

ETH zürich

life

ETH community magazine
April 2021



What will endure?

Your opinion counts!
 ETH members have until
 23 April to respond to the
 employee survey and the
 internal communications
 questionnaire:
www.ethz.ch/surveys

Procurement law

New threshold for tender process

The new Federal Act on Public Procurement came into force at the beginning of the year. Alongside the paradigm shift towards greater sustainability, it is also important to be aware of changes to the process itself. In particular, one of the new requirements is that official invitation to tender procedures must be followed for orders with a value of 150,000 Swiss francs or more. This involves drawing up a set of technical specifications and clearly documenting the evaluation of tenders. For this reason, the involvement of the Procurement Office must be sought at an early stage. If possible, three tenders should be obtained in each case and a smaller number must be justified.

www.ethz.ch/procurement-law →

Key figure

3,246

That's how many tonnes of CO₂ equivalent were generated in greenhouse gas emissions as a result of flights taken by ETH members last year. That's a reduction of approximately 80% compared to 2019. Thus, the impact that the coronavirus pandemic has had on international air traffic is also being reflected clearly in the carbon

footprint of official trips by ETH members. Other interesting ETH statistics for the year 2020 can be found in the latest annual report.

www.ethz.ch/annual-report →



Management culture

Ulrike Kutay receives the ALEA Award

Ulrike Kutay, Head of the Institute of Biochemistry, has been honoured with the ALEA Award for exemplary leadership. Professor Kutay is regarded by her team as being an honest, respectful and attentive team leader. She is committed to diversity, family values and flat hierarchies, which makes for a highly motivating working environment. The ALEA Award is presented annually to leaders who facilitate innovative working conditions and promote a good work-life balance. They are nominated by their own staff, with the jury composed of representatives from AVETH, HR and PeKo, among others.

www.ethz.ch/alea-award →



Photo: provided by Ulrike Kutay

"Point"

New community platform

"Point" is the name of ETH's new digital community platform. It is open to all members of the university, from administrative and teaching staff to students. The website allows users to join groups and swap information about the things they are interested in, share details of events and offer tips, or give their used items a new lease of life via the marketplace.

www.point.ethz.ch →



Photo: Omar Zeroual

The rETHink project

An overview of the workstreams

ETH launched the rETHink project to enable the university to secure its status as one of the world's leading universities well into the future. The aim is to set the course for the university's further organisational development. Six workstreams will reflect on the current structure and address the current and future challenges the university faces. The individual workstreams are presented on the rETHink website, which also provides details of their current project status.

www.ethz.ch/rethink-project →



PeKo turns 50. All information and event details can be found at: www.ethz.ch/staff-commission →

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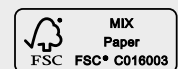
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Event management

Virtual events studio

The Services department has set up a studio for virtual and hybrid (combined virtual and physical) events inside the Main Building. The studio is equipped to a high technical specification and is suitable for producing panel discussions, town hall meetings and webinars, as well as other broadcasting formats. A green screen allows the background to be customised. ETH members can book the studio online using the Servis tool.

www.ethz.ch/virtual-events →

Public tours

Discover ETH via livestream

In light of the current situation, public tours of ETH are now also being conducted virtually. Every Tuesday evening, virtual visitors can explore the university and all its facets via livestream. This offers the opportunity to go on guided tours of ETH premises and watch presentations on a variety of subjects. The tours last approximately one hour each. Information about the programme is available online along with the relevant registration links.

www.ethz.ch/public-tours →



Photo: zvg

What will endure?

The end of the pandemic is still not in sight, but we have every reason to be hopeful. How has the first year of living with the virus changed ETH? And what will endure after the crisis ends?



I only briefly experienced what ETH was like before the pandemic. The first coronavirus measures were imposed by the Swiss Federal Council about a month after my first day of work. And it was on that very day in March when the “extraordinary situation” was declared that I turned 25. I remember sitting in a Zurich park with some friends. The mood was subdued and the situation was difficult to get your head around. It feels as though the first year of the virus has flown by: with life having lost some of its everyday rhythm, as if all the days have been rolled into one. And yet, these days have changed us all. Lots of people are having to contend with increased pressure in their professional or private lives. At the same time, the crisis has raised countless questions for everyone collectively. One of those is: “What will we take forward with us when it ends?”

ETH has a particular responsibility to bear in this situation. As a leading university, it is helping to tackle the crisis through its research, but – bearing in mind its thousands of staff and students – also has to learn from the crisis and come up with innovative solutions for the future worlds of work and teaching.

The side of ETH that the public sees most clearly during the crisis is its research. ETH members are responsible for calculating the notorious R number, working out the ICU bed occupancy rate, assessing how people feel about the economy or determining the mobility of the population. In this way, they are helping to guide us through the uncertainties of the situation. But, conversely, how has the crisis changed the nature of research at ETH?

Solidarity and innovation in research

Stories about pandemic-related research projects are taking up a lot of space in the media. Could this reflect an imbalance in

research that exists in reality? Although coronavirus-related topics dominate public discourse, Detlef Günther is confident in refuting this as far as research activities at ETH are concerned. Professor Günther, Vice President for Research at ETH, has the following to say: “The entire breadth of our fundamental research has remained apparent to me throughout. And that is not going to change in the long term either.” Specifically, he cites data science, nutrition, medicine and energy, stating that all of these will remain key focus areas. Even the funding awarded

“The crisis has encouraged discourse between all disciplines and spawned innovative collaborations.”

