



# Get smart, Swiss smart

Going back to school isn't just for kids

**Who'd want to settle for just a Swiss watch or Swiss chocolate when you can also have a Swiss diploma? Let's look at how you can take advantage of the adult advancement opportunities on offer ...**

By Justin Brunjes | Swiss universities offer high-quality tuition at a good price, and have recently been expanding their English-language courses. This means that speakers of English, who may not be very strong in other languages, can benefit from the long heritage of high-quality education in Switzerland.

Switzerland has a huge amount of foreign residents – nearly a fifth of the population, in fact. It follows then, that

Switzerland also boasts the highest percentage of foreign students attending its universities in Europe, according to CRUS (Rectors' Conference of the Swiss Universities). Where until recently courses were predominantly offered in French, German and Italian, now the number of post-graduate courses offered either partially or exclusively in English has risen to 225 – 124 of which are taught entirely in English. It is now possible to find a course in English in a large variety of subjects, from sciences and medicine, through law and economics, to business administration and the arts.

### Educational reform

Universities across Europe have been undergoing massive restructuring over the past decade as a result of the Lisbon and Bologna Conventions. These conventions called for a homogenised system of higher education across Europe.

This means that since 2001/2002, Swiss universities have been abandoning the traditional four-to-six year *Lizentiat*

courses – similar to a combined Bachelor and Master's degree – in favour of courses that conform to the Bachelor, Master and Doctorate degree models, and are regulated in length by what is known as the European Credit Transfer System, or ECTS.

As holding a *Lizentiat* is comparable to holding a Master's degree, one of the big problems of old was determining where foreign students with Bachelor's qualifications could enter a Swiss course of study, how many credits could be transferred, and how many needed to be made up.

This homogenisation has eased the process of recognition of qualifications across borders and will improve the potential for exchanging ideas between students and researchers, according to CRUS. This means that entering a foreign university, including having your existing qualifications recognised and appraised, is no longer as complicated as it once was.

Another upshot of the Bologna Convention is an organisation called Euraxess, which is maintained by the European

Commission, and is essentially a networking platform for researchers. Euraxess aids academic researchers who are searching for projects to take part in, or for an institution to support a project of their own.

### Getting oriented

In order to understand where to look for information and courses being offered, it is also necessary to understand a bit about how the Swiss system of higher education is structured.

Swiss institutions of higher education are grouped into three categories. There are 12 academic, research-oriented universities that have the special privilege of awarding doctorate degrees; and a further 14 universities of teacher education (*Pädagogische Hochschulen* in German and *Hautes écoles pédagogiques* in French). Finally, there are an additional nine universities of applied science (known as *Fachhochschulen* in German, or *Hautes écoles spécialisées* in French) that offer professionally oriented studies at the graduate and post-graduate level, and an additional 57 English-language courses to those mentioned above.

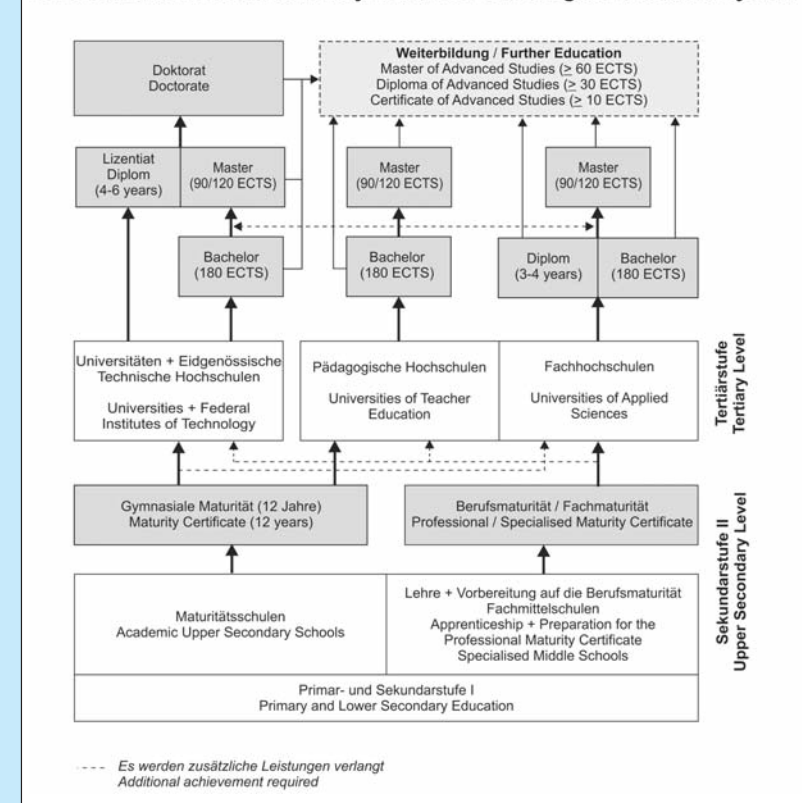
For those interested in studying at one of the 12 Swiss universities, the information portal known as CRUS and its various extensions (see next-page sidebar) is the place to find (almost superfluous) information on all English-language courses offered at Swiss universities.

