WRAP UP
SAIEF 2025

THE 1ST SWISS ACADEMIC INNOVATION AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP FORUM (SAIEF)

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SAIEF

The 1st Swiss Academic Innovation and Entrepreneurship Forum (SAIEF)

At the 1st SAIEF meeting on January 14th 2025 in Biel/Bienne, participants from all over Switzerland gathered to exchange on policies and practices to foster innovation and entrepreneurship at Swiss Academic Institutions. This document summarizes the forum and gives recommendations for future iterations of SAIEF.

Strengthen the exchange and knowledge transfer

Over the past decade, Swiss higher education institutions have initiated a number of measures to foster an entrepreneurial mindset and support students and researchers with commercializing their innovative ideas. Despite the rapidly growing ecosystem around academic entrepreneurship and innovation, the exchange among the various players has been largely informal and unstructured.

SAIEF was initiated by a group of dedicated innovation champions from various Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences with the aim to strengthen the exchange and knowledge transfer around academic innovation and entrepreneurship support. It builds on the experience from the Swiss Forum for University and Student Innovation initiative that was set up in Fribourg in 2017, 2019, and 2021 (online).

12 Universities in the organizing committee

SAIEF is a collective initiative by a group of dedicated innovation champions from these 12 Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences: University of Bern, University of Zurich, University of Geneva, ETH Zurich, EPFL, ZHAW, University of Fribourg, School of Management Fribourg, University of St.Gallen, USI Startup Centre and Berner Fachhochschule.

Participants from over 60 institutions

The 1st SAIEF meeting brought together a broad range of practitioners and stakeholders representing over 60 institutions, including innovation advisors, mentors, program managers and coordinators, technology transfer managers, entrepreneurship lecturers, representatives from student organizations, and Swiss Innovation funding agencies.

Keynote, Panel discussion and workshops

The 1st SAIEF meeting was hosted by the Swiss Center for Design & Health (SCDH) in Biel/Bienne. Next to a poster session and interactive workshops, the event included a keynote

lecture by Arno Meerman, CEO, UIIN with a following panel discussion inviting also Eva Jaisli, President of the Board of Directors bpswisstools, Patrick Kessel, CEO Perivision and Christian Brunner, Head BRIDGE Programme.

Identifying joint challenges and synergies

To bring the participants together around joint challenges and to identify synergies, the forum provided seven workshops on relevant topics that were each visited by 15-40 participants. This section summarizes the key takeaways from these workshops.

1 Transfer: *How can the "Transfer" phase in startup support be improved and how can innovative trends and models from other regions inform our next steps?*

Key take-aways: TTOs and future founders face multiple challenges during the license process. The main cause for these challenges is the lack of transparency of the process, resulting in a mismatch of expectations and a large power-imbalance between TTOs and future founders, as the latter is unaware of the process steps, timelines and expected deliverables before going into the license process. This causes future founders to distrust TTOs from the start as they are not experienced negotiators and are not well educated and prepared. Different solutions to provide more transparency in the process were discussed with the Fast Track Models offered at the Technical University of Munich and Cornell University as example of a solution that offer detailed steps, predefined timelines and template agreements.

2 Entrepreneurship promotion: *Which narrative and entrepreneurial journey best inspire students to start a venture project?*

Key take-aways: The incentive structure of universities does not support entrepreneurship equally to research. Therefore, we need to not only focus on a narrative for students (including PhD students) and one for professors, but more broadly, promote the concept of awarding ECTS credits for entrepreneurial projects. Fostering and show-casing entrepreneur role models (at different stages of development and, when possible, still students) and champions which are approachable is important.