Detlef Günther
ETH Vice President for Research

over the past year has gone to projects from a wide variety of fields. “Nevertheless, research into every aspect of pathogens is certainly going to become more significant in the future,” Günther says with conviction. In any case, there has traditionally always been a strong connection between the natural sciences and medicine: even before the pandemic, around a third of ETH researchers were either directly or indirectly investigating questions of a medical nature.

The key point for Günther is that the importance of synergies has become even more striking. He explains that the crisis has encouraged discourse between all disciplines and spawned some innovative collaborations. These research projects

have often been launched very quickly indeed. One example is the CoV-ETH study that is looking at the immune response to COVID-19 infections. This is being led by three ETH researchers from three different academic departments. The collaboration came about as a result of the extraordinary situation, confirms project co-leader Susanne Ulbrich: “We didn’t know each other beforehand but wanted to work together to help build an understanding of the spread and behaviour of the virus within the ETH community.” So far, around 2,900 subjects have participated in the study, which was launched just a month and a half after the start of the first lockdown, thanks in part to a high level of solidarity: “ETH members from every possible area have generously provided us with advice and practical support. Experiencing that has been very rewarding.”

Detlef Günther stresses that this openness is something that we must take forward with us after the coronavirus crisis ends: “Unconventional, interdisciplinary research initiatives are more important than ever when it comes to tackling the major problems of our age.” And perhaps digital communication can help us with that, now that it has become even more firmly established. Although communicating with colleagues exclusively through a screen can be gruelling, platforms like Teams and Zoom do represent an opportunity, especially for international cooperation in research. According to Günther, another area with potential is rapid data exchange. “There may now be a greater awareness that you can accomplish something truly momentous by pooling the data obtained,” he says.

Risks and opportunities in teaching

It is for the sake of students, in particular, that Günther is hoping for the end of the pandemic. Studying used to involve study groups, informal meetings and even parties – none of which can be digitalised.

Other critical issues are student mental health and the home learning/working situation. This was revealed by a student survey that the Educational Development and Technology administrative department conducted in mid-December 2020. Well over half of the students surveyed rated their ability to concentrate and their motivation lower than during a normal semester and also reported feeling depressed more often. New students at both Bachelor's and Master's level are the ones who feel the least socially integrated.

"One of the key challenges of digital teaching is getting people to interact," asserts ETH Rector Sarah Springman. The survey clearly showed students' preference for courses and events that offer ways to interact. These include breakout sessions, polls or the chance to ask questions via the chat function. The thing that respondents appreciated the most was having their webcams enabled, particularly when the sessions were small. "At

least some of that sense of belonging can be preserved," says Springman. Designing the digital teaching programme should also be a learning process for the lec-

"One of the key challenges of digital teaching is getting people to interact."

