

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 27 (2000)
Heft: 4

Artikel: Further education : "We are the people's university"
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907647>

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"We are the people's university"

INTERVIEW: ALICE BAUMANN

When education is dependent on the economy, funding is no easy matter. An interview with Education Officer Barbara Geiser.

What does the slogan "life-long learning" mean to you?

Man never stops learning. Continual professional training is of paramount importance. Another way of looking at education is as a practical way of filling leisure time. Adult education also performs a social function, since friendships are forged in the course of study. In addition, education is a resource for social development and a precondition for future prosperity. Universities perform an important task.

Such exalted sentiments are often met with empty coffers. What is the situation of the Berne Popular Institute of Learning (Volkshochschule)?

Cost-cutting pressures also lead to uncertainty at any popular institute of learning. Our budget is CHF 2.55 million, and we finance 80 percent of our operating costs from course fees. We obtain 20 percent subsidies from the canton and city of Berne and 17 percent from communities in the

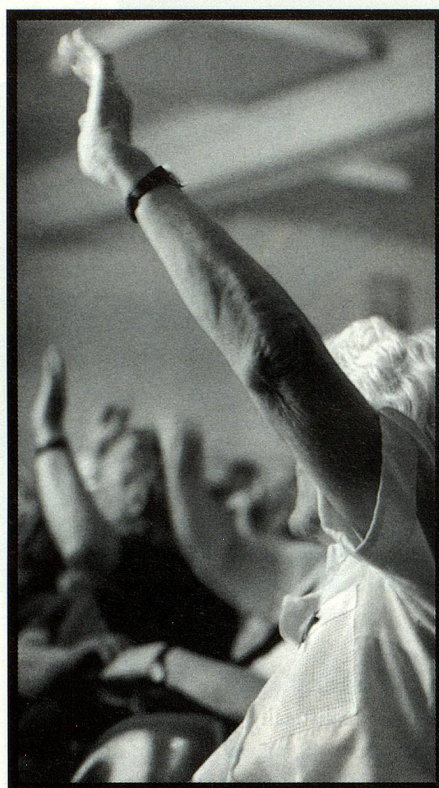


Photo: Martin Möbi

agglomeration. So we must bear four-fifths of the costs ourselves. This is why we seek sponsors.

But your infrastructure is cheap.

Yes, we benefit from cantonal facilities. Our courses are held on the premises of Berne University and in state schools. By the way, for many students it is important to be taught in the hallowed halls of the university. We also obtain support from the state in the form of subsidies to our umbrella organisations.

How has the recession of the 1990s impacted the demand for further education?

The demand for education depends on the economy. Like so many other educational institutes, the shadow of cost-cutting looms over us. The number of students has dropped since 1992 from 17,000 to 12,000. Our financing system is extremely sensitive:

if 1000 students leave, our annual budget becomes unbalanced. In 1999 we survived with a deficit of CHF 186,000. Fortunately the economic upswing set in. Added to this, we launched some targeted marketing measures.

How many courses do you hold and who attends them?

In 1999 we held 1200 courses. Our market research indicates that our student base comes from the middle layer of society. Most students already have qualifications. Men and women over 40 make up the majority. But we want to change our image and increasingly target young people.

What subjects do you offer?

Our subjects range from political science, information technology, languages, art and culture, to health and fitness. Because we work closely with the university, we can also offer academic courses.

How is the curriculum worked out?

The fact is that education is gaining in importance because people are spending less of their time in gainful employment and have more free time at their disposal. In terms of individual career planning the trend is towards modular studies with the option of intermediate diplomas. Even now our students can gain a diploma in IT or languages which is valid throughout Europe. Currently we are designing a similar module in the field of culture.

How do you differ from the Migros Club School and other institutes of adult education?

We are the people's university and offer high-quality tuition at a reasonable price. Comparisons have shown that we are cheaper in some areas than Migros. This is only possible because our 500 lecturers are imbued with idealism; only a very few depend on their fees for subsistence. Unlike the nation-wide Migros curriculum, we fine-tune our offerings to individual regions. Moreover, we have close contact with government authorities.

The interviewee



Barbara Geiser is 52 years old and lives in Berne. A graduate in educational science, she has been head of the City and Region of Berne Popular Institute for Learning for a year. The institute is 80 years old and performs a public education mandate.