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Passionate, not shy of conflict and very successful

Patrick Aebischer took over the management of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne (EPFL) in 2000 as a change of career. He comes from a modest Fribourg family with an artistic background and has enhanced the stature of the Federal Institute in Lausanne through his tremendous ability and passion.
By Matthias Meili

Federal Council press releases on the reappointment of officials usually make very dry reading. The statement issued on 4 May 2011 was an exception. The first paragraph was extraordinary. Where normally tedious biographical details are listed, Patrick Aebischer was lauded as a charismatic and experienced leader. The second paragraph was no less euphoric: the Federal Council announced that the President of EPFL, the sister institute of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH), had helped the institution to establish an outstanding profile. The reappointment of the long-serving President for a fourth term from 2012 to 2016 was clearly an extremely pleasant formality.

Malicious rumours suggested that the reappointed official had written the press release himself as his appointment happened on the recommendation of the Federal Institute of Technology Board, the supervisory body of the federally owned university with its two branches in Lausanne and Zurich as well as affiliated research organisations. Aebischer sits on this board in an official capacity and is said to be a powerful figure within it. He is extremely familiar with political mechanisms and aware of how important communication is to his strategic objectives, which he always pursues with great determination and using every possible means.

His time as President of EPFL got off to a tumultuous start. Practically Aebischer's first official act after being appointed EPFL President was to refuse to take up his position. The established Lausanne professors had opposed the reorientation of the university because Aebischer wanted to change the entire senior management structure at once. As a trained physician and bioscientist, he wanted to appoint a second expert in medicine to the institute's management board. This was an act of sacrilege but one which encapsulated his vision back then of turning the institute into a centre of

biosciences. Letters of protest went back and forth, and complaints were made to Ruth Dreifuss, the Federal Councillor responsible at the time. But Aebischer's threat paid off. He forced through his conditions and then brought about upheaval in Switzerland's research landscape, firstly in the Lake Geneva region and then throughout the whole of French-speaking Switzerland. The Machiavellian coup earned him the nickname "Bismarck", which his opponents still hiss with anger today when they reflect on his successes.

Vision and assertiveness

Since becoming President of the Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne, Aebischer has turned the previously rather conservative little sister of ETH Zurich into a serious competitor of its historic Zurich-based counterpart. The tools he deployed were internal reform and expansion of the sphere of influence. He streamlined the institute's structures in spite of all the internal opposition he faced. In 2002, he reorganised the 12 departments into five large faculties known as schools. Two new "colleges" were then added. In these large units, researchers work relentlessly on a cross-disciplinary basis in future-oriented research fields, such as life sciences, computer technology, micro-technology, finance and management. He appointed people of his choosing to top management positions but grants them a large degree of autonomy in the management of the faculties.

A source with inside knowledge of the politics of higher education describes Aebischer's strategy as follows: "Retain good people, get rid of poor people and gobble up good institutions." Aebischer has frequently adopted a very adept strategy in the competition to attract the best professors. The high-profile Israeli brain researcher Henry Markram chose Lausanne as the location for his Brain Mind Institute despite receiving offers from leading universities all over the

world. "The director's vision won me over", Markram explains, partly in appreciation and partly in awe. As a former neuroscientist, Aebischer declared the project was one close to his heart. Markram and his colleagues are currently working on the outlandish idea of creating an artificial brain with the help of computer power. Millions of Swiss francs have already been invested. The Federal Institute of Technology Board has declared the project an infrastructural priority, the Federal Council and federal administration have now also been persuaded of its merits, and even the EU might be the next to be won over. Under the title of "Human Brain", Markram and Aebischer have put the concept forward for a billion-euro EU programme, the so-called FET Flagship Initiatives. The decision will be made at the end of the year and, even though insiders do not see "Human Brain" as one of the main favourites, funding approval would not come as a surprise.