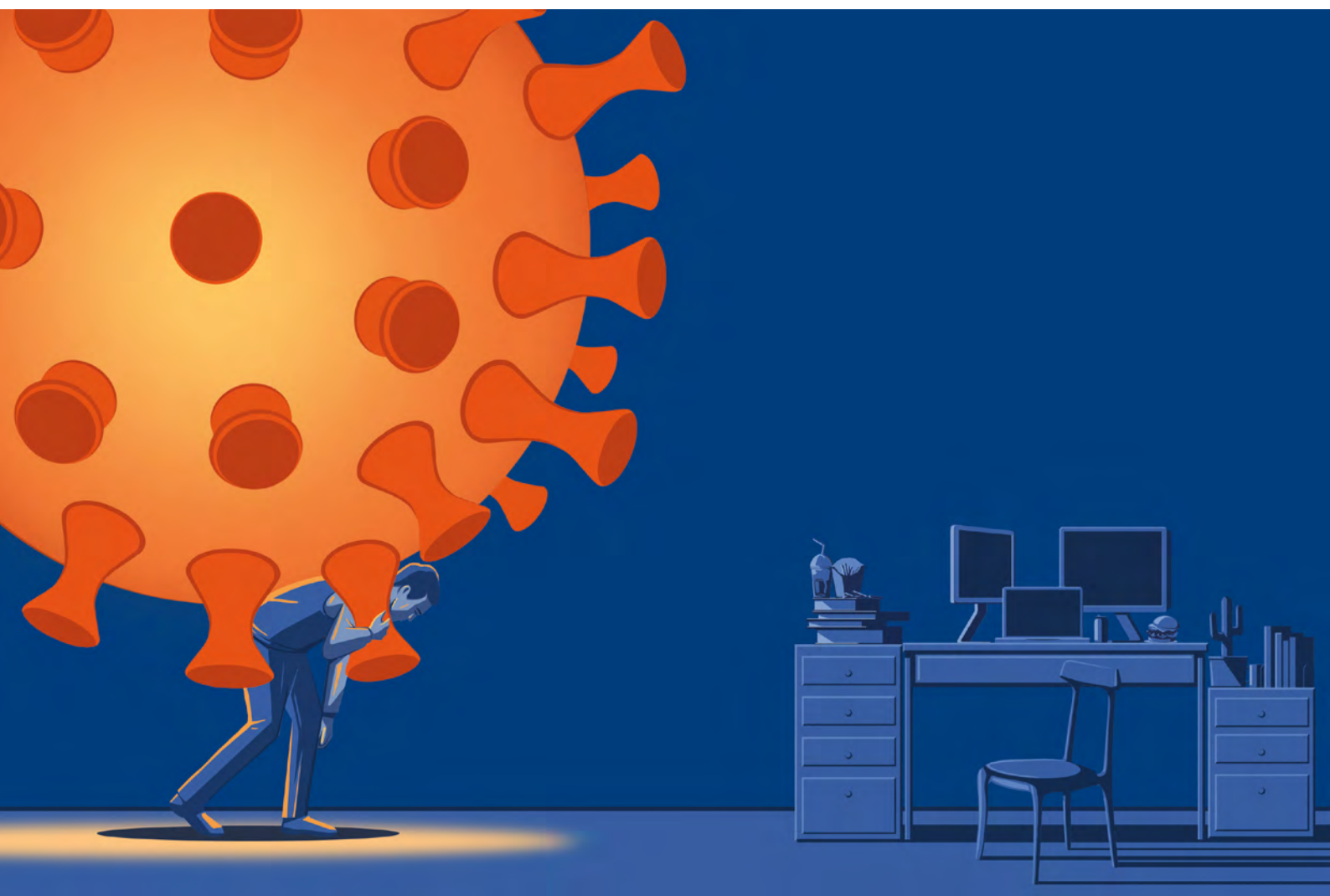
Sarah Springman
Rector of ETH Zurich

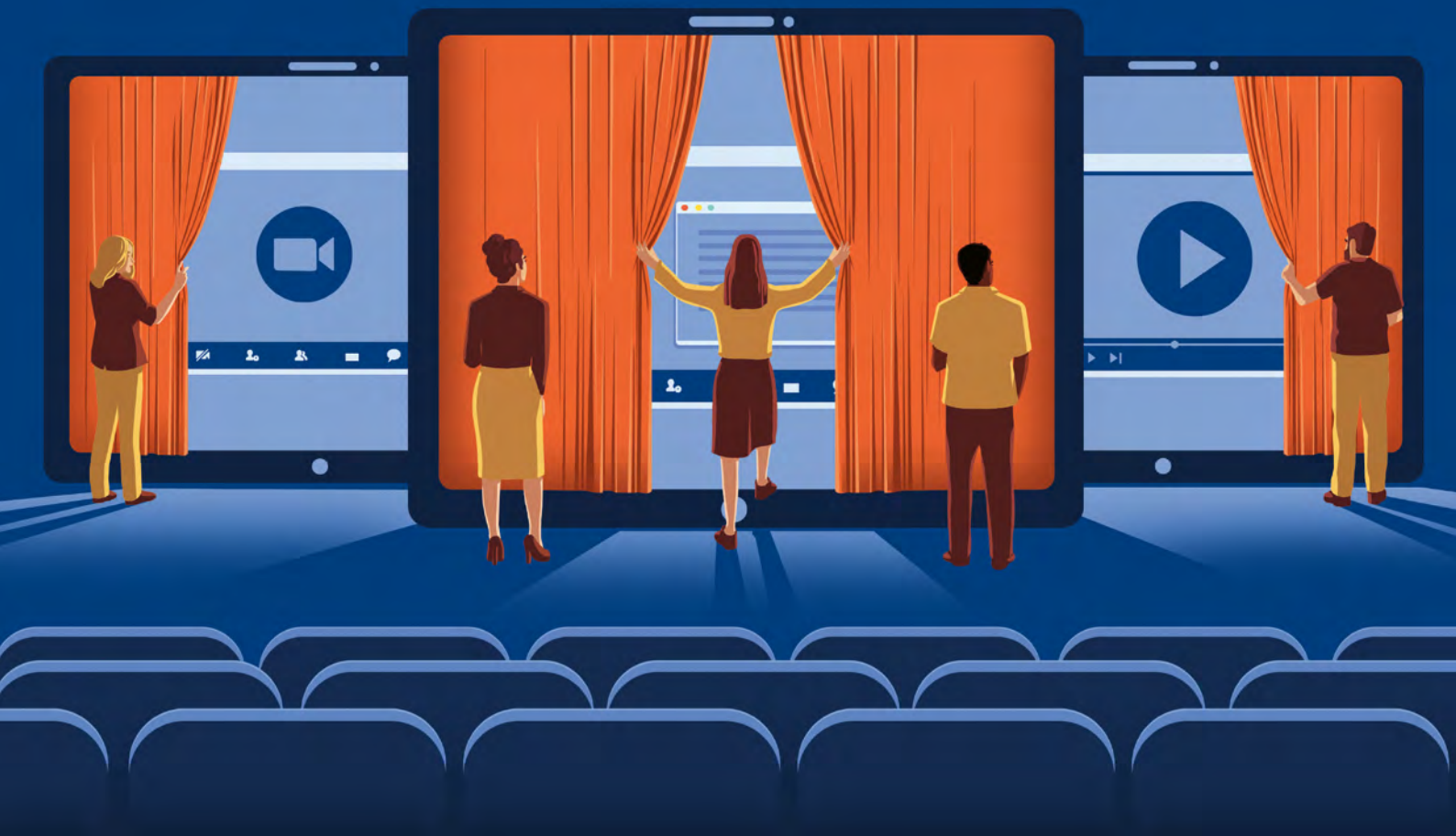
urers: "Each member of teaching staff should design their distance teaching to suit their own personal style and experiment with new approaches to make it as lively and engaging as possible."

