ETH zürich

life

ETH community magazine
December 2020

The new vice presidents of ETH Zurich

Opening times

Happy Holidays

ETH will close for the holidays from 1 p.m. on 24 December 2020 until 3 January 2021.

The ASVZ counter at the Sport Center Polyterrasse will be closed all day from 24 December 2020 to 3 January 2021, but it will be possible to access the sports halls until 12.30 p.m. on 24 December. The Sport Center will then be closed from 1 p.m. The Irchel and Hönggerberg sports facilities will be operating on partial opening hours over the holidays. It is also worth noting that the ASVZ has added to its range of video courses in recent months.

We wish all ETH members a joyful holiday season and a happy, healthy New Year!

www.ethz.ch/academic-calendar →
www.asvz.ch/en →

Photo: Alessandro Della Bella

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Photo: ETH Zürich/Gian Marco Castelberg

Opening of AI Center

A hub for artificial intelligence

ETH Zurich's new research centre for artificial intelligence opened its doors on 20 October. The AI Center's mission is to strengthen research in AI principles, applications and impacts, provide an incubator for AI start-ups and facilitate joint research projects with international science and industry experts in an Open Lab. The ETH AI Center will begin with a core faculty of 27 professorships working with 45 associated professorships from all ETH departments. These members specialise in AI principles or apply AI in their research. Applications for the doctoral fellowship programme are currently being welcomed.

www.ai.ethz.ch →

Procurement law

New procurement culture

Switzerland is bringing a revised version of its public procurement law into force on 1 January 2021, a move that will introduce a host of changes. The most profound one comes in the form of lawmakers creating a paradigm shift that aims to encourage more competition on the basis of quality, plus improved sustainability and innovation. This will mean giving priority to tenders that offer the most advantages, rather than those that represent simply the cheapest option. ETH Zurich welcomes this change: it intends to take advantage of the opportunities it will bring and define a new procurement culture.

www.ethz.ch/procurementlaw →

ETH Day 2020

An unusual birthday celebration

Held on 21 November 2020, this year's ETH Day was forced to go ahead with a much smaller number of attendees than usual owing to the pandemic – but the Academic Celebration was still livestreamed from the Semper Aula hall. Steve Quake and Frans Spaepen were awarded this year's honorary doctorates, while Adrian Weiss and Calvin Grieder were made honorary councillors. The Golden Owl prize winner was introduced in an original video. A recording of the event can be found on the website.

www.ethz.ch/eth-day →

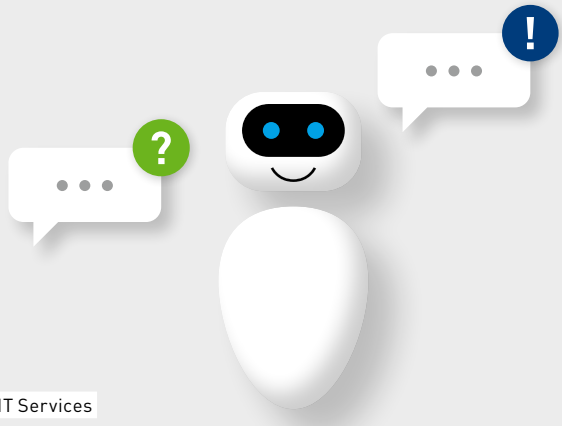
Photo: Oliver Bartenschlager

Personnel Ordinance

Three key changes

The partially revised Personnel Ordinance for the ETH Domain (PersO-ETH) has been in force since 1 October. The ETH Board has introduced this version with the aim of addressing current needs, and has incorporated three key changes. Firstly, the duration of wage continuation in the event of accident or illness will now be based on the number of years for which the person has been an ETH employee. Secondly, if an employee is absent due to illness or accident, they must present a doctor's note on the fourth day of absence. Thirdly, paid leave is being extended to employees who have to care for parents: it is now possible to take three days' leave per occasion.

www.ethz.ch/services/en/employment-and-work →



IT Services

Chatbot up and running

The IT Service Desk recently launched its own chatbot: currently in its introductory phase, this artificial intelligence tool is designed to learn from each interaction it has. The Service Desk decided to introduce it after finding that it was repeatedly dealing with the same kinds of issues and requests, many of which can be solved through defined text blocks or sets of instructions. Although these were already available online, users rarely sought them out – so the chat bot has been designed to do the searching instead and show the user exactly the information they need.

