

Life

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ETH zürich





Discover AI through play

MorphTales, a new obstacle course, is a fun way to better understand artificial intelligence. It can be found on the ground floor of the ETH Main Building and comprises four games that use augmented reality to show how artificial intelligence and people can work together to solve complex problems.

→ www.ethz.ch/morph-tales-en

Have you ever wanted to look back 26 years? The new ETH Zurich web archive lets you do just that. All ETH websites are archived and accessible to the public here. Using the full-text search, you can research specific names and topics. What's more, you can track the various versions of the websites over the years.

→ www.ethz.ch/webarchive



Smart commuting

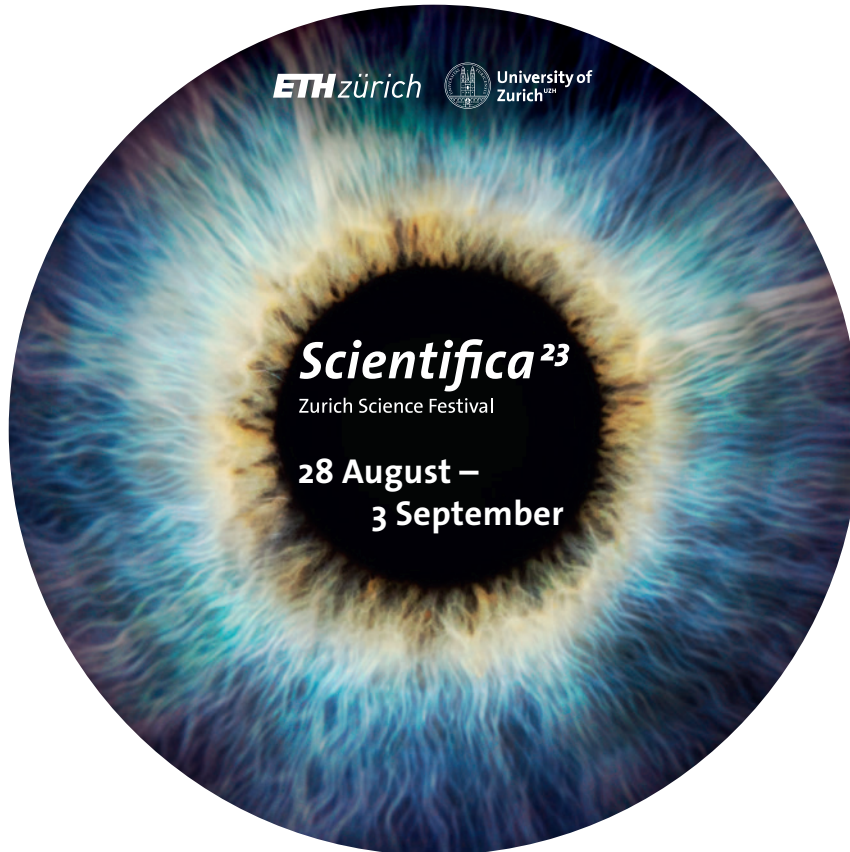
How can we travel in a more energy-efficient way and conserve resources? Since March 2023, the "smart moves" campaign has provided inspiration in various workshops and events. A major mobility survey is currently being conducted as part of the campaign, and on 5 October, events will be held as part of the ETH Sustainable Future Mobility Awareness Day.

→ www.ethz.ch/smart-moves-en

Explore the forest

Since June, Globi's Forest Laboratory on the Höggerberg campus has been open to visitors interested in exploring nature. Here, children between the ages of seven and twelve can learn about the forest ecosystem by taking part in a tour along an educational trail. By carrying out exciting experiments, they can discover how the water cycle works or what makes trees grow, for instance. Globi's Forest Laboratory tour is free of charge and is open to school classes on request. The tour lasts approximately 2.5 hours and is suitable for groups of 10 to 25 children.

→ www.ethz.ch/school-offers



Break down prejudices

Stereotypes, preconceptions and beliefs that we unknowingly have within us can lead us to unwittingly treat our fellow human beings unfairly or discriminate against them. In the Unconscious Bias e-learning course, ETH members can learn more about these unintentional assumptions and their consequences, as well as strategies to reduce them.

→ www.ethz.ch/unconscious-bias

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How accessible is ETH really?