The coronavirus crisis may actually have triggered some positive developments in university teaching that are here to stay. In the future, hybrid teaching could well become the norm, i.e. a blend of face-to-face and digital teaching that combines the best of both worlds. The majority of students are in favour of partially digitalising teaching. In the survey, around 80 percent of participants said that they could imagine having at least one day of remote teaching a week going forward. Springman believes that there is further potential here for joint degree programmes. Virtual modules could be offered within this context to allow students from several different universities to attend them at the same time.

The future working environment

The crisis has also created risks and opportunities for ETH staff. For many, being forced to work from home leads to increased stress. To combat this,





Human Resources has been supporting staff and managers through coaching and counselling. Recognising that mental health and physical fitness were becoming hot topics, the Executive Board responded with a series of four virtual town hall meetings. While the administrative staff at ETH enjoy a high level of job security, the academic staff below the level of professor are finding themselves under increased pressure. Doctoral students and postdocs are employed on temporary contracts and their academic careers rely on being able to switch to other universities. The difficult economic situation and travel restrictions have increased uncertainty and made the future look hazy for many of them. From the moment the crisis started, HR has been implementing new regulations to create a framework for solutions that are as flexible and individual as possible. In many cases, contracts have been extended.

According to Lukas Vonesch, Head of Human Resources, the crisis has accelerated a long-term trend: "We have realised that when it comes to home working, the critical issue is not productivity but a sense of community." This is changing how we understand management: "Increasingly, managers are becoming facilitators." To assist with this process, HR has already hosted popular webinars for various groups of managers and professors. Vonesch can easily envisage the physical workplace taking on a new significance as well: "Perhaps, in the future, we will use it more consciously as a space to meet and interact."

One thing is certain: for many, home working is going to remain part of everyday working life. As a result, the requirements concerning work infrastructure are also changing. In December, the Swiss government commissioned the ETH Domain to analyse these impacts

and consider changes towards flexible forms of working in light of digitalisation, the changing needs of employees, and the ecological and economic benefits of using space more efficiently. Although the pandemic is not the actual reason for this development, the working situation that we have seen over the past year is likely to accelerate it greatly and will provide plenty of valuable findings to assist with implementation.

We are still very much in the grip of the coronavirus crisis. It is causing a huge amount of damage globally but, at the same time, has opened up opportunities. Responsibility for taking advantage of them lies with each and every one of us. "We have the chance to learn a great deal from the pandemic. But only if every single person is prepared to reflect deeply on both the good and the bad before simply carrying on exactly as before," concludes ETH Vice President Detlef Günther. ■



“Lots of supervisors use their own experience of being supervised as a template”

Antonio Togni says goodbye, Manfred Sigrist says hello. The outgoing and incoming Vice Rectors for Doctoral Studies discuss the new doctoral ordinance and how their own doctorates differed from those of today.

You both supervise doctoral students. What is the current situation like for you?

Togni (pictured right): In March 2020, my entire group started working from home. Most of my doctoral students only had the writing-up phase to complete by then. In that sense, the lockdown almost did them a favour, and I was able to make plenty of time for conversations because there was no longer any laboratory work going on.

Sigrist: The typical image of theoretical physicists is that they like to gather around the blackboard and have a discussion. In a virtual environment, that is only possible to a limited extent. Online interactions with my doctoral students are less spontaneous. That is something that they miss as much as I do.

The new doctoral ordinance comes into effect this autumn. What improvements will it bring?

Togni: Essentially, it will make doctoral students less dependent on their supervisor. We will assign them a second person to provide close academic supervision. We have also introduced the aptitude interview. Our intention here is to ensure that doctoral students start grappling with their research project together with their designated professor right from day one. Some academic departments are already familiar with this. Now we have rolled it out across ETH.

What is it that we have not yet achieved?

Togni: One of our objectives with the new ordinance is to create a more homogeneous idea of what constitutes a doctorate across the whole of ETH. We would like our professors to give more thought to their role as a supervisor so that they know exactly what it entails.

Is a regulation capable of achieving that?

Togni: Of course not. However, we have spent more than a year discussing the doctorate at ETH while drawing up the ordinance. And that's a good thing!

Professor Sigrist, what are the next steps once the new ordinance is in effect?

Sigrist: It is now up to the academic departments to implement the new regulation while exercising their freedom to be creative. I see my job as assisting when issues need to be clarified, not policing. I believe that the new regulation will provide the doctorate with clearer structures, and this will make it easier to see whether a doctorate is going well. Ultimately, though, preventing problems comes down to good teamwork on the part of everybody involved. That is why we are asking everyone to immerse themselves in the new culture.

There must be plenty of discussions coming your way then ...

Togni: Having discussions is the whole point! I must admit that it was only after becoming Vice Rector that I read the old doctoral ordinance from beginning to end for the first time. And I'm sure I'm not the only one – there was never an urgent need to read it in carrying out day-to-day duties. The situation is different now: thanks to the consultation work we did in the early stages of drafting the new ordinance, lots of people at ETH have become relatively well acquainted with it.

Sigrist: That is an important point. Up until now, lots of supervisors have been using their own experience of being supervised as a template. Often, their thoughts only turn to the regulations when they get stuck on a problem. I hope that this fresh beginning will prompt everyone to engage with the rules more consciously. If they do, I am confident that there will be fewer tricky situations to deal with.

