

Press release

There is no alternative to full association

Brussels, 1 October 2015: *Scientific Switzerland needs unrestricted access to the best brains, and therefore full association to the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, Horizon 2020. This was pointed out during a media session in Brussels by the Presidents of ETH Zurich and EPF Lausanne, following discussions with EU representatives.*

“Switzerland is ranked among the most innovative countries in the world. International committees certify this fact year after year. It would be detrimental for all if Swiss universities were prevented from participating in this European research competition,” Lino Guzzella, President of ETH Zurich, tells media representatives in Brussels. His counterpart at EPF Lausanne, Patrick Aebischer, confirmed the concerns of the two leading technical universities: “After the adoption of the Initiative Against Mass Immigration, science as a whole was the first to suffer the consequences and we must fear that we will also be the first ones having to deal with the negative repercussions if no binding solution for the Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons can be found by the end of 2016.”

Together with their Vice Presidents of Research, both Presidents met in Brussels with various high-ranking EU representatives for talks. Among these discussions were bilateral meetings with Jean-Pierre Bourguignon, President of the European Research Council ERC; with Robert-Jan Smits, Director-General for Research and Innovation; and with two European Commissioners, Carlos Moedas and Tibor Navracscics. Moedas is appointed to the portfolio of Research, Science and Innovation; Navracscics is the European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport. The talks with the EU representatives indicated that fundamentally, there is a mutual understanding on both sides that Switzerland has to be a full-fledged member of the European Education, Research and Innovation Area.

Important access to the talent pool

Aebischer and Guzzella emphasised the urgency to convert Switzerland’s currently provisional status into a full association, as it is only with an equal participation in the European Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation that the latent uncertainty among scientists may be allayed. During the Seventh Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development (FP7, 2007–2013), Switzerland ranked in 5th place in absolute terms regarding ERC Grants. No other European country has been able to raise more competitive subsidies per capita than Switzerland. “Openness and unrestricted access to the talent pool have been key factors for the success of Swiss universities in the past,” according to Aebischer.

At the same time, a full association of Switzerland would also benefit Europe in continuing the close scientific relations with Switzerland, some of which have existed for decades. Examples include research organizations such as the European Space Agency (ESA), the European Southern Observatory (ESO), or the CERN, which has been a scientific home to many European researchers for years. For a long time now, Switzerland has been very well-integrated into European research; a sideline position within Horizon 2020 would most probably have negative consequences in the long term, affecting all parties involved.

Scientific excellence requires competition

Another evidence of Switzerland's internationality in top-level research is the fact that roughly three-quarters of the total number of ERC Grants at Swiss universities were awarded to non-Swiss researchers. Both ETH Presidents emphasised this during the talks with the EU representatives. Excluding Switzerland from the programmes would prevent many European researchers from pursuing attractive career opportunities at Swiss universities.

According to ETH President Lino Guzzella, there is also an accompanying benefit for Switzerland: "The ERC grants not only provide funding for Swiss universities; more importantly, they enable us to engage confidently in competition. ERC Grants are prestigious and may determine whether young scientific talents decide to join EPF Lausanne or ETH Zurich instead of another top-ranking university." Patrick Aebischer added that an exclusion from the European Programmes would disadvantage both ETH Zurich and EPF Lausanne compared to other countries when it comes to recruiting young professors.

Researchers from Europe and other countries working at both ETH Zurich and EPF Lausanne contribute to a position of scientific strength; at the same time, they boost the Swiss national economy, as many students remain in Switzerland after their master's degree or doctorate as sought-after engineers or natural scientists; some of them even start their own companies.

Contact:

ETH Zurich

Media Relations

Tel.: +41 44 632 41 41

E-Mail: mediarelations@hk.ethz.ch

EPFL

Olivier Küttel, European Affairs

Tél. +41 79 428 29 18

E-Mail : olivier.kuttel@epfl.ch