

Swiss education system

Albert Einstein and his apprentices

By Marion Widmer

Switzerland has one of the lowest unemployment rates in Europe. The latest statistics by the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs put it at only 2.9 per cent this June – and numbers are expected to continue to fall. One decisive contributing factor is the country's education system, which aims to foster a healthy balance between academic knowledge and practical experience. Due to the high standard, 95 per cent of pupils attend state schools. At the same time, Switzerland has a rich history and a high density of excellent private schools.

Switzerland's education system has been perfected over time. As early as 1536, Geneva was the first canton to introduce compulsory education. In accordance with the Swiss federal political system, each canton has been able to determine its own educational guidelines for centuries. However, recently a new guideline – called HarmoS – was introduced to facilitate moving house within Switzerland and further improve the quality of the national education system. HarmoS sets more unified nationwide parameters to define the number of years spent in education as well as schooling goals. State schools in (so far) 15 cantons, which have accepted the HarmoS legislations, as well as private schools following the Swiss education curriculum, will gradually have to apply these new regulations by 2015.

Although only five per cent of the Swiss population attend private schools, Switzerland has a long history and one of the highest concentrations of private boarding schools in Europe. Due to the attractiveness of Switzerland as a workplace for the international community, private international schools keep growing at a fast pace. "Switzerland is perceived all over the world as a politically stable and clean country, respecting nature and the environment," explains Dr Dirk Craen, Dean of European University. "And with one of the highest GDPs in the world, Switzerland is very attractive to set up schools to educate future leaders, since it offers the perfect combination of job opportunities and quality of living."

Private schools

Parents wishing to send their children to bilingual or English-speaking institutions have a vast choice of international private schools offering the acquirement of an International Baccalaureate (IB) or Advanced Placement courses (AP). Private schools are not subsidised by the government and therefore require education fees between CHF 15,000 to CHF 35,000 each year. One of the most popular international schools in the German-speaking part of Switzerland is the Zurich International School (ZIS), with locations in the Greater Zurich and Baden areas. Currently, around 1,500 students aged two to 18 and from almost 60 countries attend the school. The official language used at ZIS is English. The school is recognised both internationally and regionally, by the Council of International Schools and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges in the U.S. and the Departments of Education of the Cantons of Zurich and Aargau. Thanks to ZIS's unified curriculum and worldwide network, students can easily follow the curriculum when moving to another country. At the same time, parents are actively involved in school activities and they are assisted with practical advice on questions that may arise regarding settling into Swiss life.

State schools: primary education

Education at Swiss state schools officially starts with kindergarten, where children aged four to six playfully prepare for starting school. Under the new HarmoS



guidelines, two years of kindergarten will be mandatory as an integrated part of primary school. At state kindergartens, the language spoken is Swiss German, French, Italian or Romansch, depending on the region.

Under HarmoS, children start primary school at the age of six or seven and stay there for six years. Pupils are allocated to schools according to their place of residence within a municipality. The small catchment area is to encourage children to walk to kindergarten or primary school on their own – a practice that is foreign to many non-Swiss parents. Depending on the region, the official languages at school are French, Italian, Romansch and High German. According to HarmoS, the first foreign language is introduced in the third year of primary school and the second in the fifth year. In the German-speaking part of the country, English is the first foreign language and French is the second. Meanwhile, in the French-speaking part, German is the first foreign language and English is the second. In some of the bilingual regions, pupils start with French as their first foreign language and only learn English at a later stage.

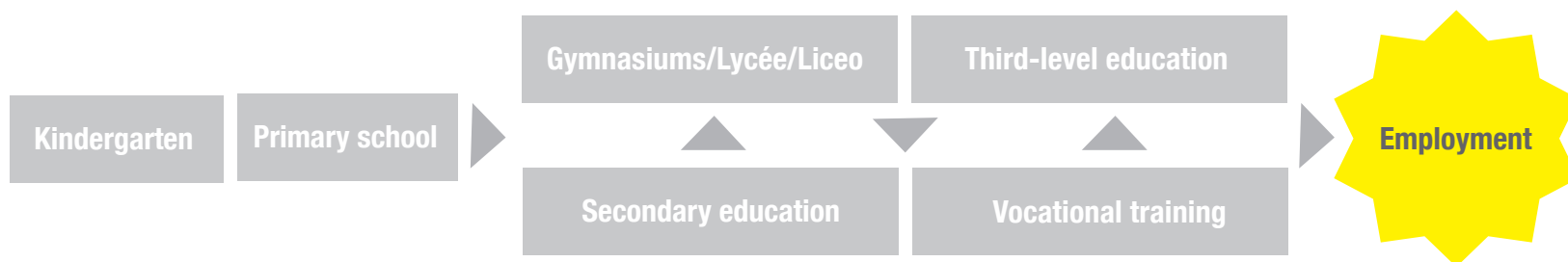
State schools: secondary education

After pupils have successfully completed the *Unter-* and *Mittelstufe*, as the first six schooling years are called, they enter secondary school. There are two options: secondary school (the choice of 80 per cent of pupils in 2010) and

Gymnasiums/Lycée/Liceo (chosen by 20 per cent in 2010). The former are practically oriented and lead to three-year vocational training at upper-secondary level. Different models are currently being tested, which will allow students to choose subjects according to their abilities.