“One of our objectives with the new ordinance is to create a more homogeneous idea of what constitutes a doctorate across the whole of ETH.”

Antonio Togni, former Vice Rector for Doctoral Studies

What was your own experience of being supervised as a doctoral student like?

Sigrist: I completed my doctorate here at the Institute for Theoretical Physics and have very fond memories of that time. My supervisor was familiar with all the latest developments in the field and showed me which research question and path would be worth pursuing. After that, he trusted me to get on with the work in my own way. During our subsequent discussions, we developed the ideas further and I was able to benefit from his wealth of experience. I try to treat my own doctoral students in the same way. But it is also important to be aware that different students have different needs. What one experiences as freedom, another will see as neglect.

Togni: I remember how my professor and I used to work on manuscripts together. On paper and by hand! If you wanted to move a paragraph, you literally had to cut and paste with scissors and glue. I spent entire afternoons with him doing that and it taught me what writing a manuscript was all about. Like Manfred, I came to appreciate it when someone allowed me to get on with the work myself. So when I'm recruiting doctoral students, I often ask myself, "Is this someone I can trust to get on with things?"

What makes for a good doctorate?

Sigrist: Each doctoral student should feel as though they are a colleague of their supervisor. The student and supervisor need to develop a project jointly and swap ideas until the results converge. The moment a doctorate becomes “good” is when I, as the supervisor, find myself being challenged by my doctoral students and have to let go of my original ideas.

Togni: One example from a few years ago was when two doctoral students came up to me and said, “We didn’t tell you straight away because we didn’t know if you’d like it, but we tried something out while you were on holiday and it worked!” [laughs] It resulted in a very successful publication.

How has the doctorate changed since you did yours?

Sigrist: There are more distractions. Nowadays, there are so many events and conferences that doctoral students should attend. And we expect them to be completely au fait with their subject despite the fact that the web archives are awash with new publications every day. They are also meant to start applying for grants and fellowships. Back in my day, things were more leisurely and I felt less pressure.

Togni: Yes, and today’s doctoral students are more heavily pressured to publish. I escaped all that. To me, it seems absurd that the primary focus of some doctoral students nowadays is on how they can get their next paper published.

“Ultimately, though, preventing problems comes down to good teamwork on the part of everybody involved. That is why we are asking everyone to immerse themselves in the new culture.”

Manfred Sigrist, Vice Rector for Doctoral Studies

Professor Togni, are there any tips that you’d like to pass on to Professor Sigrist to help him in his new role?

Togni: Not really. Quite the opposite in fact – there should be no sense of compulsion to follow in the exact footsteps of your predecessor. The Rector allowed me a great deal of freedom in my work and had a lot of faith in me. So my advice would be just to dive straight in! ■

www.ethz.ch/doctoral-ordinance →



Antonio Togni grew up in Misoix (canton of Graubünden), studied chemistry at ETH and completed his doctorate in 1983. Before returning to ETH to take up an assistant professorship, he spent some time conducting research at the California Institute of Technology (USA) and the former Ciba-Geigy pharmaceutical company (Switzerland). Besides dedicating himself to the area of doctoral studies, Professor Togni has also been involved in the campaign to reform training for baccalaureate school teachers in Switzerland.



Manfred Sigrist grew up in Giswil (canton of Obwalden) and studied physics at ETH. He completed his doctorate at the Institute for Theoretical Physics and has since spent more than 20 years teaching and researching there as a professor. His career has taken him to various places, including MIT (Cambridge, USA) and Kyoto University (Japan). He became Vice Rector for Doctoral Studies in February 2021 when Antonio Togni retired.



“The LunchLottery gives you a real boost when you’re working from home.”

The pandemic has severely restricted in-person interactions. The new LunchLottery gives ETH members the chance to meet and chat with others beyond the confines of their own teams.

Text Angelika Bühler **Illustration** Benjamin Hermann

Christian Thurn set the ball rolling at the end of October with his rETHink blog post, in which he suggested a lunch meeting platform to strengthen diversity and team spirit within the ETH community. Julia Dannath-Schuh, Vice President for Personnel Development and Leadership, decided to run with Christian’s idea and it began to take shape. Working in conjunction with an external partner, she created a new format for improving social fitness and so the ETH LunchLottery was born. “ETH members think it is tremendous that they can meet new people and expand their knowledge in this way,” explains Dannath-Schuh. Doctoral student Christian Thurn, the originator of the idea, agrees: “Particularly in these days of working from home, the LunchLottery is an easily accessible option for making contact with other people.”

All members of staff and doctoral students are welcome to register for the LunchLottery. The aim is to mix it up as much as possible by bringing different types of people together – regardless of their background, age group, administrative/academic department or position. On the first and third of each month, participants receive what is known as a “matching email” to tell them the name of the person with whom they

have been randomly paired. It is then up to the participants themselves whether they meet up for a shared virtual lunch or coffee break. The ETH Library has been taking advantage of the new format for some time, with more than a third of its staff having registered and participating on a regular basis.

