

Women on the playing field

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Columnist Ursula Keller calls our attention to a very important day. On 8 May, members of the ETH community will cast their votes for a new Rector, selecting from a diverse pool of candidates.



In the coming months, the ETH professors will have the chance to vote for the next Rector. (Picture: iStockphoto.com)

In my first column, I wrote about my personal experience as a female professor at ETH Zurich. Today, with the help of my colleague Prof. Janet Hering (WPF Vice President), I would like to comment on a topic that is particularly timely, namely the election of the next ETH Rector. In 2007, Prof. Heidi Wunderli-Allenspach made ETH history when she was elected as the first female Rector. During her 5-year tenure in this position, Wunderli-Allenspach fulfilled her responsibilities with a high degree of professionalism and was an excellent spokesperson for ETH in various public forums. Her presence on stage at the annual ETH Day signaled to all present – from students receiving prizes to members of the Federal Council – that women can be effective academic leaders. The position of Rector is central to the ETH mission and one that carries many responsibilities. Wunderli-Allenspach, her successor Prof. Lino Guzella and their predecessors have performed a great service to ETH Zurich in their role as Rector. Their service has benefited not only ETH students but also their faculty colleagues and a wider circle of stakeholders including the future employers of ETH students.

In the coming months, the ETH professors will have the chance to vote for the next Rector. This is not an opportunity to be taken lightly – ETH Zurich is one of the few academic institutions where faculty members can actively give this level of input during the process of selecting the Rector. It is very important for the success of the institution that professorial colleagues are willing to step forward and stand behind this election. Even the nomination process is quite time-intensive and demanding, and this is only a shadow of the responsibilities that await the successful candidate. It is a sign of ETH's strength as an institution and the dedication of the ETH faculty that four of our colleagues have been nominated for this position.

The candidate pool is notable both for its strength and for its diversity. It is comprised of two engineers, one natural scientist and one social scientist. Two are Swiss citizens by birth, one is a naturalized citizen and one is a permanent resident. And there are two women and two men. Most importantly, all have had outstanding academic careers and many years of experience in research and teaching at ETH. Clearly, each candidate would bring different experiences and his or her own particular strengths to the position of Rector, but all four are well qualified for the position.

We may ask what it means to be well qualified for this role and, indeed, what it means to be the Rector. As Head of the Rectorate, a major organization in its own right, the Rector must have strong leadership and management skills and a deep commitment to education. As a member of

the ETH Board, the Rector should have a breadth of experience, the willingness to debate issues intensively with his or her colleagues and a strong interest in the future success of the ETH as an institution within the ETH Domain. The Rector is also a representative and spokesperson for ETH within Switzerland as well as for Swiss research and education internationally. In this capacity, he or she needs experience in the public sphere and the willingness to engage actively on behalf of ETH and of Swiss academics.

Clearly the election of the Rector is a topic of great importance to all ETH professors, male and female. But why are we, as WPF representatives, taking a special interest in this process? In my first column, "Time to try harder", I pointed out some real problems female faculty face, problems that are unfortunately quite persistent. But it is also necessary and appropriate to highlight progress – we are very proud that two of the four candidates contending for the Rector's position are women. As WPF members and as members of the ETH community, we urge all our colleagues to engage in discussion and debate with the Rector candidates and to cast their votes on 8 May.



About the Author

Ursula Keller was born 1959 in Zug. She has been a physics professor at ETH since 1993, and director of the NCCR MUST since 2010. She obtained her Masters at ETH Zurich in 1984, and her Ph.D. at Stanford University in 1989, and before returning to ETH she worked as an independent researcher at AT&T Bell Laboratories. Her current research group explores ultrafast science and laser technology, using this competitive know-how to understand and control fundamental charge and energy transport with atomic spatial and attosecond temporal resolution. Ursula has received several international prizes, as well as a European Research Council (ERC) Advanced Grant. She currently serves as the president of the ETH Women Professors Forum ([ETH WPF](#)).