

**Swiss Virtual Campus Day
7-8 May 2002, Lugano**

**The Importance of the Swiss Virtual Campus for
the Renewal of Teaching**

**Gerhard M. Schuwey, Director of the Federal
Office for Education and Science**

Introduction

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to convey the warmest regards and best wishes from the federal authorities in Berne and especially from our Minister for education and science in Switzerland, the Federal Counsellor for the Interior, Ruth Dreifuss. She personally extends a welcome to all of you from here and abroad who have come together for this year's Swiss Virtual Campus Day.

The organisers of this event asked me to make some introductory remarks for the second part of this meeting on the topic of "The Importance of the Swiss Virtual Campus for the Renewal of Teaching". No doubt, all of you are more qualified to say something substantial about this subject than I am. The various contributions yesterday afternoon and this morning as well as the workshops and presentations have already illustrated this subject from several points of view.

Nevertheless, as a representative of the education administration, I should like to seize this opportunity

to make a few comments about the importance which the Swiss Virtual Campus and the new media have for education and research from the standpoint of *higher education policy*. The timing for such reflections certainly could not be better.

Next November, the Swiss Government, the Federal Council, will present to Parliament its White Paper for funding Swiss higher education and research during the period of 2004 to 2007. The Federal Council will also have to present its strategy for the future of the Swiss Virtual Campus, especially as part of a general review of the Swiss education, research, and technology.

At the same time, we have to examine our experience with this programme, which was designed in part as a stimulus for the new media in teaching and research at our institutions of higher education. We still have a few months to evaluate our previous experience and then re-define the programme in this important area for the coming years.

1. Where are we today? A Glance Back

As you know, the federal authorities launched the current stimulus programme for the Swiss Virtual Campus in 2000. To finance the nearly fifty projects selected from two calls for proposals for the period 2000 to 2003, thirty million Swiss francs in federal funds were earmarked for the universities, two millions stem from the Federal Institutes of Technology, and nine millions are provided by the Ministry of Economy for the Universities of Applied

Science - in addition to the matching funding from the institutions themselves.

After two and a half years, the federal authorities take great satisfaction from the fact that this programme has started exceptionally well, that it has found broad acceptance throughout academia, and that it has attracted a great deal of interest and approval - also outside traditional university organisations and circles.

“Reform and invest!” - is the basic motto of current higher education policy at the federal level. It goes without saying that new technologies provide a great potential for renewal - for both teaching and research. There is hardly an area for which the motto would be more apt. In addition, I have always been convinced that new technologies would also have a lasting impact on the traditional structures of our universities and other institutions of higher learning. One of the policy guidelines was that the individual modules were to be developed not only within a single institution, but rather that three or more faculty members from different schools work together on an on-line module, and the students of all the participating institutions should be able to earn credit-points through the on-line course modules.

The comprehensive aspect of the programme for the whole of Switzerland was decisive for the federal authorities from the very beginning, and the Virtual Campus has therefore always been more than just a technical programme for the development of new teaching technologies and electronically improved curriculum units. The intention was also to provide an important impetus to a contextual renewal of

educational theory and practice throughout Switzerland and promote cooperation beyond individual institutions of higher learning. I remember well when the programme was discussed in the parliamentary committees; precisely those parliamentarians were in favour of the programme who were sceptical of how such an ambitious concept could ever bear fruit, given the rather complicated structures reigning within the Swiss institutions of higher education.

Therefore we note with a certain sense of satisfaction that most of the project partners communicate far better with each other than we ever expected. An important objective – the promotion of cooperation among teachers throughout Switzerland – has thus been successfully initiated. For this achievement, I should like to express my gratitude to all of the participants and especially to the Secretariat of the Universities' Conference.

2. Where do we go from here?

The programme directors together with the Swiss Universities' Conference have presented the initial guidelines for a consolidation of the programme between 2004 and 2007. We are convinced that the direction spelt out there is correct and very promising, and we are therefore more than happy to support it.

