

Growth and the faculty of informatics

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The university expanded in two directions after 2000. In 2004 it created the Faculty of Informatics, the first faculty of computer science in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland, and in 2008 an Institute of Computational Science within it.¹ The Faculty of Biomedical Sciences followed in 2014, while the Faculty of Theology of Lugano became affiliated with USI in 2021. USI also integrated several research institutes: the Institute for Research in Biomedicine (IRB) in Bellinzona in 2010, the Institute of Oncology Research (IOR) in 2016 and the solar research institute IRSOL in Locarno in 2020.² The scientific profile of the university changed with these steps. In 2011 the physicist and computational chemist Michele Parrinello, who taught at the USI campus in Lugano as a professor of ETH Zurich, received the Marcel Benoist Prize, which the university's own chronology describes as the most important scientific award in Switzerland.³

The creation of the Faculty of Informatics proved decisive for the subject of this chapter. It gave the Dalle Molle Institute, described below, a university partner with doctoral programmes. It created a pool of computer scientists in Lugano who could work on problems of finance, from numerical methods for derivatives pricing to data analysis and, later, machine learning. It also made possible joint programmes between economics and informatics, among them a master's degree that combines financial technology with computing.⁴ By the late 2000s the Ticino higher education system counted almost 5,000 students, most of them in the Lugano region, while the canton's financial planning foresaw at least 1,800 students for USI alone.⁵

1 The legal and financial framework

USI and SUPSI are cantonal institutions. They are governed by the cantonal law on the university and the university of applied sciences, first

enacted in 1995 and amended several times since, and by the federal Higher Education Act, which coordinates the Swiss higher education sector and conditions federal subsidies on institutional accreditation.⁶ The canton provides the largest single share of the budget. A parliamentary committee report of June 2008 on the planning period 2008 to 2011 showed USI's costs rising from CHF 50.5 million in the 2007 budget to CHF 67.9 million in the 2011 plan. Those of SUPSI were to rise from CHF 59.2 million to CHF 81.4 million. Over the same period the cantonal contributions were planned to rise from CHF 24 million to CHF 31.7 million for USI and from CHF 27 million to CHF 37 million for SUPSI.⁷ The rest came from federal subsidies, the payments of other cantons and of Italian regions for their students under inter-cantonal agreements, research grants and private funding.

The private share is of particular interest for the financial centre. Chairs and research centres at USI have been financed by banks, foundations and private donors. The Swiss Finance Institute, discussed in the next section, finances professorships in finance at USI as at the other partner universities. Such funding is common in Switzerland and raises the usual questions of academic independence, which the universities address through their regulations on third-party funding and disclosure. For the financial centre the more important point is that the university created a local research capacity in finance and computer science that had not existed before 1996.

Year Institution or event
1988 IDSIA founded in Lugano by Angelo Dalle Molle
1991 CSCS founded (in Manno)
1995 Law on USI (3 October)
1996 USI opens (21 October)
1997 SUPSI law (11 March)
2000 IDSIA affiliated with USI and SUPSI
2004 USI Faculty of Informatics
2006 Swiss Finance Institute established
2011 Fondazione AGIRE founded
2012 CSCS building in Lugano-Cornaredo
2024 Alps supercomputer inaugurated
2025 Apertus language model released
2026 CSVN associated with SUPSI

Essentials. USI was created by a cantonal law of 3 October 1995 and opened on 21 October 1996 with faculties of architecture, economics and communication sciences. Its Faculty of Economics was founded expressly to strengthen the Lugano financial centre. The Faculty of Informatics (2004) and the integration of IDSIA gave Lugano a research base in computer science and artificial intelligence. SUPSI, established by a law of 11 March 1997, is the canton's university of applied sciences and the partner of the professional training institutions of the financial sector.

2 Notes

1. USI, "History" (above). ↩
2. USI, "History" (above). ↩
3. USI, "History" (above). Parrinello was appointed Professor of Computational Science at ETH Zurich in 2001 and held the same position at USI in Lugano; he received the Marcel Benoist Prize in 2011: Wikipedia, "Michele Parrinello", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michele_Parrinello (consulted as a last resort). ↩
4. USI, "Master in Finance", <https://www.usi.ch/en/education/master/finance>, which lists among the related master's programmes of USI a Master in Financial Technology and Computing and a Master in Management and Informatics. ↩
5. Gran Consiglio, Rapporto 5978 R (above) ("quasi 5000 studenti, in massima parte nella regione di Lugano"; targets of "almeno 1800" for USI and "almeno 900" additional students for SUPSI). ↩
6. Legge sull'Università della Svizzera italiana, sulla Scuola universitaria professionale della Svizzera italiana e sugli Istituti di ricerca of 3 October 1995, as amended (title as cited in Gran Consiglio, Rapporto 5978 R, https://www4.ti.ch/fileadmin/POTERI/GC/allegati/rapporti/12133_5978r.pdf; date of the law from USI, "History", above); Federal Act on Funding and Coordination of the Swiss Higher Education Sector of 30 September 2011 (Higher Education Act, HEdA), SR 414.20, Art. 28–30 (institutional accreditation) and Art. 45 para. 1 lit. a (recognition as entitled to federal contributions requires institutional accreditation), text at <https://www.droit-bilingue.ch/de-fr/4/41/414.20-30-33.html> and <https://www.droit-bilingue.ch/de-fr/4/41/414.20-45-48.html>. ↩
7. Gran Consiglio, Rapporto 5978 R (above). ↩

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