

Media release, May 17, 2021

Annual Report 2020: Knowledge strengthens society

The COVID-19 crisis has also been extremely challenging for the University of Bern. Nevertheless, the articles in the 2020 annual report impressively show that the University is leveraging its expertise to make a vital contribution toward efforts to overcome this crisis and serve as a catalyst for the future. The University of Bern's future success is being called into question, however, by the sluggish pace of infrastructure renewal as well as collaborative research projects with Europe that are in jeopardy.

According to [Rector Christian Leumann in his video message](#) in this year's annual report, "In 2020, the coronavirus crisis was the omnipresent topic at the University of Bern, as well, and stretched us to our limits. But the year also revealed the enormous importance of the University's work." Even under difficult conditions, Bern's researchers were still highly successful in 2020 – particularly with respect to [research into COVID-19 and ways to combat it](#) – and made an important contribution toward overcoming the crisis by lending their expertise to efforts such as the scientific task force. Bern's renowned research activities in the areas of land use, biodiversity and climate change – specifically with respect to [sustainable agriculture](#), for example – were strengthened even further by the official founding of the Wyss Academy for Nature in May.

The interruption of in-person teaching also gave an additional boost to efforts to implement our digitalization strategy. In fact, we succeeded in switching over to digital teaching in the space of just three days in March 2020.

Competitiveness jeopardized

The two biggest challenges threatening the University of Bern's future success are the building and infrastructure situation as well as uncertainty surrounding Switzerland's involvement in Horizon Europe, the European research program. Not only is the long-term assurance of basic financing from the canton essential for the University, the same also holds true with respect to developments concerning its infrastructure. The University needs swift planning processes that are adapted to meet its needs and it requires that buildings, laboratories, offices, lecture halls and other infrastructure be completed quickly. At present, neither the speed nor the momentum of these factors is adequate to meet the University's needs in the competitive environment. Delays in the renovation and expansion of the University's infrastructure are jeopardizing its competitiveness, which also diminishes the development of the entire region as a place of education, research and business.

A first: more than 19,000 students

A total [of 19,230 students](#) have been registered at the University of Bern since the 2020 fall semester – over 650 more than in the previous year. “The coronavirus crisis might not have been foreseeable, but the fact that digitalization would be an important reality in teaching was”, stresses [Bruno Moretti, Vice-Rector for Teaching](#): “The measures implemented over the past few years to modernize university teaching helped the University of Bern transition courses to distance-learning solutions so quickly.” In that sense, the pandemic accelerated the establishment of new types of teaching. According to [Vice Rector for Development Achim Conzelmann](#), the University’s attractive and successful continuing education portfolio of 124 degree programs is becoming more digital and now features more electives and combinations in an effort to fine-tune the offer to flexibly meet participants’ needs.

External funding increased further despite the pandemic

Total [revenue generated by the University](#) in 2020 changed very little year on year and amounted to CHF 916.9 million. The year-end result from the aggregated accounts came to CHF 35.5 million while the result from basic funding amounted to CHF 4.1 million. The University of Bern’s good reputation continues to be reflected in the fact that external funding is up in the national and international research environment, even despite the pandemic. [Markus Brönnimann, Director of Administration](#), says that the financial consequences of the pandemic will mainly be felt in the years to come, in part due to the fact that the University will have to provide funding for early career academics whose projects are delayed due to the restrictions and whose temporary appointments are no longer guaranteed because their project funding is expiring.

New center to fight pandemics

“Even under more difficult conditions, Bern’s researchers were extremely busy and successful during this special pandemic year,” stresses [Daniel Candinas, Vice-Rector for Research](#). The University’s successful efforts to attract national research funds show that it’s on the right track. Thanks to its numerous scientific contributions to the COVID-19 pandemic, the University of Bern – with generous financial support from the Vinetum Foundation – was able to establish a new strategic research center in December 2020, the Multidisciplinary Center for Infectious Diseases, with the goal of improving how we deal with future pandemics.

Taking our quality culture to the next level

According to [Silvia Schroer, Vice-Rector for Quality](#), the University of Bern leveraged the current accreditation process pursuant to the Higher Education Act as an opportunity to take its quality culture to the next level in a broad-based process. The University has also set itself the goal of becoming a climate-neutral institution by 2025 in all areas in which it has a direct influence.

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