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Swiss universities gear up for Europe

The aim of the Bologna Process is to establish a European Higher Education Area and achieve harmonisation in academic courses. Switzerland is leveraging this opportunity to restructure its higher education system with a view to promoting mobility among Swiss and foreign students in Switzerland and throughout Europe, with the associated positive impact on employment. But who will foot the bill?

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ImagoPress/Patrick Lüthy



Swiss universities aim to facilitate mobility.

In December Pascal Couepepin, the minister responsible for education, declared university education to be a Federal Council priority. The initiative has its origins in 1999, when the education ministers of 29 European states met in Bologna to draft an agreement on higher education. Among the signatories was Switzerland's Charles Kleiber, State Secretary for Science and Research. The aim of the "Bologna Declaration", symbolically signed in Europe's oldest university, is to create a system of easily readable and comparable degrees and a "European Higher Education Area" where students and staff can move with ease and have fair recognition of their qualifications with a view to promoting employability. Individual characteristics and academic sovereignty have been harmonised in order to enhance the global competitiveness of Europe's academic landscape. But the system retains a certain degree of European (and hence characteristically Swiss) diversity. The Process also envisages laying down quality assurance criteria and

introducing measures to encourage cooperation between institutions. In short, by 2010 all European universities must comply with a standard degree structure so as to enhance graduate mobility and employability.

Switzerland: a model pupil

Commissioned by the government to implement the Bologna Process, the Conference of Swiss Universities (CSU), an association for university rectors (mandated the Conference of Swiss University Rectors (CSUR) with its coordination. On 4 December 2003, following a heated two-year public consultation process, the CSU unanimously adopted the "Directives for the coordinated reform of teaching at Swiss universities within the framework of the Bologna Process".

Under the terms of these "Bologna Directives", licentiates and degrees are to be replaced by a two-phase course of study: a 3-year bachelor's course, covering general studies in the selected subject; and a master's course

comprising two more years of specialised study in a chosen subject at a university selected for its academic excellence. Doctorates (three years) remain the domain of individual institutions. The new academic system is based on a system of credits (European Credit Transfer System, ECTS) that measure progress in an academic year. One credit corresponds to 25 to 30 hours of academic study. 180 credits are required for a bachelor's degree, and between 90 and 120 additional credits for a master's. Jean-Marc Rapp, President of the CSUR, is all for it: "All universities will speak the same language to students, staff and future employers, and all will use the same 'currency'. It's the equivalent of the euro for universities."

Rudolf Nägeli, in charge of Bologna coordination activities at CSU, estimates that the process will take ten years to complete. "We had to battle for two years to find a political compromise, but now Switzerland is among the leading proponents!" The two Federal Institutes of Technology (ETH) are spearheading the process, but things are more complicated for universities with complex hierarchies. Some, like St. Gallen, Zurich, Basle, Lucerne and Ticino, have nevertheless instituted changes without waiting for the Directives. Berne and Fribourg have adapted several courses of study in line with the new process. And initial reticence has finally been overcome in the "golden triangle" of Geneva-Vaud-Neuchâtel. The first bachelor's degrees will be awarded this summer in St. Gallen and Basle.

But Rudolf Nägeli emphasises that there is still much to be done, because the Directives are extremely generalised: "By 2005, all universities must have drawn up plans and defined regulations which are to govern all courses of study from 2010." The difficulty lies in combining these regulations so as to enable specialised master's courses. "Every institution has its own traditions. But the law must be precise," adds Rudolf Nägeli. The first priority is to convince students. In January, 2500 persons demonstrated in Basle against the downgrading of three subjects and other cutbacks. The battle is not yet won.

Political reforms

In the wake of these reforms, the political authorities decided to harmonise the entire academic structure with its ten universities and seven universities of applied sciences, in

line with the Federal Council's message on measures to promote education, research and technology in the 2004–2007 period. A comprehensive revision of the law is planned for 2008. "The new law will lay down the foundations for the entire higher education field, and not just for universities," explains Jean-Marc Rapp. To this end Pascal Couchepin wants to merge the CSU, the ETH Council and the Swiss Council of Universities of Applied Sciences under one roof. This project to create a "governance instrument for the entire higher education sector" is currently shaping the "2008 academic landscape".

The main problems are posed by the switch from a bachelor's to a master's course of study. Many students assume that they can make do with a bachelor's for economic and academic reasons. According to the Bologna Directives, students can switch "to master's courses in the relevant subject without any additional requirements" even if they change universities. But additional criteria are laid down "for admission to specialised master's courses". Students therefore

fear a tougher selection process, and perhaps even a quota system. Switching from a university of applied science bachelor's course to a master's at a traditional university is particularly problematic.

Stiffer competition

In turn, universities will be obliged to give up their claim to universality i.e. they will need to do without certain disciplines and step up mutual cooperation. This is already happening in the "Triangle d'Azur", the coordination project covering three French-speaking universities who are keeping their first-degree curriculum but cooperating in terms of post-graduate degrees in order to expand their offerings. But some experts have warned against excessive competition (for students, funds, private mandates etc.). Federal Councillor Couchepin has recognised the danger: "We must not push specialisation to the hilt. But equally, the range of subjects should not be so broad that it becomes unmanageable," declared Switzerland's Minister of Internal Affairs in an interview with the French-speaking newspaper "Le Temps".

