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Kiwi Teen's Swiss School Experience

My name is Amy Barnes. I am 18 years old, from New Zealand and for 5 months from mid 2018 to the beginning of 2019 I was in Switzerland on a school exchange. My host family are based in Geneva thus I was living and going to school there.

From the day I arrived I began to notice the differences and similarities between life in New Zealand versus in Switzerland. I noticed small differences such as the architecture, the higher number of diverse cultures and nationalities and the different language and mannerisms. However, it was at school that I experienced many more differences.

I found that the rules and attitude to school in Switzerland were perhaps more comparable to New Zealand Universities. Differences that stood out to me were the relaxed dress code, longer school hours and treatment of students. I found that my college let the students take responsibility for their learning. If the student were to fail their year in college they would technically redo the year until they pass so this meant that in my core class there were students anywhere between the age of 15 to 20 which is very different to New Zealand.

Furthermore, this sense of self-responsibility could be seen in other schooling differences like the dress code. In Swiss schools there is neither uniform nor strict dress code. People have the freedom to wear whatever they want and present themselves in any way from piercings, to coloured hair, to painted nails, to makeup, to tattoos, to facial hair etc. This was a big difference for me as my school in New Zealand was quite the opposite, like many schools in New Zealand, where there is a strict dress code and uniform. Before going to Switzerland I was aware that there

are no uniforms in schools and I was expecting there to be some judgement or trends that everyone followed but I was surprised to see such variety, from very casual lounge and sportswear to high end/branded clothes and even formal wear such as high heels etc. Again, somewhat unlike New Zealand, where on Mufti days there seems to be big trends most people follow.

The difference that I found perhaps the hardest at my Swiss school was the longer hours. A normal day started at 8:45am and ended at 5:00pm with 1 hour 40 minutes, give or take, for lunch. I also had 13 subjects which is more than double my 6 subjects I had in New Zealand. Staying focused until the end of the day was a big challenge especially in Winter, when the sun would be setting out the window before school had even ended.

Despite a natural sense of homesickness to begin with, my exchange experience was a positive one. The language barrier (specifically accent, slang and speed of conversations) was the biggest challenge overall, especially by jumping in the deep end having to attend school in a foreign language. However, my French language skills improved greatly which was one of the main reasons I wanted to go on an exchange in the first place. With a full immersion at school this was something I was able to do. I feel very grateful for having been able to attend a school abroad and for all the experiences Switzerland has given me.

*Amy Barnes
Alumni and French student from Sacred Heart Girls' College, Hamilton*