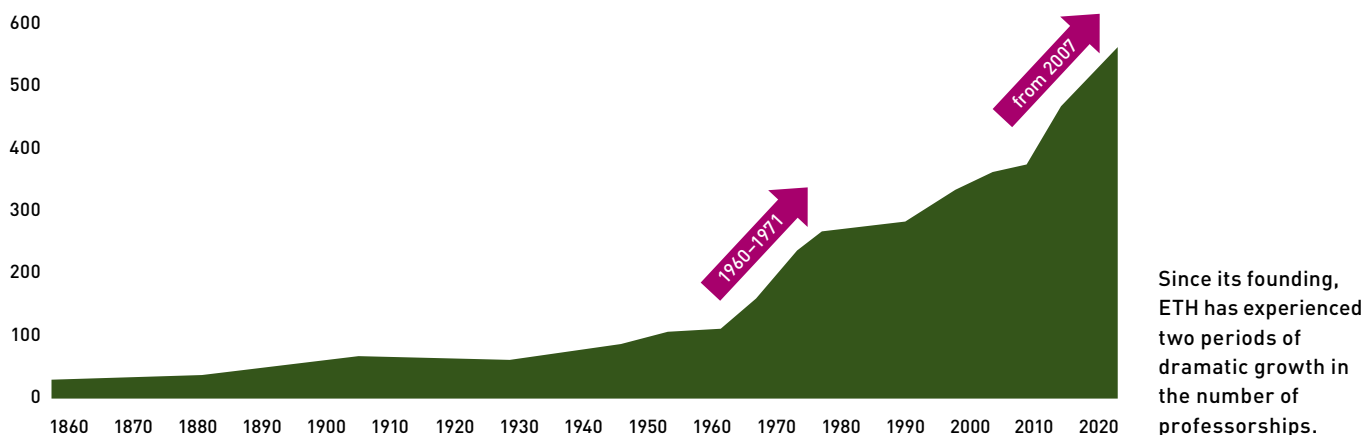
Pia Aeschlimann from Academic Services has also tried it out: “I am a big fan of the LunchLottery – even though the current situation means that it is more like having ‘team coffee meetings’.” She particularly likes the way the new networking opportunity manages to bring different types of people together. However, finding a mutually convenient time to meet is not easy and so she thinks that the scheme might be better if it ran a little less frequently. With a view to identifying further room for improvement, the LunchLottery is to be evaluated at the end of a three-month pilot phase and adapted accordingly. Regula Furegati Hafner, a lecturer in the Department of Chemistry and Applied Biosciences, enjoys meeting new people over lunch: “The LunchLottery gives you a real boost when you’re working from home – a situation that has now been going on for a whole year – and it provides a window into the multi-faceted and fascinating world of ETH.” ■

www.ethz.ch/lunchlottery →

How is the financial future of ETH shaping up?

The Executive Board has announced that ETH needs to put the brakes on its growth over the next few years. *life* answers the critical questions relating to the financial development of our university.

Number of professorships



Text Editorial team Graphics Josef Kuster

Why does ETH need to put the brakes on its growth?

ETH has grown very substantially over recent years. The academic departments and Executive Board have developed new strategic research fields with a view to accommodating the demands of politics and society as well as the growing number of students. In parallel with this, the anticipated increase in financial support from the Swiss government – which was expected to rise by 2–2.5 percent annually over the past four years – has not materialised. In light of the fact that more than 70 percent of our university’s funding comes from the federal financial contribution and the Swiss government is facing big deficits as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, we are entering challenging times and must therefore put the brakes on our growth.

Why not rely on more external funding to compensate for the lower federal budget?

The amount of external funding available to ETH has increased significantly over recent years as a result of major efforts in

this area. The majority of the external funding is intended for creative research ideas and human resources. However, staff increases also call for investment in infrastructure (rooms, equipment, etc.) and result in higher running expenses. External funding for these areas is much scarcer.

Shouldn't the Executive Board have seen the impending budget deficits coming?

The Executive Board has been self-critical in this regard, conceding that it could have taken action earlier given the disproportionately higher budgetary resources that are going to be required between 2020 and 2024 and the way that the funding situation has changed. However, the result would still have been the same: ETH has to slow down growth and, as a result, (re)prioritise the projects it has planned.

How exactly is growth going to be slowed down?

Firstly, the budget for construction projects is going to be reduced to a financially sustainable level of 180–200 million Swiss francs per year. Among other things, this will involve suspending the project for renovating and extending the MM building and

the Polyterrasse. There are currently four major real estate projects nearing completion, leaving only very limited funding available for small and medium-sized projects between 2021 and 2024, despite that project being cancelled. For this reason, the Executive Board has announced a one-off additional budget of 25 million Swiss francs plus further additional funds of more than 8 million Swiss francs to cover the real estate costs. Furthermore, all academic departments have agreed to make initial contributions to an emergency fund (totalling 15 million Swiss francs) for the current year. This means that every academic department will have to transfer reserves equating to 2.27 per cent of its base budget. In addition, all academic departments are being asked to contribute another 15 million Swiss francs between them annually over the next three years in order to finance the ETH-wide infrastructure projects that have been planned for the areas of teaching and research.

Moreover, last autumn the Executive Board asked the academic departments to review and prioritise their plans to request additional professorships in the future. In this way, the Executive Board intends to restrain long-term growth while ensuring that the professorships and associated infrastructure remain sustainable from a funding perspective even in

financially challenging times. The same goes for the central Executive Board domains, staff units, administrative departments and technology platforms. Last summer, they were also urged to revise their requirements planning downwards by making annual cuts of approximately 20 million Swiss francs for the next few years.

