



Professor Jan. S. Hesthaven
in conversation with students

FOTOS: MARKUS BREIG

Short CV

Professor Jan S. Hesthaven has been President of KIT since October 2024. Before, he had been Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs of the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne) since 2021. Since 2013, Hesthaven had been Professor of Mathematics of EPFL. Before, in 1995, he had started to work at Brown University, one of the oldest and most renowned universities in the USA, where he was Founding Director of the Center for Computation and Visualization (2006 to 2013). Having co-founded the Institute for Computational and Experimental Research in Mathematics, he served as its Deputy Director from 2010 to 2013. Hesthaven studied Computational Physics and earned his doctorate at the Technical University of Denmark in Copenhagen. Since 2022, Hesthaven has been Fellow of the American Mathematical Society (AMS) and the Society of Industrial and Applied Mathematics (SIAM). He also is member of the European Academy of Sciences and Academia Europaea.



“I Believe much more in Collaboration than in Competition”

JAN S. HESTHAVEN, THE NEW PRESIDENT OF KIT, SPEAKING ABOUT FUTURE CHALLENGES FOR SOCIETY AND KIT, THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERNATIONALITY, AND THE ROLE OF KIT WITHIN THE HELMHOLTZ ASSOCIATION

BY LEONIE KROLL AND MARGARETE LEHNÉ

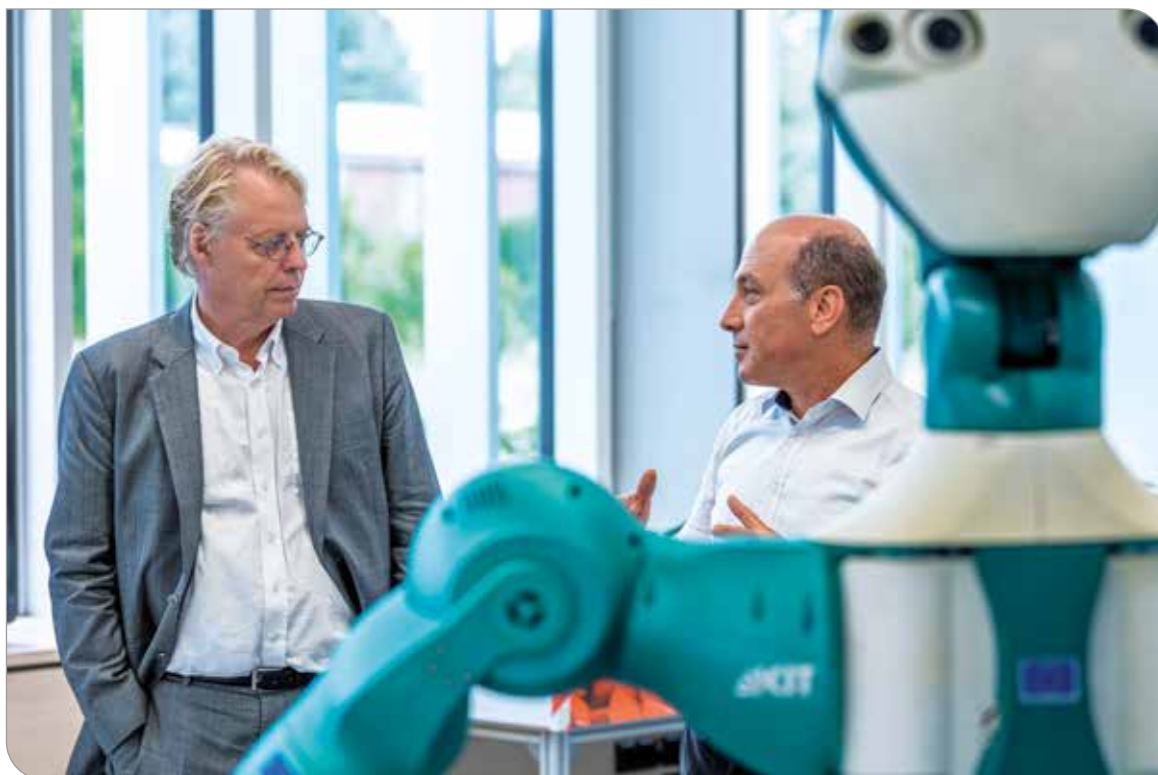
Jan S. Hesthaven will take office of KIT President on October 1, 2024. In an interview with lookKIT, he discusses his perspective on KIT's role in a changing society, his plans for positioning KIT within the international scientific community, and why education is one of his top priorities.

