only purely subjective perception. What behaviour is acceptable and where it becomes inappropriate often differs considerably from one person to the next. For this reason, we will – indeed we must – continue to raise awareness of sensitive topics such as bullying or sexual harassment, for example as part of our future Respect campaigns.

The longer it takes to respond, the more difficult it becomes for all sides to find an acceptable solution. In my view, the most important principle is therefore to tackle problems immediately and as directly as possible. One relatively small but worthy example can already be seen in the Department of Architecture, where teachers and students have agreed on non-verbal stop signals whenever someone feels harassed in any way.

We see the biggest need for action in two key areas:

1. In preventing the abuse of power and improving leadership skills. Here we need to pay special attention to doctorates, where the imbalance of power is particularly great and inherent in the system. Rector Sarah Springman will report on this in a moment.
2. We also need to improve the way we tackle identifiable misconduct. We must improve and speed up our processes whenever ETH members report inappropriate conduct. If the processes take too long, those involved lose faith in the system.

### **Prevention and leadership**

Our top priority is to avoid any escalation of the situation. That is why we launched the “Leadership” project over a year ago. Prevention lies at the heart of most of the seven subprojects. In future, all professors should not only be the very best when it comes to research and teaching, but also in leading their groups. Most of them already are today. They have realised that consistently excellent research is more achievable in a motivated and well managed group. Freedom is not possible without responsibility, and this is equally true in the world of science. In concrete terms, we have introduced the following measures as part of this project.

This year, one of the main selection criteria when appointing new professors will not only be excellence in research and teaching, but also in leadership. To this end, the Executive Board has specified seven key management and social skills to be systematically assessed as part of the appointment procedure. Even at the slightest hint of poor social and leadership skills, we will now systematically seek out references for the candidate. In many cases, leadership problems with certain candidates are already known in academic circles, and we need to be aware of them to ensure we appoint the right professors. The opinions of academic staff and students are very important to us when evaluating candidates. We would like to see an additional panel set up comprising representatives from student and scientific staff associations (VSETH and AVETH). They would meet to give their view on candidates and their opinion would be considered in the selection process.

We are also taking a more systematic and clearly structured approach to the on-boarding of new professors: right from the start, new professors will go through a comprehensive programme of courses and events by way of induction into the customs and mores of Swiss society, as well as the values and culture of ETH Zurich. This is essential for new members of a university with such an international character.

For me personally, thoroughly strengthening ETH's management culture is a top priority. As I explained at the start of the year, this involves more than simply offering leadership courses for all professors. We are introducing a comprehensive leadership programme in order to develop leadership and supervision skills across the entire university. Professors must be given individual responsibility to lead their own research groups. But in future we will also give them the necessary support, for example by expanding the range of management courses and coaching. To this end, we will upgrade our personnel and support work in the academic realm and also expand our Human Resources department. Strong leadership and a motivational work atmosphere will also help boost the performance of research groups.

Prevention also means detecting conflicts at an early stage. There are often signs when a situation threatens to escalate. These may be spotted by our various specialist reporting units, such as ombudspersons, the HR department or other administrative units. It is important to pick up on information from different channels – often only weak signals: in future we will respond much faster and more proactively when we see higher than average fluctuation or attrition rates for doctoral students or other staff, overlarge research groups or poor student ratings. And as the supervisor of all professors, I will personally not hesitate to step in when I see clear cases of misconduct. Don't get me wrong: I don't want to introduce a blanket system for monitoring professors, but we must be alert to obvious signals, assess them properly, initiate a dialogue immediately and take measures if required.

### **Dealing with allegations of misconduct**

So that brings me to our processes and concrete measures for dealing with alleged misconduct. We have appointed a dedicated case manager and increased the number of ombudspersons and trusted intermediaries. But that still is not enough, so additional measures will follow.

We will provide regular training for the various ETH contacts and specialist units from Autumn Semester 2019 onwards. Where necessary, we will restructure the specialist units charged with dealing with cases of misconduct. In future, for example, the Office of Equal Opportunities will focus exclusively on promoting diversity and developing measures to increase the proportion of women at all levels of the university. This specialisation and intensification towards "diversity management" is essential, especially as the low percentage of female professors, at 13 percent, is disappointing.

Reports of sexual harassment and bullying will be dealt with in future by a specialised and well-resourced reporting office, which will now operate as an unit located within the HR department. This unit will have its own specialists but will also be able to consult external experts if required. We are still considering whether to set up an external independent reporting office as well.

The reporting process will also be overhauled by the summer of 2019. The aim is to ensure that all reports are addressed and if possible resolved within six months. But speed alone is not enough. When conflicts arise, all those involved (accusers and accused) require intensive support. They must be regularly updated on the status of the proceedings and in some cases be given legal or psychological support as well. With this in mind, we will ensure our new case management activity is firmly embedded within the institution and strengthened over the course of the year, turning it into a full team.

Central to all this of course are measures for structurally improving the supervision of doctoral students. I would just like to briefly comment before Rector Springman goes into the details. A doctorate at one of the world's top universities is anything but a walk in the park. ETH is the home of world-class research and the university prepares young scientists for a career in a highly competitive job market. Standards are therefore extremely high – and will remain that way. In order to minimise the dependent relationship between professors and doctoral students, by 2020 we will redesign the relevant agreements so that it is impossible to put pressure on doctoral students by threatening to withdraw or shorten their contracts. Our rector, Sarah Springman, will outline the other measures we are introducing for doctorates.

**(Referat Rektorin Sarah M. Springman zum Doktorat: vgl. separates Dokument)**

I believe it is vital that professors are not exposed to any generalised suspicion. I can only repeat what our rector said at the last ETH Day: the overwhelming majority of our teachers do a brilliant job for our undergraduates, postgrads and doctoral students and work incredibly hard to provide the support they need.

As the new President of ETH Zurich, I want to encourage a climate in our university that allows everyone – students, doctoral students, as well as academic and administrative staff – to develop and fully realise their potential. On the one hand this requires a commitment to always do one's very best. Completing a doctorate at one of the world's top 10 universities is not a "9 to 5 job", but more like elite sport. But it also requires everyone to be respectful at all times – "scientific fair play", as it were.

We need to find new ways to encourage the very best performance in research while at the same time ensuring fair collaboration based on a spirit of mutual respect. We must create an environment that allows researchers the freedom they need in order to keep performing successfully in the future. But these freedoms must not allow situations to develop where inappropriate conduct goes unchallenged. In this area too, we have a duty to live up to our leading reputation as one of the world's top-ranked universities.