IN FOCUS

The “Barrier-Free at ETH Zurich” project has been running for two years with the aim of ensuring that everyone can access our university as far as possible. Have we achieved this goal yet? *life* spoke to those affected and the project manager – and we even tested it ourselves.

It is pitch-black. I can hear voices nearby, but it’s difficult to tell where they are coming from. I slowly move forward – and suddenly bump into something. A wall? A door? It’s hard to say...

No, I’m not in a dark tunnel looking for the exit, or out and about on my own at night. I’m challenging my own perspectives. At these workshops, organised by the “Barrier-Free at ETH Zurich” project, all ETH members have the opportunity to move around the campus in a wheelchair or blindfolded and with a cane. Why? To experience how people with disabilities perceive their surroundings, how they find their way around at ETH – and thereby make participants aware of the challenges that those with disabilities have to face. Because there are plenty – including at ETH.

“Since the ‘Barrier-Free at ETH Zurich’ project started around two years ago, we have already achieved a lot. But we haven’t reached our goal yet,” explains Romila Storjohann, who is in charge of the project. “For example, we have equipped the student workstations and seminar rooms with height-adjustable desks so that a wheelchair can fit underneath them. The acoustics in the lecture theatres have been improved so that people with hearing impairments can follow lectures more easily.

The ETH website has been designed to be more accessible, and there are courses on accessible teaching for lecturers. We check our buildings regularly to ensure that corridors and passageways are free from obstructions,” says Romila. “However, with existing buildings,



there's often a compromise to be made between listed building restrictions and accessibility."

Excuse me, where are the toilets?

Participants in the "A Change of Perspective" workshop can learn first-hand what sort of everyday things become a challenge if you have a physical impairment. Completely robbed of our sight by a blindfold and equipped with just a cane, we hear the voice of Esther Garo, one of the course instructors: "You're here in a corridor of the HPM building on the Hönggerberg campus and need to go to the toilet. Who can find their way there?" The participants are helpless. Esther laughs. For her, looking for – and

finding – places she hasn't been before is part of day-to-day life. Esther has had cataracts since birth. She can see around 15 % – and that's with her good eye. When she's out and about, she brings a cane and her guide dog Uraya, who is with her at ETH this afternoon.

Accessibility affects us all

Disabilities and impairments are more common than you think. "There are different levels of impairments. They not only affect people with disabilities but also people with restricted mobility due to their age, temporarily due to an accident, or due to an illness," says Romila Storjohann. "According to figures from the Federal Statistical Office, around 20 % of the Swiss population are affected. When you consider the age structure at ETH, this means that nearly 13 % of all ETH members are affected by an impairment."

And even those who are not physically impaired or moving around on crutches due to an injury benefit from a barrier-free environment. For example, you might want to find a route without stairs if you have a suitcase or a buggy. "Accessibility affects us all," Romila Storjohann believes.

Small bumps in the road can become huge hurdles

At the "A Change of Perspective" workshop, the participants now swap their blindfold and cane for a wheelchair. Their first task is to open the door to the disabled toilet with one hand while navigating their wheelchair and positioning themselves next to the toilet with the other. "The door is really heavy – it's quite an upper-arm workout," comments one of the participants.

Once they have mastered this, it's time to go outside. Here it becomes clear that even bumps just a few centimetres high can be a nearly insurmountable obstacle for a wheelchair. "We have a big dilemma here: while wheelchair users want the ground to be as level as possible, those with a visual impairment need bumps, kerbs or different road surfaces to help them





“It felt like when you are driving in the fog and miss the turning.”

find their bearings,” explains Esther Garo. “So we don’t just need plenty of communication, cooperation and creativity between people with and without disabilities but also between those with different types of impairments.”

What are the takeaways?

The workshop comes to an end. The participants get out of their wheelchairs and return their blindfolds and canes. What will they take away from this afternoon’s session? Amazement about how challenging daily life can be with restricted mobility – and a great deal

of respect for those affected. “With the blindfold, I lost all sense of distance and orientation – I could barely take a few steps forward,” says one participant, summing up her experience. “It felt like when you are driving in the fog and miss the turning.”