Is it a question of there being a freeze on recruitment or even of job losses?

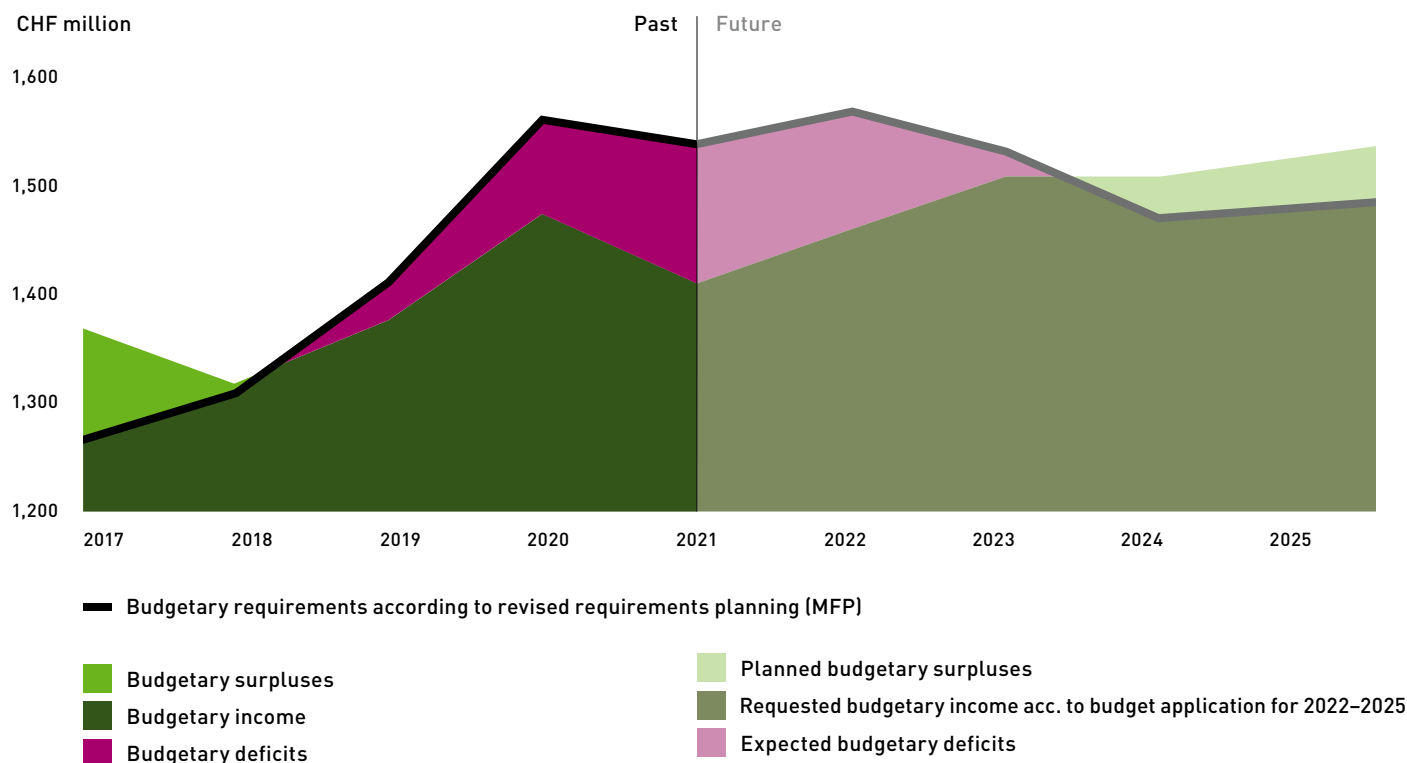
No, there is currently no recruitment freeze or policy of job cuts.

In light of this “cost-cutting exercise”, can ETH still be considered an internationally competitive institution?

ETH remains on as financially firm a footing as before and has a solid equity base. And ETH can also be said to be very well off compared to its international counterparts. Because 70 per cent of our university’s funding comes from the public purse, it does not – in contrast to many foreign universities – have to say goodbye to the things it already enjoys. Primarily, the cuts are going to affect planned growth, i.e. items that are currently on the wish list. ■

www.ethz.ch/financial-development →

ETH budgetary requirements after revision of requirements planning and budgetary income



Mark Buschor, Head of IT Service Desk

A technician at heart

Text Karin Köchle **Photo** Florian Bachmann

“It hit us hard,” recalls Mark Buschor as he thinks back to March 2020. The IT Service Desk is the contact point for all IT-related queries and he has been in charge of it for nine years. Last year, the number of queries almost doubled compared to the previous year. However, it was not just a question of answering a myriad of questions – the Service Desk also facilitated the switch to remote teaching while providing thousands of staff members with home office IT support.

As well as heading up a team of six, Buschor is also in charge of the IT Services ticket system, the chat bot and the new knowledge database that will contain all the instructions relating to IT services. He admits that managing a team from home is certainly a challenge and something that calls for a high level of trust. However, he says he has learned to focus more on how much his crew gets done and less on how many hours they work.

