

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 39 (2012)
Heft: 4

Artikel: Education - a battlefield and political hunting ground
Autor: Rumley, Tasha
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907471>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 26.03.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Education – a battlefield and political hunting ground

After 15 years of disarray, reform and political manipulation, education in Switzerland is regaining stability. It appears to be adopting a more pragmatic approach, focusing on the core subjects and geared towards the world of work.

By Tasha Rumley

Eleven years have gone by but the painful episode is still fresh in the memory. This is because Swiss pride has been damaged in an area to which it attaches great importance. A small nation without any natural resources, for decades it revelled in the quality of its education system, which was held up as an explanation for its economic miracle. Politicians, university rectors and lecturers repeated in chorus “grey matter is Switzerland’s most precious resource”.

A great slogan that has nonetheless been left in tatters. In 2001, the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) undertook an international comparative study of the abilities of pupils aged 15 for the first time in history – the PISA study. Switzerland, which believed it had one of the best education systems in the world, only narrowly achieved an average rating. In reading, the main area tested, it finished in 17th position in the rankings, just above Spain and the Czech Republic but light years behind Finland, which had the best pupils in the world.

Hammering home the message, PISA also revealed that the Swiss education system cemented social differences and did not offer pupils from less affluent backgrounds the same opportunities to succeed as more privileged children. Mediocre and segregationist – this is what had become of Switzerland’s most precious resource.

The generalist approach abandoned

Since the PISA bombshell, educationalists and politicians have been desperately trying to make amends. The repetition of the study every three years provides an opportunity to improve performance. The process had to begin with Switzerland conceding that it had followed the wrong path. Several years earlier in 1995, it had completely reformed the grammar school-leaving diploma that provides access to university education. Numerous new optional subjects had been introduced, allowing grammar school pupils

to explore new horizons as a foretaste of university. These included religious studies, psychology, Spanish and many other subjects. However, PISA only takes account of the core subjects – the mother tongue, maths and the sciences. Switzerland had to abandon its generalist curriculum despite its popularity among pupils if it wanted to compete internationally.

The problem is that improving the general standard of education is much more complex in Switzerland than elsewhere. Federalism has created a tangled web of responsibilities between communes, cantons and the federal government, which differ according to primary, secondary, grammar school and university levels. Regional trends also exist. PISA revealed, to everyone’s surprise, that pupils in French-speaking Switzerland were slightly better than those in German-speaking Switzerland and Ticino.

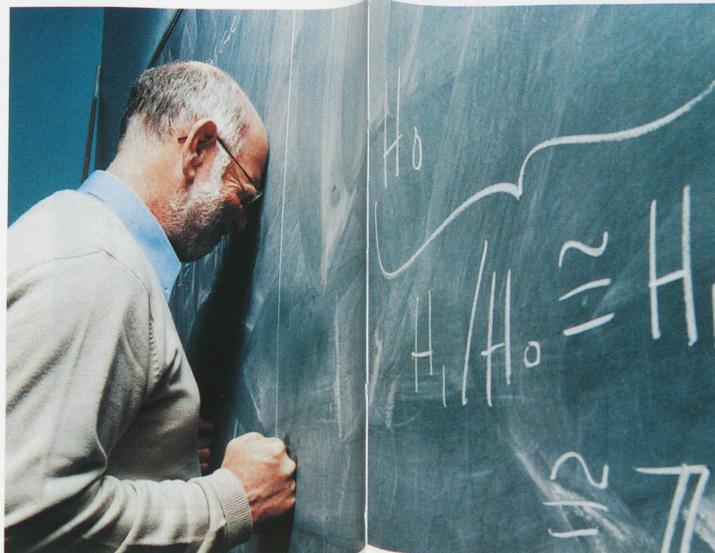
HarmoS or the Swiss education system

These painful observations have nevertheless done some good. They have enabled Switzerland to introduce the most ambitious educational reform in its history. Allowing pupils to be educated differently in Appenzell to those in Geneva is now out of the question. This is partly because the tendency for Swiss people to settle in their region has been replaced by greater professional mobility among parents. It is no longer feasible for their children to repeat a class when moving from one canton to another. Switzerland has to unite vis-à-vis its neighbours in a globalised world where education is a factor in economic competitiveness. Compulsory education has therefore been set the task of adopting a uniform approach, broadly speaking, under the difficult-to-pronounce term of HarmoS.

