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Measures towards the prevention of unethical and illegal behavior in the Department of Biology

The scientific staff disapproves of the recently uncovered incidents of bullying and misuse of power at the institute for Astrophysics in DPHYS. Our objective is to resolve potential conflict situations in our department and thus prevent similar cases in the future. We appreciate the open discussion with the executive board regarding the current situation in DBIOL. To our knowledge, our department maintains a healthy culture of supervision and interaction between supervisors and their employees. Nevertheless, it is possible that conflicts between members of our department arise in the future. It is in our best interest to recognize and resolve such conflicts at an early stage. Currently, the following contact points are in place, where the scientific staff can turn to in case of need:

AVETH counseling team: Volunteer service offered by the scientific staff that counsels on all possible affairs.

ETH ombudsperson: Responsible for counseling on a diverse set of affairs, mainly concerning ETH-internal processes.

ETH trusted intermediary: Counsels on scientific integrity and good scientific practice.

ETH office for equal opportunities: In case of discrimination and sexual harassment.

ETH human resources: In case of bullying, violations of the working contract and other internal affairs.

DBIOL internal counseling position

All of the contact points mentioned above provide counseling and support. They are confidential and open to ETH employees from all departments. What is missing however, is a contact person on departmental level, being more familiar with our internal organization, regulations and practices. The AMB would appreciate such a counseling position for departmental affairs, allowing problems to be identified faster and solved within the department. We are open to discuss the requirements and formalities regarding this position.

Transparency of contact points

For a fruitful prevention, it is essential to promote the points of contact to the scientific staff and faculty members. We will increase our efforts to inform our members about the counseling options at ETH, in particular with the AVETH welcome packages and at our yearly welcome event for scientific staff. However, we invite the department to take actions and to inform the staff officially about their options to resolve delicate conflict situations. This could be achieved by providing a fact sheet with the respective information. AMB is willing to engage in the development and distribution of such a factsheet.

Annual Appraisal interviews for scientific staff

According to the ETH Personnel Ordinance, supervisors are conducting yearly appraisal interviews with the employees that are paid on a performance-related basis. The ETH also recommends carrying out regular performance assessments for all employees, which includes the scientific staff (doctoral students, postdoctoral researchers and senior scientists). The annual appraisal interviews are an important opportunity for both the staff and the supervisor to evaluate the employee's performance but also to elaborate strategies for personal and career development. In addition, such meetings give a platform to recognize and resolve conflicts on a very early stage. We are aware that these interviews are not consequently held throughout the department. We highly encourage the faculty to take the opportunity and discuss personal performance and development with their employees at least on an annual basis.

Counseling during PhD thesis committee meetings

An important opportunity for PhD students to recognize and resolve conflicts are their PhD committee meetings. These meetings are highly appreciated by the students. They receive scientific input for their project but also advice for their personal development and in conflict situations. The latter is however not always the case as some students are not aware of this opportunity. Others lack the experience to judge, which situations are problematic or do not dare to step forward with their problems. Thus, we would like to foster the non-scientific part of the committee meeting by integrating a set of questions regarding the personal development and general well-being of the student. Some of these questions should be discussed in the absence of the supervisor. The AMB is open to work out these topics, as well as their implementation, in collaboration with the department and the graduate school.

Consequent execution of committee meetings

Most PhD students host their committee meetings on a yearly basis. However, a minority of students in our department does not get the opportunity to meet with their PhD thesis committee or to speak with their committee members in the absence of their direct supervisor. We thus want to remind the faculty to support meetings on a regular basis and to follow the protocol. We highly encourage the graduate school and the PhD programs to perform stricter monitoring on the realization of these meetings. At the same time, they should consequently inform the students as well as the professors when the next meeting is due.

Not all of the PhD students in the department are affiliated with a PhD program. Lacking the support and information of the PhD programs, these students often do not have committee meetings on a regular basis. We appreciate that the department passes down the relevant information for organizing committee meetings to the PhD students along with the reminder for the research proposal.

We treasure the opportunity to raise our suggestions and are open for further discussions on identification and preventive measures in order to improve the working environment at the Department of Biology.

On behalf of the AMB board,



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