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Questions raised over foreign student influx

Students from abroad are flocking to study in Swiss universities, but this development has raised concerns in some quarters. While many agree that overseas students help boost diversity and quality, a debate is raging over whether quotas should be introduced or fees raised to stem costs.

Studies have shown that overseas students are attracted by Swiss universities' good reputations and study conditions. Low fees, at an average SFr1,500 are also a help. Another factor has been the Bologna reform, which harmonises qualifications across Europe and encourages mobility. This is particularly relevant for masters programmes, many of which were created in the wake of Bologna.

But the numbers have caused concern. A recent article in the 'NZZ am Sonntag' newspaper spoke of an invasion of foreign students, resulting in Swiss universities being the victims of their own success and a rise of foreign bachelor students to one in four in ten years' time.

The Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich (ETH) has seen many Germans in the growing tide of overseas students. This is because of the difficult German university situation and growing interest in studying in Zurich, said Rector Dieter Wüest. "The advantage is that there is more competition, we hope to bring in excellent students which improve quality and there is an international atmosphere and culture which is also a benefit to our Swiss students. On the other hand we have to take care that we don't exceed our capacities."

One solution - most recently mooted by local politicians in Zurich - is introducing an overseas students' quota.

St Gallen University is one of the rare institutions to have a 25 per cent quota in place. It was introduced for a combination of financial and diversity reasons. The university is owned by the canton. For Swiss students it gets a subsidy from the student's home canton and from the federal government, but for foreigners, only part of the home canton's subsidy is replaced by the federal government. The canton of St Gallen, or its taxpayers, have to stump up the rest. A quota is a big chance because it offers the framework to select students. All foreign students have to pass a very rigorous entry exam.

At Geneva University, where foreigners number 40 per cent, there is a slightly different view. Deputy Rector Yves Flückiger agreed that overseas students boost quality, adding they also benefited Switzerland as a whole as human capital. But he is not in favour of quotas and higher fees. "The right answer is to integrate these students in the Swiss economy at the end of their studies so they contribute to our economy." Right now they have to leave.

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Outside funds raise bar at top university

High-flying students will be awarded grants covering their cost of living as Zurich's Federal Institute of Technology seeks to attract the best international talent. The initiative will be funded by private donations, which are playing an increasingly important role in plans to compete with the world's premier seats of learning.

The Institute piloted the Excellence and Opportunities Scholarships with 13 top grade students receiving SFr 21'000 in 2007 and 20 more were awarded the grant in 2008. Funds have now been allocated for more than double this number of Masters students in future years. The scholarships - along with plans to introduce 80 new professors in the next ten years and the construction of 1'000 affordable housing units at the Science City research complex - are part of an expansion drive at the Institute.

State funding still makes up the lion's share of the total budget, but a minimal increase last year has forced the Institute to look elsewhere for money to implement its plans. Last year, funding from external sources accounted for nearly 17 per cent of the budget, compared with 12 per cent in 2001.

Donations from companies, individuals and other bodies to the Institute's fundraising Foundation have been steadily rising.

It's the way the top American universities have been working for a long time, and this has spilled over into Europe. To stay competitive it is important that universities attract research money and private donations.

The Foundation plans to raise enough money to provide a steady stream of income through interest payments.

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Illegal medicine imports on the rise

The Swiss Agency for Therapeutic Products (Swissmedic) said custom checks had been stepped up at borders in response to a growing trend among the public to order medicine online. The resulting checks uncovered 1,045 suspicious and potentially illegal imports last year. Proceedings have been launched against their producers.

The shipments came from 64 different countries, with the majority from India and Western Europe. The products included erectile stimulants and slimming, hair growth and muscle building aids. But it is just a fraction of the 50,000 illegal medicine imports estimated to reach Switzerland every year.

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