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# Association of Secretaries General of Parliaments

**COMMUNICATION**

**by**

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**on**

**“Virtual Web-Seminars for Students”**

**Madrid Session**

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Dear colleagues,

At our last meeting in May 2021 – at that time only in a virtual format – I presented briefly the new digital service offered by the Bundesrat Visitor Service since spring 2021: Virtual web-based seminars for students. We call them “webseminars”. This new option was developed because of the restrictions due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The ASGP asked me to report today a little more detailed on these seminars. Many of us are currently grappling with the challenge of new virtual formats. I would therefore like to give you a brief “work-in-progress” report: what was necessary to develop the concept of our webseminars. And I will tell you about our initial experiences.

Our new interactive webseminars connect speakers from the Bundesrat visitor service via a video conference platform with students in their classrooms at school or at home. The seminars present basic knowledge about the function, composition and workings of the Bundesrat. The focus is on the role of the Bundesrat within Germany’s legislation.

Usually, in normal times over 50,000 students at the age of 14 to 18 from all over Germany take part in Bundesrat information programmes every year. They come to Berlin and learn about the Bundesrat’s role, how it works and, above all, they have an opportunity to see politics in action on the spot. Last but not least with outreach of experts of our visitor service from first hand perspective.

This first-hand and on site-experience is the “unique selling point” that we as parliaments can offer to school classes. It is the special difference to classical school lessons.

But how can we transfer this unique selling point to our webseminars? How can we make clear that only parliaments can provide this kind of online service we offer?

Our first and most important decision was not simply offer material for a download. We focus on individual outreach by members of the visitor services team. They moderate the webseminars, explain the Bundesrat’s work and engage in discussions with the students.

However, this can only be achieved with team members who have a particular flair for online formats and can convey information seriously and entertaining at same time on camera.

In addition, the formats we offer must be informative and lively. We have a range of options: short explanatory videos, animated graphics and, above all, interactive, playful elements, such as quizzes. That allows the young people to use their smartphones and cast their votes virtually via the web application “TedMe”. This is really popular during the webseminars. And voting has a very direct link to parliaments.

During the seminars, the students can discuss a current political issue from their daily life. With support from the moderator, they explore how this would be addressed within the framework of the Bundesrat’s legislative activities. Here too the students can join in with their smartphones and discuss through the chat function. Many young people find that much easier than speaking in front of the whole class at school. This is the second really popular item of the webseminars

You see, we use tools in the webseminars that are familiar to students from their daily lives.

At the same time, we try to make the technical requirements for participation as simple as possible, in order to enable as many schools as possible to take part. We use an official government videoplatform system that is similar to webex and therefore easy to understand and to use. Additional Information for teachers is available on the Bundesrat homepage, providing details about what a webseminar offers, the technical requirements and how to register.

The key to successful webseminars is therefore a good mix of entertaining formats, an easy-to-use technical set-up, and, above all, scope for active participation by students. Good moderation with a human touch holds everything together, responding to questions and situations as they arise. Only this personal contact makes these formats vivid, with first-hand experience and flexibility.

When designing a program you have to remember a simple point: a successful webseminar - like all other programs - is not a magic machine that turns students into experts on federalism and the legislative process in Germany. We cannot replace instruction in schools and cannot teach an entire section of the curriculum in just one hour. However, we can provide a targeted complement to classroom-based teaching and, above all, we can offer something that schools cannot: authentic first-hand experience.

Most important to remember: an hour is not a long time. And an hour in an online format feels twice as short. Attention spans on screen is much shorter than in analogue life. Think of our many video conferences in recent months. That means: you need to concentrate more than ever on the essentials when running a webseminar. In the limited time available the point is not to convey as much information as possible, but to focus on the essentials and sustain interest as much as possible.

To the point: Think about these three points:

1) We formulate clear core messages!

2) We use formats that are suitable for the content and are at the same time familiar to the target group! You must be up to date, knowing which media formats young people use and understanding how these formats can be utilised effectively. That calls for outside expertise when designing a program.

3) The most important thing however: webseminars should not simply copy previous analogue formats. At the start of the design process, a real new approach is needed to thinking about the content and formats, and finally a little bit a new approach about the role of your parliament. You need to take the perspective from the outside of the politics bubble.

Our webseminars are the first format we offer specifically for a generation with school and education in a digital world. Therefore the webseminars are the first truly cross-media format that the Bundesrat has made available. We rapidly realised that it’s necessary to create a network linking all our analogue and digital information formats. This is the challenge for our information service for the next years but an enormous potential for new programs and ideas.

Quite current e think there will be huge demand for webseminars even after the pandemic. This format also offers a chance to reach out to schools that do not have the time or opportunity to come to Berlin. Ultimately, the pandemic was kind of kickoff into a new digital world – but not to forget the fatal price of many victims of the Covid pandemic all over the world.

Our webseminars are the first step to a digital world, created out of necessity and far from being perfect. But all change starts with a first step.

Colleagues, we do not have time today to view an entire webseminar. However as my final message, I can present you our new short promotional video. It’s a world premiere. Enjoy it! And thanks for your attention.