

Forbes

KAOSPILOTS

FLYING HIGH IN CHAOS

The KaosPilots are truly out of the ordinary. The Business School trains responsible entrepreneurs – sometimes with highly unconventional methods. After 25 years of success in Denmark, the model came to Switzerland in 2010. But the school faces challenges.

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“I have spoken,” concludes one of the students sitting in the circle. “Ho” chants the rest of the group as one, thus signalling to the speaker’s neighbour that it is his turn to take the floor. Around 25 young people officially begin their Tuesday morning with this “check-in”.

The students’ contributions, which sometimes also end with “These are my words”, refer back to the messages that students have taken from their lectures. The topic that the “KaosPilots” are discussing today is “Communicating

unfinished business”. How can I communicate my progress to the outside world effectively in the development phase of a project or a company?

KaosPilots is an innovative business school, hailing from Denmark. The school describes itself as a “school for responsible entrepreneurs, creative leaders and change makers.”

Uffe Elbaek, who later became Minister for Culture, founded the programme in Denmark 25 years ago. An initiative crowned with success: Bloomberg Businessweek named KaosPilots one of the best design schools in the world in 2007, and in 2011, Fast Company ranked it in the Top Ten best schools to prepare you for the startup economy.

The school has been offering its unconventional curriculum in its independent outpost in Bern, Switzerland since 2010. Unconventional because the programme focuses not only on entrepreneurial skills and students’ social conscience, but also, and above all, on their personal development. Participants are encouraged, during the three-year course, to ask themselves existential questions. Who am I? What do I want? What is my dream? The answers to these questions should form the basis for the entrepreneurial projects that students may work on during and after the training programme.

The formulaic expressions used during the check-in may seem strange at first, but they have their roots in the basic approach of the business school. It is in this way that the KaosPilots learn how to reach decisions by consensus and work together in a group.

But what might sound like chaotic daydreaming is actually part of a relatively down-to-earth programme. Students constantly work on concrete projects, often for genuine clients. The curriculum is built around four pillars: Create Leadership, Creative Project Design (first year), Creative Process Design (second year) and Creative Business Design (third year).

Working with clients is also a topic for the circle of students: a Danish student discusses her communicative success: yesterday evening she landed a project order – including remuneration. “I have spoken.” “Ho.” Now comes the turn of Matthias Straub, known as Matti, who is sitting near the middle of the circle. At first glance, you would never know that the director and head of the school has just taken the floor.

Of course, there is a reason for that – Straub himself is a certified KaosPilot. He went to the school in Aarhus, Denmark. After coming back to Switzerland and founding his own consultancy, “changels”, he toyed with the idea for a while before getting down to business and founding the KaosPilots in Switzerland with

his team.

“We knew that we had to think big,” Matti Straub explains. For the headmaster, at that point, quality had to take precedence over accreditations and certifications: “Quite simply, we wanted to start a good training programme.”

Today, two classes, Team 1 and Team 2, have graduated, meaning that the Swiss school has sent 21 KaosPilots out into the world. Current students, Teams 3, 4 and 5, comprise an additional 32 students.

Meanwhile, the communications workshop led by Danish communications designer and external lecturer Jørgen Smidstrup continues after the check-in. Students work in groups and present the projects of team members in their final year. According to the Danish communications designer, what is important here is not so much content, but more the ability to put together a presentation quickly in a group. “This situation mirrors what happens in practice when a client awards a contract and students have to deliver to a quick deadline.”

Over lunch, the students chat, cook in the kitchen available on the premises, or go out to eat somewhere. The atmosphere in the school is more like that of a huge shared apartment than a university. It’s also plain to see that the students are close to one another.

The premises, visiting lecturers, small class sizes, intensive tutoring, a two-month stay in South Africa in the second year – it goes without saying that all this doesn’t come for free. Quite the contrary. Becoming a KaosPilot comes with a fairly hefty price tag – 100 000 CHF (93 000 €) for the three-year training programme. Students have to pay around half of this (48 000 CHF or 44 700 €). By comparison, three years at the internationally renowned ETH Zürich cost around 3 200 €, and in Great Britain students pay the equivalent of around 35 000 CHF (32 500 €) – even at the elite universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

Straub sees these costs as “around average for a training programme of this kind. We’re not excessively expensive – but of course when other courses are state financed, then the difference seems greater.” The second half of the cost burden is borne privately by the school itself – financed in equal parts through services (such as consultancy projects) and sponsoring or fundraising. This is a major reason why the self-financing of the school is currently the greatest cause for concern. Straub points out that “in Denmark 70 to 80 per cent of the school’s budget comes from the state. In Switzerland, we don’t receive that kind of support. And finding sponsors has also been difficult in recent years.” In traditional universities, this type of financing structure would provoke criticism. For example, a few years ago, the high level of external financing at the University of St. Gallen (via consultancy projects, expert opinions for companies, for example) came under

severe criticism, because according to observers, this threatens the independence of the academic staff. The university itself disputes this.

The KaosPilots also have to deal with the issue of conflicts of interest. For example when students have to choose between two project offers, might they not decide upon the one that is less sustainable just because it brings in more money for the school? According to Straub, this issue has never come up. “When it comes to choosing a project from our pool, our students will actually always choose the most exciting one, rather than the one that is most lucrative.”

