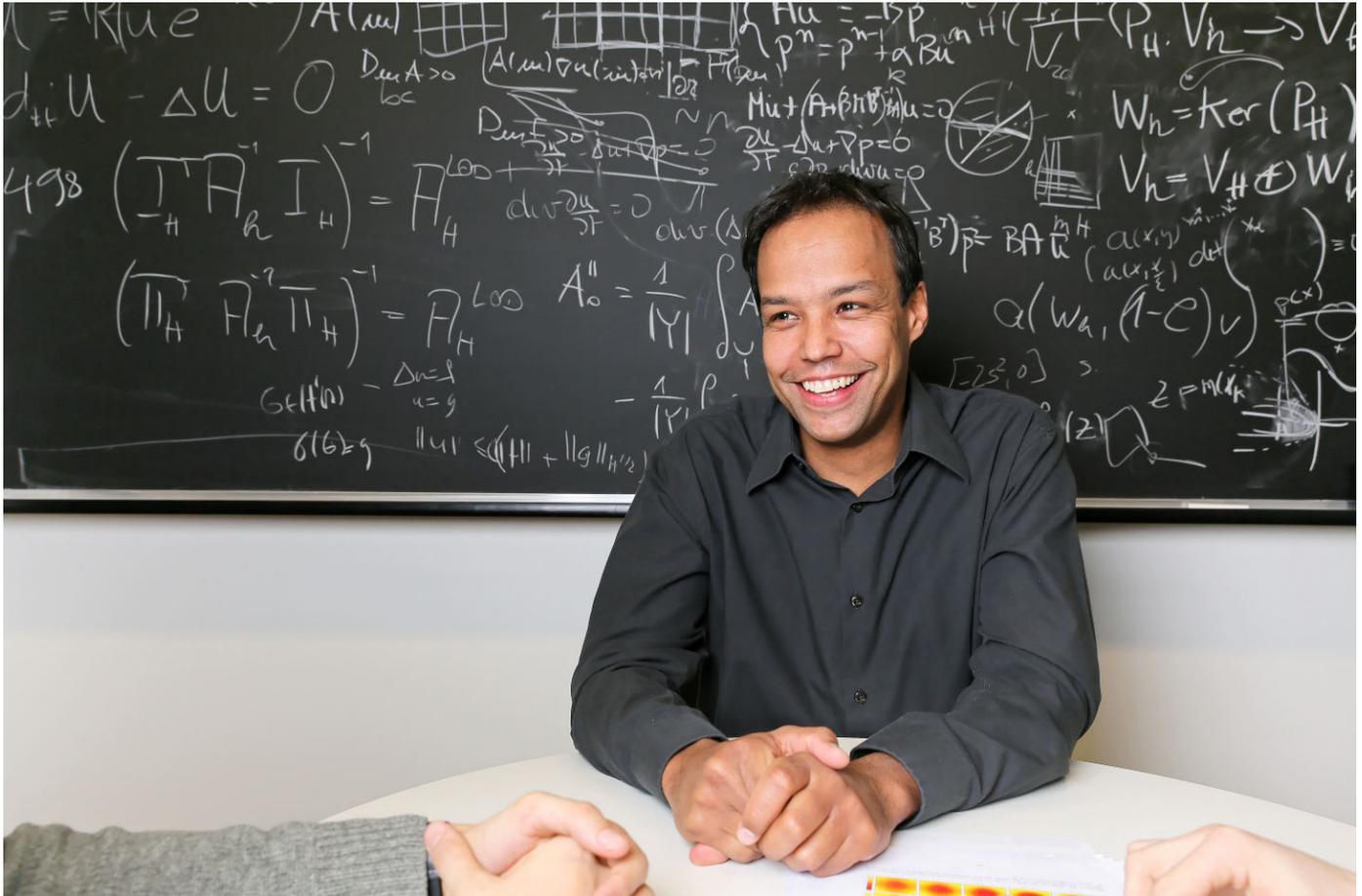


TEACHING PORTAL EPFL

Assyr Abdulle

Prize in the Math section



Professor Assyr Abdulle's passion for math is so infectious that he can convert even the most phobic. "To really appreciate math, you have to understand its melody – in all its breadth and depth – in addition to the method," said Abdulle, whose teaching load includes the first-year linear algebra course. When the students get stuck on a problem, he steers them towards the solution, "like a mountain guide" in the mathematical highlands. He's there for his students. And with him, things are never boring, even though the subject matter still demands rigor and hard work.

Abdulle considers himself strict and does not tolerate any chatting in class, and he is well liked by his students. He is methodical and rigorous in his approach to teaching, yet he also enjoys asides and digressions into the history of the ideas he is teaching, tying in the occasional "math hero." Regardless of a given day's topic, the entire class is captivated by his enthusiasm. "My job is to arouse my students' curiosity, make abstract notions interesting, convey my motivation and passion, and teach my students how to think."

While entertainment is part of his formula, so is simplicity: chalk and a blackboard are all he needs. What's his take on advances in educational technology? Abdulle has no problem with new teaching tools, as long as they don't replace the classroom. "A

video can't teach you how to ski or play the violin," he says. And for him, an online course "is just not as interesting, it doesn't tap into your emotions, it would be like taking away the music concealed within the concepts. Personally, I much prefer to attend presentations, so I'm not going to force my students to look at a screen."

He finds that math is well taught at EPFL, thanks in part to the diversity of the teaching staff. "My colleagues are full of enthusiasm and enjoy teaching. We are very fortunate that our instructors employ different teaching methods: if we all studied piano with the same method, we would all play the same way," he added.

Abdulle's responsibilities include running the new Master's program in computational science, but he would not want to give up teaching his first-year math course. "The students come to the 8am class because I've managed to pique their curiosity. And I always get something out of it. The entire field is important – even classical theories are fascinating and always have something to offer."

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