Students fear a two-tier system

In January, a study commissioned by the Capital and Economy Working Group (CEWG) of Avenir Suisse and economiesuisse caused a storm in the academic world. Entitled "New Paths to University Funding", it proposes increasing annual study fees to between CHF 5000 and CHF 7000, as opposed to the current average of CHF 1300. According to the study, Switzerland is "among the European countries with the lowest study fees", and these cover only three percent of the total costs. Raising these fees would bring in an extra CHF 500 million. To avoid widening social gaps, however, the study recommends increasing the number of student loans and offering them either interest-free or at 5 percent (compared to the bank rate of 11 percent). After deducting these costs, CHF 400 million would remain available for improving the educational budget. According to the CEWG, this 12 percent increase would cover the cost of 800 new lecturers.

The CSUR has not issued any official statement on the study, but Raymond Werlen is cautious: "It's a very sensitive area, and there is a risk that the cantons would reduce their contributions. Simply transferring the financial burden from the state to parents will not help and can only create serious problems, for example by detracting from equal opportunities." For their part, students fear it will lead to "privatisation" and a two-tier system. Three quarters of students have to work part time while studying, and if Bologna accelerated the pace of study, they would have less time to earn money. "The proposed loans scarcely cover the fees, let alone living costs," protests Caroline Gisiger, Vice President of the Association of Swiss Student Unions. She is also worried that, prompted by the prospects of having to pay back a loan, students will choose a course of study based on future earnings capability rather than on their aptitudes and interests.

Translated from German.

A ranking of university institutions could be beneficial for rationalisation purposes. The proposal is controversial, but Swissup, an association financed by economiesuisse, is in the process of breaking this taboo by drawing up a university ranking list in conjunction with the "Centre for University Development" in Germany, and with the blessings of the CSUR. If the latter succeeds in encouraging the Swiss to adopt a more transparent form of cooperation, from 2005 students would be able to choose their course of study by consulting a list of German, Austrian and Swiss university rankings on each subject.

Who foots the bill?

In 2003, parliament voted to increase federal contributions to universities by 4.75 percent to CHF 17 billion for the 2004–2007 period. But the number of students has doubled to 125,000 since 1980. This trend looks set to continue, although with a tertiary education ratio of only 19 percent, Switzerland is well below the OECD average of 41 percent. Once the impact of the Bologna Process on the length and structure

of courses becomes clear, the question of funding will once more raise its ugly head.

According to Raymond Werlen, assistant general secretary of the CSUR, a total of CHF 30 million has been set aside to cover the initial costs of the Bologna Process in Switzerland's ten cantonal universities. After that, it is difficult to say. "We are only at the start, so the extra operating costs are difficult to quantify. But there is talk of annual costs of CHF 200 million, for which no funding yet exists," adds Werlen. The University of St. Gallen has introduced the Bologna system without waiting for directives, and its budget has grown by 10 percent. Elsewhere there is talk of 15 percent. And that's just for starters.

For their part, business and economic groups have long been pushing for higher fees. After all, they argue, students have better chances on the job market and can expect to earn a good wage. Charles Kleiber believes that, while education is a public service, it is "not necessarily a free one." In principle, the State Secretary is not against increasing study fees, particularly for a master's, but – as he has repeatedly emphasised

– "only on condition that a system of grants and loans is first set up". Ideally he would like to see an across-the-board increase in university fees in 2008, when the government's new grant system is scheduled to replace the cantonal system which has proved deficient.

Raymond Werlen of the CSUR does not hide his concern: "By 2010, all courses of academic study will be 'Bologna-compatible' – if the financing is in place. If the situation is exacerbated by factors such as the current budget cutbacks and the catastrophic finances of some cantons, the entire process could once again be open to question." Jean-Marc Rapp concurs: "It's very important that the support is financial as well as verbal. Switzerland must have the opportunity to become a first-class academic centre. Let's not forget: in our resource-deficient country, this is one of the very few areas with the potential for growth and prosperity." Everyone agrees on one thing: the grants system must be improved. 

Translated from German.

Equality at risk?

The Bologna Process promises higher quality of study for students, more mobility and greater equality. Caroline Gisiger, Vice President of the Association of Swiss Students, remains unconvinced.

CAROLINE GISIGER is angry. "Our opinion was asked when the Directives were drawn up, but lots of our proposals have not been taken into account. We feel we have been misused. We're asked to make recommendations, and then they don't listen!"

Her worries concern the additional requirements which universities could impose for students switching from a bachelor's to a

specialised master's course. The Vice President of the Association of Swiss Student Unions believes this is akin to a selection process. "As far as the quality of study is concerned, course structures will be more rigid, thereby restricting the options for interdisciplinary combinations. Mainly, however, we are hoping for as large as possible a number of criteria for admission to a master's course, in order to guarantee the promised level of mobility. Specialised master's courses should remain the exception and not be an opportunity to introduce a quota (numerus clausus) and a two-tier educational society."

Ultimately, however, the success of Bologna depends on cash, which is why students are campaigning strongly for an improved grants system. Otherwise, Caroline Gisiger believes that equality will no longer be guaranteed. "The reform is predicated on a full-time course of study, yet 75 percent of



Caroline Gisiger campaigns for student rights.

students have a part-time job while studying, and one third of this number need a job to finance their living costs." 

Translated from German.