Another obvious issue is the exclusiveness of the school, given the high tuition fees. But this is something that the school actively counteracts. “To date, we have never sent anyone away because they lacked the necessary financial resources when they signed up. Learning how to organize resources is already key to our KaosPilots training programme.” The school also organizes loans for students.

Kaospilots also offers bursaries to people from, as Straub says, “the global south”. One quarter of students currently come from Switzerland, but there are also participants from Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Kosovo, Brazil, Japan, Ecuador – and even Kenya and South Africa. One of the bursary students is South African Melilizwe Gqobo. “The school has taught me to question everything that I had learned in the first three decades of my life. It has also made me think intensively about how I can become a responsible entrepreneur.”

Meli, as he is nicknamed, is still not sure about the exact project he wants to run – but he is sure about the field: Impact Investing. In his opinion, this would also solve the school’s major problem – financing. “You could ask investors who have the school’s best interests at heart to join the board – and generate impact like that.”

Impact is also relevant in another way for the KaosPilots. Because a criticism levelled at the school in the past has been that changes in the world brought about by the KaosPilots remain to be seen. Forty per cent of the Danish school’s alumni own their own business, while 50 per cent work in major organisations and companies. However, the self-employed graduates often work in one-person or small companies. The remaining 10 per cent are otherwise occupied (for example in further education).

On the other hand, around 75 per cent of the Swiss graduates are self-employed. But Matti Straub believes it is too early to have a real overview. “So far, only 21 people have graduated from the Bern school. It’s still just the beginning! We’ll be able to measure the real impact in five or ten years.”

When it comes to Switzerland, South African student Melilizwe Gqobo has only

good things to say – or almost. “It’s only now that I’m really getting to know Switzerland – and I certainly really like the chocolate and the cheese. The country is beautiful and works like a well-oiled machine. But sometimes it seems a bit too clean to me. Switzerland could do with a touch of flavour”.

If the young South African were speaking metaphorically, he could hardly have found a better description of the role that KaosPilots could have in Switzerland’s academic environment. The institute looks a bit like a bird of paradise in what is otherwise an often rather bland educational landscape. It is notable that the school in Denmark is generously subsidized by the government, whereas in Switzerland it has to fight for its financial survival.

According to an interview in NZZ Campus magazine with Philipp Sarasin, Professor of Modern History at the University of Zürich, that is because the educational system in the country has, for decades, specialized in producing “qualified professionals”. That means that there is a lot of space for doctors, lawyers, engineers and researchers at renowned universities like the ETH or the University of Zürich – but not so much room for experimental approaches. The KaosPilots are therefore the exception to the rule.

But problems in the university system are not unique to Switzerland – they affect Europe as a whole. The Bologna reform has made universities become more like schools, with rigid curricula and standardised approaches. What is more, students are under greater pressure: not only must they graduate with flying colours; they are also expected to participate in internships, voluntary activities and stays abroad. This leaves little room for self-discovery and reflection – you can’t stop and take stock when you’re running round on a hamster wheel. In Bern, however, there is space and time for exactly this type of activity. But here too each day has a very clear schedule. With the exception of Friday afternoons, which are free, students are at the school from 8.45am to 4pm. “This structure – and students’ physical presence – is simply necessary to a certain extent”, says Cedric Zaugg, the class teacher responsible for students in their first year, along with his colleague Sam Nüesch.

Both are responsible, in addition to the curriculum, for Council Guide Training, which makes up a substantial part of the programme. “We really invest time in personal development,” says Nüesch. “Some people outside of the school could also find that very helpful and are looking for that. For them, KaosPilots are exactly the right place to come.” The school’s tribal approach is also reflected in the Council Guide Training, which runs throughout the entire programme. “We don’t have a pyramid structure,” Zaugg explains. “That means students have to organize themselves and come to decisions together.” And that is how the morning check-ins and intensive groupwork sessions also contribute to the KaosPilots’ education. “Five of our seven exams over the three-year period are done in groups.

Students simply have to learn how to behave in a team, how to work with other people. Teamwork is a skill listed on every job description nowadays, but students don't learn it anywhere," says Matti Straub.

Groups of four or five KaosPilots have discussions every Tuesday afternoon where they exchange slides and presentation content. Jørgen Smidstrup moves from group to group, providing tips, encouragement, and criticism where necessary. His connection with the KaosPilots dates back some time: he supported the school in Denmark and now also teaches in Switzerland in his area of expertise, communication design.

"The school is on the right track," Smidstrup says. "The only thing missing now is bigger class sizes. That would allow us to further build upon the diversity of personalities that we already have – which would be positive for everyone." Diversity is certainly already present. There are young, naïve, but highly motivated students who have just finished school. But there is also Mario Grossenbacher, forty-five, who has become a KaosPilot after leaving a well-paid management post at pharmaceuticals giant Novartis. Or Kawira Nyaga, who, like Meli, has come to Switzerland on a bursary and previously worked as a brand strategist in Kenya. Like Smidstrup, Sam Nüesch and Matti Straub also see an increased participation rate as essential to the school's positive future development. In a way, KaosPilots, as an organization and a school, has the same task as its students this Tuesday: its "Unfinished Business" is to communicate effectively what the school is doing to the outside world. Because it is certainly possible that there are people out there who would benefit from asking themselves who they are and what they really want.

The fact that the school and its methods seem completely outlandish in Switzerland no doubt adds to the charm of the whole project. Because despite the many questions that the school still has to answer, one thing is certain: the KaosPilots are adding a touch of flavour to Switzerland.