

ETH Zurich Guidelines on Science-Policy Engagement

dated February 1, 2024 (as of May 21, 2025)

This is a translation of the German original provided for information purposes. In the event of any conflict between the two versions, the German version shall prevail.

The Vice-President for Knowledge Transfer and Corporate Relations of ETH Zurich, based on article 11 paragraph 3 letter e of the ETH Zurich Organization Ordinance of 21 November 2024¹,

issues the following guidelines:

Preamble

ETH Zurich is committed to serving society through education, research, and knowledge transfer. Knowledge transfer includes a dialogue between scientific experts and policymakers, in the sense of article 2 paragraph 1 letter e of the ETH Act², so that policies can be designed and policy decisions made with the best available scientific evidence. Hence, ETH Zurich encourages its scientific community to engage with policymakers, to be receptive to their interests and needs, and to provide scientific assessments on societally relevant questions.

Chapter 1: General Provisions

Art. 1: Subject Matter

1. These guidelines outline the basic principles for the interaction between scientists³ in their role as subject experts and policymakers at the communal, cantonal, national, or international level.
2. The guidelines provide an overview of the supporting units that are available to members of ETH Zurich for questions related to science-policy engagement and to support interactions with policymakers.

Art. 2: Scope of Application

These guidelines apply to all those members of ETH Zurich in the sense of article 13 of the ETH Act who are involved in science-policy engagement.

Art. 3: Definitions

1. "Policy" in the context of these guidelines refers to public policy. It is the content dimension of politics, which is expressed through laws, programs, plans, regulations, or guidelines

¹ Editorial amendment following the complete revision of the ETH Zurich Organization Ordinance per January 1, 2025

² SR 414.110

³ In the context of these guidelines, the terms "science" and "scientist" are used broadly in the sense of the German term "Wissenschaften", i.e., encompassing natural and engineering sciences as well as social sciences and humanities.

(potentially) adopted by a legislative body, a government, a public institution, or an international organization in order to reach a certain goal.

2. "Policymaker" in the context of these guidelines refers to a person in charge of political decision-making, i.e., responsible for or involved in formulating, amending, or enacting policies. Thus, policymakers are employees, advisors, or elected members of the executive or legislative branches, of an international organization, or of a political party.
3. The dialogue between science and policy encompasses two types of activities that should be separated to the extent possible to avoid actual and perceived conflicts of interest:
 - a. **"Science-policy engagement"**⁴: Activities in which researchers apply their scientific expertise to support or influence policymaking. This includes activities such as science-based policy advice, engaging publicly on policy issues, for example at public events, in the media or on social media, or engagement or membership as scientific experts in political or advocacy organizations. It can also include teaching students how to apply their scientific knowledge to societally relevant issues and to policymaking. These activities are the focus of these guidelines.
 - b. **"Political relations"/"Public affairs"**⁵: Institutional activities to achieve favorable framework conditions to fulfill the activities of ETH Zurich, including conducting scientific research (i.e., "science-friendly policies"). Such activities do not fall under these guidelines.
4. "Science-based policy advice" in the context of these guidelines refers to all activities in which researchers, based on their expertise, advise policymakers on policy positions and decisions in all stages of the policy cycle⁶.

Chapter 2: Science-Policy Engagement

Art. 4: Basic Principles of Science-Policy Engagement at ETH Zurich

The basic principles of science-policy engagement at ETH Zurich are the following:

- a. Science-policy engagement in its different forms is protected by ETH members' freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and academic freedom.
- b. ETH members are free to choose if and how they participate in activities of science-policy engagement. They may choose to limit themselves to conveying scientific evidence or they may also make explicit statements on social and political issues. In practice, the boundaries between such different roles are not always clear-cut.
- c. Scientific rigor, integrity, and objectivity are important reasons for the credibility of science. Hence, these values should be upheld by ETH members in their science-policy engagement.

⁴ Science-policy engagement is often referred to as "science for policy" (see Brooks, Harvey 1964. "The scientific advisor," in Robert Gilpin and Christopher, Wright (eds.), *Scientists and national policy-making*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 73–96).

⁵ Political relations/public affairs are often referred to as "policy for science" (see Brooks 1964).

⁶ See for example <https://www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/lexika/politiklexikon/296466/policy-cycle/> (German), accessed on August 3, 2023.

