10 stories
for 10 years

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Ten years of academic innovation

In 1996, in a country with a seven million population, nine universities and two institutes of technology, there seemed to be little room for a new university. One had to come up with new ideas and the courage to put them into practice. What opened doors for USI, the only Italian-speaking university outside Italy, was a powerful alchemy of attractive academic programmes, new approaches to management, and new funding models.

Teaching started in 1996 with 326 students; 10 years on, the student body exceeded 2,000. It was an exciting project for the region and for the Swiss university system. Of the initial three Faculties, Architecture and Economics drew upon, and reflected, strong professional traditions in Southern Switzerland, while Communication sciences was a novelty nationwide. It reflected the growing interest in the phenomenon of communication, its modes of expression and the role it plays in a global society. And then, in 2004, the Faculty of Informatics was founded. It addressed a clear demand for a discipline which is turning into a theoretical science affecting and refashioning several fields of scientific inquiry through concepts and ideas.

Unencumbered by nineteenth-century traditions, and committed to academic autonomy, USI is run by one single organ. Its lean management sets it apart from the other Swiss universities, granting independence, flexibility and fast decision-making. The presiding body is the University Council. It comprises ex-officio members (the minister for education in the cantonal executive

and the Faculty deans) and external representatives, mainly full professors in sister universities, with a long experience in teaching, research and academic management. The Council is self-ruling in academic matters and independent in terms of planning and finance. It elects the president of the University, who becomes the chairman of the Council and takes on the full-time role and responsibilities of a rector.

Within the Council, the presence of strong academic personalities on the international academic stage (we currently have four university rectors), of the minister for culture and education, and the chairman of the Foundation for the Faculties is a guarantee of academic and political professionalism. Equally important is the role of the Faculty deans as members of the Council, because they directly represent their Faculties and are jointly involved in the running of the University.

In its first ten years of existence, USI has fully taken on board the reforms prescribed by the Bologna Declaration, conquered a statute of independence, and implemented major collaborative projects promoting teaching and research with national and international higher-education institutions. USI is an active player in the creation of Switzerland's new academic landscape ('**Swiss**university.ch'). The latter foreshadows a national university system where ten cantonal universities and two federal institutes of technology are joined together by cooperation, fair contest and complementarity.

Academy of Architecture

There was a time when, in Switzerland, studying architecture meant studying in German or in French at the Federal Institutes of Technology, in Zurich or Lausanne. No longer so. Ten years ago, an alternative was created: USI's Academy of Architecture. Drawing upon a centuries-old tradition of architects and master builders of northern Italy's lake region, but equally upon modernism and post-modernism, the Academy leads the debate on the role of architecture in society. A rich array of humanistic disciplines – aesthetics, art history and history of architecture, sociology, anthropology, ecology – stimulates critical thought on the concepts that support architecture and the search for a new balance between man and environment. In the end, the architectural project subsumes a series of processes (cultural, social, economic, and technical) and mediates between the initial idea and the final product.

At the Academy, deep historical roots do not rule out a broad international horizon. The ateliers, where each student has a personal drawing table, like in an architect's studio, are supervised by professionals from all four language areas of Switzerland and from several European countries, all with their own different styles and approaches. By progressing from one atelier to the next, the future architects are confronted with the major trends in world architecture.

Informatics: it's everywhere

We communicate by electronic mail, read newspapers on-line, shop and buy from companies that exist only in cyberspace… Engineers use software to design and build airplanes, and pilots use software to fly them... Ninety percent of the cost of cell phones is software… Informatics is everywhere. Universities must reflect on what role they can play in this new world, how best to respond to informatics and ever newer and broader applications; and they must review their teaching methods. That is why, in 2004, USI created a Faculty entirely devoted to Informatics.

The teaching curriculum focuses on the fundamentals of the discipline: software design and architecture, modelling and analysis of complex systems, the theory of the latest technologies, and the development of system thinking. As it is essential to practise programming, theoretical lectures are complemented by fairly complex projects. In their daily laboratory activities, students have a chance to apply concepts and principles acquired during regular lectures, testing their soundness and learning to design and programme from day one.

The Faculty is becoming an internationally recognised centre of research and teaching in advanced informatics; and it promotes synergies with the programmes of the Institutes of Technology in Zurich, Lausanne, and Milan, with which it already enjoys a fruitful partnership.