www.ethz.ch/servicedesk-en →

Key figure

50 ♀/♂

The Equality Monitoring report for 2019/20 focuses on equality and diversity at ETH Zurich. It concludes that recent years have seen a growing percentage of women at all career levels: in 2019, women made up half of all newly appointed assistant professors and 21 percent of full professors. These results indicate that ETH is making important progress in equality and is set to continue promoting women in these roles.

www.ethz.ch/equality-monitoring-en →

ETH welcomes two new vice presidents

ETH Zurich has expanded its Executive Board from five to seven domains. *life* presents a profile of the two new vice presidents.

Text Anna Maltsev **Photos** Markus Bertschi

"You bring valuable qualities and skills that fill a gap in the Executive Board. Such all-round diversity is extremely important to me personally," ETH President Joël Mesot commented at the media conference to announce the expansion of the ETH Executive Board. On 1 November Julia Dannath already joined the ETH Executive Board as the new Vice President for Personnel Development and Leadership, and on 1 January Vanessa Wood takes up office as Vice President for Knowledge Transfer and Corporate Relations. But who are the two new board members? What motivates them and what are their specific personal and managerial qualities?

"Trust is essential for working together"

"Good managers can be measured by how successfully they are able to create the right overall environment for their staff to grow," says Julia Dannath. Her first task in her new role as VP is to engage in dialogue with as many ETH members as possible to identify where – and exactly how – management skills and structures can be improved at ETH. At the same time, she is looking forward to the challenges she faces in her domain. "Whenever people work together conflicts naturally arise from time to time. To resolve this, it is crucial to get everyone involved on board as early as possible and to understand the intentions behind the various types of behaviour," says the 43-year-old expert in transformation advisory.

Dannath has also been tasked with finding ways to make better use of the advantages of the university's diversity and building up the development opportunities for all career groups. As part of her involvement in the rETHink project, she will also oversee two workstreams: support of professors and organisation of central administrative units and boards.

Julia Dannath

Organising people according to their strengths

"Trust is essential for working together," Dannath says with conviction, "and that has nothing to do with direct contact." As team leader and most recently CEO of an HR consultancy, she has coordinated teams in Zurich, Hamburg and Cologne while providing organisations around the world with support in the areas of personnel development and management culture for more than 12 years. Online collaboration was therefore routine for Dannath, who has a PhD in psychology, well before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

"Julia is a very good listener and is very skilled at understanding how to organise people according to their strengths," says Maximilian Buyken, who spent ten years in her team of consultants and has headed her Executive Board staff unit since 1 December. He highlights several particularly attractive aspects of Dannath's management style: she gives staff plenty of freedom and responsibility, fires them up with her enthusiasm and is very open in dealing with mistakes and new ideas.

"I draw a lot of energy from my work"

Before Dannath started her career in consultancy, she studied for a PhD in "agile knowledge acquisition" at the University of Tübingen, before moving on to

← Vanessa Wood, Julia Dannath and Joël Mesot on the Polyterrasse

work as scientific assistant at the Institute for Behavioural Psychology at ETH Zurich. She then moved back to Germany for family reasons, but her enthusiasm for ETH stayed with her: "I am very taken by the combination of tradition and innovation, as well as the passion that everyone has for their work here."

As a CEO and mother to three children, her everyday life has been very demanding for years, without allowing much time to unwind: "I draw a lot of energy from my work, however, and from the many amazing people I am surrounded by." Dannath, originally from Saarland in Germany, actually likes having such a busy lifestyle, as boredom, idleness and solitude are alien to her nature. When she does have some time to herself, she likes to do sport, listen to political podcasts or detective audio books, or read biographies.

Self-confident, independent and compassionate

Aside from her job, family and her relationship with her husband are the most important things for Dannath. Her parents brought her up as a very independent, self-confident and compassionate person, and she tries to do the same for her three sons. As her eldest is currently studying for his final high-school exams (Abitur), he stays at his grandparents in Germany together with his brothers during termtime, while she and her husband will shift the main focus of their lives to Zurich once coronavirus restrictions allow.