Start-up fever

"I would obviously like to see EPFL become one of the best universities in the world", Aebischer remarked at the opening of the Rolex Learning Center two years ago. This is his mantra, which he repeats incessantly. Aebischer loves projects that have public appeal. A good example is the collaboration with Alinghi – the sailing yacht's successes have projected the Lausanne institute's name worldwide. Another example are the space research projects where he always likes to get Claude Nicollier, the only Swiss astronaut, on board. He not only permits but indeed vigorously promotes sponsorship of buildings and infrastructure from the private sector. Patrick Aebischer sees only benefits in this approach: "If companies make a financial contribution, we can spend more of our public funding on research and teaching." Aebischer has brought the business world back into the institute: he personally sits on several



Patrick Aebischer

Boards of Directors and an innovation campus is being built directly adjacent to his institute for companies wishing to benefit from its successful profile. Start-up fever has taken hold in Lausanne.

This get-up-and-go mentality is in Aebischer's blood. "Irish blood", he explains. He is named after Saint Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland. His mother was Irish. She came from a family of teachers who had emigrated from the Irish provinces to impoverished post-war Liverpool. There she met his father, a native of Fribourg, in 1952. He had been an errand boy for a baker in Berne before turning his passion into a career by becoming an artist and glass painter. Aebischer talks about his roots very candidly, full of respect for his origins and full of love for his parents. He does not come from the aristocratic or political elite or the academic bourgeoisie. Aebischer's arrival at the Federal Institute of Technology and in university politics – areas dominated by the elite – was a change of

career for him. He was a successful neuroscientist and one of the first research entrepreneurs but he did not have any pedigree.

A leaning towards philosophers

Someone once wrote that Patrick Aebischer detests ties. The fact is that he grew up as an only child in lower Fribourg, the poor Basse-Ville district. And he takes great pride in that. He loves telling people about the small two-bedroom apartment that his parents lived in. He recalls: "One of those was my father's studio." When asked to, Aebischer can still speak the German-French dialect of the Basse-Ville known as "Bolze". He was one of the first people from

the district to attend university. But getting there was not easy. He initially took poor grades home at grammar school as he was something of a rascal. His mother later sent him to a private school in Geneva. He discovered the philosophers there and with them a thirst for knowledge and passion for education. He went on to graduate from Collège St. Michel without any problems. He later studied medicine in Geneva and continued his career in the USA. This is where he found an environment in which he could really flourish. Performance was all that mattered there, not family background. Aebischer rose to academic prominence, becoming the Director of the Institute for Biomaterials and Artificial Organs at Brown University in Providence.

He returned to Switzerland in 1992 and founded his own company in 1996, a start-up based on the American model. It was one of the first Swiss biotech companies to be financed by venture capital. "Patrick Aebischer is the precursor of the knowledge entrepreneur", said his colleague and

supporter Charles Kleiber. This former Secretary of State for Education and Research recruited him as President of EPFL.

But Aebischer was never just an entrepreneur. He is not motivated by money in itself. His family home offered an atmosphere of ambitious self-education blended with culture and hospitality. "Our house was always full of artists and philosophers. My father was a multitalented artist and my mother enjoyed providing hospitality", he once told the Geneva daily newspaper "Le Temps". He recalled: "She loved people and had an ability to listen." This humanistic legacy continues to shape him today. He reveres painters, artists, thinkers and writers. He has a special interest in "Vienna at the turn of the century", he says, though he has very little time to devote to this.

Criticism despite great success

By the end of his fourth term as President of EPFL in 2016, Patrick Aebischer will have reached the age of 62. He sometimes already allows himself to look back on his life. "I am proud when I see what we have achieved – the vast amount of funding we have attracted, the top publications, thousands of students who want to come here and the awards we have received", he remarks. However, all of this has failed to silence the critics of his directorship in French-speaking Switzerland and even more in German-speaking Switzerland where he is like a red rag to a bull for many representatives of ETH Zurich. He receives particular criticism for his close ties with industry which it is feared could jeopardise the independence of the research. His financial policy is denounced behind closed doors as unsustainable, and detractors claim professorships are being created without securing long-term funding and students enrolled just to boost the statistics. Yet, Aebischer has achieved many of his objectives, though not all of them. His desire to unite ETH Zurich and EPFL under the new title of Swiss Institute of Technology failed in 2009 despite the support of former Federal Councillor Pascal Couchepin. In this respect, ETH Zurich remains Switzerland's flagship.

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