

Press release

ETH Day 2018

An attractive university for everyone

Zurich, 17 November 2018

This year's ETH Day was organised in honour of our students and as an appreciation of the work of Lino Guzzella, the outgoing President of ETH Zurich. Numerous speeches recalled the many highlights of the past year and addressed the important tasks that lie ahead for ETH.

ETH Zurich celebrated its 163rd anniversary with invited guests from academia, politics and business. In his ceremonial speech, Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis stressed the importance of international relations for Switzerland as a research location. He referred particularly to the European funding programme, which the EU suspended after the adoption of the mass immigration initiative and with which Switzerland was only fully associated again in 2017. The new EU research framework programme "Horizon Europe" will be launched in 2021 and Switzerland is keen to participate fully and on an equal footing here. "As in research, going it alone is unlikely to be successful in politics. Science is an integral part of politics and politics is part of science. Your voice, dear scientists, is also important beyond the alma mater", said the Federal Councillor, addressing those present.

Steep learning curve

Lino Guzzella, President of ETH commented on the university's impressive range of achievements over the past year, such as the conferring of the Fields Medal on ETH professor Alessio Figalli, the successful launch of the undergraduate degree programme in medicine, and the ETH+ initiative. He also took the opportunity to comment on the accusations of improper leadership raised against certain members of ETH. "All of us at ETH went through a steep learning curve last year, and we have taken effective steps to bring about tangible improvement." He further stated that three key conditions must be in place to ensure the long-term success of a world-class university: resources, openness and autonomy. Guzzella concluded his address by thanking the taxpayers, without which the success of ETH would be impossible. "Only if we make selfless contributions to the confederation will Idée Suisse continue to flourish in the future."

“Students first”

In her speech, ETH Rector Sarah Springman emphasised: “Students come first at ETH.” She listed a host of measures intended to improve doctoral supervision at the university. ETH remains an attractive university for everyone. Its new record number of 21,000 students is testimony to this, as is the growing percentage of women on most programmes and the fact that more than 95 percent of undergraduates would like to complete their postgraduate studies at ETH.

But the growing number of students also raises some new challenges for ETH. So far, it has managed to keep teaching quality at a consistently high level – an achievement it owes partially to innovation. “In some fields, digital transformation helps us maintain and even improve our high teaching quality, despite the soaring number of students. Finding ways to sustain qualitative growth will be an important task over the coming years. We want to keep attracting the best students to ETH,” said Springman.

Committed students and excellent teachers

Of course, ETH Day also gave a platform to the students themselves. Young researchers from the IT department demonstrated to interested visitors how they develop learning algorithms for robots, how server centres and the internet are becoming more secure, and how humans and computers will interact in the future.

The students’ union VSETH awarded the Golden Owl for excellent teaching: one teacher per department received the distinction. Professor Markus Reiher of the Laboratory for Physical Chemistry was also honoured with the Credit Suisse Award for Best Teaching.

Three honorary doctors and an honorary council

Traditionally, on the occasion of its anniversary, ETH awards honorary doctorates to outstanding academics. Professor Lia Addadi teaches and researches at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot, Israel. With this honorary doctorate, ETH acknowledges her ground-breaking work in the field of biomineralisation, which opens up wide-reaching applications in medicine and material sciences.

Professor Stefan W. Hell is the director of two Max Planck Institutes, in Göttingen and Heidelberg. With the invention and development of STED (simulated emission depletion) microscopy, he revolutionised the possibilities of observing and characterising the smallest building blocks of life. In 2014, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Chemistry.

Professor Naomi Oreskes of Harvard University is one of the world’s most renowned historians of science. She has made seminal contributions to the history of earth sciences and to the social dynamics that underlie politically motivated scepticism towards science. Her outstanding books and articles have provided invaluable stimuli for social discussion about climate change.

Furthermore, Prof. Dr. Hans Hengartner was appointed as honorary council for his extraordinary commitment to promoting teaching and research.

Critical minds, ethical responsibility

At the end of the academic celebration, Fritz Schiesser, President of the ETH Board, formally said goodbye to Guzzella and honoured his services to the university. It is thanks to his efforts that ETH is now able to contribute to the training of future doctors. With the Critical Thinking Initiative, Guzzella has supported students' ability to understand complex issues and recognise contexts. "Teaching young people is a matter dear to Lino Guzzella's heart. They should develop into personalities with a critical spirit and a sense of ethical responsibility towards society and the environment."

Further information

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ETH Zurich
Media Relations
Tel: +41 44 632 41 41
mediarelations@hk.ethz.ch