

Annual media release, September 10, 2020

Coronavirus leads to a push towards digitalization and a raised media profile

Even in the emergency situation between March and June 2020, the teaching activities at the University of Bern continued on a very good basis – and numerous research successes surrounding Sars-CoV-2 gave it a pleasingly high and positive media presence. The teaching at the University was digitalized within a very short period of time. However, the new semester is getting underway again with as much classroom teaching as possible. 19,000 students are now enrolled.

On Monday, September 14, the 2020 fall semester is starting at the University of Bern. There have been no significant changes in the number of applications for the Bachelor's and Master's programs compared with the previous year. The University of Bern is presently expecting to welcome approximately 2,600 first-year students (in the fall semester of 2019 there were around 2,300 first-year students). 600 people are applying for a Master's degree program for the first time, in addition to those returning to the University of Bern after an interruption or seamlessly advancing from a Bachelor's to Master's degree program. The University of Bern has recorded a significant fall of roughly 50% in the number of students who have enrolled at a foreign university for a semester due to the situation surrounding the coronavirus.

"In keeping with the excellent reputation of the University of Bern, these new figures confirm the trend in recent years, which has seen a constant increase," explains Bruno Moretti, Vice-Rector for Teaching at the University of Bern.

The Faculty of Medicine remains the biggest faculty with over 3,500 students, followed by the Faculty of Science, which also succeeded in recording its highest number of applications this year. To date, there are applications for studies from 130 countries and the share of foreign students in the University of Bern has remained constant at 13 percent.

Expansion of the medical center and a new building for "Uni Muesmatt"

Cooperating closely, the Canton of Bern, the University of Bern and the Insel Gruppe AG are further developing the important Insel Campus on the University Hospital area. In this context, in 2019, sitem-insel was opened, the Swiss Institute for Translational and Entrepreneurial Medicine. The University of Bern is a founding member and academic partner of sitem-insel.

In 2019, the Bern Center for Precision Medicine (BCPM) of the University of Bern and the Insel Gruppe AG began operations. Precision medicine is considered the medicine of the future due to its approach of offering “tailor-made” treatments to individual patients. The planned new education and research center of the University of Bern, which will bring the institutes of the Faculty of Medicine together under one roof, is also focusing on the future. Markus Brönnimann, Administrative Director of the University of Bern, explains how this is a huge step forward for Bern as a medical center: “This merger will create modern research conditions – combining research, teaching and clinical practice at the same location allows for a wide range of synergies to be used.” The winning project for the construction of the center has been determined, and the preliminary project, with the cost estimate, should be available by the end of 2021.

A new building for the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry of the University of Bern is to be constructed on the “Uni Muesmatt” site in the Länggasse. The Cantonal Government of the Canton of Bern has approved the loan for the project management and the tender to the amount of CHF 22.8 million. The new building is necessary because the existing building on the Muesmatt site is in considerable need of renovation. Moreover, it no longer meets the current requirements for a teaching and research building. Construction is scheduled to start in 2026.

“Despite these projects, the infrastructure situation at the University of Bern remains insufficient. In addition to the 'Teaching Building for Medicine' and 'Veterinary Medicine Laboratory' projects, temporary accommodation is urgently needed. Without these measures, there won't be enough space for teaching and research in the foreseeable future,” explains Brönnimann.

Wyss Academy for Nature: Initial projects in preparation

The Wyss Academy for Nature, which was founded by the Wyss Foundation, the University of Bern and the Canton of Bern in 2019, aims to promote sustainable development at the interface between land use, biodiversity and the climate. Four regional hubs in Latin America, East Africa, Southeast Asia and the Canton of Bern play a key role here, where new solutions for people and nature are being jointly developed, tested and implemented at the interface between practice and research. In May 2020, the Wyss Academy was established as an independent foundation, the Board of Trustees was appointed and Peter Messerli was appointed as Director. 14 projects of the Bern Hub are currently being updated and initiated. All the project contracts are set to be signed by March 2021, and at the request of the Wyss Academy, the updated implementation program 2021-23 is set to be adopted by the Cantonal Government in spring 2021.

“The Wyss Academy for Nature allows the University of Bern to strengthen its national and international position and to make a definite contribution to the sustainable development of society worldwide,” explains Rector Christian Leumann.