Trust and honesty are extremely important for Dannath both professionally and personally. "A continuous dialogue with others, an intensive feedback culture, an implicit assumption that the other person is acting out of good intention, and support for one another through personal difficulties – such an approach engenders trust and loyalty," of that she is convinced.

Vanessa Wood

Role model and mentor

Vanessa Wood grew up as an only child in Sarasota, Florida. She often spent the weekend in her grandfather's workshop, where he helped her build her own small sailing boat and electric cars for her Barbie dolls. Later on her physics teacher immediately spotted her interest in how things work and recruited her to the robotics team and gave her individual lessons in quantum mechanics. "I think such strong support and encouragement gave me the confidence to dedicate my

career to science, despite the highly competitive environment," says the 37-year-old professor.

She went on to study physics and French literature at Yale University while also working part-time as a translator for the law faculty. After some months, several law professors invited her to their lectures and shortly afterwards she was interning with one of these attorneys, who later became the legal adviser of Barack Obama.

Reaching her goals with consideration and respect

Vanessa Wood strongly believes her success is in part due to many others who have been kind enough to encourage and support her along the way – and she would like to do the same. "Vanessa has an incredible talent for networking and her approach is always considerate and respectful," Jens Poulsen comments. The 41-year-old has been working as a coordinator at her institute for four years and will become part of her school management team in January. The two got to know each other ten years ago at the ASVZ running training.

Apart from playing the cello, swimming and road cycling, running is Wood's favourite leisure activity. What she likes best is to take the train to the mountains, leave her laptop in a locker at the station and go for a run. Since she became a mother in July, she also takes her small daughter along in a baby jogger to explore the hiking trails of the Zurich Oberland, where she has now settled with her husband and is currently preparing for her Swiss citizenship test.

First female professor at D-ITET

Vanessa Wood's first contact with the business world was when her doctorate in electrical engineering at MIT created a spin-off, since acquired by Samsung. Shortly after completing her PhD, she became the first female assistant professor appointed at the Department of Information Technology and Electrical Engineering at ETH Zurich, at the young age of 27. "I was really excited when I came to my job interview," she recalls. "The opportunities to build up a research group here and the proximity to large-scale research facilities at the Paul Scherrer Institute are unique worldwide."

Vanessa Wood will take up her duties on the ETH Executive Board and continue on with research. No one in her research group doubts she is capable of mastering both roles. "Vanessa has poured all her energy over the past two years into her role as group leader and also department head," Jens Poulsen says. The fact that she manages to do so many things so well at the same time is due to her composure and her talent for prioritising. Micromanagement is not her style. However, these qualities can sometimes mean you have to wait a little longer for her answers – but that's easy to forgive, as she herself is a forgiving person, says Poulsen with a smile.

Focus on knowledge transfer and promotion of young people

In her function as vice president, Wood would like to further intensify ETH Zurich's partnerships with industry and make them even easier to manage. "I want to find new ways to facilitate the exchange between industry and ETH members as well as promote flexible models for ETH spin-offs, thus strengthening innovation at ETH and in companies alike and supporting economic development," she says.

It has always been extremely important to Wood that her own research results provide some societal benefit. That's why one pillar of her research is on lithium ion battery technology. The results from her research have gone into three spin-offs, and the work of her research group has led to the creation of two other spin-offs. In addition, she has set up numerous partnerships with industry players, including BASF. Wood has already won several awards for her strong commitment to knowledge transfer.

Additionally, since joining ETH she has been involved in various initiatives to encourage more women into natural sciences and support them in their career path. The new vice president also wants to use her position to foster a supportive and inclusive environment and hopefully set an example for young people both as role model and mentor. Just as her former physics teacher once did for her. ■

A turbulent year

The coronavirus has flipped ETH Zurich's working and teaching life on its head. Before the second wave hit, we asked ETH members how this extraordinary year has been for them and what they hope will come out of it.

Editing and photos Omar Zeroual, Angelika Bühler

"I've realised that seeing people face to face is crucial, particularly in these difficult times. I hope we can learn from this crisis to appreciate all the social contacts that are keeping us alive."

Mariasole Agazzi, Bachelor's student in interdisciplinary sciences

"I'm from Korea and I have not been home since I came here one and a half years ago. That is quite a long time. So I want to go back there soon to visit my family. I'm looking forward to seeing them."

