

Press release

ETH Day 2019

“Future-ready graduates”

Zurich, 16 November 2019

At the ceremony to mark the 164th anniversary of ETH Zurich, Rector Sarah Springman outlined how she wants to equip students for the future. ETH President Joël Mesot and Federal Councillor Guy Parmelin spoke about social changes and how the ETH is addressing them. As part of the celebrations, the physicist Evelyn Hu was awarded an honorary doctorate.

ETH Zurich celebrated its anniversary on 16 November with guests from politics, science, industry and the arts. In a speech commemorating the 200th birthday this year of ETH's founder, Alfred Escher, the guest speaker Guy Parmelin, a member of the Federal Council, looked back at the pioneering beginnings of the university, as well as describing how its early teaching and research helped to drive forward Switzerland's industrialisation. Today, ETH continues to play a pivotal role in addressing urgent social challenges. “I'm thinking here of climate change, energy supply, mobility and especially digitisation, artificial intelligence and cybersecurity,” said the Minister for Economic Affairs, Education and Research.

Shaping social development

Joël Mesot has been ETH President since 1 January 2019. He confirmed that the past months had been fairly intense, but also said he was impressed by the energy and dynamism that characterises ETH. President Mesot described some recent successes in teaching and research, and detailed some highlights in the transfer of knowledge and technology. He also stressed that it was important to focus not only on technological, but also social change. ETH is becoming more diverse and the understanding of hierarchy is changing too. “As a university we are part of a process – equally affecting the social dimension – that questions the status quo and makes demands,” Mesot said. The Executive Board has responded to these increased demands by launching the reETHink project. Its goal is to sharpen processes and responsibilities, strengthen individual responsibility and leadership skills, and foster ETH's development as a community based on shared values.

Big changes on all study levels

Over the past year there have also been major changes in the area of teaching, to ensure ETH's ability to pursue its mission to produce “future-ready graduates”. “If I look back on the past year, I can see

it has been a very intense and exceptionally productive period,” said Rector Sarah Springman, master of ceremonies for the ETH Day. In her opening remarks she outlined the doctorate programme, which has had a major revamp in 2019. All doctoral students, for example, will in future be assigned two supervisors even before the end of their first year. Around this time they will also be expected to submit a research plan, as well as present and support their research concept at a colloquium.

With the overhaul of the master’s programme, Springman and her team have focused mainly on the question of admissions. More and more young people from every corner of the globe are applying to study at ETH. This is a very encouraging trend, as the internationalism and diversity of students are an essential ingredient to ensure the university fulfils its educational mission. At the same time, however, the available infrastructure and supervision capacities restrict the number of students who can be admitted.

The rector wants to solve this problem by implementing the project “Redefining Master’s Admission”, which aims to attract the very best international students. In doing so, it is important to make sure that the candidates show an interest in Switzerland and are able to fit into the ETH community. The emphasis in all of this is on ETH’s teaching mandate and the transparency of the Swiss educational system. “At the end of the day, we also need to be able to control the admission of students, especially in terms of numbers,” the rector commented.

Outstanding researcher and teaching staff honoured

Of course, the students themselves also had the opportunity to speak at the ETH Day. Thierry Hörmann, President of the Association of Students at ETH (VSETH) said he was delighted at “how sensitively and sympathetically the ETH handles students’ concerns.” He said this shows that the motto “Students first” is not just an empty promise. He is more critical about the way in which performance is assessed – and not just at ETH: “Our education system is too focused on results and performance metrics, without encouraging quality assurance in the setting of examinations.” He rounded off his speech by presenting the Golden Owl award for excellence in teaching, which goes to an outstanding teacher in each academic department. The Credit Suisse Award for Best Teaching 2019 went to Professor Markus Aebi in the Department of Biology for his exceptional commitment.

At ETH Day the university traditionally awards honorary doctorates to outstanding researchers. This year ETH honoured Evelyn Hu, Professor of Applied Physics and Electrical Engineering at Harvard University in Boston. Professor Hu’s technological research has led to a number of scientific breakthroughs in semiconductor quantum structures, photonic crystals and laser structures that shape our daily lives.

A list of all prize-winners can be found here: www.eth-tag.ethz.ch →

Further Information

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