New Vice-Rectors elected

The Cantonal Government of the Canton of Bern has elected two new members to the Executive Board of the University. On August 1, 2021, Prof. Dr. Virginia Richter will assume the role of Vice-Rector for Development (succeeding Achim Conzelmann) and Prof. Dr. Fritz Sager will assume the role of Vice-Rector for Teaching (succeeding Bruno Moretti). As the former Dean of the Faculty of Humanities (2014 to 2017), Virginia Richter has wide-ranging knowledge of the university and considerable managerial experience. The same applies to Fritz Sager, who was Dean of the Faculty of Business, Economics and Social Sciences from 2016 to 2018.

Until August 2021, the Executive Board of the University has the following members: Christian Leumann (Rector), Silvia Schroer (Vice-Rector for Quality), Bruno Moretti (Vice-Rector for Teaching), Daniel Candinas (Vice-Rector for Research), Achim Conzelmann (Vice-Rector for Development) and Administrative Director Markus Brönnimann. The Executive Board of the University is supported by Secretary General Christoph Pappa and by Christian Degen, Head of the Communication & Marketing Office, as a visiting appointee.

A push towards digitalization and an increased media presence due to the coronavirus

The lockdown as of March made it necessary for the entire teaching operations of the University of Bern to be converted to digital media. Thanks to the strategic developments in recent years in the area of innovative teaching and IT infrastructure, and due to the huge commitment of lecturers and students, this was achieved within just three days. Although the 2020 fall semester will start again with as much classroom teaching as possible, the lecturers are free to continue to hold their courses exclusively online or in mixed form (blended learning). “In this respect, the coronavirus crisis has made it clear to everyone that the instruments for allowing digital teaching are already in place. The University of Bern remains convinced of the particular value of classroom teaching, however, and considers the best development to be a beneficial combination between classroom and online teaching,” explains Vice-Rector for Teaching, Bruno Moretti.

The coronavirus has also seen research projects being delayed in certain areas. On the other hand, the University of Bern has been able to position itself strongly with its research on Sars-CoV-2, which has found reflection in numerous reports in the media both in Switzerland and abroad. In the fields of epidemiology and virology in particular, the research has been very successful. In February 2020, for instance, the University of Bern had succeeded in cloning the new coronavirus. This clone is now supporting research groups with the development of antiviral drugs and vaccines worldwide. “The work we carried out early on during the pandemic is certain to raise the profile of Bern as a location for research,” says Daniel Candinas, Vice-Rector for Research.

The University of Bern has also been required to reschedule some major events: The “Nacht der Forschung” science festival, for instance, which attracts 9,000 visitors and was scheduled to take place in September 2020, has been postponed until the beginning of September 2021. Other events will largely take place in digital form, such as the Bachelor Information Days for prospective students in December 2020.

Office for Gender Equality celebrates its 30 year anniversary

The University of Bern established its Office for Gender Equality (AfG) 30 years ago. Its goals include ensuring a balance of both genders at all levels as well as a balance between the study, work and care obligations for women and men. During the lockdown, the AfG provided an additional service, and offered support to employees and students who found themselves under considerable physical and psychological strain due to the coronavirus measures. “People with care obligations and those in the group of persons who are at risk or live with someone who is at risk continue to face considerable challenges. The past few months, in particular, have shown how important the work of the Office for Equality and the structures of equality in the faculties is,” explains Silvia Schroer, Vice-Rector for Quality.

Annual report now available as digital content package

The Annual Report 2019 of the University of Bern has been published in digital form for the first time, and marks a milestone in the digitalization of the communication work at the university. With its new digital annual report, the University of Bern presents itself as what it is: a leading university which is future-oriented and which focuses on the social relevance of its activities. In the interests of sustainability and according to the digitalization strategy of the University of Bern that was adopted in 2019, the existing high-quality printed product was transformed into an innovative and varied digital package of contents. Christian Degen, Director of the Communication & Marketing Office, explains: "It was a real challenge. Together with our partners, we developed a completely new digital magazine in about half a year in three different languages: German, French and English. The magazine is well received: most of the feedback was very positive." The 2019 annual report is available [here](#).

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