lookKIT: What was your first impression of KIT and what made you think it is a place that you would like to be part of? KIT is clearly a diamond in the rough, an institution which has an enormous potential that has not been reached fully yet. Throughout

my career, I have found that I prefer to build and change organizations rather than simply running them. At KIT, I saw a unique and exciting opportunity to do precisely that: To help build an institution which is already successful and has a long and impressive history, but also an institution that has the potential – the people, the infrastructure, and the resources – to be a lot more than what it currently is.

What are your plans for the first 100 days at KIT?

It will be most important for me to get to know the people of KIT. Listening to what



Jan S. Hesthaven speaking with Professor Tamim Asfour, Head of the High Performance Humanoid Technologies Group at KIT's Institute for Anthropomatics and Robotics (IAR)

they have to say is the best way for me to learn about KIT, the many opportunities, and perhaps some challenges. While I am open to seek changes to the benefit of the institution, I am well aware that many elements of KIT work very well and should certainly not be changed dramatically. Finding this balance requires that I have a deeper understanding of KIT. At the same time, I would like to launch a discussion with the community of where we are as an institution and where we would like to be in five or ten years from now.

Which changes are we looking at in particular – and what are their implications for strategic research at KIT?

I can easily realize three very general themes by simply looking out of the window: You can see things that are a result of human intelligence, for example buildings or cars; you can see life in humans, plants, animals; and you can see society, in the way we organize ourselves to live as a society. What is changing now and what will continue to change very substantially in the next decade or two is that we are entering into a world impacted by artificial intelligence, artificial life, and a strong focus on the sustainable society. For me, these are the three general areas of KIT and many elements of the core research and technological expertise required already exist at KIT. As these elements begin to converge, implications will be tremendous for how we live, how we work, how we interact, for our health, and our learning. We are potentially at an inflection point in human development and KIT needs to be at the center of this transformation.

Where do you see KIT in ten years from now in relation to other universities and research institutions in Germany and worldwide?

I strongly believe in collaboration, more so than in competition. We need to identify trusted partners, both in Germany and internationally, with whom we can collaborate in our core missions – education, research, innovation, and societal engagement. Institutions like KIT cannot master everything and there is only a handful of institutions that have the financial resources necessary to do so. To have an impact and to play in that league internationally, we will have to do it together with partners that are complementary. Therefore, I would like to position KIT as one of those places to which other institutions turn when looking for a partner and an emerging and important new activity, be it in education or research.

In earlier interview you said that KIT is not as international as it should be. How would you like to attract more international talent?

This impression is not unique to KIT. While there have been changes to the better in recent times, German universities are generally not as international as they should be and could be. We have to attract international talent and to do that, we have to be better at showing what our strengths are and why they should join the KIT community. At the same time, we need to make sure they stay by creating an environment in which international colleagues feel welcome and valued.

What role should KIT play within the Helmholtz Association?

First of all: I do not really recognize a strong distinction between the importance of research and education. With this in mind, I believe that KIT should take a central part as the research university in the Helmholtz Association. The unique strength of a university is that it, in contrast to a research center, can undertake very-high-risk research while hedging this high risk with education – even after failure, it has still succeeded in its educational mission. This is an equally unique

opportunity for research centers. We need to make better use of this strength in the role we can play within the Helmholtz Association. Our students could also benefit enormously – we need to make optimum use of this unique position and resources across the Helmholtz Association to collaborate more closely across disciplines in research and education.

What does academic freedom mean to you?

An Alexander von Humboldt living off the family estate and thus financing his research across the world could do what he wanted. We, however, get paid to a large extent by either taxpayers or private funders. The freedom to pursue whatever academic area you wish for is a fundamental quality of the system and this must be maintained. But the freedom comes with a responsibility. Ultimately the goal of the work is to impact and improve society through the solutions we develop and the people we educate. That is our contract with society. ■



Professor Jan. S. Hesthaven, new President of KIT

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