“What I want most is more acceptance”

Merline Scheerer (24) is in her sixth semester of studying biochemistry at ETH. Since childhood, she has had a visual processing disorder, which means that the images that her eyes send to her brain change constantly.

Merline, how does your visual impairment affect your day-to-day life?

Merline: You can't tell that I'm visually impaired by looking at me. However, I trip more often than other people and get lost more frequently because I struggle to read signs. What I see changes all the time. My brain tries to correct the image it receives – but it doesn't do this properly. I then see letters that aren't really there.

What would help you?

Merline: The use of a larger font in study materials, for example. The smaller the font, the more difficult it is for me to read. However, I have text read out by machine wherever possible.

What about examinations?

Merline: These are often hard for me, as during an exam, it is too late to change anything if the font on the documents is too small or the print quality of the enlarged font is poor. I do get more time in written examinations thanks to the disability compensation system. My doctor recommends that I take my examinations orally, because I will always be at a disadvantage with written exams. However, ETH does not offer this option.



Is ETH doing enough for people with impairments?

Merline: A lot has already been done, and you can tell the intention is there. However, when it comes to formal things – like exams – there's very little wiggle room. My grades are much worse than what I'm capable of. That annoys me.

What sort of support do you want?

Merline: More acceptance. When my friends ask if I want to do anything in particular, such as read a text, and I say no, they accept that; but they at least give me the opportunity to try. I wish everyone would treat me like this.

You can find more information on the “Barrier-Free at ETH Zurich” project and the dates of the next “A Change in Perspective” workshops at:
www.ethz.ch/barrier-free

Where did communications expert Carolyn Arndt take this photo?

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Take a guess and email your answers to life@hk.ethz.ch by 8 September. With a bit of luck, you might just win one of three ETH penknives!



Take part now!
Send us your own
snapshot for the next issue:
life@hk.ethz.ch

ANSWER

December 2022 edition: Coralie Busse-Grawitz took her photo from the ETZ building on Gloriatrasse. She says that those in the know are aware that you can avoid the stairs to the building by walking through this passage to the underground car park of the ETZ. The entrance is next to the ETF building on Sternwartstrasse. Congratulations to our winners Julia Bernreiter-Trächtler, Katharina Ceesay-Seitz and Jean-Claude Eischen!



PORTRAIT



Between wrestling, animal protection and music

Samanthi Wolter has lived on the same estate for 44 years – but her life couldn't be more varied.

When Samanthi Wolter has a goal, she achieves it – even if it takes more than 20 years. “When I was 13, I saw wrestling on TV for the first time and knew straight away that this was a field I'd love to work in,” recalls the 44-year-old.

After attending countless wrestling shows in the USA and learning everything there is to know about the sport, her time finally came 13 years ago. Samanthi made her dream a reality and became an official media partner for WWE, the largest wrestling organisation in the world. For three years, she has run her own website featuring reports on and photos of her muscular idols. “The shows are so big and flamboyant. There's nothing like it in Switzerland and it has always fascinated me,” says the Zurich native, explaining her obsession. She has learned from the wrestlers to believe in her dreams and to never let anything get her down.

Treat all people equally

Her parents have also had a huge influence on her. “They taught me how important family is and that you should treat all people equally. I also inherited my tremendous love of animals from them,” says Samanthi.

Even as a child, she regularly brought cats home with her, getting one of her own at the age of seven. Six years later, she started walking dogs from the animal shelter – which she still does almost every Saturday. For the last few years, she has sponsored a sheep in the Zurich Zoo and a cat in Romania. Both of her own cats are from a rehabilitation centre.

She has lived with them in an apartment near the Höggerberg in Zurich for four years. She grew up just two buildings away on the same estate and has

never lived anywhere else. “I've always felt at home here, and lots of my school friends have also stayed in the area,” explains Samanthi.

Natural and down-to-earth

She also loves the fact that she is just ten minutes from her office in the Octavo building. Samanthi has worked as an assistant for Ueli Weidmann, ETH Vice President for Infrastructure, for around a year. She takes care of his schedule, deals with his post and does the preparation and follow-up work for various events. Samanthi is also in charge of IT for the five-person team in the Office of Infrastructure.

“What I like best about Samanthi is her natural and down-to-earth manner,” says Ueli Weidmann. “At first, she might come across as a bit serious, but she is really cheerful at heart. And she works unbelievably quickly.”