- d. A two-way dialogue between policymakers and ETH scientists based on trust and mutual understanding should be the foundation for science-based policy advice.
- e. Policymaking and science play different roles in society that should be mutually respected. Policymaking focuses on making decisions and is dominated by should-questions. In science, the focus is to systematically study and understand phenomena, their causes, their behavior, their interaction, and their potential consequences. In science, is-questions dominate. Hence, ETH members should acknowledge that public policymaking must necessarily consider more aspects than just scientific evidence and information, particularly societal values and interests.
- f. Science-based policy advice should typically be based not only on disciplinary expertise, but also on interdisciplinary perspectives as policy decisions and assessments of new technologies need to consider a variety of policy impacts and points of view. Hence, ETH members are encouraged to work across disciplinary boundaries.

Art. 5: Responsibilities of ETH Members

1. All members of ETH Zurich engaging with policymakers have the responsibility to:
 - a. adhere to general rules of scientific integrity and rules of good scientific practice as outlined in the ETH Zurich Guidelines on scientific integrity⁷;
 - b. base their assessments and advice on the available evidence and be transparent about assumptions, uncertainties, incomplete evidence, or lack of consensus in the scientific community, aiming to provide a balanced and transparent assessment;
 - c. disclose towards ETH as well as policymakers actual and potential conflicts of interest⁸ when establishing an activity and when publishing and communicating based on their engagement;
 - d. use their best efforts to distinguish their personal opinion from the view of ETH Zurich as an institution as well as between statements they make in their capacity as scientists and as private individuals;
 - e. when engaging on sensitive topics, consider and take due care in minimizing potential reputational risks for ETH Zurich;
 - f. consider the risks of advising or supporting partisan political actors, for example political parties, especially the risk of research results being politically instrumentalized.
2. Chapter 4 lists support units available for members of ETH Zurich who are active in science-policy engagement. These units can assist in assessing and managing risks mentioned in article 5 paragraph 1, particularly those in letters e and f.

⁷ RSETHZ 414

⁸ See Article 56 Paragraph 2 of the Personnel Ordinance of the ETH Board of March 15, 2001 (PVO-ETH; 172.220.113) as well as Article 2 of the Guidelines concerning conflicts of interest and conflicts of commitment in connection with outside activities of professors and other employees of ETH Zurich of January 1, 2022 (RSETHZ 501.2).

Art. 6: ETH Zurich Members with Institutional Roles and Governing Body Functions

1. ETH members who hold institutional roles within ETH Zurich, for example as members of the Executive Board, as Associate Vice-Presidents, as Department Heads, or administrative or technical staff members with high visibility, must understand that these institutional roles have implications for their potential science-policy engagement.
2. Statements made by ETH Zurich representatives as defined in article 6 paragraph 1 are usually interpreted as statements reflecting the opinion of ETH Zurich as an institution. Hence, these representatives have a special responsibility with regards the risks mentioned in article 5 paragraph 1 letters e and f.
3. Representatives as defined in article 6 paragraph 1 should generally exercise restraint in publicly taking clear political or policy positions. Excluded from this is engagement in political relations (see definition in article 3), which can be a core responsibility of representatives in such institutional roles.

Chapter 3: Science-Based Policy Advice

Art. 7: Delineation

Science-based policy advice (see definitions in article 3) is one specific form of science-policy engagement. Science-based policy advice:

- a. can take place in different formats and settings, including participation in formal hearings, participation in officially mandated advisory councils, conducting research projects or scientific services mandated by policymakers, conducting research for which the funding agency requires policy briefs or policy recommendations, and engagement in informal exchanges with policymakers.
- b. can involve new research but in most cases takes place in the form of an assessment of the current state of science on topics relevant to a policy.
- c. differs from other forms of policy advice in that it follows good scientific practice and is non-partisan, independent, and pays particular attention to methodological rigor.

Art. 8: Recommendations with regards to the role of ETH Members

1. As an independent expert organization, ETH Zurich focuses particularly on providing advice to institutionalized policymaking organs such as governmental and international agencies and their employees.
2. Policy issues can be classified on a continuum ranging from clearly framed problems with clear policy objectives to unclear issues without clear policy objectives or with strong conflicts of objectives.
 - a. In science-based policy advice, ETH members should avoid that their personal values and policy preferences are perceived as scientific facts.
 - b. The more a policy issue is characterized by unclear goals and conflicts of objectives, it is recommended that ETH members refrain from providing policy-prescriptive advice. Instead, they should support the problem framing, scientifically assess

possible policy options, and develop new options in collaboration with policymakers. If they choose to recommend a specific course of action, they should take due care to separate the scientific evidence and their opinion.

