

Discussion

‘Intercontinental Dialogue’ at the Federal Palace

The digital transformation of vocational education and training: What can Switzerland learn from other countries?

Artificial intelligence (AI) and other new digital opportunities are changing job profiles and, with them, vocational and adult education. How is Switzerland, and how are other countries, addressing this challenge? At the invitation of the Swiss Society for Vocational Research and Practice (SGAB) and the Zurich University of Teacher Education, seven experts from Asia, Africa and Europe exchanged their experiences with a dozen Swiss politicians, as well as representatives from government agencies and associations, at the Federal Palace on 11 March 2026.

Timm Eugster is a registered professional journalist and, from July 2026, will be the editor-in-chief of the specialist journal Transfer.

Members of the Swiss Parliament continue to work in their regular professions. “I, for example, work as a lecturer at the Zurich University of Teacher Education,” says Simona Brizzi, Member of the National Council and Co-President of the SGAB, as she explains the Swiss part-time parliamentary system to her guests at the Federal Palace. Some of the technology and education experts from Singapore, South Africa, Vietnam, Hong Kong and Germany find this close intertwining of politics and professional life quite unique and admirable. They are used to politics in their own countries being a well-paid full-time profession, complete with a sizeable staff and a prestigious office.

Switzerland is proud of its part-time parliament. But also of its vocational training system. “Of course, we have a wealth of experience and are successful,” says Peter Kaeser, Director of WKS KV Bildung and President of the umbrella organisation for all vocational schools in Switzerland: “But that doesn’t mean we can’t learn from other countries.” Especially now that AI and other digital tools are driving rapid change. This poses a challenge for the Swiss vocational training system, which is geared towards resilience and stability, says Kaeser.

Experiences from nine countries

The aim of Martin Berger's SGAB project, supported by Movetia, the national agency for exchange and mobility, is to look beyond national boundaries and engage in international dialogue in the search for answers. During a sabbatical, the lecturer and researcher at the Zurich University of Teacher Education visited institutions and experts in nine countries to learn about their experiences on the path to the digital future of vocational and adult education. Seven of them have now made a return visit to Switzerland (others had to cancel at short notice due to the war in the Middle East or have been stranded en route to Switzerland).

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Simona Brizzi, Member of the National Council, President of the SGAB

The guests and hosts are now seated in Committee Room 3 of the Federal Palace, reporting, discussing and exchanging views. Also invited are the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI), employers' and employees' associations, members of the Science, Education and Culture Committees (SECC) of both chambers, and the Parliamentary Group on Vocational Education and Training. “Dialogue and exchange are crucial when setting the course for sustainable governance in vocational and adult education,” explains Simona Brizzi, SGAB Co-President and Member of the National Council representing the Social Democratic Party from the canton of Aargau.

Switzerland: Grassroots initiatives are crucial

But the guests also have high hopes for their visit to Switzerland, which includes an SGAB symposium the following day. Take Hoang Ngoc Nhung, Head of the Department of Science and Technology at Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology (HUTECH) in Vietnam: “I am very concerned about our students. With our outdated programmes, we cannot prepare them well enough for today's job market.” Yet there is a strong will and commitment to change this – thanks in part to ideas from the exchange here in Switzerland.

Peter Kaeser is familiar with the problem: “There is nothing about AI in the curriculum for commercial students.” And this in a professional field that benefits greatly from the new AI tools whilst at the same time being radically transformed. But: “The topic is nevertheless very much present in the classroom.” For Kaeser, the strength of the bottom-up approach in Switzerland is “that we're doing it anyway.”

Hong Kong: An overarching strategy

Hong Kong is taking a completely different approach, as Professor Guandong Xu, Director of the Department of Artificial Intelligence and Education Innovation at the city's Education University, explained following the introductory session as part of a 'World Café': the government has developed a top-down, overarching strategy for AI literacy that funds infrastructure and projects across all educational institutions. This is based on UNESCO's AI competency framework, which comprises three dimensions: basic technical understanding, application and ethically responsible use. Pupils are already spending significantly less time in the classroom, instead learning the material independently. And when they are in class, the lessons are tailored to them: "The teacher enters the class profile into the tool, and the AI makes suggestions for how to structure the lesson – preparation time for teachers has been massively reduced," says Xu.

Baden-Württemberg: A jointly developed strategy

In the discussion group next door, the model adopted by the German state of Baden-Württemberg is the topic of conversation: here, the teacher training colleges and the state have recognised the need for a comprehensive AI strategy, according to Jan Wischmann, Director of the Weingarten College for Teacher Training and Continuing Professional Development. This is now being developed jointly – "but without involving everyone from the outset and thus running into deadlocks at such an early stage" – and is due to be available shortly.

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Peter Kaeser, Director of WKS KV Bildung

Of course, this does not mean the AI strategy has been implemented by any means. Various approaches were discussed here too. Should teachers in future be required to attain a certain level of AI competence in order to be allowed to teach? Or should we start by experimenting with a handful of motivated teachers in pilot classes, and then bring the next twenty on board – ideally those who are highly regarded by their colleagues? "Once ten per cent of teachers are on board, the tipping point is reached and you can mobilise an entire school," says Peter Kaeser, speaking from experience. And this happens faster than by trying to reach everyone at once. A Swiss recipe for success? – "That's exactly how we do it too," says Toru Iiyoshi, Professor of Educational Technology from Kyoto, Japan.

For Regina Durrer-Knobel, a centrist Member of the National Council from the canton of Nidwalden and Vice-Rector of the Nidwalden Vocational School, looking beyond borders is inspiring and enriching: “Everyone faces the same challenges – and finds different solutions to them.”

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– Dani Duttweiler, SERI

Dani Duttweiler, Head of the VPET Policy Division at SERI, has raised two questions that he repeatedly puts to the various discussion groups: “How do you share examples of good practice?” And: “Is there any monitoring of activities and projects?” As he explains to the international guests: “Here, innovation happens very much from the bottom up. The question is, what is needed to ensure that as many stakeholders as possible can learn about successful examples and draw lessons from them.”

Associations bear responsibility

Markus Maurer, a professor at the Zurich University of Teacher Education, believes that associations in particular bear responsibility within the Swiss vocational education and training system: “We provide training for around 250 occupations. Things work differently everywhere, which means that specific digital skills are required.”

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Nicole Meier, Swiss Employers’ Association

Nicole Meier, Head of Education at the Swiss Employers’ Association, adds: “As long as the vocational training system remains as closely aligned with the labour market as it is today, we are in a very good position.” The latest practical experience and requirements are incorporated every five years when the job profiles are revised. But is that enough? “The relevant regulations and curricula have become increasingly detailed in recent years and have laid down ever more specific skills,” Markus Maurer points out: “Consequently, they become outdated just as quickly.”

Dani Duttweiler sums up the issue as follows: “What about a new megatrend such as cleantech? In that case, for example, the new profession of certified solar installer arose

from a market need and required no overarching regulation. But what if the change this time is much faster and more extensive?”

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Martin Berger, Vice-President of the SGAB

The debate is now underway, says Martin Berger with satisfaction: “Whether from the world of research or practice, whether from Hong Kong or Bern – we understood each other very quickly and have moved on to concrete steps.” He adds: “The SGAB will continue to provide platforms for dialogue so that Swiss vocational and adult education can find a path into the digital future that is both appropriate and meaningful for our system.”