

Life

Fostering a common understanding of our university

How we can improve collaboration between the professorships, academic departments and ETH Executive Board.

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What impact has the rETHink project had so far?

Nine ETH members involved in rETHink talk about their experiences in the project.

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The Department Coordinator talks about why her own children are great examples of successful people.

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ETH zürich



PORTRAIT



“As a professor your work is never done”

Nina Buchmann likes to get actively involved. She is passionately committed as a researcher and lecturer, and just as deeply dedicated to ETH Zurich as an institution.

Even as a doctoral student she wanted to become a professor. Nina Buchmann has now been with ETH for 20 years. As Professor of Grassland Sciences, her main research topics are the carbon and nitrogen dynamics of ecosystems. Born in Heidelberg (Germany), she has long been a leading light in her field. Nina Buchmann is a Fellow of the American Geophysical Union (AGU) and has twice received the distinction “Highly Cited Researcher”. From 2012 to 2021 she served first as Deputy Head and then for four years as Head of the Department of Environmental Systems Science (D-USYS). The 57-year-old likes to get involved, which is why she played an active role in the rETHink project. She was also attracted by the opportunity of viewing ETH from different perspectives and assisting with its further development.

Professorships under the spotlight

What should a professorship at ETH involve in future? This was the key question tackled by Workstream 2, led by Nina Buchmann and emeritus biology professor Markus Aebi. Despite her many years as a professor, she was confronted repeatedly with numerous surprises. She was unaware, for example, that assistant professors not only consider research and teaching to be important tasks but also outreach and knowledge transfer. What’s more, they are also equally involved in university self-government or in external bodies – but are generally less deeply engaged than their colleagues on fixed-term contracts. She also found it very motivating that the desire to make ETH fit for

the future was evident across all university groups. “The collective willpower is incredibly strong,” says Buchmann, and that makes her feel proud of “her ETH”.

Taking a break to recharge batteries

Pausing for reflection is important – not only for the university but also for Nina Buchmann herself. “I regularly take a step back and ask myself: Am I still doing the right thing?”, explains the very busy researcher. “As a professor your work is never done. You always have a manuscript lying around somewhere that you need to work on, or an email to reply to.” That’s exactly why she says it’s so important to take a break: chill out, make time for the family or some sport, or simply do nothing for a change – just listen to the birds sing.

Buchmann’s main form of relaxation is travelling with her family. Even while she was head of department, she took advantage of the summer breaks to take extended family holidays with her daughter, who at the time was still at school. Her dream destination is Australia. She would have liked to have spent her 2021 sabbatical there, but this was not possible due to the pandemic. She had to change her plans at short notice, first spending two months at the University of Lund in Sweden, followed by six weeks in Granada.

Research group is her extended family

For Nina Buchmann, her research group numbering almost 25 members is like an extended family. The bonding between team members is tangible, particularly on special occasions such as Christmas parties, which are usually celebrated with family members. “Nina definitely makes the group a high priority,” says Anna K. Gilgen, her management and research assistant. “As an ambitious leader and quick thinker, she demands

quite a lot of her team, but always takes time to deal with our problems.” This informal exchange deepens the already strong team spirit.

Flexibility to adjust priorities

Of course there have been some setbacks in Nina Buchmann’s life. Last year the death of a team member forced her to reorganise the research group and adjust her priorities. She calls it “adaptive priority setting”. At the level of the university as a whole, she found COVID-19 to have been an enormous stress test, as she did the exclusion of Switzerland from the Horizon Europe research programme.

“Being a professor at ETH can be challenging, but it is also very satisfying and great fun,” she summarises. This gives her energy and drive. “Life is too short for bad research, bad collaboration and bad coffee,” she says with a grin, and hurries off to her next lecture.