An organisational whizz

Samanthi's favourite job is organising appointments. “I just love managing schedules. I find it really fun, even though very few people understand why,” she says. It will come as no surprise that she is an absolute pro. After all, in her personal life, she needs excellent organisational skills to juggle all her commitments and hobbies.

In addition to wrestling and animal protection, music has been a huge passion for the 44-year-old since she was little. As a youngster, she won the Swiss modern dance championship together with her team. She has played the flute for years and has been taking piano lessons for one year. “I need to schedule my free time carefully,” says Samanthi. “I like doing all these things, but there are still moments where it all gets a bit too much. When I really want to relax, I treat myself to an evening of Netflix now and then.”

She usually spends her holidays in the USA or Berlin – her second home,

as she describes it. As a child, she often visited the German capital with her parents and still has lots of friends there.

Committed to her beliefs

Samanthi always knew she wanted to do a commercial apprenticeship – and she has never regretted that decision. She completed stints as an assistant in a wide range of sectors, most recently in Zurich's animal hospital, before switching to ETH.

Samanthi wouldn't change anything about her life: “I've built up everything myself from scratch and I'm pretty proud of that. Not everyone ends up at WWE,” she says. She then adds: “I am committed to animal protection because it's a cause that I really believe in. I think there are so many people and animals living in unfortunate circumstances, and we have it so good here in Switzerland. And I believe you should try to give something back.”

Margot interviews Marco

DOMINOES

**Margot Ziekau**

57

Department Coordinator (D-MATL)

Has been at ETH for 15 years

Marco Strässle

54

Head of Accounting

Has been at ETH for 5 years

Marco Strässle tells Margot Ziekau why he switched from industry to ETH and when he needs to step in.

Margot Ziekau: ETH will have less money at its disposal in the next few years. However, talking about cost-saving measures is not exactly motivating. How can we encourage employees to find constructive solutions to make us all more efficient?

Marco Strässle: Yes, “cost-saving measures” sounds negative. But when you compare our situation to the private sector, you have to put things into perspective. There are no redundancies planned, nor is there a recruitment freeze. I believe it is an opportunity for all of us to think about whether we’re doing the right things – and whether we’re doing them right.

Margot: Does that apply to your team too?

Marco: Yes, definitely. We have also taken a look at what we do and had a bit of a reshuffle. We are now doing some things differently or not at all. We are also checking whether all of the services that we provide for the departments are actually needed. I don’t think there’s anything negative about that.

Margot: What sort of things do you actually do – what’s in your in-tray?

Marco: Lots of management tasks. But also problems that the departments can’t resolve on their own.

Margot: Such as?

Marco: For example, when budgets haven’t been entered into the system correctly. A project was recently entered with only a provisional budget. As nobody followed this up, a deficit resulted in the accounts, meaning that the costs incurred were higher than those budgeted for. The team and I then came up with a way of closing the gap that everyone agreed with. In other cases, it’s simply a matter of explaining and enforcing the rules.

Margot: And what else do you do in a typical day?

Marco: That depends a bit on the time of year. In the winter, we have a lot to do for year-end closing. I am also in regular contact with the finance people from the ETH Board and work together with the other institutes in the ETH Domain on finance-related matters. We are responsible for liquidity management as well and try to get the most out of this for ETH. There are also always special cases where I have to figure out where our department’s expertise is needed, such as when it came to founding the Wyss Zurich Foundation. That makes my work really interesting.

Margot: What could run more smoothly at ETH?

Marco: From a financial perspective, the diversity and complexity of the institution pose a challenge. Things would definitely be more efficient if we worked in a more standardised way here and there. We’ve already achieved a fair bit, but there’s still more to do. Plus, we could also try to put ourselves in each other’s shoes more often.

Margot: And what’s the best way to do that? Having more lunches together?

Marco: That’s one way – you can clarify a lot of things on an informal basis. We could also set up working groups to discuss issues together and understand one another’s perspectives.

Margot: What prompted you to come to ETH five years ago?

Marco: At ETH, the goals are completely different to those in industry, where everything revolves around sales and profit – and usually the next quarter. One day, I asked myself how long I wanted to do all this last-minute rushing around. At ETH, everything is geared

towards the very long term. When we employ a young professor, they stay with us for 23 years on average. We have time for development here.