Buschor, who is from Zurich, did his IT technician apprenticeship with UBS before leaving the world of banking behind and training as a non-commissioned officer of the Swiss Army. He started his first job with the IT Service Desk at the tender age of 21. For him, the antidote to work is getting outdoors a lot in his free time. He goes snowboarding in winter and hiking in summer – and also spends time with Kim, his girlfriend’s dog. She is a border collie mix and he regularly takes her to hoop agility training, where he has to guide her through an obstacle course using just physical gestures and voice commands. “Without the pair of them, the past year would certainly have been a lot tougher,” says the 35-year-old.

But could he ever imagine himself doing a different job one day, perhaps even in the great outdoors? “Not at the moment,” Buschor replies firmly. “There is so much I can accomplish and learn at ETH. And although I have discovered a passion for management within myself, I will always be a technician at heart.” ■



Do we need to adopt a more informal culture at ETH?



For

Christine Bratrach
Director of Sustainability
(President's Office)

What we need are interactions on equal terms – especially at a university! They are the elixir for developing creative ideas and risking new intellectual approaches. That means interacting openly and without bias, using first names and addressing each other with the informal “Du” form in German. That goes for all of us: students, lecturers and staff alike. Only then will we be able to get the full potential from our university. I am often struck by what happens during ETH Week: we get a barrier-free environment that enables learning and teaching to take place on equal terms – regardless of whether the person sharing their ideas is Sarah Springman, Claude Nicollier or a student. By contrast, a formal culture where people address each other in German using the formal “Sie” form consolidates hierarchies and hampers innovation. ETH will become a more creative place if we switch from “Sie” to “Du”.

Our management culture also stands to benefit. People win us over when they exude natural authority. Our ability to manage our teams successfully does not depend on the use of “Sie”. We attract staff and students through expertise and through trust. As managers, we can easily hide behind institutional power by using “Sie”. When we use “Du”, we are more vulnerable and, in turn, more authentic. In my first job after university, I encountered a boss whom no one criticised anymore – not even when he made obvious mistakes. The more impressive someone’s title, the more difficult it is to criticise them openly and honestly. When we use “Du” we are more open to criticism – it may be more painful but it is definitely more worthwhile.

Last but not least, everyone is worthy of respect and appreciation, regardless of their age, education or background. This appreciation is far better expressed through the use of first names than it is through the “Sie” form, which implies distance and emphasises the disparity in a relationship. The rules governing who is allowed to address whom as “Du” – and when – are the expression of an anachronistic disparity that we need to get past. Particularly when research and academic operations are running smoothly, there is a tendency to forget that they are actually only possible because of the many people working behind the scenes: combined heat and power station personnel or the members of staff working at our workshops, in logistics or in IT. The success of ETH depends on each and every one of us. Let’s cut through the formalities and show our true appreciation for one another by using first names. This will allow us to create a stronger sense of community.



Against

Robert Schikowski
Grants Office Staff Member
(Office of Research)

Whenever my postdoctoral supervisor uttered the words “I strongly suggest that you ...”, I immediately knew that it would be difficult to refuse. On the surface, this appears to be nothing more than an informal suggestion from one colleague to another (although the English personal pronoun “you” actually started life as a polite plural form, making this – strictly speaking – a formal suggestion).

In fact, it is a good example of how language can sometimes mask true meanings. Language can be used to disguise commands as recommendations, make managers look like equals or outsiders seem like friends. As a linguist, I am the last person who would dispute that language has the power to shape reality – but this must be assessed on a case-by-case basis. If, for example, you believe that language has the power to eliminate hierarchies, you will probably end up disappointed.

I am not saying that hierarchies and other outmoded ideas of a similar nature, such as formality and distance, are immutable. However, I am convinced that controlling language by forcing people to use the “Du” form is not the right way to go about changing them. ETH is a complex organisation that now has more than 33,000 members. A microcosm such as this provides room for all sorts of social relationships. Managerial authority and anonymity are just as much a reality here as friendly discussions and being able to have a say across hierarchies. The places where the “Du” form is adopted and the manner in which this comes about should not be decided centrally, but by lots of individuals in the context of their own networks. After all, each person knows for themselves whether “Du” is the appropriate personal pronoun for the interaction concerned.

By the way, I am someone who is quick to adopt the “Du” form but occasionally I do prefer “Sie”. To me, it is a sign of honesty and professionalism but it also protects against overfamiliarity. In addition, it is a good way of keeping a person separate from their role, particularly in unpleasant situations. When a relationship involves the “Sie” form, I find it easier to offer criticism and also to accept criticism without taking it personally.

However, the “Sie” form is not just about unpleasant experiences for me. For example, I have very fond memories of a former boss and yet we did not start using the “Du” form for a whole year. My relationship with her was always excellent – but trust and collegiality take time and, sometimes, so does making the switch to “Du”. ■

Illustrations: Kornel Stadler

What do you think – do we need a more informal culture at ETH? Join the discussion on Internal news: www.ethz.ch/informal-culture →



UP CLOSE



#moveETH is in full swing

In late autumn of last year, the coronavirus resurged with a vengeance. The dull weather and short days made the situation even more unbearable. Worried about the mental health of ETH members, Rector Sarah Springman decided to launch the #moveETH exercise campaign in conjunction with the ASVZ. The idea is that ETH members should use this hashtag on social media as a way of encouraging each other to engage in sporting activities, because sport improves not only physical fitness but also mental well-being. Since the campaign's launch on 14 December 2020, it has already generated more than 250 posts. www.ethz.ch/moveeth →