



**Swiss Virtual Campus Days, University of Basel, March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2006**

2 – 3 p.m. , Kollegiengebäude

**The Strategic Added Value of E-Learning: Educational Innovations as Competitive Advantage for Swiss Institutes of Higher Education?**

By Charles Kleiber, State Secretary for Education and Research

Dear Professor Jufer, president of the Steering Committee of the Swiss Virtual Campus, dear Professor Schmitt, Vice President of the ETH Zurich and chair of this panel, dear Dr. Ischi, Secretary General of the Swiss University Conference, dear E-learning community

First, let me take the opportunity to thank the Steering Committee of the Swiss Virtual Campus and its staff for organizing this year's Swiss Virtual Campus Days at the University of Basel. I would also like to thank the University of Basel for hosting this event. This is an important event:

- it is bringing together the key figures of the Swiss E-learning community and thus allows for in depth discussions
- we are just past the middle of the second funding period (2004-2007) of this program, therefore we ask:
  - what has been achieved?
  - how do we continue?

## What we invested

Switzerland did not stand aloof from this development. On the contrary!

As you know, this is a time of very tight budgets and, unfortunately, education policy makes no exception in this respect. Money is tight. And yet: the Swiss Confederation has made a very significant investment in order to boost e-learning at Swiss Universities:

Since the beginning of the program (2000) until today the Confederation has distributed

**53 million franks**

for e-learning projects and e-learning related mandates. This is a very remarkable amount.

The national program “Swiss Virtual Campus” has been by far the largest and most expensive project among the so-called “project linked contributions”.

This shows that Switzerland is very much convinced of the values of new information and communication technologies (ICT) in education.

## What we achieved

As you know, there have been four calls for projects by the Swiss Virtual Campus since the beginning of the program in 2000. In the context of the first two calls 50 projects were approved. Of these, 30 have in the meantime been fully integrated into the curriculum and are being supported with maintenance contributions during the 2004-2007 consolidation phase.

32 e-learning courses are now being prepared and the evaluation of the fourth and last call for projects just very recently led to the acceptance of another 25 projects.

Thus by the end of 2007, **more than 100 e-learning projects** will have been supported by the Swiss Confederation – not to mention additional activities in the form of mandates aiming at further establishing the Swiss E-learning community.

What did we achieve, what are we achieving thanks to the Swiss Virtual Campus?

- There is no doubt that thanks to this investment the **quality of teaching and learning** has improved; instructionally meaningful interactions for students have been created. Students can engage in a learning experience that matches individual needs.
- More generally, this E-learning program has helped to further **stimulate the pedagogical ambience** at the Universities.
- The national program “Swiss Virtual Campus” is part of a broader initiative to **modernize the Swiss university system**. E-learning focalizes some of the most important aspects of the ongoing modernization of learning and studying, usually simply summarized under the keyword “**Bologna**”:
  - **Mobility**
  - **Cooperation**
  - **Innovation**

These are characteristics of E-learning, but also of the currently ongoing modernization of learning. Bologna and E-learning go hand in hand: The **mobility** of students is improving in the context of Bologna and, at least to some extent, also thanks to E-learning;

the strengthening of the **cooperation** between universities in Switzerland – which is an important aspect of our national university policy – is supported both by Bologna (think of the Masters coordinated by several Universities) and by projects such as the Swiss Virtual Campus (as you know, cooperation with several other universities was a *conditio sine qua non* for all projects of the Swiss Virtual Campus);

finally, E-learning stands for **innovative** new forms, but also contents of learning. Similarly, “Bologna” obliged the whole university community to question its program of teaching and learning and to find new ways of instruction and study.

Bologna and E-learning are a good match!

- And finally, let us not forget the **aesthetical value** of E-learning! E-learning with its endless possibilities of animations is embellishing the traditional *ex cathedra*, face-to-face teaching.

The program “Swiss Virtual Campus” has achieved all this and thus has helped to create a new **competitive advantage** for the Swiss university landscape. Also on a political level, this is an important program.

### Lessons learnt

E-learning is still a relatively new phenomenon with few international benchmarks. It was clear that down the road we would have to learn from possible mistakes and misunderstandings. When we launched this program, in 1999, we not only wanted to encourage higher education institutions to make more use of information and communication technologies (ICT) as part of an overall process of promoting the “Swiss information society”. We were also aiming at creating an actual “virtual campus” with courses that involved distance learning *only*. This is how we phrased it in the “BFT-Botschaft” (Message FRT) 00-03.

