

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 23 (1996)
Heft: 5

Artikel: Specialised universities to open in 1997 : deep-seated changes in the university system
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907760>

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Specialised universities to open in 1997

Deep-seated changes in the university system

The Swiss university landscape is at present undergoing dramatic transformation. From autumn 1997 specialised universities – in all probability eight of them – will join the existing universities and federal institutes of technology. This is the most radical education reform project for decades and is being implemented in an astonishingly short time.

The launch date is rapidly approaching. This is not a given for the Swiss education scene, so dependent upon federal procedures; particularly when we take into account

Andreas Stuber*

that this is the most far-reaching and expensive project for very many years. The specialised universities will start teaching in 1997. According to today's plans there should be eight of them: one in French-speaking Switzerland, one in Canton Berne, one in Canton Soleure, one (possibly two) in Canton Aargau, one in each Basle half-canton, one in central Switzerland, one in Zurich, one in eastern Switzerland and one in Ticino.

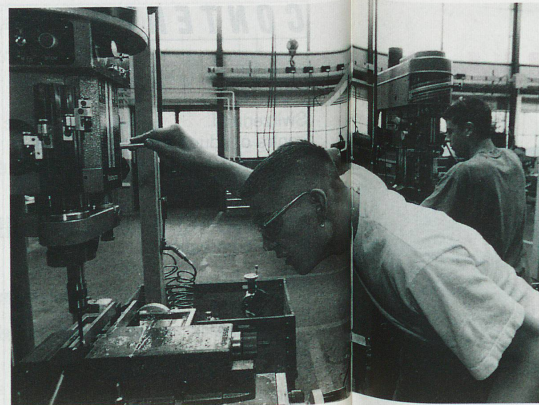
The specialised universities will supplement the existing cantonal universities and the two federal institutes of technology in Zurich and Lausanne. It is intended that they should concentrate more intensively on practical work

and that they should promote cooperation with small and medium-sized businesses in the fields of research and development.

The aim of the specialised universities is to provide access to academic laurels for those who have chosen vocational training and intend to remain with it.

Expensive and complex

This reform does not come cheap by any means. The initial expansion phase between 1997 and 2003 will cost Sfr. 5.4 billion, of which the federal government will provide a maximum of Sfr. 1.6 billion. This means extra expenditure of Sfr. 600 million over the present level of federal assistance to universities – and in these very gloomy financial times, that is not small fry. In addition, the project is by no means simple. There are already 29 higher engineering schools with about 10,000 students, as well as 14 colleges of business administration with 2,200 students and 7 schools of art with 330 students. All of these would of course like to be given Berne's seal of approval as specialised



Children are taught two things which bring success to adults: concentration and creativity.

Swiss apprenticeships are still regarded as good training. (Photos: Keystone)

universities. Another problem is that the specialised school system includes units organised in very varied ways – some being umbrella bodies, etc.

Why so quickly?

In spite of its high cost and complex structure the reform project is being implemented very rapidly. In June 1994 the Federal Council presented the draft law to parliament. In January 1995 it was passed by the Council of States and last autumn by the National Council. This year the executive ordinances should be approved, and next year each of the new specialised universities will receive federal recognition. In parallel with this the cantons will pass their own laws, and indeed the creation of the specialised universities will sometimes be used, as for example in Aargau, to make old dreams about cantonal universities come true.

Since their diplomas will be Euro-compatible, the specialised universities should help to compensate in some measure for the voters' refusal to join the European Economic Area in December 1992. Equally important are the hoped-for favourable economic consequences; the specialised universities are considered as an investment in the future of the country.

Criticism too

The high speed of these reforms has led to some scepticism in political discus-

sions. It is claimed, for example, that the opportunity is being missed to realise a genuine joint construction on a "single building site". The objection is that reform of vocational training will take place only after the specialised universities have started work, although there is a sense in which the latter are a "continuation" of vocational training. The existing universities are also accused of lack of cooperation. In this sphere too reforms are taking place, but some people feel that not enough attention has been given to coordination between these and the new specialised universities.

There has also been controversy about the fact that the federal government is for the moment concentrating its subsidies in the technical and economic spheres and is therefore giving a preference to "male" professions. It is only in a second phase that "soft" and rather more "female" branches, such as the health and social professions, will come to the fore. The federal authorities have been arguing that these fall under cantonal jurisdiction and that they are responsible only for professions recognised by the Federal Office for Industry and Labour. In spite of this, however, as from autumn 1997 there will be specialised universities for art and later for the health and social fields, one of which will be in Canton Berne. But these will have to be financed entirely by the cantons and will start out with a very small number of courses.

Recognition of diplomas: Interview with Rudolf Natsch*

"To be able to work abroad"

Swiss Review: If a Swiss Abroad asks about the validity of diplomas in Switzerland, the answer will be: "It depends on the canton" or "It depends on the university" or even "It depends on the faculty". Do we not have to clean up our own house before pursuing international diploma recognition agreements?

Rudolf Natsch: We should do the one without neglecting the other. It is in our paramount interest that our Swiss diplomas should be recognised abroad. But we cannot only make demands. We have to give something in return. Perhaps the debate on European integration will give some impetus to efforts here at home which point in the same direction.



Rudolf Natsch: "At the end of the day, the winners will be those which can offer a little more than the others". (Photo: Michael Stahl)

With the reform of the university entrance system and the introduction of the vocational certificate and the specialised universities, things really are moving here. Is this due to pressure from outside?

I would not like to use the word pressure, but it is true that the integration debate provided a definite incentive to do something. It is twenty years since we were given the authority to set up specialised universities, but the time has come when we really must pursue this fully. With the close network of specialised institutions which we now have, the preconditions already exist to carry out reform in a relatively short time. Training in these establishments can already claim to be just as high quality as in other countries. But we would like to have something extra,

because in the last resort it is not just a question of having our universities recognised as formally equivalent. At the end of the day, the winners will be those which can offer a little more than the others.

One of Switzerland's advantages as a business location is its high level of education and training. Is there not a danger that mutual recognition of diplomas would mean a levelling downwards?

It would be completely arrogant to suggest such a thing. During the European Economic Area negotiations there was a general conviction that we would have to recognise each other's diplomas, but that every country had to understand that there would be some ways in which they would each have to sacrifice quality on a common altar. The idea that one's own system is the best seems to be widespread and not uniquely Swiss. Objectively speaking, all the countries concerned are in a position to provide good education and training.

Which would gain the most from the mutual recognition of diplomas, Switzerland or the EU?

Even if somebody in Brussels is listening, I would say that we have more to gain. For us it is of the first importance that our citizens residing abroad should be able to work. It is vital to them personally, but it is also of great overall significance for our export-oriented economy.

There is an information agency which deals with the validity of university diplomas. How will the recognition of other types of diploma be regulated, for example regarding access to the specialised universities?

The Federal Office for Industry and Labour is working on this intensively at the moment. Every day we process about 20 applications from people all over the world who wish, for example, to take a vocational examination and want to show that they have appropriate training behind them. In principle the specialised universities set their own requirements. But we may be in a position

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