

## Federal and autonomous: the ETH Domain's model for success

**With its six federally financed institutions and the ETH Board as its strategic management and supervisory body, the ETH Domain is a complex, unique and highly successful system. Historian Urs Hafner has charted the history of the ETH Board and shows how it influences the development of Swiss science and how the ETH Domain became what it is today.**

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In 1855, what is now known as ETH Zurich was founded together with the ETH Board as its School Board. Other institutions were added over the decades – EPFL, PSI, WSL, Empa and Eawag – to form what today is the ETH Domain. The duties of the ETH Board have changed accordingly: It became the strategic management and supervisory body of six institutions, while also representing them in dealings with policy-makers and the Confederation. "The ETH Board is as complex as it is paradoxical, being embedded in and permeated by Switzerland's finely balanced federal structure. The same is true of the ETH Domain", writes historian and journalist Urs Hafner in *"Den Zufall steuern – Vom Schulrat zum ETH-Rat"* (Guiding chance – From the "School Board" to the ETH Board).

This ETH Domain system is also highly successful: "Autonomy plays a central role here", says Michael Hengartner, President of the ETH Board. The ETH Board handles its business independently within the framework of the law, while representing the ETH Domain vis-à-vis policy-makers and the Confederation. They approve a four-year budget – a stable financial basis and a fundamental pillar in the institutions' success – and define strategic objectives for the ETH Domain. The two Federal Institutes and the four research institutes are autonomous public law institutions established by the Swiss Confederation and decide for themselves on how to use the funds allocated to them.

### **The ETH Domain at the service of Switzerland**

Hafner describes the collaboration within the ETH Domain as well as with politicians and the Federal Administration as involving constant negotiation on the bounds of responsibilities: "This is exhausting and time-consuming, but prevents the ETH Domain from being kicked around by politicians or overbearing managers. If managers get too far above themselves, the system brings them back down to earth. Changes are made only rarely, after careful consideration and with broad-based agreement. They are the result of exhaustive deliberation."

Of course, not everything has gone smoothly in the more than 160-year history of the ETH Board: It frequently found itself caught in the middle between its institutions and politicians. The highly complex system, which lives by a process of mutual exchange, is *per se* a characteristic feature of today's Swiss Confederation, according to Hengartner. "This route of negotiation may not always be the fastest, but has created remarkable stability. It has not only fostered innovation in the ETH Domain but has also made Switzerland one of the world's most innovative countries." Hengartner believes this should also be exploited for the challenges of the future, such as digitalisation and climate change. "The ETH Domain is at the service of Switzerland, helping it to build these solid foundations for our country's future success."

### **Information**

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The ETH Board is the strategic management and supervisory body of the ETH Domain. The ETH Domain is made up of the two Federal Institutes of Technology, i.e. ETH Zurich and EPFL, as well as the four federal research institutes PSI, WSL, Empa and Eawag. The members of the ETH Board are appointed by the Swiss Federal Council. The ETH Board supervises the development plans of the institutions, is responsible for strategic management accounting and ensures coordination. It draws up the budget and the financial statements of the ETH Domain and coordinates the value maintenance and continued functionality of the properties. It is the authority responsible for appointments and represents the ETH Domain before the federal authorities. A staff assists the ETH Board in the preparation and implementation of its business.