HarmoS – a German acronym meaning harmonisation of compulsory education – is an agreement between the cantons that establishes the basic principles of Swiss education. It was the Swiss people who resolved to put an end to the 26 different systems when



School in the 1940s – teachers had a clear role and pupils were well disciplined and obedient



Reforms and interference from politicians have demotivated teachers in recent years

they overwhelmingly approved these constitutional articles at a referendum in 2006 with 86% in favour. With an air of revolution, HarmoS has set key practices in stone. It has established four as the age when schooling begins and has set the total duration of compulsory education at 11 years, including two years of nursery schooling. This has forced some cantons that only provided one – Fribourg, Lucerne, Obwalden, Schwyz and Uri – to create classes. The more delicate matter of educational content has also been defined, specifying mandatory subjects, when they begin and the standards to be achieved.

A political godsend

All cantons must adopt the HarmoS framework by 2015. A fierce battle involving the entire nation was fought before arriving at this consensus. Harmonisation has had an unexpected consequence as, by creating a single foundation for everyone, it has made debate possible at national level. Both the structure and the content of education can now be discussed across Switzerland. The political parties were quick to see this was a godsend as never before had they been able to make education a national issue.

The Swiss People’s Party (SVP) soon seized the opportunity. Switzerland’s biggest party, which has a conservative outlook, focused on the school entry age. It portrayed this as the premature removal of children from the family unit and “state interference” in the educational role of parents. It overlooked the fact that 80% of Swiss children already started school at this age. By attempting to collect signatures in every canton to trigger referenda, the party demonstrated its phenomenal power in 2008 and 2009. Public spaces were inundated with posters of a little girl in tears at the prospect of being forced to go to school. This was a tug at the heart strings of parent voters. The press has since revealed that the photograph did not show a four-year-old child as claimed but rather a little girl aged two. Despite this piece of manipulation, the Swiss People’s Party won the referendum in seven German-speaking cantons (AG, GR, LU, NW, TG, UR, ZG). If these do not adopt HarmoS by 2015, the federal government will have to bring them into line.

A laboratory for an ideal society

The intensity of the Swiss People’s Party’s campaign set a precedent. All the major parties have attempted to position them-



SVP poster against starting school at the age of four

selves on education, putting the institution at the centre of a battleground. The politicians are very sharp – education works incredibly well as a laboratory for the ideal society. The parties can communicate the key elements of their message through education policy. If the Swiss People’s Party is fighting for school to start later and to be less stringent, it is to defend its traditional family model embodied by the mother staying at home. In the same vein, the party scored a victory with its initiative on dialect as the main language at nursery school, which was adopted in Zurich in 2011. By going beyond the issue of education, the Swiss People’s Party has been able to proclaim its vision of a rural, regionalist and traditional Switzerland.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Swiss Social Democratic Party (SP) has used education to convey its egalitarian and pro-immigration message. It is campaigning for classes that mix all pupils without streaming according to ability as well as for “integrated special-needs education”, enabling disabled children to attend normal classes with the support of assistants. The Free Democrat-Liberals present education as the antechamber of the labour market. They are calling for all-day schooling with lunch and after-lesson care to enable parents to work. The party also advocates a competitive and pragmatic dimension to the curriculum, which should educate pupils in line with economic requirements.

While public apathy in politics always presents a challenge for politicians, educational

issues guarantee heated debate, media coverage and the emergence of political figures. Such political opportunism has seen the appearance of new players such as the supporters of private schools, who introduced the idea of "school vouchers" in 2008. This would involve the state giving parents a cou-

pon worth 15,000 Swiss francs so that they could place their child in the establishment of their choice, public or private. This model has seen the development of some interesting educational concepts in the Netherlands. But it has also led to alarming segregation. The native Dutch have abandoned schools

attended by immigrant children where standards have fallen further. A divide into "black" and "white" schools with undertones of apartheid has emerged. While the «school vouchers» have attracted greater attention in German-speaking Switzerland than in French-speaking cantons, nobody is taking them seriously. They have been heavily defeated in cantonal referenda (80% on average) in St. Gallen, Thurgau, Basel-Landschaft and Zurich.