The consolidation programme for 2004–2007 is primarily designed to further develop the Virtual Campus along four tracks:

- First: The course material already worked out must be maintained and supported on an ongoing basis;
- Secondly: Professional production-teams should be set up at the institutions of higher learning;
- Thirdly: A fresh call for proposals will be made for the development of new on-line learning modules and courses;
- Last but not least: The Virtual Campus must be institutionalised on a permanent basis.

The programme directors have asked for a funding credit of 54.7 (fifty-four point seven) million Swiss francs for the next four-year period. I do not need to go into details here. Suffice it to say, that the proposed programme is persuasive and future oriented. There are three points that I feel are especially worth mentioning here.

3. Three Central Issues for the Next Years

- *A Solid Institutional Basis for the Virtual Campus*

One of the main tasks during the first phase was working out Internet course modules which enabled students to complete courses of a recognized standard on their computers irrespective of time and place. For the future programme, a solid and permanent institutional support is essential for the further development of such course-material.

The federal authorities are of the opinion that the cooperation with the Swiss Academic and Research Network (generally known as SWITCH) would lend itself well for this aspect. Thanks to SWITCH,

Switzerland has an exceptionally productive and efficient national communication system for the Swiss universities, which also ensures access to international networks. We are convinced that a close cooperation between SWITCH and the Virtual Campus will release additional synergies, and also result in an optimum balance of the various offers. The specific details of this collaboration must still be discussed. We are grateful to all involved for the openness with which they are seeking solutions.

- *The Swiss Virtual Campus as a Stimulus for Curriculum Reforms in Higher Education*

The Rectors of the Swiss universities have placed the reform of academic teaching at the centre of their planning for the years 2004 to 2007. Part of this is solving the problems of crammed classrooms, and of improving the ratio between the number of students per professor, which will certainly require additional funding. However, it also includes expanded quality assurance and a reform of the curricula. It is important that the courses are modernised and conceived as modules, and that a credit system is introduced that complies with the European ECTS model.

I feel that it is also important that the Virtual Campus is seen as a part of these reforms and is integrated within them. In many ways, I think that the Virtual Campus can become a driving force in this comprehensive reform process. Electronically developed course-materials are exceptionally well-suited to modular concepts.

It is also important that course credit-points are appropriately assigned to each unit. The rectors intend that by the year 2007, about 10% of all courses should be offered in an electronic form. I think that this programme will not only further cooperation throughout Switzerland but also open new opportunities for international collaborations, which is desirable also from the point of view of higher education policy.

- *The Virtual Campus as a Pedagogical Challenge*

We are all aware that the programme will be successful only if special attention is paid to the educational aspects. It is not just a matter of electronically repackaging traditional course material. The new media offer new possibilities for independent, autonomous, and interactive learning. We must take advantage of these opportunities.

Of course, it is understandable that our politicians hope that the electronic media will also entail lower costs in the long run. It is possible, however, that they are being too optimistic. But what is certain from our present perspective is that so-called e-learning does produce a greater learning effect compared to conventional lectures, exercises, and seminars, and this has been demonstrated by scientific studies.

I have been told by university lecturers that exam grades were significantly higher for courses where new media were applied meaningfully compared to the same lectures in previous years. This is also unquestionably encouraging.

It is certain that the inspiring personal contact with outstanding teachers will always play an exceptionally important role in education. But it is also becoming clear that the possibilities provided by the new media will promote and kindle a passion for learning among students by opening new paths for their independent discovery of knowledge.

Especially those of us, who are determined by humanistic educational ideals, see new, important didactic opportunities in redirecting our efforts toward learning-centred studies. It will be important to make these educational issues an integral part of the Virtual Campus in the coming funding period.

Conclusions

From my modest comments, it still should be apparent that the federal government continues to have great hopes for this programme.

Before I conclude my remarks, I would like to express my special gratitude to two personalities in particular. Professor Stucki, who has headed this programme very efficiently with tremendous commitment while keeping an eye on the general view and not getting lost in the details, and Professor Bernard Levrat, who not only deserves special credit for the realisation of the programme but also for providing the initial conceptual spark and the engine for this effort. He has been a constant and exceptionally efficient advisor throughout.

Thank you very much.