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University Education in Switzerland

The high standard of intellectual life in Switzerland and the value attached by its people to education is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that a population of something more than 6 million supports no less than seven universities, two institutes of technology, a university-level school of economics and social sciences and a number of other institutions at similar level. Education, like other sectors of public life, is decentralized, since Switzerland is a confederation of 25 culturally, denominationally and linguistically distinct member states or cantons. Each canton is autonomous in all education matters from compulsory schooling (usually lasting eight or nine years) to secondary and university training. The cantons thus bear considerable responsibility as well as the associated obligations, principally consisting in the heavy financial burdens involved in a modern educational system.

However, this burden has now been somewhat alleviated by a law which came into force on 1st January, 1969. During a prior transitional period, from 1966 to 1968, the Confederation had already contributed 200 million francs to developing cantonal universities, and the new Act increases federal contributions to 1.5 million francs for the 1969–1974 period. But in spite of this increased federal aid, the eight university cantons expended some 380 million francs on universities in 1970, although the total population of those cantons was only a bare four million. In the same year, federal support for the cantonal universities was about 70 million francs, some 230 million francs going to the two Federal Institutes of Technology, the only educational establishments of university rank directly maintained by the Confederation.

These figures are indicative of the great interest taken by the Swiss nation in its universities. Each university is financially and administratively dependent on its cantonal Education Department, but academically speaking there is complete research and teaching liberty. The Swiss universities pursue a

generous policy towards foreign students and in fact some 10,000 foreign students from more than 70 different countries were among the total of 45,000 registered in 1971. No other country in the world has so high a percentage of foreign students.

The 10 Swiss university-level establishments

In German-speaking Switzerland:

Basle, Berne and Zurich Universities, the Zurich Federal Institute of Technology and the St. Gall College of Economics and Social Science;

In French-speaking Switzerland:

Lausanne, Geneva, Neuchâtel and Fribourg Universities (Fribourg is bilingual, German and French) and the Lausanne Federal Institute of Technology.

There are no university-level institutions in the *Italian-speaking part of Switzerland*.

While each university has its own character, all have a similar structure. They are divided into faculties: theology; law and social sciences; arts; natural sciences, and medicine. Fribourg and Neuchâtel Universities have no actual medical faculty but their science faculties train future doctors to intermediate science standard (the so-called 1st propaedeutic examination), while Fribourg University also trains for the intermediate anatomy/physiology (2nd propaedeutic) examination.

The two Institutes of Technology train engineers, architects, chemists and physicists, while the Zurich FIT also has courses in pharmacy, agriculture, forestry, mathematics and the natural sciences. The St. Gall College of Economics and Social Science prepares its students for management positions in industry, commerce and administration and as teachers of business subjects.

The Swiss university-level institutions provide specialised education to follow the more generally oriented secondary school curricula, and thus resemble the universities of other

European countries. In the German-speaking universities in particular, students are largely free in their choice of lectures, except in the medical and technical sciences. The other faculties do have a syllabus, but this is indicative rather than compulsory.

This article is an extract from the brochure "Universities in Switzerland" published in 1973 by the Swiss National Tourist Office in collaboration with the Central Office of the Swiss Universities. The continuation of this article (enrollment conditions, duration and cost of studies, scholarships etc.) will appear in the next issue of our review.

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