

Press release

Management conduct under review

Administrative enquiry opened

Zurich, 25 October 2017

ETH Zurich is launching an administrative enquiry into allegations made in the Department of Physics. The Executive Board has already taken immediate action in the first half of the year, including measures to protect doctoral students and the closure of the Institute for Astronomy. Now the enquiry will be taking a more detailed look at the circumstances in the former institute. Additional measures may also be proposed.

ETH Zurich's Executive Board has decided to open an independent administrative enquiry in response to allegations made in the former Institute for Astronomy. The purpose of the investigation is to examine the circumstances and procedures in the areas concerned, and to review the conduct of the people involved. ETH President Lino Guzzella comments on the decision: "The official enquiry allows us to take an even closer look at the facts and decide whether further measures still need to be taken". Over the coming days, the ETH Executive Board will commission an external expert to carry out the administrative investigation.

Top priority: the protection of doctoral students

In February 2017, allegations made by several doctoral students about a female ETH professor were brought to the attention of the Executive Board by the ombudspersons and by other ETH employees. According to these allegations, the professor was supposed to have demonstrated inept management conduct towards many of her doctoral students. ETH Zurich expects everyone in management roles to treat other employees with respect. "The alleged conduct falls well short of the standards we expect of our professors, and so we took swift action," explains Lino Guzzella. At their own request, the doctoral students in question were quickly reassigned to a different supervisor in March.

At the same time, the Executive Board confronted the professor about the allegations and listened to her version of events. Concrete measures were then agreed and implemented. In particular, a system was put in place to protect doctoral students in future. If the professor is asked to supervise doctoral students in the future, she will be given close support.

No professorial couples working in the same institute

In hindsight, the personnel set-up at the Institute for Astronomy was not ideal, as both the professor in question and her husband were employed as professors in the same institute. As a result, the Institute for Astronomy was closed in August, the married couple's tenure continued as separate professorships, and the rest of the disbanded institute was integrated into the new Institute for Particle Physics and Astrophysics. Having identified the problematic circumstances, the priority was to reform the inappropriate personnel structure as quickly as possible so as to rectify the situation. The married professors were first appointed back in 2002. Nowadays such a pairing within the same institute would no longer be possible.

In-depth administrative enquiry

The university's supervisory body, the ETH Board, has also looked into what happened with the Institute for Astronomy. In September it commended the prompt and appropriate action taken by the university, as well as the remedial measures. At the same time, it was of the opinion that the next step should be for the university to carry out a further administrative enquiry.

Now that the immediate measures have defused the situation in the department, ETH Zurich is following the lead of its supervisory body. There will be a detailed investigation into what happened, focusing on the question of how better to ensure that reports of poor management conduct can be swiftly escalated to a higher level within the organisation, and in serious cases directly to the Executive Board. ETH Zurich is unable to provide additional information on this matter until the ongoing investigation has been completed and the findings submitted to the ETH Board.

Contact

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