Jungwon Lim, Master's student in physics

“The technical side of switching to remote teaching went smoothly, but for me, education is all about personal interactions. I miss seeing students’ reactions and find it difficult to convey enthusiasm for a subject online. So I hope that we can have more interaction again soon.”

Christoph Grab, Professor of Particle Physics and Astrophysics, D-PHYS

“It’s amazing to see the effort that everyone is putting in to help us deal with this difficult situation. The students are even more dedicated and the assistants are putting in extra hours. Everyone is pulling together despite the difficult circumstances, and that’s wonderful.”

Meike Akveld, lecturer in mathematics, D-MATH

“This year I’ve learned that working from home is a good thing. Especially during lockdown, I was able focus more on my work and reflect more on what I was doing. Looking towards next year, I hope that the pandemic will be over. I was supposed to get married this year but we had to cancel it. I hope we can do it next summer.”

Sylvain Petitgirard, senior assistant, D-ERDW

You can read about more ETH members’ experiences online:
www.ethz.ch/a-turbulent-year →

These photos were taken before masks were made compulsory at all ETH Zurich sites.

The lessons we should take into the new year

Text Joël Mesot **Photo** Markus Bertschi

What a year it's been. On my first day of the year at ETH, I was looking back on a turbulent 2019 with the faint hope that 2020 might be a little calmer. It just goes to show that you shouldn't make predictions, especially about the future – to borrow the words of German humorist Wilhelm Busch. We're now drawing towards the close of a year that has marked a huge turning point for all of us – here at ETH, in Switzerland and throughout the wider world. A year that has pulled the rug out from under many of us, led some of us to achieve amazing things, and demanded a great deal from all of us.

Looking back on the first wave of the pandemic and the lockdown that started in mid-March, it's clear that we have an excellent capacity for responding quickly, improvising and adapting. We managed to switch our teaching to digital formats practically overnight and were even able to conduct exams fairly in spite of the difficult circumstances. We refocused our research efforts around the coronavirus, and our administration team kept ETH running largely as normal from their home offices.

Joël Mesot, President of ETH Zurich

Back to square one?

In my article back in the spring, I talked about "togETHerness" – those genuine qualities of helpfulness and professionalism that I have observed among our staff and students. I want to take this opportunity to extend my sincere thanks once again to all those whose patience and persistence have helped us make it through the crisis largely unscathed over recent months.

The summer gave us a bit of time to breathe – but now we're experiencing a second wave of the pandemic. So does that mean we're back to square one? I don't see it that way. We have learned from the experiences we gained in the spring, we know where our strengths lie in a crisis, and we are aware of the areas that we still need to improve. I believe that three qualities – awareness, agility and endurance – will get us through the winter and keep us focused on a future beyond the coronavirus.

Awareness, agility and endurance

I'm using the term "awareness" here in the sense that we need to be aware of what the people closest to us are feeling, whether they're our friends and family or our ETH colleagues. The restrictions that we are having to place on our social interactions can be a challenge, especially during this period when we are spending so much time indoors. If you or your colleagues are starting to find it all too much, don't be afraid to ask for help and talk about things. The best way for us to make it through this challenging period is to keep supporting each other and giving help to those who need it.

Agility, meanwhile, is a principle that we need to apply to our minds so that we can adapt to such a rapidly changing health crisis. We have to keep reassessing and finding our own equilibrium, like a gymnast on a balance beam. Maintaining this kind of agility requires a healthy mental balance, so it's vital that we look after ourselves.

That leads me to endurance, the third of the qualities I referred to. Even when the pandemic first broke out, it was clear that we were in for a marathon, not a sprint. We still don't know exactly when we'll have a vaccine to combat SARS-CoV-2 – so for now, we have to get used to the thought that the virus might be with us for some time to come. We need to pace ourselves and draw from a well of confidence that comes with knowing that every long-distance effort has to end at some point.

Being productive in a crisis

Let's use this health crisis productively and feed it into rETHink, our organisational development project. We now have dozens of groups actively discussing key aspects of what makes up ETH's identity, and what values and tools we should use to make our university fit for the future. I would encourage you to get involved in this debate.

