

Another one bites the dust

The hazards of seeking to implement reforms at universities with outstanding reputations have been demonstrated once again, this time in Switzerland.

Switzerland's flagship university, the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in Zurich, is arguably the strongest in mainland Europe. The government already provides one of the highest per-capita expenditures on research in the world, and is set to increase funding by a further 30% over the next five years.

But if nothing seems to be broken, does anything need fixing? Ernst Hafen, the molecular biologist who became president of the ETH last December, thought it did. In his view, major reforms were required in order to safeguard the university's pre-eminence. Unlike most Swiss universities, where deans share decision-making, the ETH president's position is a powerful one and, in theory, Hafen should have been able to have his way.

But the ETH faculty put paid to that, pulling rank after a short but bitter public dispute and securing Hafen's resignation just eleven months in (see page 130). The hostility of the ETH faculty to the man who wanted to restructure it echoes that attracted by Larry Summers at Harvard University two years ago (see *Nature* 433, 190–192; 2005), which culminated in a row over his unfortunate comments on the aptitude of women and his subsequent resignation.

Hafen had been impressed by a previous, successful reorganization five years ago at the other federally funded university in Switzerland, the EFP Lausanne — the remaining universities in Switzerland are funded by their local cantons — and wanted to introduce a more corporate management model at the ETH.

The ETH currently has little hierarchy below the president, and what there is mostly concentrates in the *Schulleitung*, comprising the president, two vice-presidents (responsible for research and infrastructure) and the faculty-elected rector (responsible for teaching). The committee of department heads meets quarterly with the president to exchange information.

Hafen wanted to merge some departments into a less unwieldy

number of schools led by professional deans. More contentiously, he sought to reform the *Schulleitung*, eliminating the rector's position and introducing five vice-presidents, whose arrival might have threatened the clout of senior academics.

University professors are notoriously conservative and jealous of their local powers — especially at elite institutions such as the ETH. There might therefore be a tendency to dismiss the brouhaha as academic provincialism. But this would be wrong for two reasons.

First, the ETH professors have in the recent past already cooperated with changes implemented by the president's office. That was a major reason for their reluctance this time: they are still in the process of enacting the last round of reforms, which made departments responsible for their own finances and put in place a new teaching system. They were clearly unconvinced that the time was ripe for reform of these reforms.

And therein lies the second reason. Hafen failed to convince the professors that his proposals made sense, and he declined to engage in the dialogue that might have won them over. Perhaps too confident of the power conferred on him on paper, he failed to talk and, fatally, he failed to listen. He pushed too fast initially and, when an impasse arose, he moved swiftly into reverse, withdrawing his whole reform package in its entirety on 23 October, thereby losing further respect.

The ETH will doubtless survive this embarrassing setback. But Hafen's departure leaves questions about whether his proposals were really being driven by the ETH supervisory council, which hired him but failed to back him when the chips were down. The council must now start afresh, by appointing a president who will inspire the confidence of the university staff. ■

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Correction or retraction?

Errors reported in this issue by authors of a *Nature* paper pose a dilemma about trust.

The practice of science — and the publication of science in particular — is often lauded for its capacity for self-correction, and, to a large extent, deservedly so. During the peer-review process, basic mistakes and errors of judgement are frequently identified, minimizing the number that make it through into often much-improved final publications. Erroneous results that do slip through the peer-review net may be promptly identified; if sufficiently serious, they are corrected or even withdrawn.

The reality of science publication does not always accord with such

idealistic expectations, however, and the correction published this week (on page 235) is a case in point.

When an important error has been made in a published piece of work, yet the central claim or result still stands, the publication of a Corrigendum is the most sensible way forward; others are thereby alerted to any inaccuracies in the paper, which may have an impact on their own research. If, on the other hand, the errors that have been made undermine the principal message of the paper, then a retraction is in order — the paper may still contain valid scientific information, but the original publication has now lost its *raison d'être*.

There is a grey area in between, exemplified by the events — past and present — that have now culminated in the aforementioned Corrigendum. The original paper (*Nature* 366, 143–146; 1993) is viewed by many as a landmark in its field: an experimental 'first', in which compositional analysis at atomic resolution had been achieved