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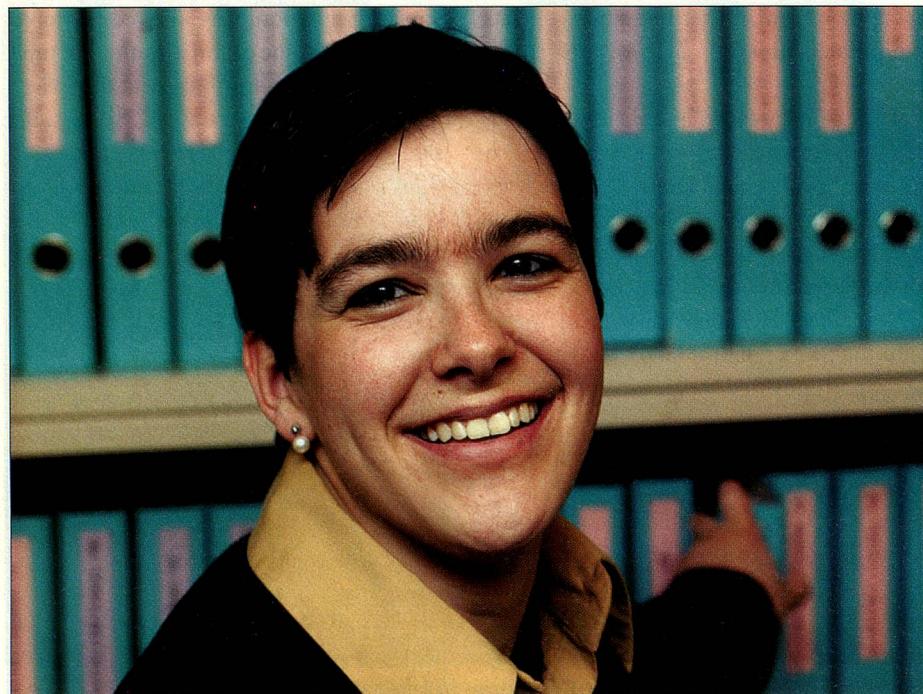
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Over a thousand enquiries a year

The Swiss education system enjoys an excellent reputation. Every year over a thousand young Swiss residents abroad contact the Association for Young Swiss Abroad (AJAS) for details of opportunities to study in Switzerland.



Chantal Dünnenberger from Hauterive/FR: the enthusiastic head of the AJAS.

SWISS REVIEW: Chantal Dünnenberger, you are the head of the AJAS. The image of the Swiss education system suffered a severe blow when the last PISA survey was published. Did you feel the effects of this?

CHANTAL DÜNNENBERGER: Here in Switzerland the weaknesses of our education system are much talked about. But by international standards we compare very well. Every year we handle over a thousand enquiries, and the number is continually rising. And that's not including the young Swiss abroad who apply directly to schools – naturally we have no definitive statistics on them,

Where do most of the enquiries come from? First and foremost from Europe, and primarily from France and Germany. But this can vary considerably depending on the political situation. For instance, enquiries from Argentina, whose currency has suffered a

major devaluation, almost doubled between 2001 and 2002.

Aren't such enquiries prompted by a hidden desire to return home?

Individually we can't really judge, but in general that is certainly not the case. A good education raises your chances on the job market. It's important to optimise your career options, particularly in countries with high unemployment.

Isn't our education system rather expensive for people from low-income countries?

Certainly the financial aspect is crucial for young people from such countries. That's also why virtually half of the enquiries are about grants. But only rarely does an applicant fail to take up education opportunities in our country for financial reasons. Lots of young people also want general information, for instance about our education system or recognition of academic qualifica-

tions (the answers to the latter vary depending on the country of origin).

How important is a good knowledge of one of our national languages?

It's not only important: it's an absolute necessity. We recommend that applicants who have no national language attend a language course in their place of residence. Other cultural differences can also play a part. It's not uncommon for us to refer young people to integration schools or preparation courses.

That sounds highly academic. Do your responses cover more than mere advice?

Yes: we are frequently in close contact with the young people and provide assistance during their period of study in Switzerland.

And what is their general opinion of the Swiss education system once they complete their studies?

The feedback is almost exclusively positive. Now and then young people may have problems being treated like a foreigner here. But such cases are few and far between. In general they are delighted with their positive experiences of Switzerland. Since many of these young people with Swiss roots only know their home country on a superficial level, they are highly motivated. That motivation naturally helps them to complete their studies successfully. When they return to their families, they take with them a very positive and credible image of our country.

Interview: Gabrielle Keller 

Translated from German.

The AJAS was established in 1962 by the Foundation for Young Swiss Abroad (SJAS), the Organisation for the Swiss Abroad (OSA) and the pro juventute Foundation. Since 1989 they have shared the OSA premises. For more information on the Association and its activities, contact:

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