Despite the ample amount of general information available from CRUS, according to Ursula Müller, admissions officer at the University of Bern – where the unique Master's in International Law and Economics (M.I.L.E.) and the Rochester-Bern Executive MBA are offered – each course as well as each university varies in terms of admission requirements, fees and deadlines.

For example, an Executive MBA in International Management at the University of Geneva costs SFr 24,300, while an Executive Master's in Education Management at the Università della Svizzera italiana will only set you back SFr 14,000.

So as soon as you find a course you're interested in (whether it is a Master's in International and European Economic and Business Law from the University of Lausanne, or an Executive Master's of Business Administration in International Supply Chain Management from the Federal University of Applied Sciences in Zurich), it's best to contact that institu-

## Das schweizerische Hochschulsystem / The Swiss Higher Education System



tion and find out how to proceed. Many people are not simply interested in studying for the intrinsic sake of gaining knowledge but to propel their careers. For these people, courses offered by one of the universities of applied science might be more fitting. Information about courses offered by those institutions (from architecture to microbiology) is available at the KFH website (see next-page sidebar).

### Getting it right

Despite the fact that under the Bologna Convention courses have been grouped into graduate and post-graduate distinctions, as previously mentioned, there are some other important sub-distinctions to be aware of.

A Master's degree (usually denoted by MA, of the Arts, or MS, of the Sciences) has to consist of 90-120 ECTS credits, or 1.5-2 years of full-time study, and once granted will give the holder the future option of pursuing a doctorate title (but only if he/she gets good grades). However,

there are many courses known as Masters of Advanced Studies (MAS), which, though shorter (only 60 ECTS credits; one year of full-time study), don't give the option of pursuing a doctorate degree afterwards. There are also Certificates in Advanced Studies, which are shorter courses still.

Understanding these distinctions and what they mean could help you avoid enrolling in the wrong course.

### Getting in

Despite the improvements that have been made in Europe under the Bologna Convention, it is still possible you will have a few hurdles to leap before gaining access to the Swiss system, especially if your former study was outside of Europe. Here, "every admission case is evaluated separately", said Müller.

If department heads are under the impression your former education was inadequate, then you might be given a list of courses to make up before you are allowed entry into your programme of



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choice. Furthermore, you may need to get a language qualification in German, French or Italian depending on your desired course, or take some kind of entrance examination.

Some universities have their own entrance exams – like the somewhat exclusive University of St. Gallen known for its business administration and economics programmes, which only allows a maximum of 25 per cent of foreigners in its student body, and reserves those spaces for especially clever candidates.

Otherwise, there is a bi-annual standard entrance examination – recognised by all Swiss universities – which can be taken in Fribourg. A preparation course for this exam is offered by the organisation VKHS and can be attended between September and July in Fribourg for the lofty sum of SFr 5,200. Prerequisite for attendance is knowledge of either German or French corresponding at least to the level of B1/B2 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, and provisional admission to a Swiss university.