There have also been clashes between the different levels in the education system, with each accusing the previous one of preparing pupils inadequately. It was the prestigious Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich that opened fire by publishing rankings of grammar schools in German-speaking Switzerland in 2009. It classified the efficiency of grammar schools by analysing the results of its first-year intake. Despite the indignation of the educational world, the universities are increasingly putting pressure on basic education, and with a certain degree of success. Efficiency is now the order of the day with an end to pleasurable, artistic and exotic subjects. One by one, the cantons are gearing their curricula towards the sectors of industry. The canton of Jura is under pressure from all sides to withdraw its theatre option at grammar school. The canton of Vaud has introduced

Bologna leaves bitter taste at the universities

Switzerland's universities have become EU-compatible. But the Bologna reform has sparked student protests and encouraged the approach of achieving the end result with the least amount of effort

Creating an education area in which a Swiss degree would be equivalent to a Polish or Norwegian one represented the final step for Europe. Signed by 29 countries in 1999, the Bologna Declaration reorganised higher education into two stages – the bachelor's degree, a basic three-year course followed by possible specialisation lasting one or two years known as the master's degree, which is equivalent to the Swiss licentiate degree under the old system. In order to obtain these qualifications, candidates have to collect "credits" that are awarded for each course successfully completed.

The hunt for credits

A decade on and the Bologna system is still unpopular. Whereas previously the university allowed students greater room for manoeuvre to put together their curricula, the reform has made study programmes much more rigid by establishing mandatory courses. Attendance lists have sometimes been introduced for monitoring purposes. This would have been inconceivable in the 1990s when sacrosanct academic freedom was based on economic factors. 78 % of students work while studying, 23 % out of through necessity. A much fuller and fixed timetable has made doing student jobs a headache. In response to this "infantile education policy", students have demonstrated an apathetic approach by choosing courses that are easiest in order to obtain credits rather than the ones in which they are most interested. "Doing the minimum is becoming the norm. Students are hunting for and collecting their credits", complained Martin Roeck, President of the Student Council in Zurich, to Zurich's "Tages-Anzeiger" newspaper.

Failed freedom of movement

One of the hopes carried by Bologna was that of "mobility", a concept which provided for semesters abroad and a change of university between bachelor's and master's degrees. But only 15.7 % of the Swiss go abroad for their education despite the 20 % target. Worse still, the rectors report reveals: "The way study is structured prevents rather than encourages mobility." However, the number of foreigners coming to Switzerland has risen dramatically. Whereas there were 19 000 in 2000, there are now 30 000, making up a quarter of the student population. This influx is exacerbating the problems of a lack of accommodation and packed lecture theatres where some students have to take notes sitting on the floor.

In response, the universities are looking to increase tuition fees for foreigners, which are currently set at a similar level to those for Swiss students (600 Swiss francs per semester). This would involve adopting the Anglo-Saxon model where non-citizens pay tens of thousands of francs to enter universities. However, the Swiss student associations are opposing the proposals as they fear an increase in fees will affect all students, both foreign and Swiss. These concerns were recently borne out at the University of St. Gallen and at the Federal Institutes of Technology.

The threats perceived by students have led to tension since 2009. The Bologna system has become a bogeyman at their demonstrations, a catch-all target for criticism relating to the European reform and Swiss issues. However, the protesters are overlooking the problems they would face in the global labour market if Switzerland were to issue degrees that were not recognised internationally. In spite of the collateral damage it has caused, Bologna is more a necessity than an option.



Student protests in Zurich

extra hours of mathematics. The canton of Zurich is working on a project to increase the time dedicated to German by withdrawing subjects deemed to be of secondary importance, such as French, for some pupils.

Cohesion sacrificed for the economy

It is paradoxical that, as Swiss education becomes more unified, it is moving further away from its goal of national cohesion in favour of knowledge that is economically beneficial. This trend emerged in 1999 when the canton of Zurich reversed the order in which French and English were learned. Thirteen German-speaking cantons followed suit. As a result, most Swiss German-speaking children today start to learn English at the age of eight and French at the age of ten, while the French-speaking Swiss continue to give priority to German.

