

Report Swiss-Kyoto Symposium, 21-22 November 2013, ETH and University of Zurich

From 21-22 November 2013 more than 350 scientists met at ETH and the University of Zurich for the Swiss-Kyoto Symposium. The Symposium was jointly organized by the two Zurich institutions together with Kyoto University and a contribution also from EPFL, and was set within the frame of the 150-years anniversary celebrations of diplomatic relations between Japan and Switzerland. Kyoto University had initiated the symposium in order to intensify scientific cooperation with its top Swiss partners and to bring the institutions already linked through a memorandum with ETH Zurich even closer together.

The symposium was opened by the Presidents of the four participating universities, who pointed out the importance of scientific relations between Japan and Switzerland but also among their individual institutions. ETH President Ralph Eichler particularly emphasized the importance of strategic relations in order to meet the demands of society in a global world, and the long standing relationships with Kyoto University. In turn University of Zurich President elect Michael Hengartner focussed on the importance of complementarity, competition and cooperation on the campus Zurich. The opening session was completed by a welcome speech by H.E. the Ambassador of Japan Ryuhei Maeda talking about the many close ties between Japan and Switzerland on several levels.

A highlight of the opening morning session was the signing of a memorandum of understanding between Kyoto University and the University of Zurich.

The second part of the symposium's morning plenary session was dedicated to presentations of research highlights by the Vice-Presidents for Research or Academic relations of the participating institutions, giving the audience a deep insight into the institutions and key topics. The presenters also set a focus on international relations to Japan and Kyoto University in particular. The following key note talks from the Swiss and Japanese side certainly also fitted with these research highlights. Prof. Shigekazu Nagata from Kyoto University talked about his research on "Cell Death and Clearance of Dead Cells", which has considerably influenced cell biology text books and also earned him an honorary doctor title of the University of Zurich amongst several other prestigious prizes. Prof. Klaas Enno Stephan, who holds a joint professorship at the ETH and University of Zurich, held the Swiss keynote lecture on "Translational Neuromodeling: A new Paradigm for Understanding and Diagnosing Brain Diseases". His work truly combines the medical, natural and engineering sciences and is also a great example for the collaboration among the Zurich institutions.

The afternoon of the first day and most of the second day saw the symposium splitting up into 16 different scientific sessions ranging from advanced bio- and nanotechnology to plants and environment, robotics, finances and risk and even existentialism. Under the lead of each a Swiss and Japanese chair 10 to 25 or even more participants in each session presented their work and latest results and discussed potential topics for future cooperation between Kyoto and its Swiss partners. Some of the sessions were complemented by lab tours and excursions and provided a trough insight for the Japanese guests into research in Zurich and partially also at EPFL Lausanne, where two of the Swiss chairs and several speakers originated from.

Vast opportunities to continue discussion and deepen relationships were also given by the several social spaces offered at the symposium, joint lunches, coffee breaks, apéros and the grand Gala Dinner at the Zunfthaus “Zur Saffran” in Zurich’s picturesque old town and in the middle of the first snow storm of the beginning winter. The evening started with a brief session on funding opportunities for international cooperation by the Swiss National Science Foundation and the Japanese Society for the Promotion of Sciences (JSPS). Of course also dinner toasts by the present Presidents and Vice-Presidents of the four institutions were also not missing, turning the evening into a truly celebratory event.

It remained in the last plenary session on Friday evening to sum up the most important conclusions and findings of the symposium. This task was mastered brilliantly by the chairs of the 16 parallel scientific sessions; who had each prepared a short presentation including findings, future joint plans and group pictures again illustrating the great diversity of the symposium. Without these session chairs the symposium would not have been possible at all, they arranged for exciting scientific programmes, led through one and a half days of intense discussions and motivated dozens of their colleagues to participate and share their enthusiasm for cooperation with Kyoto or their Swiss partners respectively. The most important conclusion to be drawn from the symposium was thus probably what Prof. Gerhard Schmitt Senior Vice-President ETH Global mentioned in his closing speech: “What characterizes the true ties between universities is not the amount of memorandums or joint publications they have, but the relations between individual people. These people are the foundation for any institutional partnership to build on and function. They are the basis for all future joint projects and publications. “Due to the people behind it the symposium had grown from the initiative to bring about 100 researchers together to an amazing large event with more than 350 enthusiastic participants.

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Pictures



above: Kyoto University President Matsumoto, H.E. the Ambassador of Japan Ryuhei Maeda and University of Zurich President elect Michael Hengartner opening the symposium



Above left: The university of Zurich and Kyoto University signing a Memorandum of Understanding.
Above right: Session on funding opportunities in the "Zunfthaus zur Safran"

Below left: Senior Vice-President ETH Global Gerhard Schmitt at his closing speech.
below right: Session chairs reporting from their session at the closing plenary.