We know today that both students and professors seem to prefer what is generally described as “**blended learning**”, that is: modules available in the Internet as a **supplement** to classic styles of instruction.

The development that I have just described – “blended learning” instead of the proposed virtual campus – is in fact one which we also observe internationally. E-learning is worldwide expanding and it will continue to do so, but it is not replacing the traditional forms of learning. Over-enthusiasm (which, after all, is never a good thing) has been replaced by a more “down to earth”-policy. In the past, the “E” in E-learning has been interpreted as

“euphoria”, “enthusiasm” and “expectations” – this is all true, but in the meantime it also has gone through an evolution.

It is, nevertheless, safe to say that our national program “Swiss Virtual Campus” is a success. Some of the best SVC projects have won **prestigious awards**, not a few of them are hosted by the University of Basel: Let me mention

- the project *Latinum electronicum*;
- and especially the winner of the most prestigious MEDIDA-PRIX, the project “pharma square” of the Institute of Molecular Pharmacy (winner of the MEDIDA-PRIX 2003);
- the following year “PathoBasiliensis”, not a project of the Swiss Virtual Campus, but one of Basel’s own e-learning projects (from the Institute for Pathology) won the MEDIDA-PRIX 2004.

It seems that this university is very open for virtual undertakings (but others are as well).

### How to continue

The aforementioned awards prove that our country is strong in information and communication technologies. It is obvious to me that we are dealing here with an important competitive advantage which we should try to maintain.

The two project periods of our national program have been called “impulse program” (2000-2003) and “consolidation program” (2004-2007). The names of these two programs are telling: While there has been, since the 1980s, some e-learning activities in higher education, the “impulse program” pushed the Swiss e-learning scene towards a **new level**.

Today the Swiss Virtual Campus is in the middle of its “consolidation program”. This four year program explicitly demands a **long-term e-learning policy** for higher education institutions in Switzerland. For this reason at each institution of higher learning so-called “**Competence Centres**” have been created or supported. Each of these centres receives

financial support from the Swiss Virtual Campus. Consolidation thus means assuring that **the investment, the know-how and the “feu sacré”**, that is constantly achieved by the Swiss Virtual Campus, won't be lost.

We have always made it clear that the national program Swiss Virtual Campus **will end at the end of 2007**<sup>1</sup>. By then the funding for e-learning is expected to be **part of the budget of each university**. The Swiss Virtual Campus will not continue after 2007. This obviously is not to exclude the possibility that in one way or another some sort of national funding for e-Learning will also exist after 2007: A task force in close cooperation with the rectors' conferences (CRUS, KFH, SKPH) has been developing different scenarios with a view to hosting **e-learning platforms** (but not a new program!) to provide basic support services after 2007.<sup>2</sup> In any case: it is in the interest of all parties involved to make sure that the know-how accumulated over 8 years will not lose its relevance.

In a very recent study of the OECD on E-learning in Tertiary Education<sup>3</sup> it becomes obvious that over the last few years ICT strategies have been pursued in many countries, not the least in our neighbour countries Germany, Austria and France, but also in countries such as Australia, Brazil, Japan, Mexico and Thailand – not to mention the United States where E-learning already has a very long tradition. Obviously, E-learning is becoming increasingly prominent in tertiary education. Switzerland cannot allow itself to stay behind.

E-learning is still a novel and, to cite the aforementioned OECD report, still a somewhat “immature activity”<sup>4</sup>. The whole tertiary community is invited to watch its youngest child of

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<sup>1</sup> „Am Ende des Konsolidierungsprogramms wird die Finanzierung der Online-Kurse und ihr Unterhalt schrittweise von den regulären Budgets der Hochschulen übernommen werden müssen.“  
Ausführungsplan 2004-2007 der SUK, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Letter from SWITCH, December 19, 2005 and the Executive Summary of the Taskforce.

<sup>3</sup> E-Learning in Tertiary Education: Where Do We Stand?, OECD 2005.

<sup>4</sup> *Ib.* p. 226.

learning and teaching continue to thrive and develop. The Swiss Confederation has done a great deal in order to give a boost to E-learning in Switzerland: Helvetia was the midwife at the birth of E-learning in this country. And, as it goes with midwives, we have an interest in knowing what is going to happen with this child. The Confederation will continue to care about E-learning and so should each university.

Thank you very much for your attention.