The dust is slowly settling after the battle over education. At international level, the latest PISA study has shown an improvement in the reading ability of Swiss teenagers, who are now significantly above average. At national level, HarmoS has left the political arena for gradual implementation in the schools. In German-speaking Switzerland, the drawing-up of the curriculum has entered its final stage under the name of Lehrplan 21. In French-speaking Switzerland, its

counterpart, the PER (Plan d'étude romand) has already been completed. In Ticino, only an uncontroversial partial amendment to the curriculum is required. Finally, following the defeat of the "school voucher" proposal in Zurich, peace has broken out on education's final battlefield. Education will

once again focus on those who matter most, the pupils who are more preoccupied with their algebra than with the reforms going on above their heads.

TASHA RUMLEY is an editor at the news magazine "L'Hebdo" in Lausanne

Apprenticeships – Swiss magic formula shows fragility

Switzerland takes great pride in its workplace training system which prepares young professionals for employment cost-effectively. A victim of its own success, it is becoming too competitive for weaker pupils.

Switzerland – a nation of intellectuals laden with degrees? The reality is in fact the opposite of this perception that is widely held abroad. Switzerland has one of the lowest rates of young people with university-entry qualifications. Only 30% of Swiss people hold the university-entry diploma (grammar or vocational school) compared with 60% on average in the OECD countries. So, what is the secret behind the far lower youth unemployment rates that Switzerland enjoys compared to its neighbours? The answer lies in the apprenticeship system.

18 applications to find a position

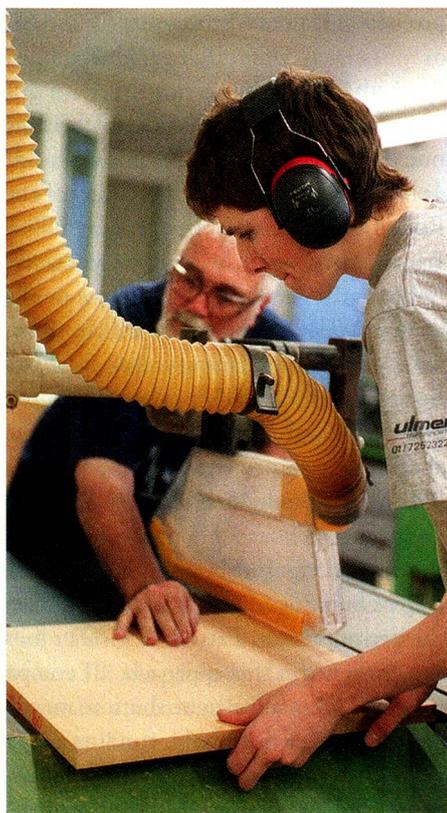
After leaving school, 70% of Swiss opt for workplace training, which combines employment in a company with educational courses. Dozens of professions can be learned in three or four years. And while every economic crisis raises fears that SMEs will stop training young people, this has failed to materialise in recent times. For one thing, the company stands to benefit. In the final year, an apprentice provides three quarters of the productivity of a regular employee for a minimal salary (a few hundred Swiss francs depending on the sector). There is also the fact that, the authorities value the workplace training system highly. Several cantons have introduced grants of up to 5,000 Swiss francs for companies creating places. A solidarity fund to which all companies are obliged to contribute is also redistributed as compensation for the investment involved in turning an employee into an apprenticeship manager.

While 70% of apprentices say they are satisfied with their training and they are better integrated into the world of work than university graduates, the situation is not rosy everywhere. A chronic shortage of places has made the apprenticeship market extremely competitive. On average, young people have to submit 18 applications to find a place. Being in a position of strength, employers are raising the requirements. They are looking closely at the type of school candidates attended. More inferior schools are a stigma for young people who, after an already difficult education, are struggling to enter the world of work.

Increasingly older

The world of apprenticeships has been transformed within a generation. In the 1980s, companies took on young people aged 16 straight from school without any prerequisites. It was the employer's responsibility to provide full training. Today, the average age of entry is 18. Companies are looking for more mature young people with professional or linguistic experience. In 2011, competition for places reached a new level. Large companies, such as Novartis, Roche and Syngenta, began handing apprenticeship places to German and French youngsters. These candidates were older and had already obtained their school-leaving qualifications, making them more profitable. At the same time, hundreds of young Swiss people were left on the sidelines.

This development raises questions about the nature of the workplace training system. Is it an educational system that aims to offer all young citizens basic professional training, as suggested by the cantonal contribution? Or do free-market rules apply, allowing companies to take advantage of apprenticeships to employ already-skilled young people at low cost? It is time for federal government to provide a response.



Apprentice and master in a joinery