Living multilingualism

To study at USI, one should be reasonably fluent in Italian and English, the two languages of tuition. Italian is the main teaching language in the three-year Bachelor's programme, while English is frequent in the two-year taught graduate curricula (Master), in the PhD and the executive Master's (Master of advanced studies) programmes, as they attract several foreign students who do not speak Italian. In addition, English is compulsory for Informatics, which is taught in its 'original' language.

In corridors, offices and classrooms at USI one tends to come across different languages on a day-to-day basis. It is not uncommon to overhear students, research assistants, and professors talking to each other in German, or run into English being spoken at the cafeteria or again attend talks and workshops in French. At staff and Faculty meetings various languages alternate and mix quite happily. At USI a typical Swiss legend comes true: four major European languages are used in day-to-day business.

Statistics bear out USI's cosmopolitan spirit: it is the Swiss university with the highest proportion of foreign students. Notably, professors come from all language areas of Switzerland, several European countries, and the United States. Not bad at all, especially when we consider that when USI was founded few believed that its name and role would echo much beyond the local borders.
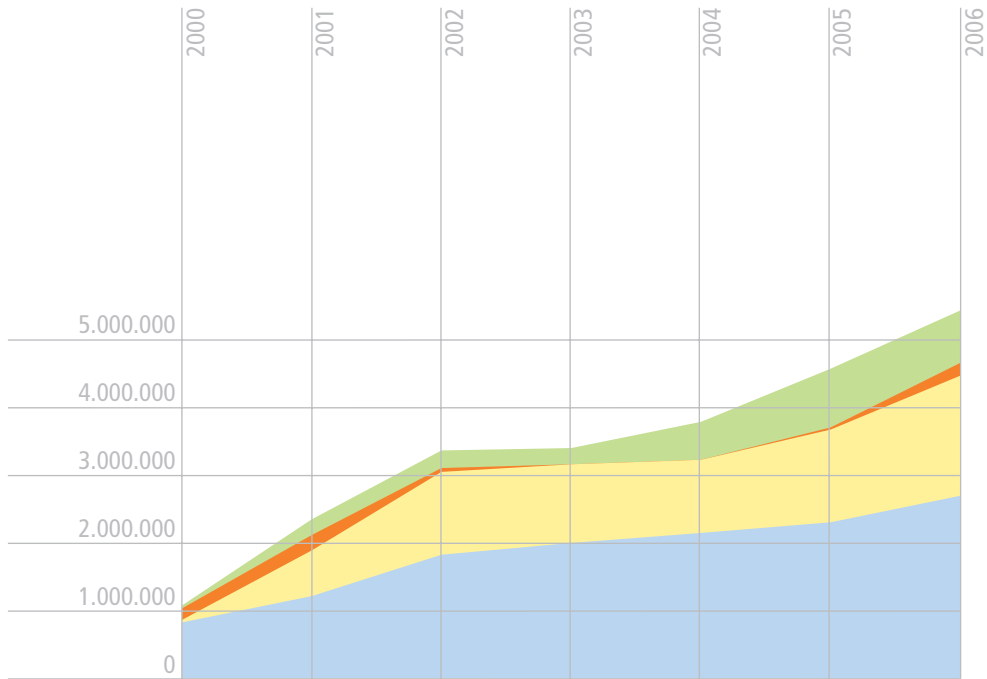
The ideal home for studying

Steady growth has not changed the familiar atmosphere typical of USI, where full professors know their students by name and can monitor their progress.

The 'Red building', where most classes are held in Lugano, reflects the architecture of an environment ideally suited to formal lectures, interactive seminars, and workshops. The primary geometrical shapes, deep colours and large window panes are - paradoxically perhaps - a powerful stimulus for concentration. This compact building unit contains three types of classrooms: all fitted with the same technical equipment for teaching, they seat 150, 60 or 36 students. By express wish of the Faculties class groups are generally small, so as to ensure maximum student-teacher interaction. This arrangement matters above all during the two-year specialisation curricula, where the majority of students come from other countries and language areas, creating a pleasingly cosmopolitan environment.

Teaching in Architecture and Informatics is closely tied in with planning skills, and one cannot help noticing how these two fields, though ostensibly far apart, have adopted comparable educational methods. In both cases, the typical teaching day is organised in two distinct phases: the morning devoted to formal theoretical lectures, the afternoon entirely taken up by workshop or laboratory practice.