Gymnasiums/Lycée/Liceo (high school) are the preferred choice for students looking for a route into academic careers. To be accepted into these schools, pupils must pass an entry test after primary school or after completing two to three years of lower-secondary school. Schooling at high schools lasts between four and six years (depending on whether a child joins straight from primary school or has already completed lower-secondary education). The high quality of education provides students with the option of majoring in a variety of fields including economics, art, maths or languages.

Some cantonal schools offer a bi-lingual *Maturität* (Baccalaureate) with so-called immersion programmes. “The English immersion programme in Switzerland sees various school subjects such as history, mathematics and biology being taught at upper secondary school level through the medium of English,” says immersion coach Colin Browne. “The main focus lies on the subject itself as opposed to the language, basically equating to a focus on content rather than on form. The actual structure of the programme varies between schools but typically includes



one or two classes per year being taught subjects in English and German. It normally lasts for a period of four years and concludes with the students being examined in at least two subjects in English and the remainder in German.” The exact numbers of cantonal schools offering immersion classes are hard to determine. It is estimated that in 2007, around 40 per cent of all Swiss state high schools participated.

Vocational training

After completing the obligatory nine years of schooling, two thirds of Swiss students enter into vocational training, where they can combine practical work experience with theory. The availability and types of apprenticeships on offer depend on economic demands and the employment market, and combine practical training with theory. Apprenticeships can be conducted in no less than 230 different fields, from hairdressing to banking. As part of their education, students attend school once or twice a week to complement their newly acquired skills with theory. After three to four years of vocational training, students are eligible to work in their chosen profession.

While completing vocational training, students aspiring to a higher degree can simultaneously acquire the *Vocational Maturity Certificate*, which allows them to enter Universities of Applied Sciences and Arts. Many students opt for a vocational training because in some fields, careers and financial prospects can be almost as lucrative as in the academic field.

The system of vocational training has proven highly successful in integrating Switzerland’s youth into the employment market. In June, the unemployment rate among 15 to 24 year olds totalled only 4.7 per cent (fewer than 15,000 people), according to the latest statistics by the *Regionales Arbeitsvermittlungszentrum RAV* (Office for Economy and Labour). But not only that – at the *WorldSkills International Competition* in 2011, which is considered to be the World Championship of vocational training, Switzerland won 17 medals. It was once again the most successful European nation.

Following in the footsteps of Albert Einstein

Graduates of a state Gymnasium/Lycée/Liceo can undertake Bachelor’s and Master’s studies in most fields at Switzerland’s 12 public universities without having to pass an entry test. Most Swiss public universities accept IB diplomas as long as the students have achieved at least 30 points, but this depends on the institution. The University of Fribourg

requires entrance examinations whereas the University of Zurich requires certain scores depending on the faculty to be entered.

The majority of third-level institutions in Switzerland are run by the cantons, with the exception of the Swiss Federal Institutes of Technology in Zurich and Lausanne. These are the responsibility of the Swiss government. The ETH Zurich ranks among the best universities in the world and is renowned for its long history of scientific research and co-operation with both the Swiss Federal Government and the economy. It boasts no fewer than 21 Nobel Laureate graduates, the most famous of whom was Albert Einstein. Many of the ETH’s courses are taught in English and one of the aims of the institution is to ensure that the general public, the environment and the economy all benefit from the research conducted.

Private universities

In tertiary education, there is a vast choice of high quality private universities offering hospitality and service programmes, language studies, as well as commercial and management courses for Bachelor’s (BBA), Master’s (MBA), Executive MBA and Doctorate of Business Administration (DBA) degrees. One of the most renowned private business universities is European University (EU), with campuses in Geneva and Montreux. Programmes offered at EU include BBA, MBA and DBA, and the opportunity to specialise in different management areas.

According to Dr Craen, students at EU benefit from the university’s combination of local and global visions. “We turn our students into eco-preneurs, doers or social responsible leaders,” he says. “European University has the largest undergraduate programme in Family Business Management. We welcome third- or fourth-generations of family business owners and make sure that they acquire all the necessary tools and knowledge to take their business to the next level.” Well-known alumni who have graduated from EU include Dr Koen Wilms, Managing Director of 3M France and Yannick Guerdat, CEO at Artionet, who was recently mentioned by *Bilan* magazine as one of the 300 most influential people in Switzerland.

Altogether, the excellent quality and diverse focus of Swiss education has resulted in Switzerland’s establishment as one of the leaders in scientific research, innovation, business and tourism, thus providing a base for the ongoing health of Swiss economy.

Useful addresses

Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK): www.edk.ch
 Swiss Federation of Private Schools: www.swiss-schools.ch
 Zurich International School: www.zis.ch
 European University: www.euruni.edu
 Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich: www.eth.ch
 Colin Browne, English Immersion Coach: <http://english.getitright.ch>