**International flavour**

For those who want to earn a post-graduate degree from an institution in Switzerland, but not through a public institution, there are plenty of options. Though in no way a comprehensive list, following are just a few examples:

Earlier this year, the *Financial Times* ranked the IMD Business School in Lausanne as first outside the United States and second worldwide in executive education. In 2008, *The Economist* ranked the

MBA offered by IMD as first worldwide.

Similarly, the University of Bern's Rochester-Bern MBA programme ranked second in the world for finance and fifth in managerial economics.

The Strathclyde University Executive MBA in Zurich offers full-time, part-time and open-learning options that allow students to keep their jobs and earn a degree in two years. The university was also ranked third worldwide for its corporate strategy by a 2009 *Financial Times* global MBA survey.

The International University in Geneva is home to a student body that represents more than 62 countries, with graduate programmes in business administration, international relations, and media and communication.

**From a student's perspective**

Augusto Diaz, owner of a family construction business in Colombia, chose to attend the "unique" Rochester-Bern MBA programme for a number of reasons, not least because of its variety, with periods of study in the United States' Rochester, New York, as well as in Shanghai, China.

As an added benefit, Diaz said "Switzerland offers a cosmopolitan atmosphere with people from a great variety of backgrounds ... non-German speakers can easily communicate with locals in English ... [it's an] international country with a modern society where it is easy to adapt and integrate as an international student."

But most importantly, Diaz chose this programme because it provided him with "two very important degrees from two outstanding institutions such as the MBA of the University of Rochester, New York, and the Executive MBA degree of the University of Bern".

**Call of the virtual classroom**

When I was recently researching potential courses to take in the field of applied linguistics my criteria were simple: Could I pay for my education without getting up to my eyeballs in debt, and is attendance feasible?

Given that I now live in the Engadine (which is about as far from any Swiss university as one can get and still be in the confines of the country), have two daughters to support and just took a year off to bum around Europe, distance learning seemed like the best solution for me.

Though Swiss universities offer some

**For more information:**

1. CRUS, Rectors' Conference of the Swiss Universities: [www.crus.ch](http://www.crus.ch)
- a. [www.enic.ch](http://www.enic.ch): info on qualifying for university entrance (powered by CRUS)
- b. [www.uni-programme.ch](http://www.uni-programme.ch): a search engine for university programmes in Switzerland (powered by CRUS)
- c. [www.swissuniversity.ch](http://www.swissuniversity.ch): a website aimed at recruiting foreign students interested in studying in Switzerland (powered by CRUS)
- d. [www.studying-in-switzerland.ch](http://www.studying-in-switzerland.ch): important information about studying in Switzerland, from costs and scholarships to personal requirements and health insurance coverage (powered by CRUS)
2. Find a professor – list of contacts for professors at Swiss universities, organised by subject: [www.proff.ch](http://www.proff.ch)
3. Euraxess: [www.euraxess.ch](http://www.euraxess.ch)
4. KFH, Rectors' Conference of the Swiss Universities of Applied Science: [www.kfh.ch](http://www.kfh.ch)
5. COHEP, Swiss Conference of Rectors of Universities of Teacher Education: [www.cohep.ch](http://www.cohep.ch)
6. British Open University: [Switzerland@open.ac.uk](mailto:Switzerland@open.ac.uk), [www.open.ac.uk](http://www.open.ac.uk)
7. VKHS, Preparatory Courses for University Studies in Switzerland: [info@vkhs.ch](mailto:info@vkhs.ch), [www.vkhs.ch](http://www.vkhs.ch)

distance-learning Bachelor's and Master's programmes (known as *Fernstudien* in German and *Universitaire à distance* in French), the largest assortment of English-language programmes of this kind is through the Swiss branch of the UK-based Open University, whose courses are all specially designed for distance learning.

Many other institutions offer similar courses of study, but the offer is more limited. It might take some *Googling* to find a course suitable for your needs.

Typically, universities that offer distance-learning graduate degrees equivalent to those offered on site are universally recognised and accepted. Just make sure that the institution is accredited by an internationally recognised body (if it is American) or has a Royal Charter (if it is British), otherwise you might end up with a very expensive piece of paper that nobody is much interested in.