2020 has been hard on all of us, but it has also shown us what we're capable of when we have to overcome a challenge together. We need to carry this community spirit – this togETHerness – into 2021 and keep embodying it. That's something we can all get involved in – and it'll make 2021 a good year, come what may. ■

The Croatian team Maker Hand won the Powered Arm Prosthesis Race with its 3D-printed prosthesis, whose open-source technology allows it to be recreated by anyone. →

Following gold medals in the 2016 and 2019 Series in Japan, Florian Hauser went on to another Cybathlon victory with team HSR enhanced. ↓

Cybathlon / Alessandro Della Bella


Marko Ercegovic

51 teams, 20 countries and a lot of emotion

Editing Corina Oertli, Karin Köchle

Four years after its world premiere, the Cybathlon enjoyed its second outing in mid-November. Working in six disciplines, the teams used state-of-the-art assistance systems to find solutions for everyday tasks. Although the pandemic meant that the races had to take place with social distancing and staggered timings, the event was still packed with thrills and emotional victories.

www.cybathlon.ethz.ch/en →


Cybathlon / Alessandro Della Bella

← Circleg began life in 2018 as a project conducted by students at Zurich University of the Arts. The prize-winning start-up, which manufactures leg prostheses using recycled plastic waste, took a top prize at the Cybathlon 2020.

In the Functional Electrical Stimulation Bike Race (FES), US entrant Mark Muhn from the Cleveland team was the only one to power the pedals using implanted electrodes rather than stimulation on ↓ the skin's surface.

Cybathlon / Alessandro Della Bella

The Cybathlon 2020 Global Edition was staged as a live event that was produced by the Arch_Tec_Lab on the Hönggerberg campus and featured live presenting and commentating. →


Cybathlon / Cleveland

Barrier-free at ETH: open access and open arms

Over the coming years, a range of teams will be pulling together on 14 individual sub-projects in pursuit of a common goal: making working life and the student experience at ETH entirely barrier-free.

Text Giulia Adagazza **Illustration** Philip Bürli

The first step on the path towards creating a barrier-free university was paved with numbers – lots of numbers – gathered with tape measures, with protractors and by asking a carefully crafted list of questions. Since 2019, the core team assigned to the Barrier-free at ETH Zurich project has been examining building after building with the input of assistants from the student body and a variety of departments. They have been comparing each structure with SIA 500, the Swiss standard that dictates the minimum requirements for barrier-free construction. "Gathering information about barrier-free access in the 41 teaching and research buildings at ETH was a mammoth task," says Romila Storjohann, who is managing the implementation programme that forms the next step in the initiative. She and Horst Weltner make up the core team of the overarching project, which is being governed by Infrastructure, one of the Executive Board domains. The two-year analysis stage involved more than just taking measurements, however: some 13 surveys were also sent out to identify areas that needed action online, in the canteens and in teaching areas. This process concluded by achieving the project's first major objective: devising a master plan for ensuring that people with physical disabilities and particular needs will have the fullest possible access to ETH buildings and services in the future.

Diverse teams to suit diverse projects

In October 2020, the Executive Board gave the green light for putting the master plan into action. Now, the coming years will see a whole package of measures being put in place as part of 14 sub-projects falling into three categories: construction, technology and institutional approach. The diverse make-up of the teams reflects the nature of the projects, with ETH members and external specialists getting involved alongside various organisational units. This is something that Storjohann welcomes: "Getting insights from people who actually have to deal with barriers in their day-to-day lives is so valuable to the project," she says. Indeed, it was only by talking to people with mobility, hearing and visual impairments that she realised just how quickly a barrier can develop if a stair handrail is too short, a corridor doesn't have contrasting colours or a room isn't set up with audio equipment.

Breaking down the barriers of anxiety

The project is also considering what really makes a university inclusive. Storjohann and Weltner believe that putting structural and technology-based measures in place is just as vital as establishing a welcoming culture: "An institution might welcome me with open arms, but that's not really much use to me if I can't get up the stairs. Conversely, there's not much point in just having a ramp in place and not actually making me feel welcome."

