

Digitally enriched teaching at the University of Bern

The chances and challenges of digitalisation make the higher education landscape very dynamic. The University of Bern embraces the opportunities and challenges of digitalisation and wants to actively, critically and sustainably shape digital transformation. One step towards this future is the [EvInCo](#) project (Evidence based digitalised teaching, digitally supported Interaction and collaboration, and an eCoaches programme).

Dr. Etna Krakenberger, Dr. Kerstin Nebel and Dr. Julia Hegy.

Digitalisation is addressed at campuses across Europe. What is unique about your approach?

What might distinguish our approach from other institutions is the typically “Swiss way” of addressing digitalisation and integrating it into teaching. The University of Bern’s digitalisation strategy, “People in Digital Transformation”, has been developed democratically, involving all faculties and employees of all ranks. At the centre are the individuals who are shaped by digitalisation in their studying, teaching, research and administration but who also can and should actively help to shape it. The digitalisation strategy ensures that students and employees are seen and appreciated as human beings amid the continuing digitalisation. It provides a general guideline within which different projects on teaching digitalisation were designed and implemented. In developing these projects, we apply – again, very Swiss – a strong and bottom-up strategy that considers all stakeholders’ diverse needs and demands. One such project is EvInCo.



Which problems did you try to target with the EvInCo project?

We primarily address three challenges: First, we need to identify where digitalisation adds value to teaching. We do not simply want to digitalise education for the sake of digitalisation but rather use it in areas where it makes sense. Good digitalised teaching, like good teaching in general, should be evidence-based. Second, appropriate infrastructure and tools are needed for digitalised teaching to be possible in the first place. Third, we need to equip lecturers with the necessary skills, know-how and resources to be able to offer good digitalised teaching. The EvInCo project consists of three parts that aim to precisely address those challenges, i.e. the promotion of Evidence-based digitalised teaching, the establishment of a foundation for digitally supported Interaction and collaboration, and the development of an eCoaches programme to help lecturers in their teaching.

How did the project kick off? What was the initial spark for setting up the project?

We have had the idea for the EvInCo project for a while. As is often the case, however, daily business and the question of funding got in the way of formalising and implementing this idea. Fortunately, in 2018, [swissuniversities](#), the umbrella organisation of the Swiss universities, provided funding within their national programme '[Strengthening Digital Skills in Teaching](#)' at Swiss higher education institutions. This shows once more how important start-up funding is to get innovative projects off the ground.

What are the main outcomes of EvInCo?

There are some very encouraging and exciting outcomes of EvInCo. We have established a solid infrastructure and related support for digital interaction in teaching and learning. Evidence-based digitalised teaching in various settings is being promoted, expanded and further developed. Our offerings range from short hands-on one-pagers and online self-testing tools to an easily accessible repository comprising tips and tricks, tools, and guidance to support lecturers in digitalising their teaching. This so-called teaching hub is under way. It will be accessed via a single point of access, where already existing information can be aggregated, and new information can be added continuously. Also, we have established an ongoing and quite popular [eCoaches programme](#), which has even been taken up by other institutions. A spill-over effect of eCoaches is that the teaching-learning culture changes in those areas where eCoaches support teachers. Thus, the principle of reverse mentoring, on which the eCoaches programme is based, works.

How have students benefited from the project and the digitalisation strategy?

Students benefit in several ways. Interactive and collaborative tools that have been established allow teaching and learning to become more flexible. The increasing permeation of digital techniques in teaching brought about by EvInCo offers another benefit for the students: they are familiarised with new technologies and tools and, thereby, are prepared for an increasingly digital future. Students can benefit more directly from EvInCo by participating in the eCoaches programme. Not only do they receive professional in-house training on topics related to technology, didactics and learning psychology, but they can also actively contribute to the evidence-based digitalisation of teaching through their work as eCoaches. Also, the university offers [online modules](#) to develop competencies for the (digital) future.

Are there plans to continue these activities after the project ends?

EvInCo's digitally supported interaction and collaboration is now an integral part of the University's service offering, while the eCoaches programme will be continued and disseminated due to its tremendous success and the many benefits for staff and students. Regarding evidence-based digital teaching, new projects are in the pipeline, such as the aforementioned teaching hub. We are currently conducting a comprehensive evaluation of EvInCo to see which EvInCo products are working and where we need to make adjustments or develop further. We are also preparing applications for additional projects and a continuation of the EvInCo project. There will always be new challenges, as the example of AI chatbots impressively demonstrates.

How has the digitalisation strategy affected institutional practices?

Driven by the global Covid pandemic, the focus of digitalisation efforts at the University of Bern and elsewhere has been on establishing digital structures. The University of Bern's new digitalisation strategy, issued last year, focuses on the role of people in the digital transformation. EvInCo is an excellent example of how this strategy is implemented across different areas and levels. Another example is the increase in research on digital transformation across all disciplines. For example, a new professorship and an entire chair focusing on the human at the centre of the digital transformation have been created, and several new interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary study programmes have emerged. The digital transformation has also been taken up by the continuing education programmes offered by the University of Bern, both in terms of design and content.

What kind of support is needed from the national and/or European level to improve the provision of digital skills among students and staff?



Various complementary actions are needed to take advantage of the digital transformation. We see much potential in the involvement of students in the design of teaching and in creating the university campus of tomorrow. And as the Commissioner Mariya Gabriel said, national and transnational mobility and networking play a significant role in supporting digital transformation and improving digital skills. In this way, the digitalisation of higher education teaching should be developed together, using synergies, instead of institutions working on the same topic but acting alone. The alliances of European Universities can contribute to this aim significantly. They should intensely focus on inter-university exchange on all issues related to digital transformation – including competence- and learning-oriented, evidence-based teaching. Programmes such as EvInCo

address the digitalisation of teaching at different levels and with different approaches. They are very flexible and thereby highly adaptable to different needs at other institutions. Policymakers should think about how to scale up such programs. We do not know what the digital future will look like, so it is essential to remain agile.

Biographies:



Dr Etna Krakenberger works as Digital Officer Teaching at the Vice-Rectorate for Teaching. She is involved in several projects regarding digitisation and teaching and is coordinator of the EvInCo project.



Dr Kerstin Nebel works as Project Manager at the Vice-Rectorate for Teaching. She leads several different funding measures in the area of good, digitised, innovative teaching. She is part of the EvInCo team and is responsible for the evaluation of the programme.



Dr Julia Hegy works as a research assistant at the Educational Development Unit at the Center for University Continuing Education. She is involved in various projects on evidence-based teaching, learning and assessment. She is part of the EvInCo team and mainly responsible for different publications about the project.