Margot: Yes, that’s true. When a doctoral student has a product idea and wants to launch it on the market, they will generally need at least ten years. We have the time for that here. But, to change the subject: at ETH, it is often difficult to find the right person to contact when you have an issue. In the rETHink project, we have tried to designate consistent points of contact for each department. Who is the first point of contact in your team?

Marco: For the departments, it is definitely the finance desk. The customer advisors process and prioritise all the requests and questions before passing them on to the specialists.

Margot: We’ve spent nearly all our time just talking about work. What do you do in your free time?

Marco: I love spending time with my family. My son is just turning twelve – I spend a lot of time with him. And I get a lot out of doing sport. We have a holiday home in Graubünden. I usually spend the winter in the mountains and go skiing every weekend. And now from spring to autumn, I do a lot of mountain biking. I love being out in nature.

Research and politics: a multi-faceted synergy

BACKGROUND



Both behind the scenes and in front of the microphone, ETH researchers play various different roles when it comes to politics. We look at two of them in more depth.

“Scientific evidence never gives you just one clear course of action. In the end, it’s up to the politicians to decide which one to take.”

Where will our power come from in future? What does the war in Ukraine mean for Switzerland’s security policy? And what impact will artificial intelligence have on the economy? It’s up to politicians to develop solutions to these and many other challenges. To do this successfully, they rely on input from the scientific community.

Many researchers from ETH Zurich regularly share their knowledge with representatives from politics and the administration, providing data, calculating scenarios, explaining correlations, evaluating suggested solutions and warning about dangers. This communication takes various different forms and can include task forces, committees and parliamentary hearings as well as consultation sessions and public lectures.

The role taken on by researchers depends very much on the matter in hand, but also has a lot to do with their personality. Often, they work away silently, unnoticed in the background, but sometimes they use media coverage to draw attention to problems.

Behind the scenes

When Russian troops invaded Ukraine in February 2022, experts from the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich appeared in the media on an almost daily basis to analyse the dramatic events. However, away from the media spotlight and the public eye, researchers still had their hands full: “We supported federal councillors, members of parliament and leading executives in the Swiss Federal Administration with re-

gard to placing the consequences of the war in the context of Swiss security policy,” explains Andreas Wenger.

Wenger is a professor of security policy at ETH and has been Director of the CSS since 2002. His institute fulfils official mandates for the Swiss Federal Departments of Defence and Foreign Affairs. The ETH professor engages in constant and institutionalised dialogue with Swiss politicians and the administration. He regularly meets with the people he advises and has known most of them for years. “Scientific policy advice requires mutual trust, a respect for one another’s expertise and an understanding of the allocation of roles between the worlds of politics and science,” he explains.

Politicians need to be aware that scientific results are never set in stone and that researchers also contradict one another. Scientists, for their part, need to understand that political decision-makers usually use knowledge strategically to resolve conflicts of interest and values within society: “In politics, knowledge is a means to an end. There is consequently always a risk that research results will be exploited to serve a specific agenda,” says Wenger. So how does he deal with this?

“A lot of what we do takes place at a very early stage of the legislative process, when the ball is in the administration’s court and the issues have not yet been really politicised. They are more open to scientific input at this stage,” explains the professor of security policy. Once politicians establish a firm

position on a matter or if a question cannot be answered in scientific terms, then there's less scope for his colleagues to make substantial contributions. "In such cases, we have rejected commissions for studies or consultation in the past," says Wenger.

In the media spotlight

ETH climate scientist Reto Knutti takes on a very different role when it comes to politics. In April, he joined more than 250 other researchers to speak out in favour of the Swiss Climate Protection Act in a public statement, on social media and in numerous interviews. By doing so, he

got involved in the legislative process at a time that couldn't be more politicised and emotionally charged – during the referendum campaign.

But the ETH professor is not naive. He is aware that his involvement carries some risks: "Of course, a minority of people no longer consider me to be a disinterested observer. The price of silence, however, is much higher – not only for the planet and society but also for the precious role that facts and science play in political and media debate."