In the course of next year, a dedicated sub-project will be considering the kind of culture that ETH wants to install, also gaining input from the culture development workstream that forms part of the rETHink project. "What we need to do now is get all the stakeholder departments and ETH groups round the table to discuss how we get our message across to as many ETH members as possible, and break down any prejudices or anxieties they might have," says Storjohann, before adding: "The Executive Board is united in its support for the implementation programme, so that lends extra weight to what we're doing." ETH President Joël Mesot affirms this view: "Our university needs to reflect the diversity that we experience in society as

> "Gathering information about barrier-free access in the 41 teaching and research buildings at ETH was a mammoth task."
>
> **Romila Storjohann, implementation programme manager**

a whole. I'm really looking forward to seeing the more accessible, more diverse place that ETH will be when the master plan is executed."

Design for all, not custom requirements

In future, ETH members involved in adapting existing buildings, creating barrier-free teaching tools or planning courses will be focusing their efforts on the principle of design for all. "We want to move away from the idea of custom solutions and instead start from a perspective that asks what will benefit everyone," says Horst Weltner. One example of this in practice is installing ramps rather than adding stair lifts to flights of stairs. Another is lecturers ensuring their presentations have a transparent structure and are delivered in a clear manner of speaking that not only reaches everyone listening more effectively, but also makes it easier for people with hearing impairments to lip-read. "Dealing with the technology and structural aspects is one thing, but raising people's awareness of the subject is quite another," says Storjohann. With this in mind, the project is now considering ways of establishing an open, inclusive environment through training, checklists and workshops.

A university for all in 15 years

The Real Estate Management department is weighing up the best point for ETH construction teams to start work in mid-2021, bearing in mind the renovation projects that are already in the pipeline. As the programme will take several years to bring to fruition, a task force has been set up for putting ad hoc measures in place, ensuring that adaptations can be introduced if and when the need arises over this time. Now that the starting pistol has been fired, Storjohann and the team are facing their next major challenge: swinging the measures into action and encouraging the entire ETH body to engage with the concepts of barrier-free access and inclusivity. ■

www.ethz.ch/barrier-free →

Omar Kassab
Sustainability project manager,
Office of the President

Inspired by justice

Text Leo Herrmann **Photo** Florian Bachmann

"Sustainability is closely intertwined with justice," believes Omar Kassab. In his role at ETH Sustainability, which he has held since 2012, the political scientist's responsibilities have included compiling the Sustainability Report. In 2018, the publication received the Swiss Ethics Award, something that Kassab viewed as both an honour and a testament to the work being done at ETH: "The report highlights the dedication shown by ETH members whose efforts wouldn't otherwise be recognised. They are absolutely vital to our success."

Kassab was interested in universities' social responsibility even back when he was working towards his doctorate at ETH. "ETH has huge leverage, so its alumni often end up in important professional roles. If you can send them out into the world with not only subject expertise, but also sustainable development principles, that makes a huge difference," he says with conviction.

It is this idea of making a difference that drives him above all else. A native of Darmstadt, Germany, with parents who came to the country from Syria in the 1970s, he moved to Zurich when he decided to take up a Master's degree at ETH. His origin story, and positions he has held in places including Nepal and Jerusalem, have led him to focus on injustice around the world. In 2014, he worked together with his brother and friends to set up the Syrian Refugee Crisis organisation, which has since been funding a Jordan-based therapy centre that takes in Syrian children experiencing trauma from war. "I want to use my privilege to help those who haven't had the same benefits," he says.

Always on the go, Kassab finds it difficult to switch off. To combat this, he often retreats to the forest in the area of Küsnacht, where he lives with his wife, or to the aki garden under the Polyterrasse when he's at ETH. Trips to the mountains also give him the sense of tranquility he needs to be inspired by new ideas – like the ETH taster semester for refugees, an initiative he was heavily involved in. "If you combine ETH's culture of empowerment with its humanitarian traditions, you really can move mountains," he says with a smile. ■

Should German neutralise its genders?

For

Franziska Schmid
Head of Media Relations

In today's gender-aware environment, the German language uses the ending **Innen* to denote that a noun could be referring to males or females: the word *Studenten,* for example, technically only refers to male students, but including **Innen* adds the female form too. This approach has been the subject of much debate – but why? Mainly because the asterisk makes us stop and think. Language and thought have always influenced each other, and claiming that a masculine plural word like *Studenten* naturally includes women goes against the body of research clearly showing the opposite. Children draw *Wissenschaftler* – the supposedly neutral word for "scientists" – as men, not women.