- c. The more policy issues are clearly framed and there are clear policy objectives, the more ETH members may recommend a specific course of action.

Art. 9: Science-Based Policy Advice in Mandates

1. When science-based policy advice by ETH Zurich researchers takes place in mandates classified as outside activities according to the Guidelines concerning conflicts of interest and conflicts of commitment in connection with outside activities of professors and other employees of ETH Zurich⁹ of January 1, 2022, these mandates need to be reported through the designated ETHIS workflow.
2. Researchers who are officially mandated by a governmental agency to advise policymakers on a subject matter should consider that any public statement they make on this subject matter will be associated with their officially mandated role. They are thus expected to adhere to the rules of the mandated panel and only make public statements that are consistent with that role for the duration of their mandate. In such roles, the timing of communication should generally be coordinated with the mandataries.
3. In communication activities in such mandates, the interest of ETH Zurich must also be protected¹⁰. The support units listed in Chapter 4 can assist with this.

Art. 10: Research Projects

1. When science-based policy advice takes place in the form of research projects or scientific services mandated by policymakers, the Guidelines concerning Contracts in the Field of Research at ETH Zurich of July 3, 2015, apply¹¹.
2. When members of ETH Zurich wish to engage in a research collaboration with partisan actors such as political parties or clearly politically positioned organizations or groups, they should inform the Science-Policy Interface in the Office of Knowledge Transfer and Corporate Relations in advance (see Chapter 4). In certain cases, this information can be provided via the Research Contract Group in accordance with article 12 paragraph 3.

Art. 11: Transparency

1. In order to promote transparency, documents resulting from science-based policy advice activities, specifically policy briefs and policy reports, should be published in an open-access manner.
2. Publication of policy briefs or reports should precede or coincide with public communication about them.

⁹ RSETHZ 501.2.

¹⁰ See article 2 of the Guidelines concerning conflicts of interest and conflicts of commitment in connection with outside activities of professors and other employees of ETH Zurich of January 1, 2022 (RSETHZ 501.2).

¹¹ RSETHZ 440.31.

3. If for important reasons, such documents cannot be published fully or only after an embargo period, it should be agreed upon upfront in writing or in a contract what can be communicated or published at what point in time¹².

Chapter 4: Support units at ETH Zurich

Art. 12: Science-Policy Interface

1. The Science-Policy Interface in the Vice Presidency for Knowledge Transfer and Corporate Relations is the central support unit for science-policy engagement. The Science-Policy Interface supports researchers with all questions concerning science-policy engagement. The support encompasses, i.a., help connecting to relevant policymakers or assessing the political and potential reputational risks of engaging in certain contexts or the risk of research results being politically instrumentalized.
2. The Science-Policy Interface supports ETH members in applying the guidelines at hand.
3. When members of ETH Zurich wish to engage with partisan actors such as political parties or clearly politically positioned organizations or groups, they should inform the Science-Policy Interface in advance. In the case of outside activities and other pursuits¹³, this information has to be provided through the respective ETHIS workflow.¹⁴ In the case of planned research contracts with partisan actors, the information to the Science-Policy Interface can be provided through the Research Contracts Group, with explicit reference to this matter.¹⁵

Art. 13: Further Support Units

The following further support units are particularly relevant for aspects mentioned in article 3 paragraph 3 letter b, article 9, article 10, and article 11:

- a. ETH Zurich's Corporate Communications office supports and advises researchers in all communication activities involving the public and the media, and general questions regarding ETH Zurich's reputation.
- b. The person responsible for political relations in the Office of the President advises representatives of ETH Zurich on political relations and public affairs, as well as on general political questions that concern ETH Zurich as an institution.
- c. The Research Contract Group in the Vice Presidency for Knowledge Transfer and Corporate Relations advises researchers on research contracts with policymakers.
- d. The Administrative Department Consulting for Professors is responsible for questions regarding outside activities of professors including their reporting and approval.

¹² See article 10.

¹³ According to RSETHZ 501.2.

¹⁴ See article 9.

¹⁵ See article 10 paragraph 2.

Chapter 5: Entry into Force

These guidelines enter into force on February 1, 2024.

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