

Address by Dr. H. Killias at the EGS Graduation Ceremony of July 30, 2011
in Saas-Fee, Switzerland - after having been conferred upon the title of
“Honorary Professor EGS”.

From Humboldt’s university to M.I.T. and EGS

Let me reflect for a moment on this title which I have chosen to bundle my thoughts at this point of time. “From Humboldt’s university...” expresses a beginning, a common root, a heritage which extends from the European “Aufklärung” in the 1760’s to the early days of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the 1890’s to the foundation of the European Graduate School in 1994.

A long process of 250 years of academic history – yet short enough that I have been privileged to experience the last 50 years of it in my own lifetime: As a student of physics at the still with Humboldtian tradition imprinted Swiss Institute of Technology in Zurich (1955-60), as a graduate student at the by that time fast growing M.I.T. (1960-64), and - after a long non-academic interruption - for by now 15 years at EGS.

Can elements of the Humboldtian vision and model for a “New Univer-sity” still be found in EGS today? A university where freedom of thought and the passion to teach was coupled with Prussian dedication to order, service and hierarchy? I dare say yes - freedom of thought, intellectual independence and the passion to teach highly gifted students are all over EGS engrained in almost every course and seminar. But what is to be said about order, rigour and discipline in our thinking, teaching and training?

Here, I want to return to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in the 1890’s, 1960’s and today. The “Institute” (as it is called inside the school) was founded on a base of rigour, both academically and in the pursuit of application of the gained knowledge to the real world - to civil engineering, steel-making and shipbuilding in the 1890’s, to the physics of radar, to biophysics (a new word then), to semiconductors in 1960 when I came. In every field, always coupled with a fierce drive to excel-lence both in teams and individually. Publishing the results of research was important, but equally their application to the “real” world - every professor was a consultant or the founder of a start-up company where his graduate students could train and earn their M.I.T. tuition.

This drive for excellence and relevance of research and teaching is still alive at M.I.T. today, even if the fields of research have changed and broadened – into economy, political science and, indeed, to Media and Communication. Held together by a common vision and, I can admiringly add, a smooth and efficient administration which stays in the background but succeeds brilliantly to secure a steady flow of new students and to provide the financing for the whole enterprise.

I come back to our small university EGS and to my question of “what can be said about order, rigour and discipline in our thinking, teaching and training”?

I truly believe that we must improve in all these respects, emulating the example of M.I.T., if we want to secure the upcoming transition of EGS of a pioneer organization to a stable and growing graduate school of European importance. And putting at every step the “education” of our students first, ensuring that they will have learned at EGS to renew their vision, are committed to excellence and have found the tools to apply Expressive Arts, Digital Media and Media & Communication Philosophy in their places and their tasks in the real world.

If I have been able to contribute to this development of EGS my small share - as lauded by Paolo a few minutes ago - I am happy to have had this opportunity, and I would like to express my sincere and cordial thanks to Paolo as Provost, to the Senate of EGS and to the Board of Trustees for this very special honour which I have received today.

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Honorary Professor EGS