Research: a success story

At USI, teaching and scientific research are inseparable. This unity is the main commitment of doctoral students, research associates and professors alike. By conducting leading-edge research and keeping an eye on its progress, researchers contribute to pushing back the frontiers of learning, thus also enriching their own teaching. Additionally, research findings and scientific publications are an essential element in the contest between universities, and a real asset in the exchange and collaborative ventures with peer institutions.

Ever since 2000, when the first degrees were awarded, the University has put a good deal of effort into research projects funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, the European Union, and other independent funding councils. From 2000 to 2006, the total of grants and subsidies received from these sources increased eightfold, hitting an annual total of SFr. 5.7 million. Many young research fellows (and doctoral students in particular) have contributed to this achievement by engaging in about a hundred research projects.

The range of topics has considerably broadened, and the number of collaborative ventures with other universities has risen accordingly. In fields where interest is currently growing – e.g. finance, health economics, health communication, and new media in education – there has been a remarkably positive spin-off: USI has created three doctoral schools, in association with various partners in Swiss and Italian universities.
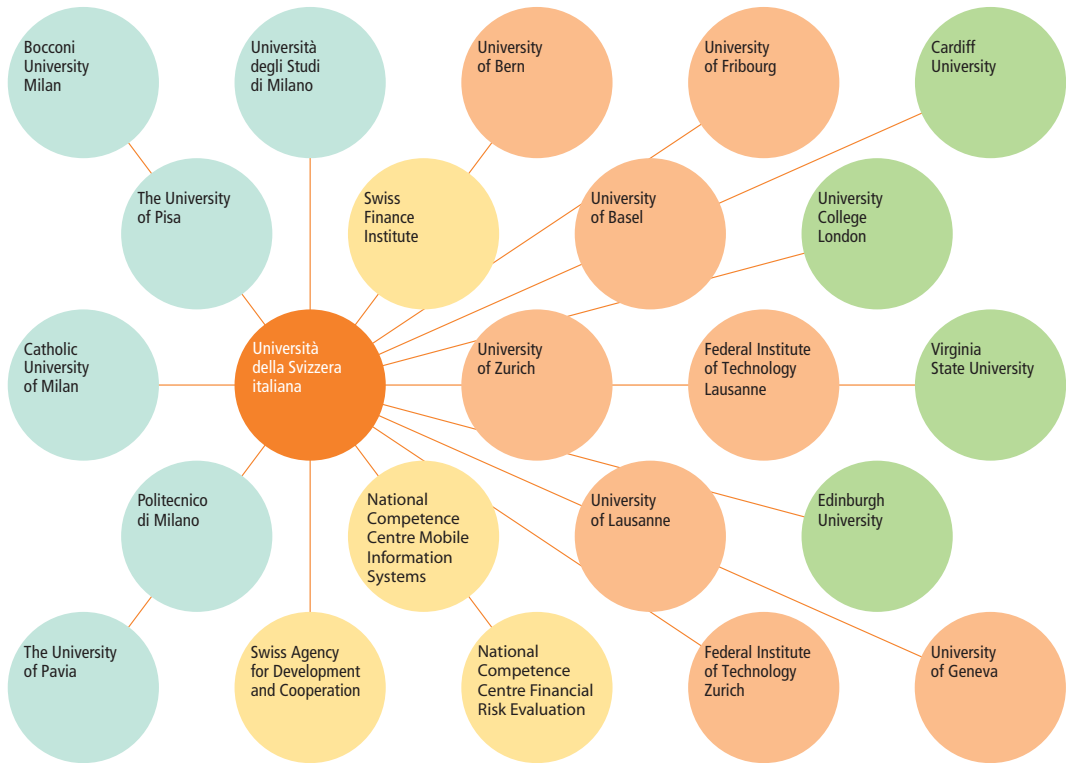
Creativity in the round

As night falls, on the Lugano campus the 'Glass building', a clear slab, 20 yards in length and five-storey high, begins to sparkle like a crystal. Inside, late into the night, one can see the intense activity of research. Sitting at modern work stations, surrounded by books and sheets of paper with their notes, and the computer screen switched on, the main actors, the students of Economics and Communication sciences, are at work on their degree dissertations or PhD theses, developing projects and term papers.

