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The “Strickhof” traditionally open-minded – an illustrative case

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The agricultural sector has to cope with an unprecedented structural change. By launching an ambitious educational offensive, the agricultural college Strickhof made the most of this difficult situation.

1. The Strickhof yesterday and today

The rural vocational training dates back to the middle of the 19th century. On 3 May 1853, the first cantonal agricultural annual college was opened on the area of the Strickhof in Zurich. Therefore, the Strickhof is the oldest still existing agricultural college in Switzerland. On the occasion of the celebration of the 50th anniversary in 1905, director Glättli from the agricultural college Plantahof pointed out the numerous former students from Strickhof who worked as teachers in agricultural colleges in Switzerland, „the college Strickhof could therefore rightly be called the mother of the other colleges.“ The entire course lasted for two years. In the winter semesters, the school lessons with about 40 hours per week of general education, scientific and agricultural subjects were predominant. In the summer semester, the students did practical work on the estate farm; the twenty school lessons were then given early in the morning or in the evening. Even in the 19th century, the authorities and the school management debated about the question of how the educational goal of the agricultural college could be reached and what courses were necessary for this in order to satisfy the farmers' needs.

A crucial stage in this continuing process was marked by the years around 1870. For some time, the number of students had decreased. Furthermore, the majority of former Strickhof students had not chosen the agricultural profession, but were looking for their livelihood in other areas of business. Sons of urban families attended the college of Strickhof and later they often found a job as farm manager on German estate farms.

During this time, politicians also had a critical look at the Strickhof. The cantonal council decided that the Strickhof should continue in existence. **Furthermore, great store should be set by special agricultural courses and courses in further education as well as by the “itinerant teachers”.** Thus, the basic elements were established; elements that even if they have a different name today can still be found in agricultural education and extension. The idea for offers of lifelong learning was conceived. The following three key elements have time and again played an important role:

1. Customer orientation: Between 1905 and 1927 additional winter schools were opened in the canton of Zurich in Wetzikon, Affoltern am Albis, Wädenswil, Stäfa, Bülach and Winterthur Wülflingen. This had long-term effects and resulted in the canton of Zurich still having one of the highest densities of agriculturally trained farmers. The transfer of the cantonal agricultural college of Strickhof to Lindau-Eschikon in 1976 was an important milestone. The then director of the Department of Economic Affairs, the cantonal councillor Hans Künzi, coined the notion of the “green university”. Künzi who committed himself enthusiastically to the new building of the school developed the vision of a comprehensive, interdisciplinary agricultural educational centre. Many of the former visions have become reality and more new ideas have come up.

After the closure of the agricultural colleges in Affoltern am Albis, Bülach, Wädenswil because of a drop in student numbers and - just a short time ago - in Wetzikon for reasons of financial policy, the remaining schools were gradually transferred into the „Strickhof“. The term Strickhof is still regarded as a trade mark. Thanks to the excellent traffic access to the school, distance is no longer a problem for many courses. However, it is still important that group extensions or field inspections are carried out in a decentralised way.

2. Innovation: In the middle of the Seventies, during the time of the opening of the new Strickhof, the number of students at the agricultural colleges reached a first low. At the time when the “green” professions made a short comeback, the number of students increased once again. However, as the number of farms went down due to the structural change – the decline rate is about 2 percent a year – the number of agricultural apprentices and therefore students sank and reached an all-time low in 1994. Today, the Strickhof is again fully occupied. The crisis has been turned into an opportunity for reorientation and opening. Newly organised courses are oriented to mastering the changes in the agricultural sector; they bear in mind the high quality demands of the consumers and the increasing cost pressure. Furthermore, the recognition of the young farmers’ need for an education that allows them - if necessary - to enter into other fields of activity has been generally accepted. Moreover, the higher education courses have been opened for related sectors i.e. professions like gardeners, forest wardens, grooms and horse trainers. Thus, the courses offered by the Strickhof prepare, on the one hand, for the challenges in the field of food and nature, and allow, on the other, hand assuming master or management functions.

Today, the Strickhof offers a variety of education and further education courses. There are new apprenticeships (semi-skilled) in agriculture and in equine professions in order to offer weaker school-leavers new professional perspectives too. After the apprenticeship, further educational possibilities are open; for example the college for commercial agriculture, the manager school with orientation towards farm techniques and business management; the master’s certificate or the attendance at the technical college for agricultural economics and management. The training for farmers’ wives has also been newly organised, and - with a few exceptions – the women attend the training after having qualified in a first profession.

3. Active knowledge system: The Strickhof always attached great importance to a close co-operation with the different knowledge-holders in agriculture. On the one hand, there have always been close relations (also physically) with the institutes of higher education ETH: Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, university), with research (research stations), with extension (LBL: Swiss Centre for Agricultural Extension), with the economy. On a smaller scale, the knowledge hub is expanded by the fact that the local farmers’ unions have their headquarters at the Strickhof. The most important element is the 3 E-concept: Education – Enterprise – Extension. With these three elements, a continuing knowledge exchange is created. The Strickhof works according to its motto „traditionally open-minded“.

2. What contribution does the Strickhof make to lifelong learning?

a) How is the educational need determined?

- Dovetailing agriculture with economy, research and general education
- Observation of the development in the professional world in general (e.g. specialisation), with limited resources (larger groups), large heterogeneity (“Niveaustufen”: classes according to development and performance level of the students) and higher demands (events for experts)

b) What educational need was determined recently?

- Offers for highly efficient students (also as a driving force for professionalism)
- Offers for weak students
- Integration of disabled students

c) *How are the reactions to the determined educational offers?*

- Rapid, pragmatic and unbureaucratic

3. What is the importance of the different levels?

a) *Basic training (farmer):* forming of independent entrepreneurial personalities. For the entrepreneur the deliberate increase in his/her knowledge is an investment.

b) *Structured further education (further education leading to a certificate):* higher education courses with a flexible offer, modularisation as a reaction to specialisation.

c) *General further education:* newspapers/ magazines, courses, group extension, events for experts, contacts with colleagues working in the same profession or in other sectors, observation of other countries, talking to people/experts, complete weaknesses of other providers.

What is important: motivation, emotion, relevance, newness. We always see the same course participants.

d) *Who decides on importance, evaluation, aims, content, available resources? Who is responsible for the realisation?*

The Strickhof.

4. Final reflections

a) *Changes in the educational need, framework conditions, offer*

Increasing diversity, the customers are able to choose, it benefits the customers, increase in competition, changes at the research stations, the universities and the Swiss Federal Office for Agriculture.

b) *Prospects*

If the farmers do not support the national/ parastatal educational offers via politics (are able to, want to support), the responsibility for further education lies with the private sector. This is my unbiased assessment.

c) *Recommendation*

Large, innovative team, contacts with the business world and with the world of research, co-operation and competition at the same time (cultivate and tolerate).

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