

Press release

Request for termination submitted and package of measures introduced

“We should treat each other with respect”

Zurich, 14 March 2019

ETH Zurich has submitted a request to the ETH Board to terminate the employment relationship with a professor in the former Institute for Astronomy. To avoid as far as possible similar cases from escalating in future, ETH Zurich is adapting its structures and processes and is launching a comprehensive package of measures to improve the quality of leadership and supervision at the university.

At today's press conference, ETH President Joël Mesot expressed regret that cases of unprofessional management had arisen at the university in the past. “On behalf of ETH, I would like to apologise to those affected by the unprofessional conduct of their supervisors,” Mesot said. ETH expects all members of its community to treat each other with respect – anything else is unacceptable.

Describing these incidents as merely the misconduct of individual professors, however, would be an oversimplification, Mesot said: ETH as an institution has also made mistakes. When concrete reports were made, escalation channels did not always operate efficiently and communication with the parties concerned was not always ideal during the subsequent proceedings. This is exactly what happened in the case of a professor at the former Institute for Astronomy. In October 2018, ETH Zurich acted upon the recommendation of an administrative investigation and [opened dismissal proceedings](#). To this end, a special committee was set up to review whether termination was appropriate.

No longer a reliable basis for collaboration

Now the Executive Board of ETH Zurich has submitted a request to the ETH Board to terminate the employment relationship. This decision was made despite the special committee reaching the conclusion that termination was not necessarily justified from a legal perspective. The committee pointed out that the warning given to the professor came too late, leaving her no chance to improve her behaviour. But the committee also confirmed that the allegations contained in the investigatory report were 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 and failed to understand that her behaviour constituted misconduct. The committee therefore recommended that the professor should be closely monitored and should never again be allowed to supervise doctoral students, or at the very least for a minimum period of two years. However, because the supervision of doctoral students is one of the key duties of all ETH professors, and because the Executive Board believes the professor lacks any insight into the effects of her own behaviour – and thus it sees no prospect of improvement – the Executive Board believes there is no longer a reliable basis for trustworthy collaboration in future.

The [investigation into alleged research misconduct](#) by the same professor has now been concluded as well. The committee found no evidence of scientific misconduct.

ETH improves its structures and processes

ETH Zurich is making intense efforts to ensure that it prevents such escalations as much as possible in future. It has learned important lessons from recent experiences – and from the mistakes it has made in the past as an institution – and plans to improve its own processes and structures with a comprehensive package of measures. “Our professors should not only be the very best when it comes to research and lecturing, but also in leading their groups,” President Mesot stresses. “Most of them already are today. They appreciate that consistently excellent research is more achievable in a motivated and well managed group.” In future, ETH will provide even more intensive support for the professors in their role as supervisors.

The Executive Board sees the most urgent need for action in the areas of prevention and leadership, as well as in concrete steps to deal with conflict situations (see info box below). Special attention will be paid to the supervision of doctoral students. To reduce the structural dependency of the relationship between supervisors and doctoral students, the Executive Board has decided that in future students must be supervised by at least two people – a key element of the new package of improvement measures. In addition, ETH Rector Sarah Springman says that dialogue between doctoral students and their supervisors will be improved through regular feedback sessions, so that problems can be identified at an early stage and quickly resolved. “With these measures, along with others derived from best practices in our academic departments and other universities around the world, we will raise the supervision of doctoral students to a new level,” Springman says. Even so, the ETH Rector also stresses that such fundamental changes take time, but ETH is committed to consistently following this path.

Key measures at a glance

Prevention and leadership

- Since the beginning of the year, the main selection criteria when appointing new professors are not only excellence in research and teaching, but also in leadership. Any evidence of poor skills in this area will always require additional information or references to be provided.

- Academic staff and students are to be more closely involved in the appointment process, by inviting them to sit on review panels, and their opinion will be considered in the selection process.
- A comprehensive induction programme for new professors has been devised and is already in place. A similar programme will also be put together for doctoral students.
- Leadership skills will be continuously improved through a comprehensive “leadership programme”. This will include, amongst other things, increased attention to questions of human resources management and supervision in the academic environment and an expanded range of management courses and coaching for professors.
- By 2020 ETH will have multiple supervision for all doctoral students.
- A new guideline for recruiting doctoral students will help professors to clarify expectations on both sides, as well as rights and obligations.
- The annual appraisal interview for doctoral students will be made more systematic and will specifically address topics such as leadership, collaboration and professional development.
- To reduce the dependent relationship between professors and doctoral students, the contracts will be redesigned by 2020 so that it is impossible to put pressure on doctoral students by threatening to withdraw or shorten their employment contracts.

Handling conflict situations

- From the Autumn Semester 2019 onwards, regular training will be provided for the various ETH contacts and specialist units.
- The number of ombudspersons has been increased from two to three, and now two (instead of one) trusted intermediaries are available to deal with allegations of scientific misconduct.
- In future, the Office of Equal Opportunities will focus on promoting diversity and especially increasing the proportion of women at all levels of the university. Reports of sexual harassment and inappropriate behaviour will be dealt with in future by a specialised reporting office within the HR department. ETH is considering whether to set up an external independent specialist unit as well.
- The process for dealing with reports or complaints will be revised and streamlined by the summer of 2019. The aim is to ensure that all reports are addressed and if possible resolved within six months.
- To this end, case management will be gradually expanded into a full team. It will ensure that the right entities are involved and that all parties concerned are kept regularly updated on the progress of proceedings.

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