USI is proud of this research breeding ground, a dedicated space for students who conduct their own projects, day and night, in an atmosphere of collegiate spirit. Spatial transparency fosters mutual consultation, dialogue, exchange of information, ideas, and vision.

Bocconi University Milan

Università degli Studi di Milano

University of Bern

University of Fribourg

Cardiff University

The University of Pisa

Swiss Finance Institute

University of Basel

University College London

Catholic University of Milan

Università della Svizzera italiana

University of Zurich

Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne

Virginia State University

Politecnico di Milano

National Competence Centre Mobile Information Systems

University of Lausanne

Edinburgh University

The University of Pavia

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

National Competence Centre Financial Risk Evaluation

Federal Institute of Technology Zurich

University of Geneva

You can tell a university by the company it keeps

It is crucial, though far from simple, for a university in the first flush of youth, to develop fruitful and dynamic academic alliances. USI has managed to do so in the relatively short span of ten years.

Today, our University has joined two national centres of competence (Finance and Mobile communication systems) and is a funding member of the 'Swiss Finance Institute', a joint operation involving the banking system and universities, with premises in Lugano, Zurich, and Lausanne. Moreover, USI co-operates with both Federal Institutes of Technology (on Urban planning, Design sciences, and Super-computing) and is an active member of various national and international programmes and networks for research and education in regional economics, logistics, public management, health economics, health communication, distance learning, and national multilingualism. Two observatories for mass communication studies – one devoted to European journalism, the second to the Comparative study of electronic media in China and Europe – are growing in status.

3M Italia – ABT, Associazione Bancaria Ticinese – ACMA Centro di Architettura – Adecco – Aduno SA – Aeroporto Agno – African Development Bank – AFS Intercultural Programs – AITI - Associazione Industrie Ticinesi – Aiti servizi SA – Aktis Conseils – Aldi Suisse – Alenia Aeronautica S.p.A – Alfex SA – Alliance Sud – Allianz Private Equity Partners (APEP) – Alpen-Initiative – Alstom – Amka films productions SA – Amministrazione 2000 – Amministrazione Cantonale – Amnesty International – Ander Group – Animédia – Aorep – Aprilia – Argo Asset Management SA – Artsana S.p.A – ASA – InWEnt - Capacity Building International – ASG - associazione svizzera gestori patrimoniali – ATED – Bain&Company – Bally Shoe Factories – Banca Arner Sa – Banca Caboto – Banca del Gottardo Sa – Banca del Sempione – Banca Intesa – Banca Nazionale Svizzera – Banca Popolare di Sondrio Suisse Sa – BancaStato – Bertelsmann Stiftung – BlueComm sarl – BMW – BSI SA, Banca della Svizzera Italiana – B-Source – Bundesamt für Gesundheit (BAG) – Bundesamt für Kultur (BAK) – Burson-Marsteller AG – Cablecom – Cardio Centro Ticino – Casinò di Lugano – Ccia, Camera di Commercio Industria e Artigianato, Ticino – Centro di studi bancari – CERN – CHC business solutions SA – CICR- Comitato Croce Rossa Internazionale – Città di Lugano – ColomboGroup Spa Industria tessile – Commissione svizzera per l'UNESCO – Compass Group (Schweiz) AG – CONSONO – Coop – Cornèr Banca Sa – Corriere del Ticino – Costa Crociere – CPC Ingénieur informatique SA – Credit Suisse – Dangaard Telecom Switzerland SA – Darwin Airline – DECS - Dipartimento educazione, cultura e sport – Deerive – Dell Computer Sa – Deloitte – Deutsche Boerse Group – DFA Federal Department of Foreign Affairs – DHL Expresss Ticino – DSC - Direzione dello sviluppo e della cooperazione – Duferco SA – EAIE- European Association for international education – Ecointesys Sa – Ef cultural Tours – EFTA- european free trade association – Ejl Consultants – Emissions Trading Solutions St. Gallen AG – Eni - Scuola Enrico Mattei – Ente Ospedaliero Cantonale – Fairfield Partners LLC – Ferrari – Ferrovie Federali Svizzere – Fidinam and Partners – Finpromotion Sa – Flybaboo SA – FOSIT – Frontline Communications – Gdsnetwork – GENERALI Versicherungen – Helvetia Patria Group – Hotelplan Italia – Hugo Boss Industries – Hupac Intermodal SA – IBM Svizzera – ICRC - Comité International de la Croix-Rouge – idheap – IKONA edizioni – Ilapak – imaginary srl – ImagoFilm Sa – Indesit Company – InWEnt - Capacity Building International – Ispfp - Istituto svizzero di Pedagogia – Istituto svizzero di Pedagogia per la formazione professionale- Ispfp – Julius Baer Bank – Kieger Ag – Kombox AG – Kora – KPMG – La Regione Ticino– LaPosta PostMail Regione Sud – Leo Burnett Italy – Ligues de la Santé – LMC Lifestyle Management & consulting SA – Logos Knowledge Network – LSE - Lingue e stage all'estero – Mangart Capital Advisors – Manor SA – Mazzantini & Associati SA – Mediaset – Microsoft – Migros Ticino – Mikron Sa – NTTCable Italy S.r.l. – Pharmaton – PKB PRIVATBANK AG – Polizia Cantonale – Postfinance – Prada Spa – Press4web Srl – Pricewaterhouse Coopers SA – Procter & Gamble Services (Switzerland) SA – Prometeia – Prometeo investment services – Recontam S.A. – Reuters italia Spa – RIRI – RTSI – SECO – Securitas – Segreteria di stato per l'educazione e la ricerca SER – SG Private Banking – Sotell - Servizi Organizzazione Tempo Libero e lavoro – Spontex Italia S.p.A – STMicroelectronics – Studio Dorè – Swatch SA – Swiss Academy for development SAD – Swiss TXT – Swisscom Mobile – Swisscontent Corp. Money – SwissLife – TC Systems – Teleticino Sa – Terroir du Monde – Ticino calcio – Ticino Management – Ticino Turismo – Ticinocalcio.ch – TicinoOnline – Tilo- Ferrovie federali svizzere FFS – Tinext SA – Touring Club Italiano – Touring club svizzero, sezione ticino – ToutLeContenu.com – Turbomach Sa – UBS – UBS Sa – Ufficio federale del consumo – UNESCO – Unicef – Unifortune Asset Management SA – United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) – United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) – United Nations Volunteers – USTAT – Valoring Sagl – Vertime – VF International - nautica – Visuel Communication – Vito Noto Design – Walt Disney Company Italia S.p.A. – Wellness and Management – White Medical Sagl – World Bank – World Tourism Organisation – WWF Svizzera – Your Franchise office SA – Zambon Group

