

Press release

ETH Day 2020

ETH celebrates its anniversary and takes stock

Zurich, 21 November 2020

On the occasion of the 165th anniversary of ETH Zurich, Rector Sarah Springman and ETH President Joël Mesot took stock of how the university has weathered the crisis until now. A few outstanding individuals were also honored during the event.

“A crisis shows what we are made of – and our university has passed this test with flying colours,” said ETH Rector Sarah Springman at this year’s ETH Day, much of which was held online. Springman pointed out how the transition to emergency operations following the outbreak of the pandemic in mid-March 2020 served as a stress test – not least in terms of teaching arrangements. She went on to note that thanks to the fantastic team spirit and commitment of all ETH members, the university was able to step up to the new challenge quickly. She highlighted how the switch to remote teaching was mostly seamless, while the introduction of “bubbles” – small groups in which new ETH students tackle all exercises together – has led to the development of a format that the university will continue to use after the crisis is over.

Focus on student wellbeing

Even so, Springman noted that students are still worried. “Enthusiasm for a subject, and thus its value, can only be conveyed personally,” she said. The lack of in-person teaching, she added, has largely prevented students from interacting with one another, which could have a negative effect on mental health. ETH is thus expanding its support services and the Rectorate will be directing its efforts toward ensuring that all students can at least complete the semester successfully.

Overcoming the crisis together

ETH President Joël Mesot also praised the commitment and community spirit shown by all ETH members. He described how many professors are involved in the federal research task force, providing model calculations on the exponential growth of the coronavirus and playing a key role in the develop-

ment of the SwissCovid app, to name just two examples. The development of the tracing app demonstrated the importance of cooperation at national and international level: “Our people were able to activate an existing international network from the start. A Switzerland in ‘splendid isolation’ would not have been able to do this,” said Mesot. He went on to add that the coronavirus-related challenges facing the global community would continue well into 2021: “In times like these, it is all the more important to show solidarity and draw strength from relationships and friendships – whether on a personal or institutional level.”

Despite the crisis, Mesot noted that ETH had seen many positive events in 2020, such as the addition of two new colleagues to the Executive Board, which enabled the rETHink organisational development project to reach its first milestone. The Executive Board wants to use this project – with the involvement of all relevant university groups – to further improve collaboration between professorships, academic departments and central units, and to ensure ETH is ready for the future.

Exceptional teachers and engaged students

The students also had the chance to have their say during ETH Day. The Association of Students at ETH Zurich (VSETH) awarded the Golden Owl for particularly dedicated and excellent teaching to one lecturer per department. This year's Credit Suisse Award for Best Teaching went to Professor Laurent Vanbever from the Department of Information Technology and Electrical Engineering. In his address, VSETH President Luca Dahle praised the university's willingness to tackle difficult topics, such as mental health. He was more critical of the increase in tuition fees, the deterioration in the student–staff ratio and the ongoing lack of full association with the EU's Erasmus+ funding programme.

Students also presented two initiatives that were launched in spring when the extraordinary situation was declared by the Federal Council. The two projects, helpfulETH and Students4Hospitals, aim to reduce the burden on healthcare institutions.

Two new honorary doctors and two new honorary councillors

Two researchers received their honorary doctorates from ETH Zurich at ETH Day. Professor Stephen Quake of Stanford University is a pioneer in microfluidics. His technological innovations have changed the face of biomedical research; for example, his work has facilitated the development of a new prenatal genetic test and made it possible to predict the success of organ transplants. Professor Frans Spaepen of Harvard University has made a number of key contributions to the field of materials science, thanks to his sophisticated experiments and in-depth theoretical insights.

In addition to honorary doctorates, ETH Zurich also traditionally appoints honorary councillors on ETH Day. This year, Adrian Weiss and Calvin Grieder were honoured for their extraordinary personal commitment to the promotion of teaching and research.

Video material of the event, text of all the speeches, profiles of this year's honorary doctors and honorary councillors, and a list of all the prize winners can be found at: www.eth-tag.ethz.ch →

Further information

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