

## Press release

ETH improves control mechanisms

# Administrative investigation concluded

Zurich, 17.12.2019

The administrative investigation into allegations in the Department of Biosystems Science and Engineering has shown that no laws were broken, although pressure was exerted on some doctoral students through employment contracts and there were errors in how some employment contracts were drawn up. ETH has taken appropriate measures and is strengthening internal controls. The department and the professor involved are working to improve the supervision of doctoral students.

The [administrative investigation](#) opened on 17 July 2018 in the Department of Biosystems Science and Engineering (D-BSSE) is now concluded. The investigation was launched in response to a poll by the Academic Association of Scientific Staff at ETH Zurich (AVETH), and allegations made by doctoral students of poor management and support. The independent external investigators concluded that no legal provisions have been violated, but that employment contracts have in some cases been used as a means of exerting pressure.

### **Professor expresses regret and takes measures to improve the situation**

The professor regrets that doctoral students have felt they were under pressure and is making every effort to improve the situation in future. A mutual agreement has been reached which includes some coaching and a series of other measures. The Executive Board and department management expect all supervisors and employees to treat each other in a supportive and respectful manner.

### **D-BSSE improves the supervision of doctoral students**

The investigation report confirms that the Department of Biosystems Science and Engineering's response has been swift and appropriate. As early as the summer of 2018, just a few weeks after they learned of the allegations, the D-BSSE professors decided to implement additional measures to improve supervision arrangements. These measures were drawn up in consultation with the doctoral

students themselves. Since then, all doctoral students are supported by a panel of experts who are regularly involved and include at least one external specialist.

### **Implementation of an early warning system**

The administrative investigation has also shown that the controls by the Human Resources department were not always effective. In future, the HR department and the Rectorate will regularly monitor indicators across ETH, such as the dropout rate for doctoral students, contracted working hours, term of contract and salary level, and intervene immediately on the first warning signs. To reduce doctoral students' dependence on professors, the ETH Executive Board will ensure that contracts are designed so that it is impossible to use the terms of employment contracts to put pressure on doctoral students.

### **Strengthening the quality of leadership**

In March 2019 the Executive Board also passed a comprehensive package of measures to improve the university's leadership and supervision structure. By 2020 all ETH doctoral students will have multiple supervision. D-BSSE already took this step in the summer of 2018. In addition, the Ordinance on Doctoral Studies is currently being revised, so as to further improve the overall conditions for doctoral studies. On top of that, the university will in future give an even higher priority to its leadership culture and personnel development. In June 2019 the ETH Executive Board therefore decided to create a [new Executive Board domain](#) with direct responsibility for personnel development.

### **Further information**

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