3 Investment: *What role can the University play in offering investment possibilities to startups?*

Key take-aways: As innovation hubs, Universities should also contribute to generating investment awareness by educating, giving guidance and fostering a fundraising mindset beyond grants. It's important to early show that not every project is a VC case and other financing alternatives exist. The universities funding for startups provides training (courses), encouragement (awards) and developing POC (grants). It should foster access to funding by facilitating collaboration, mapping the funding ecosystem, and attracting investors.
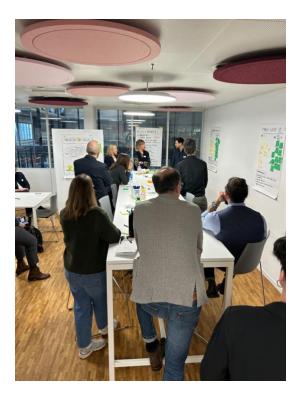
4 Designing Training modules: *Entrepreneurship Teaching and Training in Switzerland: Are we doing well, and how can we do better?*

Key take-aways: Teaching and training in innovation/ entrepreneurship must be treated differently in the Bachelor, Master and PhD level. While Bachelors need more inspiration, toolsets and structure, Master students want to be challenged with real-world cases, and bring in their own entrepreneurial ideas. PhDs need to be taught flexibility, and how to unlearn and relearn practices in entrepreneurship. Important for all levels are team formation, testing and establishing an entrepreneurial mindset, as well as acquiring key competences to build an entrepreneurial venture. There is no one-size-fits-all program for all students. Opening up courses to students from other institutions would give students a larger variety of choices. Also, while both are needed it is important to balance inspirational talks by founders and the brutal reality of entrepreneurship.

5 Innovation triggers: *How can we create an environment and a culture that truly nurtures innovation?*

Key take-aways: Universities drive innovation through research and entrepreneurship, but fostering a truly innovative culture requires strategic action. Effective approaches include prioritizing innovation institutionally, fostering inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration, and providing support programs. To further strengthen innovation, universities should emphasize societal impact, create creative learning environments, engage external partners early, and diversify career paths beyond publication metrics. There is potential to develop an inter-institutional vision for fostering innovation to create both economic and social impact.

6 Student Engagement: *How to run a Student Entrepreneur Club - F***-ups and recipes for success?*

Key take-aways: Recruiting and keeping student members engaged by investing in culture and social bonding as well as by leading by example. To attract funding and partners you need to know your audience and their needs, adjust your pitch to their biases towards a 'student-run' organization, and know when to oversell or undersell. Student organizations can learn a lot from each other and from professional organizations like Venture lab.

7 AI and Higher Education: *How can Swiss higher education prepare the next generation of AI enabled innovators?*

Key take-aways: Organizations are already working to integrate AI at all levels (teaching, research, innovation) and are interested in collaborating to share knowledge, experience, contacts, and recommendations. Challenges faced in leveraging AI include data protection, lack of awareness and transparency, more critical thinking, IP questions, cost of tools (to ensure fairness for all to have access), lengthy bureaucratic processes for approvals, and generational gaps. A shared platform for information exchange, joint workshops, hackathons, etc. is needed.

Outlook

The first SAIEF was well received among the participants, in the feedback survey the average overall rating of the event was 4.4 of 5. Especially they appreciated the unique opportunity to network with other experts and practitioners in innovation and entrepreneurship from the academic ecosystem.

In the feedback, the participants wished for more time for targeted networking in future events. Another point brought forward, was to design longer workshops allowing for in depth discussions on relevant topics. One possibility to create more focused discussions would be to have an overarching theme for the next event. It also became clear that it would be useful to have students, early career researchers and startups participating in the forum to allow for customer-centered solution development. Topics that the participants would like to discuss in future iterations of SAIEF are: How can we enhance collaboration and share resources across universities and organizations? How to promote cultural and structural change in academia?

In conclusion, the 1st SAIEF showed that this new forum was highly desired by the community and filled a void, creating a platform for a more structured exchange and the sharing of best practices in the academic entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystem in Switzerland.

The organizers are motivated to build on all these learnings to deliver SAIEF 2026!

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