University and the world of work

The career opportunities of its graduates matter very much for a university today. Universities monitor with interest the evolution of traditional professions as well as the rise of new ones, so as to be able to guide their graduate students towards well-considered choices. On the other hand, employers seem to have become more aware of the importance of being better informed on higher-education programmes, in order to identify their future staff.

If USI assists its graduates in their search for internships and full-time employment, it also provides support for its students in designing a career programme. Hence its Stage&Placement Service. The Service acts as an interface between students, graduates and teaching staff on the one hand, and firms and company representatives on the other, as a vehicle of information and exchange facilitator. It was well worth it! A recent survey has shown that over 80 per cent of USI students who graduated between 2000 and 2004 had landed a job within three months of completing their degree. In the past three years of activity, Stage&Placement has handled one thousand job offers, secured work placements for 800 students and hosted 90 company presentations at USI.

From border area to centre stage

Southern Switzerland sits in the middle between two significant cultural, economic, and scientific regions, which traditionally have not talked to each other very much: German-speaking Switzerland and northern Italy. Sensitive to this sort of 'north-south divide', USI has built an academic bridge spanning from Zurich to Milan, Pisa and St. Gallen, Lausanne and Pavia, as well as several other university centres in Switzerland and Italy. It is a metaphorical bridge underpinned by cross-border projects. It includes, for example, two-year Master's degree programmes run in conjunction with Pavia University and the Catholic University of Milan, two doctoral schools, New Media in Education and Health Economics, in partnership with five Swiss universities and the State University of Milan, not to mention structural-development programmes such as the Faculty of Informatics and the Institute for Embedded Systems Design, which USI established in association with Milan's Politecnico and the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich.

With this construct, Ticino has become a point of convergence of flows, ideas, and academic projects, which in the past did little more than brush past it. USI offers an opportunity for enriching academic exchange. French- and German-speaking students and professors enjoy learning to come to terms with an Italian-speaking academic and cultural context. Conversely, Italian students and professors value this chance to study and work in an international environment without having to leave behind their Italian-language background.

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