

Press release

Long-term partnership with the Dieter Schwarz Foundation

ETH Zurich receives major donation and plans teaching and research centre in Germany

Zurich, 8 December 2023

ETH Zurich and the Dieter Schwarz Foundation have signed a far-reaching letter of intent to establish a new teaching and research centre for responsible digital transformation with a global reach. Thanks to the foundation's donations, around 20 new professorships are to be created over the next 30 years in Zurich and on the foundation's teaching campus in Heilbronn.

Climate change, geopolitical instability, energy crises, supply chain disruptions, cyberattacks, the rapidly changing world of work: our society faces numerous global challenges. "One of the keys to solving them lies in digital transformation. Society needs to muster all its strength – especially science and universities, which have a special responsibility to play their part," says ETH President Joël Mesot, explaining the university's motivation behind establishing the new teaching and research centre.

Some 20 new professorships over the next 30 years

To help shape the digital transformation in a responsible manner, the not-for-profit Dieter Schwarz Foundation and ETH Zurich have today signed a far-reaching letter of intent. Over the next 30 years, around 20 professorships are to be gradually established with grants from the foundation.

President Mesot is delighted: "This partnership with the Dieter Schwarz Foundation allows ETH Zurich to further develop its research and teaching, particularly in the field of artificial intelligence, to an extent that would not be possible with regular ETH funding and structures." At the same time, this is the start of a collaboration with Europe-wide significance. The additional professorships will enable ETH Zurich to expand strongly in the strategic field of digital transformation and data science.

Gradual expansion in Zurich and Heilbronn

As a concrete first step, two new professorships in the field of computer science and data science will be established in Zurich, and the Zurich Information Security and Privacy Center (ZISC) will be further developed. In addition, an endowment fund will be created at the ETH Foundation, which will serve to establish the partnership over the long term and make infrastructure investments in Zurich.

More than half of the other professorships are to be located on the teaching campus, an educational facility that the Dieter Schwarz Foundation has established in Heilbronn, Germany. ETH Zurich plans to open a new teaching and research centre there, its second branch abroad.

Benefits for Germany, Switzerland and Zurich

“This donation is a win-win situation for both Germany and Switzerland, and it strengthens the traditionally close research cooperation between the two countries,” Mesot says. In Heilbronn, ETH Zurich will be helping to establish an international research and teaching hub in the field of digitalisation and artificial intelligence. Not only will the site be home to research, it will also develop new courses – from continuing education programmes to degree courses. In return, a large proportion of the funding will flow directly into research, teaching and infrastructure in Zurich. The ETH researchers based in Germany will teach in Heilbronn as well as in Zurich. Close collaboration between the two locations is also planned at the research level. “Joint research and jointly generated knowledge will benefit Switzerland, Germany, Europe and ultimately the whole world,” Mesot says.

Networking with top international universities

The focus is on topics such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, bioinformatics and the circular economy. “International collaboration is needed more than ever in these areas,” Mesot says. It is precisely this kind of networking that the teaching campus in Heilbronn aims to foster. ETH Zurich can benefit from its positive experience in Singapore, where it has been operating a research centre close to the world’s leading universities since 2010.

“We’re delighted that, following the renowned Technical University of Munich, ETH Zurich will now be strengthening the ecosystem in Heilbronn as another top international university. We need an alliance of the best scientific forces,” says Reinhold Geilsdörfer, Managing Director of the Dieter Schwarz Foundation.

The Dieter Schwarz Foundation is working on attracting further professors from other premier universities to collaborate on the campus in Heilbronn. Both the Technical University of Munich (TUM) and the Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft are present with their own branches. The Dieter Schwarz Foundation also maintains strategic partnerships with the University of Oxford, Stanford University, HEC Paris, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Nanyang Technological University Singapore.

Planning the ETH centre in Germany

In the months ahead, ETH will determine in-house how its centre in Heilbronn will be organised in concrete terms, what research and teaching priorities ETH Zurich will set there and what form collaboration between Zurich and Heilbronn will take. If everything goes according to plan, the Dieter Schwarz Foundation and ETH Zurich will sign another contract next year, which will allow the appointment of the first five professorships for the teaching campus in Heilbronn.

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