Studying German at university, I spent a lot of time grappling with language and thought – but I have to admit that I never paid much attention to gender-neutral language. When Sarah Springman became Rector of ETH Zurich, she introduced a gender-neutral language requirement for Corporate Communications – reminding us that this was our duty as federal employees. I'm immensely grateful that she did this: I have since written hundreds of texts incorporating this principle, and the process has made me much more aware of what is at stake. Gender neutrality isn't just a matter of style – it has a direct impact on how we see the world.

I love the clarity of the German language, its unambiguous distinctions. But this clarity also poses a problem: it applies a binary approach to people that favours the masculine. Detractors often argue that the language has always been that way – changing it would be ungrammatical. However, this ignores the fact that language is both standardised and living at the same time: in other words, we need rules but we also have the right to change them. Unfortunately, no single solution to this problem will make everyone happy. Some don't want anything to do with gender-neutral approaches and some want to throw out the rule book altogether, but these extremes say more about their proponents than the language.

I would urge everyone to be part of the solution. Use gender-neutral language wherever you can. This could mean experimenting a little, swapping between feminine and masculine forms. Let your texts show that you're engaging with the question of gender – however you do it, and however consistently. Even if your readers find your approach bemusing from time to time, they'll stick with you. You'll gain a greater awareness of gender issues – and you won't be betraying the rules as much as you might think.

Against

Rudolf Friederich
IT Service Desk

Illustrations: Kornel Stadler

My dear readers – or should I say, *liebe Leser* – imagine revisiting classic works of German literature and finding that they've been made gender-neutral using the asterisk *(Bürger*Innen),* the capitalised I *(MitarbeiterInnen)* or even the underscore *(Student_innen).* Think about a Thomas Mann novel, with its intricate sentences: not only would it be grammatically incorrect, it would also produce something unreadable, with none of the original flow.

Applying gender neutrality ignores the fact that grammatical genders have nothing to do with biological sex. *Der Mann* ("the man") and *der Knabe* ("the boy") take the masculine article and refer to biological males; *die Frau* ("the woman") takes the feminine article and refers to a biological female; and *das Mädchen* ("the girl") takes the neutral article – and refers to an object? Of course not.

Those in favour of gender neutrality argue that language shapes our perceptions, so we need to rid German of its patriarchal remnants. Their intentions might be good, but they get one crucial thing back to front: our perceptions inform how we use language. No society has ever undergone change as a result of artificial tinkering with its language.

Der Schriftsteller ("the writer" with the masculine article) probably used to conjure up the image of a man, but that is because it was also said to be a job for a man. In fact, the word *Schriftsteller* is intended to refer to a trade and all its members, whether they're men or women.

Another method of applying gender neutrality but avoiding insertions like the asterisk is to change the noun form into *die Studierenden* or *die Mitarbeitenden* (literally "the studying ones" or "the working ones"), for example. This is grammatically incorrect, however, as it indicates that the people have their heads in books or are sitting at desks at the moment you are describing them. They are still "students" and "employees" in their free time, so why not stick with simply *Studenten* and *Mitarbeiter?*

Gender neutrality also loses points for inconsistency: there is no consensus about how to apply it, when and to what. Why do we use *Bürger*innen* ("the citizens"), for example, but never *Straftäter*innen* ("the criminals") – only the masculine form *Straftäter?* And you're telling me that's not discrimination?

Clearly language changes over time: nobody who speaks German these days uses the language of Goethe. But language changes to simplify things, not complicate them. Indeed, readability is a vital part of what encourages us to read – and reading is what helps us form our opinions. And because women now have just as much right to read what they like as men do, to the women reading this article, I hope you felt included in my address of *liebe Leser* – as you should! ■

What do you think about gender-neutral language? Have your say on "Internal news": www.ethz.ch/gender-sensitive-language →

An ETH Christmas story

It's late one Advent evening, and a doctoral student is sitting at her desk at the Institute of Technology in Architecture (ITA). In front of her are a laptop, notes, sketches, tools – and a small inflatable Christmas tree. There's also a robot watching over the scene …

That's the start of ETH Zurich's touching festive message. And how does the story end? With a concrete Christmas tree measuring three metres tall – designed by ETH researchers and printed by a construction robot. (Photo: Christoph Küenzi)

Watch the Christmas story video: **www.ethz.ch/2021-en →**