

“Seeing talented young people so eager to conduct research makes me proud of ETH”



Dr Laura Kobel-Keller completed her studies at ETH with a doctorate in 2011. She then conducted research at various universities before returning to ETH in 2016. Today she is an ETH lecturer in mathematics.

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We sat down with Dr Laura Kobel-Keller, a former ETH student and now an ETH lecturer, to learn more about her path at the university, the connections between music and mathematics, and why she's giving back to her alma mater.

Going from a student to a lecturer - what's it like to teach at the same university where you used to study?

LAURA KOBEL-KELLER – For me, it's a very big honour to be able to give something back and to guide students and early-career researchers on their academic journey. When I was a student, it was always my big wish to be able to hold analysis lectures one day, and now this is exactly one of my responsibilities.

What sticks out in your mind when you look back at your time as a student?

The openness for sharing knowledge, and forencouraging questions from students at the beginning of their studies. To give an example, when I was in my second semester, I had a question that went beyond the scope of my assignment. First, I asked the teaching assistant since I didn't want to bother the professor. When he openly told me that he didn't know the answer and that I should ask the professor directly, I felt like I had truly "arrived" at ETH. It confirmed that my mathematical thinking was on the right level and that I was being taken seriously. That's why I always encourage my students to just ask me any questions they may have without hesitation. This creates an immense amount of added value in the lectures and also shows students how important they are.

You're both a mathematician and a musician. How are these two fields connected, in your view?

Both disciplines require talent, persistence, knowledge and creativity with a dose of insatiable curiosity and an openness towards new things.

Mathematicians have to train and practice just like musicians do. From an outside perspective, a lot of things seem easy, nice and simple, but there's actually a lot of sweat and hard work behind it.

What lessons have you learned at ETH that still stick with you today?

Alongside the field-specific knowledge, I certainly learned a lot about ways of thinking and tackling problems that are conducive to finding a solution.

What's your favourite place at ETH and why?

A very nice, but not so well-known place is the Semper Auditorium. For me, it's something unexpected to find in a temple to the natural and exact sciences. In my view, the auditorium symbolises that there's something beyond learning and knowledge at ETH - there's also culture.

How and when did you hear about the ETH Foundation for the first time?

To be honest I'm not entirely sure anymore. I think I may have read about the foundation in an ETH publication shortly after finishing my doctorate. I immediately loved the concept and wanted to help out the next generation of young talents. Seeing talented young people so eager to conduct research makes me happy - and proud of ETH!

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