

Media communiqué

Duebendorf, St. Gall, Thun, 16th December 2009

Cooperation between Zurich University and Empa bears fruit

Informatics in an Environment and Development Context

On 14th December Lorenz Hilty was appointed Professor of Informatics and Sustainability by the Council of the University of Zurich. The new professorship «ad personam» in the Faculty of Economics, Business Administration and IT has been created as a result of an agreement between the University and Empa to increase cooperation in teaching and research activities. Hilty and his team intend to develop applications in informatics which will contribute to sustainable development, and also to encourage discussion and comment on new technologies in society in general.

As with most new technologies, developments in Informatics and Communications bring not just enormous benefits to society but also carry hidden dangers. Information technology on the one hand enables the creation of greater added value in exploiting our ever-shrinking natural resources. On the other hand, however, the bottom line is that digital hardware causes significant flows of both materials and energy. While informatics technologies allow us to live and work in a spatially and temporally independent manner, they also create a societal dependency on a vulnerable infrastructure. This paradoxical situation is one which Lorenz Hilty, the newly appointed professor at the University of Zurich and head of Empa's "Technology and Society" Laboratory is very familiar. "We can shape and control all these developments because our society is not determined by technology," Hilty is convinced. Together with his co-workers he plans to identify applications and trends in informatics which will contribute to a structural transformation, including production and consumption patterns which will ensure a high quality of life for more people with reduced material and energy requirements.

How Informatics can help achieve sustainable solutions

Masters degree students at Zurich University can now equip themselves in the Department of Informatics with the necessary tools to be able to learn to understand how technical systems are embedded in our social and ecological environments. They will be able to develop their own ideas as to how information technologies can be used to provide benefits to society through sustainable developments. Hilty, who completed his professorial qualifications (habilitation) in the field of informatics, has been lecturing at the university since 2007. From 1st February 2010 he will be responsible for organizing the course modules and supervising doctoral students.

Lorenz Hilty will continue to lead the “Technology and Society” Laboratory at Empa’s St. Gall site. He has many years of experience in research and teaching, and from 1998 to 2005 he held the post of Professor of Informatics at the University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland. In parallel to this from 2000 he headed the research program on “Sustainability in the Information Society” at Empa which in 2004 metamorphosed into the “Technology and Society” Laboratory, which he heads today. After teaching appointments at the Universities of Basel and St. Gall, he gave a course over the Winter Term 2008/9 on «Sustainability and New Media» as Guest Professor at the Institute for Social Ecology at the University of Klagenfurt in Vienna. Hilty also advises the European Commission and the OECD on questions of Informatics and Sustainability. He is a Member of the Board of the Swiss Informatics Society and an Expert Member of the Committee on Ethics and Technology of the Swiss Academy of Engineering Sciences (SATW).

Cooperation between Zurich University and Empa

Hilty’s «ad personam» professorship was created on the basis of an agreement between the University of Zurich and Empa to strengthen cooperation between the two organizations. In 2008 Louis Schlapbach and Hans Weder (Empa’s Director at the time and the then Rector of Zurich University respectively) signed a contract to increase cooperation both in terms of research projects and teaching activities. As a result more Empa researchers hold teaching assignments at Zurich University and many doctoral students at Empa are registered at the University.

«Hilty’s professorship offers a range of opportunities and advantages for both institutions,” says Martin Glinz, Director of the University of Zurich’s Department of Informatics. “With Hilty we have gained an internationally renowned expert in the field of Informatics and Sustainability. This allows us to offer attractive student courses in this area, and additional research in this very promising field will help reinforce the Institute’s already strong position. We also look forward to initiatives leading to more cooperation with other research groups within the Institute and in the Faculty of Economics more generally. In the other direction initiatives, new ideas and results from other research activities at the University of Zurich will bear fruit in the work of the Empa laboratory which Lorenz Hilty also heads.”

Further information

Prof. Lorenz Hilty, Technology and Society Laboratory, Tel. +41 71 274 73 45, lorenz.hilty@empa.ch,

Home page of the Informatics and Sustainability research group: <http://www.ifi.uzh.ch/iands/>

Editor / Media contact

Communication Dept., Tel. +41 44 823 47 33, redaktion@empa.ch