Knutti believes that he has a duty to get involved in referendums where scientific questions play a key role. It is vital that researchers base their assess-

ment of political bills first and foremost on scientific facts. What's more, they should be transparent about their interests and the reason for their stance, and also be open to discussing other opinions. "Researchers must employ their expertise to determine what is true and what is not. If we fail to do this, other actors with vested interests will proffer their own interpretations," explains the climate physicist.

When will ETH adopt a position?

Unlike some of its researchers, ETH Zurich does not publicly adopt a position on political bills unless they affect research policy. "If it's to do with the underlying conditions for education, research and knowledge sharing, ETH will stand up for its interests in Bern," says Norbert Staub, who works in the Office of the ETH President and is responsible for the university's political relations. As well as liaising with key politicians, his role involves organising information events for delegations from parliament.

Sometimes, however, his work goes beyond the limits of the Swiss parliament: together with partners from the ETH Domain and the UK higher education sector, he has led a campaign for Switzerland to become fully associated to the Horizon Europe research programme. Various ETH researchers also publicly support this issue on a regular basis.



In the end, it's down to the politicians

"At ETH Zurich, there's room for differentiated roles. Researchers are given freedom on both an academic and personal level and have the right to express their opinion on political bills," explains Benedikt Knüsel. The ETH alumnus is the main point of contact at ETH Zurich for representatives from politics and the administration as well as researchers with an interest in scientific policy advice. Knüsel coordinates the numerous activities carried out by ETH researchers in the political sphere and develops new platforms for dialogue with political decision-makers. He is also currently compiling a guide that aims to support researchers in dealing with politicians.

Benedikt Knüsel encourages researchers to apply their expertise to political matters in their subject area. He recommends that they engage with the political requirements in question and use their specialist knowledge to identify different courses of action and to appraise them without clearly advocating one specific option. "Scientific evidence never gives you just one clear course of action. In the end, it's up to the politicians to decide which one to take."



Politics workshop in November

ETH researchers can take various roles in the political discourse – and they can learn what this means in practice in a one-day politics workshop being held by Benedikt Knüsel and Corporate Communications on 17 November as part of the Communication Academy. www.ethz.ch/communication-academy-en

What money-saving measures would you introduce if you were ETH President?

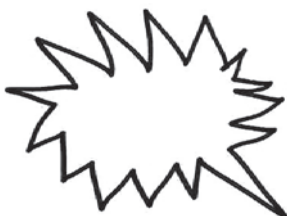
In 2024, ETH will be faced with the threat of reduced financial support from the Swiss Confederation coupled with the continuing effects of inflation. With this in mind, we asked ETH members where they could see potential for savings.

POINTS OF VIEW



Pia Aeschlimann (63)
Academic Services employee

“At the town hall meeting about making savings, Joël Mesot said that the first thing he would do is cut his salary and those of other top earners. I think that was the right thing to say – it’s exactly what I’d do.”



“I probably wouldn’t keep the Asian canteen open. I went there a few times and it was never that good – the noodles were usually overcooked.”



Manuel Domingues (48)
Main Building caretaker for 16 years

“I would shorten the Main Building’s opening hours, as there isn’t much going on there in the evening or during the holidays. Just opening for one hour less per day could mean a huge reduction in staff and energy costs. And I’d close the building altogether on Sundays. We should also install more motion detectors and light sensors so that the lights are only on when someone needs them.”



Valentin Barandun (24)
Master’s degree student at D-CHAB



Lenita Edward (20) & Maja Vogel (20)
Bachelor's degree students at D-USYS and D-MAVT



"I would hire more women. I think they're generally better at managing money than we men are."

"We'd significantly reduce the meat options in all the ETH canteens."



