

Statement on Education during COVID-19

swimsa (Swiss Medical Students' Association)

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Education Commission of swimsa (Swiss Medical Students' Association)

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Background

The **swimsa**, as the voice of more than 8000 medical students in Switzerland, is looking back on an eventful and turbulent semester at the universities. The COVID-19 pandemic turned the usual university structure upside down, and within a very short time it was necessary to switch to digital teaching methods. Great work was done by all involved - lecturers made themselves familiar with new teaching formats and flexible solutions were established; all this to enable students to have an adequate semester under crisis conditions. However, some of these solutions performed better in practice than others. The **swimsa** would like to offer the best possible support to the medical faculties in order to guarantee study success and education quality in the following semesters. This letter thus serves to present the position of Swiss medical students and suggests concrete revision approaches.

Opinion of Swiss Medical Students

With the aim to directly capture the attitude of Swiss medical students, the **swimsa** initiated a survey¹ at all medical faculties in Switzerland. Its focus was education during the last spring semester during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interest of medical students in this topic is reflected in the high number of responses; 866 students - more than one in ten students - took the time to fill out the survey. The result of the survey illustrated a national consensus on the following concerns.

Curriculum

With the transformation of various events into digital formats, the podcasts and online lectures (livestreams as well as their recording) were especially appreciated. The vast majority of students (86.6%) would like to see these education formats continue on a supplemental basis beyond the COVID-19 restrictions. Further digital formats such as annotated presentation scripts or online question forums on specific topics are also valued by a significant number of students (40.6% and 29.3% respectively). One of the biggest challenges was the teaching of practical skills. The solutions offered, for example for dissection courses, were rated as „insufficient“ or „severely insufficient“ by more than one third (38.0%) of students. There has been and continues to be a great understanding on the student side of the difficult situation facing universities, yet the

¹ The survey was conducted during the period of 09.20 - 10.13.2020. 866 medical students from all medical faculties in Switzerland and all years participated.

desire for an offer for voluntary repetition opportunities for practical courses is significant. This is especially true for the clinical anatomy practicals, the practice - OSCEs and the courses in the hospital (Clinical Skills & Bedside Teaching). Further cancellation of practicals in the following semesters should be prevented if possible. Besides the regular classes, the exams were also held under special conditions. The elaborated conditions were generally appreciated, 54.5% of students were „satisfied“ or „very satisfied“ with the final solution.

Communication

The quality and quantity of communication between the student body and the deanery emerged as a key concern. 35.2%, more than one third of students rated their experience as „moderate“, for 35.8% communication was „insufficient“ or even „significantly insufficient“. This discontent is to be explained by the fact that students did not feel sufficiently integrated into the decision-making process and learned too late about decisive changes in direction. A bidirectional communication culture characterised by transparency and appreciation can improve this concern as well as reduce psychological stress, ambiguity and frustration on the students' side. In summary, the desire for clear and early communication concerning examination modalities and curriculum structure is apparent.

Mental Health

The change to digital studies, the uncertainty regarding further educational paths and possible family challenges can be mentally stressful. In this context in particular, students would have liked to see more support from the faculties. Only 24% of students found the support offered in this area „good“ or „very good“. The COVID-19 pandemic requires consistent implementation of measures, nevertheless the importance of the mental health of those affected is to be taken seriously and addressed.

Demand of the swimsa

The **swimsa** recognizes the site-specific differences in terms of relationship and trust with the deanery, and welcomes the continuation of education as well as the flexibility in the curricula that has emerged. As the directly affected ones, our experience with the education during the last semester is essential and should be taken into consideration regarding the further planning of the following semesters. Students should be able to actively participate in discussions surrounding their education. Ensuring high-quality education is highly topical right now, as we are reminded of the challenges that will accompany us in the future. The **swimsa** therefore concretely demands:

- the improvement of bidirectional communication structures by establishing new channels of information exchange or maintaining existing ones
- the medical faculties recognize the importance of mental health and proactively inform their students about existing resources
- the continuation and further development of supplementary, digital teaching especially in the form of podcasts, livestreams and other formats
- the opportunity for voluntary repetition of practical and clinical courses as well as the prevention of further cancellations whenever possible