Marc Vetter (32)
Scientific assistant at D-MAVT



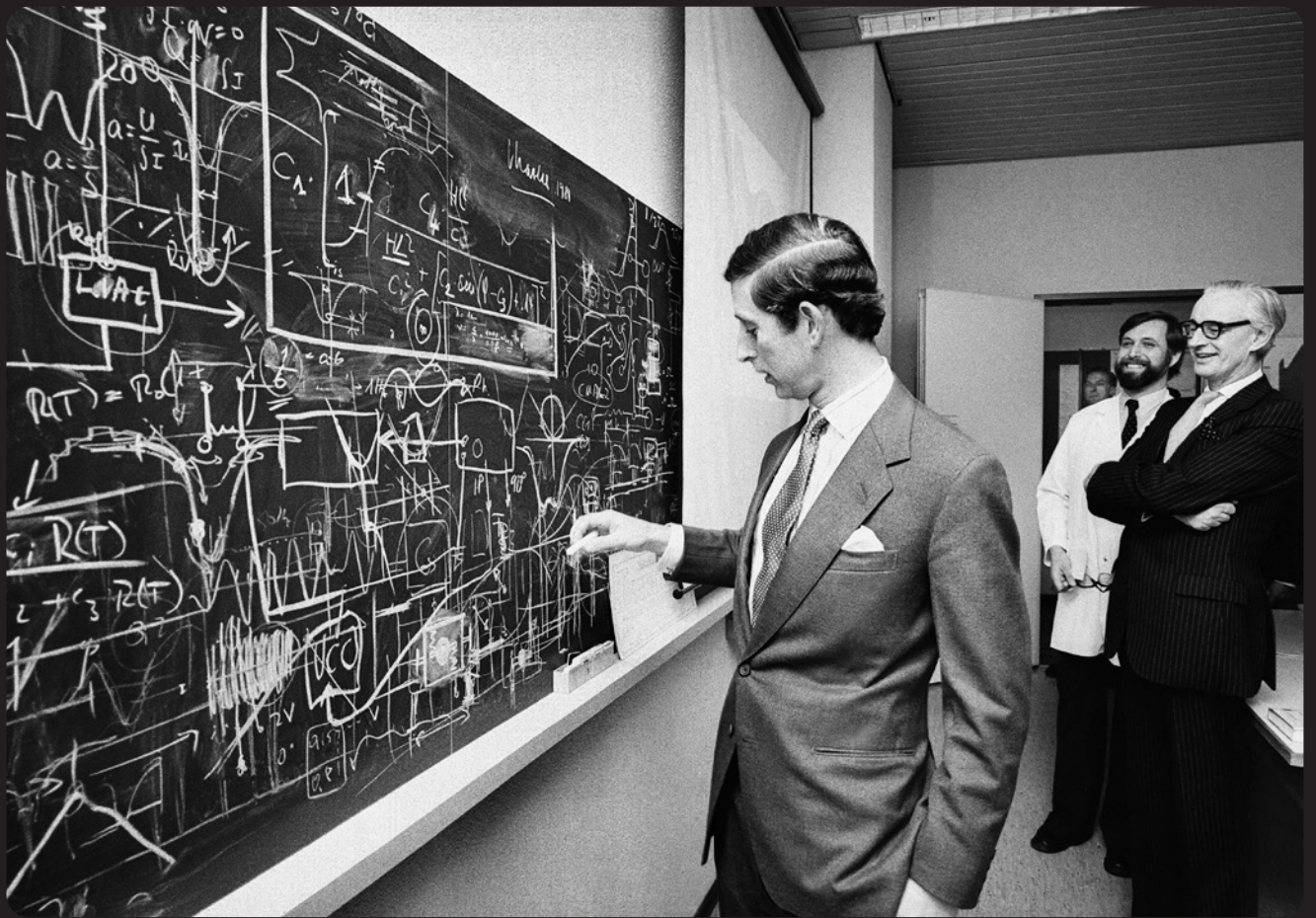
Robert Riener (55)
D-HEST professor

"I'd make some things less rigid to cut down on administrative work. Let's have less regulation and more trust and creativity. It should be okay to let more mistakes happen and by doing so reduce the administrative burden."



Thomas Zenger (39)
Multimedia producer in the ETH Library

"When I make a video, I sometimes have a whole raft of forms to fill in. Cutting back on the bureaucracy wouldn't just make my job easier, it would probably save some money too."



Royal visit

“His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales will visit ETH Zurich on Friday, 23 January 1981.” A press release from the time announced the upcoming arrival of Prince Charles at ETH. The extraordinary event had been organised long in advance – a meticulously planned schedule with stops arranged at the Hönggerberg and Zentrum campuses. However, the Prince found the research projects so interesting that the timetable went out of the window. 42 years later, on 6 May 2023, Charles III became King.

Find out what he ate for lunch at the Dozentenfoyer here:

